

The background of the cover is a religious icon depicting the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child. Mary is shown from the chest up, wearing a blue mantle over a red garment, with a blue headscarf. She has a serene expression and a halo. The Christ Child is visible below her, also with a halo. In the foreground on the left, there is a hanging lamp with a glowing orange flame and several decorative, colorful glass or ceramic spheres with intricate floral patterns in blue, red, and white. The overall lighting is warm and golden.

Witness and Record On Complicity and Clergy Abuse

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Forewords by Katherine Archer
Amos Guiora
Hermina Nedelescu
Melanie Sakoda

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Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 19, 2025

Preface: Scott Douglas Jacobsen

We need more conversation. Not every moment should be devoted to each controversial subject under the Sun, life would be unbearable. It needs variety to balance the existential spreadsheet. Other times, the opportunity arises to take on a topic. Eight or so years ago, I wrote about some scandals, including clergy-perpetrated abuse, within the Orthodox Church. Many years later, while traveling the United States, this led to a new collaboration on the subject matter of clergy-perpetrated abuse, primarily sexual abuse. I owe this continuation of the project to two women victim-advocate of note over pizza, San Diego heat, and a steep hike.

Two years ago, due to external impetus from these survivors and advocates, a new wind was thrown into the sails of this topical ship. The conversation began anew on clergy-perpetrated abuse. Most knew of the Roman Catholic Church scandals. Few, due to the overwhelm of the Catholic Church, focused on the Eastern Orthodox Church. Even though, Orthodoxy remains one of the largest Christian communions globally. Adherents care about it. They, probably, care about the integrity of the faith. Therefore, likely, they should concern themselves with clergy-perpetrated abuse, because the integrity of the faith is affected deeply by those in liturgical authority abusing the imbued authority within the faith.

This first anthology assembles a multi-jurisdictional set of interviews to examine clergy abuse and institutional responses. The primary emphasis is Orthodoxy contexts and comparative discussion across religious settings. The core material consists of advocacy perspectives, first-person accounts, and professional analyses. We need thoughtful clergy to speak out. The core problems: sexual abuse, spiritual abuse, power-asymmetrical relationships, and failure in impartial authoritative mechanisms of consequence, acting or even existing, in the first place.

Several interviews focus on documentation and pattern-finding, on archiving, on their personal narrative or experience, on their research, and some of the dynamics of effects on adult women and men, and girls and boys. Every follower is a potential victim, witness, survivor, or advocate, but, on the first, the profile of probabilities differs by age and gender. We have some new genuine answers about this problem. Many well-meaning secularists, laity believers, faithful clergy, academic scholars, credentialed theologians, targeted survivors, and passionate advocates, know the issue.

They know the issue more because of cross-fertilization in conversation. This anthology presents a partial record of this in a structured, long-form format. We need more conversation, and some conversations matter more in certain times. For Orthodoxy, this conversations seems to have met its moment in its autocephalous trans-national *zeitgeist*, after a time of radical and confrontational criticism of religious dogma in much of the West, but before the ongoing and necessary reform to deal with substantive points made while responding, even ignoring, that which always was and remained air to the core tenets of the faith. Which is to say, the conversation needs us, as much as some of us need it.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 22, 2026

Foreword: Katherine Archer

The following volume documents over two years of interviews directly related to the troubling reality of clerical abuses, and especially abuses within the Orthodox Christian churches. Scott Douglas Jacobsen solicited the expertise of scholars, academics, a law professor, an author, advocates, and survivors.

Within the United States, Orthodox Christianity has been viewed as a small fringe group, unfamiliar to many journalists and the broader media. As a result, abuses by clergy within the Orthodox churches have received little public attention. Some Orthodox Christian communities can be smaller and predominantly ethnic, creating additional barriers to abuse disclosures. However, worldwide, Orthodox Christians are the third-largest Christian community.

The clergy abuses within the Roman Catholic Church that were brought into the light in the past 50 years may have overshadowed larger questions about abuses in other religious environments, including the Orthodox Christian churches. The requirement of clergy celibacy was wrongly identified in some circles as the reason that some Catholic priests sexually abuse congregants, including women and children. In reality, any community can attract men and women who will misuse their authority to sexually abuse other adults and/or children. At the root, sexual abuse is about power and control and is violence, sexualized. Sexuality has little to do with it. When this is misunderstood, it benefits offenders. The following interviews explain these dynamics.

Religious communities can become ripe environments for abuses to occur because sexual abuse is often decoupled from the misuse of power. Offenders may take refuge in loving communities where they can claim change and ask for “forgiveness” for “sexual sins” while seeking power and influence in the capacity of ministry roles—evidence that such an individual has not changed at all. Most offenders will claim that they are the actual victim and recount stories of harm and heartbreak, crying crocodile tears while scanning the room for the next target. Offenders will not stop until someone *makes them stop*.

Many Christians are quite naive about the dynamics of abuse and the deep, lasting harm inflicted by men and women who choose to abuse. It is unloving to require zero accountability for offenders or to join such individuals in maligning their victims. To offer support to those who have caused deep, unacknowledged harm and pain to other human beings helps no one. Repentance means rightly naming and acknowledging the harm one has perpetrated and never attempting a ministry, chaplaincy, teaching, coaching or therapeutic role.

Missing from these interviews are the voices of current Orthodox Christian clergy, many of whom cannot or will not speak openly about abusive clergy brethren, laity they have known who have experienced deep harm, their own experiences, or their own frustration in many cases with a hierarchy that does not adequately address abuses. Sometimes, clergy themselves experience abuse by hierarchy. The silence of the clergy speaks volumes.

Where do we go from here? When an allegation is made, Orthodox Church administrations should utilize independent third-party investigatory bodies, with trauma-informed investigators trained to interview both victims and offenders. Clergy should be receiving extensive training in trauma-informed pastoral care and be required to do their own deep inner work. Those who feel

called to ministry roles can inflict greater harm when their own inner lives are unexamined and when they become more than servant-leaders, pushing to go first or to sit at large, well-laden banquet tables. Orthodox Christian laity should be nourished in Scripture and Tradition and be formed first and foremost in Christ. From this will flow intentional loving communities that do not overly burden a priest beyond his role in serving the sacraments. Clericalism undergirds clergy abuse. We need to develop a greater capacity for listening and for all, clergy and laity, to support each other in the one body of the Church.

Over the decades, a widening cultural lens has expanded to encompass religious environments and systems of harm beyond the Roman Catholic Church. Melanie Sakoda, Cappy Larson, and Dr. Ellen Gvosdev courageously spoke out about abuse in the Orthodox Christian context beginning in the 1990s. However, we are only now beginning to hear more direct survivor voices within the Orthodox Christian communities. There is always a cost to speaking. Thank you, Scott Douglas Jacobsen, for providing a space for dialogue.

Katherine Archer

January 21, 2026

Feast of St. Maximus the Confessor

Foreword: Clergy Abuse by Dr. Amos N. Guiora, Ph.D., J.D.

In this extraordinary volume Scott Jacobsen presents the reader with a wide-range of conversations with an eclectic group of individuals, mostly---but not exclusively---survivors of sexual abuse by their clergy.

In full disclosure, while I was interviewed by Scott these words are written from the perspective not of “interviewee” but, rather, potential reader. In other words, it is my hope in this brief forward to provide you, the reader, with a 35,000-foot view of this prodigious and impressive undertaking.

For all the obvious reasons, this is not a light nor easy read. That, clearly, is not its purpose. The conversations with survivors are painful, regardless of the years passed since the faith leader abused his status and the trust of the survivor and his/her parents. Sadly, the accounts are numbingly familiar, recalling any number of similarly disturbing accounts. What distinguishes this undertaking is the conversations extend beyond the unforgiveable assault to a broader analysis of: how the hell did this happen, and the hell does this continue to happen.

In that vein, the reader owes a profound debt of gratitude to Scott and more importantly his interlocutors for their willingness to engage in the painful question extending beyond their personal injury and harm. Both parties are to be warmly acknowledged for the candid, searingly honest, way they address the larger issue.

My research, and the reason Scott initially contacted me and subsequently asked me to write these brief words, focuses on those who because of their status know of harm, yet choose to ignore danger to present and future survivors alike. In doing so, they make the decision to protect the institution. Consequences be damned.

These are the enablers.

Without them, perpetrators would not be able to commit the egregious acts detailed in this volume. That is a reality confronted by survivors literally everywhere, as the ecosystem of enabling creates the environment whereby perpetrators can act with immunity and impunity.

It is in that context the interviews in this volume must be read. To not do so is to miss a unique opportunity to be educated on a critical issue demanding our engagement and attention. Otherwise, what you read in these pages will continue unabated and it will only be a matter of time before we read more accounts.

Demanding accountability of enablers is an “all hands-on deck” undertaking, essential to giving the voiceless a voice.

It is, then, in this spirit the voices you will encounter in the pages ahead must be read.

Dr. Amos N. Guiora, J.D., Ph.D.

Salt Lake City, Utah

September 19, 2025

Foreword: Hermina Nedelescu, Ph.D.

This is a must-read volume to understand the reality of the sexual abuse crisis in the Orthodox Church.

While I have been working with Scott Jacobsen for two years now, I am writing this foreword as a reader looking into the Orthodox context that I no longer recognize as an authentic and credible Orthodox tradition. I am Romanian-born, so I am Orthodox. I am not a convert. In the Orthodox tradition, the priesthood has an important meaning with high standards.

Clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse in the Orthodox Church is distinct from abuse in many Protestant settings. It is more closely comparable to traditions such as Judaism and Islam, where the spiritual authority is deeply relational to its “students”, “disciples”, “spiritual children”. Historically, the Orthodox priesthood was understood first as a vocation of service, a theological orientation that in contemporary contexts has increasingly given way to structures emphasizing clerical power and authority. More importantly for understanding clergy sexual abuse in Orthodox settings, members of the clergy represent Christ in our midst, theologically, and serve as spiritual fathers to their “spiritual children” (e.g., their faithful, congregants, parishioners).

In the Orthodox tradition, clergy are explicitly addressed as “Father” or “spiritual father,” while the faithful are understood as their “spiritual children.” When a spiritual father seeks sexual contact with a spiritual child, this is analogous to *incest* because of theological nature of the spiritual father–child relationship. This relationship is one of profound spiritual intimacy and trust and should never involve sexual contact. However, throughout history, there are accounts of these “relationships” involving sex, which today we know as abuse of power. In my analysis of adult clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse, I observed cases in the Protestant context almost always resulting in complete rape, whereas in the Orthodox tradition, only the most egregious cases of sexual abuse result in complete rapes, sometimes multiple rapes. It is well known that the level of sexual abuse by spiritual fathers toward their spiritual children does not correlate positively with the injury endured, with even cases of sexual abuse (with no physical contact) leading to severe injury.

This theological reality within Orthodoxy renders any sexual contact between a spiritual father and a spiritual child not merely analogous to incest, but also more readily identifiable as unequivocally wrong, with the responsibility belonging entirely to the predator father. The Church is embedded in a culture, in a society, and in our society today, we recognize incest when a “father” seeks and achieves sexual contact with his “child”.

Throughout Orthodox history, individuals across professions, including physicians, psychiatrists, legislators, and senior bureaucrats, have turned to their spiritual fathers for moral and spiritual guidance. We must admit that the universe is made of (1) material matter and (2) immaterial consciousness or what many faith-based traditions refer to as the “spiritual” dimension. I am a neuroscientist and a theologian. In the neurosciences, we recognize the fact that consciousness exists. The Orthodox Church, too, historically, understood the immaterial dimension. It is truly unfortunate that the Orthodox Church has sunk to the current levels where sexual violence is fully enabled by those in positions of power who have forgotten the meaning of the priesthood.

On a positive note, now that we know this reality, people can take precautions to stay safe.

Hermina Nedelescu, PhD

Scripps Research | Center for Theology and Natural Sciences (CTNS) | Prosopon Healing

January 19, 2026

Foreword: Melanie Sakoda

When Scott first told me about his plans for a book and asked me to write this foreword I was honored. But I was also very excited because I have thought for years that abuse in the Orthodox churches has not been adequately covered by the media in the United States.

I began investigating Orthodox abuse in 1991, when I learned that very young boys and girls at my San Francisco parish were hurt by a layman with prior convictions. In this foreword, I will explore the changes that I have seen between that beginning and now.

As a believer, after learning of the abuse at my parish I naturally went to priests that I knew and trusted for advice. The response across the board was “Abuse is unknown in the Orthodox Church!” Since the convicted criminal was a recent convert to Orthodoxy, my attention was temporarily deflected from the Eastern churches. However, the assertions of the clerics I consulted did not stand up to scrutiny. The abuser at my parish had connections to Orthodox clergymen who were also perpetrators. I discovered sexual abuse was not “unknown” in the Orthodox world after all.

Orthodoxy is one of the three major divisions of Christianity, along with Catholicism and Protestantism. Unfortunately, in this country, it is hopelessly divided administratively. There are 14 separate Eastern Orthodox jurisdictions in the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops alone. There are also many smaller Orthodox groups that do not belong to the Assembly. The churches are largely separated along ethnic lines, but there are further divisions that were created by the fall of Russia to communism, as well as the divisive issue – for some believers --of whether Christmas is celebrated on the 25th of December or the 7th of January.

I suspect that it is because of those divisions that when abuse is uncovered in one Orthodox jurisdiction, it has not been viewed as a significant media story with “legs.” Yet the attitudes, and the problems, are consistent across all Orthodox communities. I am hoping that Scott’s efforts will lead to a greater interest in reporters exposing abuse in the Orthodox world.

Of course, in 1991 it was not as easy to investigate a person or community as it is today. For my friends and I, our tools were the phone and in-person visits to courthouses and other places where we could access information. While there are downsides to the internet, it has certainly made it a lot harder for clergy sexual abuse to be covered up in today’s world, and for that I am profoundly grateful.

In 1991, there were also no policies in place in my diocese, or any other Orthodox diocese, about how incidents of sexual abuse and misconduct were to be investigated and addressed. My jurisdiction developed the first guidelines of which I am aware. As the years have passed, more Orthodox churches --but not all --have adopted policies. Universal guidelines, as well as removing the tremendous power of the local bishop to ignore these policies, and making sure that the guidelines are actually followed, remains a problem to address going forward.

Years after 1991, armed with documentation of an Orthodox priest who was convicted of child sexual abuse, the arrest of two other Orthodox clergyman for the same crime, and the incident at our parish in San Francisco, my friends and I started a website for survivors of abuse in the

Orthodox churches, Pokrov.org. The site went live in June of 1999 and continued to update until March of 2020. Pokrov included a database of offenders. During the years we were active, we grew our list of accused perpetrators 98%, and provided support to countless victims and their family members. Again, it was the internet that allowed us to comfort the abused, and expose the abusers.

Of course, not everything was rosy. When we began publishing Pokrov, the backlash was immediate, we were vilified, and there were even death threats. We had very few allies, although we were supported by Dr. Ellen Gvosdev. Ellen was the daughter of an Orthodox priest who was married to an Orthodox priest. She also had a PhD focusing on sexual abuse. Her articles on the problem of sexual abuse among the Orthodox were among the first educational pieces on our site.

As time went on, we began to hear from survivors and family members of victims about other instances of Orthodox sexual abuse. We also began to gain respect among many in the Orthodox world for our accurate and un-sensationalized reporting. More and more, the Orthodox were checking out our site, and sending us information about other cases.

Today's advocates and victims are still likely to experience pushback, but I think enough information has become publicly available that it is not quite as bad as it was in 1999. Yet, there is still room for more education. Many of the Orthodox faithful, those without firsthand experience, continue to believe that because Eastern clergy are allowed to marry that their religion cannot possibly have the same problems as the Catholics. Of course, abuse is about power and control, not about sex. In addition, most sexual abuse of children is committed by adult men in relationships with adult women – such as a married clergyman. Moreover, a priest is already afforded an automatic presumption of safety.

In the Orthodox world, my experience is that it is even more difficult for victims to come forward than in Catholic communities. Parishes are by and large small, with only one Sunday liturgy. Within the various jurisdictions, people are also more likely to know one another, or even to be related by blood, marriage or rite. In this intimate world the details of the crime may make it all too apparent who is complaining about a respected – even beloved – cleric. This problem remains. My hope for the future is that as more information illustrates that abuse is not “unknown” in the Eastern churches, it will ease.

As I grew older, I began to wonder if anyone would continue this work after I was gone. My concern was pressing, since true progress still seemed so far away.

Thankfully, new voices have begun to speak out: Bojan Jovanović in Serbia and three women in the US, Sally Zakhari, Dr. Hermina Nedelescu and Katherine Archer. Bojan is the General Secretary of the Union of Christians of Croatia. Sally has a nonprofit for survivors of abuse in the Coptic Orthodox Churches, a group with which I am associated. Hermina and Katherine have founded ProsoponHealing.com. This site expands on the work begun on Pokrov, including a database of public information about abusers within Orthodoxy.

Academic work on abuse in the Orthodox churches has also continued to expand beyond Ellen's writings. In fact, Hermina is involved with this. She is a neuroscientist at Scripps Research in

San Diego. Her work is focused on substance use with emphasis on how the brain's neurocircuitry supports substance abuse. She has expanded her work to include the connection between sexual assault-induced PTSD and substance use and abuse.

In addition to Hermina, today's advocates and survivors are also lucky to be supported in their work by allies such as Professor David Pooler and Attorney Amos Guiora. Professor Pooler studies the sexual abuse of adults by clergy at Baylor University. Attorney Guiora, who researches the question of enablers, has written a book entitled Armies of Enablers: Survivor Stories of Complicity and Betrayal in Sexual Assaults.

While there is still much work to be done on the subject of abuse in the Orthodox world, since I began this work in 1991, there has been progress. Information about abuse is more readily available. Many Orthodox jurisdictions have developed policies for dealing with sexual abuse and misconduct. Going forward, with the help of journalists like Scott, advocates and survivors like Bohan, Sally, Hermina, and Katherine, and academics and researchers like Hermina, Professor Pooler, and Attorney Guiora, I am optimistic that more progress will be made.

I thank Scott for publishing this book about where we have been. I believe that it will also point the way to how we can make things better for Orthodox sexual abuse survivors in the future. While the situation has improved over the last 26 years, there is still far to go. The work that is being done by Scott, and the others who may follow in his footsteps, will hopefully be a big factor in changing uninformed attitudes down the road.

Melanie Sakoda

October 14, 2025

The Good Men Project

Dr. Hermina Nedelescu on Clergy-Perpetrated Sexual Abuse

Dr. Hermina Nedelescu is a Romanian-born neuroscientist. Her research work is concerned with the neurobiological control of abnormal behaviors and brain functions relevant to human psychopathology. The majority of this work is directed at understanding brain mechanisms that underly substance use and abuse with emphasis on approach and avoidance of drug-paired environments. Another line of research is directed at investigating the neurobiological dysregulation caused by sexual assault-induced PTSD and suicide with hopes to inform therapeutic treatments.

For her theological work, she is training with the Center for Theology and Natural Sciences at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, where she leverages her expertise in neuroscience to develop a theological anthropology based on the Christian Orthodox tradition. This research is focused on the topic of desire vs. dysregulated desire leading to abuse.

She is an instructor for Stepping Higher Inc., a faith-based organization funded by the County of San Diego Behavior Health Services Department to teach and support clergy, pastors, and behavioral health providers who minister to people suffering from substances use disorders, substance abuse, as well as, other psychological addictions or mental illnesses.

She is actively involved in the state legislative efforts to protect adults from clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. She is co-founder of [Prosopon Healing](#), a resource site for Orthodox Christian victims/survivors of clergy abuse.

In her free time, she enjoys microscope photography and drawing brain cells to share the beautiful structure and function of the brain with the general public through art exhibits.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, I [wrote some articles based on other minor news reportage on abuse within the church communities](#). You sent an email to connect us. Thank you very much for doing so, the work you're doing is valid, salient, and should inspire others across the Orthodox community to seek justice in cases of legitimate abuse. While taking the time to investigate some of the claims, the general finding across church abuse dynamics is mostly men with unquestionable, so unquestioned, religious authority abusing mostly laity, where most of the victims will be the women congregants. There have been some newer publications within the news about [the abuse committed by nuns](#), in [Canada for example](#). However, in general, there is progress, [as justice is happening](#). It seems moot to make a hypothetical (false) moral quandary, as is common in colloquial or casual conversation: 'It shouldn't happen in the first place,' or at all. I get the sentiment. However, it's beside the point. Whether people proclaim the basest drives and instincts, or shout the highest formulations of popular ethical truisms, the reality: people have been abused. It's a 'nice thought,' to think 'this shouldn't happen at all' - naturally, or of course, but ethics only has meat on the bone if it reflects the empirical reality to some degree. I am more concerned with first-hand reports, claimants, cover-ups, theological justifications, community intimidation, legal censure, and such, of sexual abuse and harassment. The rarity is individuals who have been victimized to be both persistent and not letting minor crimes go away. The tendency is to gaslight individuals' real sentiment towards abuse as if not real, and to downplay the moral reality of crimes committed by leaders, often male, claiming to represent a moral

majority or superminority of some form. Which is all to say, I see you in the morally courageous minority. Now, with all of this said, I have to ask, “What makes you different in the context of the Greek Orthodox Church?”

Dr. Hermina Nedelescu: First, I was born into the Romanian Orthodox Church setting during the communist regime. I observed first-hand that the motive of some clergy (bishops, priests, deacons) was to maintain the status quo despite the toxicity and harm it inflicted on the people. This was my first learning experience with abusers in clerical positions of authority. Not all Orthodox clergy are abusers but a small yet significant percentage are. We need to take responsibility and hold wrongdoers accountable because this is our mutual responsibility that we have within the community.

Second, I am a neuroscientist whose research focuses on maladaptive and abnormal behaviors. As I have testified during the hearing at the [Senate Public Safety Committee](#) in Sacramento, clergy abuse is a predatory behavior involving abuse of positional power and authority. My educational training enables me to more easily identify the dynamics of clergy abuse. Abuse follows specific patterns of behaviors, and once it is identified then we must stand up and do something about it. At its core, clergy abuse is violence against humanity. It harms the humanity of not only the victims but the perpetrators and entire congregations when we allow offenders to continue in ministry.

Third, something that is rarely spoken about publicly is the existence of errant clergy. In my observation, Orthodox Christian laypeople are not typically trained to be discerning when it comes to the counsel of clergy (including priests and bishops). They are expected to receive the words of any ordained person uncritically. This failure to speak of clergy fallibility is a terrible mistake resulting in clergy-perpetrated violence and abuse against people. The errant clergy person should be decoupled from The Office of the Holy Priesthood, which has standards. There is a great denial when people hear that their “beloved priest” abused, assaulted and/or raped a victim. Abusers know how to hide their abusive behavior by putting up a façade in public for their congregation. Typically, congregations do not want to believe that having an abusive clergy in ministry could be possible in their church community, yet we have evidence from victims that this is the reality.

To answer your question more directly, I am able to face the truth even when the truth is ugly.

Jacobsen: How does this difference in temperament or not standing down make the work in advocacy relevant here?

Nedelescu: When it comes to clergy sexual abuse, the church (including congregations, leaders and administrations) tend to effectively silence most victims by blaming them. It is too much of a challenge for them to acknowledge the truth that their clergy, whom they employed, has committed sexual misconduct against a congregant.

It is critically important to understand that denying the truth, attacking the victim, reversing the victim and offender roles are all silencing tactics. If these tactics are identified then it is easier to speak of them and reject them maximally in order to continue the advocacy and protect maspeople from being victimized.

Advocacy is a type of charity work. From a theological viewpoint, standing up against abusive clergy who prey on the people of God for their own selfish gratifications is a prophetic ministry. It is much easier to speak of clergy abuse as something that may happen, but what we really need to do is go beyond and hold abusers and enablers accountable. For those who read the Bible, the idea that is presented in Matthew 25:35-36 is that, for Jesus, justice involves acts of compassion and concern towards those who are the neediest, most vulnerable and the most at risk of having no advocate. These issues are what constitute the moral values of Jesus.

I see some preachers and church leaders making just statements but they should see that their justice agenda must extend beyond issues of abortion or human sexuality. Of course, these matters are important; however, taking responsibility and holding wrongdoers accountable is a mutual responsibility that we have within a community. We can't both write and speak of LGBTQ and women's rights and not hold abusive clergy accountable by removing them from ministry.

Jacobsen: One of the reasons for doing the series on the Greek Orthodox Church was the ways in which the individuals in religious communities would use the focus on the abuse within the Roman Catholic Church as a deflection for crimes by their ecclesiastics. Have you noticed this within the Greek Orthodox Church?

Nedelescu: It is important to do a series on the Greek Orthodox Church because the largest Orthodox Christian jurisdiction in the United States is the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America with about 540 Greek Orthodox parishes and about 800 priests (probably including retired priests).

Our preliminary data, gathered from online media articles reporting clergy abuse cases, showed that the majority of articles involving clergy abuse were of abuse cases within the Greek Orthodox church. This could very well be because it is the largest jurisdiction. For a comparison, the Orthodox Church of American (OCA) has about 500 priests in active ministry (excluding retired priests).

The majority of Orthodox Christians are not familiar with the literature on clergy sexual abuse of adult women and are not aware of its extent. They typically assume that most victims of clergy abuse involve children and that most clergy abusers are Roman Catholic.

Research from Columbia Theological Seminary by Pamela Cooper-White, however, shows that about 90-95 percent of victims of clergy sexual misconduct are female congregants ([Boobal Batchelor 2013, xv](#)). (See Cooper-White, Pamela. 2013. 'Clergy Sexual Abuse of Adults' in Valli Boobal Batchelor ed. *When Pastors Prey*. Geneva. World Council of Churches Publishing. 58-81). Whether this high percentage of female victims of clergy sexual abuse has to do with women being more likely to report the abuse is beside the point concerning the real problem which is the presence of abusers with predatory behavior using The Office of the Priesthood to prey on people.

Our [research analysis](#) demonstrates that the Orthodox church is not immune to clergy sexual misconduct and abuse. There is also misconception that if priests can marry, as is the case with Orthodox priests, that they don't abuse. They do because clergy abuse is about power,

domination and control, not celibacy. The reality is that Orthodox clergy who abuse, not only violate their priestly vows when abusing their victims but they also violate their marital vows.

Jacobsen: When you are [gathering data](#) for preliminary analysis, is one of the difficulties in bringing these types forward due to the lack of investigative reportage on these denominations?

Nedelescu: Absolutely. In our first phase of analysis we used ChatGPT to aid us in generating key search terms in order to facilitate finding online media news stories concerning clergy sexual abuse in the Orthodox Church. Our preliminary search resulted in well over 50 clergy abuse cases from news articles between 2002 – 2023 with the Greek Orthodox Church of America showing up at the top in terms of case numbers followed by the Russian Orthodox Church, the OCA, Antiochian, Romanian, etc. It is important to note that these preliminary data are greatly underestimated since our data analysis is limited to only media stories found online. As we continue our research the number of cases and victims will increase in our study.

The challenge in collecting data is that most victims do not report clergy sexual abuse publicly. If victims report internally to their parish or church administration, these reports are not typically disclosed while simultaneously tactics are used to silence the victims.

Jacobsen: What have been, not only the tactics but, the more common means by which victims coming forward are silenced?

Nedelescu: It should be mention that it is important to report clergy sexual abuse first to the police. Most police departments have some staff trained in sex crimes and know how to deal with these issues. Reporting to church administrations typically results in a second assault against victims and/or against those who report. The tactics may include in any order:

- **Maintaining the status quo** – this tactic engages a traditional approach avoiding “scandals” within faith communities through sentimental requesting of forgiveness. It uses spiritualized language without realizing that the real scandal is enabling predatory behavior by keeping the offending priest in ministry and pretending everything is fine.
- **Interruptive tactic** – seeks to interfere with the process of fully resolving reported clergy abuse.
- **Obscurification** – is a tactic that seeks to make the situation murky regarding perceptions of clergy abuse and even crimes by conflating these with lesser concepts such as “consensual affairs”, “sin”, “clergy have weakness too”, “temptation” – anything but the actual reality of this being clergy abuse. This tactic has worked well in the past, but now we are aware of #metoo and #churchtoo.
- **Deception** – this tactic involves promising the matter will be taken care of. It promises action but never delivers.
- **Remunerative** – this tactic is used when survivors become imperfect victims who have not succumbed to the other tactics. In many cases, they are silenced at times even with NDAs.

- **Coercive** – this is an intimidation tactic to stop the full revelation of the abuse that took place. The victims are made to be the “enemy”.

Jacobsen: You are a highly qualified, professional scientist too. How does this scientific training help in more soberly analyzing these cases in the news?

Nedelescu: When I analyze these cases in the news articles I do so through the lens of a behavioral neuroscientist focusing on the response of both the victims and church administrations. I ‘ve observed that many victims thought that by reporting the clergy abuse to their church administrations appropriate action would be taken. They were misled (perhaps cultured) to believe that their church hierarchs (bishops) were going to assist.

The other aspect I bring to the analysis of these articles is my training focus in maladaptive behaviors and can see the severe trauma-induced dysregulation clergy abuse situations cause the victims. Clergy abuse is a public health concern and the issue needs to be raised to this level of visibility.

Jacobsen: As the late Dr. Carl Sagan reminded people in public discourse, science is more than ‘a body of knowledge,’ because ‘it’s a way of thinking’ - a means by which to systematically couple hypothesis and empirical observation to make evidenced-based hypotheses, theories, about the natural world. How does this way of thinking and this community of scientists give a different orientation on thinking about the theology around and the institutional setup in formal Greek Orthodox religious life leading to a pattern of successive crimes of a sexual nature, harassment and/or abuse?

Nedelescu: I am trained to think critically as a scientist and to quickly change my view when new evidence becomes available.

You are right that it is a way of thinking. However, it is also the definition of being a humble human being. A sign of humility is to be able to say that my hypothesis or my theory or the way of my thinking before was wrong, now that I have this new evidence/knowledge before me.

I want to point out that many “Mothers” and “Fathers” of the Orthodox church throughout the centuries were towering intellects whose ways of thinking were to use critical thinking skills. The phenomena I am observing today in the Orthodox church where people are encouraged to take the counsel of clergy uncritically is a terrible mistake. It seems to be culturally embedded into the fabric of the Orthodox church which has given rise to clergy, some of whom are duplicitous who crave attention, power and glorification from others. Taken together, this sets up a breeding ground for clergy-perpetrated abuse.

Jacobsen: How can community and individual support, of survivors bolster resolve to work in systematically gathering the relevant data for cases as well as

Nedelescu: The first reason for constructing [Prosopon Healing](#) was to provide resources for survivors of clergy abuse. Ultimately, there is an urgent need to adequately assist victims of clergy abuse. A second reason is to bring victims/survivors together because victims of clergy abuse heal quicker by transitioning to a survivor mentality in a community that validates and

acknowledges their abuse. Once survivors unite, others are more likely to speak up which will aid in understanding the breadth and depth of clergy abuse in the Orthodox world.

The wider community can also be of assistance because clergy-perpetrated abuse is a public health concern with a serious societal burden on the public mental health system. Because churches are so reactionary when clergy abuse is reported, it is challenging to identify other cases of abuse. We know that research from Baylor University showed that 3.1% of adult women who attended a place of worship at least once a month said they were victims of clergy sexual misconduct as adults. Contextualized, this research demonstrates that in a congregation of 400 faithful, there may be on average 7 victims of clergy abuse, once the abuser is identified. Yet, it is challenging to find these other silenced cases.

Education about the mechanism of clergy abuse and exploitation as well as sharing resources would all bolster and resolve this crisis in the Orthodox church.

Jacobsen: Why do you think church communities and administrations are so reactionary to acknowledging clergy sexual abuse?

Nedelescu: It is very simple. When a church community approves the words and some tears from the abuser over the victims who speak up, they have done added damage to the victims, risked the safety of others and left the abuser with a malignant disease. As a consequence these communities are toxic systems. They are not worshipping God. They are worshipping their ministries and closing their eyes to the truth to maintain the status quo rather than facing the truth and doing the hard work to heal. It is idolatry. Therefore, they are reactionary to maintain the ideological structure and anything that is a threat to this ideology is problematic because at the end of the day many will stop donating money.

Jacobsen: What is the current effort towards California Governor Gavin Newsom and the work to bring down protection for abuses who happen to be religious leaders, as with much of the #ChurchToo movement?

Nedelescu: Allow me to give some background in order to better answer this question. Clergy who exhibit predatory behavior need to be held accountable. Church hierarchies are responsible for preventative actions. But, when church administrations fail to exact discipline, then we need the state to hold abusive clergy accountable for the safety of people. This is the purpose of Senate Bill (SB) 894.

SB 894 was heard at the [Senate Public Safety Committee](#) hearing on April 16th 2024. One would have thought that in California such a bill, to protect adult congregants for abuses by clergy who are in positions of power, would have passed without any issue. Instead, we experienced some inconsistencies including a conspicuous exclusion of more than twenty-three private individual support letters from the [bill analysis](#). This legislation is critically important because it would bring California in line with 13 other states and the District of Columbia, which already have similar laws in place.

According to the bill analysis, the opposition was comprised of only two constituents: (1) the ACLU California Action and (2) the California Public Defenders Association. They took issue with the wording around the term “consent”. It is important to understand that because of the

unequal power differential between a clergy and a congregant, there can be no true consent. Consent is, therefore, dissolved when a clergy uses their position of power to gain sexual satisfaction with a congregant. True consent can only take place between two adults of equal power. And this is never the case when it comes to a clergy-congregant interaction. Clergy provide counsel to their congregants, and should never involve sex with them. Professional [therapy never includes sexual behavior](#), for example due to a similar unequal power between counselor/therapist and patient.

Now, we have been advised by Senator Dave Min to reach out to Leadership and Governor Newsom for assistance. We have already spoken to the Legislative Director from the Office of Senator Ashby who has provided invaluable information and am very thank full for his time. Next, we are waiting to schedule a meeting with the Office of Senator Mike McGuire who oversees the Senate Public Safety Committee. We have written to Governor Newsom for assistance. We have to allow the Governor and his Office the time to examine the situation, but he has had to intervene in the past when [California Democrats blocked a child trafficking bill](#). Similarly, the fentanyl bills were being stalled in the [Senate and Assembly Public Safety Committees](#), evidently. There appears to be a strong reaction when bills are proposed that would result in a new law in the state of California, even though, everyone knows the ravages of child trafficking, the opioid crisis, and clergy abuse of adults.

Jacobsen: Katherine Archer and you have been working together, as the early independent investigators and data-collectors on this work within, not only the Greek Orthodox Church but, the Eastern Orthodox Church in general. How can people get involved, financially support, or volunteer expertise or skills with you, to start building a larger movement?

Nedelescu: At the moment, we are beginning to look for funding because we will need financial support to help expedite this important work. We are just beginning to scratch the surface of a much larger problem.

In the immediate future, we welcome advocates and survivors of clergy-perpetrated abuse to join our research efforts. For Orthodox Christians we put a website together called – Prosopon Healing – where we provide resources for the community.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Hermina.

Nedelescu: It was a pleasure talking to you.

Katherine Archer on California Senate Bill 894

Katherine Archer has been involved in California legislative efforts to criminalize clergy exploitation of adults. Her primary interest is in trauma occurring in church settings, where one should expect to find more support for healing. She has been involved in nonprofit work with dual-diagnosis adults experiencing homelessness, human trafficking, and youth experiencing foster care. Currently, Archer is completing studies towards a Master of Theological Studies at Antiochian House of Studies. She is co-founder of [Prosopon Healing](#), a resource center for Orthodox Christian victims/survivors of clergy abuse, and is involved in research efforts to better understand the impact of clergy-perpetrated abuse on those victimized by religious institutions.

The series on the Eastern Orthodox Church amounts to a formal project into the clergy-related abuse in it. These publications provide a free, open-source electronically available resource for interested parties to begin some of the first contemporary research into abuse within Orthodoxy along the lines of the Roman Catholic Church clergy-related abuse scandals happening for decades.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The issue of clergy abuse is a complicated one. Not in its violation of a person's dignity and human rights, but in its style, mode of operation, means of keeping a secrecy. Naturally, the Roman Catholic Church, as statistically the largest Christian church in the world, it will garner both the most abuse cases in total and the most airtime, as, again, statistically, taking the odds, we should expect the worst cases to come out of the Roman Catholic Church too - given its size. Now, with the United States, I, recently, returned from a nationwide wide "W" trip from Montreal to New York, New York to Boston, Boston to D.C., D.C. to Charleston (S.C.), Charleston (S.C.) to D.C., D.C. to Atlanta (G.A.), Atlanta (G.A.) to New Orleans, New Orleans to Illinois, Illinois to Los Angeles, Los Angeles to San Diego, San Diego to Los Angeles to Santa Ana to Irvine back to Los Angeles, Los Angeles to Seattle, and then *all the way* back to Vancouver. Since I am back, and very marginally rested and recovered from the exhaustion of constant travel, I have some time to write some questions for our lovely guest, today, Katherine Archer, who is based out of California, United States. So, the Eastern Orthodox Church has its own issues with the abuse of the young, indeed, and other adult populations. Let's paint a general picture before the activist portion, what is the key picture of the abuse happening in the Eastern Orthodox Church based on research conducted so far?

Katherine Archer: First off, thank you for your willingness to have this conversation. I think first and foremost the media database that we have been working on clearly points to the fact that abuse *is* happening in the Orthodox churches. We have to name that these abuses are occurring and cannot say that it does not happen or has not happened within Orthodox churches. This seems overly obvious to state, but it does need to be stated. We can't say that clergy abuse is a problem that occurs only when celibacy is a requirement of the priesthood. Orthodox clergy are married and yet our database documents that we still have cases of abuse. This is to be expected because clergy abuse is really about power and control rather than the constraints of celibacy being too much. A correct Orthodox understanding of the priesthood is that the priest is a shepherd, and that there is only one true priesthood, that of Christ. Yet not everyone will approach the priesthood with this humble mindset, and some people who have narcissistic

tendencies will be drawn toward the priesthood for the wrong reasons. I think we need to understand this now in the same way that St. Gregory spoke of it in his *Pastoral Rule*. Some priests will abuse their power. Our database points to the fact that this is true. There are priests who have done some horrific things and wounded the members of their flock. We have documentation of both child victims, many adolescents, as well as adults, both male and female adults being abused by priests.

Jacobsen: How far back does your database span?

Archer: Right now the media cases go back to 1987, but we are in the early preliminary research stages. There is a book that we found that documents allegations of child sexual abuse within an Eastern Orthodox community of San Francisco in 1887 involving a bishop, and we will dive into that and see what the media reported then...so 1887 may be our earliest cases. However, our primary focus right now is about 71 media cases since 2002, documenting well over 300 alleged victims.

Jacobsen: What are the jurisdictions studied, to date, and their differences from the analysis of the data collation?

Archer: We have gathered media stories that tell of clergy abuse within every Orthodox jurisdiction. In the United States, we have the greatest number of cases of alleged abuse that are being reported to the media occurring within the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. This kind of thing is difficult because what we believe is that these media reports are just the tip of the iceberg and that there are wounded people who have never publicly come forward, perhaps never filed a police report or a civil lawsuit, so the media reports themselves are inadequate for understanding the issue.

Jacobsen: What is the #ChurchToo movements history and current form?

Archer: Church Too developed in 2017. I think we are still seeing most of the #ChurchToo conversation centered around the Protestant churches, and I think this is due to the fact that we have more resistance to this conversation within Orthodoxy. If I am viewed as standing over here pointing my finger at someone's sin and just copiously taking notes on someone else's failures, most Orthodox Christians will not want to listen to me at all or to the conversation. Within Orthodoxy we have much more resistance to what is viewed as creating drama or even scandal, or detracting from one's own spiritual life. So, we have to be very careful in this conversation.

Rather than focus on errant priests, which no one wants to do, I was brought into this research myself out of concern for the members of the body of Christ who have been wounded by clergy. If one member of the body suffers, all suffer. Clergy abuse should never be happening. Our churches should be a place of safety and healing. For clergy abuse victims, the wound is so deep and painful and the trauma is compounded when people say that clergy abuse is not happening within the Orthodox churches or when we don't want to educate ourselves as laity and understand the complex dynamics that go into abuse—of both children and adults. It might not always look like what we think, but there can be psychological coercion and other things happening, leading to sexual exploitation.

At the heart, clergy abuse takes place within a relationship which itself is the vehicle or mechanism of the abuse. Most people are not adequately educated about the relationship of trust being used as the means to sexually exploit another person and as a result, most laity simply do not understand and will often side with the priest against the victim. It seems as laity we do not want to talk about this and our silence enables abuse to happen and to continue. Are our Orthodox priests all 100% doing the work of ministry, no one is ever offending and our seminaries are turning out clergy who are never involved in misconduct?

All the misconduct cases are lies? No person with critical-thinking skills would try to say that and yet this seems to be where the conversations go when we attempt to raise this issue within Orthodox circles. Our database of cases of abusive priests is quite large and the reality is that these things are occurring, and that victims are being sidelined and their stories of trauma and abuse not taken seriously in most of these cases. In fact, often victims are flat out blamed and from other research I've conducted, the suicide rate of clergy abuse victims is just astoundingly high compared to the general population. That should give people pause. What struck me in one of the cases I read was the surrounding non-Orthodox community could believe the victim and expressed shock, sadness and disgust for the priest's actions. This is something people just can't often do when abuse occurs within our churches. It immediately devolves into a conversation about whether the accusation is true or exiling the wounded truth-teller. The fact is, statistically, people are telling the truth when they report clergy abuse and they don't always even know enough to use the word abuse. I think that how we need to approach this as Orthodox Christians is with great love for these victims and in humility, that maybe we don't have abuse dynamics all figured out. This is the Orthodox way—love and humility. I have heard of priests conducting abuse “investigations” and I am left wondering when and where they took forensic interviewing and how their priestly vocation enables such double abuse of a victim already severely traumatized.

Where is the humility there? There is extensive training needed to conduct a proper abuse investigation. Our priests and church administrations should not be conducting internal investigations. We need to be getting this right. I think #ChurchToo has shifted into where we are seeing people leave churches or completely deconstructing their faith and primarily this is due to the hypocrisy found especially in these abuse cases and so-called “investigations” that are taking place internally and really damaging survivors. So, we have to be open and transparent and note that clergy abuse is happening and then figure out not just how to prevent it, but also how to have conversations where we aren't vilifying the people wanting to discuss it. There is a real problem if a conversation about a topic is completely and always off-limits. And maybe control over investigations needs to be relinquished and just as we would call a plumber in our churches for a leak, we call a professional organization that handles investigations in a trauma-informed way and not try to take that on and cause additional trauma for victims and their families.

Jacobsen: How have these movements informed the activism, the theology, and the, essentially, humanitarian work for you?

Archer: Honestly, rather than follow a movement, I seek to be a Christ-follower and I am always trying to use discernment. I think Christ would be listening to the voices of those wounded

within our churches. Listening to the #ChurchToo voices and reading the news stories, I have been struck by the tremendous courage of the voices coming forward when it is very hard to do so, especially if one has been abused as an adult, which is less understood. There are compelling reasons to stay silent. I think the most courageous voice that I initially read was Lori Anne Thompson, who was abused by Ravi Zacharias as an adult. She was groomed. She came forward at great personal cost. One of the men who worked for Ravi Zacharias did not believe her and I recently listened to him come forward, admit his mistake, and publicly apologize to her. Within the Orthodox churches, I have not seen what could be described as a positive outcome to a case of clergy abuse, either child or adult, and a victim coming forward. Instead, I have heard of suicides and people being ostracized from their communities and incredible amounts of suffering. I think this all serves to continue to silence people who are hurting within the Orthodox churches who may have experienced harm by a priest. Why would we want to continue to silence these hurting members of the flock?

Jacobsen: As noted in the press release, there is work to call on the “government to criminalize adult clergy sexual abuse in alignment with the Southern Baptist Convention’s 2022 resolution. However, a recent bill in CA to criminalize adult clergy sexual abuse, similar to laws in 13 states and D.C., failed to leave the Public Safety committee under questionable circumstances, and survivors are calling on Governor Gavin Newsom to investigate.” What have been the failures, now, towards criminalizing adult clergy sexual abuse?

Archer: There is a failure of understanding. The bill did not move out of committee in California because of the use of the word “consent”, with a real failure to understand the dynamics present between a clergyperson and parishioner and the fact that true consent is never possible. The clergyperson holds too much power. Within the Orthodox churches, we have an understanding of spiritual fatherhood, the priest hears confession and not in a confessional—a priest hears the confession standing right there beside the person. There is a real intimacy and trust there where if a priest chooses to abuse the trust of his spiritual child and sexualize a spiritual relationship, it really is closer to incest. I believe many faith traditions are similar in this dynamic where it is a huge violation of trust like a parent and child. So honestly, maybe there is a lack of awareness of cultural dynamics or religious understanding. The priest is not one’s accountant.

The relationship is deeper, requiring the same degree of trust like a therapist even if the priest isn’t conducting therapy. We would never presume that there is consent if a therapist chose to exploit a client and moreover, there are guidelines and professional boards that oversee that kind of thing and unequivocally will name it as abuse. With clergy abuse of adults, there just needs to be more education because it is mislabeled as an “affair” and when clergy respond in an uneducated way, mislabeling it, it causes deep secondary trauma for a victim. There is a lot of research about the power differential between priest and parishioner and the fact that exploitation is never an “affair”. Legislation that criminalizes clergy exploitation of adults is important because often those who have been exploited have a lot of confusion over what occurred and how they were groomed to be exploited by another person and it can take many years to untangle it. If a criminal statute exists, it is much clearer. The way I see this is very similar to human trafficking. In many cases, trafficking victims have been exploited within a relationship and have

difficulty naming it as abuse and recognizing the exploitation. It is very similar. Our lawmakers need to understand this complexity.

Jacobsen: On April 16, 2024, California Senate Bill 894 (SB 894), or "Sexual Exploitation by a Member of Clergy" was presented. What happened?

Archer: The bill was presented, but we were told prior to the hearing that the issue had already been decided. We attended the hearing anyway and we decided that Dr. Nedelescu would speak, since as a neuroscientist she could speak about the harm done in these cases from a neurobiological perspective. Dorothy Small was already slated to speak. About 23 letters of support were submitted prior to the hearing, but they were omitted from the bill analysis and I'm unsure if they were read. I'm certain the letters would have been educational for lawmakers had they been read. This is an issue that may require some more work from legislators to understand the issue of consent and to be sensitive to the dynamics of clergy abuse. It took awhile for the dynamics of human trafficking to be understood and clergy abuse is similar.

Jacobsen: What happens to support letters about bills like this?

Archer: In California, support letters can be uploaded to a Legislative Portal and in theory those letters would be read and in Maine they even made them available to the public. However, with SB 894 at least 23 letters went "missing" from the Legislative Portal. They were never acknowledged in the bill analysis. We went back and asked the letter authors and found that all were submitted by April 9th, the date the hearing was originally scheduled for. There is no accountability for including these letters of support in a bill analysis and they simply disappeared. Who knows where those letters went. We certainly haven't been given an answer. However, they were letters of support, some of them by survivors of clergy abuse, and they should have been handled better and acknowledged in the bill analysis at the very least. People wrote in telling their own personal stories and reasons for supporting the bill and those letters were not acknowledged.

Jacobsen: Before and after the proceedings, there may be hostility to bills like SB894. During hearings, there can be, obviously, dismissive, even contempt-ridden, behaviour. How do these indicate the lack of a fair hearing or provide reasonable grounds to claim a fair hearing did not happen?

Archer: I think really these things are decided prior to the hearing, and from what we gathered, people have it all decided and then align their votes with each other, which is unfortunate and it doesn't seem like a true democratic process where information is presented and discussed. The committee members have the opportunity to ask additional questions, but no one did. Senator Dave Min even spoke out about the way that the bill had been handled and all he had done to try to work with the committee members. The letters should have been read. And honestly, a vote should have been taken so advocates could know who stood where.

Jacobsen: How can people get involved, volunteer skills and time, or finances, to your work?

Archer: Dr. Nedelescu and I co-founded Prosopon Healing as a resource website about clergy abuse for Orthodox clergy and survivors. We have been collaborating with other researchers and

laborers in this movement and we are interested in speaking to and working with anyone who wants to move the conversation forward, with love.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Katherine.

Dorothy Small on Abuse of Adults in the Roman Catholic Church

Dorothy Small, an advocate for SNAP, Survivor Network for those Abused by Priests since 2019, was a child sex abuse victim. She also experienced sexual abuse by a clergyman as an adult. Dorothy courageously addressed the latter through successful litigation publicly disclosing her identity prior to the inception of the #Me Too movement. Victimized but not a victim she shares how she moved beyond surviving to thriving using adversity as a powerful motivator. She fortified herself with knowledge of personality disorders and tactics used by predators to help her spot wolves in sheep's clothing. This has enabled her to feel safe in a world where safety is not guaranteed, even in institutions where one would expect it such as religious institutions. A retired registered nurse with over forty years of clinical experience, Dorothy lives with her loving fur companions Bradley Cooper and Captain Ron, Boston Terriers. She is a self-published author, cancer survivor, mother, and grandmother. Dorothy is currently working on a book detailing her experiences in moving beyond a life of abuse and into a new life of freedom.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I have decided, after some discussions with members of the Eastern Orthodox community who are pioneers in research into clergy related abuse and following some articles written about 6 or 7 years ago and then republished in *The Good Men Project* in January, to take a deep dive on the subject matter of abuse in the Orthodox churches. Which raises the issues, what about some of the survivors and the contexts of the crimes and criminals of the Roman Catholic Church? There has been a rich legacy of criminality wholly apart from theological veracity or the God concept. What is the contemporary understanding of the breadth of the abuse of children and adults by the Roman Catholic Church, institutionally?

Dorothy Small: I believe it is not considered to be an issue in the present as much as in the past when it came more into light in 2002 during the Boston Globe Spotlight. The focus was centered on abuse of minors exclusively with abuse of adults not considered abuse but a “lapse in judgment and vows” and “sin”. However, Richard Sipe who treated clergy for sexual related issues as a therapist estimated that about 50% maintain the vow of chastity. It is easy for a priest to dismiss the lapse as not violating the vow of celibacy which is about marriage. Teaching the Biblical position on sex belonging in marriage then acting out of their vow of celibacy violates not only the vow of celibacy but that of chastity which means refraining from engaging in sexual relationships. Most in the church understand the abuse of children is a criminal offense and believe it is being addressed which measures have been instituted to better protect minors. However, abuse still occurs. As for adults until the #The MeToo movement was ushered into public consciousness in 2017, the general consensus is that adults are consensual and that the adult is even responsible for tempting the priest instead of protecting him at all cost even if it means to remain quiet if something happens. Many parishioners who are lacking knowledge that adults are also exploited and abused have difficulty viewing the cleric in such light in order to continue in their spiritual practice in the church. It is easier to place the anger and blame on the adult who is victimized by the abuse of spiritual power and authority than to face the fact that they too have been manipulated by the cleric who is not adhering to what he preaches and his sacred vows.

Jacobsen: The practice of shuffling around priests can create a terrible image over the long term because these hierarchs can be promoted over time, garnering more authority, for one. For two, over enough decades, it can appear as if the abusers are in every parish, diocese, etc., when, in fact, it could be an apparency effect because the abusers get moved around - so, out of the total population of Catholic hierarchs, it may not be that many, but appears as such given the pervasive shuffling. It's the problem of institutional 'solutions' to deflect accountability. What else happens with these Catholic hierarchs, in terms of protections by policies?

Small: Protecting the church from scandal which it hates has created a culture of secrecy by covering up, dismissing, minimizing and gaslighting to deflect accountability for actions which cause scandal. Clericalism perpetuates the problem. The policy of transferring the clergy, which is an issue, was easy to do as the church is universal and in countries around the world. It is easy to move the cleric out of the country as many are from foreign countries and practicing in this country on work visas. Bishops are accountable for the clergy and for handling complaints. Yet the process is not conducive for the ease of reporting but for protecting the clergy. I understand it is important to protect them from false complaints. However, it is not common for someone to make such a complaint. In 2021 Pope Francis updated church law aimed at holding senior churchmen accountable for covering up sexual abuse cases expanding it to cover lay Catholic leaders and acknowledging that vulnerable adults and not only children can be victims of abuse when they are unable to freely consent. The definition of what constitutes adult vulnerability has not been settled. This is an ongoing discussion in the church. However, any adult at any age and stage in life can be vulnerable to the grooming tactics of a highly manipulative cleric due to the imbalance of power and spiritual authority. The ongoing debate of what constitutes adult vulnerability when in fact all parishioners are vulnerable to the authority of the cleric as they are in his care should settle the debate. Also, the human brain translates certain uniforms such as what clergy wear as authority figures to which to defer. Primitive human survival adaptations cause one to dismiss the gut instinct that something is wrong to hand over our agency and power to the one with greater authority.

Jacobsen: What do these policies send as a message to the laity and to the non-Catholic public? It is a juggernaut. It would be - is - impossible to ignore them, globally.

Small: That the adult is still responsible for the abuse unless they are seriously impaired. This means that as things stand there is no protective course set in place to educate the public on grooming tactics and red flags to observe as well as measures to protect oneself such as it is ok to say no to clergy and not to assume that all are safe because of their position.

Jacobsen: Not many people, as you explained to me, encounter multiple experiences of abuse over separated instances by different clergy. It happens once, repeatedly, by one Catholic hierarch. How was yours unusual in that regard?

Small: In one parish a priest groomed my husband and I at the time asking for an invitation to our home for dinner. We had two young sons around the ages of five and seven and a half. This priest was charismatic and appeared to be fond of children. We felt honored to be "chosen" by

him for personal attention. My actions prevented him from coming back to our home when I expressed concern after his behavior at our home the evening he came over. He was extremely flirtatious to me in front of my husband and asked to “tuck the boys in their beds and read them their prayers”. Years later when researching what happened to him I discovered he was out of the priesthood because of a scandal involving a minor. I also discovered that at the time he was grooming my husband and I to have access to our children, there was a complaint from another family for similar behavior of a minor child the same age as our children. This was dealt with secretly at the time but was discovered during the lawsuit per public record. Immediately after he was transferred to his next assignment another priest who replaced him asked me to help him with a ministry that he would teach me which brought us in close contact. Within a couple of weeks he let me in on his secret. A woman had sought him for counseling at his former parish and was pregnant with his child. He swore her to secrecy. Meanwhile, I was vulnerable due to unresolvable marital conflict at the time the priest increased his pursuit tactics within four months after my former husband and I separated. He was highly manipulative and charismatic, engaging what I now have come to learn as gaslighting which caused me to doubt my perceptions over his. His other victim filed a lawsuit. I did not know I was also his victim. This was in the early 1990’s. He left the priesthood. I was in counseling for a number of years at the time for issues regarding severe childhood emotional abuse and catastrophic familial losses at an early age. Experiencing narcissistically abusive relationships since childhood through care providers left me vulnerable for more abusive relationships as an adult. I did not seek any of the priests in my story for counseling. The first we were chosen just because we attended mass and visited with the priest after mass along with others in front of the church. The other chose me to engage in a ministry together. The third fixated on me as I was in ministry and visible plus we were at a luncheon held in his honor welcoming him to the parish. However, because they are priests I engaged in sharing personal information with them thinking it would protect both of us. If I shared my vulnerability, that would cause them to stay away from me. Instead, they used it to groom me and gain access to my emotions which then they gained entry into my head.

Jacobsen: What forms of justice have been met for clergy-based abusers by the abused-by-the-clergy?

Small: In my case the first two priests were sued by their victims. They both left the priesthood one mandated and the second left on his own volition before he would be forced to leave. It was a measure of control on his part. The third priest was removed from his position as he was on a work visa and sent back to his country where he was placed back in active ministry and remains to this day, to my knowledge based on what I was able to locate online. After advocating for myself through victim advocacy for around ten months I was unresolved and what I requested in order to heal was denied. I filed a lawsuit and mediated with a settlement. Not having to sign a nondisclosure agreement to maintain my voice I settled out of court to be able to focus my energy on healing. Later that year I joined SNAP, Survivor Network for Those Abused by Priests. I continue to learn and focus on the underlying issues that rendered me so vulnerable and continue to be an active volunteer advocate with SNAP. For me healing began when the lawyer who was also a psychologist took my case. He heard me, believed me, and advocated for me

against the most powerful institution in the world. This gave me the motivation to keep fighting for myself as recovery was not going to be quick or easy. I could not heal from the church abuse without bringing healing to everything which it was attached to. I was born into a tough situation and it continued throughout the rest of my childhood. I also experienced sexual abuse as a child by a familial member and a high school teacher. Standing up to the last priest and the lawsuit helped me to bring healing to what I could not seek justice for so long ago. It empowered me and gave me my voice that I use to address the serious effects of clergy abuse. It is spiritual incest.

Jacobsen: Have you had any similar style of justice?

Small: I answered this question above. But to answer the previous question I believe we are only beginning to see justice through lawsuits. Many survivors would like to see the cleric removed from ministry. However, some continue to ministry or are transferred and continue in ministry. The statute of limitations prevents those who realize they were abused as adults from coming forward. As with those abused as children it can take decades to be able to come forward because of memories blocked, fear of the repercussions or reporting, and the stigma of getting a priest in trouble.

Jacobsen: How can the abused be re-traumatized in the midst of the publicity, the legal proceedings, and so on?

Small: Victim bashing, blaming, shaming, losing religious community because the parishioners either can't understand the nature of abuse and what constitutes it or their own struggle to believe they were misrepresented, being ostracized, not believed, treated as the perpetrator through harsh questioning tactics all serve to enhance the trauma. It is pure hell on top of the abuse itself.

Jacobsen: What do you think are the lessons individuals abused by the Eastern Orthodox Church can take from the Roman Catholic Church scandals?

Small: They need to admit that abuse is taking place in their church and not point the finger at the Catholic Church as being the main problem simply because the problem was forced into the open by investigative journalists, survivors coming forward and attorneys who take the cases. From what I have been told by a couple of members seeking to bring the issue into the light there is staunch denial that the abuse ever occurred and no admission by the hierarchy to the victims that abuse happened which means there is no accountability in the way of justice.

Jacobsen: How does this clergy-based abuse, to you, have no relation to the God concept, yet poisons people's notions of the God concept?

Small: From my experience and exposure to both adults abused as children and adults abused as adults it has detrimental effects. For those abused as children it not only has lasting effects on religious practice later in life but it distorts their perception of a loving and benevolent God. For many it is as if God Himself abused them sexually. For both adults and children many have God brought into the abuse as if it is condoned or honors God in some way. God is used in the manipulation. The clergy represent Christ in-persona. Many adults including myself leave the church either for a prolonged period of time or indefinitely. I continued to attend mass until I discovered it was actually keeping me from being able to heal from the abuse. What was once a place of comfort and nurturing as well as the place of worship became the reminder of sexual

abuse. The church is considered the field hospital for spiritual healing and nurturing. It is a house or worship where we enter more vulnerable than even with therapists as it addresses our soul. The Church is meant to help us get to heaven and not drag us down into hell by a wolf in shepherd's clothing preying on the flock instead of protecting it from the evils in the world. Yet, the sad reality is we must not be blind to the reality that evil through personality disordered individuals who seek positions of power and authority with adulation and plenty of supply need to be held accountable instead of protected by their hierarchy in which they serve. No one is above the law.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dorothy.

Small: Thank you for the opportunity to express a subject for which I wish I did not have so much experience. However, I realize if I kept silent I would be complicit with the darkness instead of speaking truth bringing light into it. The truth is what is needed. It is what God stands for as well as justice. Addressing the issue and engaging in prevention and holding perpetrators accountable protects the public, the good priests upholding their vows and rules associated with their positions, and the church. I think about the name of God and who will speak on His behalf? Those of us who speak out serve God as well.

Melanie Sakoda on Orthodox Clergy-Related Misconduct

Melanie Sakoda has been an advocate for survivors of abuse in the Orthodox Christian churches for more than 25 years. Here we talk at length on Orthodoxy and clergy-based abuse.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Today, we are here with Melanie Sakoda. She is a long-time – some like the term activist, some like someone working for a morally correct cause. My first question: How did you originally get involved in this work? Because you have been doing this for decades.

Melanie Sakoda: We had an incident in our parish in San Francisco where there was a layman attending who had multiple convictions for child sexual abuse. Church officials were allowing him free rein in our parish. Many children were hurt, as far as we can tell. That started it. When the families came forward, there was such a backlash. We thought, "Oh my goodness, we are complaining about someone who was only Orthodox for two weeks before his last arrest. What if you were trying to complain about the priest?" So, we decided that we wanted to start a website where people would have a place to come where they would find a sympathetic ear. We started in June of 1999. We took it down in March of 2020.

Jacobsen: For about 21 years. What was the reaction in 2020 versus 1999? What was the reason for taking it down?

Sakoda: Greta Larson, one of Cappy Larson's daughters, did the coding on the original site. Greta stepped down in 2006. It was just Cappy and me. We are both in our 70s now. We were hoping that someone would step forward to take over for us.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Sakoda: Then Cappy said, "Maybe we should let them miss us." [Laughing]

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Sakoda: So, that is what we did. There are expenses associated with maintaining a website, and we were paying all the expenses ourselves since we never had consistent financial support. We had a post office box. We had a voicemail. We were paying for our domain name, and for our website security. It was not an insignificant amount. It was funny, it took some people years to notice that we were gone. I maintained a Facebook page that was associated with the site, and people would write in asking, "What happened to pokrov.org?"

Jacobsen: Now, this is common. I am finding this common through years and years of doing interviews with people who have left religious groups or who are still in, and have concerns, and want to see things become better, more just. It's a handful of people who do specific parts of activism over an arc of time. You and Cappy are exemplars of that. So, those people also come under various forms of attack or even abuse. So, what kinds have you encountered? Which ones have been more humorous because you must develop a sense of humour in this industry? What ones could have been more humorous?

Sakoda: The most not-humorous one was when Greta was still working with us. She was going to attend a conference in Dallas for a group called Orthodox Christian Laity, then she received death threats from this one priest whose family was very unhappy that he had been put on our

site. I ended up going with Greta. That was probably the scariest. One of the funniest things... do you remember when that girl went missing in Aruba many years ago?

Jacobsen: A few people may have gone missing, including in Aruba.

Sakoda: It was a big case. She was a young, college-aged, blue-eyed, blonde girl?

Jacobsen: Natalee Ann Holloway?

Sakoda: Yes! We used to post on various online Orthodox forums, and this priest writes on one of them, "Cappy, and you should be Aruba'd." How inappropriate for a clergyman!

Jacobsen: It just sounds like being an ass.

Sakoda: The reaction to our website was very, very hostile at first. But, the funny thing was, as the years went by, it became less hostile. People would send us stuff because they knew we would do something with it or try to do something with it.

Jacobsen: You were a safe zone.

Sakoda: It was an interesting experience. I do not regret it. My dream is to win a big lottery, rebuild the site, and hire people to work on it. In the meantime, I remind people who visit the Facebook group that I still have access to most of the information we collected. If they want additional information on someone they saw on the site, I may well have something. Unfortunately, when I went to law school, everything was on paper. I tended to keep things on paper rather than on my computer, although I do have some computer files.

Jacobsen: I am surprised you didn't have anything on microfiche.

Sakoda: [Laughing].

Jacobsen: Yes, I know, microfiche.

Sakoda: My husband and I downsized in 2018. In our old house, we had this huge office with all these bookshelves. I do not have that anymore. I have a lot of the files in boxes [Laughing].

Jacobsen: Yes [Laughing].

Sakoda: Recently, someone asked me about this one group. I swear I have something them, but I could not find the hardcopy file.

Jacobsen: Doing a keyword search on a hardcopy file is hard.

Sakoda: When we first started, in 1999, it was the internet's early days. Cappy would call people to try to find information.

Jacobsen: This is from a home line.

Sakoda: I am sure it was from her landline. The abuser in our parish was part of this group that came into Orthodoxy. They were originally a New Age San Francisco cult called The Holy Order of Mans. After Jonestown, they didn't like being on cult lists. So, they started to look for another place to land. A lot of them began joining the Orthodox churches. Through one of Cappy's other daughters, we found the posts of a Greek man who was with The Holy Order of Mans. The man was very upset when the group went under Metropolitan Pangratios Vrionis of the Archdiocese

of Vasiloupolis because he said he warned them that the Metropolitan was a child abuser. Since the conviction was supposed to be in Pennsylvania, Cappy started calling the courthouse in every county and asking, "Do you have criminal records for this man?" Luckily, Pangratos Vrionis, was not a common name.

Jacobsen: Very rare, even for the Greeks!

Sakoda: Cappy finally found him. The clerk at the courthouse was very sympathetic. She not only sent us the records without charging us, but she did a deeper dive and found more pages. This was among the first cases we publicized on our website. When it went public that Metropolitan Pangratos had this conviction, he was still operating as a bishop in Queens, New York. Newer victims came forward.

Jacobsen: Of course.

Sakoda: As a result of our publication, and the media coverage that followed, Metropolitan Pangratos was convicted a second time. Originally, we did a lot of that. Cappy was on her phone talking to clerks in various counties nationwide. But as time went on, as I said, people would start sending us stuff. They would say, "So-and-so is convicted; here is a link to the article." Also, some counties began to put court records online. Not as many as I would like, but it became easier to find information.

Jacobsen: According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC), "One in five women and one in 71 men will be raped at some point in their lives... In eight out of 10 cases of rape, the victim knew the person who sexually assaulted them." So, if those are the rates in the US, how are the rates in the Church? Are they the same, or are they higher? If they are higher, what is the point of the Church as moral relevance to these people's lives?

Sakoda: The trouble is, as I mentioned when we were talking earlier, there aren't reliable statistics of abuse in the Orthodox churches. Since 2002, the Catholic Church has published lists of abusers by diocese. The Catholics also publish the John Jay Report, with information about Catholic abuse. There is not, to my knowledge, a single Orthodox jurisdiction in this country that publishes information about their abusers. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese provided some information for a short period of time. Instead, you will see that a priest was removed, but you would not know why. Did the cleric decide that he didn't want to be a priest anymore? Was he embezzling? Or was he sexually abusing someone in his parish, whether man, woman, or child? The Catholics have the Official Catholic Directory. It is published every year. It is a huge book. It lists all the priests in the US and their assignments. If you saw the Spotlight movie, you would remember the importance of those books in the Boston Globe's research. The reporters looked for gaps in parish assignments. Priests who were frequently on "leaves of absence" or "medical leaves." The Orthodox do not have a similar resource. A few, but not all, of the jurisdictions have directories. Some are now online. I have some hardcopies, and some I just download onto my overloaded computer. It is really hard to find information about the Orthodox cases. They're under the radar. Are you familiar with the calendar issue? Some of the Orthodox churches use a different calendar than the others. Pope Gregory, instituted a calendar to start adding leap years, which is the Gregorian calendar, which most of the world now uses.

Jacobsen: Oh! He stole that from Dionysus Exiguus. I am aware of that one.

Sakoda: So, some Orthodox churches will celebrate Christmas on January 7th. They are on what is known as the Julian calendar, but it is a modified Julian calendar because it includes a leap year. Believe it or not, this is a huge issue in Orthodoxy, particularly in this country. Abusers would sometimes offer the calendar as an excuse why they were transitioning from one Church to another.

Jacobsen: A calendar.

Sakoda: Yes. There is this joke. "How many Orthodox does it change to a lightbulb?"

Jacobsen: How many?

Sakoda: "What? Change? No."

Jacobsen: That's right. That is why the men don't shave. When asked why the men grow such long beards, I remember a funny response. He responds, "I would be more curious about the reverse. Why did the men start shaving?" I will give them that one.

Sakoda: It is funny. Some of the ultra-conservatism in Orthodoxy is new. I remember my grandmother; I cannot remember if it was about wearing a scarf in Church or wearing a pantsuit to Church. My grandmother responded, "Of course, I wear a pantsuit to Church. What do you think this is, the old country?" [Laughing] My grandparents were immigrants, as was my mother. They came from a different world. I don't know if you have come across the toll houses?

Jacobsen: No.

Sakoda: It has nothing to do with cookies! It is the belief that when you die, Christ does not judge you. You go through this series of "toll houses," where the Devil judges you. This belief has become popular in convert circles. Father Seraphim Rose popularized the belief. The trouble is the way that it is put into practice. "It would be best if you had a spiritual father. You must do what your spiritual father tells you to get through the toll houses." I asked one man, "Okay, if your spiritual father tells you to kill someone, would you?" He said, "Yes."

Jacobsen: Wait. The spiritual father has more authority than the Decalogue.

Sakoda: Yes, more than anything, your conscience, the Bible.

Jacobsen: That's kind of troublesome.

Sakoda: It is very troublesome. We heard that some of these groups were amassing weapons' caches.

Jacobsen: Like AK47s and grenades?

Sakoda: Yes.

Jacobsen: What?

Sakoda: Because they are preparing for the end of days.

Jacobsen: Of course, you need ammunition and weaponry for demons. They probably watched Constantine too much or something.

Sakoda: It was a different world to me. What I was leading up to, I was telling my aunt about this. She has been Orthodox her entire life. She says, "I have never heard of toll houses." [Laughing] If people are not well-versed in their religion, someone can come along with this snow-white beard and present himself as an "elder."

Jacobsen: Looking like Jehovah in the illustrated Bible or something.

Sakoda: One man told me once he was in Greece someplace. He met this woman. They had a brief fling. The next day, he went to see this "elder." The elder told him exactly what he had done the night before. The man assumed that the elder was "clairvoyant." I said to him. "Or that the elder sent the woman to you, which is, probably, more likely." If you buy into the toll house theory, the "elder" could very well instruct a woman who followed him to go and have sex with a man. She would do it. Otherwise, she would not get through the toll houses.

Jacobsen: It is the unquestioned authority. It will be different per community. But that fundamental of unquestioned authority is the fundamental issue.

Sakoda: I was also surprised to be told that the money for some of these monasteries was supposedly coming from the Russian mafia.

Jacobsen: Ha!

Sakoda: I have a lot information about those allegations and why the people spreading them thought they were true. The idea that there are monasteries in this country with guns, that were funded by Russian money is scary to me, , especially now, with the invasion of Ukraine. Of course, I don't have any firsthand knowledge because I wouldn't set foot in those monasteries [Laughing]. You must wear a tablecloth on your head if you are a woman.

Jacobsen: The gun in churches thing is, ironically, American.

Sakoda: Yes [Laughing].

Jacobsen: The tablecloth on the head, that's more - I don't know - fundamentalist Islam or fringe Christian groups in the United States.

Sakoda: It has become more and more of a thing within the Orthodoxy of the converts. I admit that in the 50s, we did wear hats when we went to Church, but not in the sense of having to cover your hair. Now, you see little girls who have to wear ankle-length skirts with these big head coverings. To me, there is something wrong with that. One woman I used to work with, she was a priest's daughter as well as a priest's wife, and she had a PhD in the area of clergy sex abuse, said, "When you start to think about that, what is it telling people? That children are sexual objects." She thought it was abusive. In some places, converts were pushing purchasing children's bathing suits from the Mennonites as I recall. [Laughing].

Jacobsen: Probably better than the Mormons; they have full-body underwear that they think can protect you from bullets. If it works, that's great, but call me skeptical!

Sakoda: All children should have them [Laughing].

Jacobsen: Especially if you go to a Russian Orthodox Church [Laughing] or an American church.

Sakoda: Orthodoxy has changed since I was a child. It has not changed for the better.

Jacobsen: Has the core issue of abuse changed significantly other than the fact that it is coming out more?

Sakoda: I don't think it has changed. I think it was sad when we first started talking about what had happened at our Church and priests whom I trusted/admired; they all kept saying, "Abuse is unknown in the Orthodox church."

Jacobsen: Ha! Yes, I saw some vague commentary by some Orthodox priests about that, where they were more or less saying, "Look, it doesn't happen at all or as much in our Church. Regardless, we're not the Catholics, and look at them." That's the argument. It is an insidious and disgusting argument if that's your standard.

Sakoda: In the early 1990s the Orthodox Church of America was having its annual or bi-annual conference. I didn't register. I went. I had written a paper about what had happened in my parish. As people entered the conference, I was handing out my subversive literature.

Jacobsen: Excellent, way to go, good job, we appreciate you.

Sakoda: The funny thing was that this was, again, one of those things like when Cappy found the conviction of Metropolitan Pangratos Vronis. The color I chose for my little booklet was the same as the liturgy for the conference [Laughing].

Jacobsen: Nice.

Sakoda: People were grabbing them, thinking they were liturgy books.

Jacobsen: No!

Sakoda: They were opening them.

Jacobsen: Surprise.

Sakoda: Surprise! I don't remember if I learned how he got a copy of my booklet, but I got a card after the conference from a man talking about his daughter being abused by an Orthodox priest. It was somewhere around the Chicago area. He affirmed that, yes, it happens, but they don't talk about it, or they cover it up. Later I found a case from a 1800s newspaper about an Orthodox priest accused of abusing somebody.

Jacobsen: Can you send me that?

Sakoda: I would if I could find it, Scott [Laughing].

Jacobsen: It is not a small project. This kind of thing. It takes time.

Sakoda: I have a closet full of papers, four big boxes. As I said, I have a penchant for keeping hard copies, not scanning things, and saving them on my computer. But is a problem. If you don't talk about a problem, you can't solve it. That's my issue. In the meantime, let me say that if you want people to stay in the church, you must minister to the hurt people—the direct victims and their family members. Many family members leave after these kind of incidents, too.

Jacobsen: They either convert out or stop believing.

Sakoda: If the Church is the arc of salvation, then you should have everyone on board. It would help if you didn't reject the people who have been injured. It is a big shock when they think, "We are the injured party. We will go to the Church. We expect to be embraced. 'I am so sorry. What can we do for you?'" That does not happen. I do not recall a victim saying it. It could be the ones who do have this experience, do not contact me. But, I don't believe that it happens. Part of it may be a need for more education. What do you do when someone comes and tells you that? What should the response be?

Jacobsen: Some of the most recent Canadian Armed Forces data – collected in 2022 and data published December 5th, 2023, showed that most Canadian Armed Forces members don't think it is something they do; it's a lifestyle with a contract they sign. Over half of Canadian Armed Forces members either deal with it informally - that's another category, and those who do file a report figure something will be done, or more will be done. So, it would help if you got those stories. Even the self-selected groups reporting on this are the more hopeful groups; other sets are not reporting it: Dealing with it themselves or among their family. They leave. Some try reconciling it with their faith, God, or religion. I imagine that being a very difficult line to thread.

Sakoda: Yes, because, I think, one of the unfortunate things, usually, when you go to a church or a Christian church, "You need to forgive and forget."

Jacobsen: That's toxic.

Sakoda: It's not how abuse manifests itself in people's lives. You could be going along thinking, "I've put my abuser out of my mind." Then maybe your child turns the age of you when you were abused; and it brings it back up. For survivors, it is more of an up-and-down rollercoaster. What does it mean to forgive in that case? My best definition is that you are not thinking about this, not holding onto all of this anger and angst. You are moving on with your life.

Jacobsen: Right, it has been integrated.

Sakoda: What has happened to you has been done; it will not change.

Jacobsen: That part can't be changed and is the hardest to accept.

Sakoda: Yes, I have a lot of Orthodox priests that said nasty things to me. One told me that when people talk about abuse with the victims, it will further damage them. I said, "No, if you have a child that is in a car accident and loses a leg, can that child go on and have a happy life? Of course. Will it ever get another leg? No." Sexual abuse is the same thing. It is a permanent injury. So, what you want is for the injuries to heal nicely with the scar, not to be a constant abscess.

Jacobsen: What else have they said to you?

Sakoda: Our favorite one, this is another funny one.

Jacobsen: This is the point of doing this work for those reading this. You will only make it long-term if you have a sense of humor.

Sakoda: No, you laugh at things that are not funny, but you laugh at them just the same. What is the alternative - being angry and crying all the time? A priest said Cappy and I were obviously lesbians.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Sakoda: I called Cappy and asked, "Did you see this? Should we tell our husbands?" [Laughing]

Jacobsen: [Laughing]

Sakoda: I've been married for 49 years this year. Cappy's been married even longer. "Gee, should we tell Gregg and Robert?" We could laugh, or we could be angry.

Jacobsen: Yes, many atheists get that when they're critiquing religious injustice. It is the same as speaking out in the Church.

Sakoda: My favorite response to people who accused us of being "angry," "Why aren't you angry that children are being permanently injured in the name of God?"

Jacobsen: Should you be angry with me?

Sakoda: Yes, shouldn't you be angry with me? You don't have to throw rocks or use machine guns.

Jacobsen: I take anger, but not necessarily in its obvious forms of pitchforks, torches, rocks, and guns. It is the long-term burn of letter writing, campaigning, filing reports, press releases, interviewing, and gathering databases.

Sakoda: If you want to look at it, as I told someone too, "Christ took a whip to the moneychangers and drove them out of the temple. There is a precedent for some anger." Then you get a response. "What? Do you think you're Christ?"

Jacobsen: Isn't he supposed to be the example for these folks?

Sakoda: It is an example. It shows you there is a time and a place. My uncle, an Orthodox priest, was my father's youngest brother. This came to me through a convoluted process, which I won't get into. He once counseled a woman who was struggling. She gone to him for confession after a relative abused her children. She told him, "I cannot forgive them for what they did." My uncle responded, "When Christ is doing his ministry he said over and over, 'Your sins are forgiven. Your sins are forgiven. Your sins are forgiven.' What did he say on the Cross? 'Father, forgive them.'" My uncle told the woman, "Don't try to be better than Christ." For whatever reason, it released her load. She said that she was doing the best she could and that she didn't have to forgive them. She could just say, "God, it is up to you." For many survivors, particularly those struggling with remaining a part of the Church or not, that is a very meaningful thought. "I do not have to embrace my abuser. I can wash my hands of them."

Jacobsen: Our minds only work on remembering salient information. Trauma is very salient to a person to avoid that situation again. That's why it is trauma and highly remembered. The phrase you said about forgive and forget doesn't fit our cognitive system, "Forgive and don't forget" is the key.

Sakoda: Don't forgive, but live a happy life anyway.

Jacobsen: It is up to the person whether they forgive. It is not up to the community, the priest, or anyone else. For some people, forgiving is not the right choice for them.

Sakoda: If you look at it, as I said, for people still trying to be within the religion, if the idea is that if you don't forgive, your sins won't be forgiven: it makes people afraid. "How do I do this? I will be damned because I cannot forgive." That's why I said what my uncle said to this woman. It gave her much comfort because he wasn't demanding. He didn't say, "How terrible, you are going to Hell if you don't forgive your relative for sexually abusing your children." He said, "Let God sort it out." You go and live your life. I think that's not an easy thing to do anyway. It is harder to do if you are still trapped in this idea. "Oh my God, I am damning myself if I can't do this."

Jacobsen: After 2020, what are the updates on these kinds of cases for the Orthodox Church? I will be working on an analysis of the materials that Hermina and Katherine gave me. It is a year-by-year chronology of what they have so far, summarizing and breathing new life into those popular or unpopular news reports.

Sakoda: [Laughing].

Jacobsen: It covers a little bit. It doesn't have legal force. It takes people like yourself, Hermina, Katherine, Lucy, and others to make things happen. I am nothing. All the people I am aware of working on this regarding Eastern Orthodox traditions are women who are approximately 40 years old and older.

Sakoda: And up and up! [Laughing].

Jacobsen: Right, so, what is it about women in those communities and being in the latter half of life, statistically speaking, that puts that demographic in a position to speak on these topics over a long period and to put in the hard work that is doing statistical analysis, getting data, getting the stories, and being a resource for people?

Sakoda: Part of it, religion has always been more of a women's province anyway. When you have a community, for the Orthodox and the Catholics, you do not have women priests. You do not even have women deacons anymore. Although, there is a revival of that going on in the Orthodox churches. So, it is a man-centered thing.

Jacobsen: True.

Sakoda: I think men and women react a little bit differently to trauma. Part of it could be, too, that most, if not all women are likely to have experienced some form of assault during their lifetime. I remember when the "MeToo Movement" exploded, and there were all these women posting "MeToo" and talking about what they do to protect themselves. There was a man posting in the thread, he said, "What do I do to avoid sexual assault? Stay out of prison?"

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Sakoda: Women are constantly experiencing assault or unwelcome touching. I think it gives them a more sympathetic perspective when someone comes and says, "This happened to me." Maybe they are more likely to believe it happened to you because it happened to them. I don't think you could interact with an adult woman who hasn't been assaulted in some form or another. You're on the train or bus, and someone grabs your butt. Men don't experience things like that as

often. Obviously some men are victimized, and some of them even by women. But not as many or as often.

Jacobsen: I experienced some of it. I was working at a low-grade pub.

Sakoda: [Laughing].

Jacobsen: I worked in the back of the house, sometimes in the front. I worked at four restaurants simultaneously and did janitorial for 2 of them overnight, seven days a week. I remember one bartender. She would ask me to reach for something and grab my stomach, ass. That harassment was not requested [Laughing]. I don't think, from what I am reading and have heard and been told, that's nearly as pervasive as it has been for many women.

Sakoda: I think it doesn't help that for many men, particularly if a man assaulted them, will be asked, "Why didn't you fight him off?" There is shame associated with freezing. You get a little of that as a woman, but more often you will get, "What were you wearing?"

Jacobsen: Same tone in the question, too. I'm noticing. "Why didn't you fight him off?" is "What were you wearing?" What did you do to call this upon yourself?

Sakoda: Truthfully, if I am being charitable, it comes down to people's self-protectiveness. If it can happen to you, then it can happen to me. Therefore, you must have done something to bring it onto yourself. Otherwise, it can happen to me.

Jacobsen: The question will assume men's strength and self-defense regarding aggression. For the women, I am getting two points there. On the one hand, "What are you wearing?" Many women's power in society has to do with their beauty. That's what has been assigned. On the other hand, how they relate to one another in terms of telling their stories is relational. It is seeing that story in another person.

Sakoda: The other thing, something that you said. My book club read this book by Deborah Tannen once, You Just Don't Understand. She is a linguist. She said that men and women speak different languages. She puts it down to that men were the hunters, and women the gatherers. So, for the men, you had to have someone in charge. You had to have a hierarchy. You did what you were told. You didn't talk about it. The leader said, "You go there. You go there. This is what we are going to do." Women would be spending all day talking and gathering stuff. So, women talk to create relationships between themselves. Men talk to convey information.

Jacobsen: As a general tendency, when men relate to one another, picture them sitting at a log and speaking parallel, not looking at each other. Women, it is face-to-face.

Sakoda: How about that? [Laughing] I like that. All of us tried to get our husbands to read the book. The worst was my husband because he was puzzled when I told him this theory. He is smart. He went to Yale. He goes, "I don't understand. We have a relationship. You're my wife." It's not exactly what I am talking about regarding a relationship! Even within the survivors' movement, the women are more likely talk to each other. We know what is going on in each other's lives.

Jacobsen: "How are you doing? Cindy came back from a funeral and is having a really hard time. Kathryn and her kids are doing fine. One has just entered a hard business school, and the other is sick." [Laughing] This stuff.

Sakoda: It builds relationships instead of having someone in charge calling the shots, and finding your place in the pecking order. Don't get me wrong, women can be vicious, particularly teenage girls.

Jacobsen: I agree with Margaret Atwood. I don't think women are angels or demons

Sakoda: Women have a different way of relating to one another than men. You notice this in your marriage, going to the book club, because you're not on the same wavelength. Women want to talk about something. Men are like, "What do you want me to do?"

Jacobsen: It conveys data for action instead of narrative-building for relationship sustaining.

Sakoda: Yes, that may make women more sympathetic to survivors coming forward. They are trying to connect to them. As I said, I don't think most women become women without experiencing some form of sexual assault along the way.

Jacobsen: Can you say that again? It is a very powerful phrase.

Sakoda: I don't think most women become women without experiencing some form of sexual assault along the way, if they are being honest. They may not think about it as sexual assault. Someone is groping you on the bus and turning around, but you can't identify who did it. It is just a fact of life. Women do things to protect themselves. My husband was surprised. I was telling him that most women when they park their cars, they park under a street light, and they carry their keys in their hands to poke someone's eyes out if they are accosted. When I open the car door at night, if I am by myself, I check in the back seat first.

Jacobsen: That last one might be Hollywood influence.

Sakoda: It is something you read. Women's magazines talk about all kinds of things. My husband said, "Do you look at the back seat?" I said, "Yes." [Laughing]

Jacobsen: [Laughing]

Sakoda: Or if, sometimes, women are waiting for an elevator and a guy gives you a creepy vibe, you pretend, "Oh, I forgot something. You go ahead," because you don't want a ride with him. One of the books I have read in the past few years is by Gavin de Becker. It is called The Gift of Fear. He had a second book too, expanding on this theme. Women are taught to be polite. My daughter has his complaint. Men always interrupt women.

Jacobsen: True. I do it!

Sakoda: [Laughing] But men do not even think about the fact that they are interrupting. Anyways, women who are taught to be polite tend to accept that. When you are interrupted, you do not say anything. Maybe part of the reason women are more subject to assault is because they are trying to be polite. They ignore the warning signs in their gut. It is waiting for an elevator, getting creeped out, and getting in an elevator with him anyway because you don't want him to think he creeped you out. [Laughing] It is important. Same thing in church situations, people

ignore their gut. They might see the priest or teacher hugging a child. It will tingle their spidey sense. But they won't do anything about it, particularly in church situations. "I have such a dirty mind to think that Father could have anything nefarious in mind when he is hugging this child." Instead, it should be, "No, for whatever reason, we get these feelings. We need to pay attention to them."

Jacobsen: Are most priest abusers likely, so far, never to have come to justice? Those who have been abused have stayed in positions of authority or been promoted.

Sakoda: Yes. As I said, I do not have good statistics on the Orthodox because there aren't any. People used to ask me, "What is the rate of abuse in the Orthodox churches?" How would I know? All I know is that if I looked at the names on my oldsite, I probably have ten more for each name that I couldn't put on the site. Someone will write to me: Father So-and-So abused me. I keep a file on it in case someone else comes on down the road and comes and claims, "Father So-and-So abused me." Now, I forgot what you asked. [Laughing]

Jacobsen: Most who have abused, have they not come to justice?

Sakoda: I do not have as much information on the Orthodox, but I know in the Catholic context, very few priests have been prosecuted for their crimes. Part of that is the statute of limitations problem. After a certain time, the statute of limitations on these crimes expires. California tried to do this end run around this problem, saying that they wouldn't change the definitions of the crimes or the penalties, but, they would allow criminal cases to be brought forward beyond the statute of limitations. The US Supreme Court said in the Stogner decision, "No, you cannot do that. It is a violation of constitutional rights. You cannot retroactively change the criminal statute of limitations." People usually come forward between 50 and 70. It is a joke, not a nice one, that the statute of limitations (SOL) stands for "Shit Out of Luck."

Jacobsen: How did George Carlin put it? "You'd be SOL and JWF. Shit out of luck and jolly well fucked."

Sakoda: So, while I believe the situation is the same in the Orthodox churches, I do not have supporting data. Clergy crimes are not likely reported to law enforcement within the statutory limits. That is why you don't have as many prosecutions. I am trying to think. This was one of the first big Orthodox cases, I think in 1999. In an Orthodox monastery in Texas, two people were reported for child sex abuse, the abbot and another monk: Fathers Benedict Greene, and Jeremiah Hitt. Besides the Pangratios conviction we uncovered, this was among the first cases we publicized. Hitt went to trial. Greene pleaded guilty. But you still had all these people who didn't believe it.

Jacobsen: That is not the controversial part. That's pretty par for the course. Even the guy who ran the human trafficking, sex trafficking, and sex cult, Keith Raniere, was part of the HBO special or documentary series, The Vow, where he was Vanguard in NXIVM. He got life in prison and several of his accomplices as well, men and women. Still, many people defended him when in prison.

Sakoda: Yes, in this particular case, in 2006, there was a second set of charges. New victims were coming forward multiple victims. I cannot remember if 5 or 6 of the monks were convicted.

Greene killed himself before he could go to trial because I think he knew he would go to prison. After all, this was his second conviction. This was in Texas. You don't want to go to prison in Texas or Florida. [Laughing]

Jacobsen: No! The weather sucks.

Sakoda: No prison is truly humane, in my view, having visited various prisons in California. But I believe in Florida and Texas they're particularly bad. In Florida, you can even end up in a chain gang. Do you know what a chain gang is?

Jacobsen: No.

Sakoda: They let the prisoners do highway labor. What was that Paul Newman movie about a man on a chain gang? I think that they are peculiar to the South, although California has a program where you can be released to go and fight wildfires.

Jacobsen: I honestly don't know what is worse: firefighting for free or being in prison.

Sakoda: At least you're out. For many people, it is hard not to be outside.

Jacobsen: It is like the one man you're saying about #MeToo. He would probably be out fighting fires rather than being in prison, afraid of being sexually assaulted.

Sakoda: Greene was probably 400 or 500 pounds. They shouldn't have him fighting fires!

Jacobsen: Structurally, it takes work.

Sakoda: Besides, Greene came to his first criminal trial with an oxygen tank. This seems to be a common tactic for abusers to show up disabled, perhaps on crutches or in a wheelchair.

Jacobsen: It is to garner sympathy.

Sakoda: Yes, it was funny. Greene had just been to Colorado without oxygen, but many people didn't question this "health problem." When the second set of charges came down, in some ways, that was a turning point for us. That was when we got more credibility. The first charge, people said, my other favorite excuse, "Father only pleaded guilty to prevent that victim from having to lie on the witness stand." When you plead guilty, you must say "I did this" under oath. Is it better for Greene to lie? It is amazing how little people wanted to believe this happened, although the Orthodox are perfectly willing to believe it happens in the Catholic Church.

Jacobsen: It is a different frame on NIMBY. It happens not in my backyard, but over here.

Sakoda: They will say, "They have those celibate priests." Of course, Orthodox priests can be celibate, too. Some of them are abusers. All Orthodox bishops either have to be celibate or widowers. There have been bishops who put their wives in monasteries, because if their wife is still living, she has to be celibate, as well. So, you do have celibate clergy in the Orthodox Church. But I think people have the idea that it is a choice in Orthodoxy. You have to decide if you are celibate or married before you are ordained, and you have a choice. But what happens to a priest whose wife dies? He cannot remarry in Orthodoxy and be a priest. So, it's a choice between being married or being a priest. He has a hard choice to make. But I think the main issue

is that people equate celibate priests with abuse. Abuse is not about sex. It is about power and control. It is through the vehicle of sex. It makes it confusing for the victim.

Jacobsen: It goes back to the question about unquestioned power in that particular structure. If they have that transcendental status connecting to something divine, it is much harder to question it, especially if you have grown up or been imbued in it. It is much harder to question it.

Sakoda: A lot of the priests tell convincing lies. This is what God wants you to do. Sometimes, for girls, they'll say, "God wants me to indoctrinate you to what it means to be a Christian wife." It is one of those things where you must be in the situation to fully understand. You have to be the child and know everything that has happened before. Phil Saviano. helped the Boston Globe with their research on abusers in the Catholic Church. He said, "The priest gave me a beer and showed me porn."

Jacobsen: Ha!

Sakoda: The next time, the priest wanted him to go further. Phil felt he couldn't say, "No," because he was compromised by the beer and the porn. That's the way children's minds work.

Jacobsen: Yes, in some of these stories, the people regress. The way they talk. They cannot just tell this priest to "fuck off," to put it colloquially.

Sakoda: I had one man come to my meetings. I do not remember if he came more than once. I have support meetings for survivors. He said, "I am not sure I should be here," because when the priest tried to touch him, he punched him and ran away.

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Sakoda: He goes, "I wasn't abused." But what happened was his trust in the institution died, whether the priest actually touched him or just tried to touch him, and got punched. I try to tell people all the time, whether you complied or punched back and got away, you would still feel that damage. "Oh my God, he is supposed to be a priest." Particularly children, "It must have been something I did. What do I do to make sure that it doesn't happen again?" You're just in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong person. There's probably nothing you could have done, particularly for little kids. A grown man and a 6-year-old, that's not even a fair fight.

Jacobsen: 18, 20, 25, they still have a lot of the development of having a feeling and standing in it. It can be much if you push them hard enough. It doesn't take that much pushing. It takes a long time to get a backbone.

Sakoda: It's especially hard to stand up to someone who you have been told represents God. I remember one survivor. He was abused as an adult. He was a seminarian. When the priest attacked him, he froze. He was shocked that a priest would be doing this. Afterwards, he had such self-blame and loathing because "Why didn't I do something?" I think that's hard. It is not just fight or flight. It is fight, flight, freeze, or comply. People tend to not know about freeze and comply, but it happens. It can set a pattern. That freeze and compliance can haunt you in similar situations for the rest of your life. You may revert to that response instead of doing something different. Trauma is stored in a different part of the brain. It affects your behavior in ways that you do not always realize. Someone told me their abuser had told them that if they spoke up,

they would be killed. When they spoke up, they were so terrified. The idea that the axe was coming. Even though their abuser was dead, it was terrifying to come forward because of what they had been told.

Jacobsen: The tools of religious indoctrination, from my view, are based on fear. A lot of it is reinforced by fear of death. "I would rather not think about the idea that I would stop existing and, therefore, I will exist eternally in some other transcendent dimension."

Sakoda: So, "I have to do x, y, and z." It is like the toll houses. "I have to do everything my spiritual father tells me, or I will be eternally damned."

Jacobsen: The easiest presentation, I think it goes against... the philosophy on life is you're a flame. Once you snuff the flame out, it doesn't go anywhere. It just stops being. I think it is the same for us.

Sakoda: No one knows because no one has returned [Laughing].

Jacobsen: Right, people who believe in Uri Geller, who was shown as a fraud by James Randi on national television on Johnny Carson. Similar fakes and frauds, and so on, I am noticing the same phenomenon that you're describing with individuals who come forward with the abuse. They have public cases. They have data up to 2020. They have news organizations cataloguing stuff like Hermina and Katherine. People, like the X Files, they want to believe.

Sakoda: They do. Part of it is that you want to believe in something bigger than yourself. That's okay. Unfortunately, my father ruined me. He said, "Melanie, you have a head to do more than decorate your shoulders."

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Sakoda: He focused on thinking for himself and didn't tell people what to do. I think there is that element of social conditioning. You are supposed to obey the teachers. You are supposed to obey the priests. People don't ask, "What if the priest is a creep? What do I do then?" Sexual abuse is pervasive in society. It's no surprise to find it in churches. I think they need to do a lot more to make churches a safer place for people go to them.

Jacobsen: It is probably a hard pill to swallow because it makes churches seem like every other institution, which is to say, human. There's also the fact that the indoctrination starts so early. I agree with Hypatia. If you imbue someone sufficiently early, it is extremely hard for them to unravel not the moral stuff, the superstitions that are built up around this complex of theology and social life, community, and ritual, and the unquestionable authority of these priests and bishop figures.

Sakoda: Yet, some overcome it. I know the woman who runs Bishop Accountability, Anne Barrett Doyle. She was raised Catholic. I remember reading that was when she was 14, her priest was saying something. She thought it was wrong and stood up and challenged him. So, as my father taught me, you have people who believe in using their head or their conscience and speaking up when they see something wrong. Being comfortable and having someone telling you what to do is tempting. It is not your responsibility.

Jacobsen: That's scary for some people.

Sakoda: It is scary the other way too.

Jacobsen: Sure.

Sakoda: So, if the elder asks you to kill someone, you say, "Yes, sure thing."

Jacobsen: [Laughing].

Sakoda: Then you go and do it. But you will go to Heaven because you obeyed your spiritual father. That, to me, is scary. I think it is a perversion of what religion is all about.

Jacobsen: Since you have given me so much of your precious time, m'lady.

Sakoda: [Laughing].

Jacobsen: I am going to ask one last question.

Sakoda: Is it a trick question? [Laughing]

Jacobsen: I am hoping not. If you could point people to individuals or resources they can go to for help if they're coming out of the Orthodox tradition, who should they look into? What organizations can they get some help from? Also, for yourself or others doing this kind of work, here is my experience so far. It is - literally - women doing this work. How can they support them with their time, skills, volunteer efforts, and finances? What are the ways to help as well?

Sakoda: I run support groups for survivors. They follow the AA meeting model. Most people use them as a supplement to therapy, but some people use them instead of therapy. It is a way of meeting other survivors, going into a room where you say, "This happened to me when I was 6." Instead of people turning the other way or saying, "You need to forgive and forget," or whatever. People will say, "We understand."

Jacobsen: #ChurchToo.

Sakoda: There is also, in this country, a group called RAINN, Rape Abuse Incest National Network. They also offer support groups. However, they do not specialize in religious abuse, as I have over the past 26+ years. Maybe this is not quite what you meant by your question, but I also think what ordinary people can do to help support survivors. If someone comes and confides in you, "when I was 10, my priest raped me, or my pastor raped me."

Jacobsen: The severity, just hearing it, is a very... If you hear that sentence, pause and hear what they're saying to you; they're not lying to you, most likely.

Sakoda: What do they have to gain?

Jacobsen: Seriously.

Sakoda: What do you say? You say, "I am sorry. I am sorry that happened to you. What can I do to support you?" Maybe you cannot do a whole lot. This is their healing journey. If you accept what they say... I had one Orthodox survivor come to me and when I started talking to him, it was automatic, I said, "I am so sorry that happened to you." He started crying. What can I say? I

make grown men cry. He said, "No one has ever told me that before. That they were sorry for what happened to me." It is like, that's sad.

Jacobsen: That breaks the spell. I am stealing from a now-deceased philosopher, Daniel Dennett, who wrote a book called *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. What you do when you do that, socially, at least, for me, you break the spell. You break the spell for men by doing so.

Sakoda: Yes, that helps; as to what can help the advocates, if they're involved with an organization, you can support it. As I said, Pokrov never had enough support to register as a nonprofit. Maybe it will happen someday for a similar group, but I am not going to hold my breath. If you find an organization that supports survivors, donate to them. When victims know that there are people who will believe them, they will come forward. If we have children coming forward, then we will see more criminal convictions. Chances are, if an arrest is publicized by the police, it will encourage other victims or people with information to come forward. That helps to make sure that there are convictions, and some of these clergy will end up behind bars rather than behind the pulpit. The more convictions there are, the more people will be willing to believe it that it happens. There will still be a few religious zealots who never believe. "But he had hands laid on him!" In Catholicism for example, when a man is ordained he is believed to undergo an "ontological change," becoming "another Christ" to serve the Church. The best response I ever gave someone in the Orthodox Church who believed something similar was, "The Church may be mystical. It is not magic. If someone is an abuser before they are ordained, they are going to be an abuser afterwards. It is not going to fix them."

Professor David K. Pooler, Ph.D., LCSW-S on Clergy Adult Sexual Abuse

[Professor David K. Pooler, Ph.D., LCSW-S](#) is a Professor in the Diana R. Garland School of Social Work at Baylor University. His X account is [here](#).

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What was your original, either less knowledgeable or potentially naïve, position about the church, and what was the big lesson or takeaway from that?

Professor David Pooler: I had already seen and understood from the literature that there were poor responses from churches when adult clergy sex abuse is reported. But what I learned in my research, I didn't find. I asked at the end of this national survey if you had a positive experience when you reported the abuse, and if you had a positive, supportive experience from the church, would you be willing to be interviewed? I got "no." There's not a single person who had an overall positive experience. It was pretty devastating. I learned that institutions prioritize their reputation and image and the reputation and image of their leader, all in a sense; I hate to be cynical, but it appears to be to maintain their power and influence. This includes money; they will do whatever they can to maintain that. If that means throwing a victim under the bus, blaming her, or framing a narrative where she was the temptress, they will do that. That seems to be the playbook once these kinds of things are disclosed. It's interesting; it's backfiring. There's a church just recently—you may have seen this in the Dallas area—where Robert Morris, a pastor, admitted to an inappropriate relationship, which is a massive gaslighting tactic. What he did is he was sexually abusing a girl who was 12, all the way up to when she was 16, and he was aged 20 through 24.

The framing of this was to try to mitigate the damage and get people to follow, but it hit like a firestorm, so he just resigned yesterday. So that's one of the big takeaways, is that churches are probably one of the least equipped institutions to respond to reports of sexual abuse of any institution that I've come across. And you'd think it would be the other way around. Churches are supposed to be safe places, healing spaces, and restorative places. That's how many churches, in a sense, market themselves and talk about the space that they're creating for people. But actually, what I'm learning is that churches are the safest place for abusive and narcissistic people to end up in leadership; churches are not equipping people with the skills necessary to dissent or question leaders. And part of that is, for me, what I'm learning is there's one "-ism" that sits right in the lap of the church, and that's clericalism. My simple definition of clericalism is the elevation and veneration of a church leader and their priorities, needs, and agenda to the exclusion of congregants. And what that means, then, is there's this power differential, and there's no incentive on the leadership, pastor's side, or priest's side ever to do anything about that because they benefit from that arrangement. But that arrangement puts congregants and parishioners in a vulnerable place if someone in that position abuses their power, which, with that setup, makes it easier to abuse power.

In that place, in that elevated space, people are taught to trust the authority figure, not question the authority figure, and that this person is for the good. They're called, and they're special, and there are anoints on them. And it disarms people into thinking, "These are great, amazing people

here just for my good.” So, congregants have little permission to create conflict, push back, or even hold people accountable. That’s often met with stiff resistance in most religious spaces.

Jacobsen: How do individuals who come out of these experiences, in the way they’re describing it to you, experience the aftermath?

Pooler: Yes, that’s a great question. Often, when they report, they’re not believed. Like, “Our pastor would never do that.” If they go to someone else in the church, they’re often told, “No, you’re mistaken.” In other words, it’s immediately not believed. What we know in the trauma world is that an unbelieving or indifferent response to a report of that kind of abuse immediately creates more trauma. So that is a primary way. It’s not believed, dismissed, or invalidated in various ways, including people saying, “Well, you just need to keep this quiet. This isn’t something you should take any further.” It’s because, in my opinion, as I’ve watched this over time, why the institutions respond this way and why the supporters of a leader respond this way creates too much cognitive dissonance for them. Their beloved institution, the church, and their beloved pastor, all of a sudden, include the deep, factual reality that they’re abusive and they’ve sexually assaulted someone. It causes their entire view of how the world works to implode, and they don’t want that to happen. So, the easiest way to resolve that cognitive dissonance is to go ahead and keep supporting an abusive person and blame the victim. And I’ve seen all kinds of things. The other thing is that different churches have different policies in place, and that’s the thing. Each denomination has its policy. There are non-denominational churches. So, survivors face various roadblocks, barriers, and challenges when reporting. For example, some churches have no policy whatsoever. The Episcopal Church has a decent policy, but whether that policy is followed depends on the people at play with the policy in their hands.

The other thing is that sometimes churches attempt to investigate this themselves. Early in my research, I tried to set up a best practice guide for churches to investigate and learn more. I’ve learned that churches cannot investigate themselves, none whatsoever. There’s too much vested and too many major threads at play. It’s the survivor’s priority versus prioritizing themselves, which collide massively. But third-party investigators will now come in and take a look.

One of the big ones in the United States is GRACE, which stands for Godly Response to Abuse in a Christian Environment. They do both prevention trainings for churches, and they’ll do third-party investigations in the aftermath, tease everything out, and make a report like, “Here’s what happened, here’s who did what, here’s who’s responsible for the abuse,” etc. So, I don’t know if that gets what you want there at some point. But most survivors that I’ve talked with walk around wounded because, and I’ve even in my research going back a decade, there are places where, in the aftermath of the report, people were told to leave the church. You need to leave the church; there’s too much controversy; you’re too much of a lightning rod.

In other words, the very place that causes a massive injury. For many people, being a part of their church was their main source of belonging, where they made meaning, and all of their social support was there. Suddenly, people are cutting that off and saying, “Out of here.” I mean, talk about exiling and scapegoating somebody. So what I’m saying is religious institutions, the very place where people should be kept safe and restored and healed and helped, they’re doing that with the offender. They say, “We’ll restore our offender, and then they run off the victim.” That’s

the status quo. And because I'm going to do a survey again here, hopefully, either later this year in 2024 or early 2025, to try to get a snapshot. Is that still the case? And I fear that it's still the case.

Jacobsen: There's a nuance here that I could see critiques coming, probably coming your way in your past. When you're pointing out abusive behaviour by clergy and supporting those who have come forward with an allegation against a clergy member, an institution or an individual would look at that person and claim that you're making a claim against this denomination as a whole or the Christian church as an entity or an idea: You're claiming all clergy. How can we make sure that that nuance is validly taken into account by saying, "We're talking about abuser clergy, not most clergy"? We're talking about victims of those people. And how can we build institutions that can absorb these social blights and respond effectively?

Pooler: Well, there's a lot there, but you're right. So what it does, and you're right, gets into that cognitive dissonance. The moment one person brings up an allegation of abuse. It can and probably should call into question everything. Not that every pastor or leader is abusive, but it should get us all on alert to begin to ask, "What are we doing to prevent this better? How are we vetting our leaders? How are we making sure our leaders have appropriate training?" And I would say this: clergy have the most power of any helping professional, in my opinion. Some research in the U.S. goes back almost a couple of decades, but it's the fact that people, when seeking help, actually will find a minister before any other helping professional. That's their first stop for a mental health concern. So that demonstrates the level of power that clergy have.

So my point here is that other professionals, like licensed marriage and family therapists, social workers, psychologists, and even physicians and doctors, all have codes of ethics that prohibit sexual misconduct. And all these professions have some training in professional development around power, boundaries, and consent. Part of the reason that sexual activity is prohibited in these professional relationships is that people cannot consent when there's that kind of power differential. So even if they were to say yes to sexual activity, how do you tease out the fact that manipulation or coercion or pressure was not involved or just the need to please the authority figure, right? Because of the power differential. And I say all that: most seminaries don't include training on power, consent, and boundaries, right? And of course, then, if you look more broadly, just at Christianity in the U.S. or maybe even globally, there are so many varieties of ordination processes and educational requirements. Some denominations require someone to undergo a rigorous process and earn a master of divinity degree. There are other places where you can pop an organization or get an ordination certificate online, and then the church will have you. They'll let you pastor them.

So I'm just saying it's the Wild West to use a metaphor within churches. We don't call it that. We don't think of it that way. So that's part of when an allegation of abuse comes up; it calls into question many things. But if we start peeling back the layers, we're like, "Oh my God, it is the Wild West. There's no universal anything anywhere." And churches in the United States are unregulated. They're just unregulated. All the other professions are regulated. Of course, I don't think churches will get regulated in a federal sense anytime soon. So what that leaves us with then is what Lucy Huh and others and Hermina (Nedelescu) are working on is trying to

criminalize this, create state statutes where clergy are added to the list of other helping professionals so that when they abuse, sexually abuse, someone, it's a crime. So, at least we have a stop there; someone would have a criminal record if they engaged in this. But going back to your question, how do we? This will sound like a radical overstatement, but how we do church just isn't working. And part of that is clericalism, this idolatry of leaders, leaders, leaders, leaders, leaders, leaders. We're not equipping and centring and including various perspectives. We're not valuing a sense of diversity and a multitude of perspectives and opinions broadly.

So much of the way we do church is about conformity, creating in-groups and out-groups, and developing critical thinking and skills to cultivate healthy environments. Again, this may sound like an overstatement, but from my perspective, just looking at the religious institutions for over a decade. The conclusion I'm drawing is that it's not a healthy space for the most part. It's toxic. It's not safe for women. It's safe for abusers to operate. We offer too much trust, goodwill, and benefit from the doubt.

Another thing that makes religious spaces unsafe is that people are socialized to override their intuitions and concerns and not voice them. Churches are not a safe place to share concerns, intuitions, and pushback because it makes leading people far more complex and messy. But I would say, if there's a solution, we got to lean into the messy, complex nuances of human relationships and talk about boundaries and power and consent, and honestly talk about sex. That's a whole other thing where, especially in the evangelical world, there's much talk about purity culture. That may extend beyond the evangelical world and some other places, but this whole purity culture and its overemphasis on sex. But what it does then is say all sex is bad, and no one talks about healthy sexuality. So, in those kinds of environments, if an abusive pastor is trying to be sexual with someone, someone doesn't even have a framework. They say, "Well, I need to trust my pastor." And if they're saying this is okay, it must be true.

Jacobsen: How are individuals who come forward stereotyped by the community, so by their fellow laity, whether they're claimed to have the Jezebel spirit or something obscure like this? How do they get pushback?

Pooler: I don't want to oversimplify it, but I want some version of the temptress. You're right. I've heard the Jezebel spirit. Something rebellious, they're there to destroy. They're either the temptress, or they're there to destroy and harm the church. Those are the two pathways. I've seen people who report mapped onto one of those. That's how the commonpeople resolve their cognitive dissonance instead of going to the fact that, "Oh my God, this did happen. Someone did abuse." It's much easier to say, "Yeah, they're just trying to harm the church. They're trying to destroy the church." It's a way of not seeing what happened at all, right? If someone's a temptress, then they're the problem. If someone's trying to destroy the church, they're the problem. In other words, it is the scapegoating mechanism. So, myriad other ones could probably have come up, but those are probably the two most common.

Jacobsen: So the accusation of mental illness, the pastor or the priest did nothing wrong.

Pooler: I would say it this way. I hear that it's often not that they did nothing wrong. Maybe they did sin, but it's a minimized version. We saw this with the Robert Morris story, which was an

inappropriate relationship. “But it would help if you forgave,” and that’s another thing. They’re often labelled as spiritually defective. It’s more of a spiritual problem. “You’re not right spiritually with God.” That’s the problem. “If you want to get right with God, you must forgive this person.” It goes back to this: putting the burden on the one injured to resolve all of the conflict by simply forgiving and moving on, not making a big deal of this.

Jacobsen: How do abusers respond?

Pooler: What I’ve seen is most abusers at the moment, the moment that an abuser gets a sense that something might go public. I see this all the time. They try to get out in front and create and steer the narrative. So, abusers themselves use the same tactics. It’s like, “They’re rebellious. They want to take me down. They’re making false accusations against me. I did nothing wrong.” Or if they admit they did something wrong, they will call it consensual, which is still a major... it’s misinformation and inaccurate because of the power differential. So that’s a primary way. When a church platforms a minister after an accusation of abuse has been made, that is another form of institutional betrayal, like giving the microphone to an abuser after a report of abuse has come out.

They shape and frame the narrative for everyone in the community. That way, they will continue to get everyone’s support. So, if the abuser blames the victim, then the masses will follow the lead of that narrative. “Yeah, it was her fault. She tempted the pastor. She’s making false accusations and trying to take the pastor down.” I’ve seen it over and over and over and over that very same thing.

Jacobsen: So #MeToo or #TimesUp aren’t missing the point, but there is a truth behind the response of ‘not all men.’ However, the larger point of those movements is being missed there. Similarly, or by analogy, we can have #ChurchToo. I have not seen this. However, I could see this as a response regarding hashtags, ‘not all clergy.’ It’s valid. We’ve covered that a little bit in the earlier part of the interview. Yet, how can we make sure that these are acknowledged? So those who will bring those concerns forward aren’t just dismissed but also respond in a way that’s respectfully redirecting attention to the fact that it’s, in a way, missing the larger point of #ChurchToo and similar movements.

Pooler: Yes, I’m trying to follow your logic. And I guess I haven’t. It’s not that I disagree with you. I’m unsure how to create a balance where you’re not getting pushback. Well, it’s not all clergy, right? Because you’re right, that can potentially invalidate the concerns being brought up. Here’s where my mind’s going: people bringing up these concerns are just not making stuff up. When we look at the sexual assault false report rate, it’s low. And at the end of the day, the best we can tell, maybe five out of a hundred people make something up around sexual assault. So, when people bring this up, they’re likely to get pushback, right? It’s a hard process. So I’ll say it this way. No one’s making this stuff up. No one’s trying to injure, damage, or remove the church. Again, I think this is what’s hard.

People work incrementally, but it’s almost like there’s a need for a major reform. We’ve got to look at how we’ve built our structures metaphorically, created these institutions, and whether they are safe. I think part of it is beginning to include trauma-sensitive approaches and lenses and

not pathologizing. Many churches over-spiritualize mental health issues. Like if someone's dealing with depression, in some spaces, it's a spirit of depression. It's demonic. I'm saying that we're not creating safe spaces for people when we have stuff like that. Anyway, I don't feel I'm answering your question very well.

Jacobsen: What has been your biggest takeaway from the research? What are you hoping to research in the next few years?

Pooler: I think the biggest takeaway. I'll say churches are not nearly as safe as we think. Pastors, for the most part, are not trained in some of the most important elements of interpersonal relationships that will make relationships safe. So, I think that's one of the biggest takeaways. And I also would say the third one is that injuries to survivors are far more profound than we want to admit. Like this isn't just something you go and forgive. People have PTSD. They need years of treatment. On the flip side, I think we can make churches safer, better, and healthier, but it will require the concerted effort of congregants, grassroots, ground up, demanding reform and change of their leaders and institutions. They are far more involved and engaged than they have been in the past.

Jacobsen: Thank you so much for your time.

Pooler: All right. You got it. Let me know if you need anything else. Okay, thanks.

Dr. Hermina Nedelescu & Dorothy Small: Ecumenical Catholic-Orthodox Discourse

Dr. Hermina Nedelescu is a Romanian-born neuroscientist. Her research work is concerned with the neurobiological control of abnormal behaviors and brain functions relevant to human psychopathology. The majority of this work is directed at understanding brain mechanisms that underly substance use and abuse with emphasis on approach and avoidance of drug-paired environments. Another line of research is directed at investigating the neurobiological dysregulation caused by sexual assault-induced PTSD and suicide with hopes to inform therapeutic treatments. For her theological work, she is training with the Center for Theology and Natural Sciences at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, where she leverages her expertise in neuroscience to develop a theological anthropology based on the Christian Orthodox tradition. This research is focused on the topic of desire vs. dysregulated desire leading to abuse. She is an instructor for Stepping Higher Inc., a faith-based organization funded by the County of San Diego Behavior Health Services Department to teach and support clergy, pastors, and behavioral health providers who minister to people suffering from substances use disorders, substance abuse, as well as, other psychological addictions or mental illnesses. She is actively involved in the state legislative efforts to protect adults from clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. She is co-founder of [Prosopon Healing](#), a resource site for Orthodox Christian victims/survivors of clergy abuse. In her free time, she enjoys microscope photography and drawing brain cells to share the beautiful structure and function of the brain with the general public through art exhibits.

Dorothy Small an advocate for SNAP, Survivor Network for those Abused by Priests since 2019, was a child sex abuse victim. She also experienced sexual abuse by a clergyman as an adult. Dorothy courageously addressed the latter through successful litigation publicly disclosing her identity prior to the inception of the #Me Too movement. Victimized but not a victim she shares how she moved beyond surviving to thriving using adversity as a powerful motivator. She fortified herself with knowledge of personality disorders and tactics used by predators to help her spot wolves in sheep's clothing. This has enabled her to feel safe in a world where safety is not guaranteed, even in institutions where one would expect it such as religious. A retired registered nurse with over forty years of clinical experience, Dorothy lives with her loving fur companions Bradley Cooper and Captain Ron, Boston Terriers. She is a self-published author, cancer survivor, mother, and grandmother. Dorothy is currently working on a book detailing her experiences in moving beyond a life of abuse and into a new life of freedom.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, today, we will be talking about how the Eastern Orthodox Church, broadly, has failed to learn from the mistakes of the Roman Catholic Church. We can all acknowledge a fair point: The Roman Catholic Church is bigger than every religious institution. So, given its size, you will have more stories. You will have more horrendous stories. That will hit the newsstands more prominently when scandals come out, naturally due to size. It is like a more famous person having a scandal versus a less famous person. So, preface with that, however, as these abuse cases related to clergy happen within the Eastern Orthodox Church, too,

what is the Eastern Orthodox Church failing to learn from the clergy-related abuse coming out of the Roman Catholic Church?

Dr. Hermina Nedeleescu: They are failing to learn that the focus should be on assisting those who have been exploited by the clergy the Church employs; those faithful who were victimized. There is great distress to these individuals. That's one failure. Second would be the reported cases of clergy abuse; if taken seriously by the church, then there wouldn't be as many lawsuits. In the State of California, a window opened up where more than 4,000 new legal complaints were filed from abuse that took place decades ago. So, there is a constant loss of money. While the Catholic Church can afford financial restorative justice, the Orthodox Church is not as big and doesn't have a bottomless well of money. Even with the Catholic Church, parishes are having to sell their buildings or file for bankruptcy to protect their assets. Is it really worth all of this to cover up and protect errant clergy who exploit?

From the viewpoint of the victims, there's much damage in the form of trauma. There's a complete assault on their self-identity. Sometimes, leading to suicide, definitely PTSD, that these people have to live with for many years. From the viewpoint of the church, as you know, they are losing money and more importantly credibility and the respect of educated people.

There are statistics. For every one Catholic who converts to Catholicism, six are leaving. The Orthodox Church is experiencing an influx of white young men; however, the silent majority of educated women and men are distancing themselves from the Orthodox Church institution. People are responding with their feet by walking out. Maybe Dorothy can add a little more.

Small: Thank you. That is the first thing that comes to mind. What do they need to learn? You can't hide something forever. Things will come to the surface. No matter how long ago, it was done. It is Judgment Day. Coming forth, learning from the Catholic Church, and saying, "Hey, they are being forced to be transparent. They are being forced to acknowledge, 'Yes, this is happening. Why don't we as a church take a position, hold accountability, and say, 'Yes, this is happening in our churches, too'? We want to be proactive acknowledging the abuse occurs and provide restitution to the victims to the best of the financial ability to do so.'"

One thing I find that victims of clergy abuse want most is number 1, to be heard; number 2, to be believed; and number 3, something to happen to the perpetrator to penalize them instead of no consequences to them. The Orthodox Church continues to maintain a position that it didn't happen and points the finger at the Catholic Church. They are missing the boat. They are missing an opportunity to do something that the Catholic Church had to do under great duress. It looks like it could happen to them as well. What [Hermina](#) is trying to do and what [Katherine \(Archer\)](#) is doing is to bring some awareness.. It happened to us. The facts will put them right there with the Catholic Church. They point the finger saying, "They are the problem." The problem is everywhere. It is in religious institutions. It is all over the world. How can it not be there? They are losing credibility. Again, things concealed have a way of catching up with us eventually.

Dr. Nedeleescu: There is one more thing I wanted to add to your question. This is how exposing clergy sexual abuse started with the Catholic Church. A couple of people were looking into abuse cases, reporting of these cases, and then looking further with rigorous research. The same thing is

happening now in the Orthodox Church. We have begun a thorough research program for cases in the public domain. It is just the tip of the iceberg. Church administrations are failing to realize how quickly this can be exposed in our current climate and that the problem is far deeper than people would like to acknowledge.

There are different dynamics across the Orthodox world. For example, in Georgia, you have the church more entangled with the government. While in the United States, too much is left to the local bishops who are (1) not trauma informed and (2) lack training about the dynamics and causes of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse. When episcopal individuals are not well-trained in how to handle clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse and confuse it with addiction or other psychopathologies instead of acknowledging it as abuse and predatory behavior, then the situation usually ends up very bad.

While the Catholic Church has a central governing body, this is not the case among the Orthodox jurisdictions making up the Orthodox Church. It is more challenging to track clergy abuse and easier to hide things under the carpet with so much division in the Orthodox world.

Jacobsen: So, when considering the Roman Catholic mistakes, if you could take two big ones, what would they be? How is this replicated in the Eastern Orthodox Church? Starting with Dorothy, we will follow up with Hermina in reaction.

Small: The number one mistake of the Catholic Church was in covering up its abuse protecting the reputation of the church and its clerical authority. They denied it outright. The second mistake is the cover up by concealing the files and transferring the clergy who were reported to other churches often to other countries as the church is global. There was no transparency. No one has any access to their system. They could transfer priests who were reported to be SLI, put them under the radar, and put them in the next place because there is no public registry where someone could do a background check. It is akin to “sweeping the trash to the other side of the street”, so to speak.

Jacobsen: Not admitting, does this reflect their cardinal sin, pride?

Small: It is admitting that they hate scandal and will do whatever they can to protect the institution from scandal, which they believe, having their dirty laundry aired, is the scandal. They don't realize that the true scandal is lying; lying is a sin. So, you are lying to protect the church. They are committing another sin to protect the church from knowledge of its abusers, which is a crime against humanity. Crime is a sin. But they don't want to call it a crime, so they whitewash it, calling it a sin. Covering it up prevents the necessary awareness to not only seek to take corrective measures but to protect the parishioners and the church itself. Lies told are justifiable to protect the church. They protect themselves and keep the sickness locked inside. The real scandal is the lies told to conceal the systematic abuse.

Indeed, as humans we fall. It is not an acceptable excuse to avoid being accountable. It is almost as if the clerics are a hybrid between man and God. However, they are not absolved of their own humanity. Those are the two biggest ones. They lie about it and try to do everything they can to protect the institution instead of the people, who are the most valuable asset. In serving people they are serving God. It seems as if this point is missed. By lying and covering up deeds that are

hurting people the church is serving the devil itself which is the father of lies. The epic battle between good and evil, God and the devil, is playing out inside our church walls.

Jacobsen: Hermina?

Dr. Nedelescu: I agree. The first big mistake is the cover-ups. Clergy abuse is happening in the Orthodox Church across all jurisdictions. The tactics are very similar to how it occurs in the Catholic setting as well as other religious faiths. Both the Catholic and Orthodox churches have very rigid hierarchical structures. Cover-ups and silencing victims are the primary tactic used by the Orthodox Church. In the past, some church administrators had those who were exploited sign a document that stated they will not sue the church. In addition, lay people are unwilling to believe that their beloved priest could be an abuser and sex offender. All of this leads to self-justification and scapegoating which is “sin”. However, abuse and sex crimes are not to be compared with the typical “sins” we think of. Stealing a fruit is a sin too. Abusing another human being from one’s position of clerical authority must be understood as predatory behavior and not just any other “sin”.

Part of not admitting that the abuse happened and asking for more and more information, which is typically used against those who are exploited, is a typical tactic church administrators use. A variety of silencing tactics used by church administrations were described in an article by

Stephen de Weger from Australia (Religions, 13(4), Article number: 309). De Weger broke down how churches conduct these coverups. So, anything from appearing sincere at first to coercion or using the classic way. The classic way would be to say, “Let’s be forgiving. The abuser had a slip. He’s human,” “he sinned”, “he repented”, “he had a moment of weakness”, and so on. Then, there are other tactics, such as making the situation confusing because confusion diverts the attention away from the abuse. Other tactics they use are intimidation, coercion, victim blaming, and then negotiation. Ultimately, church administrations and church attorneys make those who were exploited out to be the enemy all while protecting abusive Shepherds who preyed on their sheep for food. There is great effort to blame the individuals who were exploited.

The Orthodox claim to be afraid of “scandal” should it be exposed that the beloved clergy is an abuser. Here is the scandalous thing the Orthodox often say: “We must maintain unity.” Let’s not rock the boat about clergy abuse. It is ironic. Orthodoxy is so divided into many jurisdictions. There is the Romanian Orthodox Church, which I was born into; the Russian Orthodox Church, the Greek Orthodox Church of America, the Bulgarian, Antiochian, Serbian, etc. The Orthodox Church is so divided.

Looking at this intellectually, I see a mechanism of self-justification and scapegoating which I mentioned before. So, self-justifying that protecting an offender is the right thing to do because we do not want to “scandalize” and “cause division”. This self-justification is mixed in with scapegoating. The scapegoats are those who were exploited by the clergy. These two behavioral responses (self-justification and scapegoating), can be referred to as “sin”. We know from Scriptures that Christ was the scapegoat as well. People need to self-justify to feel better about their actions in protecting their “beloved priest” who puts up a facade in public while behind the scenes he is involved in abusing and exploiting his targeted congregants. It’s important to note

that these offenders appear “very nice” in public. They are not “mean” to their victims or in public, that’s how they best deceive people by playing the role of “sincerity” and “kindness” while pretending to be part of Christ’s ministry. The deception runs deep.

Small: I just looked up on line who has the most followers, Catholic or Orthodox? ‘Roman Catholicism is the single largest Christian denomination, with over 1 billion followers worldwide. Eastern Orthodoxy is the second-largest Christian denomination, with more than 260,000,000 followers.’ This was March 19th, 2024. In size the Eastern Orthodox Church is the next largest Christian denomination. One would have to ponder, “Surely, they are not without issues of abuse.” If they are willing to look at the Catholic Church and say, “They are the ones with the problem” then they are feeding the problem rather than learning from the Catholic Church and admitting, ‘Look at how they went down, kicking and screaming.’ By December 2002 the Spotlight Team of the *Boston Globe* spotlight published 600 stories of abuse by 249 priests in Boston alone. The Orthodox Church should deal with the issue of its abuses proactively instead of under external pressure like the Catholic Church, address the problem that is at hand, and see what can be done to bring restitution to its victims.

Number one is acknowledgement. Also, offer survivors pastoral counseling for those who want that. Some people are so destroyed by abuse in a religious institution that they want nothing to do with the church or even God. However, as far as litigation goes, it appears if, if I am not mistaken, that they want to follow the Catholic Church’s defensive tactic. As of April 2024, thirty-eight US Catholic religious organizations have sought bankruptcy protection in chapter 11.

Twenty-four cases have been concluded. This ties up the cases for years, eliminates access to the court system in a trial and prevents discovery of important information on the names of the abusers.

Dr. Nedelescu: I would add that the Catholic Church is just further down the path regarding acknowledgements and exposing abuse. The Orthodox Church will catch up in time, especially now with the #me too climate and at a time when traumatization-induced abuse is understood much better. This is a time where sexual abuse by religious leaders is being exposed as an epidemic not only in the United States but internationally.

Small: If it wasn’t for the survivors, for those victimized, who are willing to stand up, and if it wasn’t for the investigative journalists who are doing what you are doing, Scott, and others like you who are trying to expose the story of abuse of adults in our religious institutions and put it out there, as well as attorneys, survivors, putting the pressure on these institutions, they would have no reason to change. They would have nothing holding them accountable. It is not okay to have abuse in the schools or to have sexual abuse in the family. I worked in nursing for 40 years. This behavior would not be acceptable. How do clerics get a free pass? It is the largest institution in the world. We seek medical care for physical illness and therapists for emotional needs. We are spiritual beings. Many of us gather in religious institutions looking for spiritual comfort and sustenance. Often issues that are addressed in therapy are discussed with clerics in religious institutions to get that perspective. The priests stand at the pulpit announcing, “This is the field hospital for those looking for spiritual healing.” They call it, “A field hospital for the spiritually

ill seeking healing and comfort.” So, we enter into the field hospital often much more vulnerable and naked, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually, more than with therapists and even hospitals. In hospitals the recovering and those dying request spiritual representatives. We reveal to a religious leader that which we wouldn’t say to probably anybody else.

Dr. Nedelescu: The Orthodox Church uses the same language. Catholics and Orthodox share the first 1,000 years, we were together before the two religious institutions split for various reasons. There are many similarities, including similarities of the rigid male only hierarchical structure I mentioned above. Women are not involved in hierarchical decision-making processes. In our society, we have women CEOs, prime ministers of countries, scientists, doctors, department heads, etc. The current situation regarding women in the Orthodox Church today is abysmal even compared to [previous centuries when the Church had clergywomen](#).

Small: That similarity includes the consecrated host which is believed to be the actual Body and Blood of Christ, literally, not symbolically. Not many religious practices have that claim. The clergy through whom the miracle happens at transubstantiation changing the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ is something we can not do. That is powerful. Clergy are there to help us reach heaven and not drag us to the hell of abuse of power and spiritual authority.

Dr. Nedelescu: We have iconography in the Orthodox Church that depicts a king bowing down on his knees before a bishop to show the power the bishop has as the person sitting in the throne of Christ. Even a king or a president is supposed to bow down to a bishop. Priests, through their bishop, reflect Christ on earth. That is where this huge power differential between clerics and any other lay person is similar in Catholicism.

Clericalism is a serious problem in the Orthodox Church. The faithful contribute to this

unhealthy “leadership” where whatever the priest or bishops says must be right. If he denies abusing those who he has exploited, then it must be true because “father knows it best”. This is how indoctrinated some faithful are even in their late adult phases.

Small: This is about a vast power imbalance. Harvey Weinstein represents movie producers. Then there are politicians. Yes, they represent earthly power. People who are seeking a job would be fearful saying anything. So, that is a reason why they don’t want to say anything. They are exploited and don’t realize it at the time. Often it takes years to realize what happened to you but the effects are there taking a toll. With the religious institution, here we are talking specifically about the Orthodox and Catholic churches and how they are structured; as you said, the icon, even with the Catholic Church and the bishops and archbishops, people bow to them. Some even kiss their hands. There is reverence—that sense of being set apart. They are 100% human. Although God’s representatives on earth they are not God. They are touching Heaven’s robe and are God’s representative. But they are not God. I think it is easy with the power of the vocation to forget that. The Catholic Church states at ordination the priests undergo an ontological change.

How do you say “No” to such power? Most of us who have been raised in these institutions have been indoctrinated as children to think they are always right. You do not question them. Protect them at all costs. So, we are trained that whatever is going on, you don’t dare say, “No.” When

something starts to go awry, we are being disrespectful when we bring it up to them and question their actions or words. We are being irreverent. An exorcist even said, “Don’t criticize a priest.” Of course, unless it is constructive and done a certain way. Do not dare speak about them behind their backs. They are used to being treated gingerly.

It is a well-known fact that personality-disordered people such as psychopaths, sociopaths, and narcissists are highly charming and manipulative deceivers. Con men. They are drawn to these vocations with power and plenty of access to fuel. What is the fuel? Attention, adoration. Supply.

Dr. Nedelescu: Glorification. Clergy who sexually exploit want to be glorified by their target victims as well as by their congregation. The exploitation is not typically aggressive. By contrast, it is a deceptively “sincere”, “kind”, and “gentle” type of violence. It’s fake sincerity, fake love. Otherwise, how would an old unattractive religious leader be able to exploit a teen or a younger woman? Abusive clergy seek this fuel of attention and want to be glorified to squeeze praises out of those they exploit, who because of the traumatization have a reinforced response to avoid further exploitation and thus respond to the perverted clergy with this traumatized . To make sense of all of this, trauma responses need to be understood well when it comes to clergy-perpetrated abuse whether emotional or sexual abuse. Clergy who exploit use punishment with intermittent reward to get attention from their targeted victims. The punishment traumatizes the person being exploited and the intermittent reward reinforces the victim to respond in a “pleasing way to their abuser”. This is a key pattern of the mechanism of clergy abuse.

Small: Yes, glorification, even negative attention provides fuel. They can manipulate the entire congregation, look beatific, and select their prey carefully selected and groomed. When something that is a red flag occurs, we end up questioning our perspective. Then when the abuser treats you a bit differently than others we wonder if it is a misperception on our part. Often, it’s a subtle variation in behavior. You start to ask yourself questions. “Surely, I am reading this wrong. He is doing this around others.” Meanwhile, they are getting into your head.

They are highly manipulative. The subtlety is missed as it seems to blend in until you find yourself alone and out of the range of others hearing or seeing the behaviors and words spoken that are “off”.

Jacobsen: When you are a young adult down to prepubescent in the presence of a father or priest, what is the feeling when interacting with them? How are you taught to feel about them in their presence when addressing them in both religions?

Small: In the Catholic tradition, we are taught that the priest is God’s representative here on earth. If they are snarky, it is something we are doing. It will always be our fault. We are taught to protect them at all costs because their job is much harder because of what they are dealing with. That the Devil is after them more because they are leading people to God. If they are tempted or acting out, we are told that we are supposed to protect them.

It should be the other way around. If they are shepherds in the pasture of the church then they are supposed to protect the flock, not the flock protecting the shepherd. They have it backwards. I was raised in the church beginning in early childhood. The priest, you never question them.

Protect them. “We need him. He is important. What would we do without him?” It is almost like the father in the family where we are taught that we are to be seen, not heard. Obey because if we don’t, you don’t want the consequences. You are kept in line. It is about power and control. That is how I was raised. Power and control are translated onto the priest as a child; there is a father and God’s representative, the priest also referred to as Father. Fear of hell or causing a priest to stumble lingers in the recess of the mind.

Dr. Nedelescu: It is identical in the Orthodox world as well. Some feel that ordination gave them this special superpower. People are supposed to believe the council of the clergy completely and uncritically because they are ordained. Clergy are viewed as on a higher step than the rest of the faithful. The faithful themselves created this image of the clergy. Others think of themselves as very special, bestowed with some superpowers at ordination. If you go against a clergyman who appears like a “beloved priest” yet he abuses behind the scenes, that’s viewed by some as an attack on the “soul” of the victim not the perpetrator. It’s ungodly to think in this way. This is where evil is allowed to run when those who were exploited are silenced under the premise that the clergy must be protected at all cause; even if he exhibits predatory behavior. Such a response is wrong because we must be able to rightly divide the word of the truth. We must be able to name and divide who did wrong here much like a surgeon divides the cancerous tissue from the healthy tissue. That excision must be done accurately. The responsibility is on the clergy who is in a position of power and exploited the The Office of the Priesthood to exploit trusting people.

Orthodox theology does not support clericalism. There is the notion of the universal priesthood that belongs to all faithful. When clergy including bishops are errant and/or exhibit predatory behavior, they need to be exposed and removed because something is wrong with them when they are soliciting trusting people under them for perverted attention and/or sex.

Jacobsen: Has Patriarch Bartholomew made any statements about any forms of abuse in the church?

Dr. Nedelescu: There is a Patriarchal Endorsement by the Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of a document called “[*For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*](#)”. In this document, there is a keyword search one can do to search for “sexual abuse” which shows up five times and is focused on child sexual abuse but there is no mention of cases when the abuser is the clergy employed by the Church. Importantly, mounting evidence demonstrates that the silent majority of those getting sexually abused by clergy are adult women, not children, though clergy child sexual abuse is what typically makes the news. So, all of this needs to be adequately updated with the evidence that is available. When it comes to a Shepherd, all congregants are spiritual children not just those under the age of 18 years old. Other forms of abuse are mentioned in this document including the following sentence: “*The Orthodox Church cannot, naturally, approve of violence, either as an end in itself or even as a means for achieving some other end, whether this be in the form of physical violence, sexual abuse, or the abuse of authority.*” on pg. 60. Not approving vs. acknowledging and taking action against the clergy abuse crisis in the Orthodox Church are two different things. I will also add that violence is not adequately defined because clergy sexual

exploitation happens with “kind” and “gentle” violence so when people see violence, they automatically think bruises and scratches.

Besides this document, I am not aware of any public acknowledgement or clear mention about clergy sexual abuse in the Orthodox Church by any hierarchy leadership. The Ecumenical Patriarchate is not the only head. There is also the Patriarchate of Antioch, Patriarchate of Alexandria, Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Patriarchate of Moscows, Patriarchate of Serbia, Patriarchate of Romania, Patriarchate of Bulgaria, and then you have the Church of Cyprus where my cousin is a priest, the Church of Greece, the Church of Poland and the Church of Albania. I have yet to see adequate statements about clergy sexual exploitation and abuse of the faithful from any of these primates.

The Romanian Patriarchate should address the recent news of the high ranking [bishop convicted for rape](#). After the conviction on Friday June 28th 2024, the Huru Diocese stated the following in a press release: “...our institution took official note of this conviction, as well as the particular seriousness, in all aspects, of the immoral acts held against the defendants.” The problem is being mentioned but there is no official acknowledgement from the Patriarchate. Perhaps the Romanian Patriarchate can have the courage to be the first to acknowledge the existence of clergy abuse and sex crimes in the church institution. Then, the rest of the Patriarchate offices and Church heads can follow.

Small: So, you’re saying the Orthodox Church is admitting there was abuse of children. Is that what I understand?

Dr. Nedelescu: Not exactly. The language is vague and merely mentions something about the topic but there is no official acknowledgement. Let’s be more precise because I am a scientist. The text from the document “[For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church](#)” on page 21 states the following: “No offense against God is worse than is the sexual abuse of children, and none more intolerable to the conscience of the Church. All members of Christ’s body are charged with the protection of the young against such violation, and there is no situation in which a member of the Church, on learning of any case of the sexual abuse of a child, may fail immediately to report it to the civil authorities and to the local bishop. Moreover, every faithful Christian is no less bound to expose those who would conceal such crimes from public knowledge or shield them from legal punishment”. Does this seem like an admission or acknowledgement that there exists abuse of children in the Orthodox Church? Most readers will answer in the negative. What we do know, is that there are court cases and media cases reporting child sex abuse and our research demonstrates that the great majority of victims are women not children in the Orthodox Church - a pattern also found in other Christian denominations. So, the data is reproducible in the Orthodox Church as well.

Small: Sexual abuse of adults has not caught up with the awareness of sexual abuse of minors in the church. I would have to concur with Hermina in her statement that much of the attention, what little attention was brought in your church, is about child sexual abuse. I know the Catholic Church states that it mostly happened in the 70s and the 80s and blame it on the culture of the priests that came in through the 60s and the Sexual Revolution. Many who are homosexual were

allowed into the seminary. However, homosexuality does not cause pedophilia, nor does it cause them to go after adult women. They might prey on adult men. Adult women that are being abused as well as adult males. As hard as it is for adult women to come forward, it is much harder for men to speak out. In 2017 about a month prior to filing a lawsuit I was self advocating through the victim advocate at my church and had been for almost ten months. I presented to the bishop a paper I wrote about the silent victims of clergy abuse being adult women. I wrote a paper about the silent victims of clergy abuse being adult women and read it to the bishop and advocate. When I debriefed with the victim advocate following the, she said, “Dorothy, it is not just adult women. It impacts adult men, too. Mark my words, the next wave to hit the church will be the news of adults who have been abused because they will most likely overshadow the number of children that were abused.”

In late 2021 the Vatican came out with a statement saying that adults can also be abused and they are criminalizing clergy abuse of “vulnerable adults.” As of 2024, they are still grappling with what constitutes adult vulnerability. They are splitting hairs. You are a vulnerable adult if you need caregiving and cannot make reasonable decisions on your own at any given time.” They painted it pretty grim. They are loosening it a bit. If, even for just a period, say you lose your husband or your health, or any other situation that causes temporary vulnerability then you’re rendered vulnerable for that period. I have written 15 or 16 letters to the institute in Rome overseeing the abuse issue in the church. I said, “Basically, you have to look at everyone in the congregation as being held equally vulnerable to being targeted by abusers simply because of the power differential and you cannot know by looking at them who is vulnerable and who is not. Everyone is vulnerable by the sheer nature of absolute trust that goes with the position. We cannot be splitting hairs. Look at the behavior of the clerics; there is no way they should be sexualizing a relationship with any parishioner. All are vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation in the church.”

Jacobsen: What about—let’s call them—congregational flak? I take this from an anti-air weapon called a flak cannon. The idea of individuals who take it upon themselves to protect the church is highly explicit. They do so by aggressively confronting individuals who are coming out with claims of abuse to them or individuals who are supporting those other people. I know, as a journalist and other journalists, who protect those people who have been abused and tell their stories and keep some stuff private, as well as those who have come out. You do get a glancing blow of some of that stuff in your inbox in person. So, it will be worse for the individuals who have come out as the identified abused. How do regular congregational members approach this context of trying to protect the church’s reputation with flak?

Small: They blame those who are victimized. There are collateral victims. The other parishioners are victimized because they are there for their spiritual needs and in order to keep going it is difficult to see the clergy member as being the perpetrator. They need to believe that

the priest, the father, is okay. Have they been duped? Conned too? We cannot hold two opposing thoughts at the same time. How can he be bad and okay at the same time? So, they must find a way to separate that to continue to justify going. They are getting rid of their cognitive dissonance by displacing their anger at feeling betrayed at the victims who come forward. So,

they will automatically transfer that over to an adult who gets it much worse. A woman in my former church when the news came out of a 13-year-old who was abused by a priest who went to trial and ended up with a prison sentence shockingly said, “Teenagers these days! They are so seductive and promiscuous!” The accused priest’s groupies gathered in support of him outside the courtroom. What message does this give for the devastated victim and their parents?

He was like a rockstar. It is the mindset. The priest is always right. When he is not right, it is because somebody tempted him. Somebody lured him. However, they are in the position of greatest power. Grooming is expertly done by a predator meant to impact emotions. They get into your head. Then the period of intermittent reinforcement ensues forming a trauma bond that is addictive as any addictive substance. Have you ever been conned? It is easier when there is a deep unmet need. Anybody can be conned by a good con artist. The church is the last place we expect to be injured by this manipulative behavior.

Jacobsen: James Randi has a famous phrase. ‘Everyone can be fooled.’

Small: Remember vulnerability. Yes, as I mentioned previously anybody can be fooled. Vulnerability makes us more susceptible. Not all who are sexually exploited by clergy are vulnerable because of unresolved early traumas. Absolute trust in itself renders one vulnerable. Trust is implied from the position they hold. The trust is not earned. In my situation I suffered from serious early childhood traumas which rendered me much more susceptible to being groomed and exploited throughout my adult life. Anyone can be seduced and fall prey to the manipulations of a con artist. Predatory clerics in the grooming phase of their prey often develop a relationship and a personal connection. We afford them more leeway. We might see red flag signs but excuse and dismiss them. Then one day they make their move. We think what just happened here? The parishioners will side with the clerics and distance themselves from the one coming forward to protect them but also their own relationship with them as clergy and the church.

Jacobsen: Hermina [Ed. Absent briefly], I was calling this class of persons in the laity or the congregation the flak, after flak cannons from back in the day, the anti-aircraft. The idea is that when someone comes forward or reports on it, the person who reports on it will get emails. The people who are coming out stating, “I have been abused.” Regular congregation members will take it as a moral imperative or an emotional need for themselves to go forward and confront these people, even in person and quite aggressively question them or do socially to prevent any potential contamination of others’ minds that happened in that particular congregation. Dorothy was describing within the Catholic context. What is the Orthodox context? Is it much the same in the Orthodox context?

Dr. Nedelescu: Yes, absolutely, it follows the same patterns. So, I do not know if Dorothy already mentioned this. Once an abusing clergy is identified, they do not exist in a vacuum. It is happening in a toxic community, a toxic parish where they are more focused on their “ministries”. However, these toxic places are missing the mark not realizing that the work of the church is not the call to ministry, but rather being more Christ-like. Toxic parish systems think that membership growth and financial gain in a ministry are proof of being Christ-like. These

toxic organisms then make decisions that silence unwelcome truths about abuse and fraud. They deceive themselves by telling themselves that cover-up is Christ-like.

So, abuse continues aided by these enablers. There is this ideology that the community is a “nice community” and that there is nothing wrong with the parish. These people find refuge and safety in their community from the outside world so it’s very challenging for them to understand and accept that their beloved priest, their Shepherd, is an abuser and that abuse is happening in their “house” under their “roof”. It is, therefore, easier to deny it.

They are more concerned with worshipping this ideology of ministry and safety that they formed than facing the truth and realizing someone they are employing is exhibiting predatory behavior and has caused great harm to people under the same roof. There are also usually more than one congregant being exploited and more than one abuser and armies of enablers. In a congregation of 400, it has been reported that there are about seven victims. This is research coming out of Baylor University.

Jacobsen: So, let’s take the perspective of an individual who has invested their life in the church. I do not mean someone who has been formally theologically educated at an elite level. This is not a critique of the intellectual prowess of theologians. As even H.L. Mencken mentioned, theologians are astute in abstraction and logical argumentation. That is not the point here. The idea is to consider the social and ethical consequences of the behavior of people who have been victimized, both men and women, mostly women. When it comes to institutions like this, individuals who have invested their lives in that community and theology, whether Catholic or Orthodox, what can one take from an individual who sees critique of abuse by clergy of laity as an attack on the church as a whole? How could that potentially be seen as a valid critique? Conversely, how could it be seen as an overgeneralization regarding the concerns brought forward with these stories?

Dr. Nedelescu: What a good question. Small, would you like to take a stab at it first?

Small: Sure. I can answer. When I reported my abuse, a church member in her late 70s said, “The church has enough scandal. Why are you doing this?” I am also with the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, and they view advocates along with the victims who report as the villains. I was first a victim/survivor, and then I became an advocate. They view it as if you bring attention to the church; you are creating the scandal. Therefore, the one reporting is against the clergy and the church. What they do not understand is that to heal something, it must first be exposed. Sunlight sanitizes abuse. By coming forward and reporting it, I was revealing inside information that this priest was not okay. He was presenting himself as one way publicly. It was a mask. I experienced the darkness beneath it.

I felt a duty to report it. If I did not, I would have been complicit by covering it up. That has been the whole root of the situation. That goes against what God teaches. God is light, truth, and justice. If you are trying to keep the light, which is the truth, out of the church, you are locking in the crime and the sin. Using medical terminology, if a patient has an abscess, it cannot heal until it is excised, opened and drained. One can take an analgesic to ease the pain, but unless you get to the root of the abscess, at the source of the infection, it cannot heal. So, it is with the issue of

abuse in the church. Covering the issue of abuse with the bandage of silence makes it spread instead of exposing it and bringing appropriate remedy such as restitution for those abused and penal action for the clerics.

I reported because I did not want the same thing that happened to me to happen to another person. I know what I went through. I cared about others who were in danger through exposure to the priest. I also reported it because I cared about the priest. He obviously was not okay, and I knew that. In caring about the priest, I also cared about the church itself and the good priests who uphold their vows. Does the church, which represents Christ, deserve to have wolves in sheep's clothing masking as shepherds? Reporting and holding them accountable is not against the church. It is not against clerics. It is against abuse and its coverup.

When we speak truth and seek healing, we are not only looking for healing for those who were hurt but also for the one who hurt, who is also in need of healing to prevent further injury. It is not anti-church or anti-clergy. It does have a huge effect. It affected my ability to keep going because it triggered night terrors and severe anxiety. I had to remove myself. I had a lifelong relationship with the church. It provided a deep source of comfort and spiritual nurturance and expression of my relationship with God. Eventually, I realized I needed to evaluate myself, examine my life, do deep healing that increased my vulnerability to abusers, and see where the church fits in the grand scheme of things on "the other side". I did not know if I would make it to the light at the end of the tunnel. It launched me into the longest dark night of the soul from which at times I thought this must be what hell is like.

My childhood was opened for investigation because the trauma that happened in the church tapped into it. I could not heal from the church without delving deeply into my earliest childhood. For those who have not been directly injured by abuse in the church, they try not to think about it. They know it is there, but ignorance is bliss as long as it does not touch them or someone they know personally. It happens to somebody else. They can sit in the pews, keep putting the money in the collection basket, keep going to church on religious holidays and every week, and have their spiritual needs met while ignoring the fact that this is happening to their brothers and sisters in the church family globally.

Let us compare this to abuse in the family. For example, let's look at a family of ten children, a father, and a mother. The father is sexually abusing one child, but he is treating all the other ones well and earning the money to support everyone. Then the abused child says something about it, and what happens? The other ones do not have that perspective. Suddenly, you just said something bad about the father, and they cannot believe it because it threatens their relationship with the father they need so much. So, who are they going to get angry with? They will get angry with the child who reported it because the other nine need the father. They do not need that other child.

This translates to the church. The one reporting the abuse is expendable, but they need the priest. They need him because that is their relationship with God. The victim who reports it just got in the way. You just brought attention to the fact that the father did something too uncomfortable for them to reconcile. The situation is comparable to the family system.

Dr. Nedelescu: The church is more than just the priest, administration, or the bishop. Small is conveying this concept of what church truly is when she uses the theological term “Body of Christ,” which means the people, the faithful, all of them. The church is not just an institutional organization.

To those with a problem with advocates who expose the truth, it comes down to whether they understand what the Church is. There was this great theologian in the past named Maximus the Confessor in the 7th century, and he spoke the truth. Here is what the Church did to him: they cut

off his tongue and his hands. That is what the Church did to him. That is what continues to happen today, whereby those who speak truth are cut off from the community. They are treated as the enemy. It is part of our disturbed humanity to shut down people who are speaking the truth. But, when we do this, we are cutting off the wrong branch of the Body of Christ. At the same time, when this happens and people still manage to speak the truth, it has even more power. So, we should not worry and have some trust. To trust means to have faith. *“Fundamental trust is ultimately a faith in meaning, to which we can decide. Among other things, it also means the awareness of our uniqueness and irreplaceability as well as our value for the world”*, says Viktor Emil Frankl, who started the Logotherapy School of thought.

That is all I would add because Dorothy covered it so well. Her point about the need to speak up because the clergy is not well is also critical. A clergy who has abused is not fit for ministry, he needs to be removed from ministry and put into an abusers’ program. In the early Christian days, people who “sinned” (NB: Clergy sexual abuse is not a sin like any other sin such as stealing. Clergy sexual abuse is predatory behavior and using “sin” to describe predatory behavior greatly undermines the gravity of the matter) were removed from the community and then very slowly brought back into the community if they demonstrated understanding of what they has done.

Research shows that clergy who sexually exploit their prey usually do not repent. It’s very rare for abusing clergy to admit to this type of wrongdoing. This involves an acknowledgement that he abused and an apology to those he exploited and lied to. Church administrations who leave them in their “sickness”, means they do not care about these offenders, the victims or the future of the Church as a Body of Christ. We advocates care about the offenders as much as we care about the people they exploit and the entire community. It’s sad to see people who call themselves “Christians” protect offenders all while vilifying the victims and cutting them out of their communities. That’s when you know that the parish is not serving God. And all of this appears under the guise of the “friendly community”. It’s brainwashing that is a pattern across all parishes with abusive clergy.

Jacobsen: What about individuals who take critique of priests from women and men coming forward as simply hating God? You are angry at God. This is something very common for individuals coming from certain thought communities. They get this online, and they get it in person. “You are angry at God. Therefore, we can dismiss or pigeonhole you and not pay attention to any of the arguments you might be making or testimonies you bring forward.” In the case of clergy-related abuse, could this be a similar prospect for individuals who take those coming forward as “you are angry at God”?

Dr. Nedelescu: Yes, angry or an “apostate”, renouncing one’s religion. That could be considered. They are greatly misguided because it is the opposite. Clergy who abuse create a situation where the concept of God is manipulated in order to exploit their congregants. Adults who learn the dynamics of clergy abuse know that it was not “God” who abused but the clergyman himself is the one who abused. In fact, the abusive clergyman can be decoupled from the Office of the Holy Priesthood, which has high standards, at least according to St. John Chrysostom.

Small: I think that would apply more to those who were abused as children. The parents and the children are angry, asking why God let this happen. In my association with those who have been traumatized in the church, whether as children or adults, I have had people say that they could have nothing more to do with God because God did it. God used the priest to abuse me. And if God did not do it, why did He not stop it? It automatically goes to God; it gets translated there. So, if we report the priest, it somehow touches upon our relationship with God. We must be angry at God for reporting His emissary? But there is an issue with theology in that regard. Let us take it back to the family. If you are reporting a father who is sexually abusing his child, are you reporting a good father? So, if you are reporting the priest, you are not reporting God because what is God? God is light, truth, and love. There is no abuse in God. The predatory priest is not a good priest. It gets mixed up. It creates confusion.

The predatory priest is acting outside of his relationship with God. It is not anger against God when an abused reports the priest. It is serving as a witness for God, saying this is abuse against God, and the cleric is manipulating his relationship and his position, representing God to abuse. The cleric is abusing the name of God and the position of God to do something totally against the religion. It does not even make sense. That level of ignorance and denial is almost a child’s perspective. When someone says, “Why did God not stop it?” Why does God not stop anything? Most abuse takes place in the family, not in the institution or the religious church. So, what happens there? Where is God? Everyone wants to blame God. It is okay to be mad at God. It is okay to feel anger.

God can handle it. It is about free choice when it is all said and done. We are given free choice. Somebody else’s free choice hurts us. Our own free choice hurts us and others. Bad things happen. But where is God in the middle of it all? He is in the helpers. There are people to help with healing. There are those of us who are advocates, support groups, therapists, family, friends etc. However, often it is too difficult to share with them and often they feel frightened and powerless about how to handle the situation. If God interfered with free choice, would it be free? No. However, not everyone thinks about free choice as a source of pain. The parishioners need to place the blame, and even the attorneys representing the church on the victims who serve as a scapegoat.

Dr. Nedelescu: That is what was going through my mind, the mechanism of scapegoating, how there always has to be a scapegoat, whether it is the victims or the Catholic Church or celibacy. Many Orthodox Christians think that abuse happens in the Catholic Church because their priests are celibate. However, our bishops are supposed to be celibate too. Now, we know from the research work of Richard Sipe that only ~ 50% of Catholic priests were actually celibate, and

more recent research work shows that that percentage of Catholic priests who are celibate is even lower. The same pattern follows in the Orthodox church where some celibate bishops and monks are having sex as well as some married priests are having sex outside of their marriage. It is the same with monks. Have you ever read the cenobitic monk literature?

The human race is a sexual species not an asexual one. Healthy sexual interactions need to be discussed in both the Catholic and Orthodox settings urgently so that the faithful know how to better identify perverted sexual situations such as clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse and exploitation.

People can have scapegoats for everything to self-justify and continue being in the rut without any spiritual formation or growth. When people respond by scapegoating those who were exploited by the clergy and justify the abuse by blaming the victims to protect their “system”, they are people who live in a disgraceful rut. We can respond to clergy-perpetrated abuse with grace or we can respond in disgraceful ways and pretend everything is ok while lives are being destroyed to the point of suicides in some cases.

Small: The scapegoat receives all the blame that others cannot see in themselves. Yes, the victims are scapegoated. God is even scapegoated because the true perpetrators do not have accountability. Actually, Christ was the scapegoat for all of our sins. That is part of the personality disorder and the mindset of the abusers. They avoid accountability, gaslight, cause confusion, self-doubt, and blame others. It is everyone else’s fault, not theirs. The root of the problem is that the issue of abuse of adults must be addressed. There is a need for public education. What can people do to be safer in the churches? The Vatican or Orthodox officials can inform the parishioners how predators groomer. Distribute flyers at the beginning of all churches informing on the tactics used by those with predatory behaviors. Predators are everywhere in the world. Yes, they are in our religious institutions. Open up the dialogue so it makes it easier to acknowledge that in this world there are no absolutely safe places. It is a fantasy.

Acknowledgement of reality reduces gullibility so that we don’t automatically assume just because it is a house of worship that it is a 100% safe place. For example, if one walked into a bar, one would have some protection. Entering into a church we think is automatically safe. Our guard is down. This is not a safe presumption to make. If one has a concern or notices something isn’t right, encourage reporting; here is a number. Call us. I know the church needs to protect priests from false allegations. One of the tactics used when I went through the deposition was being gaslit. The defense attorney asked me, “Why did you invite him to your house that day?” I replied, “Well, because he is a priest, I thought it was safe, and he asked me on several occasions to ride bikes. We were going to do something public. I did not expect to be sexually assaulted.” So, they are looking for fault in you. They are looking for what you did. If you are an adult, the automatic mindset is that you are reporting because of being a jilted lover. The priest establishes a bond of friendship and increases grooming efforts through intermittent episodes of appropriate behavior with inappropriate. If questioned he often denies it. It creates confusion and self doubt.

It is not love. It is abuse. Often, they tell you they love you and bring God into it. If someone is injured enough to the point where they will come forward and risk themselves to do that, it is not

part of love. It was part of an abusive situation. There is a great deal of knowledge deficit. Even the victims often are unaware of what is happening at the time. Predators target emotions.

Jacobsen: There are general trends for victims who come forward. Most cases of sexual assault that come forward are true. The default should be that it is true or very likely to be true. If you look at the data from the FBI and the Home Office of the UK, two separate institutions not known for being silly, they gathered up to four-figure numbers of cases of rape, the most extreme form of sexual assault. Those cases found that some single-digit percentages were unfounded. My interpretation journalistically is that either the person lied or there was insufficient data to make it found. The actual rate of lies is lower, given those other options in the present data. You either have established or founded or unfounded but insufficient evidence. When someone comes forward in general, it is likely to be true or just true. Given these general trends of denialism, Hermina is a neuroscientist, and she knows all about the denialism of scientific theories that are well-established hypotheses in the general public.

Dr. Nedelescu: It is a way to protect oneself and the rut they exist in. That is why they deny the wrongdoing. People with alcohol use disorders or substance use disorders who abuse alcohol and drugs deny they have a problem as well often until the body breaks down and they die. When they can't deny it anymore because the truth is exposed, they find strawman excuses to blame their victims.

Jacobsen: An individual not only denies but also victim blames. I am getting more general terms of what Dorothy pointed out regarding why. The why questions that you or others keep getting regarding that deposition. What would be an appropriate response to individuals who do not see it this way but are inclined to blame the victim? They might do it indirectly by asking so many why questions or directly. For individuals who do not see it this way but are victims blaming, either indirectly, as in Small's case, with all the why questions during her deposition, or directly, how do you potentially approach those individuals to reframe their mindset about these things?

Dr. Nedelescu: The question is how does one approach individuals who are using DARVO behavior? It stands for **D**eny, **A**ttack, **R**everse **V**ictim and **O**ffender. It is well-studied, and it was Jennifer Freyd who coined it. How to deal with such people is to resist them maximally. Maximally resist it and hold on to the truth because there is something very powerful in holding on to the truth. That is how people should handle those individuals. People whom the church or a clergy victimized should maximally resist DARVO behavior / victim blaming. I was once told that an old priest became attracted to another younger congregant and began an "affair" with her because the priest's wife was "bland". This church community kicked the priest out of their parish which is the right thing to do and signals that such a community is healthy and respectful of women. I say "affair" in quotes to be clear clergy who solicit their congregants for sex is not an "affair" but rather it's abuse because an "affair" requires two consenting adults of equal power and this can never be the case when involving a clergy who represents Christ on earth - that's power.

Orthodox priests can marry so some blame their wives for the priest's abusive behavior. Other abusers blame those who were exploited. It's basically everyone's fault except the clergy who

abused. Abusers take no responsibility and because there is no accountability by their employer then they continue offending unabated.

Small: I concur with what Hermina said. Unfortunately, trying to get everybody on board is probably unrealistic. Just knowing that supporting people who come forward by saying they are believed, heard, and not to be blamed or shamed is important. Expecting someone who cannot grasp that to grasp it is unrealistic. All we can do is put the information out there. Sexual assault and domestic violence have advertisements warning people about certain situations. We have no safeguards for the church. To have people automatically think the church could be a hiding place for an offender will take time and public exposure. We know that in a bar not to leave a drink unattended. It is easy to have someone tamper with it. When out at night it is safest to not walk alone. We know to avoid certain unsafe public areas. There are safeguards for being safe in other venues but no guidelines for being safe in a church.

Providing safety information about how to protect from predators and would help educate parishioners on red flag behaviors predators use to groom. The church has flyers advertising functions and pilgrimages. Why not have a place where safety information is readily accessible so people can pick it up? If it is found in the church, it will be more credible than if someone from outside the church tries to say there is a problem in the church. If church representatives, leaders, the pastors, bishops, and the Vatican allow that information to be brought in print so people can grab it on their way out, it would be more accepted. God stands for justice and protection. Yes, it is possible to be hurt in the church. Here is what it is. Reach the public. If it is accepted in the church, it will be more accepted by those who attend it. The information flows out into the general community as well. It is a public safety service.

I was banned from all ministry in my church community because I reported the priest. Had I not reported him, I could have continued in ministry. When I was ready to return, I did not know I was banned. I said all I needed to restore myself was to let me come back and sing. He was not ready. He did not want me there. He said, "Sitting in the pew for some of you is a ministry." If he had let me come back, it would have shown the congregation that he supported me which would have encouraged them to do the same. The pastor sets the mindset and standard for the rest of the congregation.

Take it back to the family. What your mother and father say goes. They have the right to bring in the information they want you to know or not know. If mom and dad accept this information, the children are more apt to accept it. Take it to the church level. If the officials bring that information into the church, it will be easier for people to accept that it happens because the officials say it does. A family discussing problems has a better success rate of preventing problems. When you have a code of silence, that is trouble. Bring awareness, but have it authorized and accepted by church officials. Right now, I do not see that happening. They do not want it in there. It is, "Let's keep it out of here". It is considered taboo if church officials do not want to discuss it. Like a family with a child showing symptoms of substance abuse, let's not talk about it because it is too uncomfortable for the rest of the family.

If a person has been victimized and is brave enough to come forward and report the priest, maybe the priest needs help. He is not okay. He is representing the church, and that will hurt the church. If we do not report him, his predatory behavior goes on. They typically do not just have one victim. They go on to prey on others. I know I did the right thing, but I was punished. If my church pastor excluded me from all ministry which is granted to the rest saying I brought scandal and will not accept me back? Then the rest of the church community will also ostracize. Let the church be willing to open up and talk about it; then, people might see things in another light.

Dr. Nedelescu: Yes, Dorothy, you covered so much. When I said to resist it maximally, I am aware that some who are victimized cannot do that. Advocates are important in helping victims get their voices back and supporting them so they can resist DARVO behavior where they are blamed by the congregation and church administration. It is a big mistake to think clergy sexual abuse can be handled within the church, internally. It cannot be resolved in a fair way internally. An external company of trained individuals needs to come in.

Also, clergy sexual abuse is a sex crime and should be dealt with by law enforcement, district attorneys, FBI and civil lawsuits. We are talking about a crime! At the very minimum a police report should be made. Depending on the severity of the crime and local city resources local authorities will handle the urgency of such a case appropriately. However, it's also important to know that the severity of the crime according to the law is not always directly proportional to the severity of the psychological traumatization, vulnerability to PTSD, etc. The damage that clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse does on the victims and collateral victims is truly profound. If people knew this fact, they would take it more seriously instead of diminishing and protecting the abusive clergy. There is research that shows that even clergy emotional abuse without physical touch led victims of clergy-abuse to completely lose their self-concept, and be made to feel worthless. It's a complete assault on one's self-identity and humanity - that part of the self that goes beyond the self and connects with God.

Small: What he was saying was about the mindset, how to get parishioners to understand that the victim is truly a victim and not a villain. We must address the problem with external pressure because they will not deal with it internally. The Catholic Church needed external pressure. How can we get parishioners to understand the victim of abuse? They weren't angry with God by reporting. Righteous anger is appropriate when having been victimized. Some are angry with God but that is not what is driving the reporting of the abuse. Introducing information from the outside of the church is challenging for most of its members. Combining external pressure with internal education is essential. Church officials must be willing to accept this knowledge and be open to discussion. Doing so can create an environment where everyone is aware of how to best protect oneself when being awakened to red flag behaviors of predators in the church.

Both external pressure and education from the inside can lead to the thought, "We're willing to accept that this is happening in our churches. And because it is, we will be open and leave it open for discussion. We will have flyers on display in a place inside accessible so you can know what to look for. We're all in this together. Let's keep each other healthy, but knowing that sometimes something will happen." We must not have our eyes and minds closed. If the church officials accept knowledge coming into the church it can help serve and protect all who attend and the

church itself. Compare once again to the family system. If a minor in recovery tries to bring home information from a 12-step program and the family is too uncomfortable to discuss the topic the chances of success dwindle. Shame is at the root of the topic of abuse in both situations. Self abuse from addiction and sexual abuse from a member of the clergy are rooted to deep shame.

The internal awareness aided by external pressure works synergistically. That's why I say bring the information into the church so the people who might have missed the cues can be aware. However, the initial pressure is going to come from the outside when an adverse situation occurs.

Dr. Nedelescu: I think everyone, including Scott and Dorothy, function like that. Dorothy is an internal person within the Catholic Church and applies external pressure working with the Legislative process, for example. And I'm functioning in that way as well. We are both insiders but also outsiders to each other's faith community as we continue our Catholic-Orthodox work together in the society and at the state legislative level.

There's an advantage to being an insider and not an outsider because then the people who doubt or have this mindset that it's the victim's fault are more likely to listen to an insider that such cases in which clergy misuse their authority and the Office of the Holy Priesthood the responsibility lies on the clergy not the person the clergy manipulated, lied to, coerced, abuse and exploited. The victims are simply driven by trust until they are able to understand the interaction is abuse.

Small: Hermina, you're correct because I did walk away from my faith practice for about four and a half years. Only recently have I felt that I could reconcile and reenter the church by focusing on the Eucharist and reconciling that along with the good, evil also exists. I'm well aware of the problems from personal experience which forced me to educate myself to heal and serve as an advocate for others wounded in the church. I returned as a SNAP advocate which assisted with my healing process and provided a service to others. I'm very open about what happened to me. I did not return to my former church because I felt it would have placed me in an emotionally unsafe situation. I finally was able to choose another church. I could not even attend any religious institution let alone another Catholic Church until recently. I had to lose my former church community that served also as a social support system and as a substitute family as well as a place of worship. After two months of being back, I let the music director know why I left and how I am returning as an advocate through the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. That is my ministry, and I am back singing. I am not ashamed. Recently the pastor even said, "It's nice that you're here singing." I hold my head up because I did not do anything wrong by reporting what happened. Remaining in advocacy also serves as a measure of protection, I believe. It feels empowering.

Hermina you're correct as it gives it so much more weight as because I was injured, stayed away to heal, and then returned. I'm absolutely not against the church. I'm not against priests. It shows injury because I had to leave. I had to stay away from my former community which created much loss and grief. But now with enough recovery assisted by pastoral care I finally felt ready

to return to another Catholic Church. I grieved the enormous losses, and now I am able to accept the new environment. For me this was difficult due to an early childhood catastrophic loss of my entire nuclear family. I was never assisted or permitted to grieve. The wound from the church tore right into that one. It was never processed.

I am comfortable returning as both an advocate for those abused and as a member of the parish. My pastoral director, who is a pastor of a traditional Latin mass who listened to me for the last four and a half years, heard quite a bit. He also learned much about the impact of clergy abuse on an adult. The focus was on minors who were abused, which is rightful. However, adult abuse and its impact is not as well understood. I did as much to educate him as he listened to me express my pain. It opened his eyes even more. However, they're still priests. The good priests are also injured by the bad ones who abuse. The system is known to protect itself from what they believe is behavior that creates scandal in the church. It is in concealing it that the true scandal stems. So, it becomes our responsibility to take care of ourselves, to drop the shame and not care about what other people think about us in the long term, one way or the other. That's where it comes down to because we can't make them all understand.

Jacobsen: What about a numbers critique that someone might be bringing forward? The idea is that only a few women and men are coming forward with these claims. What do you mean? What do you mean by putting a quote as if it were them? There are so many abuse cases, right? And these churches, how can you say that when there's so few of you public?

Dr. Nedelescu: That's where Dorothy mentioned before that most of the abuse is not reported. People are so ashamed that they don't report. Victims are often threatened if they speak up. Whatever we see in the public domain in terms of clergy abuse is just a minority of cases which is indicative of a much larger problem.

The Orthodox Church is in a crisis right now and clergy abuse is an epidemic that needs to be exposed before more lives are harmed including more suicides because the suicidality rate for those abused by clergy is higher than in other situations or other abuse conditions.

We have to do the type of rigorous research into this that scientists and social scientists are trained to do. Church administrations are not equipped to conduct serious rigorous research as they lack the personnel and training. Organizations such as the Orthodox Theological Society of America or similar organizations with trained scholars are far more equipped.

Small: I have another take on that one, too. It goes back to my interview with the victim advocate after I met with the bishop. Files are sealed. So it's not that the adult might not have reported it. It's kept confidential. When they report it to the diocese, that information remains confidential and goes into the priest's file. But after the victim's age of 25, those files are sealed.

The only reason why they opened up files up to the age of 25 in my local diocese is that they were acknowledging victims/survivors who were abused as young adults and minors. They declare young adults to be up to the age of 25. And they pick 25 because that's when the prefrontal cortex is supposedly fully on board, and you reach full maturity. But we all know that that's in the perfect world. Many do not reach full maturation long after or even well into later

years due to the effects on the developing brain from ongoing traumas as children and often the impact on the brain from addiction which is well known to be associated with trauma survivors.

Years ago before filing a lawsuit I met with a priest due to profound spiritual and emotional distress. It was protected by the seal of confession. The priest blurted out, "That's rape! He raped you!" He turned pale. He admitted he worked in the diocese the first time I reported disturbing behaviors to the pastor who reported it to the diocese. This priest said he was the one who allowed him to return after counseling on parishioner boundaries. The predator is often narcissistic and adept at being highly convincing through skilled deception. It was the first time I heard the word rape used in what happened to me. I didn't want to use the R-word. Not rape. There was no violence involved. I was experiencing what is known as the fawn effect. Compliance is not consent. It is a trauma survival response. Besides, he was a priest and I tried to see him as the beatific looking priest who celebrated mass. My mind could not hold two concepts of him. Priests don't rape.

Jacobsen: It's a chilling word. It can silence a room.

Small: I wanted to soften it. I just wanted to soften it. Initially reporting to them at the onset was the hardest thing I went through. The hardest thing was, "Oh my God, I just got Father in trouble.

What am I doing?" I could not fully grasp that I had been seriously violated emotionally, spiritually and physically by a priest I tried to see as that while pushing aside the glaring red flags. His grooming tactics targeted my emotions, and I was under his influence much like an addict to an addictive drug. The lower brain overrides the higher rational brain like any addiction due to the same powerful brain chemicals. It was an enormous emotional and spiritual burden for me. I took the bottom rung on that one. It's not the damage that he caused me. It's like, what have I done? And for a while, I even thought I was like Judas or Benedict Arnold betraying him. I was treated as such by many who did not understand. Oh my God, I handed over a priest. And because this beatific-looking person celebrated mass. He looked so innocent and holy for all intents and purposes. But I certainly saw the dark passenger underneath the facade. It's like watching the Netflix series Dexter, right? He was a serial killer who's keeping his dark impulses in check. He appears to be normal to his friends and place of employment as a crime scene analyzer, if I recall correctly. However, he had what he named his dark impulses "the dark passenger". I also gaslit myself. I felt confused and self-doubt. Others gaslight you as well. Church officials, though not all, gaslight. It takes time to unravel it all. Many won't report because they are unaware for years what happened. They think it was an affair or consensual because of being an adult and for many emotions also are involved due to the process of grooming.

Dr. Nedelescu: I think it's the church culture too. Because when I think in academic settings of professors sexually harassing and assaulting, and raping their trainees or those in lesser positions of power, which has happened at various institutions, it's different. It's very different because we have a different culture in the academic setting than in the church. The shame belongs to the person in power, not to the victim. There is a great responsibility ascribed to the person in power. In the Orthodox church, I see those who are exploited getting blamed. I see congregants siding with the abusive priest who exhibits covert predatory behavior. Most people are not trained to

understand that their beloved pastor who pretends to be “kind” in public is an abuser and the shame and responsibility belongs to him. He misused the authority given to him by the Office of the Holy Priesthood. Very few have admitted that the responsibility lays on the clergy in power. The general thought is that the victim seduced the clergy, when the reality is the complete opposite. In what universe does a 12 year old seduce a 40 year old clergyman with graying hair or a woman decades younger seduce a much older unattractive clergy? Even in the case where say a truly mentally ill teen or woman tries to “seduce” such an older clergyman, he has the responsibility to not devour her but rather to call for help. The responsibility lies on the clergy in power. We need to flip this perverted thinking around and be real and truthful. Power comes with responsibility.

Small: I think many people are afraid to use the R-word because you imagine all rape is a violent act like those depicted in movies. Again, complying or submission does not express content. It is a trauma response to avoid further escalation. The trauma response includes fight, flight, freeze or fawn. It is instinctual. So perhaps there was no act of violence *per se*, but you certainly did not give consent by submitting or complying. You didn't want to create a worse situation in one where if you would have fought might have made it a physically dangerous situation.

Dr. Nedeleescu: Freezing in cases where women are sexually assaulted is well documented as a response to avoid being violently harmed by the offender. It's a fear response with the hope to remain alive by going into freeze mode.

It's important to know that almost all cases of sexual assault and rape by clergy are silently violent cloaked under the gift of “love”, “gentle” violence involving deep deception. Deception means to be manipulated into believing in something that is actually false and untrue. When there is trust as people tend to have in their clergy, this trust - a beautiful human attribute - is taken advantage of by the abusive clergy who uses trust to exploit. Most victims of clergy abuse report that they felt “safe” and trusted the clergy who turned out to be an abuser preying on them.

Small: Yes. So when I look back at mine, I think, "Could it have been rape? I did not fight. I was on autopilot yielding to his power and position as a priest who was supposed to care about me and protect me from harm. I was always vocal saying I don't want anything inappropriate to happen. I would never agree to that. I would never do that. I was kind but also respected his position assuming he would honor it. I let my guard down just long enough. And so after it happened, I pushed it away for a year until I couldn't push it away anymore. I kept triggering. I thought, "What the heck? Why is that happening?" I tried to make it okay, but there was nothing okay. And I went, well, because it wasn't violent, maybe I could excuse it? "Did he hold you against your will? Where are the scratches?" The damage was not visible except through my symptoms. One can not see externally psychiatric trauma except through the symptoms associated with complex ptsd or ptsd. It comes out in behaviors.

Jacobsen: This is the Hollywood portrayal of violence and sexual assault.

Small: A prime example of this issue is the incident involving Stormy Daniels and Trump. As a witness at his recent court trial, she mentioned that she considered it “consensual” because she

didn't say no, and there was no violence involved. However, her description of the events does not align with a “consensual” interaction. Despite her assertion that, as an adult, the absence of violence equates to consent, those familiar with non-consensual acts and sexual abuse recognize her as a typical victim of sexual violation. However, the trial was not about sexual assault.

Jacobsen: People can find themselves in situations under pretenses where they are harmed or even murdered. The context may seem benign, but the act itself remains violent. This distinction needs to be clear. Your expertise in brain science would be valuable in this discussion. I'm familiar with Professor Elizabeth Loftus' work on false memories at UC Irvine. This could serve as a more evidence-based or academically sophisticated rebuttal against abuse allegations, suggesting concerns about false memories. Some abuse stories emerge 20 or 30 years later, raising the possibility that these claims might be misconstrued or entirely fabricated memories. Is there a risk that individuals coming forward after such a long period might be recounting false memories?

Dr. Nedelescu: I must say, no, there is no risk of fabricating such elaborate memories of sexual abuse with all the traumatization and vulnerability to PTSD that follows. There is the possibility of forgetting details and people remembering these details later, sometimes much later, when the trauma has subsided, but the idea of fabricating an entire sexual abuse memory is impossible without getting caught by experts. The main reason is that before there is memory, there is learning that needs to happen. These events can be short lived or learned over time such as during the “grooming” phase, when the abuser breaks down the victim’s natural alert barriers. Learning experiences become instantiated into the brain’s physical structure, likely at the synapses, turning into short term memory and then if important/traumatic enough, it becomes longer term memory.

In 2009, I published work showing what happens during fear learning at the neurobiological levels. Clergy who abuse operate by inducing fear in their subjects they exploit. They do this with small punishments which escalate with time and intermittent reward. It usually works like this. After a phase of attention, the abuser starts with small punishments and intermittent rewards to break down the victim’s natural defenses. Underneath it all, it is fear learning. The victim learns to fear the abuser even if they might not be able to name the emotion of fear.

At any rate, in this first author paper, my co-authors and I showed that a subunit of the AMPARs (a receptor that allows Ca^{+2} to enter the neuron) translocates from the dendritic shafts and spine heads to the synapse to support the newly formed memory of a shock-induced fear response. So, a stressful stimulus resulted in the translocation of these receptors to the synapses to support the newly formed fear memory, is what that study conducted. The internal neuronal mechanisms of the brain at the time of learning contributes to memory encoding. There has to be some sort of activation of these neurons to instantiate a memory. This activation happens through the sensory systems (i.e., our five senses) which are activated by environmental stimuli or some deep brain artificial stimulation to activate those neurons that support a certain learning and memory process as in the case of the Science paper by my colleague and mentor Mark Mayford (Science Vol 335: 23, 2012). Memory is flexible in terms of details that it can remember. Human memory

is not great, but to say that victims are capable of fabricating an entire abusive event as part of a false memory shows a lack of understanding of how the brain and behavior works.

In many of the abuse cases where people do not come forward for many years it is not so much because of their “memory” but their inability to process what happened to them. Clergy abuse is extremely painful with serious traumatization that surpasses that of veterans (see the work of David Pooler). Facing the truth is very challenging in these cases. So, the matter has to do with courage more than memory. Once that fear is named, the victim can begin to switch to being a survivor.

Are you suggesting that some might say that someone could implant a false memory, and the person then comes forward 50 years later?

Jacobsen: Yes, as a form of academic pushback against those coming forward with abuse claims.

Dr. Nedelescu: I think such cases are impossible. I am unaware of any actual instances. While it might be possible to implant minor false memories in children, a traumatic event like sexual abuse is far more complex. For example, suggesting that someone wore a red dress instead of an orange dress at a party in 1980 might be a false memory, but fake trauma and fake sexual abuse are not easily implanted in someone's memory. How would one even go about doing that? There was a [case](#) in the Orthodox Church, I believe in the Antiochian jurisdiction, where a priest abused an adult woman. He claimed that their abusive counselling sessions, where he bit her all over her body and raped her, were meant to help cure her of her childhood abuse repressed memories by her father (which never happened). This is an instance where the abusive priest attempted to “implant” a false memory of childhood abuse to justify his actions in abusing her. This is the closest real-life example I can imagine where someone (a clergy in this case) tried to implant a false memory. That priest had this victim under his clutch for three years.

Jacobsen: This situation is reminiscent of the satanic abuse ritual panic in the '90s, where well-meaning but misguided efforts by therapists and other professionals implanted some false memories. These professionals, in the course of their work, made significant errors. This differs from untrained individuals, such as community leaders, misremembering events. This nuance is essential when responding to arguments from individuals who come forward with such claims.

Dr. Nedelescu: Clergy abuse is profound, and we need to move beyond the psychology of memories. This should not be used as a defense in any way. It's crucial to make that clear. While some individuals might attempt to use this defense to reduce punishment, as seen in other court cases where abusers blame their psychopathology, neuroscientists must address these nuances and ensure our knowledge is not misused against victims.

Small: Statistics indicate that 21% of surveyed patients experienced false memories, and in 12% of these cases, at least one client later recognized their memory as false. Furthermore, 15% of respondents noted that at least one patient filed a civil or criminal complaint based on these false memories. However, how frequently do false allegations of child abuse arise?

Dr. Nedelescu: Parts of our past memories can be remembered in a patchy or “falsified” way. For example, I swear I had a white dress at age three but it turns out it was yellow from

photographic evidence. Our memories are not like a computer where you write something down, close it and if you open it 10 years later it remains identical to how you wrote it 10 years prior. We forget things and supplement with our past experiences. Memory is like a lego tower of different pieces that we put together and sometimes small mistakes are made. Being raped by a clergy is not something that can be artificially implanted in the brain.

Importantly, the trauma that is experienced from clergy sexual abuse leads victims to tell their stories in a very patchy non-chronological way. However, the more time passes from the abuse and the more the story is told, the better the victim is able to make sense of it and put the pieces together in a more cohesive way.

As I mentioned before, clergy sexual abuse is predatory behavior because a clergy is a position of immense power over his congregants and when they abuse their parishioners this power differential makes the abuse predatory. I am a scientist, I do and read experiments. There is work from Barbano et al., 2024 in Nature Communications that shows that excitatory neurons in the VTA (ventral tegmental area) are activated by the presence of a predator. These are animal studies but what I am trying to show with this example is that the brain's neurobiology is altered in the presence of a traumatizing predator leading animals and humans to respond as trauma patients respond. And what is that behavioral response? For some it's a fear response for others it's a myriad of other trauma responses that remain to be thoroughly studied.

People carry trauma differently. Individuals are all so different and how clergy sexual abuse and exploitation gets instantiated in the brain and made sense of is vastly different from individual to individual. One thing is certain, though, all victims exploited by clergy experience trauma, some with PTSD vulnerability, self-medicating tendencies and/or suicidality just to name a few.

Jacobsen: False allegations do occur, but extremely rare.

Small: Yes, they do. However, in cases of child abuse, the Catholic Church, for instance, involves trained clinicians and forensic psychiatrists to make these assessments. These professionals undergo intensive training. False reporting or false memory is less common in adults. Adults may block certain memories, and, as Hermina mentioned, they might focus on one aspect of the trauma, leading to altered perceptions of surrounding details. For example, I couldn't recall certain things because I was focused on a specific element.

A relevant example is Christine Blasey Ford's allegations against the Supreme Court nominee, reporting he sexually assaulted her in high school. Despite the years that had passed, her testimony was publicly scrutinized. Do you remember Christine Blasey Ford and the nominee? He is now on the Supreme Court.

Jacobsen: Clarence Thomas?

Small: No, not him. That was Anita Hill. This one was more recent. It begins with a "K."

Jacobsen: Kavanaugh, yes.

Small: Yes, it was a significant story in American news. Christine Blasey Ford was incredibly credible. She adhered to specific details, but critics argued her account wasn't real because of

gaps in some surrounding elements. They claimed it was false because she didn't get every detail correct.

Jacobsen: This relates to our earlier discussion about the deposition process and why. "Why? Why?"

Small: Well, it relates more to what Nina discussed about false reports. When questioning involves changing stories or minor memory discrepancies—like whether a dress was orange or red—the core assertion remains: "I was sexually violated." The peripheral details may be inconsistent, but the central violation claim stands. In my deposition, they fixated on those minor details, asking what I wore, what time, and what I was doing.

Dr. Nedelescu: That approach is absurd and shows a lack of education. This involves a priest in a position of power. Let me quickly add that the experts at [Diane Langberg's Associates](#), have decades of experience with clergy abuse, provide a clear example: If a woman walks into a priest's office and disrobes, the priest should raise his hands up in the air, leave the room and call for help. The priest should not devour her. It's not about what she was wearing; it's about the priest's responsibility who is in a position of authority and power. This is an extreme example just to make a point.

I also see uneducated phrases such as "she had an affair with the priest". An "affair" takes place between two consenting individuals of equal power. When the power differential is unequal, consent dissolves. An "affair" with a clergy is not possible. It's called abuse and it can be emotional abuse and/or physical sexual assault with rape as the most severe. We are talking sex crimes, not "affairs".

Small: I am aware of Diane Langberg and have watched some of her excellent video presentations on the topic. She is a renowned psychologist specializing in clergy and religious abuse. The greatest responsibility lies with the trained professionals who are in a power imbalance due to professional guidelines. Working as a nurse with over 40 years of clinical experience, we received frequent training on maintaining professional and patient boundaries. All patients, regardless of age, need protection because they are under our care, and we hold more power. This principle should apply to the church as well. Priests, like therapists or doctors, perform a skilled duty and are trained to protect their congregation. If a woman disrobes in front of a priest, it signals that she needs help, not exploitation. They are also trained in maintaining professional boundaries.

Small: The priest should act to protect her, not take advantage. You protect them. And what Hermina said, you have a naked woman standing there; what do you do? Do you devour her, or do you raise your hands and run like hell? If she's doing that to you, that's a red flag that she's not okay. You don't exploit her. She is not a "temptress". She's not well. That's even more the reason to protect. So that's not an excuse, but they try it. In my case, it was interesting that they asked, "Why did you have to ask him to go on a bike ride that day?" What does that have to do with sexual assault? I asked him to go on a bike ride on his day off out in the public community so I thought it was safe. But then he asked to use my restroom, which gave him access to my house just long enough.

The defense attorney during deposition asked again, “Why did you have to do that? Why could you not ask someone else?” Well, because he was a priest, I thought I was safe. I wanted safety and to enjoy physical activity which he had asked me to do on many occasions. I did not know of anyone who I could ask who could ride long distances. It was innocent. I assumed I couldn't be with a safer person. I know I would never do anything to hurt a priest; I would never be a temptress towards one. I was well aware of professional boundaries and I respected his position as a priest. I did not expect him to do what he did. The defense attorney asked me why I didn't kick him or scream? I asked, “How can I kick a priest? If he were anyone else, I would have had no problem!”

Jacobsen: He made the vow.

Small: If a patient propositioned me? I gave the standard response: "That is not allowed. I thank you for how you feel. I honor and respect that, but I cannot engage in that behavior with you per professional guidelines and workplace rules of conduct." I was in a position of power over the patient. It was not an equal relationship between two adults. The priest made a vow; they made these vows to God. There is no higher place. When we get married, we make a vow to our earthly partners, but they make vows to God. They're supposed to lead us to heaven, not to hell. They're not supposed to take us to hell with them. They're not supposed to pull us down with them if they're struggling and having issues. They should help guide us to heaven. I felt tainted. This priest did this with me, and he represented God. It felt like I cheated on God with him unwillingly. I assumed the priest's guilt. I felt dirty. Cheapened instead of protected and of value. Objectified. I felt like I was the mistress when I wasn't a willing participant. It wouldn't have happened if he had upheld his vow and professional boundaries.

Dr. Nedelescu: One thing that needs to be taught for people in churches is to decouple the errant clergy from the Office of the Holy Priesthood, which reflects God. Does that make sense?

Small: Yes, I understand Orthodox priests can marry, but not bishops. Married priests still serve God in their position in ministry. It's a double betrayal if they're married and act outside of that boundary in an affair. But assault is not an affair. It is a crime. They're answerable to the highest position because they're still priests, not just married men.

Dr. Nedelescu: It's a violation of both the priestly vow and the marital vow.

Small: Catholic priests used to be able to get married as well. Before the 1100s, during King Constantine's time, bishops and priests married. But then the sons would get the inheritance, and the church wanted the property, so mandatory celibacy was enforced. With celibacy comes chastity; in the Catholic Church, priests say they are celibate, which means not being married, but they should also be chaste, refraining from any sexual activity. Richard Sipe said at least 50% of them aren't chaste. They're engaging in sex outside of marriage when they're married to God, betraying that relationship.

Jacobsen: What about the straightforward, basic human motivations to avoid getting in trouble?

Small: Part of the Hippocratic Oath states cause no harm. The Ten Commandments condemn adultery and murder. It is possible to murder a soul. I know as humans we fail. We're not talking about a lapse in a sacred vow. The Catholic Church minimizes it by saying it was an

"inappropriate relationship" or a "lapse in judgment." They want to use the sin and we are human and fall short of the mark. There is still accountability for our poor choices.

Jacobsen: The church then proclaims itself as a "whoopsie" organization.

Small: But let a doctor sexualize a patient, and he'll lose his medical license and do some jail time. No one wants a heart surgeon with a "whoopsie" reputation. The church is like the boys' club; they cover for each other. The issue of exposing the magnitude of adults being abused is complex because, for so long, adults didn't think it was abuse. After all, we are adults. Again, submission is not consent.

Jacobsen: If someone is depressed and drunk, they're not in their right mind.

Small: It's not only drunk or depressed people who are exploited and assaulted. Anyone can be vulnerable to a predator who is also a con artist. It is illegal if a doctor or therapist does this. With clergy it's even worse because it affects your relationship with God. It gets you right in the core of your being where the image of God dwells within us. When a priest abuses you, it's different from your therapist or doctor. It doesn't mess with God. Either way, it's not okay and they should be held fully accountable by law. With the wording on the bill about counseling relationships, I didn't seek counseling in my situation. It was simply a relationship of accessibility. The priest pursued me outside of counseling simply by being a parishioner who also was in ministry. He had access. During the grooming process, it created an emotional bond. Any conversations beyond small talk with them can constitute counseling because, most times, we're talking to them outside of an actual office.

Dr. Nedelescu: I am an instructor for Stepping Higher Inc. a faith-based group of professionals funded by the San Diego County Behavioral Health Services. We try to educate people that if they have problems, they shouldn't go to their pastor or religious leader of faith for therapy unless they are trained. About 25% of people of faith go to their pastor/clergy to deal with their personal problems, and this person of faith is usually not a licensed therapist. They should not be going to a church leader for therapy and counselling unless that church leader holds a license to provide therapy in their state. But for some people of faith, there's such a stigma against going to see a psychologist that they go to their priest with their problems. Now, if that priest has predatory behavior, you can imagine what will happen.

A lot of the time, people of faith go to their priest for counselling because with a therapist you meet at their office, but a priest can come to you, to your home. The boundaries are a lot more permeable, which can raise the risk of abuse. When they're not licensed to provide counselling, many of these so-called therapy sessions are very informal, but they play the counselling role. It's got to stop. In some states, you need a license if you're providing counselling. But in California, you can do it under a religious organization without a problem. You don't need a license to provide so-called pastoral care which is confused with therapy, except it's not licensed therapy. It's pop psychology.

In other cases, the clergy will target a potential victim and lead her to believe that they will work together on some issue that doesn't even exist or that the clergy identifies as in need of "pastoral

care”. What this does is it allows the clergy to have access to their targeted victim to discuss this “problem” under the premise of “working together”. The “problem” is often vague or as in the Antiochian case above, the problem was completely made up.

Small: Guess what that does? Because they are not licensed you can't go after their license. There's a separation of church and state. In my case, I was asked, "Did he give you counseling?" I said, "Well, after I reported him initially and he was on suspension for about a week being counseled on parishioner-clergy boundaries and was returned, we started meeting weekly in the counseling room." I thought that if he really knew about my traumatic childhood and its consequences in my adult life with more abusive relationships that he would understand and it would protect both of us since they returned him to the church. That surprised me given what I wrote and handed to the pastor to give to the diocese as he said they requested of me when I first reported him. He listened intently but he only was gaining more information to use to further groom me. During those sessions every now and then he would state a highly inappropriate comment. It was shocking. But then as if it did not happen, he resumed his clerical role. I thought I was giving him information to help him understand not to mess with me, but he just took it further. They'll ask what percentage of what you talked about is secular versus non-secular. Because of the separation of church and state, they're protected if they give you counseling based on religious topics. That wasn't happening in my situation. I didn't seek him for that. I process everything through my relationship with God even in therapy. It is who I am. However, a priest is better able to understand that if the therapist is not Catholic.

Perhaps some adults strictly discuss religious matters. Many bring in personal issues to discuss even if in therapy for that perspective. With a priest, you will discuss your non-religious issues, like your relationship with your husband or children. It often involves family related issues.

Dr. Nedelescu: That's a great point, Dorothy. Some of these clergy are practicing pop psychotherapy without a license under the guise of “pastoral care” but all of this is to gain information about the person they plan to exploit. It's grooming. Importantly, they are ordained and they can be defrocked just like when a doctor who abuses their patient(s) loses their medical license. The same standards need to be applied to clergy who abuse congregants. Church administrations, however, do not hold this small but significant minority of abusers accountable. So, we must ensure the state restrains them because they typically have many victims and end up harming entire congregations. There are collateral victims as well.

Jacobsen: When you use the phrase masquerading as priests, do they have priestly qualifications?

Dr. Nedelescu: Most do. Now, I am not going to get into the quality of education in seminaries. There are, however, some people who put on a robe and pretend that they are clergy. Some become a priest in one week. Most go through seminary, though, but still play a role. They merge their role as priest who provides “pastoral care” with their self-concept. This happens with social workers, therapists, but also with those who minister in the church. For example, David Pooler says that” pastoral” role identity theory helps explain the overextended clergy who may have personal problems and starts to devote all his time “ministering” to others at all times of the day

because this rewards him with verbal and financial support, which reinforces his belief that he ought to go out of his way to be helpful, no matter what. Eventually, the chronic stress catches up with him and lust or other outlets become his primary way to cope. Lust is abuse.

These abusive clergy play a role of sincerity and kindness but in reality they are in church settings because it's easier to abuse. There is no accountability. The church setting is perfect for abusers with predatory behavior. There are lots of trusting people in the church. I know of an extreme case in which the child was raped by a priest and the parents did not believe the child. They trusted the collar and the priest at all costs.

Small: Some present themselves as priests and have yet to go to seminary. There are those as well. They just put on the vestments and say they're priests, like men posing as police officers. It just happened recently where a man wasn't a priest but posed as one. He was a con man. Look at people who pretend to be doctors. When I say masquerading, I mean they can be fully trained and ordained, but if they are abusing, they are not acting out of their vows and professional guidelines. Therefore, they're not true priests at all.

Dr. Nedelescu: Going to the seminary is part of their identity. The training is also very short, only a few years. I believe three years with no additional post educational training or ongoing development like in most careers. So, it's not a major investment or huge undertaking as in cases of doctoral work where we dedicate 5-7 years of our life just for the initial training, then another 5-7 as postdocs, etc.

Some claim they got the “call” from God to be called to the priestly ministry. I squirm at such a statement. Spiritual formation for a ministry takes time, it's a process not some “call from the sky” and let's go to seminary for 6 semesters.

Anna Salter, a clinical psychologist, interviewed people who exhibited predatory behavior and were eventually convicted. She revealed that it's not until “predators” have abused many times and had many victims that they get caught and convicted. Predators manage to fool people by playing a role for decades before they get caught. Once caught, as revealed by Anna Salter, they look at the situation as a temporary “rough time” that will pass as long as they stay calm. Meanwhile, the traumatization of the victim(s) is profound. There is a series of [interviews by Anna Salter](#) with abusers with predatory behaviors that is very useful to hear how they view the situation and how they respond to continue to fool people.

Small: Even one lapse in a vow is significant, but predators usually have more than one victim. It's like a serial killer. It is very uncommon to perpetrate once and not do it again. Each time, it's like an addiction that keeps escalating.

Jacobsen: They get away with it, so it's almost like a drug.

Small: Dennis Rader, the BTK serial killer, was just the guy next door, active in the church with a family. Predators have social covers. The pedophile who drives an ice cream truck, the clown at the circus—these vocations attract narcissistic, sociopathic, psychopathic predators. I am of course not saying all are deviants! They seek positions of power and authority where they have access to a supply of vulnerable people. When you go to church, you're there to open yourself to

God, examining your conscience is part of it. You're more open, dropping the masks of our other obligations that often define us.

Jacobsen: These aren't bad things. These are good things.

Small: Unfortunately, bad people hide in good places. Ice cream is good. It's tasty. It is a place to gain the trust of children providing them with something that is a favorite treat. Bad guys are going to hide by fitting into society. Police can have the same issue. There are good cops and bad ones who hide behind the uniform and badge. Now they are being held accountable publicly for what once was not the case. For the longest time, police were getting away with the same thing. Try being a police officer's girlfriend or wife at a period when domestic violence was even harder to report than it is because the victim doesn't want to get the partner in trouble and because there is deep emotional bond. If you wanted to report them to the other men in blue often, they would cover up for them. Try being believed; try being a domestic violence partner to a cop. They'll cover each other because cops know how cops think. They're being held more accountable now. If someone is arrested and something happened where the officer took sexual advantage? Who would feel safe enough to say no? Who would take your word over theirs? Often it is like that with clergy. The assault takes place outside of the public eye.

Jacobsen: So, who's going to believe it's a cop?

Small: That's right. Because in a court of law, the cop is known as a credible witness just for his vocation. His word is taken above the other person's. It is similar to a priest. That's an authority position with much trust associated and not earned. It is a part of the helping profession. The priest can say, "No, I didn't do that. I swear to God, I didn't do that." And who's going to believe you? One would question, "Father who represents God is the problem?" It's like trying to say that the cop is the problem. Because in these vocations, they often cover for each other. That's what's starting to break down. That's what's being eroded in the Catholic Church, but it's taken years.

Dr. Nedelescu: It's taken decades. Earlier, you said that the Catholics are trying to say these are cases that happened in the 70s and 80s. But the truth is, I just read about a current case; they're happening in the present. The priest was ordained in 2020, and got caught abusing in 2022.

I wanted to add one more thing when we were speaking of predators. Grenz and Bell (2001) categorized offenders as three types: predators, wanderers or lovers. Predators have no moral restrictions in using their position of power to manipulate and use other people. Grenz and Bell state that this type of leader is "charismatic", actively seeking to abuse women and is often a serial abuser. He will immediately move onto his next targeted victim. The wanderer does not actively seek out women to abuse, but a life crisis leads him to sexualize his own needs and to sexually abuse women. Finally, the lover leader thinks he is "in love" with a congregant, even if that woman is married. Importantly, all of these types (predator, wanderer and lover) exhibit predatory behavior and there is absolutely no difference in terms of how this abuse impacts the victims, their families or the congregation. The motivation is different but the behavior is predatory and the abuse impacts those exploited in the same way.

Jacobsen: It also demystifies the abuser by giving some evidence-based classification. Hollywood has done these portrayals, sometimes accurate, many times not. So, we have this

image of a ravaging lunatic who abuses. But there are types, and you can classify those, which can help. Dorothy's recommendation of putting informational pamphlets in churches and cathedrals and bringing them in can help. You can know what to look for rather than have a generic "help is available" message.

Small: Right, bring the awareness of signs to look into the churches. If you let it in the house, you show an openness to being part of the solution instead of protecting it. If you encourage people to become aware and say, "We care about you. We can't have total control. We screen the best we can, and we can still miss them." Even FBI profilers can have a hard time spotting a sociopath. So, you have all these checks in place. By admitting that they get through and saying, "This is what we are doing as a church to help protect the public and the good priests' names," we can work together as a family, not live in denial by burying our heads under the sand. Let's educate and be informed.

By educating parishioners about these things, you help them out in the world. Children have access to the internet, with men posing as teenagers and kidnapping them often used for sexual purposes. The church is positioned to help people be safe in the institution's walls, where you might assume there's safety, but there isn't. By inviting education and knowledge, you aren't setting your parishioners up to turn a deaf ear if something happens. You support that knowledge and welcome it. You're not causing them to go silent to avoid upsetting the apple wagon. You invite it: "Look, we want to protect our church, the people and clergy. This is what you look for." Let it in. That's an ounce of prevention.

But what to do with what's going on takes external pressure, like what Hermina's saying and what happened historically with the church. It took people trickling through until, finally, the biggest thing happened with the *Boston Globe* spotlight. In 2019, there was another huge incident in Philadelphia. You can look up that case, where abuse of great proportion became public. It doesn't matter if it happened 100 years ago; it will continue to happen because the mindset hasn't changed. The mindset hasn't healed. Rhetoric doesn't change anything. Backing words with action and public awareness do. What are they doing with the kids in school? Don't just say no to drugs. That's not enough. Bring experts in and give information. Open up the dialogue. The discussion must take place at home as well. It makes it easier for someone to come forward to report a problem if the problem is accepted for discussion.

Jacobsen: It's a deep historical question. If we're dealing with these now, have these been happening for centuries?

Small: Of course. It is time for the problem to come into the light as we evolve as a society and human race. Abuse has far reaching implications even spilling over onto future generations. Abuse is the gift that keeps on giving, is what I have heard it spoken of at support meetings. Traumatized people often turn to addictive substances to escape the pain leading to addictions. The traumatized adult unwittingly causes trauma to their children who grow up suffering anxiety and depression. If we are to heal as a society any abuse must be addressed. Abuse in religious institutions has been concealed far too long. The courage of survivors speaking out braving the

obstacles associated with that, advocates and attorneys are the external pressure on these institutions. Otherwise, internal change will not occur.

Dr. Nedelescu: It has been happening for well over 2000 years but the time to hold these abusers accountable has arrived.

Small: The Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. A church hierarchy was established and Rome was made the official center of the Christian Church. After the fall of the Roman Empire the people depended on the church for its needs. Children were treated harshly. Abuse was exacted out in the harshest of punishment, even death. As society evolves this is no longer acceptable. Look at drunk driving. Laws changed after the beginning of MADD. People smoked long before the 1960s when the surgeon general put out a warning that smoking is dangerous to your health. As we evolve and learn the impact of certain behaviors we once considered “normal” or that were kept quiet we are realizing the need to educate the public on inherent dangers of certain practices and behavior damaging not only our own health and well-being but that of the public. Part of evolution is learning, researching, adapting, changing, and realizing the enormous impact of abuse on the human mind. The adverse effect of trauma on the brain is well known through research. It creates behaviors that injure self and society. The jails are full of traumatized people who turn to substances which further compound the adverse symptoms making healing almost impossible.

We are living at a time where information is abundant and accessible to assist with change that must occur internally and most often preceded by external pressure. Sentinel events catch our attention. We can learn from the past and change our approach. Narcissism is an epidemic, and so is addiction. It is important as a society to awaken from fantasy and the myth that our religious institutions are absolutely safe and above the law if we are to bring change. The trickle effect of consistent attention in the media is the trickling of truth that can penetrate denial and misperceptions.

Jacobsen: We've also been making the opposite mistake, right? We are taking the moment's hubris, thinking, "We have these facts now; we have more stories coming forward. Therefore, we are in a perfect moment now." We are in a lucky period to make a drastic change. It could end up being a much longer process; it could be incremental, there could be many losses and not be a straightforward evolution. Could that also be a mistake in this kind of work?

Small: Can you rephrase that?

Jacobsen: The hubris of the moment, thinking or feeling that we have these stories and these facts now. Therefore, we are perfectly primed to make radical changes in the trajectory of the church and the treatment of people who have been abused and to provide a space for people to come forward and make institutional, cultural changes. In other words, we can make rapid change since we are now talking about it because we are here with these facts. Could that be wishful thinking?

Dr. Nedelescu: I don't think that change will be made rapidly.

Small: Look at the problem of global warming. It has become an issue that can no longer be pushed aside for the future. Issues that have been brewing for so long and are deeply entrenched

in our operations are normalized and ignored in order to keep going. Until an awakening occurs which I believe we are absolutely seeing at this unprecedented time. Society is in trouble. Now, more than ever, there is knowledge we didn't have previously. There are trauma-informed therapists who are skilled at helping process traumas as well as CBT and other modalities to treat trauma. There is the use of the 12-step approach for helping with improving behavior and helping recover from addiction by helping individuals form healthier connections needed for healing from trauma associated with injury caused by people who were deeply wounded or even evil. If we study trauma and what causes it, then we can seek to address it and apply laws and matters of justice to punish the offenders and bring restitution to survivors who are injured in the church. We need to inform people that it is still happening and not something from the past.

We can no longer turn a deaf ear and blind eye any more than we would to any other helping profession. No abuse belongs in the families or any of our institutions. Yet, it will still happen. That is why education, support for those victimized and laws to penalize offenders are needed. Think of the child who's in an abusive home, goes to school and is bullied by students and abused by a teacher directly or perhaps through silent complicity and goes to church and gets abused by a clergy member. Is that possible? Yes, because the child is already worn down, making them more susceptible to being abused which continues throughout the life cycle. We may not be able to eradicate the issue of abuse, but we can certainly bring awareness that in the places where we turn for help, no one is above the law. Nobody gets to escape accountability. There are consequences that must be acknowledged and addressed.

Jacobsen: I'm getting more at the sense of someone viewing individuals coming forward and doing the work you're doing as Pollyanna upstarts. I can give a personal example from my hometown. I was from Fort Langley. The largest private university is there. It's evangelical. They have the equivalent status of Liberty University in Canada. They had Supreme Court cases for a law school denied because of a covenant they had to sign that was anti-LGBTQ, etc. I interviewed the president of the university. Before him, there was another president of the university who held that status for over 30 years.

As you know, Hermina, that's very unusual. He had the longest-standing presidency of any university president at any Canadian university. He resigned around 2006-2007. Before that, a woman had come forward with a sexual harassment claim. I was working at restaurants in that town because it's my small town, and journalism is in a tough spot. It doesn't pay poorly, so you get money otherwise. I worked at one of those restaurants with someone who worked with him then. This is all to the Pollyanna upstart point. I remember talking to her, and I said, "What about that case of the harassment?" She responded, "Well, his wife just died. He was lonely." I had my response inside. I didn't want to be rude. The idea that he was lonely subtly implies that you can't change human nature or a man in power's nature. When you're coming forward, which is what I mean by Pollyanna upstarts, you're over-optimistic in thinking you can change something as deeply embedded as human nature. What might be our response to that crowd?

Small: You just hit that on the head right there. That was said to me the other day by a scientist. I was talking about what happened to me with the priest. He said, "It's biological, it's human nature."

Jacobsen: It's great when the quiet part is said out loud. I don't mean that as an insult or an epithet to the man.

Small: It's a reality. However, we are called to bring human nature under direction to the higher rational brain and not act from natural raw instinct from the primitive brain's survival mode. When I informed the pastor what happened, details, when the priest assaulted me? He said, "He was just in a low place in his life and turned to you for comfort. You were in a low place and turned to him as well. It is Holy Week. Pray." He was in a position to report him to the diocese but instead made an excuse that may be true but it violated conditions of church employment and his vow of chastity which goes with celibacy. He covered for him instead of taking action. It was "normalized". We don't just get to operate without obeying society's rules. We're not tampering with their human nature. We're telling them that there are laws governing the expression of their free choice. You can choose to have sex in appropriate situations, but you can't gratify natural impulses simply because of human nature. "I was lonely." And it's like, okay, buddy. When your freedom of choice interferes with somebody else's safety and their freedom to choose, you lose your freedom. We are not animals.

Jacobsen: It's one of those fundamental understandings around international human rights and international humanitarian law. Having one's individualistic freedom is balanced contextually with others' rights. Whether you're taking transcendentalist moral ethics found in traditional religions or an international human rights context, they are all principles that semi-conflict or rub against one another. The balance lies in not being restricted to expressing healthier ways but rather in not doing something illegal that causes harm to another person.

Small: Take alcohol, for instance. People of age have a right to drink. But do you have the right to get behind the wheel of a car and place other people in danger? So, yes. Your last sentence is a logical and rational conclusion.

Jacobsen: There's a phenomenon called the "J-A-Q," just asking questions. They call it "J-A-Q-ing off." The idea is that someone asks questions provocatively to provoke or to dismiss you, making you have a soundbite they can then use to dismiss you. People don't ask those kinds of questions about things like drinking at work.

Small: It's asking questions and looking for holes. It's about seeking to debate for the sake of debate, not seeking to understand, but rather asking questions to find holes and undermine the other person. I believe they're just trying to tear the other position down. I once attended a debate by an atheist and Christian. The atheist was not attempting to seek understanding but to find a hole to discredit the other's position.

Jacobsen: In debate forums, they ask questions to find flaws in the other side, not to understand truly but to shoot it down.

Small: When I went through the litigation process the lawyer said, "Don't be too dismayed. They will come at you the same way they would come at a child who went through the same thing." He had litigated several clergy abuse cases for adults abused as children. They went at the adult abuse as a child the same way. The abuse took place when they were children, and there's no way

that was their fault. It wasn't my "fault" either, but the same line of questioning was used, which is shocking.

Dr. Nedelescu: So, all that aside, I think they're trying to get the offender off the hook by saying the child or victim encouraged it.

Small: It's gaslighting because the priest shouldn't have been in that position in the first place. Yes, the victims are often blamed. Even if the adult threw herself at the priest, he has the greater responsibility because of the imbalance of power. If an adult acted that way, there would be something that was not right. It demonstrates a vulnerability in that adult because an adult doing that is operating out of emotional wounds, not their higher logical mind.

Jacobsen: You can make a hypothetical like a denominational Christian where women can join the clergy and get as much status as men. If a priest and priestess fall in love, get married, and have kids, but then one claims sexual assault against the other, even if those changes are made, the act of abuse is still there.

Small: Yes. You can have a nun and a priest where the priest has higher power than the nun, but if they have feelings for each other, they might fall in love and leave their vows after a careful period of discernment. There is still an imbalance of power, though. Some priests violate nuns who are still in their orders, and they have no say. If they report it, they fear the risk of losing their positions. Children born into these unions often ended up in orphanages.

Abuse also occurs between two persons in equal positions of power. Nuns also abuse. Nuns have abused novices who are under their direction and training, similar to seminarians. There is a power imbalance. Nuns abuse nuns, priests abuse priests, and priests abuse seminarians. This dynamic is still there, with adults being abused within their order. There's still a pecking order, and those seeking to stay in that order have someone in a higher position sexually exploiting them. We're talking about abuse, abuse of power, exploitation, and bringing attention to these issues. It's happening in other religions as well. The Orthodox Church is second in size to the Catholic Church, so bringing it to attention is very important. They are right behind the Catholic Church in size. How could they deny abuse in its church?

Jacobsen: Does the Eastern Orthodox Church have nuns or the equivalent of nuns?

Dr. Nedelescu: Yes, they have nuns and monks, and they have novices who are in training, as well as the more established nuns. Abuse happens there as well. I saw one firsthand when I was in Jerusalem. I worked at Hebrew University for about two years. Once, I stayed at one of these housings they sometimes rent out, and I saw firsthand abuse by an Orthodox nun towards another Orthodox nun. So, the Orthodox Church does have nuns and monks, and they're supposed to take a vow of chastity.

Jacobsen: Would the Eastern Orthodox Church handle cases where the nun takes a vow, the priest takes a vow, the priest rapes the nun, and the nun becomes pregnant, dealing with the double moral injury of being pregnant as a nun and having taken that vow of chastity that was forcibly taken from her by the priest? Are those the same cases popping up there?

Dr. Nedelescu: I still need to look into that research. My colleague Katherine has spoken about abuse in monasteries more, but we still need to conduct the research.

Jacobsen: Is there anything you want to cover that I still need?

Dr. Nedelescu: Gosh, what do you think, Dorothy? You covered everything I wanted to, giving enough time to allow the conversation to flow. If anything comes up, I'll bring it up to you again, or Dorothy could.

Small: I think we covered everything thoroughly, and there will always be "what if" or "what about" questions. The point is, look at how laws for drunk driving changed due to advocacy from

Mothers Against Drunk Drivers. Before that, the laws governing drunk driving weren't what they became after. It takes a crisis to bring something forward. That is human nature. We tend to escape and get away with something once, then think we can keep getting away. Eventually, we think it's normal and dismiss it until a crisis happens. In my situation my life crashed, and I couldn't stay silent. Remaining silent would have killed me. This was the last straw. I was willing to bear the fallout and take the hatred from the world. I realized I've been enabling my abusers since I was a child because that's how I adapted to survive. I learned to abuse myself by tolerating abuse, and it kept going.

Jacobsen: In this way, silence is complicity; it's a crime against yourself.

Small: When I reported, I never intended to file a lawsuit. I advocated for myself and asked for counseling. When I was ready, I wanted to return to church and sing again. I was denied any ministry in my church community. I asked the pastor why he banned me, and he said it was because of a scandal. I told him it wasn't my scandal. I went to the bishop, and although he said I had been abused, it makes him sick and that he prays for me, he said it wasn't his policy to interfere with local parish decisions on volunteers. Yet, he had the power to send my priest abuser back to his country but would not call the pastor to request he drop the ban? The bishop said, "The volunteer position is for the parishioners, not for the sake of the volunteer." I told him, "I am a parishioner, and singing in the church is part of my relationship with Christ. It fulfills a purpose for the other parishioners, so it is for the parishioner." His answer felt arrogant and dismissive. They are used to power and control and not being confronted especially by a lay woman.

Dr. Nedelescu: When you do, they crumble. They don't know what to do.

Small: I asked the bishop to pay for counseling until the pastor is ready to let me come back. The victim advocate told me the bishop said more counseling wouldn't help with "your problem with your pastor". Therefore, additional counseling after what was authorized was denied. They said, "You could go somewhere else. You can go to any other church you choose." I didn't want to go elsewhere. I would not have chosen to be in any other parish prior to the abuse. I was bonded and attached with the church community like a family. During confession I asked the priest, "What do I do?" He suggested, "Maybe God wants to use your voice outside the church walls. Have you ever asked God what He wanted?" I hadn't thought of that. The next morning, in prayer, I asked, "What do you want me to do?" I grabbed my laptop and searched for clergy abuse attorneys. I

found one with a psychology degree, called him, and he listened. He said, "You wouldn't have to pay for a lawyer; it comes out at the end. We will pay for therapy. The diocese will pay us." He stated he was impressed by my efforts at self advocacy for ten months. He warned me that I was close to the statute of limitations. That motivated me to act. I believe it was God's hand because the timing was impeccable. Without everything that transpired, I wouldn't be in this position right now. My voice is used outside the church walls and returned inside recently as I returned to church and once again after over eight years I am singing in a choir. How could I do both comfortably if I were against the church, priest, or God?

Dr. Nedelescu: That's right. When you have a calm demeanor.

Small: Everything I've done has helped me heal. It's all about healing while bringing light and truth into the darkness of silent complicity. I am committed to standing for the truth, no matter the cost. The truth is why I've healed, continuing to follow it even when it's uncomfortable. Although difficult to receive and to speak the truth, it is the only thing that eventually sets things in proper order and brings healing. It is important to acknowledge our emotions; however, the truth must prevail. What is the right thing to do? Our feelings will settle down. That's how I got here. I'm in better shape now because of what happened and what I chose to do with it. If I were against God, how could I have healed when nothing else worked for years? It took the event in the church, getting sick and tired, standing up, and finding someone to listen to me to realize someone cared. There was a reserve of strength deep within. Then, I put great effort into self-recovery.

It gave me the incentive to fight for my life because someone in a position of power heard me and stood up for me against a place of power. That was the therapeutic part of having a lawyer. I never considered using a lawyer, but he was better than the priests I dealt with. Destruction happened in the church with a priest. Healing began with an attorney and his law office.

Dr. Nedelescu: What an important comment you made. We were in Cambridge last year. We can end on this. I was speaking to a theologian friend, Dr. Sr. Vassa Larin, also a nun, about how other professions such as neurosurgeons and others who do good for humanity could be ordained too. There are many professions in the world. So why give all the power to the cleric? When there are others who do much good in the world.

Small: If I were against God and did something against Him it would not have ended with my recovery beyond where I was before it happened. My entire life was connected to what happened in the church. I had to heal my whole life to heal from the church. That was actually brilliant of God to use what was intended to destroy for His purpose of bringing healing. How did that happen? By speaking out from a position of love for God and wishing justice. I asked God, "Who will speak for You? They're defiling Your image and hurting Your children. It is hurting the church and good clerics. Who will speak on Your behalf?" I said, "I'll do that. I will speak for You too." I sought to use the situation to heal and not let what happened keep me in a victim mindset. Good conquers evil.

Jacobsen: Justice is part of moral human nature, too.

Small: God loves justice. There is no abuse in God. None. Those acting abusively don't represent God. Those abused who stand up do. It's all twisted. The church is being cleansed by those whom it hurt. It seems that the abused might be the saints bringing light to the church for cleansing. My spiritual director told me that those abused in the church are like the slaughter of the innocent when King Herod ordered the murder of all infant males from aged two and under after hearing of Christ's birth. The abuse revealed to me my deepest vulnerability so I could go after it and bring healing and knowledge so hopefully I will be less likely to be prey to another predator anywhere but especially the church. Christ rose after death. With much work I have risen above the ashes. It takes a long time, and it is a painful journey. We do not deserve to be traumatized in any institution, especially in the safe haven of our churches.

Dr. Nedelescu: You're a natural theologian, Dorothy. Thank you, Scott and Dorothy. **Small:** After listening today, would you say your understanding is greater now?

Jacobsen: My self-understanding, too, is reflecting on whether I was that person who thought, "These people coming forward are full of it," and then generating opposition. How might critics respond? Giving open air to that and responding live is valuable; I've gained much self-insight from you two in response. As everyone agrees, building the database, gathering stories, and parsing what abuse is are easy. But where there's disagreement, bringing some of this to light is challenging and educational; putting myself in that position live is helpful, too.

Dr. Nedelescu: That makes sense.

Small: We're all learning here. You hear my tone. I'm not upset. I've been through it all and returned as an advocate, which is also part of the healing process. I feel empowered. Hopefully with knowledge, recovery or early traumas, individuation along with secure boundaries and much self awareness I'll be in a better position to protect myself.

Dr. Nedelescu. We're all on the same coast. Good evening. Bye, everyone.

Small: Goodbye, Scott and Hermina.

Professor David K. Pooler, Ph.D., LCSW-S on Consent and Power

Professor David K. Pooler, Ph.D., LCSW-S, is a Professor at the Diana R. Garland School of Social Work at Baylor University. His X account is [here](#).

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We are back to the "delightful" topic of clergy-related abuse in general, but sexual abuse in particular, because it is the darkest in the public imagination. Regarding consent as a claim when an individual priest, pastor, or religious authority comes forward, what are some important ethical considerations? While that can be considered legitimate in some cases, it is probably not legitimate in most considerations. In other cases, it is a blanket lie.

Professor David K. Pooler: I will say this. I do think there may be people who have had sex with a married pastor, single pastor, priest, or whatever. They probably believe it was consensual because someone may not have said "No," did not resist, or was not clear that they did not want that to happen. However, those kinds of situations are not about what consent truly is. Consent is when both people can say "Yes" or "No." Both people absolutely, categorically want to be sexual with one another.

There was massive internal reluctance and the need to please an authority figure in the cases I have looked at, researched, and discussed with survivors. It is complicated because it is not just the need to please an authority figure; this person is a proxy for God. It is so complicated in that arrangement where the survivor feels that if they were to try to say no or express concern. They are going against God. Often, the person who is targeting them and initiating sexual contact is framing it in such a way that God is okay with it. That is not very easy. It is very broad to say God is okay with it, but they use much scripture and various interpretations I have heard through the years.

Then they claim their authority, saying what the Holy Spirit or God said. The other thing that complicates consent, which we must discuss, is this power differential. With a power differential, you have to ensure that undue influence, coercion, or misuse of that added power that one person has in the equation is not being used to coerce, manipulate, or push for sexual activity. I have even been asked through the years, what about a single pastor? Could they not have a relationship with someone in their congregation?

They could, but it could be more straightforward. My guidance for that situation is, "No, do not do it." If you need to date someone and you are interested in romantic relationships, date outside your congregation. Surely, your world has a bigger pool of people than you, pastor. In the rare occasion that a single pastor, for example, wanted to be sexual with someone in their congregation, to ensure that there was actual consent, you would have to bring on board some people to watch that relationship and have conversations with the person the pastor is dating and wants to be sexual with.

Let me go back to consent. Having honest, open communication about what both people want is essential. From my perspective on this and listening to survivors, it is so secretive and hidden, and the pastor is trying to keep it unknown. So, the capacity for an open, honest conversation in this relationship is almost impossible. Consent is not possible in most cases because of the power

differential. You mentioned ethics, and outside of ministry, all the other helping professions understand the complications of the ethics around this. That is why sexual relationships with people you are supporting and helping are prohibited.

It is not; here is the guidance for doing it and what it looks like. It is prohibited. You do not do it. In some professions, after the helping relationship is over, you can have sexual relations with someone. In my profession, social work, a sexual relationship is prohibited forever. Technically, if I ever wanted to have sex with a former client, I would not be able to do that according to the ethics of social work. What I am getting at is that these secular professions understand the complicated nature and the nuances of ensuring that both people are having an honest, open conversation about sex and sexuality in a relationship. It would be almost absurd to think about it happening this way but say a married pastor wants to have sex with someone in his congregation. "Hey, I realize what we are doing is inappropriate and wrong. It is a violation of marital vows, but I want to make sure that you are completely okay with us being sexual."

Those conversations never happen. Many people who perpetrate sexual abuse with someone in their congregation think, "Hey, I want this with this person. If this person is not actively resisting or saying no, they must want it and must be okay with it also," which is a horrible assumption to make. I have never had a conversation with a survivor yet where there was that open conversation.

And then I would also add that not only can sex be coerced and manipulated with that power differential, but there is certainly what we would consider sexual assault even when someone is resisting or saying "No." That happens more than we want to admit in this arrangement. Part of what I wanted to speak to is this piece where the offending pastor, if their defence is, "It was consensual. They wanted it too." I have heard this often: "They were the ones who wanted it. They were flirtatious. They were the ones who were coming after me and targeting me."

What I would say there is that all the other helping professions equip people to manage a situation in which a client or someone they are supporting might want to be sexual with them. It is the person with more power. It is always their job to put the brakes on, the fence up, the boundaries out, and say no. That is not how this relationship works. Moreover, that gets into another topic I wanted to jump on around purity culture if it is okay if we go there, which is a subset of Christianity that focuses a lot on men being instinctually lustful and that their sexuality is something that has to be tamed and managed, it is a battle they have to focus on in battling their lust. However, they put an excessive burden on the women in that environment so as not to tempt men and to not cause men's eyes to stray.

I say all that because, in many cases, that is what they are referring to: "I was tempted. This person caused my eyes to stray. I am struggling with lust, and this person came on to me." So it is this helplessness: "I was at the mercy of this powerful woman who was not managing herself in ways to protect me." Again, all this burden is on the woman. We often see the defence of an offending pastor going to that narrative, and many people in congregations buy that narrative.

"Yes, I guess it was her fault. I guess she did tempt him. I guess she was trying to undo the church." They often view women who have been victimized by a pastor as evil. That is a

complete turnaround and reversal. The DARVO—deny, accuse, reverse victim and offender—but the entire system can pull a DARVO on someone who has been victimized by a pastor sexually.

I wanted to bring that in because when we are talking about consent, there is a subset of Christianity that not only does not talk about consent at all but also puts this huge burden on the woman to maintain sexual purity for the church. The sexual purity of men in the church is the burden on the women to make sure that happens. That is a real setup for abuse to happen. Then, when abuse is reported, that victim gets blamed by the perpetrator and the supporters of the perpetrator in that whole institutional system.

Jacobsen: These are theological social stereotypes about men and women guiding this orientation.

Pooler: Unfortunately, it is.

Jacobsen: Dorothy Small brought some subtleties to my attention. [She mentioned clergy who take vows of celibacy, chastity, or both](#) in some denominations. When those individuals make those vows, how does this change the power and ethics dynamic when making claims about the victim as tempting them somehow? Or, in the opposite case, when they do not make those vows, where it is simply the power-over relationship?

Pooler: Yes, that is a great question. I have a simple answer. There is no difference. Whether the person is making a vow of celibacy or chastity or whatever, the fact remains that there is more power given and offered to a leader in any church system, especially where males are elevated, or women are potentially excluded from ministry. However, whether or not someone has made those vows does not change the dynamics of how it happens or a claim of it being consensual or "I was tempted." Again, I have already talked about the complexity of consent. The fact is, even if there were a woman who was flirtatious and attempting to tempt someone—and I am not here to say that this could never happen or does not ever happen—at the end of the day, the professional with the power, which people are trusting in a congregation, is the one responsible for navigating that relationship and keeping everyone safe and protected. So, to allow oneself to be tempted—I will say it this way: If I, as a social worker, were to allow myself to be tempted, if you will, that is not even the right word.

I will go beyond the word "tempted." If I were to be sexual with a client and I claimed I was tempted or that the client was the initiator or the instigator, it would still be sexual misconduct. My license would be sanctioned. In other words, it is always my job. My job as a helper is to meet someone where they are, to assess where they are, and to assess their needs and what it will take to keep them safe. Then, I make that referral if whatever they need is beyond what I can do.

Unfortunately, there is no universal training on assessing boundaries and the formal education process regarding ministry. In other words, ministry lags way behind on complex, nuanced conversations around power, sex, consent, and boundaries, whereas the secular helping professions are way ahead on that. That is not to say that sexual misconduct does not happen in other professions—it certainly does. However, systems are in place to deal with that in a regulated profession.

Of course, the ministry is not externally regulated by the minister's denomination. Currently, in 13 states plus the District of Columbia, it is illegal to be sexual with someone in your congregation explicitly because of that power differential and the complexity around consent. So you get the sense that there is movement in the right direction and awareness is growing, but we still have a long way to go.

Jacobsen: Another item that came up—I am not a biblical scholar, obviously, so I looked it up. I noticed this in listening to a lot of very conservative, even far-right conspiratorial pastors and preachers. Most of them come from the United States, as my reviews show. I listen to them a lot because I want to hear what other people think, which is very different from my view of the world. One of the individuals who pops up is the [former pastor](#), Mark Driscoll, of [Mars Hill Church](#). There was a scandal based on some preaching he did. He collapsed that church and then moved from Seattle to [Arizona with Trinity Church](#). Now, he is focused on rallying young men because they see the church as too feminized. He is preaching against the "[Jezebel spirit](#)" in the church. This is the part I had to look up. [The Jezebel spirit is referenced in 1 Kings, 2 Kings, Leviticus, and Revelation](#). Does this accusation come up? What does it mean?

Pooler: Yes, man. That is a great question. I would not call myself an amateur theologian, but I study people in theological environments. I study and understand, or say it this way: some underlying theology becomes apparent when I look at and research this. In its broadest sense, the Jezebel spirit claims to disempower women. It amplifies and elevates the voices of men in a patriarchal structure. So, men's voices and capacities are elevated, while women are seen as underminers, temptresses, or interested in bringing down the church. Whenever you have a theology or a leader talking about those things, what I see at the largest level is a diminishment of women and an amplification of men.

Moreover, that is part of the system that creates this abuse. When I do talk about this, I talk about gender dualism. We have had gender dualism from the inception of the church. Men have strong minds, and women are weak and emotional—all these kinds of things that are false. It is a false dualism that often feeds into traditional gender roles, but it also creates an environment in which people have to function. They then perpetuate that environment.

When I hear much talk about the Jezebel spirit and that kind of thing, it deeply concerns me because it focuses on women as problematic. A specific gender is seen as the problem and embodies the problem in a certain way. It is easy to blame a woman when that talk and conversation are more prevalent. So that is my take on that. I cannot say for certain what the Jezebel spirit entails. We sometimes throw the word around without unpacking what the original text and authors were trying to communicate when they brought that up. This one is more in the public consciousness because I did not have to look it up.

Jacobsen: It is another form—again, I am biased. I am a humanist and tend to be more naturalistic in my orientation. So those are my biases, naturally. However, another supernaturalistic excuse, in my view, that comes up is the common phrase, "The devil made me do it" or "A demon made me do it." Does that come up? Even though they may have lusted themselves, another being with supernatural demonic powers made them do this act and be tempted to do it. Therefore, it is not their fault, or at least not wholly their fault.

Pooler: Yes. I recall a few anecdotes from my research where the offending pastor used that as an excuse and quickly shifted to God and God's forgiveness, love, and ability to carry them through this. So, if that makes sense, what it did, though, I think it diffuses and almost gaslights the person being victimized by offloading a lot of the responsibility onto the devil and then presenting the solution as God. It takes the human elements of this—the sense of agency and power that the offending pastor uses—and says, "Do not look at that." It is almost like *The Wizard of Oz*—this other being the devil. And then God's love and forgiveness are at play.

When you pull the curtain back, you see a coercive, manipulative pastor who is narcissistic in many cases and has been targeting someone to be sexual with. However, they take all that attention off of themselves through that very thing: "The devil made me do it." However, that is the lesser piece of it. That becomes the vehicle to pivot to God's love and understanding: "Maybe this is not what God has for us, but God will forgive us. Let us focus on that." It is a way to keep being sexual with someone and not stop the inappropriate behaviour. So those are some of the things I have seen.

Jacobsen: Mark Driscoll has used the case before. His reemergence is a traditional Christian story of redemption. Does that narrative allow misbehaving clergy to pop back up within the community consciousness in some instances?

Pooler: Absolutely. This is where it gets complicated because, of course, we want there to be redemption stories, stories of a life resurrected and restored, and those kinds of things. Blaming women becomes a false redemption: "She was the one who made me do it. I have now worked on my issues and why I was tempted, and I will not let this happen again, and I am coming back to ministry." We see that a lot. My response is that we must do a much deeper dive into what restoration, redemption, and healing look like. When is someone truly restored?

Someone once asked me if someone who ever offends in this way should even be allowed to minister again. As a researcher looking at this and the damage done, I would say no because you have shown yourself untrustworthy. When you sexually abuse someone who has trusted you, you have lost the ability to have people's trust again, at least on that large scale, to be entrusted again. The other challenge, for example, with a Mark Driscoll story, is that you have got someone who is a self-appointed leader. He is not part of any system or structure holding him accountable.

He left one system or structure he had created, which tried to hold him accountable. He exited and found another, bringing that back to life. So, there is no real accountability, and no one is looking at everything that's going on with him to ensure he is ready to lead a church again. Unfortunately, that is a very common narrative. People will leave one denomination, go to another after offending in the Baptist church, and then become Methodist or Presbyterian or move to another state where their actions are not a crime.

That is clever. There are so many ways to keep going as a leader in Christianity. What worries me the most is that we, the congregants, the participants in religious life, allow this to occur. Somehow, so many of us are okay with it; that is one of the things that scares me. Why are we unwilling to hold our leaders accountable, ask them hard questions, and ensure that someone can

return to ministry? Alternatively, saying, "Hey, we know you have done X, Y, and Z. We will not hire you to be our pastor. We are not going to allow someone to be our pastor."

In denominations with a more top-down hierarchy, why are bishops and other high-level administrators reappointing a pastor after being offended? That is a whole other set of questions, but it is all part and parcel of a system that short-circuits important questions about how and why this occurred. Just because someone says, "I am ready to pastor again," or "I am right with God again," how do we ensure that? It is very, very complicated and not easy.

Jacobsen: Last question. What about the distinction between the system and bad apples and the survivor's forgiveness of the abuser?

Pooler: Yes.

Jacobsen: As Dorothy Small told me, these clergy are sick and have committed these crimes. So, separating them from the clergy as a class and dealing with it as forgiving but not forgetting is a very mature and subtle point she made to Hermina and me.

Pooler: People ask and go back and forth, and there is even a paper written by a couple of academics at a Jesuit university that said it is not just bad apples. In other words, we have a system in which clericalism is present, which elevates our leaders and disempowers congregants. It is in that system that we are creating situations where people, as they gain more and more power, almost become Frankenstein monsters who then harm and injure us. I do think we have some systematic structural problems, and I would say that churches have always had these issues.

Any world religion with an elevated leader can have problems with clericalism. One question is whether this model works. I would say we are getting some concrete evidence that systems in which clericalism is present create and amplify the risk of harm and abuse by someone with more power. I have started to see a term in the literature.

It is called "vulnerance." It is about the complicated factors at play when someone has power and thus has more capacity to harm because of that power. So, I would say many of our pastors have enormous vulnerance. In other words, they have way more capacity to injure than the average person; part of it is our systems creating that.

We need to take a look at that. Lastly, forgiveness this way, putting on my clinician hat: forgiveness should never be pushed by an institution, should never be pushed by a leader, and should never be demanded. I have seen forgiveness used to bypass all this hard work: "Do not hold me accountable. Do not do that. Forgive me, and let us move on."

We need always to remember. Whether or not an individual or a congregation can forgive is this: It is hard work. It is multilayered. What I have looked at, as far as trauma and people who have been traumatized working on forgiveness, is an onion. As you heal from your trauma, you face deeper elements and can name with clarity the injury that's happened. You feel more pain.

Once you find that intersection, another layer of forgiveness is needed. *Forgiveness* is an ongoing, long process that always needs to be finished. It is not something you do and then it is done. Boom. We need to have more complex conversations about forgiveness. I have even had

some survivors say, "I do not know how to forgive, and I do not think I can forgive." Moreover, I say, "Yes, that is okay. It is okay."

It is okay not to know how to forgive when an injury this deep has occurred or even to say, "I cannot do it. I cannot forgive." We need to find forgiveness and empower people with the injury, with the tools to figure out what that will look like, rather than an institution or a theological statement telling people they need to do it.

Jacobsen: Thank you so much for your time today.

Pooler: All right. Good deal. Take care.

Irene Deschênes on Outrage Canada

Irene Deschênes is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse by a roman catholic priest. Irene went to the diocese of London (Ontario) in 1992, and Irene and the diocese engaged in litigation shortly thereafter. Almost 30 years later, Irene received a settlement from the diocese of London in 2021. Irene is a staunch advocate and activist for survivors of clergy sexual abuse. She has worked in social services for most of her adult career, supporting marginalized populations for decades. When yet another case of sexual assault by roman catholic priests comes to light, Irene is known to ask, “Where’s the Outrage?” Irene hopes that those outraged by catholic employees engaging in illicit activities will ask the same question, and that Canadians will be spurred to action. Irene invites all Canadians to be outraged and to use this energy for change in a long-standing institution that has engaged in deceitful acts for centuries.

Outrage Canada is a national, non-religious coalition of outraged Canadians that hold the Roman Catholic church of Canada accountable for ongoing crimes and advocates for all victims of Catholic clergy.

We are committed to ensuring justice for victims, the safety of all children and the prevention of abuse by the Roman Catholic church.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We are here with Irene Deschênes. I've been conducting interviews with several people, mostly women who have come forward as victims of clergy-related abuse, primarily within Orthodoxy, as much of the focus has been on the Catholic Church. Could you share your experience, including your denomination? And to clarify, this is happening in Canada rather than the United States, correct?

Irene Deschênes: Yes. I grew up Roman Catholic and was baptized at a very young age. My parents were immigrants who came to Canada in 1959, married, and I am the second oldest of five children. We had a very religious household, attended church every Sunday without fail, and observed all the special times during the church calendar year. I went to a Catholic school and then a Catholic high school got married to a nice Catholic boy and had two children. Would you like me to talk about my memory recovery now?

Jacobsen: Yes.

Deschênes: Okay. My children attended a French first language school because my ex-husband is Francophone. We both wanted them to be raised bilingually, so they went to a French school.

When my daughter was preparing for her First Communion, she would make it with her classmates, and the mass would be in French. However, since my parents didn't speak French, we decided she would make her First Communion in English so my parents could attend and understand the service. The priest said he would need to talk to my daughter first to ensure she was ready to make her First Communion. So, I took my daughter to meet with the priest, and he chatted with us for a while. Then, during the conversation, he asked if he could speak with my daughter alone.

I said, “No.” I was aghast because I had always been a good Catholic girl and had never said, “No,” to a priest. Here I was in my thirties, saying, “No,” to a priest. That was unsettling, and I

didn't understand why I reacted that way. Nonetheless, my daughter ended up making her First Communion in English.

I was a stay-at-home mom, so we had a typical summer, doing activities with the children, taking them places, and helping them make memories. Then, in September, for the first time, both my kids were in school every day. After dropping them off at the bus stop and returning home, I sat in my living room and started crying uncontrollably. I didn't know why I was crying or what was happening. Suddenly, a flash of memory overwhelmed me, and I remembered everything the priest had done to me.

I cried and cried, convinced that I was going crazy because there was no way a priest would do that to a little girl. I should talk to a priest about what was happening because, growing up, that's what I was taught—to go to your parish priest with any problems or concerns. So, I found the old phone book and started making calls, but I couldn't reach a priest because they're off work on Mondays since they work on Sundays.

Finally, someone told me, "You need to call the chair of the sexual abuse committee." I was shocked—there was a sexual abuse committee? How could there be a sexual abuse committee if I was the only one? This was before the Internet, so I truly believed I was the only person whom a Roman Catholic priest had sexually assaulted as a child. I spoke with Father Richard Tremblay, and he asked if I wanted to come in and talk. I said yes.

He invited me to a meeting, so I went to the church, sat in the rectory, and he was there, wearing his collar.

It mimicked the experience I had as a little girl of being sexually assaulted in a rectory by a priest who had his collar on. So, I sat there in the chair and made myself small. I gathered my coat up against my body. Then he asked me the priest's name, and I said I couldn't say it. I couldn't say it because this priest had also performed my wedding ceremony.

So, there's that, and I had known him since I was nine years old. That's quite a history with someone you think you can trust. So, I couldn't say his name, and he said, "We want to make sure he's not still harming little girls." I shook my head, and he said, "Could you tell me what city it happened in?" And I said, "Chatham. It's Chatham, Ontario." He said, "Was it Father Sylvestre?" And I thought they know. They knew.

It's him. He's got a history. He's done it before. They're going to take care of me. They will be kind, help me get into counselling, and be there. But the exact opposite happened. They did pay for counselling for me for two years, but I'm still in counselling off and on. Every once in a while, I need a tune-up, Because the impact is lifelong.

It's not something that two years of counselling will help you completely work through. It's a lifelong process—not core recovery but ongoing maintenance, a common experience among those whom priests have abused. Yes, I would say it's common. Still, some mitigating factors include having family support and receiving adequate counselling in the early years to help work through some of the issues. So, it depends on how quickly you can work through those issues and the level of support one has that makes a difference.

In the early 1990s, I felt there weren't any therapists I could find to help unpack that extra layer. Being sexually assaulted as a child is devastating enough, but when it comes from a church leader, there's another level to it that needs to be unpacked. Therapists weren't trained in the early 1990s to do that. I found that it wasn't helpful because the spiritual abuse also needed to be addressed, and there wasn't training for that in those days. So, that was difficult for me.

I didn't have any family support or supportive friends at that time. So, in the early years, it was very hard for me, and I sank into a deep depression because I couldn't find other survivors or anyone else who truly understood what I was going through. That made it more difficult for me. When survivors come forward today, they probably find it easier because it's been in the news so much. With the advent of the Internet, much more information exists. Survivors can find help more easily these days than 30 years ago.

Jacobsen: What about recovery resources? You have an email address on the Outrage Canada website. What do survivors of this abuse need at different stages of their recovery process so they can go back into something like a reintegrated life, being successful and being themselves? What do people need regarding resources—not just to report it, watch a documentary, or read a book, but to get the proper support so they can transition back into a culture where they can be their authentic selves? I don't mean success in having a family, children, a high-powered job, or an education. They still feel comfortable in their skin, living however they choose to live in a free society. The church is part of a community.

Deschênes: I wish I had the cookbook to hand it to folks and say, "Follow these steps. Mix in a little bit of this and a little bit of that." It's different for everybody, but for sure, people need to be able to surround themselves with personal and professional support first and foremost. That helps quite a bit.

That's what many people gravitate to, especially in their later years when they join the church—to have that sense of community. I didn't have that. I lost it when I came forward. People in the church didn't gather around me, put their arms around me, and say, "Irene, we'll help you through this." Nobody contacted me from the church. When I left the church, I was all alone. I had lost that community. Community is important. It's one of our basic needs.

On Maslow's hierarchy of needs a sense of belonging is one of our basic needs. So, in probably 1993 or 1994, I was watching the Phil Donahue show. One of his guests was Barbara Blaine, and she was the first survivor I ever met.

She was from Chicago, and her phone number came up on the screen at the end of the show, and I called her immediately. She had gone on Phil Donahue and talked about being sexually assaulted by her parish priest. We had long-distance phone call charges back then; she was my lifeline. The only way to communicate with her was by letter or by phone.

So, I did speak with her quite a few times. With other people's permission, she connected me with other people in Ontario, Canada. But many people weren't coming forward then, and they weren't telling anyone, so it was hard to find other survivors. I remember going to my first SNAP conference, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, in Chicago in the early 1990s and meeting other survivors. It was a huge sense of relief.

Not being alone—that's a huge burden to carry alone. So, that was my community for some time. Then I went through the civil suit process, and the diocese gave me some money.

It was attached to a gag order. So, I wrote to the bishop, saying, "I need to be released from this gag order. It's keeping me sick. I'm keeping a secret that's not mine to keep." So, the Diocese of London did release me from my gag order, and the media at the time reported that I was the first person in Canada to be released from a gag order by the church.

Jacobsen: So, after that—after you were released from the gag order—you found out that Phil Donahue is, in fact, alive at 88?

Deschênes: Yes. I'll have to contact him and thank him. He has no idea how much he's helped me. After I was released from my gag order, I thought the gag order said I couldn't tell anyone anything, which was my mistake. It was a rough time, a rough period for me when I had this civil suit hanging over my head. But after I got released from the gag order, I went to the police in Chatham, Ontario, which is where the abuse happened, and I reported him.

So they started a criminal investigation. That's when almost 50 women came forward. Father Charles Sylvestre was pegged as the most notorious pedophile in all of Canada. He denied everything and said they put us up to it. Then, he started preaching with a little Bible or book at one court appearance. He was preaching to us, and we all said, "Oh my God."

Anyway, he was sentenced to three years, and then he died a couple of months later in prison. During the criminal trial, I told my lawyer that suddenly, the diocese said they had this police report from 1962—a police report from 1962! I was born in 1961, and they have this police report. These three little girls from Sarnia, Ontario, reported to the police, and suddenly, this police report came out of nowhere.

So, I told my lawyer, "I want to reopen my civil suit because they kept denying and saying, 'We didn't know anything about Charlie. Good old Charlie? We didn't hear a thing about him.'" But they have known since 1962. I'm reopening my civil suit. She said, "You better find yourself a contract lawyer." So, I got myself a lawyer in Toronto. I said to her, "Can you take my case?" And she said, "We'll have a look at it." She's in a big law firm.

So she said, "We'll have a look at it." I told her, "I just came out of a civil suit and a criminal trial. I'm exhausted. I need to move forward with my life."

"If you need me, call me. Otherwise, do what you need to do," I said because I was so invested in the first civil suit. I was exhausted and said, "I can't do this again. You do what you need to do and get back to me."

So, ten years later—ten years later—she called me. "We're going to court on Friday." I was like, "What?" So she had been doing whatever she needed in the background, getting all the legal paperwork and mumbo jumbo in order, talking to the diocese, and having all these conversations with their lawyers. So, we went to the court in London, Ontario, and the judge said, yes, I could reopen my civil suit. That was a victory.

Then, the diocese told the media that they were appealing that decision. So the media called me and said, "What do you think of the diocese of London appealing the judge's decision?" I thought it cruel they would tell the media before having the courtesy of contacting my lawyer!

They couldn't call my lawyer to inform them of the appeal. They had to call the media so the media could call me. That isn't kind.

Jacobsen: Just so people are aware, two points of contact. This one, the first one, is short. How long had you been in legal proceedings?

Deschênes: 30 years.

Jacobsen: Second part. I listen to a lot of fundamentalist preachers and extreme political people because I already know my orientation. So, I want to know what the other side says about these different things. I listen to them. They will say things like "the Jezebel spirit." What are the biblical and non-biblical insults and epithets thrown at you while pursuing this line of justice? I wouldn't even say against the church. It's for the church because it's in the church's best interest to weed out the bad clergy and not have the good clergy, who do community service and commit their lives to that, be blanketed with that at the same time in a way.

Deschênes: Yes. I'm doing this for the church, but they'll never eliminate their brothers in Christ. That's the pact. They'll never do it. A few might be whistleblowers, but they're out of there. They don't want those guys around.

That's why the good priests don't say, "Irene, what happened to you was wrong. It should never have happened. This is what I'm going to do to help you work through this." Never—no nun, priest, or anyone else in the church ever said that to me. Not even a congregant.

So, not even a peer, let alone starting at the bishop on up to the pope. I'm still waiting for that call. He's got my number. I gave it to him. There might be good priests in there, but I have yet to meet them. They have never used biblical terms against me. They never publicly said that, and they never privately said that because they have never contacted me.

They went through my lawyer whenever they wanted to message me or say anything. Nobody from the church contacted me in those 30 years. So, no, I didn't get called Jezebel or anything like that.

It started when I was ten years old. A little weird. Father Sylvestre did say something about those girls with their short skirts sitting on his lap: little girls, little 10-year-old Catholic girls in the sixties, and they wore dresses. Then, sticking out our pink tongues at him when he went to give us communion—he's the one that sexualized all our very normal activities. At ten years old, I didn't even know what the fuck sex was.

I didn't know what it was at 12. I don't think I fully understood even in high school when they started to talk to us about it. This is a bit of a side point.

Jacobsen: The sexual education kids received in the sixties, seventies, and eighties was not exactly comprehensive or realistic. So, let's continue. You're going through a storm of legal proceedings. What else happens?

Deschênes: So, they appealed that. We went to the Ontario Court of Appeal in Toronto. Both lawyers presented their sides, yada yada. Then, the judges for the Ontario Court of Appeal took months to make their decision. So, you wait again and then they make that decision. They said, "Yes, I can reopen my civil suit." Then, the diocese's lawyers appealed to the Supreme Court of Canada. So, I created this group called the Justice for Irene Network, and our message was "Settle with Irene; She's Tired."

We would say the church has the right to appeal. But is that the right thing to do? Yes, they had the right to appeal. But anyway, they appealed to the Supreme Court of Canada. That took weeks or months. My lawyer and their lawyers—right, my one lawyer and their three lawyers—went to the Supreme Court of Canada to make their case, and then we waited for the judge's decision again. Then the judge said, yes, I can reopen my civil suit. So, I won at the highest level of court in Canada.

So, I asked my lawyer, "What's next?" She said, "We can go to trial, or we can go to mediation." When folks go to trial, you typically prepare for trial. Still, the trial isn't scheduled for 18 months, or however long, so you'd have to wait again. Inevitably, what they do is settle the day before the trial starts. So after all those anxious months and weeks of waiting and preparing for trial, the day before, they offer to settle out of court.

I said to my lawyer, "Let's go to mediation." This was during COVID, so we were on a Zoom call. This gentleman comes on my screen and says, "Hi, Irene. Nice to see you again." It was the same mediator from the first civil suit 20 years earlier. So, we started at 10 a.m. went until 9:30 at night. Then the church's lawyer said, "We'll pick up again tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock." So, I had to try to sleep that night, wondering what was going to happen.

Then, around 10:30 in the morning, my lawyer called me and said, "They've accepted our last offer." They wanted me to have one more sleepless night instead of settling right then and there. So that was it—I was done that day. I was 60, and I got my settlement. I publicly thanked them for paying me for all my years of activism and advocacy for other victims.

"Thank you for paying me for the work I've done over the last 30 years," I said, and I promptly retired. Yes, I might be a little tired—very tired. Then, the Justice for Irene group we created to encourage them to do the right thing morphed into Outrage Canada.

We were only incorporated last year, so we're pretty new. We're having our first AGM on September 28th. Several survivors contacted us after we circulated the press release announcing our new organization. Typically, they email us so that I could schedule a Zoom call with them. I would have a one-on-one conversation to see where they're at, what further support they might need, or any direction or words of wisdom I might provide.

After doing this for 30 years, I'm a bit of an expert in the field. Plus, I worked in social services for most of my adult life. My last job was as a residential counsellor at a women's shelter, so I have some experience in that realm. When people contact me, we will do a Zoom call like this.

It would be about two hours long. "Are you good?" "Yes." "Are you good?" "Yes." "Reach out again if you ever need to talk." Some contact me occasionally, and others I have not heard from again.

Jacobsen: I did notice you collaborated with Patricia Grell. I'm aware of her because we interviewed in 2017.

Deschênes: I know what you interviewed about—the school board.

Jacobsen: Correct. I will quote if I indulge. [So, in that original interview with Patricia Grell, BSc, MDiv, quoting Grell:](#)

9. *Jacobsen: How did you find yourself where you are now in terms of the relationship with the school board or system?*

Grell: *I would say it all started by taking a degree in theology from St. Michael's College, Toronto School of Theology. I am eternally grateful to my professors because they taught me that I didn't have to put my intellect on hold to have a faith in Jesus and follow Jesus. St. Michael's College took a historical-critical approach to the Bible, not a literal approach, and an intellectual 'faith seeking understanding' approach.*

So I came out of university with an intellectual understanding of my faith. I brought a deep understanding of the historical Jesus and his message everywhere I went. I worked as a Pastoral Associate in a parish in Timmins, as a Program Coordinator in a retreat center and then as a Catholic school trustee. Each place I worked, I got a glimpse into the Catholic Church behind the scenes and I became more and more scandalized. [Laughing]. I was scandalized because deep down I had this understanding of the Gospel that was very rooted in the historical Jesus. And then I would see nuns, priests and so-called devout Catholics not living at all according to the Gospel.

I heard, for example, the archbishop's representative state to the Board that perhaps Catholic schools are not the place for transgender students. I saw the school district with the support of the archbishop, deny a transgender girl access to the girls' washroom, insisting she uses the gender-neutral washroom on the other side of the school. I saw the resistance by the church to allow GSAs. All these things led me to conclude that the church had lost its way.

I think working in the school district was the 'watershed moment,' where I realized that "Wow! This is a social club. This is not a faith." These people act as though they belong to a bike club or dance club. They are not together because of their faith in Jesus and his message of love, acceptance, and mercy. Catholicism, I concluded, had become a social club.

I thought this is not where I can be anymore. I can't be here. They're not living what they're talking about. It's all window dressing. That's how it is; it's all window dressing. We'd have signs in our schools, for example, that state 'Christ is the reason for this school' and then we'd go on our merry way and do things that totally contradicted this.

For example, we have an academic high school that requires students to get a 75% average in grade 9 in order to be accepted. If a Catholic student who lives near this school misses the mark by even 1%, they are not admitted. This student then can't attend high school with their friends and must travel outside their community because the

district can't make any exceptions for fear of lowering the standards of the school. To add insult to injury, the academic school will offer any vacant spots to non-Catholic students who do achieve the required average. The lack of compassion and mercy in the interest of competitiveness seems to fly in the face of "Christ is the reason for this school".

Another example is the denial of attendance at grad ceremonies if students don't complete the required amount of the religion curriculum by a particular date. The School Act in Alberta does not require completion of religion credits in order to earn a high school diploma. The district then uses attendance at grad ceremonies as the carrot to ensure students complete their religion credits. It seems odd to me to use coercion as a way to encourage students to learn about Jesus.

I would think that if our Catholic schools were teaching by example, and living according to the Gospel then we wouldn't have to coerce anybody to take religion; students would want to take religion. They would want to learn about this rebel named Jesus. Teenagers are rebellious anyway! [Laughing]. I think they would really think he's pretty cool if they could learn about who he was and what he stood for. You don't have to coerce someone by saying you must take this or we're not going to let you come to grad. What kind of example is that? What are we trying to do here?" One of the moms who had a son in high school last year and was concerned about this grad rule, said, "Geez, with the legacy of residential schools, you would think that they wouldn't be interested in coercing people to take religion through Catholic schools."

These are publicly funded schools. I'd rather try to invite kids to be interested in the faith by our example of love and compassion rather than coercion. We can invite students to learn about our faith by being merciful people. Students will be attracted to that [Laughing]. So that's the kind of stuff – that really...I just was disappointed, I was heartbroken... literally heartbroken to see people acting this way in the name of Christ [Sobbing] I'm sorry.

10. Jacobsen: *It's okay.*

Grell: *[Sobbing/weeping] I guess...I'm still grieving.*

11. Jacobsen: *It's okay. Take the time you need.*

Grell: *It really upset me that we had schools for elite students. Parents came to a Board meeting when I put forward a motion to request the district make exceptions for Catholic students, to show some mercy and these parents said: "We want our kids to get ready for this competitive world." I thought, "That isn't what I thought Christianity or Catholicism was about," competition.*

Anyway, it's really broken my heart. I'm an honest person. I couldn't run again to be a Catholic trustee, I might run one day to be a public-school trustee, but I couldn't in good conscience put my name on that ballot and say, "Yeah, I'm a Catholic school trustee. I want to be a Catholic school trustee."

No, I don't want anything to do with this Catholic Church; if Catholic means being like this, sorry, not interested. That's not what I learned about and learned what Jesus was about at all. So, I must distance myself. Anyway, sorry I got emotional. I guess I didn't realize I was still this upset. But we're not then I heard that priest say that our Catholic schools were not for transgender kids, I thought, "That's it. That's the last straw." If that's what they're about, I am NOT interested in this church.

I have invested a lot of my life in the Catholic Church; I spent a lot of money on my education. Fifty thousand dollars to get a MDiv. We used to pray for laypeople to come forward in service to the Church. Then I noticed they stopped praying for that. They started praying again for more vocations to religious life and more priests. I remember I saw this shift happening around 1992. Prior to this, there was a great push to have more lay people educated in theology so they could take leadership roles in the church. But that approach seems to have fallen by the wayside.

I have spoken with other women, who have left the church and I agree with them when they say: "I didn't leave the church, the church left me".

So, I'm aware of several stories of women who have come forward within religious traditions in Canada and understand the difficulties they have to go through in the limelight. Some men do that, too, but the women's cases are talked about a little less. So that's the thing. It's more to highlights like that and your own.

You're taking on a juggernaut. If you run the lines of best fit, only about half or a little less than half of the population are Christians today. So they've owned the country for about 150 years, approximately. So, I commend her and you for the work that you're doing.

So, you got paid out. What's the follow-up?

Deschênes: To backtrack, I heard Patricia Grell on CBC Radio. I thought that woman would be on my team, and she was. That's how it goes.

Jacobsen: That's how it goes. I hope to do that with interviews like this and people who read them. Don't fuck up.

Deschênes: Anyway, so, now that I have the financial means, I can start this organization, pay for the website, and pay to have assistance. Do you know Murray Foster?

Jacobsen: No.

Deschênes: He's from the Great Big Sea. I paid him to write an anthem for us. It's called Justice is Coming. Check it out at www.outragecanada.ca.

Jacobsen: He sounds like Dan Barker from the Freedom From Religion Foundation. He makes jingles. He's a former evangelical preacher and musician.

Deschênes: I have heard of him. This has been great, Scott. Thank you.

Jacobsen: Thank you so much.

Bojan Jovanović (w/ Damir Katulić): Survivor Advocacy, Serbian Orthodoxy

Bojan Jovanović is a Father in the Serbian Orthodox Church, and **Damir Katulić** is the president of the Association of Christians of Croatia.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Thank you for your patience with me, and for taking the time for this interview today. Often, the media stories on the Catholic Church garner more attention and notoriety. Orthodoxy seems less affected in the public sphere. I do not want to stereotype or portray this inaccurately or unfairly, as the subject matter arouses many emotions and instincts at tension with one another, because of the seriousness of the allegations and the severity of the consequences for churches, communities, priests, and laity: defensiveness, retribution, fear, pity, pain, regret, anger, betrayal, shame, sadness, disillusionment, guilt, helplessness, maybe hope. As my knowledge and experience grows on this topic, I want to relay experiences and views with sensitivity, but with forthrightness, given the deep impact on people's lives. I will fail at this, but I will continue to aim for this mark in this work. In prior writing, my bias would have been more oriented towards a bias of directed blame against abusive acts within religious institutions without proposal of, or search for, realistic and concrete constructive solutions. Looking back at my younger self, the former emotions in empathy with the experiences of others in pain seems legitimate, while not directing these energies to appropriate formal and grassroots fairness and justice movements was a gap, a failing. I come from the intellectual backgrounds of several non-religious traditions locally and internationally, which colours, therefore potentially biases, the qualitative research into these areas. How have you observed clergy-related abuse manifesting at the local level within the Serbian Orthodox Church?

Bojan Jovanović: Clergy-related abuse within the Serbian Orthodox Church has been observed in several ways at the local level. Reports often include:

1. Sexual Abuse Allegations: Instances of sexual misconduct by clergy members have emerged, leading to a lack of trust among congregants.
2. Financial Mismanagement: Abuse of power related to financial resources, such as misappropriation of donations or misuse of church funds.
3. Spiritual Abuse: Manipulation of parishioners' faith for personal gain, including coercive practices and control over congregants' personal lives.
4. Lack of Accountability: Inadequate responses to complaints, with some cases being covered up or not addressed properly, causing further harm to victims.
5. Community Division: Conflicts within congregations often arise as a result of these abuses, leading to factions and loss of community cohesion.

Efforts to address these issues vary, but many advocate for greater transparency and accountability within the church structure.

Jacobsen: How do the local and national contexts both reflect and differentiate from one another?

Jovanović: The local and national contexts within the Serbian Orthodox Church reflect and differentiate from one another in several key ways:

Reflection:

1. **Cultural Traditions:** Both levels share deep-rooted cultural and religious traditions that shape practices and beliefs. Local communities often preserve specific customs that align with national church teachings.
2. **Hierarchical Structure:** The local parishes operate under the broader national church hierarchy, maintaining a unified doctrinal stance and organizational framework.
3. **Shared Challenges:** Issues like clergy misconduct or financial mismanagement are often seen at both local and national levels, prompting similar responses or initiatives for reform.

Differentiation:

1. **Local Dynamics:** Local communities may have unique social, economic, and political conditions that influence their practices and responses to issues. For instance, rural parishes may prioritize different concerns than urban ones.
2. **Response to Issues:** Local leadership may handle allegations or community conflicts in ways that differ from national policies, leading to varied levels of accountability and transparency.
3. **Engagement with Community:** Local churches often have closer relationships with their congregants, which can affect how they address community needs and concerns, diverging from the more formal, national approach.
4. **Diverse Opinions:** While the national church may present a unified front, local congregations can have diverse opinions on theological and social issues, leading to potential tensions between local practices and national directives.

In summary, while the local and national contexts of the Serbian Orthodox Church are interconnected, they also exhibit distinct characteristics shaped by their specific environments and community needs.

Jacobsen: What are the challenges to communities in Serbia when addressing abuse allegations against clergy members?

Jovanović: Communities in Serbia face several challenges when addressing abuse allegations against clergy members:

1. **Cultural Stigma:** There is a strong cultural reverence for clergy, making it difficult for victims to come forward due to fear of backlash or disbelief from the community.
2. **Lack of Support Systems:** Many communities lack adequate support services for victims, such as counseling or legal assistance, which can deter reporting.

3. **Hierarchy and Authority:** The hierarchical structure of the church can lead to conflicts of interest, where local leaders may protect clergy members rather than address allegations appropriately.
4. **Fear of Isolation:** Victims may fear social isolation or ostracism from their community if they speak out against a beloved figure, which can perpetuate silence.
5. **Inadequate Church Response:** The national church's slow or insufficient responses to allegations can undermine trust and discourage communities from taking action.
6. **Legal and Institutional Barriers:** Navigating legal processes can be complex, and there may be a lack of clear mechanisms for reporting abuse within the church.
7. **Historical Context:** Past experiences with authority and distrust in institutions can lead to skepticism about the efficacy of reporting mechanisms.

These challenges can create an environment where abuse remains unaddressed, further complicating the path to justice for victims.

Jacobsen: How does the Serbian Orthodox Church's approach to handling abuse cases compare with other national religious institutions in the region?

Jovanović: The Serbian Orthodox Church's approach to handling abuse cases has several distinctive features when compared to other national religious institutions in the region:

Similarities:

1. **Hierarchical Structures:** Like many religious institutions in the region, the Serbian Orthodox Church operates under a hierarchical structure that can complicate accountability and transparency.
2. **Cultural Sensitivity:** Many religious organizations in the region grapple with cultural stigmas surrounding abuse, which can lead to reluctance in reporting and addressing allegations.
3. **Community Relations:** Similar to other institutions, local communities often prioritize maintaining their relationships with clergy, leading to underreporting of abuse cases.

Differences:

1. **Public Response:** The Serbian Orthodox Church has faced criticism for its slow or inadequate response to allegations, while some other religious institutions may have adopted more proactive measures, including public apologies and commitments to reform.
2. **Institutional Reform:** Other religious organizations in the region may have established clearer protocols for handling abuse cases, such as independent review boards or mandatory reporting policies, which the Serbian Orthodox Church has been slower to implement.
3. **Victim Support:** Some institutions have developed robust support systems for victims, including counseling and advocacy services, which may not be as developed within the Serbian Orthodox Church.

4. **Engagement with Authorities:** The willingness to collaborate with civil authorities can vary. Some religious institutions may have more established partnerships with law enforcement, while the Serbian Orthodox Church has historically been more insular in handling cases internally.

Conclusion:

Overall, while there are some common challenges across religious institutions in the region, the Serbian Orthodox Church's approach to abuse allegations can differ significantly in terms of responsiveness, victim support, and institutional reform. These differences can impact the effectiveness of addressing abuse and fostering trust within communities.

Jacobsen: Can you discuss the impact of clergy-related abuse scandals on public trust in religious institutions in Serbia and neighboring countries?

Jovanović: Clergy-related abuse scandals have significantly impacted public trust in religious institutions in Serbia and neighboring countries in several ways:

Erosion of Trust

1. **Loss of Credibility:** Scandals undermine the perceived integrity of religious leaders, leading to a general loss of credibility for the institutions they represent. Many congregants begin to question the moral authority of their religious leaders.
2. **Disillusionment Among Faithful:** Long-standing members may feel betrayed, causing disillusionment with the church and a decline in regular attendance or participation in religious activities.
3. **Increased Skepticism:** Communities may become more skeptical of religious teachings and practices, particularly regarding ethical behavior and accountability within the church.

Community Division

1. **Polarization:** Scandals can create divisions within communities, with some members defending the clergy and others calling for accountability and reform. This polarization can weaken community cohesion.
2. **Fear of Reporting:** Victims may feel discouraged from coming forward due to a perceived lack of support or fear of ostracism, further perpetuating a culture of silence.

Social and Political Repercussions

1. **Demand for Reform:** Increased awareness of abuse scandals often leads to calls for institutional reform, including better oversight mechanisms and clearer reporting procedures for allegations.
2. **Public Discourse:** These scandals can shift public discourse about the role of religion in society, prompting discussions about accountability, transparency, and the need for reform in religious institutions.

Comparative Impact in Neighboring Countries

1. **Similar Trends:** Neighboring countries may experience similar declines in trust, especially if their religious institutions face comparable scandals. The impact can be magnified if media coverage highlights systemic issues.
2. **Cultural Differences:** The degree of impact may vary based on cultural attitudes towards religion and authority. In some regions, religious institutions may retain a strong influence despite scandals, while in others, the trust may decline more sharply.

Conclusion

Overall, clergy-related abuse scandals pose significant challenges to public trust in religious institutions in Serbia and neighboring countries. The fallout from these scandals can lead to lasting changes in how communities perceive and engage with their religious leaders, ultimately influencing the role of religion in society.

Jacobsen: What role does the Serbian government play in either addressing or overlooking clergy-related abuse within Orthodoxy?

Jovanović: The Serbian government plays a complex role in addressing or overlooking clergy-related abuse within the Orthodox Church, characterized by several key factors:

Addressing Abuse

1. **Legal Framework:** The government has established laws that criminalize abuse, including sexual abuse, which can apply to clergy members. These laws create a basis for legal action against offenders.
2. **Cooperation with Authorities:** In some cases, the government has cooperated with law enforcement to investigate allegations against clergy members, especially when public pressure mounts for accountability.
3. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** The government may support initiatives aimed at raising awareness about abuse and promoting rights for victims, although this is often influenced by civil society rather than direct government action.

Overlooking Abuse

1. **Cultural Sensitivity:** The close relationship between the Serbian Orthodox Church and national identity can lead to hesitation in pursuing investigations against clergy, as doing so may be seen as undermining the church's authority.
2. **Political Influence:** Religious leaders often hold significant sway in political matters, which can lead to a reluctance to confront or adequately address allegations against clergy members to maintain political stability and support.
3. **Lack of Accountability:** The government may overlook systemic issues within the church, leading to inadequate responses to abuse allegations. This can be attributed to a desire to avoid conflict with the church and its followers.

4. **Historical Context:** A history of church-state relations may contribute to a tendency to prioritize religious authority over accountability, leading to a culture where allegations are handled internally rather than through formal legal channels.

Conclusion

In summary, the Serbian government's role in addressing or overlooking clergy-related abuse within Orthodoxy is multifaceted. While there are legal mechanisms and instances of cooperation, cultural and political factors often lead to a lack of thorough investigation and accountability, creating a challenging environment for victims seeking justice.

Jacobsen: How have international organizations and the global community responded to allegations of abuse within the Serbian Orthodox Church?

Jovanović: International organizations and the global community have responded to allegations of abuse within the Serbian Orthodox Church in several ways:

Advocacy and Pressure

1. **Human Rights Organizations:** Groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have highlighted cases of abuse and called for accountability, urging the Serbian government and the church to take allegations seriously.
2. **Public Statements:** Various international bodies, including the European Union, have made public statements emphasizing the importance of addressing abuse allegations within religious institutions and ensuring the protection of victims' rights.

Monitoring and Reporting

1. **Regular Monitoring:** International organizations often monitor the situation regarding religious freedoms and abuses within various countries, including Serbia. Reports may include sections on the Serbian Orthodox Church and its handling of abuse cases.
2. **Investigative Reports:** Some organizations produce detailed reports on the state of religious institutions, assessing their responses to abuse allegations and providing recommendations for improvement.

Support for Victims

1. **Resources for Advocacy:** International NGOs sometimes provide resources and training for local advocacy groups to support victims and raise awareness about abuse within religious contexts.
2. **Networking with Local Groups:** International organizations often collaborate with local NGOs and civil society to amplify the voices of victims and push for reforms within the church and the broader society.

Calls for Reform

1. **Institutional Recommendations:** International bodies may call for the Serbian Orthodox Church to adopt more transparent procedures for handling allegations, including independent investigations and better support for victims.

2. **Legal Reforms:** Advocacy for stronger legal frameworks to protect victims and ensure accountability for clergy members may also be a focus, pressuring the government to strengthen its legal stance on abuse.

Challenges

1. **Cultural Sensitivity:** The close ties between the church and national identity can make international advocacy challenging, as local sentiments may resist perceived external interference in religious affairs.
2. **Limited Impact:** The effectiveness of international responses can be limited by the church's internal dynamics and the political context within Serbia, which may prioritize maintaining stability over addressing allegations.

Conclusion

Overall, international organizations and the global community have taken steps to respond to allegations of abuse within the Serbian Orthodox Church, advocating for accountability and reform. However, the interplay of cultural, political, and religious factors can complicate these efforts and affect their outcomes.

Jacobsen: Are there global patterns in how religious institutions handle abuse allegations, and where does the Serbian Orthodox Church fit within this international context? Professor David Pooler in the United States has noted consistencies to me.

Damir Katulić: In principle one can talk about the global patterns of how religious institutions (meaning not just churches pertain to Christian religion but a religion institutions in general) handle abuse allegations. It is almost like the model of 5 stages of grief. The first reaction is usually a denial. But after firm evidence is presented then we are witnessing the anger of the religious institutions, their bargaining with the legal and public domains, and in most cases acceptance in the form of the court settlements. Since institutions can not been depressed, we are lacking this part of the grief model. Anyhow, this process is in direct correlation with the size of the religion's institution; the bigger the institution, the condemnation of the abuse is more rapid and wide.

What is special about Serbian Orthodox Church in this model is that SPC is lacking the universal character of the religion institution, and it is deeply intertwined with the political agenda of the Serbian state. Therefore, the whole process of dealing with the abuse problem is suspended in the step one because the Serbian state doesn't allow that the information of the abuses becomes public and when it against all odds does, state uses its institutions (including the state-controlled media) to suppress it.

This practice makes the handling of the abuse issues in the SPC extremely hard and very often quite dangerous.

Jacobsen: What lessons can be drawn from international cases of clergy-related abuse that might help address these issues within Serbia?

Katulić: To really deal with the issue of clergy-related abuse within the SPC this problem has to become international so that a Serbian state loses its mechanism to suppress it from the public domain. The more countries, non-governmental institutions and publicly acclaimed individuals are aware of this problem and talk about it openly, it would be immensely harder to conceal this issue within the corridors of power in Serbia and SPC as a main perpetrator.

So, the main lesson would be to internationalize the abuse cases that happen within the SPC and then it will be dealt with like the other similar cases in the last couple of decades around the world.

Jacobsen: How does collaboration with regional experts like Mr. Ivan Valek enhance understanding and action against clergy-related abuse in the Balkans?

Katulić: Mr. Ivan Valek is really a well-educated expert in this field that invested decades of his life exploring this topic. His expertise can be really helpful not just because he has a deep understanding of this problem, but he possesses a broad knowledge of a historical concept related to the religion issues in the region of the Balkans. Therefore, whoever would like to expand and enhance its understanding of this topics should, in some form, have a contact and conversation with Mr. Valek.

Jacobsen: What importance does cross-border cooperation hold in effectively tackling clergy-related abuse at both national and regional levels?

Jovanović: Cross-border cooperation is crucial in effectively tackling clergy-related abuse at both national and regional levels for several reasons:

1. Shared Best Practices

Exchange of Information: Countries can share successful strategies and protocols for addressing abuse cases, enhancing overall effectiveness in handling allegations.

Training Programs: Joint training initiatives can equip clergy and lay leaders with the necessary skills to recognize and respond to abuse.

2. Strengthening Legal Frameworks

Harmonization of Laws: Collaborative efforts can lead to more consistent legal standards and practices regarding abuse across borders, making it harder for perpetrators to evade justice by relocating.

Mutual Legal Assistance: Countries can support each other in prosecuting offenders who may flee to another jurisdiction.

3. Victim Support and Advocacy

Cross-border Networks: Establishing networks among NGOs and support organizations can provide victims with resources and assistance regardless of where they are located.

Awareness Campaigns: Collaborative campaigns can raise awareness about abuse and available support services, fostering a culture of accountability.

4. Joint Investigations

Pooling Resources: Collaborative investigations can be more effective, pooling resources and expertise to address complex cases that cross national boundaries.

Sharing Intelligence: Law enforcement agencies can share intelligence and evidence, facilitating more thorough investigations.

5. Cultural Sensitivity and Understanding

Regional Context: Understanding the cultural dynamics and sensitivities of different countries can improve the effectiveness of interventions and responses to abuse allegations.

Building Trust: Cross-border partnerships can foster trust between countries, communities, and religious institutions, essential for effectively addressing abuse.

6. Strengthening Institutional Accountability

Joint Oversight Bodies: Establishing regional oversight bodies can ensure consistent monitoring and accountability for religious institutions across borders.

Encouraging Transparency: Collaborative efforts can promote transparency in how allegations are handled, making it easier to hold institutions accountable.

Conclusion

Cross-border cooperation is vital in addressing clergy-related abuse, as it enhances legal frameworks, supports victims, fosters shared knowledge, and strengthens institutional accountability. By working together, countries can create a more effective response to abuse that transcends national boundaries, ultimately protecting vulnerable individuals and fostering a culture of accountability within religious institutions.

Jacobsen: What has been the hoped-for impact through promoting your updated book at the International Book Fair in Montenegro?

Jovanović: Promoting an updated book at the International Book Fair in Montenegro aims to achieve several hoped-for impacts:

1. Increased Visibility

Broader Reach: The fair provides an opportunity to reach a diverse audience, including readers, publishers, and literary agents, enhancing the book's visibility in the market.

2. Engagement with Readers

Direct Interaction: Engaging with readers allows for firsthand feedback, fostering a connection that can lead to increased interest and sales.

3. Networking Opportunities

Collaborations: The event facilitates networking with other authors, publishers, and industry professionals, potentially leading to future collaborations and partnerships.

4. Cultural Exchange

Promoting Dialogue: Showcasing the book can stimulate discussions about its themes, contributing to cultural exchange and dialogue within the literary community.

5. Strengthening Literary Community

Supporting Local Authors: Participation in the fair highlights the importance of local literature, helping to strengthen the overall literary community in Montenegro.

6. Sales and Distribution

Increased Sales: The fair provides a platform for direct sales, potentially boosting initial sales figures and establishing distribution channels.

7. Feedback for Future Works

Valuable Insights: Feedback received during the fair can inform future writing projects and marketing strategies, helping to refine the author's approach.

Conclusion

Overall, promoting the updated book at the International Book Fair in Montenegro is expected to enhance visibility, foster engagement, and contribute to the broader literary landscape, ultimately supporting the author's career and the promotion of literature in the region.

Jacobsen: How has media coverage at different levels influenced public perception and institutional responses to clergy-related abuse in Serbia?

Jovanović: Media coverage at different levels has significantly influenced public perception and institutional responses to clergy-related abuse in Serbia in several ways:

1. Shaping Public Awareness

Raising Awareness: Media reports have brought attention to instances of clergy-related abuse, informing the public about the issues and prompting discussions that may have previously been suppressed.

Highlighting Victims' Stories: By sharing personal accounts from victims, the media has humanized the issue, making it more relatable and fostering empathy among the public.

2. Influencing Public Opinion

Framing the Narrative: The way media outlets frame the narrative around abuse can shape public opinion, either by emphasizing accountability and justice or by downplaying the severity of the allegations.

Creating Outrage or Support: Intense media coverage can lead to public outrage, pressuring institutions to respond more decisively to allegations. Conversely, favorable coverage can create a protective atmosphere for the church.

3. Impacting Institutional Responses

Accountability Pressure: Media scrutiny can compel institutions, including the Serbian Orthodox Church and the government, to take allegations more seriously and implement reforms to address systemic issues.

Response Strategies: Institutions may adopt different strategies in response to media coverage—either reinforcing their positions or making public commitments to transparency and accountability based on the coverage.

4. Regional and International Influence

Comparative Analysis: Coverage may draw comparisons with how similar cases are handled in other countries, influencing public expectations regarding accountability and institutional reforms.

Global Awareness: International media attention can amplify local issues, prompting both public and institutional responses that align with global human rights standards.

5. Encouraging Dialogue and Reform

Facilitating Conversations: Media coverage can encourage broader societal conversations about the role of religion, authority, and accountability, potentially leading to demands for reform.

Inspiring Activism: Increased awareness and public interest can mobilize civil society organizations and activists to advocate for victims' rights and institutional change.

Conclusion

In summary, media coverage at various levels has played a crucial role in shaping public perception and influencing institutional responses to clergy-related abuse in Serbia. By raising awareness, framing narratives, and applying pressure for accountability, the media has the potential to foster significant change within both religious institutions and broader societal attitudes.

Jacobsen: How might international human rights frameworks be applied to address clergy-related abuse within the Serbian Orthodox Church?

Jovanović: International human rights frameworks can be applied to address clergy-related abuse within the Serbian Orthodox Church in several key ways:

1. Legal Obligations and Accountability

Ratification of Treaties: Serbia is a party to various international human rights treaties, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These treaties obligate the state to protect individuals from abuse and ensure accountability.

Incorporation into Domestic Law: The principles of these treaties can be integrated into national legislation, requiring the Serbian government to establish legal mechanisms that address clergy-related abuse effectively.

2. Protection of Victims' Rights

Access to Justice: International frameworks emphasize the right of victims to seek justice and redress. Implementing these rights can empower victims of clergy-related abuse to come forward and report incidents without fear of reprisal.

Support Services: Frameworks can guide the development of support services for victims, including counseling, legal assistance, and safe reporting mechanisms.

3. Monitoring and Reporting Mechanisms

Independent Oversight: Establishing independent bodies to monitor cases of abuse within religious institutions can ensure transparency and accountability. International human rights bodies often recommend the creation of such mechanisms.

Regular Reporting: Countries are encouraged to report on their compliance with human rights obligations. This can include data on abuse cases within religious institutions, fostering accountability and public awareness.

4. Training and Capacity Building

Education for Clergy and Officials: International human rights frameworks can promote training programs for clergy, church officials, and law enforcement on recognizing, preventing, and responding to abuse.

Best Practices: Sharing best practices from other countries that have successfully addressed similar issues can guide reforms within the Serbian Orthodox Church.

5. Encouraging Collaboration with Civil Society

Partnerships with NGOs: International frameworks can encourage collaboration between the church, the government, and civil society organizations to address abuse comprehensively.

Community Engagement: Involving communities in discussions about clergy-related abuse can help raise awareness and promote a culture of accountability within religious institutions.

6. Advocacy for Institutional Reforms

Policy Recommendations: Human rights bodies can provide recommendations for reforms within the Serbian Orthodox Church, such as establishing clear reporting procedures for abuse and creating transparent investigative processes.

Accountability for Leadership: Advocating for accountability measures for church leaders who fail to address allegations of abuse can promote a culture of responsibility.

Conclusion

By applying international human rights frameworks, Serbia can enhance its approach to addressing clergy-related abuse within the Serbian Orthodox Church. This includes ensuring legal accountability, protecting victims' rights, fostering transparency, and promoting collaboration with civil society, ultimately contributing to a safer and more accountable environment within religious institutions.

Jacobsen: What are the legal and institutional barriers at the national level that hinder effective prosecution of abuse cases involving clergy?

Jovanović: The legal and institutional barriers at the national level that hinder effective prosecution of abuse cases involving clergy can include:

1. Weak Legal Framework

Insufficient Laws: Existing laws may not adequately address clergy-related abuse, leaving gaps that can be exploited by perpetrators.

Statute of Limitations: In many jurisdictions, the statute of limitations may be too short, preventing the prosecution of cases that come to light after a significant delay.

2. Institutional Protection

Clerical Privilege: Some legal systems may afford clergy special protections or privileges, making it more difficult to prosecute them compared to lay individuals.

Internal Church Investigations: Many religious institutions may prefer to handle allegations internally, often resulting in inadequate investigations and lack of accountability.

3. Cultural and Social Factors

Religious Influence: The strong influence of religious institutions in society can lead to reluctance among victims to come forward due to fear of stigmatization or retribution.

Public Sentiment: Societal attitudes that prioritize the reputation of the church over justice for victims can hinder reporting and prosecution.

4. Lack of Resources and Training

Inadequate Training for Law Enforcement: Police and legal personnel may lack specific training on handling abuse cases involving clergy, leading to mishandling of investigations.

Limited Resources: Financial and human resources for investigating and prosecuting such cases may be insufficient, affecting the overall efficacy of the legal process.

5. Judicial Bias

Perceived Bias: There may be a perceived or actual bias within the judicial system favoring religious institutions, leading to reluctance to prosecute cases against clergy.

Fear of Community Reaction: Judges and prosecutors might fear backlash from religious communities, which could influence their decisions regarding prosecution.

6. Victim Support Deficiencies

Lack of Support Services: Insufficient victim support services can deter individuals from coming forward, as they may feel unsupported in navigating the legal system.

Trauma and Stigma: The trauma associated with abuse, coupled with societal stigma, can prevent victims from pursuing legal action.

Conclusion

These barriers create a complex environment that can obstruct justice for victims of clergy-related abuse. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive legal reforms, enhanced training for law enforcement, better support for victims, and cultural shifts that prioritize accountability and transparency.

Jacobsen: How does the culture of silence at the local level affect efforts to expose and prevent abuse? What can break this culture?

Jovanović: The culture of silence at the local level significantly affects efforts to expose and prevent abuse in several ways:

1. Hindrance to Reporting

Fear of Retaliation: Victims and witnesses may fear reprisals from the community or the church, deterring them from coming forward.

Stigma: There may be societal stigma attached to reporting abuse, particularly in religious contexts, which can silence victims and supporters.

2. Normalization of Abuse

Cultural Acceptance: If abuse is seen as a normal part of the religious or community environment, it becomes more difficult to challenge and address.

Minimization of Issues: Community narratives may downplay the severity of abuse, leading to a lack of urgency in addressing the problem.

3. Lack of Support Systems

Insufficient Resources: Communities may lack adequate support services for victims, further entrenching silence.

Limited Awareness: There may be a lack of awareness about the rights of victims and the mechanisms available for reporting abuse.

4. Institutional Protectionism

Covering Up: Religious institutions may prioritize their reputation over accountability, leading to internal cover-ups rather than external reporting.

Inadequate Responses: Institutions may have inadequate procedures for handling allegations, reinforcing the culture of silence.

What Can Break This Culture?

1. Education and Awareness Campaigns

Public Education: Increasing awareness about abuse and its effects can empower victims and the community to speak out.

Training Programs: Offering training on rights and available resources can help dismantle the stigma associated with reporting.

2. Supportive Environment

Creating Safe Spaces: Establishing confidential reporting mechanisms can encourage victims to come forward without fear of exposure.

Community Support Groups: Fostering supportive networks for victims can help them feel less isolated and more empowered to speak out.

3. Engagement of Community Leaders

Involvement of Influential Figures: Engaging respected community and religious leaders in discussions about abuse can lend credibility to efforts to break the silence.

Public Statements: Leaders can make public statements denouncing abuse, reinforcing a culture of accountability.

4. Legal and Institutional Reforms

Strengthening Legal Frameworks: Implementing laws that protect whistleblowers and provide clear reporting pathways can encourage more individuals to come forward.

Accountability Mechanisms: Establishing independent oversight bodies can ensure that allegations are taken seriously and investigated thoroughly.

5. Advocacy and Activism

Grassroots Movements: Supporting grassroots initiatives that advocate for victims' rights can create pressure for change at both the community and institutional levels.

Coalitions: Forming coalitions among NGOs, activists, and community members can amplify efforts to expose and prevent abuse.

Conclusion

Breaking the culture of silence requires a multifaceted approach that combines education, support, community engagement, legal reforms, and advocacy. By fostering an environment that prioritizes accountability and victim support, communities can more effectively expose and prevent abuse.

Jacobsen: What are effective ways in which to continue and expand survivor advocacy, so victims can move from survivors to thrivers with appropriate social supports?

Jovanović: Continuing and expanding survivor advocacy is crucial for helping victims transition from surviving to thriving. Here are effective ways to achieve this:

1. Holistic Support Services

Comprehensive Care: Provide integrated services that address physical, mental, and emotional health, including counseling, medical care, and legal support.

Safe Housing: Ensure access to safe and affordable housing options for survivors to rebuild their lives without fear.

2. Empowerment Programs

Skill Development: Offer vocational training and educational programs to help survivors gain independence and financial stability.

Leadership Opportunities: Encourage survivors to take on leadership roles within advocacy organizations, allowing them to influence policy and support others.

3. Community Engagement

Support Networks: Foster peer support groups where survivors can share experiences and resources, creating a sense of community and belonging.

Awareness Campaigns: Conduct community outreach to educate the public about survivor issues and reduce stigma, fostering a more supportive environment.

4. Advocacy and Policy Change

Lobby for Legal Reforms: Advocate for changes in laws and policies that protect survivors and provide necessary resources.

Partnerships with Organizations: Collaborate with NGOs, government agencies, and other stakeholders to strengthen advocacy efforts and resource availability.

5. Access to Resources

Information Hubs: Create centralized resources where survivors can find information on available services, legal rights, and support systems.

Financial Assistance: Provide grants or funds to help survivors with immediate needs, such as medical bills or educational expenses.

6. Mental Health Support

Trauma-Informed Care: Train service providers in trauma-informed approaches to ensure that survivors feel safe and respected in all interactions.

Crisis Intervention Services: Establish immediate support services for survivors in crisis, including hotlines and emergency counseling.

7. Cultural Competence and Inclusivity

Tailored Programs: Develop services that are culturally sensitive and inclusive of diverse communities, ensuring that all survivors feel represented and understood.

Language Access: Provide resources in multiple languages to accommodate non-native speakers.

8. Monitoring and Evaluation

Feedback Mechanisms: Implement systems for survivors to provide feedback on programs and services, ensuring that their voices shape ongoing advocacy efforts.

Data Collection: Collect and analyze data on survivor needs and outcomes to inform program development and improve service delivery.

9. Long-Term Follow-Up

Continued Support: Establish long-term follow-up services to check in on survivors, ensuring they have ongoing access to resources and support.

Mentorship Programs: Pair survivors with mentors who can guide them through their healing and empowerment journeys.

Conclusion

By implementing these strategies, advocacy efforts can create a supportive framework that empowers survivors, helping them transition from surviving to thriving. Collaboration, comprehensive services, and a focus on empowerment are essential components of this process.

Jacobsen: How do cultural and religious factors unique to Serbia and the Balkans influence the recognition and handling of abuse allegations?

Jovanović: Cultural and religious factors unique to Serbia and the Balkans significantly influence the recognition and handling of abuse allegations in several ways:

1. Cultural Attitudes Toward Authority

Respect for Authority: There is often a deep-seated respect for authority figures, including clergy, which can lead to reluctance in questioning or reporting allegations against them. This can result in a culture of silence around abuse.

Collective Identity: The importance of community and collective identity may discourage individuals from coming forward, as doing so could bring shame to the community or institution.

2. Religious Influence

Clerical Authority: The Serbian Orthodox Church holds considerable sway in societal norms and values. Allegations against clergy can be seen as attacks on the church itself, leading to defensiveness and denial rather than accountability.

Moral Expectations: Religious teachings often emphasize forgiveness and redemption, which can lead to a tendency to downplay the severity of abuse or to prioritize reconciliation over justice.

3. Stigmatization of Victims

Social Stigma: Victims of abuse may face stigma and isolation, leading to fears of being ostracized by their communities. This can deter reporting and seeking help.

Gender Roles: Traditional gender norms can further complicate the situation, as women may feel pressure to conform to societal expectations that prioritize family unity over individual well-being.

4. Legal and Institutional Framework

Inadequate Legal Protections: The legal system may not fully address the complexities of abuse allegations, particularly within religious contexts, leading to insufficient responses to reported cases.

Internal Church Mechanisms: The tendency for religious institutions to handle allegations internally can result in inadequate investigations and a lack of transparency, reinforcing the culture of silence.

5. Historical Context

Legacy of Conflict: The historical context of the Balkans, including recent conflicts, can affect societal attitudes toward authority and trust in institutions. Distrust in state systems may lead individuals to rely on religious institutions, complicating the response to allegations.

Collective Trauma: The region's history of trauma can influence how communities respond to individual trauma, often prioritizing collective healing over addressing specific allegations.

6. Community Support Structures

Limited Resources: Support systems for victims may be underdeveloped, making it difficult for individuals to find help or advocacy. Communities may lack access to counseling or legal assistance.

Role of NGOs: While some NGOs work to address these issues, their influence may be limited by cultural and religious norms, making it challenging to advocate for change.

Conclusion

Cultural and religious factors in Serbia and the Balkans create a complex landscape for recognizing and handling abuse allegations. The interplay of authority, stigma, and community dynamics can hinder reporting and accountability. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of local contexts, as well as efforts to educate communities and reform institutional responses.

Jacobsen: What are necessary actions for effectively combatting clergy-related abuse in the Serbian Orthodox Church for the long-term?

Jovanović: Effectively combatting clergy-related abuse in the Serbian Orthodox Church for the long term requires a multifaceted approach that includes the following necessary actions:

1. Establishing Transparent Reporting Mechanisms

Independent Reporting Channels: Create confidential and independent channels for victims to report abuse without fear of retaliation.

Clear Protocols: Develop clear procedures for handling allegations that ensure thorough investigations and accountability.

2. Implementing Robust Training Programs

Clergy Training: Provide comprehensive training for clergy on ethical conduct, boundaries, and the impact of abuse.

Educating Congregations: Offer educational programs for congregants about recognizing signs of abuse and the importance of reporting.

3. Strengthening Legal Frameworks

Advocating for Legislative Changes: Work with lawmakers to ensure that legal protections for victims are strengthened and that there are stringent penalties for abusers.

Collaboration with Law Enforcement: Foster partnerships between church leaders and law enforcement to ensure that abuse cases are taken seriously and investigated thoroughly.

4. Creating Support Systems for Survivors

Counseling Services: Establish access to psychological support and counseling for victims of abuse.

Support Networks: Develop peer support groups for survivors to share experiences and healing resources.

5. Promoting a Culture of Accountability

Zero Tolerance Policy: Implement a clear zero-tolerance policy for abuse within the church, emphasizing that all allegations will be taken seriously.

Public Accountability: Encourage public statements from church leaders that condemn abuse and outline the church's commitment to preventing it.

6. Encouraging Community Engagement

Community Awareness Campaigns: Conduct outreach programs to educate the public on the issue of clergy-related abuse and the importance of supporting victims.

Involving Lay Leaders: Engage lay leaders and members of the congregation in discussions about preventing abuse and promoting a safe environment.

7. Ensuring Transparency and Accountability in Investigations

Independent Oversight Committees: Establish independent committees to oversee investigations of abuse allegations and ensure transparency in the process.

Regular Reporting: Require regular public reports on the church's handling of abuse allegations to maintain accountability.

8. Fostering a Safe Environment within the Church

Policy Development: Create and enforce policies that promote safe interactions between clergy and congregants, particularly minors.

Regular Audits: Conduct regular audits of church practices and policies related to abuse prevention and response.

9. Encouraging International Cooperation

Learning from Best Practices: Collaborate with international organizations and other religious institutions to adopt best practices for preventing and addressing abuse.

Support from Global Church Bodies: Seek support from global Orthodox church organizations in implementing reforms.

10. Promoting Open Dialogue within the Church

Encouraging Whistleblower Protections: Implement protections for whistleblowers who report misconduct or abuse.

Facilitating Conversations: Create forums for open dialogue about clergy-related issues, allowing congregants to express concerns and propose solutions.

Conclusion

Addressing clergy-related abuse within the Serbian Orthodox Church requires commitment, transparency, and a collaborative approach. By implementing these actions, the church can create a safer environment for its members and foster a culture of accountability and support for victims.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Bojan.

Jovanović: You're welcome! If you have any more questions or need further assistance, feel free to ask.

Len Prazych on His Two Fathers

Len Prazych, an 11-year-old survivor of clergy abuse, shared his experience of parental denial and healing. He believes many male victims, like himself, delay reporting due to shame. Prazych emphasized the importance of discussing abuse openly and offering support to those affected, especially men reluctant to come forward.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I am with Len Prazych. This is a recommendation of a mutual woman colleague who is involved in deep research into clergy-related abuse. So, thank you for coming forward.

I know that these particular cases are probably more difficult than for women. One, there might be fewer men and boy victims. Also, as far as I know, more women tend to come forward. That's only a qualitative analysis, not a formal quantitative analysis. So, you wrote a book.

You are a survivor and coming forward to report on this from an American orientation. So, how old were you when this happened?

Len Prazych: I was 11 years old at the time of my incident. And if I can make a point and that is I believe there are more boys and men who experienced abuse. I believe fewer come forward because of the shame, guilt and pain associated with it.

Also, I learned at the recent SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests) Conference that men often wait decades before admitting their abuse, if they do so at all. In some cases, it may be 10, 20, 30, 40 years. In my case, it was 50-plus years before I came forward with it and wrote my memoir.

I got up in the middle of the night and told my mother that Father Duncanson had his hand in my underwear. The following morning he was gone. So somehow, as an 11-year-old altar boy, I could make a priest disappear? I was both confused and sad, and the fact that no one wanted to speak about it ever again only added to the confusion, the anger, the frustration, the shame, the guilt, and the ultimately ruined relationship with my father for the next 50 years.

So yes, many men are reluctant to come forward. But sometimes, it's not their conscious choice. Sometimes the abuse is so traumatic that the brain suppresses those painful memories or incidents. They consciously do not remember it happening.

And it usually comes out later in life when there's a problem with anger, alcoholism, addiction, relationship issues, or something else that triggers the memory of the incident. It's not until decades later that they may remember, wow, I was abused and then they have to come to terms with that.

I'm in no way comparing my one-time incident of what was essentially a fondling to the horrific abuse that others have suffered. I think this is another reason I remember the event as if it happened yesterday. It was a one-time event, but I remember the details clearly, and that's likely because I've been writing about it, talking about it, and thinking about it.

I've largely healed and forgiven, but I will never forget. It's something I don't want to see repeated with anyone. I believe it's important to say something if you see something, and we need to talk about these things because, for the most part, we don't—especially men.

Jacobsen: When you told your mother, did she recall the context or her response? Did that help with future conversations around this subject when you started discussing it more openly and publicly?

Prazych: No. Both my parents denied it ever happened. I can only speculate that decades later when I brought it up that it may have been just a blip in their life, something to bury and forget. But at the time of the incident, my mother was the one who took action, so I thought she would confirm that it happened, even decades later. I suspect she supported my father in his adamant refusal to acknowledge the abuse and perhaps, keeping his pact with the church to stay quiet. From what I've read, the practice of having parents being paid by the parish or the bishop to stay silent about their boy's abuse was common back then. I have no reason to believe that it doesn't still happen. In my case, my family never really had money so the incentive of a cash "settlement" to stay silent was probably very strong. My parents were raising three boys in Catholic school, so perhaps they received free tuition, but again, I can only speculate. It's unlikely that I will ever know.

Jacobsen: That sounds like an incredibly difficult experience, and how these situations were handled is troubling.

Prazych: Yes, it was, and I still think about it, but I've come to terms with how things were dealt with, even though I believe it was wrong. Maybe they got some help otherwise. Whatever the case, my parents never discussed it again and took the secret to their graves.

Jacobsen: So, when it came to this particular case, has this methodology been corroborated by future reports from other survivors, as well as official church documents about a policy of silence and shuffling priests around?

Prazych: I can reference accounts in the literature, which is widely available, about families being paid off to keep their stories quiet. If not, lawyers may have to get involved and perhaps, the case is settled out of court.

Jacobsen: What themes have you noticed in male survivor stories, particularly after attending the SNAP conference or potentially others? What are some of the thematic threads that run through them?

Prazych: As I've shared, one is the reluctance to come forward and share due to the shame and the perception that it's a weakness. It affects a man's life and his relationships, and it may manifest in addictions, anger, abuse, and more.

Jacobsen: Did any men report substance misuse as a way to cope with emotional problems?

Prazych: I'm confident hundreds have done that and support groups are full of individuals who have suffered tremendous abuse.

Jacobsen: When you write a full book, it becomes a project. It could be 60,000 words or 120,000 words. Either way, for most people who don't spend time writing, that's a huge amount, especially when typing each letter on the keyboard. So, why did you write a full-length text describing this context for yourself?

Prazych: I am a professional writer. I publish a weekly trade publication so getting the words on the page never a problem for me. I've also always been a journaler. I believe in journaling and note-taking as a regular practice, it's my meditation and one way I cope, organize my life, express feelings, etc.

It was during the period after my father passed—a three-year period of helping him die, after spending three years helping him help my mother die—that journaling became tremendously important to me. I was essentially grieving both parents after six years. During one of my entries, I stumbled onto writing a letter to my father.

Jacobsen: And where were you going with that?

Prazych: So, I wrote this handwritten letter and felt like, wow, that came out pretty easily. Let me keep going. Then I had another letter and another. The memories started connecting so I added some elements of literary interest. There was no shortage of things to write about and things I wanted to ask my father, though obviously, some questions never got answers. There were also things I just wanted to say, and it felt good to say them.

As a first-time memoirist, 60,000 words is about the low end of where you want to land for your readers, and you better have a good story to tell within those 60,000 words. So, I was aiming for that amount. I had a great editor who helped me with many things we all need editors for. So, getting it done wasn't an issue.

A few obstacles, however—and this relates to one of your earlier questions about men wanting to share their stories, not necessarily about priestly abuse, but any abuse—stem from unconscious reasons for not writing. Because they're unconscious, you don't always know why. Still, after working through them, you realize that some of the same messaging initially prevented you from sharing your story.

For me, as an 11-year-old, the messages for me were:

- You don't talk badly about priests or the Catholic Church.
- We don't discuss these things in our family.
- We don't share our secrets unless we confess them to a priest
- We don't talk about sex.

So to speak about being abused by your beloved priest in your parents' bed? There was no way that was going to be talked about! So, the message was always to stay silent and repress those feelings. Not an uncommon thing, I've discovered, especially in Catholic families. I often say that the incident of abuse itself wasn't as bad as the 50 years of betrayal and gaslighting by my parents, the priests, and the Catholic Church. That was the real trauma for me, and it's what still lingers in my thoughts and from what I've heard, in the stories of others.

Jacobsen: Was this a one-off event, or did you have recurring memories? Did it happen two or three times?

Prazych: It was a one-time, one-off event

Jacobsen: Is the book out yet?

Prazych: Yes, it's been out for a year. I self-published and, for the most part, have been self-promoting and advertising. If you check my website, I've been doing media appearances over the past few months, which I'm very pleased with. Every time I do a radio interview or a live TV spot, I notice a small bump in book sales. It's available on Amazon by contacting me directly via my website at LenPrazych.com.

Jacobsen: So, how did this affect the arc of your position on the tenets of faith and the religious community over time? An important point isn't discussed enough: less about the incident and more about the fallout—the narrative built around the Catholic Church or churches in general. How has your relationship with the church been since that time, since being 11?

Prazych: Well, I've always had questions and a natural curiosity about the mysteries of not only Catholicism but all religions. But from the age of 11, there was still the mandate:

- You must go to church on Sunday.
- You must go to confession.
- You must the sacraments and the 10 Commandments

I did this with a very dubious perspective, even as an 11-year-old. I thought, "All right, I think I see how this works now," but I wasn't sure. I was 11! But it did spark my curiosity about the bigger questions—why do we listen to these people, the priests, that is? But I couldn't take it seriously after that because they couldn't answer the questions I had, questions I couldn't articulate at the time—like, why do priests abuse children? I couldn't wrap my head around that.

I also attended an all-boys Catholic high school, which was generally a positive experience. But at some point, during religious education class in sophomore year, I believe, when I rebelled and shut out anything related to organized religion. That pretty much marked the beginning of my separation from both my parents and the church but became conflicted when I was going to marry

In the Catholic tradition, when a man and a woman are getting married, they go through something called Pre-Cana, a weekend moderated by a priest—because, of course, who else would know best about a healthy relationship between a man and a woman? That forced me to confront my own biases and I wondered, "Am I going to let something like a single incident of priestly abuse stop me from moving forward with my life and living as a good Catholic family?" I couldn't say no at the time. And then there was the expectation of raising my children in the Catholic faith. But that only lasted for so long. My children saw for themselves at an early age—maybe with some urging and teaching from me—to avoid that.

So, my relationship with the Catholic Church since then has been pretty nonexistent.

Jacobsen: Do you think that's a relatively normal outcome for someone who's been abused by a father or priest?

Prazych: Is it normal? I don't know what "normal" is, to be honest. The more I talk with people who've been abused, the more I see a variety of responses. For some, like myself, it's, "Yeah, I know what happened, and I want nothing to do with the Church." As long as no one's telling you that you have to go to church, many will have nothing to do with the church, priests, or religion in general. But others who've been abused for years still maintain their faith in God and continue going to church. They don't like what happened to them, of course, but they still have this faith that's embedded in them and apparently cannot let go of. There's a spectrum of experiences in between.

Jacobsen: What, in brief terms, can you share about your abuser?

Prazych: With Katherine's help, I've learned much more about him than I knew since I finished my book. I learned everything I could find out on Ancestry.com and other free websites available to the public. I discovered that Father Wesley Duncanson was born in Waltham, Massachusetts and was married at age 16, which surprised me. He joined the military at age 17, served for six or seven years, then went to college as a premed student. After that, he went to a monastery and was ordained in 1956.

With Katherine's help in accessing the Catholic Directory, we created a timeline of his life in the priesthood. And from what we can tell, Saint Henry's, my parish, was his last assignment until he died in 1979.

By speaking up and saying something, I may have ended the career of a probable serial pedophile and sex abuser. I say "probable" because although I haven't seen the records and may never see them, the NJ State Police say the records they've subpoenaed are "voluminous."

By reporting Father Duncanson, I may have prevented others from being abused—both in my church and wherever else he may have been assigned, if the Church did send him elsewhere. More importantly, I may have protected my two younger brothers from being abused. Pedophile priests have been notorious for preying on families with multiple siblings. Once they're in the door, it becomes much easier for them to continue abusing others in that family. There are several documented cases of this, and I know someone personally who experienced it.

Jacobsen: That's tragic; the family structure can also be exploited.

Prazych: Yeah.

Jacobsen: Yeah, the state of the family structure. So, in these instances of lack of parental oversight or involvement—whether the mom or dad isn't assertive in ensuring the child's safety, especially during adolescence—how do you view that?

Prazych: I would hesitate to lean heavily on the idea of "lack of oversight" in a negative way. My parents were hard workers. Dad worked all day and Mom worked at night. Dad helped neighbours and did odd jobs to make extra money when he wasn't working his day job. It wasn't like they were neglecting or partying and letting us kids go unsupervised. Aside from this incident, my father was a saint, and my mother supported him.

But when a parish priest took an interest in their oldest son and offered to take him and his friends horseback riding, bowling, or out for pizza—things we couldn't afford to do—the influencing a priest must have seemed wonderful. It wasn't a matter of my parents ignoring us; they were busy providing a living so we had what we needed. But priests could see that, too. What hardworking parents wouldn't appreciate having their child looked after for a couple hours, a weekend, or even an overnight? I describe one incident like that in the book.

Jacobsen: What you're describing is part of the nuance in many of these stories. On the one hand, you have families of likely blue-collar parents and a dual-income household, where a priest stepping in to mentor and partially raise young boys within that community can seem like a positive thing. There are overnights, some literature is discussed, maybe even a higher education influence, and one-on-one time where social skills and norms are expressed. The kid can feel noticed and appreciated. But at the same time, those few incidents within that smaller arc leave a mark until later in life.

Prazych: Right.

Jacobsen: So, how do you reconcile these two narratives that aren't necessarily in conflict but exist simultaneously in the same lifetime?

Prazych: I'll admit, yes; I loved this priest. I loved him like I loved my father because I was getting from him what I wasn't getting from my dad—the time and attention that a growing boy needs. That's one of the reasons the abuse was so painful. But there was also this rift developing, where I was asking too many questions of both my fathers, questions that didn't have satisfactory answers.

Jacobsen: Yeah, I can see that.

Prazych: Father Duncanson seemed genuinely curious about me—what I was reading at age 11, my chemistry experiments in the basement. So, in a way, he became my stand-in father. He'd even come to my baseball games, games my father wouldn't or couldn't attend.

Jacobsen: He was very avuncular.

Prazych: Paternal, a little *too* paternal, as I would soon realize. So, he fooled an 11-year-old child. Congratulations! But part of my work in therapy has been about forgiving that little boy who may have thought it was somehow his fault. I know now that it wasn't my fault. I didn't do anything to bring this on. I was being an 11-year-old kid. Do you want to pay attention to me and teach me some stuff? Sure, I'm on board with that. I'm still on board with that at age 65—just keep your hand out of my pants while you're doing it!

Jacobsen: There's also an aspect of this where many men in North American cultures fear getting involved in public life, particularly in mentoring or spending time with kids who aren't their own, because of the stigma associated with it. There are a lot of conflicting feelings for many men—they'd love to take a kid to a ballgame, go bowling, camping, or whatever—but this social stigma exists. At the same time, you have this minority of cases where adult men get past that stigma, win the trust of the community, or take a position of trust, and then leverage that to

take advantage of young people—often boys or adolescent males in particular. It's a strange cultural conversation.

And the case that you experienced, and that others bring forward at SNAP and similar organizations, are cases of acute abuse. But it's part of a larger conversation about male mentorship—what are red flags and what aren't. We're not always having the necessary conversation around what is just stereotyping of men and what are actual, appropriate red flags.

How do you feel overall, given your positive reflection on some aspects of your experience, about how the Catholic Church mentors and raises boys who aren't their own? How do you think general culture handles this?

Prazych: I can't say. I need to be closer to the issue now to give an educated opinion. But from my perspective, as an older male now, my wife has often said, "You should be a mentor; you have so much to offer." I did great with four kids. I'm doing great with two grandkids. But the thought of anything untoward happening to any of them in terms of abuse—well, that's a huge trigger for me.

But I don't want to be alone in the same room with a child that's not my grandchild. If I'm in a bathroom in a restaurant and a little boy walks in, I immediately walk out. I don't want even the thought of being alone any situation where it's just me and another child. Knowing what I know and having experienced what I've experienced, I don't want to be in that position.

Jacobsen: That's a conversation that's not even on the main agenda, but it's part of an important, albeit undeveloped, secondary discussion—how individuals like yourself are triggered by the fallout from their own experiences and how this intersects with the stereotyping of men in mentor or authority roles with young people. These are all important conversations, even if it's not the primary point of this one.

Prazych: Right. It's something to keep in mind, at least. I like to ask if others have been abused by Father Wesley Luke Duncanson at Saint Henry's Parish in Bayonne, New Jersey, or anywhere else, that it's okay to come forward and share their secret.

Jacobsen: So, based on some of the information given earlier in the interview, if people know someone who may have been a survivor during that time or if they are survivors but have been afraid to come forward, how can they get in contact?

Prazych: They can contact me personally. My email is on my website, but they can also contact me at len@prazcomm.com. My phone number is international, in case they're in another country. My number in New York, United States, is 518-366-9017.

What I've also done recently is prepare for another career as a life coach, to perhaps help both men and women. In this capacity, as a survivor of sexual abuse, I'm willing to coach others—whether it's coming forward with their story or writing about it. Writing could be journaling, poetry, short stories, or even letters to their father—not necessarily for publication. It's about demonstrating the therapeutic power of writing to heal. I'm happy to speak with anyone interested in doing that. It may be a gentle way to come forward, even if they can't yet verbally articulate what they need to share.

As I mentioned, men are now coming forward after decades, and for all the reasons that men often wait so long to do so. This is the demographic—this is the time, as it was for me. I was recently asked to speak to a men's group of survivors of abuse aged 50 to 60. This is the demographic that tends to come forward and share their stories of abuse. I'm happy to help anyone share and tell their story, even if it's just to listen without judgment. I'd gladly share my experiences and knowledge.

Jacobsen: If anyone wants to publish an anonymous letter about their experience or response, they can send it to me, too. I can help: scottdouglasjacobsen@yahoo.com.

Prazych: Thank you for that.

Jacobsen: Did we cover everything?

Prazych: Yes, we've hit the main topics. I'm happy to speak to a group—whether it's a men's group, as I've been asked before, or even a small book club. I'll be adding more information about readings and appearances to my website. My press details are there now, but I plan to build a larger platform as this message gains more traction. Ultimately, it's about preventing sexual abuse of children from happening at all. If you see something, say something. Let's talk about these things. And parents, tell your children the truth, okay? If my parents had told me the following day what had happened to me, we may not even be having this conversation.

Jacobsen: Len, nice to meet you, and thank you.

Jacobsen: It's a pleasure, Scott. Thank you for your promptness in turning around the article and giving the story the attention and coverage it deserves.

Prazych: As I'm finding, and this can be an aside or not, social media has promoted and publicized my books. I hadn't been on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or any of those before. I had no reason to, no interest. But I realized it was necessary if I was going to sell books and get some coverage.

What it did do was reconnect me with several of my old classmates. It allowed me to say, "By the way, this is my book. This is what happened to me." The response was collectively, "Oh, we're sorry. We didn't know this happened to you, and you said nothing." Well, how could they know unless it happened to them, too, which it didn't? For most of the people I spoke with, they didn't even remember Father Duncanson. That made me think, "Did this guy exist? How come nobody else remembers him?"

Jacobsen: But you have the documentation—Father Duncanson was there when you were there.

Prazych: Yes, but it's with the New Jersey State Police Sex Crimes Unit. Hopefully, one day, it will come to public light with the New Jersey Grand Jury. In the meantime, if anyone else comes forward they could have a criminal or civil case. But if no one else comes forward and accuses Father Duncanson, my case “dies” because my parents, Father Duncanson and the pastor at the time, who were the only other “witnesses to the crime,” took their secrets to their graves.

I'm happy I was able to get Father Duncanson listed on the BishopAccountability.org website. That's an accomplishment because someone else may not want to come forward but may see that

someone else did and say, "Oh, Len did it. Maybe I can come forward, too." That might help verify their claim or show the power of confession to heal emotionally and physically. Keeping these secrets takes a tremendous toll on mental and physical health. It can manifest in addictions, alcoholism, and even cancer—any number of stress-related diseases that come from withholding the truth. So, I'm encouraging people to tell their secrets, as hard as it may be. Maybe I can be living proof. "Hey, it took me 50 years, but you can do it too, and you'll be better off for it."

Jacobsen: Thank you, Len.

Prazych: You're very welcome, Scott. And thank *you* for allowing me to share my story and my message of hope and healing.

Amos N. Guiora on Institutional Complicity and Legal Reform

Amos N. Guiora, J.D., Ph.D., is a legal scholar and former IDF Lieutenant Colonel whose work focuses on institutional complicity and the legal accountability of bystanders and enablers. Shaped by his Holocaust-survivor parents and counterterrorism background, Guiora pioneered legal frameworks addressing bystander culpability, authoring *The Crime of Complicity*, *Armies of Enablers*, and *The Complicity of Silence*. His advocacy inspired Utah's 2021 bystander law. Through the Bystander Initiative at the University of Utah, he campaigns for criminalizing enablers, arguing that religious, educational, or athletic institutions often protect perpetrators rather than victims. Guiora draws a direct line from the Holocaust to contemporary abuse cases, highlighting the recurring failure of institutions to act. He emphasizes that through silence or action, enablers perpetuate harm and must be held accountable under the law. His tireless work seeks systemic reform through legislative change, education, and survivor-centered justice. "All hands on deck," he says, summarizing his approach.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Amos N. Guiora, J.D., Ph.D. He is an Israeli-American legal scholar, a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and a Professor of Law at the S.J. Quinney College of Law, University of Utah. He is a global authority on institutional complicity and bystander accountability. He authored *The Crime of Complicity: The Bystander in the Holocaust*, *Armies of Enablers: Survivor Stories of Complicity and Betrayal in Sexual Assaults*, and *The Complicity of Silence: Confronting Ecosystems of Child Sexual Abuse in Schools*. His work, shaped by his family's Holocaust legacy and decades of counterterrorism legal experience, helped inspire Utah's 2021 bystander criminalization law—one of the first of its kind in the United States.

He previously chaired Gymnastics Canada's Task Force on Abuse and is an advisor to S.E.S.A.M.E. (Stop Educator Sexual Abuse, Misconduct & Exploitation). His academic roles include Distinguished Fellowships at the Consortium for the Research and Study of Holocaust and the Law (Chicago-Kent College of Law) and the International Center for Conflict Resolution (University of Pittsburgh). He directs the Bystander Initiative at the University of Utah. He is a widely cited advocate for confronting institutional ecosystems that enable abuse in schools and other settings. That will be our focus today. So, how did your personal background and military legal career shape your focus on clergy abuse and institutional complicity?

Dr. Amos N. Guiora: Those last two topics may converge: When I retired from the IDF 21 years ago and entered American academia, my early scholarship focused on what I had done during my two decades in the IDF—mainly counterterrorism and national security law. But around twelve years ago, while training for the Salt Lake City Marathon, my running partner—who is not Jewish—asked me, "How did this happen?" *This* means the Holocaust. I gave what I thought was a smart academic answer: "I don't know."

Both of my parents—now deceased—were Holocaust survivors. I'm an only child. I was raised in a home where the Holocaust was never discussed. When I was twelve, my father took me canoeing—why canoeing, I still do not know—and he said, "In one minute, I'll tell you my story. In one minute, I'll tell you your mother's story. And this will be the first and last time we discuss

it." The word *Holocaust* was never mentioned in the house. There were no books on the subject at home.

When my running partner asked me that question, I realized I didn't know. I decided to become an autodidact on the Holocaust. Of course, you can't read everything—there are thousands of books—but it became clear to me that one issue had never been analyzed through the law's lens: the bystander's legal culpability.

There were two notable books on the bystander—one by historian Raul Hilberg and another by sociologist Victoria Barnett. But no one had addressed it from a legal standpoint.

When I first met with Dr. Barnett, a senior scholar at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington at the time, I told her I was thinking of writing about bystanders and the law. I was admittedly nervous. She told me, "You'll be the first to do it. You'll set the bar." I thought, "Okay, here we go."

I went on to write *The Crime of Complicity: The Bystander in the Holocaust*, which has been translated into Dutch and Chinese. I've lectured worldwide on the book. I was done with this topic. I had written about the Holocaust, about my parents, and the bystander—I finally thought I understood my parents' story. I was right about my dad.

I thought I understood my mom's story, too, but not fully—I'll get to that moment.

Then, I was having dinner with my editors at the American Bar Association in Chicago, and the editor—a great guy, Brian K.—asked me, "What's next?"

I said, "I'm done. Going back to counterterrorism. Thank you very much."

He said, "Yes, but you've heard about the Catholic Church?"

I said, "Well, Brian, even though I'm Jewish, yes—I have."

He replied, "You're a huge sports fan." And it's true. I used to have a radio show in Israel about American sports.

Then he said, "Well, there's your next book."

Like a dummy, I said, "Okay."

That book became *Armies—plural—of Enablers*. I interviewed survivors from USA Gymnastics, Michigan State, football athletes and students from Ohio State. I couldn't get to the boys from Penn State. That book changed my life in many ways. Since then, I've written articles on the topic.

Then, about three years ago, I came across a complicated story—the murder of a 12-year-old boy named Jeremy Bell. He was murdered in West Virginia in 1997 by a teacher who was a known pedophile. Everyone knew—and enablers surrounded him. It was all about enablers.

That case has become a focal point for me. I still occasionally write about counterterrorism—especially **after October 7** and what happened in Israel—but my primary focus now is enablers and bystanders.

You referenced the Bystander Initiative at the S.J. Quinney College of Law. I've just finished a new book that looks at societal enablers during the Holocaust and modern-day enablers in Israel—specifically, those who enable Prime Minister Netanyahu. For me, all of these issues are connected.

In plain English, I'm focused on the bystander and the enabler. And if we're being honest, I'm probably obsessive about it—because all roads run through the enabler and the bystander.

Jacobsen: How would you describe the bystander effect within the context of clergy-related abuse?

Guiora: The bystander is the person who is physically present—they see the abuse occur. That's distinct from the enabler, who either knows of the harm or should know of the harm based on their role, position, or institutional status.

Three or four legislative sessions ago, in Utah, mandatory reporting laws were expanded to include bystanders, thanks to Representative Brian King and Senator Curtis Bramble. That was a critical step. As for the enabler, we haven't had legislative success yet—not in Utah. We came close in the Netherlands, but it didn't pass.

In the context of priest abuse—whether the bystander is another priest in the room or a church official nearby—most of the cases I've examined don't involve someone physically present during the abuse.

But in general—particularly with the Catholic Church—the institutional response, as highlighted in the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Spotlight* reporting and film, has been to move the priest to another parish. That's what's often called "passing the trash." I don't love the term, but the label is stuck.

And the result is that the priest—the abusive priest—is just shuffled off to another parish and becomes someone else's problem. But these guys are not one-and-done. It's repeat behavior. So, if they did it in Parish A, they can do it in Parish B. That same behaviour repeats itself, frankly, regardless of denomination. There was a rabbi in Israel who was convicted either last week or two weeks ago.

Same story. When you hear the boys' accounts—he abused boys—when you listen to their accounts, you could just as easily be hearing about the Catholic Church. Or this church, or that church—whatever the denomination. In all of them, nothing is more important than the institution. And—pardon my English—the victim be damned. That is what enablers do.

Jacobsen: So, you got your story about the Holocaust quickly while canoeing. By the way, what you were told was accurate. What was the misinformation from your dad?

Guiora: My father and both my parents were from Hungary. My father was in a work camp in Yugoslavia called Bor. He told me in that one-minute story that nothing bad ever happened there. That was 100% not accurate. I met with a Hungarian scholar, Professor Czapádi. It took him nineteen years to write the history of that camp. White Holocaust historians have defined it as the single most brutal work camp there was.

My mother was the Hungarian version of Anne Frank—in the attic with my grandmother. She was twice taken to be shot. I know how she was saved the first time—when she was already lined up against the wall. I figured out how she was saved the second time.

What I did not know when I wrote *The Crime of Complicity*—what I only learned after my mother died three years ago during the shiva—were additional facts about her life after the Holocaust: how she escaped and how she was imprisoned in Czechoslovakia. None of that I knew.

When I was writing the book, my father was dying. I wanted to finish it before he passed. When I met with Professor Czapádi, he told me how my father had survived two death marches. When I asked my mom, "How did he survive?" she told me word for word what he had told me when I was 12. And I said, "That's not the story. That's not it."

She was surprised. "Why didn't he ever tell me?" And I asked, "Why didn't you guys ever tell me?" They had made a decision when they got married that they would never share their Holocaust stories with their children. I'm an only child, and they had promised each other never to tell me their story.

There's a long discussion in Holocaust literature about how survivors choose whether—or how—to educate or share their stories with their children. But my parents decided not to discuss it at all.

Jacobsen: In conversations with other children of Holocaust survivors throughout your life, is that a common theme?

Guiora: Yes. It's a mixed bag. I have friends who, at dinner, the main conversation—not the only one, but a central piece—was the Holocaust. I have other friends who knew more than I did but less than those others. It's a mixed bag. Like me, I also have friends in Israel who knew nothing about their parents' stories.

Recently, I've spoken to about a thousand sixth, seventh, and eighth graders in Salt Lake City about this. Sixth graders—beautifully unfiltered—asked me if I was mad at my parents for not sharing their stories with me. Not at all. I'm not judgmental in the least. It was their decision, and I respect that. But I am glad I now know their story, and I'm in a position to write about it.

Jacobsen: Do you think this significantly influenced the trajectory of your academic and research interests?

Guiora: If you had asked me fifteen years ago, I would have said no. But after training for the marathon and the life-changing question asked by my running partner, there's no doubt about it. It changed everything. For me, all roads—when I examine the enabler—run through the role of the enabler during the Holocaust.

So yes, to your question: 100%, it frames—consciously or unconsciously—how I view the enabler. Without a doubt, that lens is the Holocaust.

What is also important to note—and we can talk about this more—my grandfather, who was murdered in Auschwitz in May of 1944, took four books with him. That's what he had. He took

them because, as they were told, "You're going to be resettled in the East." Those four books somehow made their way from Auschwitz—we don't know how—to the private library of Julius Streicher, who was the editor of *Der Stürmer* and one of the chief Nazi ideologues.

It's an extraordinary story, which we could talk about at length. But those books, eighty years later, are now in my possession. It's an incredible, full-circle story. There have been articles written about it. To your excellent question—yes, the issue of enablers and bystanders for me is completely framed by the Holocaust and my parents' experiences.

Jacobsen: How much do the books cost?

Guiora: Which books?

Jacobsen: The ones from the editor are from Streicher.

Guiora: So it's interesting—Streicher, I've read a lot about him recently. He viewed himself as an expert on Judaism, particularly the Talmud or Jewish scripture. Those are the four books my grandfather took with him.

My father grew up in abject poverty. So when my grandparents—on May 12, 1944—were deported from their town in Hungary to Auschwitz, they were told to bring their belongings. What my grandfather had were books. That's what he took with him. Those were his belongings.

I now have them—not with me where I am currently, but at home—and they're the only thing I have of my grandfather. I don't have any photos, and I don't have anything from my grandmother. I have one picture. Now I have, in my possession, what my grandfather took with him to Auschwitz. My grandparents were gassed—murdered—we believe **on May 26, 1944**.

Streicher, by contrast, was hanged after the Nuremberg Trials. So my grandfather was gassed, and Streicher was eventually sent to the gallows. And now, I have the books. And those four books—for me, it's full circle.

Jacobsen: Why is there this weakness in traditionalist religious structures, where a percentage of highly trained academicians or clergy commit crimes—primarily against two categories: young boys and adult women? In one quadrant, you have pedophilia; in the other, you have sexual assault.

Guiora: I'm not an expert on perpetrators or pedophiles. A significant body of literature about their needs, cravings, attractions, etc. But the larger question—which is the one you're asking—is why the institution enters institutional protection mode.

There are a variety of reasons for that. No institution wants its name splashed across a *New York Times* headline—"Another Priest," "Another Rabbi," "Another Abuser." So, the instinctive response of any institution, including faith-based ones, is *institutional protection mode*.

The enabler within a religious institution—or in sports teams or elsewhere—directly protects the institution. They're indirectly protecting the perpetrator. The perpetrator benefits from the institution being protected. However, the result is the continued vulnerability of the victim. I hate the phrase, but it's pretty literally like leading sheep to slaughter—because the institution must be protected, and the consequences be damned.

It's a pattern that repeats itself repeatedly. Unfortunately, the enabler is never held accountable. Now, again, I'm a law professor. I'm not a moralist. I'm not an anthropologist. I'm not a psychologist. For me, it's all about accountability—through the lens of the law. That's where the Bystander Initiative comes in. The effort is to convince legislators to enact laws that hold enablers criminally accountable. Because otherwise—nothing will change.

Jacobsen: Does the shuffling of clergy over decades inadvertently create the perception that abuse is more prevalent than it is? Say, three out of a hundred clergy are offenders—but if you shuffle those three between multiple parishes, it can appear as if twelve out of a hundred are offenders. These recidivists are not held accountable and keep getting moved.

Guiora: I understand the question. But the point is that the recidivist starts in Parish A, is shuffled to Parish B, and then again to Parish C. Along the way, you have enablers in A, B, and C. The enablers don't care how many priests are perpetrating the crime. That's not the metric. The real question—the only question—is: *How many children are in harm's way?*

It doesn't matter whether there are three, six, or nine priests. What matters is the number of children who are being exposed to harm. The same is true for teachers, who are also shuffled. This only continues to place vulnerable children at risk—that's the cost of enabling.

If you think about Edgar Fredericks—the teacher and principal who murdered Jeremy Bell after over thirty years of abuse—he moved from place to place, from school to school. And who knows how many boys he attacked? It's a lot. He knew that wherever he went, he would be protected by enablers. That protection—sorry for repeating "enable"—allowed him to act with impunity and immunity because he knew he would be shielded. No school administrator or district official wants a banner headline screaming: "Pedophile Teacher, Perpetrator in Our Midst." Nobody wants that.

So, what do they do? They shuffle him off, or they ignore the complaints. That is precisely what happened in his case, and it ultimately resulted in the murder of a child. What kinds of theological excuses are given? What types of standard social excuses are offered? And are those excuses sufficiently distinct to be considered different categories? No. When it comes to the perpetrator, no.

The priest assaulted the Catholic church survivors whom I interviewed. One of the women I interviewed was in high school when the priest attacked her, and she was laughing about it. She's a little bit younger than me. She was laughing about it. She said, "I felt for the oldest line in the world, which was, to know the Lord, you must know my body." She asks, "Can you believe I felt for that?" And she was on this camping trip with her friend.

She says, "My friend, dumb as me, also fell for the same line. Today, we laugh." I don't know if they laugh, but we'll go with a laugh. That's an old line. When I told other church survivors, they said, "Yep."

That line works. "Lord, to know the lord, you must know my body." One of the women who I interviewed was assaulted by the family priest from the age of seven till 14. He was a master groomer. He knew that the family had issues. He locked in on her.

And when it was brought to the mother's attention that the priest was abusing her daughter, the mom said, "Oh, he loves her." That's what groomers do: They do the child and the parent. Another person, a guy who was 12 when he was assaulted. He had a great relationship. This is positive from his perspective. Had a great relationship with the priest.

The priest took advantage of that and was quietly shuffled off. However, the victim I spent significant time with had a great relationship with him. The priest was an important figure in his life and took complete—*nefarious* would be the polite word—nefarious advantage of that. One interviewee even framed it as having "two fathers," a poignant play on words.

Yes. And, basically, not even with much reluctance. The person who committed the abuse was also someone the victim loved. That was part of the abuse. He was a paternal figure in the victim's life—a platonic, paternalistic form of love.

The two victims I've spent significant time with both saw the priest as a genuinely important person in their lives. Absolutely. And that probably makes it more devastating—when they realize that the priest was taking full advantage of what I suppose you could call affection or even adoration.

I don't know. But whether it's a seven-year-old or a twelve-year-old, the last thing in the world a priest should be doing is engaging with them sexually. And when they're simply shuffled off, it means the next victim is just around the corner—which is precisely what happened with the boy, Jeremy Bell. It's clear that the killer, Friedrichs, should never have been in contact with that little boy. That child should never have even seen that teacher.

Friedrichs should have been in jail years earlier. In the same way that, in sports, you have these systems—these *armies of enablers*—I wrote about this in connection with the girls who were assaulted by Dr. Larry Nassar, who was exalted for his work with USA Gymnastics. Or Dr. Richard Strauss at Ohio State: if you wanted to play, you had to see him. Or Dr. Robert Anderson at the University of Michigan—same thing. If you wanted to play, you had to go through Anderson.

These individuals often take full advantage of their positions of authority and are frequently enabled—actively or passively—by the institutions in which they operate. That is why I say that whether it is a school, a church, or a faith-based institution, there tends to be a recurring pattern of behaviour. The perpetrator often feels confident and protected, which emboldens continued abuse.

Perpetrators act with the assurance that they will be shielded from consequences. That is the core issue. While I understand that the media, prosecutors, and the courts focus heavily on the perpetrator—and I have met with many in those systems—the systemic failure often lies in the protection offered by the institution itself.

We must hold the enablers accountable if we are genuinely committed to meaningful change in churches, schools, or any environment. Without that, no real progress can occur.

I was recently asked whether I have seen examples of small church communities or other institutions where the internal culture has changed enough to create safe ecosystems without

relying on external oversight or security. The truth is, I have not. That does not mean such communities do not exist. Still, the people who contact me are almost always victims or survivors—not representatives of successful reforms.

Jacobsen: So, do you have positive examples to point to?

Guiora: No. But again, that may be because individuals in healthy environments are not the ones reaching out. I hear from those who have been harmed.

Jacobsen: Are there differences between religious institutions and other settings, such as sports organizations or schools, when perpetrators are protected?

Guiora: Structurally, no. The pattern remains the same: institutions prioritize their reputation over accountability. However, in faith-based settings, the justification may sometimes involve religious language or spiritual rationalizations—phrases like "know your body, know the Lord." That kind of rhetoric is typically absent from schools or sports environments.

But language aside, the effects are comparable. In all contexts, the harm increases vulnerability for children or other individuals under institutional care. Whether in faith, education, or athletics, the core issue is institutional protection of offenders, not protection of the vulnerable.

Jacobsen: You mentioned Canadian gymnastics.

Guiora: Yes. I was chair of the federal government's Working Group on Gender Equity in Sport, which produced recommendations in 2019. Across the board, we saw the same pattern: harm, denial, and institutional self-preservation.

In religious contexts, the behaviour may be obscured with theological framing. However, regardless of how it is presented, the outcomes are consistent, and to call them merely "damaging" would be an understatement.

What becomes clear when speaking with survivors is the profound injustice they realize in hindsight: they never should have come into contact with the perpetrator in the first place. In many cases, the offender had prior allegations or investigations and remained in their role.

That retrospective awareness is a form of revictimization. Survivors often say, "I never should have met that person," once they understand that the perpetrator could—and should—have been removed long ago. Yet institutional protection kept them in place.

Jacobsen: It reminds me of physicist Richard Feynman's idea of the "paths forward for science." In these institutional cases, we can also imagine paths forward—at least three: faith, sport, and education. However, we remain stuck in repeating the cycle unless we confront the enabling systems.

Regarding survivors' healing arc, I see three general paths. Of course, there's more nuance, but broadly speaking, one path is the most tragic: suicide, self-injury, stagnation—surviving but still very much suffering from the incidents. The second is a state of suspended harm, where people function but remain deeply affected. The third path is thriving. These individuals have integrated the trauma into their narrative and gone on to build fulfilling lives for themselves and often with others. In your experience, what is more likely in these instances?

Guiora: From the people I have interviewed—someone once tried to keep count—I have interacted in one way or another with sexual assault survivors from over 30 countries. I do not have the statistics to break down the proportions of those who remain suffering, those who stagnate, or those who move forward and thrive.

The easy answer is that I would never want to be in their shoes. Some have become powerful advocates, and they deserve every ounce of praise for that.

But people reach out to me—across all three domains, whether faith, sport, or school—as I have been told repeatedly because I focus almost exclusively on the legal culpability of the enabler. I am not saying I am the only one doing it, but I've been told I'm most actively engaged on that issue.

Some survivors have had a tough time. In at least two cases I know personally, family members did not believe them when they came forward, and they took their own lives. Yes, there is anger—but what stands out is how that anger is directed.

When I interviewed the women—who refer to themselves as "girls"—who were assaulted by Larry Nassar, the doctor affiliated with Michigan State and USA Gymnastics, they were not focused on him. Yes, he did terrible things, and he was a predator. But their most profound anger was directed at the enablers. When they begin to reverse engineer what happened and start to articulate it—this is the word survivors often use: *articulate*—it is a turning point.

It is a form of healing, I believe, to understand that as evil as Nassar was—and he was—the broader, more insidious issue was the people who protected him: the coaches, doctors, and trainers who, whether out of self-interest or institutional loyalty, kept him shielded. Those individuals directly or indirectly protected him, whether at Michigan State or within USA Gymnastics. He was the beneficiary of their inaction.

Jacobsen: That same pattern seems to occur in religious contexts as well. The same institutional dynamics exist in church abuse cases. When trying to codify legal frameworks and consequences for enablers, how do we distinguish between degrees of culpability—between those with apparent, intentional complicity and those without?

Guiora: Context is essential to creating a legally sound and morally reasonable framework. When I testified four or five years before the Parliament of Victoria in Australia, I made a mistake—one I now publicly acknowledge. I initially defined the enabler's role as a "crime of omission." But that was incorrect. It is a *crime of commission* because the enabler has *decided not to act*. That choice is itself an act.

For that decision, the enabler must be held criminally accountable. The challenge, from both a jurisprudential and legislative perspective, is that enablers are often not physically present at the scene of the abuse. So, to hold them accountable, you must legally prove that they were aware of the abuse or the risk of abuse and prove *intent* under the standard of *mens rea*, or guilty mind. This is what makes enabler accountability legally complex but no less necessary.

I understand because I have been repeatedly told that pursuing enablers is challenging. I accept that challenge. On the other hand, I am fully aware of the harm enablers cause and the consequences of their actions.

To say that this work is hard does not deter me from pushing forward. When you spend as much time with survivors as I do, you understand the depth of the harm inflicted by enablers. So yes, it is hard—absolutely. But so what? In case after case, I can document instances where the enabler knew what was happening and deliberately chose not to act on behalf of the vulnerable. Instead, they decided to protect the institution. For that, they must be held accountable. That is not a *crime of omission*; that is a *crime of commission*.

This is the same reasoning I used in my recent book, where I examined societal enablers in Hungary, focusing on the period leading up to and during the Holocaust—something I wrote about because of my parents' experiences. I see parallels today in Israel with those enabling Prime Minister Netanyahu. They know the harm he is causing in the same way people knew what was happening eighty years ago.

To hide behind a claim of "lack of knowledge" does not stand up to scrutiny—because I can prove that they *did* know.

Jacobsen: Does this become more complicated when dealing with adult survivors who were abused as children?

Guiora: Absolutely. The people I work with are now adults, but they were harmed when they were children. I applaud them for coming forward—it takes immense courage.

Think about the Michigan State, Penn State, and Ohio State survivors. These were student-athletes. Or consider the survivors of religious institutions or children abused by teachers in schools. Some of them had a tough time moving forward. Not everyone welcomes or supports them.

One woman I spent time with wasn't even sure she was assaulted—she believed she had been in a consensual relationship. It is, sadly, the same old story. She faced, in polite terms, hostile social media attacks from people she went to school with.

Another woman who came forward about Larry Nassar told me—pardon my language; I am quoting her directly—she was "slut-shamed." And only after others came forward confirming her account did they apologize. But the damage was done. There is always a price for speaking out.

Some survivors become emotionally exhausted from being seen as "professional victims." They want to move on with their lives—which I completely understand. One woman said speaking publicly so her children would know her whole story was vital. That is incredibly courageous, and it is not easy by any means.

Some survivors feel strongly that the public should see a name and face attached to the experience—not just "victim." They want to claim their identity and their agency. On the other hand, some prefer anonymity—Jane Doe or John Doe—because they want to protect themselves, their families, and their children. And I fully respect that.

Anyone who comes forward deserves to be applauded and supported—not physically embraced—many do not want that—but embraced in spirit, acknowledged, and believed. That is the least we can do.

Jacobsen: Now, the image we have in our minds, which is statistically substantiated, is men who abuse boys and adult women. So pedophilia in the first instance, as you're noting in, sex results in sex results in the latter. A few cases are not that, and it goes against the stereotypes you have about these things with generalizations. Those are important to cover in case there are any differences. So, for instance, in Canadian media, there was some news about nuns who were in there, I believe, eighties or even nineties, who were going to court because people had come forward against them for abuse.

There might be physical imposition differences in terms of the amount of damage that can be done if there's physical abuse involved. But, when it comes to the stuff in terms of its psychology and, more to your point, more of your expertise around its ecosystem, are there big, small, or no differences? Is it even a reasonable question?

Guiora: No. It's a reasonable question, but for anybody who abuses a child knowing that the institution protects them, it doesn't matter if it's in the church context, whether it's a priest or a nun. I have heard of cases of nuns abusing in the same way that I don't know about in Canada, but there have been several instances here. One of the guys who I interviewed, a little bit older than me, when he was in seventh grade, had sex daily with his female teacher, k, in her house with her husband in the house.

When they met later in life, he asked her, "Do you understand how much harm you caused me?" Her response was, "We have to understand." I hate that line. "You have to understand. You have to understand what a difficult time I was going through."

If you're going through it, you're an adult.

He was 12. However, there are cases of female teachers having sex with high school boys. I don't think it's in the exact numbers as with male teachers, female or female students, or male students, but that's also out there. And when we met, when we talked, sure, there was, "This, maybe, is uncomfortable," but when you were in seventh and eighth grade, there was a cool factor in having sex with your teacher. On the other hand, the harm caused him was significant.

Jacobsen: In your interviews, what words describe the experience? If not specific words, what emotional tones do you use?

Guiora: Well, the best example I can give you is her name. I've written that we've spent many hours together and about her. Her name is Tiffany Thomas.

She was a softball player at Michigan State University. She was violated by Larry Nassar somewhere 50 times, and we were on Skype. I was home in Israel. It's not important where she lives. She starts grabbing her throat.

I'm screaming at her because she's choking.

I'm thinking, "Well, here's the irony of ironies. I'm the bystander guy."

I'm picking up my cell phone. I said, "Who the hell do I call?"

"Barbara, she lives here."

I say, "What the hell do I do?" Screaming at her.

"Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop." She finally stopped.

And I said, "What was that?" She calls me "Mister G."

She said, "Mister G, that's how I wake up every morning."

"What do you mean that's how you wake up every morning?"

She said, "I wake up every morning like that."

I said, "What was that?"

She said, "Well, they're choking me."

I said, "Who's choking you?"

And her answer was one word: "enablers." Not Nassar.

In Tiffany's case, what happened on one Thursday was especially telling when she played softball at Michigan State. She went to the female trainer of the women's softball team. But instead of telling her what Larry Nassar had been doing, she *demonstrated* it—she did to the trainer what Nassar had done to her.

The trainer's reaction was, "Oh my God. Oh my God. This is bad." Well—yes, it wasn't good. The trainer told her, "You need to talk to the head female trainer for all women's sports at Michigan State."

So she did—all by herself, without the first trainer's accompaniment. And that's what enablers do. The head trainer and the coach then conspired and manipulated the situation to frame Tiffany in a way that led to her removal from the team. She left school the very next day and never returned to college.

That choking incident I described earlier happened roughly five years ago. It was *twenty years* after what happened at Michigan State. And yet, she was still waking up every morning with that choking sensation.

When she reverse-engineered it—and we've spent much time together—she had what you might call an "Oh shit"moment. She realized Nassar wasn't just the predator—*he was protected*. She had gone to that trainer and demonstrated, on her own body, precisely what he had done. But instead of saying, "We need to protect Tiffany," the trainer passed her off to someone who ultimately had her removed from the team.

That is what enablers do. And for that, they must be held accountable.

Jacobsen: My impression—based on what you're saying—is that people who have been abused in this way are often in a kind of suspended state. It is not static but almost disassociated, and that dissociation can reemerge at seemingly random moments in the day or throughout the year. To me, the choking phenomenon you described feels like a reenactment.

Guiora: I don't know—I'm not a psychologist. My late father was a psychologist, so it's too late to ask him. But I leave that to those who specialize in it. At my age, I know what I don't know.

What I *do* know—and what I've learned from Tiffany and other survivors—is that the harm caused by enablers is real. That motivates all of my work. It's the foundation of the Bystander Initiative. It's also what drives my research on the Holocaust and my other projects: making the case to the public that this is *real*, actionable harm for which people must be held accountable.

Jacobsen: Are there any legal models in place that address this?

Guiora: I've testified in the Netherlands, Australia, and the United States. In the Netherlands, the process is different. First, they pass the bill, and then they draft the law. So, yes—a law was passed that criminalized the role of the enabler. But unfortunately, the government fell shortly afterward. And politics being politics—much like in Canada this week—it is unclear whether the current Dutch parliament will reenact that law anytime soon.

That was the closest we came, however.

Jacobsen: When assigning punishment—considering both the direct perpetrator and the enabler as culpable—how would you approach the balance? What kind of ratio or weight would you assign?

Guiora: In Utah, where a bill criminalizing enablers was introduced, we did not have success. If I recall correctly, it would have created a Class D misdemeanour—punishable by up to six months in jail and/or a \$1,500 fine. The proposed bystander legislation used the same classification: Class D misdemeanour, six months, and/or \$1,500.

I've given hundreds of talks over the years, and at one of them—though I cannot recall exactly where—a young person, younger than you even, asked me a thoughtful question:

"If you're an enabler to a serious crime, shouldn't you receive a greater punishment than an enabler to a less serious crime? Shouldn't there be a differentiation based on the severity of the offence?"

I shared that question with Representative King in Utah. Ultimately, the decision was made not to differentiate between levels of severity. Under the bill, all enabler offences would be treated equally, regardless of the nature or magnitude of the underlying crime or harm to the victim.

But it's a compelling point. I thought, "That kid's going to be a future law student."

Jacobsen: Can silence—or failure to report—be ethically distinguished in court from a cover-up?

Guiora: That's a critical question. The title of one of my books is either [*Complicity of Silence or The Silence of Complicity*](#)—I can never remember which, and I apologize for that.

But my position is clear: If your silence enables harm, you must be held accountable as someone actively participating. However, you protected the perpetrator—whether through omission or commission—and helped them. That should not require legal or moral differentiation.

Let me add this: I occasionally read criticisms of my work online. It's essential to engage with dissent. Someone once wrote that I am "victim-centric." They meant it as a critique, but I took it as a compliment.

Jacobsen: Are there survivors who defend or excuse enablers? And do enablers themselves offer any other justification beyond "I was just doing my job" or "I was following orders"?

Guiora: No. Sometimes, there are different dynamics, and I have studied a few other cases. But generally, in most of my interactions, survivors—when they do the reverse engineering—realize that, if not for the enabler, the perpetrator could not have acted.

Just the other day, a woman contacted me. I asked her to create a scorecard categorizing enablers, bystanders, and perpetrators. She told me the list of critical enablers in her case was incredibly long.

As for what enablers say, especially during trials: yes, you hear excuses like, "I was just following orders," or "I was a cog in the wheel."

Unfortunately, that echoes Hannah Arendt's treatment of Adolf Eichmann in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where she referred to the "banality of evil." Interpretation gave him a free pass. That was a terrible, unforgivable mistake.

That defence—you were doing your job—does not hold water. It may be used, yes, but it should not be tolerated.

Especially in the era of mandatory reporting, saying "I didn't understand," "I didn't realize," or "I was just doing my job" is entirely insufficient. Your obligation is to the vulnerable individual.

So, to return to your earlier question, we must hold enablers accountable, both legally and morally.

Again, for me, all roads lead through the Holocaust. That line—"I was just following orders"—must never be tolerated, especially given the harm it ultimately enables. You are right to call it out.

Jacobsen: Do survivors feel more emotionally harmed by the abuser, the enabler, or those who ignored them?

Guiora: Yes. By the second group—those who ignored them. One survivor I interviewed at length, Maddie Larson, was sexually violated by Larry Nassar 750 times. You can watch her victim impact statement on YouTube. During her testimony, she looked Nassar in the eye and said, "Do you know how much I fucking hate you?"

And that makes perfect sense. The judge allowed the survivors to speak however they needed to. But from that moment on, Maddie's focus shifted not to Nassar but to the enablers.

I completely understand that. Jamie Dantzscher, an Olympic bronze medalist, also gave a powerful statement. When Nassar began what sounded like an apology, she responded, "How dare you fucking apologize to me?" Then, she moved beyond him and turned her focus to the broader ecosystem of abuse.

I applaud them for speaking their truth. That is not easy.

For context, the last time anyone touched me was in seventh grade—during floor hockey. I have been fortunate never to experience that kind of harm.

Jacobsen: The last time someone laid a hand on me seriously was during a Melchizedek priesthood ceremony in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints—but I'm joking, of course.

Religion still commands respect in most societies—even in North America, where religious authority is declining. There's still legal deference. Financially, too—tax-exempt status, access to grants, and benefits unavailable per capita to secular or humanist institutions. Groups like The Satanic Temple, with their protest-oriented messaging—as in the documentary *Hail Satan?*—highlight those double standards.

So, if we shift our focus away from individual clergy or laity and look instead at institutional structures, do religious institutions have a special legal or cultural protection compared to institutions like USA Gymnastics or Hollywood?

Guiora: Yes—and no. Regarding cultural deference, religious institutions often enjoy a shield of legitimacy, even privilege. But from the survivor's perspective—from those harmed—I have not seen a difference in the magnitude of trauma based on the type of institution.

Whether the abuse occurred in a church, a school, or a sports environment, the psychological damage is profound. The harm itself is the overwhelming constant. I have not observed that survivors measure their suffering based on whether it came from a religious figure, a coach, or a teacher.

Jacobsen: There have been various atheist movements over the years—New Atheism, for example, with Hitchens, Dawkins, Harris, and Dennett; then more militant, online-based versions; and finally, Firebrand Atheism, which was more confrontational. Some of those groups weaponized institutional abuse scandals to attack religion as a whole.

But that seems like an overreach. It is a broad brushstroke—unfair and unhelpful here—especially given that many members of the clergy and laity alike genuinely want reform and accountability.

Guiora: I agree.

Jacobsen: Painting all religious institutions or individuals with the same brush is unfair and counterproductive. Many spiritual leaders have been at the forefront of reform efforts. The conversation must focus on accountability and systemic change, not a blanket condemnation.

In most faith-based institutions, the laity typically does not possess the same formal education or institutional authority as the clergy. That imbalance often creates power dynamics that can be exploited, and sweeping condemnations of all religious participants can be both inappropriate and unhelpful.

So, on a more constructive note, what *is* helpful? How do we move from identifying the flaws to working with communities and institutions for reform, accountability, and justice at the relevant levels—especially concerning these crimes?

Guiora: I do not know if you follow sports, but very often, when misconduct is brought to a coach's attention, the response is: "We'll take care of it internally." I've heard that line a lot. "It's a team problem. We'll handle it."

But that is a huge red flag.

That language—whether intentional or not—protects the institution. It ensures the problem stays quiet and ultimately *enhances the vulnerability* of the individual victim.

There is one case I know of involving a major American university's football team. Some players were engaging in serious misconduct, and one player came forward, calling out what he described as a rape culture. Instead of being supported, the coach gathered the entire team and publicly singled out the whistleblower.

The results were predictable. The player who spoke out was socially shunned, marked with a giant X. As you gestured, it was the code of silence—everyone becoming a "gangster rapper," as you said, embracing silence as loyalty.

That is a textbook case of *complicity of silence* or *silence of complicity*. The fact that the coach led that meeting and shamed the player who dared to speak up—is, to put it politely, damning beyond damning.

Jacobsen: What about external communities? How should they respond? Or do people outside these institutions usually take a "not my backyard" approach—NIMBY?

Guiora: Exactly. That's the attitude many take—unless it is in the headlines or unless it involves a high-profile team or organization. Otherwise, most people look the other way.

But again, I am not an anthropologist, psychologist, or sociologist. I'm just a modest law professor. It comes down to one thing: *criminalizing the actions of the enabler*.

I genuinely believe this: until we do that, nothing will change. The perpetrator *knows* they are protected. And when they know they are protected, they have no reason to change. They feel untouchable. Larry Nassar was untouchable—until he wasn't.

Jacobsen: Let me offer a legal framing. If we assume that laws and policies shape the institutional "ecosystem," is there an even *higher-order* source—something upstream from law and policy that informs the entire system? For example, the philosophical argument: What comes first—the law or the moral code of a society?

Guiora: That's a great question, but I leave it to others. I'm not a philosopher.

I'm efficient. The straightforward way to stop this is to criminalize the enablers' conduct and hold them accountable. I respect the larger moral and philosophical questions and understand their importance, but they're outside my purview. What I know is this: real accountability, codified in law, is what stops the cycle of abuse.

Jacobsen: Is that an admission that, to a carpenter, everything looks like a nail—and to a lawyer, everything looks like the Code of Hammurabi?

Guiora: [Laughing] That's the classic line: "If I had a hammer, I'd have a nail—and I'd call it Simon's son."

But it's a fair question: *How* do you hold people accountable?

Again—not to repeat myself—but while I understand the value of moral and philosophical questions and respect them deeply, my focus is shaped by the lived experiences of people like Tiffany, Maddie, Jamie Dantzcher, and many others. For them, what matters most is this: hold the enablers accountable in a court of law.

That is what grounds my approach. And again, much of my thinking stems from my understanding of the Holocaust.

Jacobsen: There's a conceptual merger between what these survivors have experienced and how I interpret historical accountability—particularly around the Holocaust. For me, it's a *practical, grounded* analysis.

Let us consider two cases. One on the global-historical scale and one more parochial.

After World War II, we developed new legal codes and held the Nuremberg Trials. These served as a preventive mechanism against future atrocities—on the scale of genocide and crimes against humanity.

Meanwhile, at the more local level, corporal punishment—justified through "spare the rod, spoil the child" interpretations—was once widespread. Legal reform and social shifts have challenged that. In both cases, has the law reduced the incidence of harm in the long run?

Guiora: Nuremberg was of *supreme* importance. It was the first real opportunity for a post-conflict society to demonstrate vigorous justice—and to hold individuals criminally accountable for their roles in war and genocide.

Did Robert Jackson and others envision the long-term, historical impact of the trials? That, I do not know. I do not know enough to say.

But did they recognize the immediate necessity of accountability? Absolutely.

Did the Nuremberg Trials hold the Nazis accountable? Yes.

Was the denazification process—especially in the 1950s and 1960s—flawed? Certainly, but Justice Jackson's focus was clear: those responsible for the Holocaust and for Nazi crimes must be held accountable. That was the priority.

I don't know if there was also a broader historical vision. But from a legal perspective, this was one-plus-one-equals-two: you commit the crimes, you are held accountable.

Jacobsen: That makes sense. Now—playing the hypothetical New York politician here for a moment—let us say we imagine a large-scale, long-term *educational* initiative. One focused not on punishment but on prevention.

Let us say that one U.S. state allocates \$10 million toward a multi-year program. Schools dedicate one or two days each year to teaching students how to recognize abuse, identify enabling behaviour, and avoid becoming passive bystanders.

Would that be worthwhile? Could that work?

Guiora: That would be enormously valuable.

Jacobsen: In the Canadian Armed Forces under the Royal Canadian Navy, there are significant efforts towards culture change—similar to efforts underway in Japan, the U.K., Australia, Canada, and other countries—focused on how to address sexual assault in military contexts.

The challenge is that military personnel are technically subject to military and civilian law. So, theoretically, the disincentives should be doubled compared to the civilian population—but the outcomes do not always reflect that.

Let me focus on education—in hierarchical structures like the military or more lateral ones like public education systems. Do you think educational interventions could work in these environments? Are there examples of successful models?

Guiora: I would say that education and engagement—legitimate and unquestionably necessary—have a place. But they should never come instead of accountability.

As someone who served in the military for 20 years—in Israel and the United States—I know firsthand that military law is distinct from civilian law. I served as a JAG officer, so I lived it.

You can lecture, train, educate—I have done that many times. But at the end of the day—and maybe this is my legal background speaking—accountability is essential.

That does not mean education is unimportant. It is. But it is complementary, not a substitute. Training is helpful; it can reinforce values and awareness. However, it is not sufficient to change institutional behaviour.

In criminal law, which I teach, we emphasize deterrence. Punishment is not just about penalizing an individual—it is about sending a message to others.

That is why I believe, without reservation, that if we want to change enabling behaviour, we need to hold enablers accountable—and publicize it. Please put it on the front page of *The Globe and Mail*, metaphorically speaking. Otherwise, nothing will change.

Jacobsen: A follow-up on deterrence. The real question is not whether it works but *how much* deterrence works. For example, a 200-year sentence versus a 20-year sentence: beyond a point, the deterrent effect diminishes.

Guiora: Of course. I will leave Old and New Testament discussions to those better versed in scripture. I hang my hat on what I've seen proposed in Utah: a Class D misdemeanour—six months in jail and/or a \$1,500 fine. That is enough to send a clear message. If we were talking about Methuselah, sure—then maybe we would need different deterrents. But for the average person, this kind of consequence is serious.

Jacobsen: Let's say you implement that Class D misdemeanour. Add the \$1,500 fine, which—especially in Canadian dollars—would be significant. Add six months of jail time. Then, supplement it with educational programs—not as a primary tool, but as a supportive one. That seems solid. What else do you consider helpful? You're approaching this from a legal deterrence, public education, and engagement standpoint. What complements those efforts?

Guiora: Public exposure. The brighter the light we shine on enablers and the consequences of their actions, the better.

When I speak with people about enablers, it is often the first time they have considered the issue that way. Their reaction is often, "Oh—wow." That realization is powerful. I can make a modest contribution by working with legislators and engaging with media, podcasters, and people like you.

I have done this in Israel, and more recently, my work has been cited in public demonstrations and on social media. Visibility matters, but it is a constant effort. You are right—there is a critical need to educate. I view that as a modest use of my platform as a law professor. That is what I do with it. So when I get up at 4:00 in the morning and go to bed late at night, this is what I do—day in and day out.

Jacobsen: With all these media interactions, many assumptions are inevitably floating around, but there are also taboos. What topics remain off-limits, even in a subject area already so sensitive? It feels like walking into a media room full of bear traps hidden on the floor and meat behind the walls. Earlier today, someone told me I was addressing issues they didn't quite call taboo, but they used *verboden*.

Guiora: Yes, that resonates. I am sixty-eight years old—as of thirty days ago. This is what I do now. This is what I consider my modest contribution.

At my age, you stop caring whether someone gets upset. If, through my efforts—or through the extraordinary work of the 20+ students who have worked with me over the past three years—we can move the needle, even slightly, it has been worthwhile.

As we say in Yiddish, it cannot get better than that. But yes, it isn't easy. It is hard work. And I am deeply, deeply grateful to the students who have worked on this with me. I raised funds to support them, and I have a dean who is incredibly supportive of this initiative.

It is a process.

Jacobsen: What about the high-profile cases that dominate the headlines—cases that shape public understanding more than anything else—but then, a few years later, the consequences are significantly reduced?

Take Bill Cosby, for instance. In 2023, he was released. That case could be considered Tier One—hugely public and predatory.

Guiora: If I recall correctly—and here I'm speaking cautiously because I don't want to overstate anything—I did not interact directly with any of the Cosby victims. I believe one may have contacted me, but I am not certain.

I understand that his release came about because of a procedural or technical issue related to due process or a jury-related matter. But I honestly don't know the details. And at my age, if you don't know, you say so.

Jacobsen: What about Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell?

Guiora: Maxwell—was she an enabler? Perhaps both?

Either way, jail is the right place for her. As for Epstein—was it suicide or murder? We could sit here until your hair looks like mine and still not get to the bottom of that. But yes, the Epstein case is *classic*—a classic example of institutional protection, elite silence, and systemic failure.

Jacobsen: I have a couple of friends in the Mega Society in the United States, and one case that came up in my discussions with them was Keith Raniere—known as "Vanguard" in the NXIVM cult. There's a documentary about him called *The Vow*.

It was interesting to watch what unfolded while working on these interviews. Raniere surrounded himself with a group of women who revered him almost worshipfully. One of the inner circles was called DOS—which stood for a Latin phrase meaning "master over slave" or something along those lines.

The women were branded like cattle with his initials near their groins. Many of them had sexual relationships with him. One of them was actress Allison Mack, known from the *Superman* TV series *Smallville*. She became one of the central figures in that inner circle.

Jacobsen: I was also going to ask you about that particular case, but we can set it aside. Let's get more specific. Outside of the national or federal level, are any U.S. states significantly better at effectively punishing enablers or enforcing deterrence? Do enablers in certain jurisdictions know there will be consequences?

Guiora: No. No state has yet criminalized the enabler. This is new ground. We'll see where it leads. A bill was introduced in Utah, but it did not succeed. I am currently in direct and indirect contact with legislators in four other states, exploring similar legislation. It is a process, and we will see where it goes.

Again, not to repeat myself, but this is what I do. The fact that there is more engagement on this issue—more willingness from legislators or their staff to have the conversation—is encouraging. It does not guarantee success, but it shows progress.

I respect the process. I understand it. Before I went to law school, I worked for two years in the U.S. Congress as a representative from Michigan, so I know how legislation works. Still, because I focus on victims, I believe this is the best use of my time—modest though it may be.

Jacobsen: What are the counterarguments you regularly face when making the case for punitive legislation against enablers?

Guiora: The typical legal objections focus on proving intent and knowledge. That is, distinguishing between a *crime of omission* and *commission*. The question is: *How do you prove that someone knew? How do you prove they intended to shield the perpetrator?*

These are classic prosecutorial challenges. Five main objections are also commonly raised against bystander legislation—although we've made some progress in overcoming those. However, the central objection to enabler legislation is always about *proof of knowledge and intent*.

Take, for example, the case of Jeremy Bell—a young boy who was killed. I wrote a book and an article about that case. The detective who broke it was extraordinary. He entrusted me with 15,000 pages of documents.

My research assistant at the time worked through all of it and developed an appendix with detailed flowcharts. We could demonstrate, step by step, *exactly when* the enablers knew. That kind of documentation helps overcome the "lack of knowledge" defence.

But make no mistake—15,000 pages is a massive undertaking. Turning that into charts, timelines, and legal diagrams requires time, people, and resources. I am so profoundly grateful to the students who have worked with me. It is a big project, but it is essential.

Jacobsen: Is there a strange feedback loop in which perpetrators might defend their enablers to reduce their culpability—or at least weaken the case's legitimacy overall?

Guiora: In the sense that the perpetrator might say, "They knew and did nothing"? Yes, that's possible. But no, I have not personally seen perpetrators trying to defend enablers as a way of downplaying their guilt. That may exist, but it has not come up in the cases I have worked on.

I am not saying it does not happen; I have not seen it personally. So, I am not saying no; I have not heard it. You also rightly noticed that we have used the word *enablers* in the plural far more than the singular during this conversation.

Jacobsen: That is right. So, apart from a perpetrator protecting an enabler, do enablers protect one another?

Guiora: If Detective Barber—the man who broke the Jeremy Bell case—were here, he would tell you *yes—one* hundred percent. He would say they are part of the same club. But, to put on my legal hat for a moment—if I cannot prove it, I cannot prove it.

Mr. Barber, who worked on the case for three years and broke it after local law enforcement had covered it up, has said clearly that enablers protect one another. They are part of the same professional or institutional milieu, the same scheme, if you will.

In *The Crime of Complicity*, I wrote that this was Mr. Barber's view. While I cannot independently prove it, I included it in the book to reflect his perspective. Readers need to understand that this view is grounded in deep investigative experience.

Jacobsen: When enablers get a whiff of potential punishment, do they ever quit or try to disappear?

Guiora: Yes—but here is the point: *no enabler has ever been punished*. So yes, you're right—that instinct to flee or vanish may be real, but we have no legal or judicial structure to test it. That is the core of this entire effort: to change that paradigm.

Jacobsen: If you were to set a realistic timeline—under decent circumstances—how long until such legislation passes in at least one state, county, province, or territory?

Guiora: Where are we now, 2025? I want to think *next year*.

Jacobsen: If people begin pursuing the broader circle around the perpetrator—those enabling or shielding them—is there a risk that those same enablers will retaliate by attacking the victim or isolating the survivor's support system?

Guiora: Absolutely. That dynamic is very real.

Let me give you a concrete example. I just finished a book about the enablers of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. I do not know how closely you follow current events, but as of now, 59 hostages are being held in Gaza. Of those, 24 are believed to be still alive.

Netanyahu, in my view, has no interest in pursuing a ceasefire or an agreement with Hamas—because doing so would require releasing those hostages. His enablers—those around him—protect him from the political consequences of *not* securing their release. As a result, they are complicit.

They are enabling the continued captivity of those hostages. From my perspective, they have *blood on their hands*. That is the central theme of the book. And yes, I am involved in the protest movement. I attend demonstrations regularly. I am active. Have the police harassed me? Yes. Have Netanyahu supporters harassed me? Yes. Have I been named in social media campaigns? Absolutely.

At a recent demonstration in Haifa, one of the speakers even mentioned me by name. But again, I stay focused because the priority is the hostages. Your question is timely. When you go after enablers, especially those who protect influential individuals, there is always a risk of backlash. But that does not change the need to hold them accountable. In Israel, I am calling for legislation that would criminally prosecute those enablers—just as I am doing in the United States.

For me, there is a direct and unmistakable link between the Holocaust, the hostages, and the enablers. One hundred percent. That connection is central to my work. And part of that is this project—criminalizing enablers—whether in one of the three core paradigms we've discussed (faith, sport, education) or now, even more urgently, in national and political contexts like Israel. I am serious about this. I start my day at 3:30 or 4:00 a.m. This is what I do. It is an *all-hands-on-deck* effort.

Jacobsen: Where does the media miss the boat?

Guiora: I would not say the media 'misses the boat.' I think the attention has historically focused on the *perpetrator*, and I understand why. That is what makes headlines. However, I am grateful that there is growing interest in the role of enablers.

I was recently featured on a podcast in Israel—actually, two: one major show in February or March and another just last week. I'm interviewed regularly here as well. I understand this is a process. I respect that.

Rome wasn't built in a day. Mao had his long march. Gandhi had his. I get it. That's why we created the Bystander Initiative. I've tapped into donors and raised money for this work. The media is part of that process. I do not know if "teaching" the press is correct, but I believe in engaging and working with them.

And I enjoy it. In addition to writing my articles and books, I genuinely enjoy talking to the media. It matters. Whether people agree with me or not is less important at my age. The point is to be *heard*, make the argument, and push the conversation forward.

Jacobsen: A typical dynamic in these systems is "power over"—where someone in a position of authority abuses someone of lesser power. Think of coach to gymnast, priest to parishioner, rabbi to follower, etc. But are there situations where that dynamic is reversed—where the subordinate has control or influence, but the relationship still appears legitimate?

Guiora: Yes, absolutely, I understand what you're asking.

In the cases I have worked on, survivors were often *directed* to people like Larry Nassar. They were told to go to him. Sometimes, they even wanted to go to him because he was loved. That's an important point to remember. Larry Nassar was *trusted* and *beloved* by many.

Take Dr. Robert Anderson at the University of Michigan. He sexually assaulted somewhere between 5,000 to 6,000 student-athletes. If you were a football player at Michigan, you had to go through Anderson. There was no choice. You weren't invited—you were *instructed*.

The same goes for Dr. Richard Strauss at Ohio State. You had to go through Strauss to wrestle or swim competitively. That's just how it was. Was there a power dynamic? Yes. And even among the football players, there was an expression among the football players at the University of Michigan. There was a saying: "*If you're in the tub, you're not in the club.*"

It meant that if you were in physical therapy, you were off the field—and everyone wanted to be *on* the field. These were guys who dreamed of going to the NFL. But to play on Saturday, you had to be cleared as healthy. And to be removed, you had to see Dr. Anderson. And if Anderson touched you inappropriately—grabbed you this way or that way—that was just the *cost*. It wasn't perfect. Larry Nassar? Maddie Larson said he sexually violated her 750 times. That is not a typo. That is reality.

Jacobsen: I worked at a horse farm for 27 months as part of another project. Seven days a week—shovelling horse manure, scrubbing stall fronts, filling water buckets, breaking ice in the Canadian winter, feeding hay—Timothy, alfalfa, or local hay, depending on each horse's digestion. Driving tractors, landscaping, gardening. It was a great experience. I interviewed many people—up to and including two members of Team Canada in show jumping.

Out of that came a book project involving extended conversations with equestrians. One relevant thing I learned is that the show-jumping community implemented a program called *SafeSport*.

Guiora: Yes, absolutely—SafeSport.

Jacobsen: Is *SafeSport* effective?

Guiora: I have interacted with SafeSport. Anything that pushes this issue out into the public sphere is essential. Effectiveness can be measured in different ways—short-term and long-term, by who is impacted and who is not. But I want to give a shout-out to SafeSport for elevating the conversation.

They deserve credit. They've had me participate in some of their sessions or internal engagements—I do not recall all the specifics—but I've been involved. This work is essential.

Jacobsen: Could similar programs be applied outside of sports—perhaps in education, faith settings, or elsewhere—as complementary measures?

Guiora: As part of a broader public awareness effort? Absolutely. But not as a replacement for legislation. That is the key. Programs like SafeSport are complementary, not substitutes. SafeSport is an excellent example of a helpful model, but it cannot stand alone. It must be accompanied by legal mechanisms that hold people accountable.

Jacobsen: Let's go back to legislation. Hypothetically, what would be an example of going too far? In other words, what kind of law would be inappropriately punitive to these crimes?

Guiora: Great question. I believe the line would be crossed if a prosecutor—using discretion—brought charges against someone who *did not know*.

That would be casting the net too broadly. It would not be, and the courts would view that with disfavour. It would also risk negative, unintended consequences—like chilling legitimate professional behaviour or overburdening the justice system.

We must be precise. Look at the article we published on the Jeremy Bell case—we *carefully* delineated exactly who knew what and when. That specificity matters.

Jacobsen: Would such prosecutorial overreach happen often—or would it be rare?

Guiora: It is scarce. And again, that is where prosecutorial discretion becomes critical.

The prosecutor ultimately decides once legislation exists and a case is brought forward. I completely respect that role. It is essential.

Guiora: I was a prosecutor in a former life. So I'll tell you this: if you have the legislation, and if I, as a prosecutor, can show knowledge, intent, *mens rea*—all of it—then there's no reason not to go forward with prosecution.

But go back to what I told you earlier. In X years, you'll have this conversation with someone else, and *nothing will have changed*.

And in the meantime, there will be countless additional victims—*entirely preventable*. That's why I've been accused of being "victim-centric." I can live with that.

Here's how I see it: I am the only child of two Holocaust survivors. And now that I know what I know—if I weren't doing this, I would be nothing more than a bystander. An enabler. And *that's not going to work*. That does not sit right with me.

This is not about me. But I also can *not* be involved. Every time someone reaches out to me—and it happens a lot—they get my full, undivided attention. That's the reason.

Jacobsen: It may not be about you, but every aperture has a narrative source. Let me ask: where is *prosecutorial discretion* typically the most difficult to parse?

Guiora: *Knowledge.* Without question. And prosecutors—look, I get it. I've been one. The decision involves more than just the facts. It's about time, resources, and cost-benefit analysis. Can you win the case?

I've met with prosecutors and spoken with them at length and understand their thinking. I used to think that way myself. But again, it comes down to whether you can establish knowledge and intent. The Bell case is a classic example. But that kind of framework can also be built in other cases—just as rigorously.

Jacobsen: "Armies of Enablers"—tell me about the title.

Guiora: Lindsey Lemke, the women's gymnastics team captain at Michigan State University, coined the term "armies." I kept using the word "*army*"—singular—and she got frustrated. She said, "Jesus, it's *armies*. How fucking stupid are you?"

And she was right. Everywhere she turned, someone was protecting Nassar. Everyone fell in line with the coach, trainer, administrator—*tuck, tuck*. That's how I came to view it: the book's title, *Armies of Enablers*, honours Lindsey. From the victims' perspective, it was never one person. It was always plural. Always an army.

Jacobsen: For prosecutors, that's a high bar.

Guiora: Sure, and I get that. However, my focus remains squarely on the present victim and preventing future victims. And just so it's clear—though I know I've said this fourteen times—the Holocaust plays a foundational role in my understanding of all this. I know what happens when society chooses *not* to act.

Jacobsen: People engaged in this work often face an emotional and moral toll. Does that happen to you?

Guiora: No. Honestly, no. I feel *fortunate* to be involved in this work. I don't experience it as a toll. When I'm done for the day, I will watch the NBA and have dinner. That's it.

Jacobsen: [Laughing] That's good. Let's do that. Final question—do you have a favourite quote?

Guiora: It isn't very easy. My favourite quote is a play on a quote from a complicated person. But for this conversation?

All hands on deck. There you have it.

Jacobsen: There you go. Thanks for joining me.

Guiora: Thank you for having me. That was fun.

Rev. Dr. John C. Lentz Jr.: Clergy Abuse, Church Reform, and Accountability

Rev. Dr. John C. Lentz Jr. served over 30 years as Lead Pastor of Forest Hill Presbyterian Church in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. Known for passionate preaching, community leadership, and a commitment to justice and compassion, he profoundly shaped the Church's mission before retiring in 2024 after a celebrated ministry. Lentz reflects on his 30-year tenure at Forest Hill Presbyterian Church, where he inherited the traumatic legacy of sexual abuse by a former associate pastor. Lentz details the Church's response—early efforts at acknowledgment, limited legal options, and survivor support—highlighting the structural weaknesses in denominational accountability. He explores systemic patterns of abuse across denominations, including the role of clerical authority, enabling networks, and institutional cover-ups. Drawing from neuroscience, psychology, and theology, Lentz emphasizes the importance of independent investigations, seminary reform, and third-party oversight. He warns against simplistic narratives that scapegoat Catholicism alone and calls for nuanced, data-driven reform efforts across religious institutions. He discussed how virtues like compassion and forgiveness, without accountability, can become vulnerabilities. Both advocate for cultural and institutional reforms rooted in moral clarity, survivor support, and transparent justice processes. The dialogue ultimately calls for partnership—not polarization—in addressing clergy abuse.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So, you are a former pastor at Forest Hill Presbyterian Church. What is the story there? We can use that as a context for a broader conversation about a wider phenomenon.

Rev. Dr. John Lentz: Yes. I served as pastor at Forest Hill Church for thirty years, from 1994 to 2024. During my final interview before being offered the position, the search committee told me something they felt I needed to know. They said, “John, we need to tell you this because it might affect your decision to come here.” They explained that a previous associate pastor had been involved in the sexual abuse of youth in the congregation.

That wasn't comforting to hear. Here is what I learned so from personal knowledge: In 1977, Reverend Dale Small became the associate pastor at Forest Hill Church. He came from another congregation in the Detroit area of Michigan. His primary responsibilities were overseeing the confirmation program and leading retreat and camping ministries. He served in that role until 1981.

Afterward, he retired and was granted the honorary title of pastor emeritus. He moved to North Carolina following his retirement. In 1984, he organized a reunion-style camping trip for former youth members of Forest Hill Church in North Carolina. During that event, one former youth participant—by then in his twenties—experienced a resurgence of traumatic memories related to prior abuse. He left the trip and returned home.

Later that year, he and his parents sent a letter to the Church's governing body (the session) reporting that Dale Small had sexually abused him. The letter also mentioned other possible victims, although it is unclear how many individuals were named or how those claims were verified.

When I joined the Church in 1994, ten years after that disclosure, I learned that the session at the time had responded by engaging a consultant—though I do not know their name—to assess what actions should be taken to support the congregation, particularly its youth. They also reportedly sent letters to families whose children had been part of the youth group or confirmation classes during that period, asking whether anything inappropriate had occurred.

It was reported that at least half a dozen boys came forward, identifying themselves as victims of abuse. Many of these boys came from homes where the father was absent or where the family structure had been disrupted. All of the reported victims were male.

Even years later, I encountered the impact of this traumatic history. One individual told me he had been abused not directly by Reverend Small but by someone who had themselves been abused and possibly groomed by Small. I also became close to someone a few years younger than me who eventually disclosed that he had been one of the victims. He confided in me and described the abuse in detail.

His account matched what is now known to be common patterns in clergy abuse cases: identifying vulnerable boys, assuming the role of a surrogate father figure, using pastoral authority to gain trust, showing excessive attention, and initiating inappropriate physical contact during church retreats—starting with massages and escalating to sexual abuse.

As more stories emerged, it was essential to support survivors in any way I could. I recall one conversation with a survivor in which I said, “Whatever you need, I will help. Let’s pursue justice if that’s what you want.” By that time, Reverend Small had passed away so that any legal recourse would have been limited. Still, the priority was to provide acknowledgment, support, and whatever healing was possible.

There was also a statute of limitations, and unfortunately, it was heartbreaking. The abuse survivor did not want to proceed. He still had such mixed and conflicted emotions about this man—someone he said he loved and who, he believed, loved him. You can imagine the emotional complexity and heartbreak that comes with hearing something like that.

Then Dale Small died, so pursuing anything in a legal sense became moot. I did ensure, however, that he was no longer listed as pastor emeritus. I also informed our local presbytery, which removed Dale Small from the rolls as a retired and honourably retired pastor.

I have probably left out many details, but that’s the general account. That part is fact—that is what I know to be true. What lies in the murkier areas—and this is what makes it so difficult—is that there were some alleged incidents of misconduct at Dale Small’s previous Church in Michigan. Now, my predecessor—whom I overall have great respect for and who was a prominent leader in this community—knew Dale Small personally. He was the one who called and invited him to serve at Forest Hill Church.

I cannot say with any degree of certainty, and I have no evidence, that he knew of the abuse or that he was abused. But, from what I understand, he may have been a classic enabler.

Jacobsen: I believe Margaret Atwood was asked in an interview last year about Alice Munro. She said something about boundaries in response to a question about that situation. She did the

interview. She was asked about Alice Munro, who has passed away. The interviewer mentioned that Munro's daughter was abused by her stepfather when she was a single digit age. Someone brought this to Munro's attention at the time, but she did not act. Atwood's response was something along the lines of, "I was a professional friend, not a confidant."

Does that kind of analysis apply to your friend as well?

Lentz: Which friend do you mean? The contemporary friend or the pastor?

Jacobsen: The older pastor—your predecessor.

Lentz: I do not know. When the allegations surfaced, my predecessor said he was not aware of them. To his credit—and this is based on what I've heard—he did not attempt to block any investigation. I know several of the church leaders from that time, including the church attorney.

To the best of my knowledge, my predecessor did not attempt to hinder any of the investigations into the allegations. Nor, to my knowledge, did he defend Pastor Small publicly or in any official letters. I do not want to say more than that because I genuinely do not know. One other piece, which I admit could be me defending my institution—and I recognize that possibility—but I will put it out there. Since these events occurred before my tenure, I can view them with some degree of objectivity and a certain distance.

I believe that Forest Hill Church's response to supporting victims was one of the earlier public acknowledgments of sexual abuse within the Presbyterian Church. I am not sure if it made national news. Still, I do think it contributed to a shift in the atmosphere within the denomination. It helped initiate the process of establishing guardrails and accountability measures for clergy, lay leaders, and all church employees. That much, I believe, is true. So, that's that part of the story.

Another related experience occurred about fifteen years ago—I can provide you with the exact dates. As part of my responsibilities within the presbytery, I served as the chair of the Permanent Judicial Commission, essentially functioning as the chief justice for that body. Charges were brought against a currently serving pastor.

What was interesting—and, in some ways, troubling—was how the authority of the Presbyterian Church functioned in that context. While there are sound theological and ecclesial reasons for this structure, there was a failure of process. Ultimately, we could only remove his ordination. We had no authority to initiate legal proceedings, and we, as the presbytery, could not bring criminal charges ourselves, as I understood it.

Once this pastor renounced the jurisdiction of the Church under Presbyterian canon law, we were unable to pursue the matter further. The policy has since changed. Now, I believe we are required to retain investigative files for a designated number of years so that in the event of a criminal trial, our findings and testimony can be used as evidence.

Jacobsen: What have you observed as *not helpful* in other denominations' responses to abuse cases?

Lentz: Let me think about that for a moment. I would say this, and I want to be careful. I understand the deep trust that exists between a parishioner and a pastor and how meaningful that relationship is—especially in contexts involving confession or personal disclosure.

In the Presbyterian Church, we do not treat confession the same way the Roman Catholic Church does. However, I believe that using a pastoral or confessional setting to protect a perpetrator is entirely unacceptable. That kind of confidentiality should *not* be used to shield someone from justice.

I know that in some parts of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Roman Catholic Church, there is still a strong emphasis on absolute confidentiality in such contexts, even when crimes are confessed. That greatly concerns me.

Other issues are more anecdotal. For example, I believe many pastors—myself included, at times—can have an inflated sense of both ego and expertise. Some pastors begin to think they are a person’s primary psychological therapist. But I am not a therapist—I am a pastor. My role, at best, is to triage and then refer people to professionals who are trained in mental health care.

So, when pastors assume too much authority—whether because of how they interpret scripture or the power given to them by their role—they sometimes overstep. That is dangerous. Accountability is essential.

We now have a system in place in the Presbyterian Church where pastors are designated legal reporters. If I hear of abuse, I am required to report it. If an accusation is made against me, a formal process begins. It involves the clerk of the session—who is the top layperson in the Church—and the associate pastor, among others. There are clearly defined steps now.

There is a whole process for adjudicating these kinds of accusations. Therefore, any denomination that lacks a clear and transparent process should be held accountable in some way. I’m not sure what that accountability would look like in every case. Still, at the very least, they should be publicly called out—shamed, even—for failing to take these issues seriously.

Another significant gap I see is in seminaries. I still do not believe that enough is being taught about the seriousness of sexual abuse in church contexts—how to hold oneself accountable, how to hold others accountable, and how to actively create a culture where abuse does not occur under your care. That is a structural problem that needs urgent attention.

Jacobsen: Are there areas where there is such hypervigilance that it becomes counterproductive—where it reflects broader cultural anxiety rather than actual prevention?

Lentz: Yes, that is a great question. One of the unfortunate byproducts of necessary hypervigilance—because it *is* needed—is that it can sometimes create a feeling of suspicion or fear that deters good people from volunteering.

Take, for example, a family with two children in Sunday school. The parents want to help out, but now they are required to go through multiple steps, including a criminal background check, safety training, abuse prevention protocols, and more. None of these are inherently evil. They are reasonable and necessary measures that send a clear message: “We take this seriously. We want to protect your child and you.”

But on the flip side, it can also unintentionally send a different message: “There must be a real problem here if the safeguards are *this* extensive.” That perception, although unintended, has deterred some well-meaning volunteers.

Another example is how we set specific guidelines in Forest Hill Church’s child safety policy. We outlined exactly how many adults must be present in a room, who is allowed to escort children to the bathroom, who can drive them, and who can supervise them. But inevitably, gray areas arise.

Say a father is volunteering, and everyone else has gone home. One child remains, and the parents have not arrived yet. The volunteer calls to report the situation, and the response used to be something like, “Thank you for checking in—please go ahead and take little Johnny home.” Today, in that same situation, I might think, “Have we now created a liability risk or a situation where something could go wrong?”

That said, in my experience as a pastor, most people appreciate how far we go to protect children. More and more parents today, when searching for a church, are actively asking whether we have a sexual misconduct policy, whether our Sunday school teachers are trained, and what our prevention strategies are. So, no—I do not think the hypervigilance has been a net negative in my experience.

Jacobsen: Do you think third-party investigations are essential in these cases? Independent reviews beyond the Church itself.

Lentz: Third-party investigations are vital. You can have all the internal reforms and guardrails in place, but without independent review, it lacks credibility. Even from a purely public standpoint, it is essential.

When something happens at a church, you cannot simply handle it internally. You have to be willing to make that call—to law enforcement or an external body. Yes, it might create bad optics, but that is the cost of doing the right thing. Transparency is not optional; it is the moral and ethical price you pay for being entrusted with people’s lives and trust.

It would be hard—I am not saying it would not be difficult. As a pastor, I might very well know the person involved. They may have texted me; I may have attended social engagements with them; I may have even officiated at their child’s wedding. I can imagine how excruciating that would be. But even so, we cannot just say no. If a crime has been committed or alleged, you have to follow through with it—no matter how personally painful it may be.

Jacobsen: From a pastoral point of view, what do you think were the motivations behind the policies of silence or secrecy instituted by some denominations—especially the Catholic Church—when they reassigned clergy to other parishes after misconduct or when they attempted quiet reintegration?

Lentz: Obviously, this is speculative. I do not have direct evidence, so I want to acknowledge that upfront. But I can speak based on what I have observed and discussed with others. The theological or ecclesiastical justification, particularly in Catholicism, often revolves around the

sanctity of the confessional. The idea is that when someone confesses their sins to a priest and God, that moment is sacred and protected. The confessional is meant to be inviolable.

I do know priests who would respond to such a confession by saying, “You committed a crime. You need to turn yourself in.” That is, in my view, an appropriate and responsible response—and I am sure that has happened in some cases. But the reality is that nothing in Catholic doctrine requires the priest to report the crime, even if they know someone has been seriously harmed.

So, you end up with a situation where the confessor might receive absolution, but what happens to the victim? What about restoration? Repentance is not just about the sinner; it has to include the harmed party. Any serious conversation on this issue must include the question of repair—what restoration and justice look like for the victim.

Restorative justice models can be effective in some instances. There may be a time when the parties come together for a mediated conversation. I do not want to push that as a universal solution—it may not be right in many cases—but I can imagine that, for some, it could be a moment of grace.

What absolutely must end is the simplistic, linear model of “I confess, I’m sorry,” and the priest says, “Say five Hail Marys, and you’re forgiven.” That is spiritual malpractice. That’s not justice—it is a distortion of forgiveness. We have to stop perpetuating that.

This problem—of minimizing clergy misconduct—was not unique to Catholicism. It occurred in many denominations. There was a time when someone like Pastor Dale would be described as “overworked” or “stressed,” and people would say he had “poor boundaries.” The solution was often to give him a week off and place him in a new context, hoping that everything would work out.

That is unacceptable. In the Presbyterian Church today, according to our *Book of Order* and our broader system of governance, such quiet reassignment is no longer permitted.

Does it ever still happen? Unfortunately, probably. But we now have strict guidelines. If any allegations are made, they must be reported to the presbytery. The presbytery must then inform any other presbytery to which the accused might be seeking transfer. That creates a system of accountability where the receiving presbytery is also obligated to act.

Indeed, this type of reassignment has significantly declined in the Presbyterian Church. I do not have complex numbers to offer, but I can say with confidence that the process today is much more rigorous.

Jacobsen: What about the broader implications of these patterns—especially outside of Presbyterian structures?

Lentz: Yes, one of the lingering effects we continue to see—especially in non-Presbyterian contexts, and primarily within the Catholic Church—is the legacy of institutional protectionism. That damage is still unfolding, and I believe it will take generations to address fully.

Jacobsen: An example of institutional failure is the silence, cover-up, and the practice of moving clergy to new parishes. From a mathematical point of view, let’s say you have two abusive clergy

members out of 100. If those two are quietly moved around four times to different parishes, that inflates the perception.

What happens is that, although the actual number of perpetrators is two, it begins to look like 10 different parishes have had abuse cases. So it now appears—incorrectly—that 10 out of 100 parishes have had abuse, when in fact it is still only two out of 100. But in the process, justice is delayed, additional harm may be caused, and the institutional reputation is severely damaged.

Do we have any approximate numbers of clergy involved? Because I know it is a sensitive topic. And I think part of the problem is that when this issue was taken up by some of the more strident “New Atheist” voices, it became a tool to bash the entire Church—rather than a sincere attempt to work toward reform.

The better approach would be to work *with* the innocent clergy and the victims to set up institutional reform while also respecting freedom of religion and belief. What has been your experience with the numbers? Is there any insight you can offer?

Lentz: That’s an important point, and I agree—the goal should be to work *with* people, not against them, and to protect both accountability and religious freedom. Now, I can only speak from my experience, which is a small sample size. But in my 30 years of serving in this presbytery—which includes around 50 or 60 churches in the Cleveland area—I am personally aware of three cases.

One of those cases involved a pastor who was not accused of direct abuse but was found to have downloaded child pornography. While no individual victims were identified, that behaviour is, of course, deeply troubling and incompatible with the pastoral role. The other two cases involved clear instances of clergy sexual abuse. Out of approximately 60 churches over the past 30 years, I am aware of three cases. Statistically, that is a small percentage—but each case matters profoundly.

You are right to highlight the danger of inflated perceptions. When a small number of individuals are relocated, and their misconduct is not addressed transparently, it artificially inflates the perception of widespread abuse—and in the meantime, more people are harmed.

That is why, instead of silence, cover-up, and transfer, the institution needs to name the problem directly. This should start as early as seminary training. When I was preparing for ordination, I went through an entire weekend of psychological testing and counselling sessions with trained therapists. These were designed to probe our motivations, character, and readiness. I do not know if seminaries still do that, but they absolutely should—especially concerning issues related to sexuality, power, and boundaries.

We must acknowledge that there has been cover-up in the past. We must blow the top off that silence. We also need a transparent and documented process for transfers. That is one way to limit the potential for repeat offences.

Jacobsen: This is not just a church problem—it is a cultural one, too. We see it in the Larry Nassar case. We see it in Hollywood. Hollywood, in many ways, is even more egregious because these individuals often have more personal power and institutional protection than a single clergy

member. So even in these so-called “secular” environments—where there is no ecclesiastical structure—the abuse can be just as bad, if not worse.

Abuse of power transcends the religious and secular divides. Whether it is in churches, Olympic teams, or film studios, the issue is cultural. So the deeper question becomes: What are the cultural forces that serve as accelerants—or brakes—on this kind of behaviour?

How can we develop a culture, especially within religious communities, where clergy do not cross these lines in the first place? Where systems are in place to prevent it? Where the reporting process is trusted and respected? And how do we structure accountability in ways that center victims and deter future abuse?

Those are the questions we need to be asking—not only within our denominations but across institutions, sectors, and ideologies. Additionally, we must acknowledge that there have been significant difficulties in both the recruitment and retention of clergy across many denominations. Several of the challenges stem from stress, workload, and the overall demands of the job. Even so, most pastors still report high levels of job satisfaction.

At the same time, even if those pressures increase vulnerability or create environments where bad things might happen, I want to be very clear—I do *not* see those as excuses. To explain a phenomenon is not the same as explaining it away—or excusing it.

Lentz: Understanding the context is not the same as offering a justification. It is helpful to recognize the reality of pastoral stress. Some clergy are working 50 to 60 hours a week. That matters for understanding mental health and burnout, but it does not explain—or excuse—abuse.

I’ve worked 60-hour weeks. I’ve had moments where I’ve felt overwhelmed, exhausted, even at my wits’ end. But not once did that ever come close to pushing me toward crossing a grotesque boundary like sexually abusing anyone. So, yes, it’s a factor to consider for context, but I do *not* believe it’s a cause—at least not in any direct or morally relevant way.

The causes of abuse are deeper. And I’ll admit—I’m stepping a bit outside my expertise here. But that does not mean I will not try to explore it. In the church culture I’ve been part of, there is no ambiguity. Sexual abuse of children—of girls, boys, or anyone—is antithetical to the pastoral call. It is not walking in the way of Jesus. It is not aligned with any authentic understanding of pastoral care.

But here’s something I remember clearly. And I want to be cautious—it is a broad brush. Back in seminary, my friend and I would often discuss this over dinner. We would ask, “How many of our classmates would we want as our pastor?” And the answer, unfortunately, was probably not many.

Now, I am *not* suggesting that any of them were abusive. What I am suggesting is that the pastoral profession may skew toward people who are—how shall I put it—emotionally needy or working through unresolved personal issues. And the Church can be an incredibly welcoming place for those people.

Church culture—at its best—is a culture of radical acceptance. “You are loved. Come in as you are.” That’s beautiful. But it also creates a space where individuals with deep psychological needs can be affirmed without ever being challenged or helped to heal.

If you are charismatic, if you preach well, if you're good with kids, if you know how to perform leadership in that context—you get affirmed. And if you have an unaddressed need for ego validation, that culture can place you on a pedestal. That, in turn, can blur boundaries in unhealthy and dangerous ways.

So yes, it is partly about the culture. Perhaps even the culture of acceptance—ironically—can enable these situations. And yes, many people bring unresolved baggage into ministry roles. If the institution lacks structures for accountability, mentoring, psychological evaluation, and ongoing support, those deeper issues can remain unaddressed.

Jacobsen: So would you say that certain cultural conditions—like unconditional acceptance and an overemphasis on trust—can make it easier for boundary violations to occur?

Lentz: Yes, I think that's a fair and essential point. The very virtues we value—like grace, compassion, forgiveness, and trust—can become vulnerabilities if rigorous structures for accountability and healthy boundaries do not accompany them. Let me reiterate something clearly, though: I have *never* heard of a denomination or theological tradition that says it is acceptable to abuse children. That is *off the table*—always. It would be a strange—and horrifying—thing to hear anyone suggest otherwise. I want to be clear on that.

It is interesting, though, because we do know of some cults where the charismatic pastor or leader—sometimes under the garb of Christianity—claims that to experience true spiritual oneness, one must engage in sex with others. That kind of thing does happen.

Jacobsen: Yes, and it happens in India too—with gurus or spiritual leaders ('godmen') claiming divine authority over others, including sexually. But in mainline denominations—traditional churches—anything that has structure and accountability mechanisms meant to transcend the charisma of a single leader, that kind of exploitation is much less likely.

Still, your point is well-taken. I do think that love, inclusion, and acceptance—even the powerful idea that you can be forgiven—are all beautiful and essential aspects of the Christian faith. But they can also create openings in the safety net. And when those openings go unchecked, that's where danger can creep in.

One of the biggest attractions—and arguably one of the greatest strengths—of the Christian tradition, speaking now as someone not deeply embedded in it, is that it offers hope and meaning to people who are wounded. And let's be honest—most people are traumatized at some point in their lives.

I walk into almost any setting, assuming that a significant portion of people are essentially “the walking wounded.” Christianity speaks to that. It offers not only a theological answer—through Christian humanism or existential theology—but also a practical framework: continuity, grace, meaning, and healing.

Lentz: There's a famous, influential book from about 50 years ago by Father Henri Nouwen called *The Wounded Healer*. His central message was that it is through understanding and embracing our woundedness that we can truly reach out and help others. That idea has been powerful for many. But you can also see how it might inadvertently encourage a culture where

emotional pain is romanticized or where red flags get overlooked in the name of compassion. I want to be careful in how I say this, but yes—it can create gaps in the safety net.

Jacobsen: Here are some key statistics that provide a sobering backdrop:

- According to the John Jay Report in the U.S., covering 1950 to 2002, 4% of Roman Catholic priests and deacons were found to have substantiated allegations of abuse.
- The Australian Royal Commission (1950–2010) reported that 7% of priests had substantiated allegations.
- In Germany, the MHG Study (1946–2014) found that 4.4% of clergy accused of abuse.
- In New Zealand, research by the Royal Commission found that 14% of diocesan clergy had been accused, covering both minors and adults.
- Between 1950 and 2022, the Diocese of Worcester recorded 209 total allegations, of which 173 were deemed credible, 28 unsubstantiated, and eight false or withdrawn.
- A 2024 independent report found at least 1,259 clergy offenders in the EKD, although no percentage was provided.

That’s a sobering overview. The Anglican data is somewhat inconsistent, so let us refer to the 2024 Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS). The 2023–24 Australian Child Maltreatment Study reports that 0.4 % of Australians aged 16–24 experienced clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse before age 18.. These cases occurred in religious settings. This suggests a more stringent and specific definition of sexual abuse compared to other studies, likely resulting in a lower prevalence rate.

This brings us to a more nuanced and complex issue: false or malicious reporting. These are extremely sensitive topics. False reports do happen, but research shows they are rare. Meta-analyses place false allegations of sexual violence between roughly 2 % and 10 % of all reports, consistent across multiple jurisdictions.

I was once invited to speak at a Croatian Christian conference as a humanist and journalist. In my presentation, I emphasized that false beliefs and false accusations—though real—must be viewed in the context of a broader, evidence-based response. These elements should not become a distraction from addressing the actual harm.

Jacobsen: Our focus should be on truth-telling and accountability. However, this is not a simple binary issue. There is a complex spectrum of responsibility—individual, institutional, and communal. These cases exist within an overlapping set of ethical and organizational dynamics that need systemic reform. That’s an important contextual point.

Even in situations where confirmed abuse rates are relatively low, there remains the ethical concern: What percentage of other clergy knew about abuse and failed to act? That question speaks to institutional complicity and moral responsibility.

We are examining concentric circles of accountability, including peers at the same hierarchical level (other priests) and superiors (bishops and archbishops), who may have had the authority to intervene but failed to do so.

Additionally, there are members of the laity—individuals in the community who were not directly harmed but knew victims and made excuses for the Church. This dynamic also contributes to a culture of silence and denial.

Understanding this fully requires expert legal and psychological analysis. Some legal scholars and advocates for survivors have been pioneers in this area. So, yes, there is a silver lining—if we acknowledge that the majority of clergy (likely 85–95%) have not committed abuse and may support reform efforts. Many do not want to be unjustly associated with those who committed crimes. It is critical not to tarnish all clergy with the same brush.

That said, there has always been a small segment of the secular community that engages in broad, often reactionary anti-church rhetoric, especially online. This was particularly visible in the mid-2000s to early 2010s. However, we should avoid reactionary cycles. The cultural pendulum may swing, but our moral response should remain clear, proportionate, and grounded in facts.

The more constructive approach is reform—dealing with the actual numbers and then conducting a realistic assessment, working from there. What are your thoughts?

Lentz: You put it well. I concur and support that.

What we clergy have to be careful of is that while it is true that roughly 95% of clergy are good, ethical people who never commit abuse, it can still sound like we're defending or covering something up. So, we need to be cautious with that framing. But your point is well taken, and it goes back to something I was trying to say earlier.

Silence is not an option. Cover-up is not an option. Transferring the accused is not an option. In theory, this should be straightforward: take every allegation seriously, follow the process, do not cover it up, and do not transfer the accused; instead, involve the legal system when necessary.

Jacobsen: I wonder if the percentage of abusive clergy is comparable to the percentage of people who commit crimes more broadly—such as shoplifting or fraud—or even how, under the Trump administration, there was this narrative that immigrants are more likely to commit crimes.

Lentz: Yet we know from data that immigrants, on average, are *more* law-abiding than native-born citizens. Therefore, percentages and numbers can be skewed or manipulated. But yes, what you described is essential.

Jacobsen: So, after doing these long-form interviews, a different context emerges. We want to deal with the reality that approximately 95% of clergy, give or take, are not involved in abuse. However, over time, a significant portion of allegations are eventually substantiated when examined in aggregate across multiple institutions and cases.

The standard institutional response, at least historically, has been for clergy and laity to defend the institution. Just look at some of the major scandals. If you're going to believe someone—well, the odds are, statistically speaking, about 1 in 20 cases may be false or malicious. That's still uncomfortable, but the presence of false allegations does not justify ignoring the 19 out of 20 that are valid. That's why we need a robust reform process to deal with both realities.

We require independent verification and investigation conducted externally to the Church. The pattern in some denominations has often been to let the Church investigate itself—which is problematic. What you pointed out earlier—the avoidance, the cover-up, the rotating of offenders—is precisely what should not happen.

Another key pillar is examining the enabling networks—those within the institution that facilitate abuse through silence, complicity, or willful ignorance. That’s where people like Amos Guiora have focused: on both clergy and laity who enabled the abuse. We need to ensure this is embedded in larger cultural conversations. Because this does not only happen in the Church—it’s part of broader human, institutional behaviour.

But the reason it’s so crucial in this particular context is because it’s happening in institutions that claim moral authority. Religious institutions operate under a specific guise that’s supposed to be distinct—providing ethical and spiritual guidance. So, they have a different kind of social power. Accountability must reflect that.

When I interview people from different religious backgrounds, they often equate being spiritual with being moral. That is typically what they mean: “I get my values, meaning, and guidance from religion.” So why not leverage that ethical framework to be leading lights in this area—for the good of the broader culture?

Lentz: Absolutely.

Jacobsen: The other question—though it may take longer to research—is more scientific in nature. For instance, some researchers are looking at long-term dysregulation in people who have been affected by abuse. The direction of the research is pointing toward the physiological and psychological consequences of early trauma.

So, trauma becomes embedded in the brain—at the level of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis—which governs stress response and shapes physiology. It restructures the brain over time. Minor stressors can trigger significant reactions, and this cumulative wear begins to degrade both cognitive function and emotional regulation.

A colleague is doing some fascinating work. She wants to examine cadaver brains of trauma survivors—women soldiers, for instance—to study the long-term physiological changes caused by trauma. So, the scientific question will probably require long-term research: What is the extent of physiological damage to those who have experienced childhood or clergy-related abuse, especially if the trauma was a singular but profound event?

That’s an important direction for the research. There’s also one last narrative point to make before I get to two questions—if I can remember them. The narrative point is this: We must acknowledge the reality of victimization without reinforcing an identity of permanent victimhood. People should not be excused from personal responsibility because they were harmed—but at the same time, we must recognize that real harm occurred. The goal is to help individuals transition from a survivor mindset to a thriver mindset on their terms.

Lentz: Have you come across any research on the commonly held belief that abusers were themselves abused? I wonder how many clergy abusers have histories of having been abused.

Jacobsen: That's a good question. Yes, there is research suggesting that while not all abusers were abused, those who were abused are statistically more likely to become abusers themselves than the general population. It's not deterministic—it's probabilistic.

Similarly, those who were victimized are also more likely to be revictimized. This is sometimes referred to in the literature as the cycle of abuse or victimization vulnerability, mainly if trauma is not addressed early. So these are related but distinct dynamics—two poles of a larger pattern.

Have there been cases where clergy perpetrators have come forward and confessed? As in: “Yes, I did this. I need help. I accept the consequences. I want to repent, reform, restore, and make amends.” Are there examples of perpetrators living by their stated moral code and seeking true forgiveness?

Lentz: There have been a few rare cases where clergy abusers confessed publicly or privately. Some have written letters, others have made statements in court or to investigators. But genuine contrition, including willingness to accept prison time, make restitution, and seek treatment, is exceedingly rare.

Most cases involve either denial, minimization, or legal evasion. Unfortunately, moral failure is often compounded by institutional protectionism and legal maneuvering. Still, I believe stories of repentance do exist—they are not the norm. What about those abusing clergy who are preconditioned to abuse?

Jacobsen: That aligns with patterns we've seen in other forms of crime. Let me offer an analogy. Some people commit impulse-driven crimes, such as kleptomania or arson. They steal or burn things compulsively—it's part of a psychological compulsion they cannot easily resist. In such cases, the individuals often admit to their behaviour and seek help, especially when the crimes are nonviolent.

On the opposite end, there have been serial killers who, after being caught—or even voluntarily—have said things like, “Use my brain for research.” They understand they are a danger and want to contribute something afterward. They might say, “I couldn't stop myself. Please study me.” That's a darker but more revealing example of self-awareness in pathology.

In both examples, there's at least some recognition of harm and a desire—however delayed—to prevent future damage. In the context of clergy abuse, even a small number of authentic confessions could potentially lead to new models of accountability and healing if they were part of a public, restorative process.

They find that, in some cases, individuals who committed violent crimes had tumours so large that they were pressing against the frontal cortex. So, the parts of the brain responsible for impulse control, judgment, and emotional regulation were compromised.

The emotional dysregulation can be profound. In at least some of those cases, postmortem examinations showed clear physical causes—tumours disrupting neural networks. The structure of the brain had been altered, which likely contributed to the individual's behavioural issues. And some of those individuals, before dying, even requested, “Please examine my brain after death—I can't stop myself, and I want you to understand why.”

That fits with the foundations of early psychological and neurological studies. One of the classic cases is Phineas Gage, the 19th-century railroad worker who survived an iron rod piercing through his skull. It destroyed much of his frontal lobe, and afterward, his personality changed dramatically. He went from being responsible and mild-mannered to impulsive and irritable. Those close to him described him as a completely different person.

Gage's case was one of the earliest pieces of evidence that personality, self-control, and ethical behaviour are rooted in the brain's physical structure—particularly the frontal lobes. This links neuroscience and psychology with the development of moral behaviour. Some people, due to trauma or brain abnormalities, may be neurologically predisposed to violence or antisocial behaviour.

But we have to be careful. That kind of explanation is meant to illuminate, not excuse. It helps us understand certain behaviours, but it should not diminish the fact that crimes have victims—and every crime has a perpetrator. There is still moral and legal responsibility.

That is a critical distinction. And it's worth noting that clergy, like members of the military, operate under a kind of dual legal structure. They are subject to both internal ecclesiastical processes and civilian law. In this way, they are not above the law but instead embedded in institutional systems that often shield them from full accountability.

Lentz: That makes sense. Your insights into brain science help frame this more precisely. Without knowing those details, I've often felt conflicted—because while we should never excuse criminal acts, I don't believe we should blame the Church for creating abusers or pedophiles.

The Church doesn't create them, but it may attract or fail to filter out individuals who are already predisposed due to psychological, neurological, or even traumatic histories. The Church often promotes a message of love, acceptance, and forgiveness, which, while good, can also be exploited.

Jacobsen: The responsibility lies in creating strict, transparent protocols that screen for risk, set clear boundaries, and respond swiftly when abuse is suspected. So, while we cannot blame the Church for the existence of abusers, we can hold it accountable for institutional cover-up, failure to act, and patterns of enabling.

Lentz: Even if we did everything right, some people would still come into the Church and do terrible things. But we must be held accountable for what we can control—oversight, response, transparency, and justice.

Jacobsen: Critics will respond quite rightly that the institution bears responsibility, especially when denominational structures contribute to abuse concealment. For example, the Roman Catholic Church is organized hierarchically—pyramidal and vertical—and in many documented cases, cover-up orders were issued from the highest levels, including the Vatican.

The Catholic Church is a clear case of top-down accountability. That's different from the Eastern Orthodox Church, which also has a vertical structure but allows for more regional autonomy. And it's different again from most Protestant denominations, which often have decentralized, more lateral networks.

So institutional structure plays a critical role—not just in how abuse happens, but in how it’s managed—or mismanaged—the Presbyterian or Congregational traditions, for example. My Dutch grandfather could have been ordained if he had chosen to do so when he came to Canada. He was a devout man.

That’s why there are so many variables at play. This is a sensitive and emotionally charged issue. Any topic with such emotional weight demands a multivariable approach. Many conversations are happening simultaneously, involving multiple parties—survivors, congregants, clergy, critics, and institutional defenders.

Lentz: Some people will say, “The Church is the story of my life.” I’ve heard that personally. I get that. I would never disabuse a survivor of their feelings or dismiss the violence they experienced at the hands of someone who was supposed to be a trusted priest or pastor.

The way you’re framing it is helpful—these are complex, overlapping layers of experience and responsibility. Abuse and cover-up intersect with dynamics found throughout our culture: in schools, businesses, the film industry, religious life, athletics—all of them.

Jacobsen: Yes—and what would be interesting is asking: What is particular about the Church, or church culture, that allows this to happen in such specific ways? The vertical hierarchy is undoubtedly part of it.

Lentz: Yes. I also believe that the status and spiritual authority granted to pastors and priests play a critical role. That reverence can sometimes shield misconduct. Add to that a culture of naïveté, paired with values like acceptance, forgiveness, and unconditional love, and it can become a toxic mix—especially without clear systems of accountability. Historically, we’ve had no consistent accountability process in the Church until the last 50 years—and arguably not until the last 25 years has there been any substantial institutional shift. That’s a long time—25 years out of centuries.

Jacobsen: That said, are pioneering denominations that are helping drive institutional reform? On the secular side, there also needs to be a different tone and a more nuanced analysis. The way some critiques have landed over the past 15 years hasn’t always been productive.

Lentz: Agreed.

Jacobsen: The sharpest secular critiques—many of which are online—are often disconnected from institutional reality. There’s a kind of rhetorical recoil that isn’t landing with clergy or even many congregants. And that weakens the reform effort.

Lentz: That’s an interesting point.

Lentz: Scott, you’ve probably already done this, but I do think denominations like the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the United Church of Christ (UCC) have at least verbally and procedurally taken this seriously. It’s in the Book of Order, it’s in process manuals, and it’s now a standard requirement to have sexual misconduct policies at every level of the Church.

I know this is true for the Presbyterians. I suspect it’s also true for the UCC, Methodists, and likely the Episcopalians. It would be worthwhile to research the specific reforms that different

denominations have implemented over the last 30 years. [Ed. Under PC(USA) Book of Order G-3.0106, every council ‘shall adopt and implement a sexual misconduct policy and a child and youth protection policy.’]

Jacobsen: I do think there’s a tendency to bash the Church as if nothing has changed and there has been only cover-up and denial. That’s neither accurate nor fair. It certainly doesn’t advance the conversation.

The real question is: What is the goal? If it’s reform, then we need to focus on the institutions that have made progress and build from there. Constant condemnation doesn’t create a path forward. What does continuous criticism achieve if it’s not fair? What is the practical politics of your aim?

If the aim is justice and reform, then we need to be precise. We know there are clear cases where abuse and cover-up were institutionally embedded. But treating all churches and all denominations as identical is not helpful. That flattens the nuance and erases differences in structure, governance, and response.

A more constructive path respects the freedom of religion and speech enjoyed by both clergy and laity, domestically and internationally. If you’re going to critique the Church, make the case targeted. If you want to help, target your approach to engage that particular community. Say clearly: “Here is the reality as we currently know it, based on the evidence—and we will not speculate beyond the facts.”

Once that’s done, we can use that foundation as the basis for reform. Over time, more data and expert insights will be gathered. This enables the development of a reliable database for comparing how different denominations have handled abuse allegations. Of course, errors will occur in early efforts—but that’s part of building a transparent record.

For example, when you look at reported abuse rates across denominations—sometimes ranging from 4% to 14%—that’s a wide margin. It might be beyond typical statistical error, which raises the question: What’s contributing to 14% versus 4%? Why the difference?

Ideally, we want the number to be zero. So, how do we reduce that 14% to 5%, then to zero? That is a reform roadmap. But here’s the thing—we’re often not asking broader cultural questions about how to get to zero across society, not just in the Church.

It’s unfair to assume that only one denomination—the Roman Catholic Church—is responsible. Yes, we can always identify specific hierarchical structures that exacerbated the issue. But it’s not exclusive to Catholicism.

Lentz: One more thing: this should have been said earlier. There’s a tendency among Protestants, especially in the Presbyterian tradition—which I know well—to treat this as a “Catholic problem.” And that’s a problem in itself.

That mindset is a form of denial. When I write or speak about this issue, I always make a point to say: This is not just a Roman Catholic problem. Sure, their hierarchy may exacerbate specific dynamics. Still, the issue of sexual abuse by clergy is present across all faith traditions.

Do you find instances of sexual abuse in Jewish communities?

Jacobsen: Yes, though it can be challenging to get a clear picture because some of the reports are anecdotal or poorly substantiated. Still, from what I'm told by people I trust, the issue does exist. It tends to be more prevalent in closed or insular communities, such as certain ultra-Orthodox sects. That makes sense—the more enclosed the community, the more opportunity there is for abuse to remain hidden. A rural Presbyterian church can be just as closed-off in its way—serving a town of 1,500, where everyone knows each other and goes to the same Church for spiritual sustenance.

It's the spiritual authority of the leader, the structure, and the theological grounding in sacred texts that create the possibility. Often, these structures are patriarchal, and that adds another layer. So, no—it's not that abuse is inevitable. However, the structural conditions can increase the likelihood and certainly complicate accountability. This is not an anomaly-based phenomenon; rather, it is a pattern observed across various faith traditions, denominations, and cultures.

Lentz: Listen, I've got to run, but what a privilege to talk to you, Scott.

Jacobsen: Likewise—thank you.

Serbia's Orthodox Church and Clergy Abuse: Jovana Trninic Speaks

Jovana Trninic is a Serbian interlocutor and advocate focusing on clergy-related abuse and institutional accountability within the Serbian Orthodox context. After reporting sexual misconduct by a priest and encountering evasion from church authorities, she turned to evidence-based healing, psychotherapy, and communities such as Prosopon Healing. Trninic emphasizes critical thinking over magical thinking, transparency through survivor databases, and legal literacy for victims. Her perspective integrates skepticism, human rights, and lived experience, arguing that reform must involve believers and secular allies to prevent recurring harm.

In this interview with **Scott Douglas Jacobsen**, Trninic discusses clergy-perpetrated abuse and the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church. She recounts reporting a priest Blasko Paraklis for sexual misconduct, facing institutional evasion, including a bishop Maxim office mediating by email but imposing no consequences. Trninic advocates for critical thinking, utilizing databases like Prosopon Healing, promoting legal literacy, and employing evidence-based therapy to enhance public transparency, prevention, and institutional reform.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Today we're here with Jovana Trninic from Serbia. We've known each other peripherally. Anyway, we're talking about a topic I've been learning more about: clergy-perpetrated abuse, or clergy-related abuse more broadly. After speaking with institutional leaders, researchers, and survivors, I want to ask: What is the state of this in Serbia? And what is the role of the Orthodox Church?

Jovana Trninic: Orthodox Christianity is the main religion in Serbia and Serbian Orthodox Church plays the main part in the spiritual and cultural life of Serbians.

Jacobsen: How do people see their Orthodoxy?

Jovana: For Serbians Orthodoxy is closely tied with cultural, historical and national identity.

Jacobsen: When they think of their identity within Orthodoxy, what ideas and feelings come to mind? In America people say: "Jesus is my lord and saviour". Is it similar here?

Jovana: Yes, it's similar with more emphasis on the concept of "Svetoslavlje". Svetoslavlje encompassing the ideology, spiritual tradition and national character derived from the life and teachings of St. Sava the first Serbian Orthodox Archbishop.

Jacobsen: Are Serbians generally highly religious, or more like North Americans or Europeans, where religion is a part of life but not life itself?

Trninic: In general I would say Serbians are more traditional then religious.

Jacobsen: What do you mean?

Trninic: Some traditions are tied to the church. For example, we have *Slava*. Each family has their own patron saint. We celebrate Slava with a cake(bread) blessed by a priest, who comes to the house for the ceremony or parishioners bring cake(bread) to the church. It's a tradition connected with religion, but for most people, it's more about tradition. Only a minority strictly follow religious rules.

Jacobsen: That's a fair point. In my experience interviewing many people, those who strongly claim a religious faith, and even those who claim to have rejected it, often haven't read the holy text.

Trninic: It's personal matter and free will whether someone will be a believer or not.

Jacobsen: When you went through Orthodoxy—community, maybe Sunday school—what lessons were emphasized? Not every Christian denomination emphasizes the same traditions. Sometimes they teach the same things, but rank them differently. What stories or ethics are highlighted? Beyond the core belief that Jesus rose from the dead, which is non-negotiable for Christianity, the same way the Quran is non-negotiable in Islam.

Trninic: Serbian Orthodox Christian Church utilizes both the Old Testament and the New Testament as Holy Scripture viewing the Old Testament as a preparation for Christ's coming with emphasis on New Testament. Key practices include Divine Liturgy and the Seven Sacraments Mysteries (Holy Baptism, Holy Chrismation, Holy Communion, Holy Confession, Holy Matrimony, Holy Ordination and Holy Unction.)

Jacobsen: An essential point in all of this is community and hierarchy. Now, key to the issue of clergy-perpetrated abuse: if someone were to question these fundamental claims, or even say they no longer believe, how would the community respond? Would it be considered inappropriate? Would questioning be welcomed or rejected?

Trninic: Speaking from my own experience, and from what I see around me, questioning clergy authority is considered highly inappropriate and rejected. When I wanted to speak up about what had happened to me in Orthodox Christian community in terms of warning and preventing sexual misconduct from happening to other females, a female friend who introduced me to the faith was extremely against that action. I asked her: "Why should I stay silent? This is not my shame." This is the shame of clergy man. He can harm another person if he is not held accountable for his wrongdoing. She told me this: "Yes, but you never know if he repented". This statement led me to the conclusion that the Sacrament of confession in this case confession (repentance) can be misused in perpetuating the ongoing sexual misconduct cycle in silence. She also told me this: "We have to be silent, this is how we keep our faith to not crumble down".

Another thing, she was the first person I came forward and told her in detail about everything that happened to me that night. Her first response was this: "If any other female told me the same thing the first thing I would ask her is what did you do to provoke him. But because I know you, I believe you".

When I called another friend to raise a red flag on this incident and prevent it from potentially happening to her I got another bizarre response. "Because priests are by default close to God, they are also more attacked by demons". So this is how she justified his wrongdoing. This phenomenon is called "clericalism" when people think priests/clergy are on a higher level of spirituality than others. I was also stuck in this trap for some period of time.

When I showed an inappropriate and disturbing text message I had received from that priest to my other friend, her response was this: "This is why I always pay attention to how to communicate with the priest". Speaking of that, I want to clarify some things here which I think

many religious people do not understand. And that is: “It is not my responsibility to teach priests how to communicate”.

Jacobsen: When you come forward with a complaint, and you're told it's untrue without grounds, how does that feel?

Trninic: That leads to feelings of frustration, anger and invalidation, but it also leads to clarity of the reality taking the place of the truth. Actually, this experience helped me see things crystal clear and I will hold on to this truth no matter what.

Jacobsen: Are there biblical parables—or passages—you know of, as a Christian, that support women who have been mistreated?

Trninic: Yes. One example is rape of Tamar.

Jacobsen: Has this shaken your faith?

Trninic: To some degree yes. I still believe in God, but sometimes I have a feeling I have attacked God. This is the paradox. I have been pushed to that point to defend the truth and myself by speaking up against those who represent God on Earth.

Jacobsen: In your case, what was the individual failure—the crime? And what was the institutional failure of Serbian Orthodoxy? And, as an olive branch, what would have been a better response? Individually, the first failure is apparent: do not abuse. Institutionally, the reaction after the fact is more complicated.

Trninic: Well, according to the experts when it comes to clergy abuse and sexual misconduct Church is supposed to do few things.

1. Launch an external investigation
2. Remove the clergy who abused during investigation
3. Provide money for victim to get counseling
4. Provide mandatory counseling for clergy
5. Defrock

In my situation none of these steps were done.

Speaking of individual failure, when I called the bishop's office a woman who claimed to be a psychologist told me that the bishop was going to call me. But he never called, which spiked my anxiety. When I asked her next time why the bishop did not call me. Her response was this: “The Bishop doesn’t talk with regular people. He only talks with people inside of his circle who are educated in theology.”

When I asked her if other people had complained about the same priest, she said she wasn’t allowed to give me that information. Based on that answer, is what concerns me—that I may not be the only one.

Jacobsen: Are you still part of the community?

Trninic: To be honest, from this point of view I do not wish to be part of that community.

Jacobsen: How long has it been since the original incident?

Trninic: It happened in 2022.

Jacobsen: Compared to your anxiety and stress then, how do you feel now?

Trninic: I still feel disoriented and unsafe and carry a high level of anxiety. There has been progress—I've improved with therapy and support from psychiatrist psychologists and psychotherapists.

Jacobsen: What advice has helped you that could also help others as they begin their own journey of healing after victimization?

Trninic: Oh my God, there is so much to say. Ok. First I want to tell this to every survivor: “If you have ever continuously felt neglected, criticized, rejected, abandoned, for speaking the truth, if your accomplishments were minimized, if you have been betrayed by those who were supposed to protect you and cherish you, if you have been blamed by those people that something was wrong with you, it’s time for you to wake up and claim your power. Book “It’s not you” by dr. Ramani Durvasula can be your starting point. Also the book “Blind to betrayal” by dr Jennifer Freyd is crucial for healing. For survivors who have been part of the cult, I highly recommend the book “Take back your life” by Janja Lalich. Finding the right trauma informed psychologist who understands relational trauma and Complex- PTSD is the most important part of your healing journey. For the Christian Orthodox Clergy abuse survivors The Prosopon Healing website is crucial. They help with education, including how to recognize abuse in early stages. Some of the books I have recommended are on their website as well.

The problem with some religious people in general is they often rely on magical thinking instead of critical reasoning.

Jacobsen: What is magical thinking in this context?

Trninic: Magical thinking can mean many things. For example, believing that just by touching the bishop’s robe can create some blessings or miracles in your life is magical thinking. People often think that if they perform certain practices, their problems will go away, and oftentimes they are led by Church authorities into that thinking.

Jacobsen: So, better education in critical thinking could help prevent abuse?

Trninic: I think critical thinking is important but can not prevent abuse itself. It is helpful in later stages after recognizing the abuse. It is important not to be obedient to authority which does not allow it to be questioned. We were abused because we trusted those people. What can prevent abuse in my opinion and which is the stand point from Prosopon Healing are these three things:

1. Education is important so people are aware of the abuse and they are not shocked when it happens
2. Hold perpetrators accountable

3. The most important thing is to hold enablers accountable. Enablers are individuals who allow perpetrators to exist in the system and exploit the system.

Jacobsen: Do you know other women in Serbia who had similar experiences?

Trninic: I do not know anybody personally.

Jacobsen: Is there a perception that abuse is primarily a Catholic problem, not an Orthodox one?

Trninic: Yes. In our Orthodox community, people say, "*That happens to Catholics, not us.*" Or they claim that if it happens in Orthodoxy, it's rare. They argue it happens in Catholicism because priests aren't allowed to marry, which is false. Many abuse cases involve married clergy.

Jacobsen: What resources have helped you most?

Trninic: All books I have mentioned above. Also there are other books like:

"C-PTSD from Surviving to Thriving" by Pete Walker.

"Trauma and Recovery" by Judith Herman

"Believing Me" dr. Ingrid Clayton

Jacobsen: Do you feel more secure in your sense of self now?

Trninic: Yes.

Jacobsen: Many abuse cases are by married men, including married clergy.

Trninic: I am aware of that now.

Jacobsen: In American evangelical circles, the argument is that prominent pastors are held to a higher standard. Yet in Serbian Orthodoxy, based on your case, an individual of higher stature is instead given a supernatural excuse—that demons attacked him, causing him to commit this crime. That lets him evade personal accountability, followed by an institutional cover-up, and then, in your case, betrayal by a close associate. You can see how these dynamics play out. They're clearer to me now. They don't surprise me, but they are deeply unethical and, in some cases, explicitly criminal, as shown in court cases. Do I have both the big picture and the details right?

Trninic: Yes.

Jacobsen: I don't believe in the supernatural; I see no evidence for it. Many believers do, even victims. But regardless of whether it's real, it's used to shift accountability away from the clergy. So the supernatural is used as a shield to deflect responsibility.

Trninic: Yes, that's how I see it as well.

Jacobsen: What has helped you feel safer—not entirely secure, but safer—compared to those moments of distress and anxiety?

Trninic: Speaking with dr. Hermina Nedeleescu and my psychotherapists have helped me a lot, education and Prosopon healing website and their community.

Jacobsen: What do you think is the importance of the Orthodox abuse database?

Trninic: The database from Prosopon Healing is essential because it consolidates all information in one place—a clearinghouse where individuals can share notes and build an accurate picture of the extent of abuse. That way, the numbers aren't underreported or exaggerated. You can't just say there are 100,000 victims, but you can show a distinct number, plus estimates for unknown cases.

Jacobsen: Most clergy don't abuse—that's important to state explicitly.

Trninic: Really? I'm in shock. Now I think everyone is abusing.

Jacobsen: I mean, it's like most crimes: a small number of people commit them repeatedly. In North America, there's a term—recidivism. It describes people who commit the same crime over and over. Why does an arsonist commit arson? Because he's an arsonist. Why does an abuser abuse? Because he's an abuser. I don't want to make an essentialist argument, but it's a pattern of psychology and behaviour that repeats.

That's why I'd argue it's likely a minority of clergy who abuse, and we can't paint all clergy with that brush. It's essential to involve innocent clergy, regular believers, and the broader public in reform efforts. We see abuse in many domains—gymnastics, Hollywood, corporate settings, and academia. Men and women can be victims in different ways. The real issue is identifying effective reforms and implementing them.

Trninic: Yes, but I don't agree with one point. If clergy or congregants see another clergy who is abusing others and they stay silent, they're protecting the abuser. Silence in the face of evil is itself an abuse of power. My previous roommate and friend was the person who introduced me to that priest with the recommendation that he is the most spiritual among them. I feel betrayed by her as well. I had never imagined these things could have happened.

But from this point of view, I wish I had spoken more in public and been more vocal instead of remaining in silence. That is why I am speaking now and using truth and my story to empower other people first to wake up from cognitive dissonance, not to be blind and obedient to any authority, to recognize the abuse, return the shame to those that belong to and to speak up to prevent others from going through the same horror.

I want to share these statements from psychologist Beth Matenaer in the book “Take back your life” by Janja Lalich which helped me a lot and it might help other survivors:

A Survivor's Promise

by Beth Matenaer

- **No longer will I carry** the shame that has enabled other people's bad behavior. I decide. No more.
- **No longer will I minimize** the things I need to accommodate another person's shortcomings. I decide. No more.
- **No longer will I accept** that I am responsible for any choices and actions other than my own. I decide. No more.

- **No longer will I negotiate** a version of the truth that denies my experiences to make others feel more comfortable. I decide. No more.
- **No longer will I choose** to value other people's perception of me over my own knowledge of myself. I decide. No more.
- **No longer will I allow** fears of what I cannot control to hold me back from the things I know I can accomplish. I decide. No more.
- **No longer will I compromise** my own thoughts, feelings and ideas because they are different from yours. I decide. No more.
- **No longer will I apologize** for hoping, for loving, for believing, as they are my gift to this world.

I decide. No more. I promise.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Jovana.

Michelle Stewart on Cult Abuse, Confession, and Accountability

Michelle Stewart is a cult survivor, author, and advocate whose memoir, “Judas Girl: My Father, Four Cults & How I Escaped Them All,” chronicles her childhood entry into, and adult exit from, multiple high-control religious groups. Raised in an environment that included a Hutterite community and other Anabaptist and Orthodox enclaves, she examines how spiritual authority, conformity, and secrecy enable abuse: Stewart’s work centers survivor safety, legal accountability, and ethical pastoral confidentiality. From Colorado, she speaks and writes about distinguishing mainstream faith from cultic enclaves, reforming confession practices, and fostering healing narratives that emphasize agency, nonlinearity, and evidence-based support for survivors.

In this interview with **Scott Douglas Jacobsen**, Stewart differentiates organized religion from cults by centering survivor experience, highlighting speech suppression, enforced conformity, and authoritarian leadership. She recounts entering high-control groups as a child, including a Hutterite community, and leaving four groups by her twenties. Stewart critiques how confession and obedience to spiritual fathers can be weaponized, especially in Eastern Orthodox and Anabaptist enclaves, shielding crimes and silencing victims. She argues for universal mandatory reporting, accountability, and practical reforms prioritizing child safety and legal responsibility. As a survivor-advocate, she promotes trauma-informed interviewing and healing narratives emphasizing agency, nonlinearity, and systemic change over sensational detail.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Today, we are here with Judas girl herself, Michelle Stewart. You are a cult survivor turned author and advocate. There are a few kinds of people: some are still in the cult, some have left and never talk about it again, and some, like you, write, speak, and advocate about this troubling aspect of human psychology and group dynamics. Let’s start with the obvious question: what separates a cult from a formal religion for you?

Michelle Stewart: I’ve been asked that many times, and you’ll hear different definitions from different people. There are shared traits, but no single academic litmus test—no exact checklist that determines whether something is a cult. My understanding has evolved. While there are standard features, I believe it’s the experiences of survivors that reveal whether something truly functions as a cult. When I talk with people from various groups—fringe offshoots of mainstream traditions, Amish or other Anabaptist communities, the Unification Church (often called the “Moonies”), or the Twelve Tribes—specific themes repeat. One is the inability to speak out freely. People may hold personal differences in belief or culture, but challenging authority often leads to ostracism. You can’t both belong and speak out. This shows up primarily in cases of abuse—people risk losing community, family ties, and support systems. Another consistent feature is the demand for conformity. In most mainstream congregations—Episcopal, Baptist, or Jewish synagogues—you see substantial diversity in lifestyle, politics, and personal views. In high-control groups, there’s far greater oversight of daily life. For example, some Orthodox Jewish communities observe detailed dietary laws (halakha) but also include health exemptions; in certain separatist Christian groups, such as some Anabaptist or Old Order communities, dress codes can be strict and engagement with outside politics limited or guided by leaders. In some groups, political or social views are tightly scripted. Within broad traditions you

can find both healthy, pluralistic congregations and insular enclaves that become high-control. For instance, Eastern Orthodox Christianity as a whole is a mainstream religion. Yet, particular enclaves or breakaway groups can operate in cult-like ways. That distinction matters. People often respond, “You can’t call the Orthodox Church or the Amish a cult.” Labels applied to an entire faith are rarely accurate. But a person can have a cult-like experience within a subset of almost any tradition. You can live under a cult mentality while still being nominally part of a larger, mainstream religion.

Jacobsen: How does your experience fit into that? How did you fall into it?

Stewart: How did I fall into cults? I was brought in as a child. I was seven when my parents joined what I describe in my book *Judas Girl: My Father, Four Cults & How I Escaped Them* All as the first of four cults. For me, it began as a childhood experience that I later had to leave as an adult. When I entered, I had no understanding of what a cult was or even the vocabulary to describe it. I only knew that suddenly, I was in a highly controlled environment. The first group was a Hutterite community.

As I mentioned earlier, you can have an organized religion with cult-like enclaves within it. Moving from a mainstream evangelical background into a setting where the group controlled all finances, clothing, housing, work, and spending meant having almost no personal autonomy. I knew it was different, but I didn’t understand what those differences meant until years later. It wasn’t until my twenties—after four separate groups—that I escaped and began to reflect on and understand those experiences.

Jacobsen: What were the through lines for those four groups?

Stewart: Just to make sure I understand correctly—the commonalities between the four? Yes. There were several universal through lines. They connect back to how I define a cult. The first was that in all of these groups, church leadership was revered far above the average member and held unquestioned authority. There’s irony in the fact that many of them referred to their leaders as “servants,” when in practice, it was the opposite.

Whether it was an Orthodox priest or a bishop in an Anabaptist sect—the kind I spent years in—the leader’s opinions were treated as sacred and beyond challenge. As a lay member, especially as a woman, my opinion was not considered equal. I was taught to accept that my wisdom was inferior. Leadership was seen as divinely superior.

With that came varying degrees of control. In some groups, the leader’s authority was absolute—obey or be expelled. In others, defiance led to psychological punishment: being ignored, condemned to hell, or subtly ostracized. It wasn’t always physical rejection but often psychological manipulation. That dynamic was consistent across every group.

Another constant was the use of God and salvation to control people. There was a mentality—unstated but deeply ingrained—that the ends justified the means. If you had to shun, manipulate, or even lie to someone to preserve their “salvation,” it was seen as justified. Abuse—whether psychological, emotional, or, for children, even physical—was rationalized in the name of saving souls. The goal was to ensure compliance with the group’s beliefs at any cost, because salvation was considered paramount.

Of course, not all cults are religious, but in my case, they all were. These were faith-based, coercive systems—extreme forms of existing religions. In this case, extreme iterations of Christianity, specifically of the Anabaptist tradition, which emerged during the Reformation and includes Mennonites, Amish, and Hutterites, as well as parallels in specific Orthodox contexts. They were radical offshoots of otherwise recognized faiths.

There's one more through line worth mentioning: the suppression of individuality. In every group, personal expression was discouraged. In some, conformity was enforced through clothing. In others, like the Orthodox sect I was part of, individuality was discouraged in thought, behavior, and aesthetics. Even how you decorated your home, prayed, or spoke had to conform. There was a constant demand for uniformity, presented as a condition for salvation.

Jacobsen: There are two points I want to touch on. The book is not anti-faith; it's anti-abuse. The other is your father's declining mental health, with his reported revelations. Can you expand on the distinction made in the former and the development—or deterioration—of the latter?

Stewart: That's an essential aspect for me. *Judas Girl* speaks candidly about religion and religious control. As we discussed, there's a difference between a cult and an organized religion, and beyond that, between people of faith and those with no organized religion at all. *Judas Girl* is meant to be accessible. If you're not a person of faith, you won't feel pressured to embrace someone else's God. You can read it from a secular perspective. But if you are a person of faith, it's written to help you understand how elements of faith can be both used and abused. In a sense, it's almost written to protect faith.

There's often backlash from people with a cultic mindset who claim that speaking out against a church is the same as speaking out against God. To me, speaking out against religious abuse is actually faith-affirming—just as speaking out against child abuse is affirming of parenthood and family. You can condemn abuse without condemning the larger institution. Abuse isn't inherent to religion, but acknowledging and addressing it is essential for any faith to survive. I try to make that distinction clear throughout the book. It's not a confrontation with God; it's a confrontation with people who misuse God.

As for my father's mental illness, it developed gradually. In his case, I believe his illness was the on-ramp to these extremist groups. He began showing schizoid and borderline personality traits. He was later diagnosed with aspects of both, although he avoided psychiatric treatment whenever possible. People with that type of mental framework tend to see things in extremes—very black and white—and that meshed perfectly with the rigid, binary worldview of cults.

There was also a part of him that wanted what he saw as a simpler life, which is ironic because being in a cult is anything but easy. They may offer a sense of unity and care, but the cost is enormous—far greater than simply living independently. His black-and-white mindset absorbed cult ideology like a sponge. As he developed more religious delusions—believing himself, and later others, to be prophets—he became increasingly susceptible to manipulation by cult leaders claiming divine authority.

Those two factors—mental illness and cult influence—worked in parallel. Each reinforced the other. Both eroded his ability to reason or listen to outside perspectives. When we entered a new

group, family members who spoke against it became “the enemy.” Similarly, people with untreated mental illness often reject voices of reason that might anchor them. As he cut those ties, he spiraled further, descending into a kind of shared psychosis between his own mind and the cult ideology.

Jacobsen: How did you feel about that during that time? And how do you think about it now, knowing it doesn’t work?

Stewart: At the time, my understanding changed across my cult experiences. At first, I was young, and my father told me he believed he had a physical illness. I also didn’t have the education to understand mental illness. Another common thread in all these cults was a systematic denial of mental illness. They didn’t acknowledge it as real, or if they did, they framed it as a deliberate choice or a sin. That encouraged him and left me without tools or vocabulary. Someone growing up in secular society might encounter diagnoses and develop understanding earlier than I did. I first believed him when he said he was physically ill. As he developed spiritual delusions, I took them at face value. I was a child. It was terrifying, but I believed completely. When we entered an off-grid Anabaptist commune, by the fifth or sixth year the group started pushing back on him. I was a member of that church, which meant my obedience was to them over my parents. It was a conflict, but I had to obey the church. They confronted my dad. They wouldn’t call it mental illness; they called it lying and sin.

“We have deemed you are not a prophet. We have deemed you are not unwell.” That was even scarier, and it’s where part of the *Judas Girl* concept comes from. I had two authorities—a father and a church—each telling me to reject the other or go to hell and be abandoned. Both ended up dumping me. As that evolved and I gained my own understanding, it created a schism that made me question both my father’s mental well-being and these cult mentalities. It took a long time to put together. I knew the questions were growing, and they were confusing and terrifying at the time. As an adult, with education and academic learning about mental illness—and curiosity about my own experience—I look back and see a heartbreaking story of a father who was abusive, manipulative, and controlling, but also very ill and in need of help, exploited by cults and extreme religion. That is one foundation for why I wrote the book: to bring these thought processes and psychology to light so people can better understand cults around them and, possibly, their own experiences.

Jacobsen: Let’s take a round-table view. You’ve looked at Eastern Orthodox hierarchy as a kind of petri dish where allegations can climb multiple layers. How does that model differ from, for example, the Catholic Church’s more centralized, pyramidal hierarchy and the autocephalous—though still hierarchical—structure of Orthodoxy?

Stewart: I don’t have personal experience in the Catholic Church, so when I speak about it, I’m referring to conversations with people who do. We’ve compared stories. What stood out to me in the Eastern Orthodox Church—stronger than what my Catholic friends described—was the control held by the spiritual father, the confessor. In my experience, that person had enormous power over how one perceived salvation. They often used that influence to control people who wanted to report abuse.

The article we discussed was about abuse. I, along with others who I won't name, experienced situations where we wanted to say, "I was abused, and I'm struggling." The response was that seeking accountability outside confession wasn't our role. It was said to be between the abuser and their spiritual father. We were told to confess our resentment or "unforgiving heart," but never to speak publicly.

I saw that mindset climb the hierarchy. There's a current case involving Father Matthew Williams—my brother-in-law—where layers of cover-up are alleged. There's evidence that misconduct occurred long before the cases now on trial. When I say "petri dish," I mean that the Church sees itself as responsible for the sins of its members—but only internally, to the exclusion of external authorities. In practice, this means that even criminal acts are treated as matters for spiritual correction rather than legal accountability.

While the Catholic Church has had cover-ups too, what sets parts of Orthodoxy apart, based on my experience and conversations, is the intense secrecy. The idea that "it's not the business of the secular world to know the sins of the Church" allows abuse to remain hidden. I know people who were told explicitly that if they reported abuse, they would be denied communion. Considering that communion is tied to salvation, withholding it is devastating. That level of spiritual coercion goes beyond what I've heard in Catholic contexts. I have seen similar tactics in cultic environments. Still, within Orthodoxy, it's distinct in how authority and obedience are used to silence victims.

Jacobsen: What are the ethical lines between pastoral confidentiality and shielding a crime?

Stewart: It's interesting. I mentioned earlier that I have a social media account where people discuss these topics, and this week's discussion was about the protections of confession—particularly when child abuse is confessed. Where are the ethical lines in that situation? I don't have an obvious answer. Still, I believe the well-being of children and victims of sexual assault should always take priority.

Suppose a clergy member—or anyone providing pastoral care—is aware of ongoing abuse. In that case, I believe they have an ethical duty to protect the person being harmed. I phrased that deliberately: there's a narrow space in pastoral care, especially under the sacrament of confession, where someone might seek forgiveness for past misdeeds that are no longer ongoing. In those cases, the clergy member might not be a mandatory reporter, though even that should be carefully examined. Those instances are rare, but they exist.

What troubles me most is why pastoral care—whether in Orthodox, Catholic, Amish, or Methodist settings—so often excludes accountability. Why is legal responsibility not part of the moral direction given by those in authority? It's well known that, in many cases, it isn't. Returning to our earlier discussion about the "petri dish" of confession, if clergy hold such profound authority in a person's life, why isn't that authority used to encourage, or even require, legal accountability?

Why are these two realms—spiritual care and justice—so disconnected? We've created a system where, in some Orthodox confessions and even specific Catholic contexts depending on jurisdiction, someone can confess to actively abusing a person and remain confident that no one

will report it. They can continue serving as clergy, or in any position of authority, with complete impunity. That raises the deeper question: why are we still preserving this expectation of absolute privacy for abusers, instead of fostering a norm that confession should lead to accountability and protection for victims?

Jacobsen: This has been a recurring theme across some of my conversations—with counselors, psychologists, psychotherapists, and social workers—people who deal directly with the individual psyche and moral responsibility every day.

Through some of my conversations with counseling psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, and social workers—people who deal with individuals one-on-one in intimate settings—I've noticed that these professions are bound by a clear duty to report abuse. Clergy, on the other hand, are also a kind of professional class. They're educated, often intelligent, and serve hierarchical community roles.

Yet they're not bound as strictly by mandatory reporting laws. There was a bill introduced in California last year to change that, but it didn't pass. These are recurring concerns. So, what justifies lowering the universal standard of duty to report within religious contexts—for priests, bishops, or other clergy?

Why is that the case, and why shouldn't it be? Why does religion get that exemption?

Stewart: My personal view is nuanced, but I believe there should be a consistent standard across professions. The argument for giving clergy a lower reporting standard doesn't hold up when compared to the reasoning used for psychiatric or social work confidentiality.

When I've spoken with people who support the priest-penitent privilege, they often cite the sacramental nature of confession. The laws vary by state, and some jurisdictions differentiate between a casual conversation with a pastor and a formal sacramental confession. That distinction, mainly relevant to Catholic and Orthodox churches, effectively creates a privileged carve-out. A conversation with a minister in a Protestant setting might not receive the same protection, which raises fairness concerns on its own.

The justification I hear most often—and I can understand it emotionally, even if I disagree—is that this protection encourages abusers to seek repentance. The logic goes: if someone knows their confession could lead to legal consequences, they may never come forward, and the abuse will continue unchecked. By maintaining confidentiality, the clergy can supposedly help the person change course.

I understand that rationale but reject it. Mental health professionals also want people to come forward, to seek help for harmful impulses or past actions. But their systems recognize that protecting victims must take precedence over preserving an abuser's privacy. The same principle should apply to clergy.

When confidentiality shields active abuse, it becomes complicity. There are cases where priests have confessed to abusing their own children, and the information was never reported. The result was continued reoffending. That, to me, is the moral failure of this privileged exemption. The

idea that pastoral confidentiality should outweigh the safety of victims—especially in cases of ongoing abuse—is indefensible.

We know that the data show recidivism rates are high. We know from data that someone confessing to many of these crimes is highly likely to reoffend, even if the incident they're confessing to is in the past. For that same reason, while I have empathy and sympathy for people in the Catholic or Orthodox churches who want to protect that sanctity—and that the seal of confession has long been recognized as inviolable—I think the victim's rights truly have to come first, for the same reasons the psychological community reached that conclusion.

Jacobsen: What else? What would signal actual reform?

Stewart: I would say a public embrace of accountability. I would love—well, I mean, we never want a crime to have occurred—but I would love to see a scenario where a priest stepped up and reported abuse. I would like to see the church stand behind him. For example, years ago, I don't know if you're familiar with the Christ of the Hills Monastery in Blanco, Texas. I happened to be; my then-spouse was being used by the defense in a child sexual abuse case. The conversation came up that they might try to subpoena the alleged perpetrator's spiritual fathers to testify as to whether he had confessed to sexual abuse. The response was universal: "We will go to jail before we break the seal of confession." And again, I understand that faith is deep and complicated, and I hurt for anyone who feels they must make that decision. However, reform to me would have been the opposite: the church saying, "We have potential child victims—ongoing child victims. We are accountable to the state first. We hold our clergy to higher standards than the general public, not lower." That kind of accountability would signal real reform.

It would also help if people were made very clear—even in confession or religious counseling—that taking accountability for your actions outside of skipping communion for a few months is part of repentance. It's part of the path to healing, not a way to avoid facing consequences. Changing that narrative entirely would give the process absolute integrity. Frankly, it would prevent more abuse than sheltering people in confession ever could. Right now, many think, "All I have to do is confess." We know clergy members have confessed to child sexual abuse and then continued to serve liturgy afterward. If they knew that confession would not remain purely private, that would put real weight behind accountability and integrity within the church. It could be a significant turning point in shifting the culture around abuse.

Jacobsen: What about those without significant agency—children who grow up under those conditions? What are the additional risks and contexts for them in terms of community safety? For instance, we know from Orthodox records that most sexual assault cases involve adult women. In contrast, most pedophilic cases involve young boys. But children have an additional lack of agency when they're cognitively undeveloped and under coercive control—not just part of a community but trapped within it. From your experience in law, is there additional context for that, or does the law treat both roughly the same, perhaps just applying child abuse statutes?

Stewart: I'll answer this as best I can, and you can tell me if it needs reframing. As far as victims of abuse, what I've seen and experienced—and I mentioned this earlier—is the silencing of those victims. That needs to be completely reversed. I've seen policies in more mainstream churches

where a victim of abuse knows they'll receive immediate support if they report, rather than the church systematically silencing them or treating it as a matter for confession or for clergy to decide. I've seen this repeatedly across multiple churches with a cult-like mentality, where victims are told that forgiveness is required. That includes me. When you struggle psychologically, mentally, or emotionally as a victim of abuse, that struggle is layered on as another sin—your supposed inability to forgive or heal. It becomes another mechanism of control. I've also heard of more than one case where priests asked victims to recount details of their abuse repeatedly in confession.

I bring that up because part of the change I want to see is not only ensuring safety and the right to come forward, but also reforming how confession itself is taught and understood—how to identify abuse and manipulation even within the sacrament. That means recognizing when a priest abuses that role, whether for gratification or power. Confession should never be a place of manipulation. It should be spiritual guidance, not the endpoint for psychological, medical, or legal support. It's a place for spiritual reflection, not for silencing or retraumatization.

Jacobsen: Your focus is on systems critique within the personal narrative. Do you ever focus on individual perpetrators who hold significant authority? Is it appropriate to do so, or is it generally better to focus on systems to achieve accountability?

Stewart: I think you need both. When I wrote my book, it came very much from a personal perspective. Specific individuals absolutely need to be called out. Abusers should be named, and every victim deserves full support and access to resources. Hence, they know it wasn't their fault and that help exists. Focusing on specific perpetrators definitely has its place. In personal life, that's often how things unfold—you respond to harm by identifying those responsible. Each scenario deserves attention and accountability.

That said, I lean toward systemic analysis because there's always a percentage of any population that will abuse—whether through rape, child molestation, or psychological harm. What distinguishes abuse within specific religious systems is that those systems build scaffolding that allows abuse to thrive. It's not limited to cults or extremist sects; we've seen it in mainstream religious institutions as well.

My focus happens to be on those environments where abuse in a more mainstream religious setting might be reported and stopped much more quickly. In contrast, some institutions create conditions where abuse thrives. I know you focus a lot on the Orthodox Church. Still, I've also done much work with Amish and Amish offshoots, which have very similar approaches. What we see in those cases are abusers who remain active for years, often with multiple victims, all covered for by the system.

Now, of course, the individual abuser is fully responsible for their behavior. But could they have been stopped if they lived within a structure that required accountability—mandatory reporting, sex offender registries, restrictions from being near children—instead of simply confessing, facing minimal church discipline, and then being placed back into authority over the same vulnerable groups? That, to me, is the key difference.

I live in Colorado. We have wildfires here. If a fire breaks out in a swamp, it won't spread far. It's still a fire and still dangerous, but in a wet area, it's contained. Now imagine a drought area, like much of California. A single spark can become a massive blaze. The person who lit that spark is responsible, but the conditions make the destruction far greater. That's how I see institutional abuse. Each case matters, but these systems create drought-like conditions—structures that let a small flame turn into a wildfire destroying countless lives. That's where my focus lies.

Jacobsen: What are the consistencies in how cults and religions handle abuse cases? If someone were abused within the Moonies or within Orthodoxy, both institutions would respond in specific ways. What aspects would be essentially identical?

Non-extreme religions or cults too. When I interviewed David Pooler, he noted that regardless of Christian denomination, the immediate institutional response to clergy abuse is usually self-protection—and the community participates in that defensiveness. So, in that sense, cults and religions behave similarly.

Stewart: That's a good observation. Reflecting on Pooler's comment, I'd agree that there's a general human tendency across institutions to be defensive. You can even see it in nonreligious contexts like the Boy Scouts. This organization systemically hid abuse to protect itself.

Where extreme religions and mainstream ones could diverge is in their foundation for accountability. Some mainstream or progressive religious institutions have taken steps to ensure victims or perpetrators are referred to legal and psychological support systems. But yes, many spiritual and organizational structures share that same reflex: to defend the institution, preserve public image, and protect financial interests. Religious organizations handle millions or even billions of dollars, and that economic dimension often reinforces secrecy.

Still, I've also seen positive exceptions. Some churches have acknowledged abuse publicly, reported it to authorities, and immediately defrocked or removed offending clergy. So, I wouldn't say the behavior is universal across all religions. There's a clear dividing line between how extreme or insular groups respond versus how more progressive, accountable, or legally compliant ones do.

Jacobsen: How can you tell a story while maintaining the objective fact that people have been victimized—whether or not they identify as victims, or adopt a survivor mindset, or eventually move toward one? That's mainly up to them. So when it comes to interview practices and media work involving people who've been victimized—especially in cult contexts—how should we avoid falling into what's often called “trauma porn”? How do we prevent the stigmatization or sensationalizing of trauma while still telling stories factually and empathetically, incorporating that first-person perspective? What are your recommendations?

Stewart: I love that question. And I've had to confront it while writing my own story—which, with permission, includes parts of others' stories too. It's a tricky space, and I don't think there's an obvious line. It's one reason you've heard me in this conversation veering toward systemic critique—focusing on institutional change and mindset shifts—rather than delving too deeply into explicit personal accounts. However, I do explore those in my book.

When interviewing survivors, I approach it from the perspective of helping them share their experience in a way that fosters healing. Some interviewees won't be fully healed, and that's okay. But if they're willing to talk, they're usually at least beginning to process the experience and acknowledge that something wrong occurred. That's the foundation.

I would strongly advise against pressing someone who hasn't yet recognized their own abuse or manipulation into doing so on record. I've seen interviewers try to coax that realization out mid-conversation, and it rarely leads to genuine insight—it risks retraumatization instead. The focus should remain on healing and change.

For example, I can describe being in a car accident—my leg shattered, immense pain—but the emphasis should be on how I recovered: the physical therapy, the emotional reckoning, and how I reached a point where I could walk or even run again. That story becomes one of endurance and transformation. Likewise, if someone is speaking about abuse, the focus should be on why we're telling the story: healing, accountability, prevention, or awareness.

You can convey the depth of trauma without detailing the blood and gore. Those visceral details can eclipse the point, which is understanding the impact and how change occurs. Include only enough to give context for the gravity of the experience, not to exploit it.

Ultimately, keep intent front and center. If the intent is to shock or horrify, that's the wrong motive. If the intent is to illuminate, empower, and advocate for healing or accountability, then the story serves a purpose. And if someone's goal is just to make audiences gasp, they probably shouldn't be working in this space at all.

Jacobsen: What would you consider the healthiest self-narrative for survivors of cult or clergy abuse to adopt as they go through the healing process?

Stewart: I like how you framed that earlier—the distinction between victims, those with a victim mentality, those who are healing, and those who are thriving. Speaking from personal experience rather than an academic standpoint, I'd say that while reminders like “it's not your fault” are essential, the most powerful narrative centers on healing as a journey.

First and foremost, you—and only you—are responsible for your healing. That may sound daunting, but it's also liberating. Someone may have harmed you, but recognizing that you have not only the responsibility but also the *power* to heal gives you agency. That mindset moves you forward much more effectively than staying in a place of “I am broken.”

At the same time, it's essential to understand that healing isn't linear. You're accountable to yourself and only to yourself as you uncover, process, and come to terms with what's happened. There's no timetable, no external requirement for how quickly or neatly that process unfolds.

There's no requirement to have forgiven anyone by a specific date or to have recovered from PTSD in a particular timeline. Healing doesn't obey a schedule. One of the most powerful realizations for me—and for many survivors—is that while abuse feels deeply personal, it actually isn't. To the abuser, it was never truly about *you*.

That's hard to internalize, because for most victims, the violation feels like the most personal event imaginable—especially in cases of sexual or psychological abuse. But when you can

decouple yourself from it, when you can recognize that the abuse came from something entirely outside of you—a sickness, a distortion, a system—that’s when real healing starts.

The old saying “it’s not your fault” is true, but it doesn’t go far enough. It’s not only not your fault—it’s not *about* you. You were simply in the path of someone else’s damage, like a car running over something in the road. That may sound devaluing, but it’s freeing: none of this comes back to your worth.

In my own case, understanding that both the sexual and emotional abuse I endured had very little to do with me—realizing it wasn’t about who I was or what I did to “deserve” harm—was essential. Whether the cause was religious indoctrination, mental illness, moral corruption, or plain cruelty, it originated entirely in them, not in me.

Accepting that truth has been one of the most significant contributors to healing.

Jacobsen: Thank you very much, I appreciate it.

International Policy Digest

Journalism's Role in Moral Narratives and Synopsis of Clergy-Related Abuse

I recently addressed a Croatian Christian association via a virtual conference on clergy-related abuse, emphasizing journalism's essential role as a watchdog in exposing institutional misconduct. I argued that victims should be the primary voices, institutions secondary, with journalists facilitating balanced narratives. I urged acknowledgment of abuse without condemning entire denominations, advocating evidence-based investigations, interfaith dialogue, and robust reforms to protect victims and faith integrity.

Citing historical scandals and cultural movements as context, I stressed that transparency and accountability are imperative. This speech, along with the rest of the conference, will be shared with the Ecumenical Patriarch, EU Parliament, Roman Catholic Church, UN in Geneva, UNICEF, World Council, World Council of Churches, World Health Organization, and other major institutions, ensuring accountability and healing universally.

Below is the transcript of my comments.

Journalism is, first and foremost, a human enterprise. It's built on human observation, written for human consumption, and concerns human enterprises. Just democracies, fair societies, accountable power, and the like require journalists as critical watchdogs to bring otherwise hidden stories to the forefront. Clergy-related abuse is a complex and subtle issue with blunt outcomes.

The primary voices of clergy-related abuse should be the victim who can give indications of patterns and see firsthand weaknesses in institutions that have misbehaved, abused, and often told lies or merely partial, softened truths about it. The secondary voices are everyone else in the institutional setup leading to the abuse in the system in the first place. Religious institutions have a minority of persons in positions of authority, unfortunately, who have abused. Journalists are a tertiary voice around these two.

The role of journalists is working with victims, with the majority of clergy who have not abused, and other researchers, to gather the narratives and collate those to get the wider scope of the patterns of the minority of clergy who have abused. People take the accountability problem seriously, as it's bad for the victims, bad for the laity, bad for the image and authority of the clergy, and, essentially, bad for the representation of the faith. If you care about the future of Orthodoxy, then you care about this as an issue relevant to the integrity of the faith.

So, I wanted to take these few minutes to recognize the substantial problem before us, for a few reasons. Some factors played into the situation in which we find ourselves. First and foremost, the crimes of a select number of clergy. Second, these crimes went institutionally unchecked for many, many years in the largest denominations of Christianity—almost as a prelude to the broader cultural movements witnessed in many Western democratic societies.

Third, a tendency to reject the claims of victims when the prevailing evidence presents the vast majority of reported cases in the extreme cases of misconduct, i.e., rape, are evidentially supportable. False allegations happen, but these are a small minority and should not represent a

false dichotomy of support. Institutions should establish robust processes to investigate all claims, addressing false allegations decisively while preserving trust in genuine victims.

Fourth, there is a diversification of the faith landscape of many Western cultures, particularly with the rise of non-religious communities and subsequent ways of life. One result is positive: Citizens clearly are more free than not to believe and practice as they wish. One negative result is the over-reach in non-religious commentary stereotyping churches as hotbeds of abuse, which creates problems—let alone being false. It doesn't solve the problem while misrepresenting the scope of it. It makes the work of the majority of clergy to create robust institutions of accountability for the minority of abusers more difficult and onerous. It's comprehensively counterproductive.

If we want to reduce the incidence and, ideally, eliminate clergy-related abuse, we should first acknowledge some clergy abuse without misrepresenting the clergy of any Christian denomination as a universal acid on the dignity of those who wish to practice the Christian faith. It's a disservice to interbelief efforts, makes the non-religious look idiotic and callous, and blankets every clergy with the crimes of every one of their seminarian brothers and occasional sister in Christ.

For the second, we should work on a newer narrative context for the wider story, see the partial successes of wider cultural movements, and inform of unfortunate trends in and out of churches for balance. For the third, we simply need to reorient incorrect instinctual reactions against individuals coming forward with claims as the problem rather than investigations as an appropriate response, maintaining the reputation of the accused and accuser while having robust mechanisms for justice in either case.

For the fourth, some in the non-religious communities, who see themselves as grounded in Reason and Compassion alongside Evidence, should consider the reasoning in broad-based accusation and consider with compassion the impacts on individuals in faith communities with the authority who are working hard to build institutions capable of evidence-based justice on one of the most inflammatory and sensitive types of abuse. Interfaith dialogue can be slow, quiet, but comprehensive and robust in the long-term—more effective and aligned with both the ideals of Christ or Reason, Compassion, and Evidence.

To these four contexts, journalists can provide a unifying conduit to the public in democratic societies to discuss the meaning of justice in the context of the Christian faith living in democratic, pluralistic societies. We cannot 'solve' the past errors, but can provide a modicum of justice for victims and create a future in which incidents are tamped to zero for a new foundation to be laid. Then 'upon that rock,' we do not have repeats in the Church as we have witnessed in other contexts discussed over the last few decades:

- 1991 – Tailhook Scandal (U.S. military sexual harassment scandal)
- 2012 – *Invisible War* documentary (exposing military sexual assault)
- 2014 – #YesAllWomen (response to the Isla Vista killings)
- 2017 – Australia's Royal Commission Report (child sexual abuse in institutions)
- 2017 – #MuteRKelly (boycott of R. Kelly over sexual abuse allegations)

2018 – #MeTooBollywood (Bollywood’s reckoning with sexual misconduct)
 2018 – #MeTooPublishing (exposing sexual harassment in the literary world)
 2018 – #WhyIDidntReport (response to Brett Kavanaugh hearings)
 2019 – Southern Baptist Convention Abuse Scandal (Houston Chronicle exposé)
 2019 – K-Pop’s #BurningSun (sex trafficking and police corruption scandal)
 2020 – #IAmVanessaGuillen (military abuse and murder case)
 2021 – #FreeBritney (exposing exploitation and control of female artists)
 2021 – Haredi Jewish Communities’ Abuse Cases (journalistic investigations by Shana Aaronson & Hella Winston)
 2002-Present – Catholic Church Sexual Abuse Crisis (Boston Globe's Spotlight investigation)
 2017-Present – #MexeuComUmaMexeuComTodas (Brazil’s movement against misogyny in media and politics)
 2020-Present – #MeTooGymnastics (Larry Nassar’s abuse in U.S. gymnastics)
 2020-Present – #SayHerName (Black women and LGBTQ+ victims of police violence)
 2021-Present – #MeTooIncest (focus on childhood sexual abuse within families)

Gospel of Denial: How Churches Continue to Fail Clergy Abuse Survivors

Today, I'm joined by Katherine Archer, Father Bojan Jovanović, Dr. Hermina Nedelescu, and Dorothy Small for a wide-ranging discussion on clergy abuse—its psychological toll, institutional roots, and pathways to reform.

Katherine Archer is the co-founder of Prosopeon Healing and a graduate student in Theological Studies. She will begin a Master's in Counseling Psychology in the fall. Her work focuses on clergy abuse within the Eastern Orthodox Church, blending academic research with nonprofit advocacy. Archer champions policy reform addressing adult clergy exploitation, advancing a vision of healing grounded in justice, accountability, and survivor support.

Father Bojan Jovanović, a Serbian Orthodox priest and Secretary of the Union of Christians of Croatia is known for his searing critiques of institutional failings within the Church. His book *Confession: How We Killed God* and his work with the Alliance of Christians of Croatia underscore a commitment to ethical reform and moral reckoning. Jovanović advocates for transparency and internal dialogue as essential steps toward restoring trust in religious life.

Dr. Hermina Nedelescu is a neuroscientist at Scripps Research in San Diego whose research probes the neurobiological underpinnings of human behavior, particularly in the context of substance use and trauma. Her current work explores how trauma, including sexual abuse, is encoded in the brain's circuitry and how community-based interventions can address PTSD and addiction in survivors of clergy abuse.

Dorothy Small is a retired registered nurse and longtime survivor advocate with SNAP. A survivor of both childhood and adult clergy abuse, Small began speaking out long before the #MeToo movement gave such voices a broader platform. A cancer survivor and grandmother, she now writes about recovery, resilience, and personal freedom, amplifying the strength of survivors and the urgency of institutional accountability.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: In 2024, journalists faced unprecedented threats, with at least 124 killed—the highest number recorded to date—though some sources report 122. The violence in Gaza accounted for a significant share of these deaths. Beyond physical danger, journalists today confront a host of pressures: online harassment, legal intimidation, surveillance, the erosion of press freedoms, and increasing self-censorship. I've experienced several of these realities myself. That is the nature of this work.

Each of you here has encountered similar challenges through very different lenses: as a distinguished member of the Serbian Orthodox clergy, a young adult woman within the Orthodox community, a Catholic youth, and a neuroscientist. These identities frame the most critical points of contact within each of your narratives. You all chose to speak out—something most people never do. So let me ask: Once someone breaks that silence and becomes outspoken—whether about their own experience or on behalf of others—what happens? What shifts and consequences follow when the truth is no longer kept quiet?

Katherine Archer: When I was 21, I came forward and reported a clergyperson for what I experienced as a violation of trust and an abuse of pastoral authority. If I had to choose one word to describe how I felt in the aftermath, it would be annihilation. The Orthodox Church upholds the use of icons in worship and annually celebrates the Triumph of Orthodoxy--a commemoration of the end of iconoclasm, or the historical period when people smashed and destroyed icons.

I have often felt a deep dissonance between the reverence given to painted wood as the representation of the human person and my own experience, as a living person, coming forward with a painful and vulnerable account of harm involving a priest. Over the years, I have spoken with many survivors who shared similar feelings after trying to report experiences of abuse within Orthodox Christian communities---whether through conversations with fellow parishioners, clergy, or through official channels.

It is a beautiful and moving tradition to process around the church holding icons on that particular Sunday in Lent. Yet it is profoundly more difficult to carry the weight of someone's story, confront painful realities, and respond compassionately to a living human reporting such things.

Father Bojan Jovanović: When I first spoke the truth, my truth experienced a paradox: liberation and humiliation in the same breath. I talked about the attempted sexual abuse I survived within the Serbian Orthodox Church and about an even more harrowing reality — the knowledge that a child had been raped and murdered in a monastery. The facts were clear, but the world I spoke them into could not receive them.

Instead of being a space of light and confession of sin, the Church became a prison of denial. Some immediately tried to silence my voice, to “protect the Church,” as if the truth were the threat and not the crime. Others looked at me with discomfort, as if I were the one disrupting the order. Theologically, I felt like a prophet bringing truth, only to be met with stones. Psychologically, it was only the beginning of confronting the deep trauma I had suppressed and wrapped in silence for years.

Hermina Nedeleescu: I received supportive responses from most individuals and institutions. In contrast, the response I experienced from the Greek Orthodox Church of America was, in my view, deeply disappointing and lacking in basic compassion. From my experience, their response felt—and continues to feel—fundamentally inhumane.

Dorothy Small: Reporting the sexual assault by my grandfather, just shy of age six, resulted in a slap across the cheek by my grandmother and a swear in French. Ultimately, it resulted in no further abuse by my grandfather. However, almost a year later, living under the same roof as the predator, my grandmother brought me to a Catholic orphanage to be adopted. At the last minute, I was adopted by an aunt and uncle. They were abusive. I feared them. But they were familiar. I feared the orphanage far more. It was unknown. Plus, I feared nuns.

Reporting the schoolteacher helped to stop the harassment my best friend was receiving. It also caused me to be blamed and scorned by my parents. I only had one friend who stood beside me. Ultimately, I ended up moving across the country to escape a small town and the state where I

lived. I could not recover from the emotional consequences of living in that state. It took about three or four years for the emotional pain to ease. My parents contacted the principal of the school, mandating that the teacher had until evening to reveal what he did with me to his wife, or my adoptive father would pay him a visit to his home. He had to tell his wife.

Reporting the priest led to a massive fallout. On a work visa from a foreign country, he was pulled from the ministry in the diocese here and remanded to his bishop, where he returned to active ministry. I was banned by the pastor of the Church from all ministry for reporting him. If I had not, I could have continued ministry even though they knew what happened. Silence would have been rewarded. I lost a few close friends due to the publicity of the lawsuit and their discomfort being associated with me. I feared retaliation beyond being shunned, ostracized, and ridiculed, which led to my retreating at home for six weeks, afraid to leave. Some told me that I was hated and accused of seducing the priest.

Once loved and accepted by my church community, I fell sharply from grace. There was also a backlash from my adult son. I ended up walking away from the community that was like a family. It caused marked spiritual confusion and distress for well over five years.

Jacobsen: How were people helpful in this coming-out experience?

Archer: The community of survivors and advocates is incredible. I have come to know some incredibly fierce, strong, and benevolent people. I am moved by people like law professor Amos Guiora and some of the attorneys we have spoken to, who are empathic but knowledgeable and have a fierce resolve to help survivors see justice.

I am excited about the community I will join in the fall to start working towards my Master's in Counselling Psychology, with professors willing to engage with complex ideas and not turn to binary thinking or platitudes. I do not think a person needs a vast community, but since we are wired to connect with others, some community is necessary for healing. It can be a community of another person, holding a story with respect and tenderness and unwilling to inflict further harm. That is a true “triumph over iconoclasm,” by the way.

Jovanović: Individuals — not institutions, not the majority, but individuals — became lighthouses in my night. These people did not demand proof but listened to my heart. Psychologists, friends, and a few believers who truly understood Christ's message of love and justice — helped me rediscover my humanity. Their support was not in words, but in the silence where I could cry without shame.

From a theological perspective, it was through these people that God drew near to me. Paradoxically, it was only after I left the institution that called itself His house that I felt God's presence in my pain. Through them, I understood that faith is not unquestioning loyalty to an institution, but the courage to break with evil in the name of truth, even when that evil is draped in robes.

Nedelescu: Colleagues, mentors, and even strangers responded with empathy and moral clarity, affirming that speaking out was valid and necessary. Some institutions took immediate steps to understand what happened and offered to help in any way possible, whether through documentation, emotional support, or a safe space to be heard. Those responses reminded me

that despite my suffering, individuals and institutions are committed to accountability, dignity, and survivor support.

In contrast, the only institution that responded in a reactionary and, in my view, deeply disappointing manner was the Greek Orthodox Church of America. That response had a severe emotional impact on me and compounded the trauma.

Small: With my grandfather, I suppose that although initially, it met with a shocked reaction from my grandmother, there was no further incident the remainder of the time I stayed with them. The positive thing about the schoolteacher was the response I received from the superintendent. I expected to be chastised. Instead, he listened as I berated myself. He interrupted and told me never to speak harshly and negatively about myself again. I was just talking about myself and the way I was spoken to at home. The teacher, however, only received a verbal warning. He did not lose his position.

With the priest, the victim advocate for the diocese was very kind and supportive. One woman from my parish ended up standing beside me throughout everything, even though she did not understand anything about dealing with someone with so much trauma and symptoms, as well as clergy abuse of adults.

After the lawsuit was mediated, I found a spiritual director ed, who became a strong support person. The lawyer I retained was phenomenal. He had a degree in clinical psychology as well as in law. I also contacted SNAP, which is a nonprofit organization for those abused by clergy. I also had a therapist initially, but she did not understand the complex nature of clergy abuse. I ended therapy.

Jacobsen: How were people unhelpful in this coming-out experience?

Archer: People who will not access a body of knowledge on trauma, consent, or abuse, including spiritual abuse, have said atrocious things to me over the years. I was abused by a man starting when I was 14, so I have been in this space of being a “survivor” (and actually, I do not always like that word) for a long time. However, over time, with healing, ignorant words feel like tiny ant bites as I move towards the people committed to modeling authenticity in their lives and growing and learning.

When people say atrocious things, I think, “Thank you for showing me who you are so I can move far away from you.” So, the unhelpful people have ultimately been helpful, after all, in allowing me to disconnect and attach to healthier people and communities. There are healthy communities; we do not have to feel stuck in sick communities.

Jovanović: The unhelpfulness of people was most deeply expressed in their silence. It was not just the words of denial — the quiet distance, the turning away, that wounded me the most. Some even tried to convince me I had misunderstood what had happened, that “people like that do not exist in the Church,” as if I had imagined my trauma.

The abuser did not inflict the most significant pain, but by those who knew, suspected, or heard, and did nothing. Their theological passivity, their silence in the name of “peace” and “God's order,” is what spiritually broke me the most. They failed to see Christ in me as the wounded

one. They trusted those in vestments more than the truth of a broken soul. Moreover, that, in my most profound conviction, is the greatest betrayal of faith.

Nedeleescu: How the Greek Orthodox Church of America has responded has, in my view, been profoundly unhelpful—and continues to be. Rather than expressing empathy or taking responsibility, I experienced their response as involving victim-blaming, narrative distortion, and a general attitude that felt fundamentally inhumane. From my perspective, their actions appear more focused on protecting the institution than on acknowledging the harm I experienced at the hands of one of their high-ranking employees.

That kind of ongoing institutional response doesn't just fail survivors—it intensifies the harm and reinforces the very silence we are trying to break. It is profoundly disheartening to witness such reactionary and defensive behavior from individuals in positions of authority who, in my view, knew—or should have known—that serious harm had occurred and failed to act to mitigate it.

This aligns with what Professor Amos Guiora, a leading expert on sexual assault and enabling behavior, defines as the “enabling phenomenon.” As he writes, an enabler is “an individual able to reasonably know another individual has been harmed and/or is likely to be harmed yet fails to act to minimize the harm to that individual.”

Finally, the words of Diane Langberg resonate with me: “Systems that cover up abuse through deception, coercion, or abuse of power mimic the perpetrator and revictimize the victim. Tragically, many lives have been sacrificed on the altar of secrecy for the sake of the church or the mission.”

Small: The comments made by those who just did not understand the abuse of adults by clergy were tough. My grandmother struck my face with an open hand. My grandfather threatened me after the assault that if I told, he would tell everyone I was lying and I would get into trouble. No one would believe me.

Much is the same when I reported the priest as an adult. Many stood beside him and turned away from me. I think just the fundamental lack of knowledge and understanding, as well as the impact on their religious practice, made it more complicated than if what happened were with a stranger or anyone but a priest as far as the school teacher admitting to my parents, who discovered evidence in my room, that the teacher caused me to hear some of the most horrific things any person who calls himself a father should ever say to any teenager.

His words took deep root. He was a sadistic bully who left a lifetime of damage in his wake. The consequences of being raised by the aunt and uncle, as well as devastating early childhood loss, left me vulnerable to subsequent abuse, culminating in what transpired with the priest at age sixty.

Jacobsen: Thank you all for continuing to break new ground by offering distinct perspectives on this less-discussed darkness in the community ecosphere around abuse.

Can Journalism Draw Parallels with the Council of Nicaea?

On May 18th, in honour of the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, a Croatian Christian association invited me to give a virtual speech. The following is my contribution to the conference.

Distinguished guests, esteemed colleagues,

With sincere gratitude, I accept the opportunity to address this gathering of international intellectuals, researchers, and religious scholars. This occasion is both solemn and celebratory, as we mark the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, a foundational moment in the theological and institutional development of Christianity. Though I come to you not as a theologian or confessional believer but as a humanist and a journalist grounded in secular principles, I approach this event with profound respect for its historical gravity and moral resonance.

The Council of Nicaea, convened in 325 CE, was not merely an ecclesiastical deliberation. It was a forged coherence in doctrinal chaos, a work to unify diverse communities under a shared conceptual framework. The idea was to assert that *truth* must be sought collectively and with a seriousness of purpose. This ambition, couched in theological terms of the day, remarkably echoes the vocation of journalism.

Journalists operating in open, pluralistic societies such as Canada are entrusted with a public responsibility not unlike that of the Nicene Fathers. We are to confront genuine ambiguity, interrogate prevailing narratives, and seek the contours of *truth* in the cacophony of competing claims. The mechanisms differ: evidence over exegesis, investigation over revelation. Even so, the ethical thrust remains analogous.

To practice journalism with integrity now is to swim against currents of misinformation, polarization, and sensationalism. We do not gather in councils. We ‘convene’ in newsrooms, editorial boards, and digital spaces. We have a responsibility because we shape public consciousness. Moreover, we often give voice and clarity to the sentiments already present within it.

We should strive to exercise discernment. We do not amplify what is popular but accurate and proportional. These may include aspects of fairness and justice. Some accurate and proportional truths reveal unfortunate realities: unfairness and injustice.

As a humanist, I operate within a worldview anchored in reason, empirical inquiry, and the inherent dignity of all persons. I do not profess metaphysical certainties, but I am not without conviction. Akin to Christian ethical traditions, the humanist lifestance esteems truthfulness, compassion, and defence of the vulnerable. These values should transcend doctrinal boundaries and offer a common cause, particularly in an age needing principled dialogue.

There is an urgent need for rapprochement between religious and secular actors in the public sphere. The gates of *truth* themselves are under siege, and some walls have been breached. We must not conflate differences with hostility. We should recognize our shared concerns and

common moral aspirations. We converge around shared imperatives: human rights, peace, intellectual honesty, and epistemic humility.

Journalism functions as a moral cartography. It maps the terrain. It informs, yes. But it also describes, interprets, orients, and records. It buttresses the elements for building the future by creating the narratives for it.

The Council of Nicaea engaged in a similar project. It defined orthodoxy and stabilized the foundations of collective meaning. While I may not subscribe to the theological conclusions, I recognize the profundity of the aspiration: to reconcile *truth* and conviction with coherence in the community.

Today, as we reflect on the legacy of that council, let us reflect on the character of our institutions—both religious and secular. Are they upholding the *truth* or succumbing to expedient falsehoods? Are they fostering understanding or estrangement? Ultimately, do they deserve the public's trust?

These questions transcend tradition. We must continue to ask these questions rigorously and together.

In closing, I thank you for the opportunity to speak across differences and to dignify those differences on concerns of the intellectual commons. In the space between faith and reason, as between the meaning of music made between a note and a rest in a piano piece by Orlando Gibbons or Johannes Bach, we may yet rediscover that most elusive and essential of social goods: the *truth*.

Dear God and Company: Confronting Clergy Abuse and the System That Enables It

[Clergy sexual abuse](#) is not confined to any one faith, denomination, or country—it is a global crisis rooted in power, secrecy, and institutional self-preservation. In this conversation, survivors, advocates, clergy, legal scholars, and researchers confront the patterns that allow abuse to persist and the systemic enablers who shield perpetrators from accountability. From the misuse of spiritual authority to the failure of church leadership to act, their testimonies reveal both the depth of the harm and the urgent need for reform. Together, they ask the questions that religious institutions have long avoided—and challenge the structures that have turned sacred spaces into sites of betrayal.

Katherine Archer is the co-founder of Prosopon Healing and a graduate student in Theological Studies, soon to begin a Master's in Counseling Psychology. Her work lies at the intersection of academic research and nonprofit advocacy, focusing on clergy abuse within the Eastern Orthodox Church. Archer champions policy reform to address adult clergy exploitation, advancing a vision of healing rooted in justice, accountability, and survivor support.

Irene Deschênes, a survivor of clergy sexual abuse, first reported her case to the Diocese of London (Ontario) in 1992. Nearly three decades later—after a Supreme Court of Canada ruling—she reached a civil settlement in 2021. With a background in sociology and a career in social services, Deschênes co-founded Outrage Canada, a national, non-religious coalition demanding accountability from the Roman Catholic Church and justice for victims. Known for asking Canadians, “Where’s the outrage?” she works to prevent further abuse, protect children, and keep survivor voices in the public conversation through media appearances and documentary work.

Amos N. Guiora, J.D., Ph.D., a legal scholar and former IDF officer, has made a career of confronting institutional complicity and promoting bystander accountability. Author of *The Crime of Complicity*, *Armies of Enablers*, and *The Complicity of Silence*, Guiora draws direct lines between Holocaust history and modern abuse cases. His advocacy was instrumental in Utah’s 2021 bystander law, and through the Bystander Initiative, he presses for survivor-centered legal reforms. “All hands on deck,” he insists.

Father Bojan Jovanović, a Serbian Orthodox priest and Secretary of the Union of Christians of Croatia, is recognized for his unflinching critiques of institutional failings within the Church. His book *Confession: How We Killed God* and his leadership in the Alliance of Christians of Croatia reflect his commitment to ethical reform and moral reckoning. Jovanović calls for transparency and open dialogue as prerequisites for restoring trust in religious life.

Rev. Dr. John C. Lentz Jr. led Forest Hill Presbyterian Church in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, for more than three decades. Known for his passionate preaching and deep commitment to justice, compassion, and community leadership, Lentz retired in 2024 after a distinguished ministry. During his tenure, he inherited and confronted the traumatic legacy of clergy sexual abuse, guiding the congregation through its aftermath.

John Metsopoulos, a former Connecticut state representative and Fairfield's first selectman, has publicly accused two Greek Orthodox bishops—Metropolitan Athenagoras Aneste (2017–2019) and the late Metropolitan Iakovos Garmatis (1970)—of sexual and psychological abuse, as well as financial misconduct. Now living in Central America, Metsopoulos advocates for institutional accountability and supports fellow survivors through the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP).

Dr. Hermina Nedelescu, a neuroscientist at Scripps Research in San Diego, investigates the brain's circuitry to better understand the neurobiological roots of abnormal behavior, particularly in the context of trauma and substance use. Her current research examines how sexual trauma is encoded in the brain, with the goal of improving therapeutic strategies for PTSD and addiction comorbidity.

Professor David K. Pooler, Ph.D., LCSW-S, teaches at Baylor University's Diana R. Garland School of Social Work. Specializing in trauma, abuse, and institutional responses to misconduct, Pooler is a committed advocate for survivors. His research focuses on systemic injustice and ethical accountability within faith-based organizations.

Dorothy Small, a retired registered nurse, has been a vocal survivor advocate with SNAP for decades. Having endured both childhood and adult clergy abuse, she began speaking out long before the #MeToo movement brought wider attention to such experiences. A cancer survivor and grandmother, she now writes about recovery, resilience, and personal freedom, amplifying survivor voices and pressing for institutional reform.

Michelle Stewart is a cult survivor, author, and activist whose memoir *Judas Girl: My Father, Four Cults & How I Escaped Them All* recounts her harrowing upbringing in extremist religious groups. Now based in Colorado, Stewart advocates for survivors of religious abuse, focusing on the harms of coercive control and religious trauma in children. Through public speaking, education, and support work, she pushes for greater awareness and protection for the vulnerable.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Drawing on your experience, conversations, and research, what broad trends and facts have emerged—either definitively or with near-conclusive certainty—in international cases of clergy-related abuse? Which truths, when stated consistently and publicly, are most crucial for reshaping the informational landscape—not only around misconduct in general, but clergy abuse in particular?

Katherine Archer: Clergy abuse has nothing whatsoever to do with sex; rather, it is sexualized violence that, at its root, is about power and control. We are now learning that the majority of clergy abuse survivors may be adult women, but because historically adult abuse has been mislabeled as an “affair,” women do not easily come forward and report their experiences. Many women delay disclosure or never disclose, and this isolation in secret-keeping exacerbates the injury.

Finally, clergy sexual abuse cannot be separated from spiritual abuse. There is significant spiritual injury before or as part of the abuse, and it is inseparable from the clergy abuse. This causes a truly profound double-injury, in that typically a victim-survivor has greater difficulty turning to a Higher Power or to one's spirituality or religion to heal from a tremendous injury. In

this way, it differs from other types of violence, wherein one might decide to turn to a Higher Power to heal. The place of healing is also a place of injury. It is like taking medicine that also feels poisonous.

There is a third, even greater injury when a religious community aligns against a victim-survivor. I would say that in most communities, congregants might understand that a priest exploiting an adult congregant is abusive as a theoretical idea. Still, when it comes to a situation in front of them, they do not view the adult victim that they know as an injured party. It's common to label the adult victim with a mental illness in a derisive, dismissive way, and this is yet another abuse. If a victim-survivor is experiencing symptoms of what is termed mental illness, perhaps the priest's actions induced depression, anxiety, or whatever it may be. The victim is not "crazy." This is ignorant, and it's unacceptable.

Irene Deschênes: What I have seen, not only from my personal experience, but also with working with other survivors of clergy sexual abuse, is that the church hierarchy's knee-jerk reaction is to contact their lawyers before doing anything else. One would think a moral institution that purports to offer compassion and care to the most marginalized in society would instead take a pastoral approach to survivors who come forward. Sadly, this happens more often than not. First, the Catholic Church attempts to litigate its way out of dealing with the real issue – care and healing of the victim they created. Don't get me wrong, most survivors need the monetary compensation that a civil suit might provide to deal with an interrupted work history. However, most victims merely want to hear, "What happened to you was wrong. It should never have happened to you. This is what we're going to do...and, what do you need from us?" These words were never spoken to any survivor I have worked with in the 33 years that I have been advocating for and with survivors.

Secondly, members of the hierarchy, globally, obfuscate when speaking to their flock, the media, the public, and, more importantly, to survivors that come forward. The Roman Catholic Church have staff and unlimited financial resources. How can survivors' voices, individually or even collectively, ever be heard with limited to no resources to tell our truths?

Thirdly, the secrecy is mind-boggling. Whether it be with meeting a member of the hierarchy or in litigation, a lot of information is held to the chest. Canon law even speaks of 'secret files' that must be maintained. Most survivors are told they are "the only victim," and there is no way to verify or refute it. The church hierarchy has this information but refuses to release it to the public or even to lawyers or plaintiffs. It's common knowledge that perpetrators rarely only have one victim; therefore, it's of great importance that victims know they are not alone and that there have potentially been allegations against a clergy perpetrator.

The seal of the confession is making news in the United States as of late. Roman Catholic priests who learn of a child being abused by a penitent (one confessing to a priest) are not required under canon law to report the abuse. In Canada, everyone is a mandated reporter. Everyone. However, those professionals who work with the marginalized in our communities have a greater obligation to report. Does canon law supersede civil law? The church seems to think so.

Finally, [on our website](#), our values are the extreme opposite of what the church espouses vs. what they do, in my experience.

Dr. Amos Guiora: To fully appreciate clergy abuse requires that we recognize the critical role played by enablers. While attention is generally focused on the perpetrator of the abuse, the role of the person in a position of authority/status who knows or should know of harm to vulnerable individuals demands our attention. That is the individual I define as the enabler. In a series of books and articles, I have argued that the enabler must be held accountable for the harm they caused. It is for this reason that I have engaged with legislators, the media, the broader public, survivors, and thought leaders both in the U.S. and internationally, with the aim of criminalizing enablers by enacting legislation addressing the crime of enabling.

In examining clergy abuse, I have focused on the actor who directly protects the institution, indirectly the perpetrator. Interactions with clergy abuse survivors shed powerful light on the harm caused by the enabler upon recognition that the perpetrator had previously abused and should not have had access to the vulnerable individual.

As I learned when writing two books addressing enablers, [Armies of Enablers](#), and [The Complicity of Silence](#), and a [series of law review articles](#), the impact of the harm caused by enablers was, more often than not, a revelation (the word is not used theologically) to the survivors whose primary focus, for understandable reasons, been on the perpetrators. However, when we would “reverse engineer” the interaction with the perpetrator, the survivor would come to understand that absent the enabler, the abuser would not have been able to commit the heinous crime/s they did.

While I am not a person of faith (I am a secular Jew), I have come to appreciate the powerful role of the Church as an institution and the clergy as an individual in the life of a person of faith. Undoubtedly, in the overwhelming majority of cases, this triangular relationship is positive. Of great significance to the believer, the question before us is what happens when abuse occurs and is reported to faith leaders. THAT (caps intended) is the question that demands our attention; as I have come to learn, in many cases, the report is either not believed or the abuse of clergy is “shuffled” off to another location. Both reactions are devastating for the survivor who was not only physically abused but, no less significantly, emotionally injured.

Understanding the harm caused to them would result in neither punishment of the perpetrator nor acknowledgment of the abuse to which they had been subjected, which often resulted in re-victimization. This is the essence of institutional complicity, whereby (in the faith context), faith leaders make the conscious decision to prioritize the “good name” of the church, thereby casting asunder the survivor for whom, in many cases, the abusive clergy was an individual whom they revered and held in the highest regard.

The all-but instinctual reaction to hunker down, reflective of institutional protection, is oft-repeated, almost akin to a time-tested manual with one clear purpose: protect the institution, consequences to the individual be damned. Criminalizing the enabler is necessary to address institutional complicity that protects the abuser while re-victimizing the survivor and placing in

harm's way individuals who will encounter an abusive clergy in the future. Who is the beneficiary of the act of enabling by those whose primary obligation is to protect the vulnerable?

In a clergy-faith context, failure to address the consequences of the harm caused by the enablers is akin to saying to people of faith: we knowingly abandon you, and no less egregiously, we are consciously placing other vulnerable individuals in harm's way. That, in a nutshell, is the essence of enabling.

The time to act is now, with the understanding that as the lines are written, an individual who should have been protected is in harm's way because of enablers who have committed the act of enabling. To address this, we need an "all hands-on deck" approach, inspired by a handwritten letter from a Holocaust survivor who once wrote me, "You give voice to the voiceless."

Ask any survivor: we do not have the luxury of time; given the numbers and accounts of clergy abuse, addressing the crime of enabling demands our immediate attention.

Fr. Bojan Jovanović: First hard fact: Abuse within religious structures is not a "failure" of individuals, but a result of a hierarchical system that enables complete control, isolation, and impunity for perpetrators. Abuse happened—and continues to happen—precisely because of the power that religious office holds: the unquestioning of authority, manipulation of conscience, and the belief that the institution stands above the law. These are not isolated incidents; they are patterns.

The handling of internal disciplinary processes, without mandatory reporting to the state, has allowed rapists to be transferred from one location to another without any punishment. These "internal proceedings" are nothing more than a smokescreen to evade legal accountability. Every such cover-up is an act of complicity, which, in legal terms, qualifies as aiding and abetting or concealing a criminal offense.

Thousands of victims never got the chance to speak out because they were threatened with spiritual consequences—that they would be excommunicated, that they would "harm the Church," that they would lose their community. This is institutional intimidation. In many cases, those who tried to report abuse were ridiculed, belittled, and their testimonies discredited.

To this day, in many countries, there is no legal framework that obligates religious officials to report suspected sexual abuse. This puts religious institutions above the law, and this must be dismantled in public discourse. Because an institution that delivers moral sermons while protecting rapists is not a sanctuary—it is an organization that must be held accountable like any other. If not more so.

Rev. Dr. John C. Lentz Jr.: What must be consistently stated in public discourse is the amount of clergy sexual abuse (aka "misconduct") that continues to occur. Furthermore, it is not just a Roman Catholic issue.

I think it is important to note what denominations have done in the past 20 years or so to confront cases of abuse. For example. I know that in the Presbyterian Church USA, there are now criminal background checks for every hire of pastors, Directors of CE, Music directors, and staff. Sexual misconduct trainings are held for all elected leaders of the congregation, and all

who volunteer with children (birth through 18) must have said training. Any allegations against a pastor must be reported to the Presbytery (regional governing authority,) and all allegations must be shared with all other Presbyteries if a job transfer is requested. However, it has not stopped abuse from taking place.

In the PCUSA, pastors are legally mandated to report cases of sexual abuse and misconduct. If a pastor is accused, then the Associate Pastor or Clerk of Session (ordained lay leaders) is legally mandated to report the pastor.

I think that most Protestant denominations have moved in the right direction in the matter of sexual misconduct and abuse in the past two decades. However, enabling and covering up continue. The status and perceived power of the pastor or priest continue to create barriers to reporting and accountability.

John Metsopoulos: It is not the fault of the abused, and it can happen at any age. It is a fallacy that it only happens to the young. The abuser uses many forms of abuse, including physical, sexual, emotional, and financial. They may use others to degrade the victims and increase their power and control over the victims. The abuser starts building up the abused, making them feel special, and then they begin to tear them down. In addition, the abuser attempts to alienate them from family, friends, and persons who might see a change in the behavior of the abused. Once they are isolated, the abused now has no one to trust, and the abuser now has complete control over the victims. The abused feels totally alone emotionally and mentally. The abused is further confused as they may enjoy the physical aspect of the abuse, as the body tends to respond to the abuse.

The abused hunt their victims, and seek out victims for the innocence of a person and their depth of faith. The stronger the faith, the greater the opportunity for the abuser. The abuser seeks out individuals whose family is going through turmoil. The abuser seeks out victims whose families have deep faith and would never believe a member of the clergy would abuse anyone. They make the victims feel that what is normal in their lives is abnormal and only they can bring normalcy. Abuse is a total, all-consuming devastation that leaves them alone and deprived of self-respect.

Dr. Hermina Nedelescu: The first truth is this: accused sexual offenders employed as “clergy” by Church institutions often remain in ministry—unimpeded—unless they are criminally convicted and physically imprisoned. Church administrators routinely go to extraordinary lengths to shield or reassign these individuals, often prioritizing institutional reputation over victim safety. This persistent pattern is exactly why enabling behavior must be criminalized, as law professor Amos Guiora has argued through his extensive work on the “enabler” phenomenon.

There is a noteworthy trend. In the Russian and even in Romanian Orthodox churches in Russia and Romania, sexual perpetrators are held accountable at higher rates than sexual perpetrators in Orthodox churches in the United States. Our preliminary data show that more accused clergy are defrocked or penalized by the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia compared to other jurisdictions.

The second truth is even more grotesque: victims of clergy sexual abuse are frequently blamed for their abuse. Church officials often reverse the roles, casting the victim as the perpetrator and the perpetrator as the misunderstood “man of God.” The immense power differential between clergy and laity suddenly disappears from their moral calculus.

We are talking about a crime—so, lacking any legitimate defense, they default to blaming the victim. I read about a case that involved a 4-year-old child accused of “encouraging” an adult man by wearing his boxer shorts. If defenders can stoop to blaming a toddler, they certainly won’t hesitate to call the abuse of an adult woman an “affair” or something “consensual.” That word—“consensual”—has become a favorite among Church apologists, conveniently ignoring the inherent coercion that comes from spiritual authority. But sexual abuse cloaked in sacraments is still sexual assault, which is a crime. Calling it “consensual” doesn’t make a crime any less criminal.

The third truth is a demographic pattern that should raise immediate red flags: clergy sexual abuse cases often involve victims who are decades younger than their abusers. Many of these clergy are well beyond retirement age, yet inexplicably remain in active ministry—exempt from both moral scrutiny and mandatory rest.

And finally, at a recent academic conference on religion and sexual abuse, we presented findings from our research into hundreds of clergy sexual abuse cases within Orthodox Christian communities. The data is clear: the Orthodox Church has a clergy sexual abuse problem. This is not hearsay. This is research-based.

Among U.S.-based Orthodox jurisdictions, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America stands out for having the highest number of reported sexual misconduct cases in the public domain. Oddly enough, this American jurisdiction answers to a high-ranking official based in Istanbul—who was even honored this year with the Templeton Prize for his climate change advocacy.

I find it deeply troubling that a man can be celebrated while disregarding the suffering of women and children who were, and continue to be, abused by clergy under his spiritual authority. There can be no climate justice without social justice. Yet while victims suffer here at home, ultimate decision-making power remains half a world away, seemingly more invested in liturgical pageantry and accolades than in justice for the abused.

Dr. David Pooler: In public discourse around clergy sexual abuse, we must first name it as a phenomenon that is about the abuse and misuse of power, role, and position of a religious authority. The responsibility for the safety of people in interpersonal relationships is on the professional in a position of power. And this is especially true in relationships where someone with more power represents God.

This religious authority does not have to be a pastor or priest only. It is far more about the way the person has power in any given religious system. Even a volunteer who is given much authority and power can use their position to have sex with someone they support.

When the victim is an adult, we must unequivocally state it is not an “affair” and the person being targeted is not “participating willingly.” We must smash the idea that the victim in adult clergy sexual abuse wants this or should be responsible for stopping it. The harm done to a

victim is profound and complex. The reason this is so urgent is that officials and spokespersons within religious systems continue to use the idea that it is an unfortunate case of consenting adults who had an inappropriate relationship. The longer we tolerate a false and misleading narrative like this, the longer clergy sexual abuse can be done with impunity, and the harm done to survivors overlooked or minimized.

Dorothy Small: The firm facts and broad trends—based on my personal experience and on conversations with other survivors of clergy-related abuse, whether as adults or as children—are consistent across international cases: dismissal, disbelief, victim-blaming and shaming, retaliation and ostracism after reporting, loss of faith or religious community, and the protection of clergy perpetrators and institutions over the needs of the abused. Silence is rewarded; speaking out is punished, often for the very reasons I’ve listed.

Victims frequently struggle with the emotional impact of grooming tactics. Trauma bonding formed through intensive grooming creates a powerful attachment, akin to an addictive mood-altering substance on brain chemistry. This bond gives the illusion of being “in love,” fostering an addictive pattern that overrides rational judgment. Pursuit behaviors—chasing after what once felt good—are fueled by intermittent reinforcement, alternating “love-bombing” with withdrawal and emotional coercion. This cycle drives the exploited person to dismiss the pain in search of the next emotional high. The victim often falsely believes their involvement was “consensual,” when in reality it was the result of manipulation, not genuine care or love.

Regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, or culture, human beings tend to respond similarly to such abuse, though specific factors can create unique challenges. For example, males sexually abused by males often experience heightened embarrassment and shame, which can adversely affect sexuality. Adults abused by clergy frequently feel responsible not only for what happened but also carry the guilt and shame projected onto them by their abuser.

Michelle Stewart: While most Eastern Orthodox clergy are not abusers, the hierarchical structure creates an environment in which abuse can flourish. Though the majority of clergy are likely well-intentioned, the system of spiritual authority within the Eastern Orthodox Church often acts as a petri dish for misconduct. Allegations must typically pass through multiple layers of hierarchy, where, in my experience, the benefit of the doubt is more often given to the accused than to the victim.

A well-documented example is the case against my former brother-in-law, Fr. Matthew Williams. Another is St. Innocent’s Academy, where reports of student abuse were ignored or minimized for years. In both cases, the Church’s delayed response not only obscured the misconduct but effectively enabled it.

The Church frequently resists external oversight, minimizing legal accountability. When it does respond to allegations, legal action is often delayed or actively resisted. My first encounter with this came nearly twenty years ago in the case of Christ of the Hills Monastery, when ROCOR (Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia) vigorously defended monks accused of child sexual abuse—even supplying character witnesses. As the then-spouse of one such witness, I overheard private conversations in which participants acknowledged the allegations could be credible. Yet

the institutional response prioritized church sovereignty over victim protection, with statements like “this is a matter for confession” or, more bluntly, “this is none of the legal system’s business.” Similar dynamics are now playing out in the Fr. Matthew Williams case.

Confession and the authority of the spiritual father are often weaponized to silence victims. In *Judas Girl*, reflecting on my own experiences and broader patterns of abuse—particularly within ROCOR—I wrote: “There is no greater predator than the one who convinces you they have power over your soul.” Those unfamiliar with Eastern Orthodoxy may underestimate the influence of the spiritual father, especially within the sacrament of confession.

While I do not advocate eliminating confession for those who find it spiritually meaningful, it is important to note two critical points: In many states, clergy are mandatory reporters; however, the seal of confession often exempts them. Many Orthodox believers are taught that obedience to one’s spiritual father is essential for salvation—even when that guidance is ethically or spiritually troubling.

In my own case, when I disclosed emotional or spiritual abuse by my husband or clergy during confession, I was rebuked and told I was spiritually deficient for harboring resentment. I was told such matters were not mine to speak of, but rather the abuser’s to confess. This pattern is not unique to me. Several victims I’ve spoken with shared that after disclosing sexual abuse during confession, they were advised not to speak publicly—reinforcing a culture of silence and spiritual coercion.

Jacobsen: What question is the most crucial to ask about clergy-related abuse to you?

Archer: The most urgent question is why all 50 states do not have legislation holding criminally liable clergy persons who misuse their position of trust and authority. A clergyperson is in a position of trust and power relative to their congregant. A doctor or therapist cannot sexualize a relationship with a patient because professional ethics and state boards recognize the power differential and expressly prohibit this behavior. It is known to be abuse. There are no state boards for clergy. Why is it that clergy get a “pass” on ethical standards, when I would argue that there is even more implicit trust and intimacy in a relationship of soul-care?

I view this from the perspective of an Orthodox Christian, with an understanding of the long history of soul-care within Orthodox Christianity; however, the spiritual intimacy between clergyperson and congregant holds within many other faith traditions as well. Orthodox tradition recognizes a long history of psychotherapy, or care of the psyche. This is different from mental health therapy as it is practiced with a superbill and a co-pay, but truly no different ethically if a priest sexually abuses a man or woman who has gone to him for help. It should be criminalized so that a victim-survivor can gain some understanding of the injury, and a priest cannot continue to pastor.

In the absence of this kind of law in every state, many church bodies “investigate” these abuses as though they were affairs. There may be substantial evidence of what we term misconduct, but it is viewed through the lens of it being an “affair.” This is a reprehensible protection of the institution over a human person who has experienced severe injury. Church investigating bodies, which include attorneys and clergy, inflict greater injuries when sexualized violence is

mislabeled as an “affair.” As a society, we should demand that all clergy understand this issue—even if religious seminaries are not addressing this subject well enough for clergy to use the correct language.

Deschênes: The hashtag I used on Twitter was #thechurchcantpoliceitself—and that’s exactly what has been happening for a long time. There is no transparency, only secrecy. All matters are handled internally, leaving victims unaware of what discussions take place or what decisions are made. Many survivors are told the offending clergy is no longer serving their community. Yet, in reality, they often remain in place or are quietly transferred to another parish—sometimes across provincial or federal borders—where new victims can be found.

The Roman Catholic Church, as many can attest, has changed little in its thinking or *modus operandi*. The few changes that do occur happen over a lifetime, not years or decades. The Church should reevaluate how it responds to victims. One member of the hierarchy once said, when told that most victims simply want an apology, “That can’t happen, because then we set ourselves up for litigation.” Survivors who have endured litigation know how arduous, re-traumatizing, and drawn-out the process can be—delaying healing, if healing is even possible.

My question is: why not evolve and change your approach when a victim of sexual assault by one of your members comes forward? Why is litigation the first response? Why protect your “brother” instead of a member of your flock? What do you lose by treating victims with compassion and care?

I believe the secrecy exists to protect the Church’s reputation. It may have worked in the past. But with the internet, survivors can find one another, offer mutual support, and learn—often through the media—about credible allegations against clergy. What is the Church’s real reputation today? Person A: “Our parish priest was charged with sexual assault.” Person B: “Another one? Well, that’s the Catholic Church for you.” That is the reality now. What institution would want that?

Metsopoulos: What is the true number of cases of abuse by clergy? It seems that a true figure does not exist. It is important to get a true number, as it is a lot higher than the churches or their attorneys admit. They do not want to face the problem, as it is a problem that is at the core of the church’s organization. The abusers in the churches are the majority of the institution. The clergy all have incriminating evidence on each other and blackmail each other to silence each other, preventing the truth from coming out. To get a true figure would decimate the churches, and it would become apparent that the rot goes all the way to the top.

Also, the legal professionals associated with the churches are not concerned with the truth coming out, but with protecting the church, allowing the abuse to continue.

The attorneys and churches, under the pretext of wanting to end clergy abuse, seek victims to share their traumatic events to bring justice, when in fact they are attempting to cover the tracks of the abusers and discredit the victims of abuse. The goal is not to achieve justice for the victims but to evade the law. The attorneys play both sides against the middle. They are the worst of the legal profession and, in some ways, worse than the abuser, by providing false hope for the abused.

Why are victims afraid to come forward?

The victims are victimized by the church, the public, friends, and family. They feel isolated, empty, and guilty for coming forward. They feel shame and guilt for allowing it to happen and allowing it to continue. They may confuse healthy sexual relations with abuse. In the end, the victim is victimized and left alone.

Nedelescu: The most urgent question is this: Why are church officials who knowingly enable clergy sexual abuse not held criminally liable?

People including Melania Sakoda and Cappy Larson have spent decades cataloging the crimes of abusive clergy within the Orthodox Church (all jurisdictions), and while that work is continuing by Katherine and I, it is no longer enough. A new frontier of accountability must now target the enablers—the bishops, chancellors, general counsels, and senior administrators who receive complaints, suppress evidence, intimidate victims, move or cover for perpetrators, and then dare to call themselves “spiritual leaders,” “protecting the Church,” or seeking “truth.”

These enablers rarely touch the criminal justice system. Why? Because our legal frameworks still treat institutional cowardice and bureaucratic cover-up as unfortunate oversights rather than as deliberate acts that perpetuate harm. And yet, without the enabler, the perpetrator cannot persist. The real scandal is not just the abuse—it’s the system that sustains it.

We must stop pretending these enablers are merely misguided managers. They are collaborators. Their silence, their memos, their settlement clauses—all of it—forms the infrastructure of abuse. And until we criminalize enabling behavior, the Church will continue protecting predators while branding survivors as “unstable,” “sinful,” “temptress,” or “misunderstood.”

The urgent question is no longer “Who abused?” but “Who knew—and did nothing?” And if the answer is a bishop or a synod or a patriarch, the next question must be: When will that enabler be indicted?

Pooler: To further advance the study of justice in clergy-related abuse, the most crucial question to ask is what barriers stand in the way of churches setting up rigorous protocols to prevent abuse from happening and responding well when abuse is discovered or reported? One answer is Clericalism, the invisible force at play that teaches people to trust a spiritual authority and distrust themselves blindly. Religious leaders benefit from this arrangement, and therefore, religious systems appear impervious primarily to outside feedback and seem to struggle to reflect and accurately appraise how well they train leaders, develop useful processes to deal with abuse, and respond to survivors. In my observation, churches are largely ineffectual in addressing these issues and cannot admit it to themselves or others. And truly, one of my most profound questions is “why”? It would seem to me that churches could lead the way and model to society the virtues of kindness, generosity, care, and create robust and thoughtful responses when a leader injures someone in their care. But churches appear to fail at this repeatedly and often. And a second question is, why aren’t churches asking this question for their own sake? The fact that there isn’t a great answer to either of these questions deeply troubles me.

Small: The most urgent question about clergy abuse is this: Why is it still an issue today, given the decades of documented complaints, known victims, and our expanded understanding of the

serious, lifelong health consequences? Addiction, for example, is one such consequence, with far-reaching effects. It is a global epidemic, and research has long shown that at the root of addiction often lies complex post-traumatic stress and other severe mental health conditions, frequently stemming from abusive relationships and relational traumas.

In other caregiving professions, abuse has been met with legal consequences—heavy fines, imprisonment, and loss of licenses—effectively removing offenders from positions of trust. Yet in religious institutions, whose reach and influence are vast, the problem persists. This is a public safety crisis of epic proportions. The data clearly show the profound damage such abuse inflicts on mental and physical health. The most powerful institutions have the capacity either to heal and unify, as they were meant to, or to cause lasting harm, as history has shown.

Why, then, is it so difficult for religious institutions to sanction and remove offenders instead of shielding them—often by transferring them to new locations where they can prey on the vulnerable again? The Catholic Church’s global presence, for instance, allows abusers to be relocated to other countries, where they continue to exploit trust. Vulnerability is universal; trust itself makes anyone susceptible. While minors are the most at risk, vulnerability spans all ages.

Why is immediate corrective action so rare when credible accusations arise? At the very least, institutions could remove the accused from active roles and make their names public. By the time a survivor fully recognizes they were abused, decades may have passed. Concealing an abuser’s identity only leaves others at risk. During the grooming phase, a victim may sense something is wrong, but the perpetrator—armed with authority and institutional backing—can manipulate, plant doubt, and gaslight the target into confusion and compliance. This dynamic not only weakens victims but also enables escalating abuse.

Stewart: The most urgent question is: How can external accountability be meaningfully enforced within the Eastern Orthodox Church, particularly among the clergy?

Abuse can occur in any organization and may never be fully eradicated. However, the decisive factor is how institutions—especially those in positions of authority—respond when abuse surfaces. Their response determines whether the organization actively works against abuse or inadvertently becomes a breeding ground for it. In hierarchical systems like Eastern Orthodoxy, abuse is not merely the result of individual misconduct; it is often facilitated—and concealed—by the very structures designed to provide spiritual guidance. The rigid church hierarchy, combined with the protections of confession, can allow perpetrators to avoid legal scrutiny, while internal mechanisms have consistently failed to safeguard victims.

As documented abuse cases accumulate, the Church—and those responsible for holding it accountable—now stand at a critical crossroads. Raising awareness is an essential first step, but the next imperative is to implement enforceable mechanisms of accountability that address and dismantle the systemic enablers of abuse. While some within the Church hierarchy may resist what they perceive as external intrusion, there is, hopefully, a broader majority of clergy and faithful who are willing to support reform. Their participation is not only desirable—it is likely essential to achieving meaningful change.

Jacobsen: Everyone, thank you for taking a little time to discuss this straightforward topic with complex derivatives. I appreciate the courage, forthrightness, and honesty.

Orthodox Clergy Sexual Abuse: Prosopon Healing's Data-Driven Reform

Katherine Archer and **Dr. Hermina Nedelescu** co-lead Prosopon Healing, documenting Orthodox clergy sexual misconduct and advocating survivor-centred reform. Archer, a trauma researcher and advocate, focuses on PTSD, somatic healing, and community care. Nedelescu, a neuroscientist, studies sexual-trauma neurobiology and drives database, policy, and legislative efforts to hold churches accountable.

Archer and **Nedelescu** discuss clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse in Eastern Orthodoxy and the wider failure of church accountability. Through Prosopon Healing's Orthodox Church Sexual Misconduct Database, they document hundreds of accused clergy and extrapolate tens of thousands of likely victims, most never reporting. They describe legislative and legal reform advocacy in California to hold clergy to professional counselling standards and expand mandatory-reporting and safeguarding laws, including the Safe Learning Environments Act. Drawing on neuroscience and trauma research, they outline physiological and psychological harms of sexual assault, emphasise somatic therapies, community support, and urgent systemic reform within religious institutions.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Today, we're here with what we found out is an especially apt phrasing, the "lovely" Katherine Archer and Hermina Nedelescu, to talk about the serious and significant problems of clergy-perpetrated abuse. We have been collaborating for a substantial amount of time now, along with our extended networks in this work. Looking at the last two years, what would you argue are the most significant developments in accountability and documentation of clergy-perpetrated abuse broadly, not necessarily only within the Eastern Orthodox Church?

Katherine Archer: I do not know that there has been any movement toward greater accountability within the Orthodox churches. In fact, there have been cases made public in the media that demonstrate a remarkable lack of care for victims. I am speaking specifically about the most public case, that of Father Matthew Williams. To my knowledge, he has still not been defrocked, even though he was arrested and charged on felony sexual-abuse counts, and that has been sad to see unfold. There has been no progress or change in understanding child-safety protocols, nor in transparency, nor in calling for additional victims to come forward. That is simply not happening. This is taking place in ROCOR, the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, right now.

Dr. Hermina Nedelescu: I fully agree with Katherine that, so far, there has not been accountability. Take the case of Greek Orthodox priest Dean Dimon, 76, arrested in the human trafficking crackdown in Ohio early this year where he was involved in soliciting prostitution. It was publicly reported that Dimon admitted to a prior offense, while the Church entity was "unable to verify any record of a prior criminal offense". In my view, this raises concerns about whether the institution appropriately tracked or responded to past misconduct, and may reflect significant gaps in oversight.

However, I am hopeful that in terms of documentation, because of our Orthodox Church Sexual Misconduct Database at Prosopon Healing, we now provide a centralized system where, for example, attorneys can check whether alleged sexually abusive clergy have previously been involved in sexual misconduct. This creates what is called notice, and it will be easier for plaintiffs in the future to seek accountability and justice, because typically the Church will say three very familiar words: "We did not know" about Father X.

In many of these cases, clergy are not defrocked, as Katherine mentioned. We also have in our database clergy with standing allegations who remain in ministry.

Jacobsen: As of today, November 20th, how many victims are represented in the Prosopon Healing Orthodox Church Sexual Misconduct Database? How many clergy are associated with those allegations?

Nedelescu: Over 25,000 victims.

Jacobsen: The premise for the mathematical extrapolation. I recall this from the presentation at a conference. How much is being used to extrapolate that? Is it approximately a twenty-fold extrapolation, and what is the basis for that mathematical extrapolation?

Nedelescu: Scott, I want to be more exact. This is important. So let us do the calculation. What goes into this mathematical extrapolation is the number of Orthodox clergy accused of sexual abuse. Right now, we have about 265. The number of exploited victims is ~1330+. Then we have to take into consideration the percentage of victims who report, which is about two to five percent. Then we have to be honest and consider the percentage of those who are wrongly accused which is 2-10%. We can set up a cross-multiplication and solve for X which gives us over 25,000 victims after correcting for the "wrongly accused". Importantly, this amount is only from about the early 2000's until now.

Jacobsen: Again, credit to Pokrov, Melanie Sakoda and Cappy Larson, as well as to you two, for accomplishing this and putting it together. Now, when we first started working together, there was that one bill that was held in committee. What has been the development, if any, since that bill, about any other significant efforts? Not that new legislation has passed, as per Katherine's earlier response, but in the sense of things being put forward so that the issue is not dead: duty-to-report, and other areas.

Archer: This is as individuals, not the work of Prosopon. But we have continued to meet with legislators and their offices—sometimes their aides—to support legislation. The need for legislation has not changed. The initial proposal was to add clergy to the list of mandated standards, holding them accountable if they offend their parishioners, and to make it a crime. It would have imposed criminal sanctions.

We have moved forward. We have met with legislators. We have gone over the Business and Professions Code in California. What we have come up with is adding clergy to the Business and Professions Code, rather than creating an entirely separate bill. There is a section of the Business and Professions Code that defines the conduct of, for example, therapists. We want to add clergy to that section of the B&P Code. That is what we have been meeting with legislators about. Hermina can say more about where we are now.

Nedelescu: There might be other appropriate code sections where we can integrate some of this language to hold members of the clergy accountable to the same standards we hold other counsellors or people in helping professions, including therapists. We are actively working on this—literally as of the last twenty-four hours. I shared some emails with Katherine from a legislative office that is helping us move this forward.

I do not know where it will end up. The situation is complicated in California because there are unlicensed pastoral counsellors—non-licensed, non-therapist clergy—who have absolutely no training in therapy, no training in seminary to address mental illness, and they are allowed to practice what is legally termed "the work of psychological or therapeutic nature" with no license.

This is part of California law that is contradictory. It complicates things because clergy with no training are allowed to practice work of a psychological and therapeutic nature with no licensure. Yet, there is no licensing board to hold them accountable. So we have to consider addressing that as well. To avoid harming people, you must have training. You must have a licence to practice as a therapist. Ordination does not prepare you for the work of psychological nature. Seminaries lack adequate training. It is quite shocking that clergy can practice under the umbrella of religion without any of the safeguards required of therapists who are actually trained.

So yes, we are doing this simultaneously—trying to add members of the clergy to the California statute, but also addressing the other piece of legislation that allows them to practice without a license. This isn't new as fifteen other states have clergy abuse laws and so will California.

Archer: Interestingly, through this work, we also became aware of how much we have to explain these issues to people. Some people understand it immediately; others do not. But in California, there is no minimum age for marriage. California still allows child marriage with the consent of the parents, which is absolutely shocking. It gives you an idea of what we are up against in terms of education.

Jacobsen: On the international rights front, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most signed and ratified rights document in the history of the United Nations, despite being relatively young. Somalia was the second-to-last country to approve it. The United States signed the Convention more than 30 years ago, but of the 193 UN member states, 192 have ratified it. The United States is the only one that has not ratified it.

Archer: This correlates to our work because these problems—child marriage, abuse, exploitation—are happening within religious communities. These are fundamentalist religious communities where you see child marriages arranged or organized by parents. Interestingly, in California, if a child is married to an adult man—usually a female child married to an adult male—they can enter into that marriage with their parents' permission. But they cannot get out of it because they lack the legal authority to terminate the contract. They have no rights, and no attorney will take on a child client. They are in an impossible situation that should be immediately evident to legislators, yet it is not. It feels similar to clergy abuse. We are having to explain the role of a pastor, the role of a priest, what they are doing, and why these situations are absolutely not consensual.

Nedelescu: There has been some progress in California on the Safe Learning Environments Act, a bill introduced by Senator Sasha Perez. Both Katherine and I attended that press conference and I delivered a speech on the negative impact of sexual trauma on the brain, especially the developing brain. A couple of hours after it was delivered, Governor Newsom signed the bill into law. What this law does is require schools—including religious schools—to provide education about grooming and what constitutes an appropriate or inappropriate relationship, such as between a student and a teacher or a staffer. There will also be a database listing individuals accused of sexual misconduct. If they are found not guilty, they will be removed. This is a very significant development for California schools, including K–12 schools and religious schools. Senator Sasha Perez wanted to ensure that religious schools and private schools were included. It was a significant victory to see the Safe Learning Environments Act passed. That is an essential aspect of our work.

Jacobsen: What is the current state of the research on the dysregulation of body systems, from sexual and other trauma that would obviously correlate with clergy-perpetrated abuse?

Nedelescu: Yes. I will let Katherine jump on this. We attended the Society for Neuroscience, where our work was one of the few posters on sexual abuse. Let Katherine say a bit about it, since it was her poster. She is the one who presented.

Archer: There is still so much we do not fully know. But what we do know is that, within the diagnosis of PTSD, people who have experienced sexual trauma are experiencing a different form of PTSD, and there will need to be better treatments and more understanding of how this presents. Women are the majority of people who receive a diagnosis of PTSD. There is some research saying this is due to women's biology or hormones. Hermina and I are saying, let us look at sexual assault. Women are being assaulted more, and that is why the rates are higher. The rates for women are twice those of men for PTSD. The rates of sexual assault for women are now at least one in three. Is that what it is, Hermina? For men, we used to say one in six, but the number is higher now.

Nedelescu: Yes. The most recent CDC data show higher rates. The CDC reports that “over half of women and almost one in three men have experienced sexual violence involving physical contact during their lifetimes”. To add to what Katherine said, there is literature on "situational trauma" that may also be a risk factor for PTSD in females more than males—things like silencing or victim-blaming. That is called situational trauma.

One thing we learned at this conference: a urologist from the Netherlands stopped by. I did not know this, but rape victims, because the assault involves penetration, often have irreversible, permanent pelvic dysfunction. He explained that urologists operate in the pelvic region, and some victims can no longer urinate and require a catheter. Each time a catheter is inserted, there is re-traumatization. This is something we absolutely need to elevate to the public-health domain.

In addition, some victims cannot pass bowel movements because the muscles tighten from the rape trauma. In those cases, they require a colostomy bag. I was surprised that these interventions were needed. He also said that 90–95% of his patients with irreversible pelvic dysfunctions are rape victims. He has a number of publications on this issue. He has also developed a device that

he implants that sends stimulation to the pelvic area (near the vaginal region/near the bowel) to help with the pelvic dysfunction.

Whether the sexual abuse is hands on or hands off, the damage is severe implicating every physiological system in the body of the victim.

Jacobsen: What other preliminary findings are coming up in the peer-reviewed research, either from your poster presentation or otherwise?

Nedelescu: We are about to write a review article on PTSD. I am currently involved in reviewing 300 clinical trials to see what has been done to treat PTSD pharmacotherapeutically. We are emphasizing the need to divide trauma types—combat trauma, accident trauma, bereavement, and sexual trauma. Sexual trauma carries the highest conditional risk for PTSD and the most severe symptomatology, even higher than combat trauma, accident trauma or loss of a loved one.

From there, Katherine and I are taking the sexual-trauma subset, and now Katherine is looking through the current clinical trials listed through NIH.gov to identify what therapeutic modalities have been tested. You can expect something official in the next couple of months, I hope. So not just pharmacologic treatments, but also therapy-based approaches.

You have trials that use only drug interventions, others that use therapeutic or counselling interventions—cognitive-behavioural therapy or other modalities—and some that combine the two. Some are efficacious others are not.

Archer: From an initial review of the broader literature—not only clinical trials—I did a larger review of treatments for sexual-trauma-induced PTSD. What appears to be most effective are self-compassion therapies, which cultivate compassion toward oneself, paired with a supportive community. That seems to be key.

This is precisely what is missing within the Orthodox Church—a supportive community. It is non-existent, either because the clergy are not trained, do not know what to do, or are unwilling. The support necessary for a victim of clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse is simply not there.

Jacobsen: What other resources do you recommend outside of personal healing or your own work, independent of the mandate of Prosopon Healing?

Archer: A lot of my personal knowledge of this topic informs my research and my curiosity about where the evidence is pointing. I have found that talk therapy alone is not adequate. It simply will not cut it, because there is deep nervous-system dysregulation.

This dysregulation is not even necessarily from the sexual trauma alone—it is often from the community response: asking for help and being shut down, dismissed, or blamed. Many victims experience this. It is not kind. It affects the body at a deep physiological level.

Healing from something like that takes longer and requires more than meeting with a therapist one-on-one and talking about it. That will not be enough. A person—and therapists — need to think more broadly about engaging the body and using somatic work. Obviously, EMDR is well known. I have recently been trying something called Brainspotting, which is less well-known,

but I find it to be incredibly effective. With EMDR, it can feel as though something is being done *to* you.

But with Brainspotting, you can remain entirely in control of the experience. You also do not need to speak to the therapist or narrate any part of what you are processing. That is helpful to consider for people who have experienced sexual trauma, because one of the core aspects of the trauma is being out of control or losing autonomy. Brainspotting is a modality—derived from EMDR—that allows a person to retain independence and control over their own therapy.

Nedelescu: From a behavioural neuroscience perspective, three significant factors contribute to mental and behavioural health: biological, psychological, and environmental. Of those three factors, the environmental factor is the easiest to change. The biology takes a long time to return to baseline after trauma—sometimes ten years and other times never. One just has to adapt.

Psychological factors also take a very long time. In fact, Amy Nordhues, who recently spoke about therapist abuse and clergy abuse, has also said it takes about ten years to recover from something like this. So it is a long process.

But environmental factors—you *can* leave that toxic community more easily. And I would recommend an immediate fleeing from the environment where the abuse occurred, because it does not happen in a vacuum. It is an entire system that is a toxic system with other cases of abuse in that same community. Diane Langberg also talks about this as well. There is mounting literature on this.

Together with what we know from the neurosciences about how the environment affects the body, mental and behavioural health, the first thing is: get out of the community and find a new community of support immediately. Adaptation can take place more quickly that way. Survivors can gain their agency quicker in a healthy environment.

Jacobsen: I want clarification on the three points, a little more, please: the biological, the psychological, and the environmental changes.

Nedelescu: They are all connected. The way it works is that environmental stimuli are instantiated or encoded in the brain, which then affect behaviour. That is how the human brain and behaviour function. So if you change your environment to a healthier one, you can heal or adapt in a healthier setting. One can recover more quickly by not having those noxious stimuli continuously triggering you.

Talk therapy takes a long time. I said ten years because Amy Nordhues said ten years, and I typically see ten to twenty years for people to achieve a state where they can talk about it *neutrally*—meaning without being triggered.

Jacobsen: What are some nuances—especially when you are talking to people, legislators, politicians—about policy change, legislative change, or about the fact of clergy abuse itself, that they do not understand? Or even those who *do* understand: what are the nuances where you want to be precise and transparent about the actual state of affairs, the facts?

Archer: The churches are not going to police themselves. That is a massive point that people are not fully understanding. People who are going to abuse will gravitate toward religious

communities. They come to religious communities because they know they will hear about forgiveness. They can persuade people that—even if they have past allegations—they need or *deserve* a fresh start.

So these communities—while many people understand this—are often not fully grasping that predators deliberately seek out religious environments because there is a complete lack of oversight. You cannot. It's very, very difficult to ensure adequate state-level oversight because of the separation of church and state.

Nedelescu: This is where Amos's (Guiora) work comes in, because he analyzes this and calls out the enablers of sexual violence. Perpetrators are simply exploiting a system that enables them. They know they are not going to be removed; they know they will be kept in ministry and protected. So, they continue.

That is where the enablers come in. That is why we called out the chief enabler—we had to because he has been involved in transferring accused sex offenders from one community to a new community. There are several chief enablers within the Orthodox Church. With this system of enabling, which is well-documented in Amos's work and others', even if other scholars do not always use the word "enabling." We now have a new window opening next year that holds accountable not only the perpetrator but also the entity which covered up. The office of Assembly member Cecilia Aguiar-Curry put that forward and it passed into law.

Archer: So people *are* beginning to understand that it is the entity that is enabling. But progress is slow. We have been in meetings where someone—maybe an aide in a legislator's office—will ask, "Well, if someone experiences grooming or abuse, can't they go to the church?" And we have to explain: no, they cannot, for many reasons. Nothing will happen, or the church already knows, or the victim has already been told not to speak.

Nedelescu: Yes, that is one of the significant nuances. Another is that people do not understand that coercion negates consent. For some reason, this is difficult for many to grasp. Coercion *absolutely* negates consent. Our first involvement with the clergy abuse and exploitation bill ran straight into this consent issue.

There is the power differential, which people are finally beginning to understand—that there is an enormous disparity of power between a member of the clergy and a parishioner. Especially in Orthodoxy, where you have clericalism: the priest is considered to be on a higher step, closer to God, and therefore viewed as spiritually superior. Some even believe the priest can be "attacked by demons" precisely because of this supposed spiritual closeness to God. This is bizarre thinking, but it flows from clericalism and the idea that "father knows best", "He wouldn't do this", "He is holy" or "he is overwhelmed", etc etc etc

Archer: Yes. So you have clericalism, you have coercion, you have people not understanding that coercion negates consent, and you have the enabling system Hermina mentioned.

Jacobsen: Something that has come up during the collaboration and the conference presentations is the idea of the integrity of the faith. For those who are within the faith—from laity to the highest echelons of Orthodoxy—should they be concerned about victims and accountability for the sake of the faith itself, for the integrity of the institution? People have the right to freedom of

religion and conscience, but should they care about the institution's reputation and moral standing? Who has been the highest-level response that you have received within the faith regarding clergy-perpetrated abuse and accountability—either on a specific case or on structural reform?

Archer: All responses right now go through the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese. They go through their attorney. You will not be able to speak with or engage in dialogue with anyone else within the administration. Everything is funnelled back to an attorney.

Nedelescu: Which is interesting, because you can see the problem immediately. An attorney is used for HR issues and assessing liability. Also these people have no adequate training with trauma victims.

Archer: We are finding that many people we speak to—often privately—are not vocal. They are not going to speak up publicly or give interviews for various reasons, but they are walking away. They walk away from the community. They pull out their families, their children. They take many loved ones with them, and they never look back.

If you are a Christian and take your faith seriously, and you believe your faith is healing, then the fact that people are so wounded that they permanently leave the faith should matter. People do not realize how many are going—how many are hurt. They would be absolutely floored and shocked by who we speak with and what they tell us. It would shake them.

Nedelescu: On the matter of integrity: in the Orthodox tradition, there is a vast amount of theology about helping the wounded, the poor, and the injured. But that is not what is being practiced in real life. An individual whom a member of the clergy has sexually abused whether hands on or hands off, and you are not helping that victim-survivor—then what are you doing? As a leader that should be your greatest priority. You are not living your own theology. So integrity is directly implicated.

Jacobsen: In the press release regarding Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, we stated that God has created the world, that human beings are part of creation, and that we are to care for creation. Therefore, if we are not caring for the vulnerable, the wounded, the abused—who are part of creation—we are not fully committed to the care of creation as a whole, within that theological frame of Orthodoxy. Is that generally correct?

Nedelescu: Yes. Human existence and the rest of creation, including what he has said about climate change and environmental care, cannot be separated. We are part of the environment. So yes—absolutely—this is the argument we made. There is a deep interconnection. Orthodox theology has not developed much recently. The only concept of interconnection or relationality is in the Trinitarian doctrine but that's often divided by a skybridge where you have the “heavenly committee” composed of the “father”, “son”, and “holy spirit”, vs. the people down below. This is at odds with the reality from the life sciences where everything is interconnected and inter-dependent. Buddhist concepts have it closer to reality. Orthodox theology needs help and the Orthodox Church needs a reformation which has already begun.

Jacobsen: What were some of the responses to that argument, if any?

Archer: You can't know. We do not receive direct responses. People are not necessarily arguing with us. They are silent. And silence is a response. It becomes a form of enabling at that point.

Nedelescu: The only people who have responded—at least to some of the members of our coalition—are from the Templeton Foundation. The new president responded by thanking some of our members for letting him know about the clergy-perpetrated sexual abuse crisis in the Orthodox Church, which is good because silence is another form of abuse. I believe he said he was thankful that we let him know about the sexual-abuse crisis in the Orthodox Church—something to that effect. Is that correct, Katherine?

Archer: Yes. I do not have the letter right in front of me.

Nedelescu: I do. Here: "Thank you for your correspondence regarding abuse within the Eastern Orthodox Church. I appreciate that you wrote and how you have worked to support survivors of abuse." So, at least, there is acknowledgment.

The Church has not responded in that way. So we are thankful to the Templeton Foundation for at least having the decency to respond.

Jacobsen: What else?

Archer: We are getting many views on the website and many opinions on the Substack. The numbers are incredibly high, yet engagement is very low. People are afraid, perhaps. But we can see—it is thousands.

Jacobsen: This was brought up in one interview, and it is important to reiterate. We see these cases in Hollywood—Weinstein, et al. We see them in sports—gymnastics—Nassar, et al. We see it most prominently in the Catholic Church, given its scale. They have paid out over a billion and a half dollars in Los Angeles alone as of 2024. As a matter of factual fairness, this happens across secular and religious lines. But you work where you are. So your work is on Orthodoxy because that is the community you are know. Is that a fair characterization?

Archer: Yes. There is an additional element, though, because within a community where sexual abuse is *not recognized*, it makes that community extremely risky. In terms of future victims, because it is not discussed, it is perceived as safe. Whereas in some secular communities, people at least have some warning signs or awareness. That makes it extremely risky. The Orthodox Church still has not come to grips with the fact that it has a sexual-abuse crisis.

It has reached epidemic levels—epidemic in the sense that the rate of sexual abuse, sexual violence, and sexual misconduct is higher than in the general population, which is about three to five percent.

Jacobsen: Any points to add to that?

Nedelescu: There is not much more to say, except for this final point: it is a *riskier* community than others. We know what happens in schools. We know what happens in academia—there is a database in academia. But in the Orthodox Church, people genuinely believe, "It doesn't happen here. It happens in the Catholic Church somewhere else." That makes it a precarious place. That is why it is so important to speak up.

Archer: We do not have the benefit of public visibility. If there is a public arrest or a situation involving clergy in Orthodoxy, it is not covered in the media because Orthodoxy is viewed as fringe and unfamiliar. Not *you*—I am talking about the broader media landscape.

For example, in the Father Matthew Williams case, we reached out to many news outlets but could not get it covered. If he had been a Protestant pastor, they would have been calling for additional victims. This is a priest who served in orphanages in Haiti, who had contact with many children, and who had multiple victims. Yet there has been *no* call for additional victims. He was arrested in January, and still—no call. Yes.

Jacobsen: Yes. There is probably a tiered analysis we could do on this—an extended conversation outside this interview—about the stages at which things stall. There is the arrest, and then nothing further: no outreach, no call for victims, no systemic follow-up.

It is similar to arguments I have heard in a comparable context when speaking with experts in international criminal law about Russia's aggression against Ukraine. There is political provocation, then social-media reporting, then media reportage, then a political narrative slant, then eventually a legal standard for a war-crime designation—murder, genocide, ethnic cleansing, enforced displacement, and so on.

What, as far as I know, has not been done about clergy abuse is mapping that same type of flowchart: *where do things stall?* From the perspective of victims' well-being.

The first barrier is always what you have said: 96–98% never report. Fear, shame, belief they will not be heard, being frozen in trauma, being unable to work, or not having the language or reflective experience to identify what happened as abuse. That would be an interesting direction to continue in Q1 2026 and onward.

Archer: Yes. We also have the problem that if you are within that community, if you are abused within that community, Orthodox Christians often think they should go to *other clergy* to report abuse. It is tough to change someone's mind or educate them that their beloved clergy person—who may be excellent at serving the liturgy and performing sacraments—is *not* educated about sexual abuse and may not be the person to go to. He may not know anything about reporting; he may not know to advise the victim to make a police report; he may not even recognize that—and this happens with adult victims—what occurred *was* abuse. Sometimes the victim needs the language, and clergy often cannot give it.

So you have this small percentage that comes forward, and then they think to go to their clergy person first. And we see this in cases—for example, in California, we had a look-back window. We have lawsuits now, and you can see the progression: someone went to the clergy person or the church first, and here we are *decades* later, with the adult reflecting on how it was mishandled. They are using the look-back window in California. But that is decades later. Not all states have look-back windows. So the person is shut down, and the statute of limitations may run out.

Jacobsen: As a note, at an international secular conference, I asked about what happened to a particular individual. They told me, "Oh yes, he's gone. He offended in X, Y, Z way, and he's been gone for six or seven years." It was stated very matter-of-factly. I thought that type of

institutional response—immediate suspension or removal—was healthy. It prevents things from becoming systemic. One case is too many, but if there were two or three, it would have stopped right there. The person lost their position and was no longer part of the community. That is a healthier response.

But the unhealthy response I have seen from some parts of the secular community—reflecting critically—is that in the 2000s and early 2010s, some online non-religious activists used clergy-perpetrated abuse as a cudgel to slander individual religious people and broad-brush entire faiths. Their interlocutors kept saying: "You are doing this to hundreds of millions of people. This is not a fair argument."

And if you care about people but do not believe in an afterlife or the theology, you should still work with those communities on reform and accountability—because then you respect people's rights to religion, belief, and conscience *while* reducing harm, which is what these critics claimed they cared about. These incidents happen. They are real.

Nedelescu: Absolutely. Interesting that you mentioned the word "reform." The Orthodox Church is undergoing a reform at the moment. It has already started. There is so much crisis at every level in the Orthodox world that something is going to happen. These are difficult and exciting times. We do not have to go into the reform topic. But you mentioned something important about the conference: the president said the perpetrator had been removed. I want to highlight something in our database.

Out of approximately 200 clergy—we have more than 200 now, but using 200 because I am looking at the plot from when the database had 200 alleged sexual perpetrators—around 117 of them were still either in ministry, or no one knew what happened to them. At least three were promoted to higher positions. And only 25 were removed from their posts. This is critical data.

Jacobsen: Yes, that is concerning. On the one hand, it is suitable for survivors that this information is documented. But it is hazardous for an institution to keep these individuals in ministry. And yet, this is what is happening.

Archer: Right.

Jacobsen: Someone did a very in-depth analysis a year or two after the initial hashtag #MeToo movement, and also after the #TimesUp movement. They tracked what happened to many of the men in power positions who were removed. Most of them found work. It was not a long exile.

Nedelescu: They go into ministry.

Archer: Even if these priests are removed, they end up entering military chaplaincy, becoming life coaches, and some even practice therapy. We came across someone who was actively practicing as a psychologist and had written about treatment. They are so well-versed.

Jacobsen: These are psychopaths. You do not want to give them therapy, because they come back with tools. They are going there for training, essentially. They become highly educated predators. This is a long conversation about American institutions.

Yes, to your earlier point, Katherine, about licensure. There is a broader problem in the U.S. where someone with no qualifications at all can become a "life coach," or even present themselves as a counsellor or therapist. Then you have someone with no relevant credentialing, qualification, or licensure advising at critical developmental stages of a child's life.

The "high school counsellor" in many schools is inadequately trained. There is very little real counselling. This is a known problem in American culture. That is a more extended conversation we can have in another session—how these cultural systems intersect with the Orthodox context as a global issue.

Archer: We have also been meeting with people like Amy Nordhues regarding therapy harm. She is working on a documentary. She has all the statistics. The number of therapists who exploit clients is much higher than most people realize. And some are still—in the same way as clergy—still practicing. It is hard to name names.

Jacobsen: Several years ago, a Human Rights Watch page on [equitable access to safe abortion services](#) as a fundamental human rights, regardless of one's view on abortion, access should be there because it is part of healthcare.

Another example is that crisis pregnancy centers outnumber abortion clinics in the United States by two, three, maybe four times. It is an enormous disparity. Their purpose is to talk women out of abortions.

Institutional religious privilege in the U.S. is substantial. It structurally affects people's lives. In the case of adult women facing clergy-perpetrated abuse, these structures can do enormous harm. Crisis pregnancy centers primarily impact women and teens.

What are your favourite quotes? They can be religious or not. And also—your favourite quote from scripture, if you want—something that you feel personally resonates, not necessarily sanctifies, but provides theological solidity for how you are directing your time and energy.

Archer: One of my favourite quotes right now is from St. John of the Cross: "Where there is no love, put love, and you will take out love." I have loved that quote for years. It is St. John of the Cross.

Nedelescu: Mine would be from the father of one of my professors at the Graduate Theological Union. He taught us "The Spirituality of Nonviolence." The quote is:

"The world is so varied and beautiful. Seek wisdom wherever it is to be found."

Meaning—not necessarily in the Church. For some people, especially survivors of sexual abuse, they cannot walk into a church again. There is wisdom elsewhere. Sanctity is not confined to the Church.

Jacobsen: I remember covering a film festival in Vancouver a few weeks ago. I was on the bus, in the back, answering emails on my phone. The bus stopped, and to my right, I saw a man overdosing on the sidewalk with two people helping him. The reflection I had was: could be anyone, wisdom can be found anywhere, even in unfortunate circumstances. We were likely passing through the Downtown Eastside at that moment. Any others before we part ways?

Archer: You wanted a religious or scripture one?

Jacobsen: Sure.

Archer: I have been listening to *Habakkuk*. It is only three chapters. Let me tell you how it starts:

Why do you make me look at injustice?

Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?

Destruction and violence are before me;

there is strife, and conflict abounds.

The law is paralyzed,

and justice never prevails.

The wicked hem in the righteous,

so that justice is perverted.

I listened to every translation while walking my dog because it gave me so much validation.

Jacobsen: Definitely some Job and Ecclesiastes energy there. “Meaningless, meaningless,” and all that. No justice, no law.

Archer: Yes, Habakkuk is so angry. But my favorite part is at the very end: “For the director of music. On my stringed instruments.” There is even a translation that says it is meant to be played with an orchestra. My friend and I were saying: there definitely need to be drums. It is a lament, but with instruments.

Nedelescu: I am glad you highlighted that, Katherine, because in Orthodoxy we do not currently have theologians like Walter Brueggemann, who speaks so much about justice. He is a very famous biblical scholar in the Protestant world. The Bible is full of justice and law, but we do not have Orthodox theologians pushing that forward. Maybe, you could do that. You could talk about justice. Mine is about practical theology.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Katherine and Hermina.

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Author Biography



Scott Douglas Jacobsen is a Canadian author, interviewer, and publisher, and a board member and executive on numerous boards whose contributions to secularism, humanism, and human-rights discourse are distinguished by their rigour and accessibility. He established In-Sight Publishing in 2014 to produce freely available or low-cost e-books and periodicals under a Creative Commons license, thereby ensuring broad dissemination while safeguarding intellectual property.

As editor-in-chief of *In-Sight: Interviews* (ISSN 2369-6885), launched in 2012, Jacobsen curates and presents meticulously prepared, long-form dialogues with a wide range of interlocutors. These

interviews include scientists and philosophers, activists and public intellectuals, addressing themes such as secular ethics, freedom of expression, evidence-based policymaking, and the global defence of human rights. His work appears regularly in peer-recognized outlets, including *The Good Men Project*, *International Policy Digest* (ISSN: 2332-9416), *The Humanist* (Print: ISSN 0018-7399; Online: ISSN 2163-3576), Basic Income Earth Network (UK Registered Charity 1177066), *A Further Inquiry*, Canadian Humanist Publications (CA Registered Charity 118833284 RR 0001), *Uncommon Ground Media* (UK Registration 11836548), The New Enlightenment Project, *News Intervention*, *Canadian Atheist*, Trusted Clothes (CN: 9562184; BN: 791402928RC0001), among dozens of others.

Jacobsen engages globally and interdisciplinarily with issues of social justice, belief plurality, and economic equity. Jacobsen has held the Tobis Fellowship in Research at the University of California, Irvine, on multiple occasions, contributing to empirical and normative studies on ethics and public discourse. He maintains active membership in numerous professional media organizations, fostering adherence to editorial standards and facilitating ongoing intellectual exchange.

His editorial leadership and commitment to open-access formats have generated a substantial, publicly accessible archive—known as the Jacobsen Bank—that documents contemporary secular and humanist thought. Based in British Columbia, he continues to expand the reach of his platforms, amplifying diverse perspectives and promoting evidence-based dialogue across cultural and disciplinary boundaries.

