

An Abusive Church Culture?

Clergy Sexual Abuse and Systemic Dysfunction in Ecclesial Faith and Life

Scott Cowdell

Around Australia, churches are now taking responsibility for clergy sexual abuse. One senses a palpable relief that new attitudes and structures are dealing with the problem of abuse and its concealment. But are they? I suggest in what follows that there is a whole dimension missing from current attempts to diagnose and treat the scourge of clergy sexual abuse. I judge these responses, while laudable as far as they go, to be insufficiently systemic. They identify and address the symptom, which is abuse, without inquiring after a deeper malaise in the church that becomes manifest in abusive relationships.

Systemic disorders

I was led to these conclusions initially by family systems theory, which helped open my eyes to a deeper understanding of Scripture and its collective understanding of sin and salvation, rather than reading Enlightenment individualism into Scripture. Systems theory is a psychological discipline that explores the systemic dynamics of relationships, discovering standard patterns of provocation and reactivity. Hence the commonplace acknowledgement that oldest, youngest and middle children face distinct challenges based on their relative position in the family. We have also come to recognise certain widespread family roles, such as the over-functioning ‘good daughter’ who compulsively adopts the role of mediator in a conflicted family, or else the ‘black sheep of the family’ whose chronic poor judgement, misbehaviour or self-destructiveness plays out the unacknowledged and unresolved denials, hurts and aggressions of the whole family. Such individuals are known as ‘the designated patient’, through whom the system expresses its sickness. Sorting out the disordered family system depends upon the diagnosis of its true condition. So the challenge to dysfunctional individuals and the naming of the disorder as a whole go together in righting a systemic wrong. The designated patient is not the only one with a problem, nor are they necessarily the optimal starting point for treatment.

The insights of family systems theory are now being applied more widely. They help in diagnosing and treating unhealthy corporate and workplace cultures, which can maintain themselves in dysfunction over time even if all the players change. Now the widespread fact of church conflict is being analysed using systems theory,¹ helping us understand the parish that cannot keep its clergy, for instance, or the priest who is chronically pastorally accident prone, or the run of clergy family disasters that plague particular congregations—like the Australian parish that in four successive incumbencies left no rectory family unscathed, with depression, two divorces, and a suicide.

All this can seem fanciful to some, who properly insist on the responsibility of each individual before God for repentance and amendment of life. If the parents eat sour grapes, must the children’s teeth be set on edge? (Jer 31:29; Ezek 18). Yet the systemic, holistic nature of both physical reality and human identity is now well established throughout the natural and human sciences. Similarly, Bible and tradition affirm that sin is a primordial disorder woven into human being both individually and collectively. The old and the new Adam are both collective realities. The whole people of God as well as its individual members are called to repent, just as the corrupting influence on individuals of the disordered whole is a constant of prophetic testimony, from the prophets of Israel to the prophets of the Reformation on to

today's feminist and liberation theologies. The Epistles approach disorders of faith and life in the earliest churches by ministering theologically and spiritually to the whole community, and not just denouncing individual wrongdoing. Their household codes (Eph 5:21-6:9; Col 3:18-4:1) mandate transformation of individuals through transformed understandings of the household and its relationships, as well as seeking to influence households through altering the behaviour of their individual members. Our struggle is not with flesh and blood so much as with powers and principalities in the heavenly places, which is New Testament wisdom about the systemic nature of evil understood as a system that co-opts individuals, neither reducible to individual acts of wrongdoing nor separable from them. It is necessary, in announcing God's judgement, to proclaim the Gospel to the angel of a church, not only to wrongdoers within it (Rev 2-3). That is, the Book of Revelation mandates a ministry to ecclesial culture and not just to individuals.

These insights have led me to question the way clergy sexual abuse is understood by the church. I have come to wonder whether the priest who abuses is in fact the 'designated patient' acting-out the abusive dynamics of a larger system in the church. Consequently, it concerns me that the increasingly widespread acknowledgement of systemic factors in producing abusive church environments is not reflected in our current modes of response. Specifically, it is disingenuous at best and sinister at worst for the church to limit its response to addressing individual behaviour, as the Codes of Good Practice and their attendant complaints procedures do. Seeking only to identify and discipline individual abusers, as if that alone will address the problem comprehensively, is to misrepresent and trivialise a more complex reality, and to risk creating scapegoats. Of course, scapegoats often draw attention to themselves precisely because of disordered behaviour, and may well need to be disciplined, but neither truth nor justice is served by loading all our sins and burdens onto them, thereby denying a wider problem in ecclesial faith and life.

Further, I suggest that these new institutional arrangements on the church's part, with codes, tribunals and a new pitch of clergy discipline, covering much wider issues than sexual abuse, are themselves potentially if not actually abusive. Under cover of a genuine crisis of sexual abuse, detailed codes of behaviour governing every aspect of ministry are now applied in many dioceses, with clergy being brought before investigators, some of whom are ex-police officers, and before committees and tribunals, based on complaints received from parishioners and members of the public that have nothing to do with sexual abuse. Even undergoing such investigation can incur stigma and guilt by association, hence risking irreparable harm to a ministry and to however many lives consequently.

So, for instance, parish conflicts which have nothing to do with sexual abuse, of the sort once handled by bishops pastorally or, if serious, by the mechanisms of beneficence avoidance canons, are now the bread and butter of these new committees of discipline. In the worst cases, disaffected parishioners are effectively assisted to harass disfavoured clergy by official means. Clergy have been brought undone by such processes, complaining with some justification of having been abused by the church.² Such a state of affairs serves the prince of lies, not the prince of peace.

Recent Australian voices

The systemic nature of the Roman Catholic Church's abuse problems is now the subject of a growing literature.³ A recent Australian book by former Sydney Auxiliary Bishop and national clergy abuse crisis front-man, Geoffrey Robinson, goes

to unprecedented lengths, however, and is so radical that one understands the bishop's decision to 'retire' before writing it.⁴

Bishop Robinson concentrates on immature patterns of relating between hierarchical levels in the church, with the papacy not properly grounded in a relationship of respectful mutuality with the bishops, and the clergy regularly dominating the laity. This state of affairs is supported by a 'creeping infallibility' which, in this era of fast communications, makes the papacy ever more obviously in control—also a detached and self-protective authority structure in the Vatican Curia that monitors and disciplines clergy and theologians who raise awkward questions, so the church as a whole finds it difficult officially to acknowledge error. This loyal son of the church is no advocate of anything-goes liberalism, which he sees as an overreaction to past excesses of the opposite sort. Rather, he advocates the development of mature relationships and mutual accountability in his church, with the Peter-figure uniquely placed to lead by example.

Significantly, Bishop Robinson links failures in church culture with distorted beliefs. One aspect is the way sexuality has been demonised and repressed, as in the imposition of celibacy on priests who have not received celibacy as a gift and calling from God. The underlying issue is God's portrayal in Australia's traditional Irish Catholic culture as a God of disapproval and judgement, of obedience and rule, rather than a God of love who, by a mix of tenderness and firm vocational leading, draws human beings to the fullness of their own being in Christ.

In Anglicanism the darkening of Biblical testimony to the goodness of human sexuality has been resisted at an official level, with clerical marriage from the sixteenth century representing a key turning point in Western Church attitudes.⁵ However, Anglican rejection of clerical celibacy probably had more to do with a growing Protestant distaste for what David Hume called 'the monkish virtues' than with any really positive affirmation of human sexuality—which Greek philosophical dualism regularly suppressed in the Christian imagination, overcoming the Biblical earthiness of embodied Old Testament faith.

I judge that Anglicanism remains ill-at-ease in bringing sexuality, spirituality and psychological maturity together. In Australia at least it also struggles with widespread patterns of unhealthy relating between clergy and laity, as Muriel Porter concludes.⁶ Caroline Miley, in an admittedly uneven and overblown discussion, nevertheless gets it right about a mood of resistance in middle-to-high Australian Anglicanism about necessary spiritual growth and attitudinal change.⁷ Aspects of Evangelical Anglicanism have received similar critical attention from writers such as Muriel Porter and Chris McGillion,⁸ who point to patterns of authority and aspects of belief recalling those Bishop Robinson identifies as problematic for Roman Catholicism. A challenge of this sort is now being investigated and worked through in the Diocese of Sydney, following a controversial Open Letter by the Revd Keith Mascord about aspects of diocesan culture which he and many of his respondents find abusive.⁹

The cult of managerialism and abusive culture in the church

At least part of the blame for abusive attitudes in the church—especially regarding the discipline of non-abusing clergy who are nevertheless deemed to be errant—can be attributed to the managerial culture that is increasingly annexing the ecclesial imagination in Australia and throughout the West. Managerial thinking, reducing the Gospel to a commodity that the church provides to spiritual consumers, is at the root of a lot of evangelistic talk nowadays, with sustained attention given to 'client

preferences' in worship and fellowship among whichever 'niche market'. Likewise, the culture of strategic planning and human resources management now determines how we evaluate ministerial effectiveness and hence treat our 'staff'. I have written elsewhere about the will to power that infects this latest version of modernity's characteristically controlling mindset, and how this cult of managerialism is inimical to a properly theological understanding of the church, its leadership and its mission.¹⁰

Managerialism flourishes in the church because its instrumental attitude towards people and its two-dimensional approach to the three-dimensional business of spiritual leadership sits well with aspects of Christian faith as practiced. The Conservative Protestant God who imputes salvation impersonally, leaving personal transformation and the formational context of the church as secondary and derivative, is well-suited to managerial culture,¹¹ as is the commodification of the Gospel under Liberal Protestant influence, seeing Christianity primarily in terms of resources for personal meaning¹²—in both respects seriously compromising Gospel and mission. Managerialism dismisses the Christian conviction that people matter as people, and it replaces an organic understanding of church and mission with an industrial and economic one. This state of affairs is widely experienced by clergy as abusive and destructive of vocation. God the bond of love is increasingly replaced by an authoritarian, arbitrarily willing God from the fourteenth century onwards, who is best served nowadays by managers rather than shepherds. This case is strongly argued by Richard H. Roberts, who dons the prophet's mantle in condemning the typically dominating, performance-orientated agenda of human resources management as a post-democratic, post-human project.¹³

In light of this insight I have come to see that clergy Codes of Good Practice, and their increasing deployment against clergy who are not sexual abusers, represent a characteristic example of how power-focussed managerial culture will always seek more control over staff. The goal of this trend is towards a compliant and inoffensive body of clergy who endorse 'management priorities'. The recipients of these controlling attentions are not necessarily the child abusers and sexual predators who should be dealt with, or even those clergy who demonstrate serious pastoral liabilities, but are regularly found among those more independent-minded clergy who will not conform themselves to the required superficial and submissive pastoral profile.

To some further reflections on problems of belief underlying dysfunctional church culture I now turn.

An abusive God?

Let me be clear at the outset: I am not saying that Christian orthodoxy is blighted by an abusive God, though many modern critical voices—feminist, liberationist and environmentalist, to name a few—testify to the regularly-poisonous legacy of mis-applied orthodox Christian belief. We have given our God a bad press. At the heart of Western imagination a deep-seated cultural and religious conviction has established itself that sees God as opposed to our embodied and limited nature, with a disapproving, sexless perfectionism widely held to be the Christian norm. Many internalise this disapproval thanks to harsh methods of child-rearing widely applied until recently in the West,¹⁴ projecting it onto God thereafter. God functioning as the superego on an internally repressive mission is nothing to do with the God of the Gospel, however—a God whose love issues in imaginative and moral transformation, rather than a god of will imposing a dry, fragile obedience that sucks the *juissance* out of life. Atheism is a suitable reaction to such a false god, and is often the necessary

first step in a life of faith illuminated by a different God, the real God, through the Gospel.¹⁵

A dangerously mixed message about God's love in tandem with divine disapproval is involved. The Gospel is invoked to deal with the burden of sin, but the law regularly supplants the Gospel when it comes to the living of Christian life. The Gospel is certainly gift and task, indicative and imperative, but even as a task it is always a gift, and being able to acknowledge the gift-like nature of all Christian life as grace and affirmation—even those aspects involving judgement and transformation—would go far to removing the mood of life-denying negativity that many associate with the church. This touches deep issues in the way we imagine human persons before God, and whether salvation is formal and forensic, or else more deeply personal and transformative in the cause of human wholeness—not the repression of our actual selves, but the healing and fulfilling of our actual selves.

The price of preferring a repressive dualism to a liberating holism in our theology, ethics and practice is a church in which flat, unimaginative, conflicted, false selves are overrepresented, manifesting a widespread Christian inability to accept the shadow side of our human nature. Former Church of Ireland priest and now family therapist Jeremy Young could no longer bear this awful version of faith and left the church. Among his Christian patients he regularly identifies the 'prison symptoms' of anger, blame, guilt, self-hatred and depression.¹⁶ Young zeroes in on the growing market for authoritative religious certainty in Western Christianity as a key symptom of our inability to live at ease with the incompleteness and regularly unresolved nature of life—with our inherently limited human nature, in fact—subjecting ourselves instead to the type of god that establishes our certainty and worth at the expense of a weak and despised 'other' upon whom all we cannot face in ourselves is projected.

With this range of psychological insights we are in the territory recently mapped to great effect by the French-American theorist René Girard and his most profound theological interpreter, the English Roman Catholic priest James Alison. At the heart of his comprehensive account of human culture, Girard places the mechanism of human meaning-creation by scapegoating, which serves to quieten the escalation of violence.¹⁷ The meaning that humans make for themselves, in every culture and religion, is what Girard calls 'the false sacred' and, like Karl Barth, he sees the Gospel as the critique of religion. The real sacred is affirming, inclusive and non-violent, whereas the false sacred subsumes the individual into collective processes of cultural creation which are typically violent and exclusive.

A widespread sense that the Christian God is abusive is due to the penal substitutionary theory of atonement. It is *not* my intention to reject this venerable theory, which can be traced back to St. Paul, but it is necessary to interpret it, ensuring that it serves rather than undermines the Gospel. The cross of Jesus Christ, rather than the price paid to an abusive God, is better understood as God's Trinitarian act reaching out to humanity through Jesus—a sacrifice outing and overcoming the sacrificial mechanism of every false sacred reality.

James Alison dismisses what he calls 'the Aztec view of atonement'. He points out that it is God's lifeblood poured out on the cross while we humans—and our culture, and our religion—adopt the role of wrathful deity. If we need blood to be spilled before we can abandon our wrath, or if self-harm is necessary before the depth of our grief can be accessed, then our God says 'I will give my blood', 'I will harm myself', 'I will pay to help you break through'. But it is our requirement, not God's. Hence an abusive god-image is overcome by the God disclosed in Jesus as loving, transforming and non-violent.¹⁸ Jesus takes away the sin of the world, but not as the

ultimate human sacrifice to an angry god. Rather, the cross demonstrates how far our loving God is prepared to journey into the far country to meet us and, through the death of God the Son, to do away with the universal psychological disorder of sacrificial, life-denying ‘false sacred’ religion. The Evangelical tradition needs to recover this more Trinitarian understanding of the cross as Jürgen Moltmann¹⁹ and, more recently, Peter Adam²⁰ remind us, so the death of Jesus in our place to save us can be reclaimed from the mistaken albeit widespread conception of God as abusive.

Divine judgement without divine abuse

At this point it is important to acknowledge the concern of those who believe that such arguments understate the reality of sin and misrepresent how the God of the Bible deals with it. Many, especially Evangelical Protestants, insist that a God without wrath toward the sinner, who lacks a righteousness fit to redress the evils of history, is neither Biblical nor effectual. I want to endorse the Biblical doctrine of judgement, but to ensure that we do so in a properly Biblical way. We must remember that if there is a God of wrath in the Bible, then this is the same Biblical God we know to be a loving God. If there is divine punishment for sins, it will be administered in a way that has nothing to do with typically human desires to get even and pay back the evil. If there is a divine justice, it will be a restorative justice. And if it has a retributive dimension, then that will serve as it does in the best expressions of human justice, which lead offenders to confront their wrongdoing as a necessary step on the way to their eventual repentance and the restoration of relationship. If our God punishes, the clue to imagining the nature of God’s punishment will be Jesus’ behaviour on the cross, rather than that of the vengeful mob which put him there.

Some will rightly counter that there is real vengeance in the Bible—not only in the Old Testament but also in Jesus’ teaching. The Old Testament witness to divine violence is not uniform, however, and is regularly challenged by other accounts of divine mercy. Is the foundational Judaeo-Christian testimony to God’s oneness—to God’s consistency, undividedness and covenant faithfulness—to be trusted? Could it be that God has a conflicted personality, like many abusers (i.e. not all bad, perhaps, but certainly bad enough)? Is the God of the Bible more like Jesus, or more like the Destroyer of the Egyptians, of Sodom and Gomorrah, of the Canaanite tribes? And as for Jesus, is the Synoptic apocalyptic Christ the last word on judgement in the Gospels? I look to John’s Gospel for an answer here.

The Gospel of John presents a view of divine judgement as the flip-side of revelation. The light and truth revealed in Jesus shows up the darkness and lies of this world. Judgement is the exposure of sin and evil, of false divinity and structural betrayal of the abundant life that Jesus brings. Jesus is the agent of God’s judgement (John 5:22, 27, 30; 8:16), so God’s judgement cannot be inconsistent with the rest of Jesus’ liberating project. Jesus’ mission of judgement is to bring the truth of God, while at the same time to reveal evil and confound its agents, ‘so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind’ (John 9: 39b). In this passage, from John’s account of Jesus and the man born blind, it is to be noted that a secure religious establishment is revealed to have gotten God completely wrong, and in this it is judged by Jesus.

The nature of Jesus’ judgement is evident in the way his own passion is portrayed by John as God’s great revelation of the true nature of good and evil. The punishment that Jesus underwent, rather than any punishment that Jesus might inflict on others, is declared decisive—‘Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out’. This is a judgement that when rightly understood is

seen to be attractive, not repulsive—‘And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself’ (John 12: 31).

Importantly, the ultimate nature of judgement is not properly understood in advance of Jesus’ ministry—or in advance of God sending the Holy Spirit to aid the church in a time of violence and persecution, according to John 16. In such a time it would be easy for the church to arrogate righteousness to itself alone, loading sin and the vengeful judgement craved by wounded human egos onto its enemies. But just as sin and righteousness need to be rescued from misunderstanding by Jesus, so too the church is invited to re-evaluate judgement—‘And when he [that is, the Advocate] comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement...’ (John 16: 8, see also vs. 9-11). It is his own ministry of judgement and liberation into which the risen Jesus incorporates the church when he pours out the Holy Spirit, reassuring them that ‘If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’ (John 20: 23). It would not do if we were to mistake this commission and invitation for a theology of judgement understood in terms of vengeance, which the whole Johannine arc of teaching on judgement appears to set aside.

Charles Wesley seems to have understood judgement along these Johannine lines, in terms of revelation rather than vengeance, according to his well-loved Advent hymn, ‘Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending’. The judgement of light upon darkness will be felt suitably keenly when the truth about God, Christ and humanity is revealed publicly at last in its fullness. A modern translation brings this out even more clearly.

Every eye shall now behold him
robed in awesome majesty;
those who have betrayed and sold him,
pierced and nailed him to the tree,
deeply shamed before him, deeply
shamed before him,
deeply shamed before him
shall the true Messiah see.²¹

And one of the things they will see is a vision of judgement very different from that which we humans inflict on one another.

What form of punishment might be involved if this is the nature of judgement and if, contrary to the false sacred, our God is not in the business of payback? Perhaps we could extrapolate from John’s Gospel, concluding that punishment comes with the fruits of living in darkness, so that God’s punishment for those who on account of their sin are revealed to be spiritually blind is experienced in the actual living-out of their disordered lives. Could this view of God’s punishment—as woven into the pains and burdens of a sinfully deluded life—be entailed when Jesus declares that misguidedly pious religious leaders ‘have already received their reward’? (Matt 6:1-6). Those who condemned the man born blind in John, Chapter 9 did not at that stage recognise their fault, but perhaps living with the consequences of flawed attitudes and stubborn choices, in a life of anxiety, emptiness and bitterness, is the way a loving God helps people come to their senses. There is, as I have suggested, a place for an element of retributive justice as part of the journey that equips people for becoming parties to restorative justice.

Further extrapolation could lead us to imagine eternal damnation as *self-selected* alienation from God—an outcome with which God would concur, though without it being God’s own vengeful punishment of the sinner. This is the sort of ‘hell’ that C.S. Lewis imagined in *The Great Divorce*,²² with some of the inmates thinking it was really heaven, and which they could have left at any time to go to heaven had they wished.

There is one obvious problem with this attempt at a non-violent account of divine judgement and punishment, however. If God’s punishment is experienced as the cost of living under sin’s tyranny, what of those more sinned against than sinning, and especially the victims of sexual abuse, whose suffering is logically entailed by sinners remaining and acting in the darkness that God’s judgement has revealed? Could my attempt at a more positive account, seeking a Scriptural route beyond a violently punitive god, actually make things worse for victims of abuse? I suggest not, and invoke the traditional Christian conviction that, without liking it, God nevertheless allows human sin and its consequences as the price of human free will. This is a cost God asks us to bear for the greater blessings that human freedom brings. But God does not stand back and leave us to our fate. By helping us bear and heal life’s wounds in the present, also through the promise to redeem and transform them into glory in eternity, God helps victims find a way beyond their suffering. The fact that faith abides for so many victims shows that they know God to be neither the cause of their suffering nor a passive bystander as they undergo it but, rather, that God is their partner in bearing it and their hope of moving beyond it.

There is certainly a terrible burden to be borne by victims of human sin and violence, including sexual abuse, as the judgement of God is revealed in the bitter outworking of human sinfulness. Only God’s incarnate solidarity with the victims of abuse in God’s crucified Son, promising the liberation and healing of victims through the resurrection and the outpoured Spirit of New Creation, makes faith possible in the face of such human evil. Likewise the self-loathing and alienation of many abusers, or else their empty megalomaniacal isolation—all of which they may stubbornly choose to maintain eternally—shows that the God whose light reveals our darkness in judgement is also punishing human sin. Not as an active punitive agent, however, but as the stubborn force of love against which we pray and hope that all evil will eventually batter itself into submission.

If such an understanding as this, following hints in John’s Gospel and elsewhere, is reasonable and credible, it is also *necessary* if we are to claim back divine judgement as part of the good news. Otherwise, widespread misapprehension will continue to greet our presentation of the Gospel, as it has throughout the West since the Enlightenment—which opted for tolerance, universalism and humanism, and for providential deism, over a religion that seemed obsessed with sin and sacrifice.²³ Thanks to that obsession the church helped prepare the ground for its own rejection throughout today’s West. This was a profound theological and spiritual failure that we can no longer afford. Indeed, unless the Christian imagination begins to be freed from this error, all our earnest talk about mission today will remain largely ineffectual.

Abuse, the clergy and the church

I am suggesting that we find the emotional root of abuse in the church when we tolerate and even perpetuate God’s portrayal as the disapproving enemy of human ordinariness, including human sexuality—a God committed to overshadowing and punishing us rather than journeying with us through human depths of which God has no fear to the fullness of our human life with God. Clergy formed in such a toxic

theological and spiritual environment—and the church culture of immaturity, resentment and abuse it fosters—are more likely to punish in others the softness, the weakness, the child, the feminine, which they have been unable to honour and accept in themselves.

Here is the resentment of a thwarted self which Friedrich Nietzsche identified. He extolled the Greek divinities as swaggering, life-affirming bullies, favourably comparing them with paltry Christianity—a religion for losers, making do with a slave morality that breeds a Christian emotional underground of repressive rancour. Nietzsche is right about the rancour, and the failure of a religion that infantilises people, with ‘ascetic priests’ dispensing pastoral escapism rather than helping people grow to emotional maturity.²⁴ But he gets the cause wrong. It is not that Christianity has killed the real sacred, which he believes to be violent and self-assertive, in favour of a pallid imitation. Rather, the false sacred, in the person of an abusive (false) god, has entrenched a bitter and defeated attitude in the church, which emerges in resentful, hard-done by, abusive behaviour of all sorts. The real sacred has nothing to do with this at all, however. The God of Jesus Christ does not rob us of authentically human life but is its great champion and guarantor. Rather than a dominating divine individual creating a race of cowering, vengeful human individuals, in a dynamic rightly identified by Nietzsche, we have a God of love and relationship whose will is to build a church of mature, emotionally healthy, confident and accountable human mutuality.

Our response to abuse

As well as contributing to the cause of abuse, dysfunctional church culture is also evident in aspects of its preferred treatment. I have indicated that closing ranks against sexually errant clergy and scapegoating them is an inadequate and in fact quite disordered response. Owning-up to the emotional harm encoded in beliefs, practices and structures is necessary in addition to the properly firm, just and transparent treatment of those who have offended, so the church as a whole can move beyond psychological immaturity in terms of sexuality and relationships of power.

Importantly, it is not acceptable for churches to assume that their beliefs and structures are preserved infallibly from distortion so that sin adheres only to individual Christians. In the sixteenth century the Reformation pressed this claim of error in faith and morals on the Roman Church, while the Roman Church at the Council of Trent denied it. As for Protestant Churches subsequently, the belief that all corruptions were purged at the Reformation dies hard, so that Protestant beliefs and structures are regularly declared to be sin free, in a way that demonstrates little difference from the spiritual arrogance that Protestantism regularly condemns in Roman Catholicism. Whenever a church, be it Roman, Protestant or Anglican, seeks its institutional preservation by hiding its sin and dysfunction, like any corrupt business or government, it demonstrates a theological and spiritual loss of nerve in opting for such purely worldly thinking, as if God were not real. Such churches plainly prefer lies and self-deception over judgement, repentance, and conversion, all of which are significant marks of authentic faith among the people of God.

One important sign of this repentance is that greater maturity of relationship is encouraged between clergy, clergy with bishops, and clergy with laity in the Anglican Church as well as the Roman one. With this must come a greater freedom to name the deep problems openly, rather than more-or-less fearfully playing along with the false optimism and the managerial superficiality with which deep issues are often addressed. The pastoral ministry needs to be reclaimed from today’s widespread

ecclesial agenda of institutional survivalism, to serve the transformation of Christian imaginations, pastors, congregations and dioceses towards spiritual maturity.

In responding to abuse we must take care not to deepen our perceived hostility towards human sexuality. But we must also avoid the overcompensation of refusing to challenge further sexual deregulation. We have quite enough of that today in response to culture's obsession with and commodification of sexuality—though strangely at the expense of the sparkle that a healthily-inhabited sexual nature can bring to one's whole range of human relationships. With the sociologist Anthony Giddens I am simply advocating 'the flowering of Eros in communicative love and friendship'.²⁵

A further challenge faces us now that proper, loving and joyful physical relating with children is increasingly off-limits in the wider society, with any touching of other people's children now widely regarded as suspicious. I have in mind the sort of physical contact that once seemed so naturally and properly a part of ministry, as when children take the priest's hand during a social gathering, or stretch out their arms to be picked up during the informality of a typical peace greeting in the Parish Eucharist. Detailed rules now govern all clergy interaction with children, however. This concern arises in tandem with society's growing sexualization of children—a seeming disparity resolved by attending to the unrivalled power in today's West of the commodity form. According to sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, human persons are increasingly commodified in the West. This is true for children, too, and it works in a particular way. As parents and other adults increasingly keep their distance from children, for fear of risking abuse allegations, children are rendered more and more socially isolated. Thus they become the unbonded, free-floating, more easily programmable consumers of commodities that the global economy most needs them to become.²⁶ Here the church ought to be able to tell a different story, modelling a genuine and joyful community of free, emotionally healthy adults and deeply loved, integrated children.

Conclusion

In this discussion I have linked unhealthy and immature approaches to relationships and authority in the church with a widespread, harmful image of God accompanying a set of beliefs, practices and structures widely perceived to be hostile to human thriving. The result for many is a church that is turned inward, anti-life, and in denial about its own crisis while continuing to claim the moral high ground in society. Some individuals within the church's ordained ministry become abusive, just as children subject to abuse can become abusers themselves. Institutional failures to respond in the past, and the abusive deployment of more recent disciplinary means designed to solve the problem, perpetuate rather than heal the abuse. The solution must surely involve

1. continuing to investigate, discipline and, where the law may have been broken, bring to police attention the clergy who are accused of sexual abuse, involving properly objective and reliable church procedures, though without making scapegoats of the accused to draw attention away from the more widespread ecclesial roots of abuse, and without misusing the regulatory, investigative and disciplinary apparatus set up in response to sexual abuse against clergy who are not abusive;
2. theological reflection on how the God disclosed in Jesus Christ and at work through the Holy Spirit for the healing and liberating of human life can be

- more fully known in the church, while the symbols, attitudes and institutional forms reflecting the false sacred are unmasked;
3. a commitment from bishops and synods to foster spiritual maturity, honesty, openness and respectful mutual listening at every level of church life;
 4. a commitment from bishops and synods to admit institutional dysfunction and confront the issue of abuse systemically;
 5. a review commissioned, at Standing Committee of General Synod level, of existing discipline protocols and procedures against the charge that they are being misused in an abusive manner.

Clergy who have abused and victimised others emerge not from a vacuum but from the church's culture. It is by attending to that culture, and the spiritual distortions it has accommodated, that we will begin to cut the nerve that victimises and abuses.

The Reverend Dr Scott Cowdell is Associate Professor of Theology at Charles Sturt University and Canon Theologian of the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn

This article has been peer reviewed, and is deemed to meet the criteria for original research as set out by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training.

Notes

¹ See for example Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems*, The Alban Institute, Washington DC., 1993; Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, Guildford Press, London & New York, 1985; Michael H. Crosby, *The Dysfunctional Church: Addiction and Codependency in the Family of Catholicism*, Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, IN., 1991; David B. Lott (ed.), *Conflict Management in Congregations*, The Alban Institute, Bethesda, MD., 2001.

² See for example Louise Greentree, 'Confusing Abuse with Misconduct', *Marketplace*, 12 December 2007, p. 7.

³ For a powerful discussion reflecting on the American Church crisis see Donald Cozzens, *Sacred Silence: Denial and the Crisis in the Church*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2002. Serious psychological work on Roman Catholic Church culture and clericalism has been done by the German priest, theologian and psychotherapist Eugen Drewermann, at the cost of official censure. His works are not yet translated into English, so I am indebted to a comprehensive overview by Matthew Beier, *A Violent God-Image: An Introduction to the Work of Eugen Drewermann*, Continuum, London & New York, 2004.

⁴ Geoffrey Robinson, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*, John Garratt Publishing, Melbourne, 2007.

⁵ See Muriel Porter, *Sex, Marriage and the Church: Patterns of Change*, Dove, Melbourne, 1996.

⁶ Muriel Porter, *Sex, Power and the Clergy*, Hardie Grant Books, Melbourne, 2003.

⁷ Caroline Miley, *The Suicidal Church: Can the Anglican Church be Saved?*, Pluto Press, Melbourne, 2002.

⁸ Muriel Porter, *The New Puritans: The Rise of Fundamentalism in the Anglican Church*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2006; Chris McGillion, *The Chosen*

Ones: The Politics of Salvation in the Anglican Church, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005.

⁹ See the Open Letter website:

http://www.openletterupdates.org/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1
(accessed 19 January 2008).

¹⁰ Scott Cowdell, *God's Next Big Thing: Discovering the Future Church*, John Garratt Publishing, Melbourne, 2004, Chapter 6, pp. 191-227. See also Stephen Pattison, *The Faith of the Managers: When Management Becomes Religion*, Cassell, London, 1997; Richard H. Roberts, *Religion, Theology and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.

¹¹ John Milbank, 'Stale Expressions: The Management-Shaped Church', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, Vol 21.1, 2008, pp. 117-28.

¹² Bernd Wannewetsch, 'Inwardness and Commodification: How Romanticist Hermeneutics Prepared the Way for the Culture of Managerialism—A Theological Analysis', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, Vol 21.1, 2008, pp. 26-44.

¹³ Richard H. Roberts, 'Personhood and Performance: Managerialism, Post-Democracy and the Ethics of "Enrichment"', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, Vol 21.1, 2008, pp. 61-82.

¹⁴ For the far-reaching harm this can do, see Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*, translated by Hildegarde & Hunter Hannum, second edition, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1984.

¹⁵ For a fuller discussion of these matters, see my book *A God For This World*, Continuum, London & New York, 2000.

¹⁶ Jeremy Young, *The Cost of Certainty: How Religious Conviction Betrays the Human Psyche*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 2004.

¹⁷ See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, translated by Patrick Gregory, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD., 1977.

¹⁸ James Alison, 'An Atonement Update' in *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-in*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 2006, pp. 50-67.

¹⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, SCM, London, 1974.

²⁰ Peter Adam, 'Trinity Essential to Understanding the Atonement', *The Melbourne Anglican*, December 2007, p. 17.

²¹ #263 in *Together in Song: Australian Hymn Book II*, HarperCollins Religious, Melbourne, 1999.

²² C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, Geoffrey Bles, London, 1946.

²³ On the particular problem that the juridical-penal model of the atonement became for the Enlightenment mind (and continues to be for many unbelievers today), see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, The Belknap Press, Cambridge MA. & London, 2007, pp. 78-9, 650.

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), translated by Douglas Smith, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, especially 2/22 (p. 72-73), p. 97, 3/15 (pp. 104-105).

²⁵ Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA., 1992, p. 167ff.

²⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, 'On Postmodern Uses of Sex' in *The Individualized Society*, Cambridge, Polity, 2001, pp. 220-237, especially pp. 232-236.