



Recognising Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse

Responses from Sodalicio Survivors in Peru

Rocío Figueroa

Good Shepherd College, Auckland, New Zealand

rfigueroa@gsc.ac.nz

David Tombs

University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

david.tombs@otago.ac.nz

Abstract

This article presents the findings from qualitative interviews to explore responses to the idea of Jesus as victim of sexual abuse. The seven participants are adult male survivors of prior church sexual abuse, which they experienced as teenagers and young men. The perpetrators were leaders of the Sodalicio society in Peru. The article by Tombs (1999) on naming the torture of Jesus as sexual abuse was discussed, to assess whether participants see this as persuasive, and as meaningful for sexual abuse survivors, and important for the church. The interviews suggest that: (1) naming Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse was new to all participants; (2) most found the historical and biblical evidence to be persuasive; (3) the group were divided on whether this was of value to survivors of church related sexual abuse; (4) all of the group agreed that it was important for the wider church.

Keywords

Jesus – crucifixion – sexual abuse – torture – Sodalicio – Sodalitium Christianae Vitae

1 Introduction

Starting in the 1970s, feminist biblical scholars have re-shaped New Testament scholarship by exposing many of the patriarchal biases and blind-spots that have distorted the work of male scholars who have been inattentive to gender.

Feminist scholarship has demonstrated beyond question the importance of a gender-sensitive reading of biblical texts. Recent studies on biblical constructions of masculinity, by scholars informed by critical gender theory, have taken this work into new areas as demonstrated by the articles in this collection on gendering Jesus. Careful attention to the cultural norms and social values of biblical masculinity offers significant new insights into biblical texts and their meaning.

One concern which might reasonably be expected to have been prominent in these readings—but which has so far received limited attention—is the sexual abuse of Jesus. Sexual abuse brings together power, control, gender constructions, sexual identity, and vulnerability, in an especially intense way. The sexual abuse of male victims is often seen as bringing the victim's whole gender identity into question, at least in terms of traditional constructions of femininity and masculinity (Ganzevoort and Sremac 2016; Zalewski et al. 2018). It is, therefore, surprising that so little attention has been given to Jesus' experience of sexual abuse as part of his stripping, torture, and crucifixion. The gender issues in sexual abuse are so strong, and the cross is so central to the New Testament, that any discussion of Jesus and gender is incomplete without this neglected part of his experience. Yet sexual abuse is invariably missing from biblical scholarship on crucifixion (Hengel 1977; Chapman 2008; Samuelsson 2011; Cook 2014; Chapman and Schnabel 2015).

The idea that Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse is almost always initially met with surprise and incredulity. Many people say that when they first heard the idea it seemed absurd, even outrageous, or offensive. Some have gone as far as to suggest that it might be blasphemous and should not even be said. Yet after hearing more about the gospel accounts, and having a chance to reflect on these, people often change their minds. The idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse no longer appears strange; what seems strange is that something so clear in the biblical text could be hidden for so long, and that it could stay hidden in what amounts to plain sight within such well-known passages.

This article presents the findings from interviews with a group of sexual abuse survivors to explore their responses to identifying Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse (Figueroa and Tombs 2019). The starting point used for the interviews was a much earlier article by one of the authors (Tombs 1999) on crucifixion, state terror and sexual abuse. This earlier article draws on Latin American liberation hermeneutics to address the torture and abuse of political prisoners in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. It highlights the political use of torture to communicate state terror, and acknowledges the wide variety of sexually abusive practices that can be used as torture for this purpose. It then explores how

attention to state terror and sexual abuse might open up new questions, and offer new insights, on Roman crucifixion.

Our argument is that when Jesus is recognised as a victim of sexual abuse in light of these torture reports, then the need to consider the implications of this for other forms of sexual abuse becomes unavoidable and long overdue. It is extraordinary that the sexual abuse of crucifixion has been largely ignored for so long, especially since it has an important bearing on other theological and ecclesial debates. For example, feminist theologians have highlighted significant parallels between traditional atonement theories and divine child abuse, but these have not addressed crucifixion itself as a form of sexual abuse (see, for example, Brown and Bohn 1989). Likewise, a great deal has been written on church responses to child sexual abuse in recent decades, but Jesus' own experiences of sexual abuse are invariably missing from the debate, or dismissed as insignificant, despite the work of the Catholic priest Michael Trainor on the body of Jesus and sexual abuse (Trainor 2013; 2014).

Identifying the relevance of the sexual abuse of Jesus during torture for a consideration of church sexual abuse is not to equate the two as the same. It does not mean that the two are interchangeable or viewed as identical. Sexual abuse takes different forms, and each form should be understood in its own terms and specificity. Even within a broad sub-category, such as childhood sexual abuse, the experience of victims varies dramatically. Alistair McFadyen notes (2000: 57):

What the reality of abuse actually is for any individual child or adult survivor—how it is experienced, the nature and extent of its effects—relates to a complex interaction of factors which will be unique in every case.

Yet, whilst the specificity of both forms of sexual abuse must be maintained, the similarities they might share should also be addressed. Feminist analysis of sexual violence foregrounds attention to the gendered dynamics of power and control (Brownmiller 1975; Kelly 1988). The abusive power and control of perpetrators, the sense of isolation and stigma experienced by victims and survivors, and the silence and silencing of the churches are all potential points of contact (Tombs 2014; 2017).

Since October 2017, the #MeToo movement has reinforced the urgent need for churches to address sexual harassment, sexual assault, and sexual abuse in all its multiple forms, both within the church and in the wider society (De Muth 2019; Stiebert 2019; Everhart 2020). A number of important works might have helped churches to make links between the abuse of Jesus and #MeToo (for

example, Crisp 2010; Heath 2011; Gafney 2013; Edwards and Tombs 2018) but so far the connection has largely been missing from #MeToo conversations within the churches apart from a few exceptions (Reaves and Tombs 2019; Stiebert 2019).

The voices of survivors should have a privileged place in shaping a conversation around the abuse of Jesus in relation to both church abuses and #MeToo. To this end, the first section below sets out a brief rationale for why Jesus should be acknowledged as a victim of sexual abuse. The main section presents participant responses to this idea, with particular attention to their views on the significance this might have for survivors of sexual abuse, and also for the wider church.

2 Crucifixion as Sexual Abuse

In the Roman world, crucifixion was used to do more than just kill the victim. Crucifixions were intended to degrade and dehumanize the victim in the eyes of the wider society. Most references to crucifixions are for the execution of men, though there is evidence that women were also crucified (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.3). For both male and female victims, crucifixion as a public spectacle with a naked victim was a form of sexual humiliation. This humiliation also served as a warning to the public about the terrible consequences of rebelling against those in power.

The passion narratives offer details about the crucifixion of Jesus in which the sexual element is clear. According to Matthew (27:26–27) after being condemned by Pilate, the guards took Jesus into the governor's headquarters (*praetorium*). In front of 'the whole cohort', that likely numbered four hundred to five hundred soldiers, the guards 'stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him' (Mt. 27:28). He was mocked, beaten and spat upon by a crowd of soldiers before being stripped again (Mt. 27:31). Based on this passage, and its parallel in Mark 15:16–20, Jesus was first stripped naked to be mocked. The soldiers then stripped him again and dressed him for his journey through the city. At the cross, they then stripped him a third time, and exhibited him naked on the cross until he died before a mocking crowd. If Jesus was also initially stripped to be flogged (Mt. 27:26), that brings the recorded strippings in Matthew to a total of four, in the space of just six verses (Mt. 27:26–31).

It is a further step to establish with full confidence that each stripping involved complete nakedness. John, which is the gospel known for its detailed descriptions, records that when the 'soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took

his tunic: now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top' (Jn. 19:23). Raymond Brown concludes that although the gospels don't specify that Jesus died fully naked, the evidence favours a complete despoliation during the crucifixion. Brown (1994: 953) writes:

Certainly John, who gives the greatest attention to the scene, is so specific about every item of clothing that one would have the impression that nothing was left. The normal Roman pattern was to crucify criminals naked, as attested by Artemidorus Daldianus (*Oneirokritika* 2.53).

For both the Romans and the Jews, nakedness during execution was a sign of humiliation, vulnerability, and absolute powerlessness in which shame and dishonour were integral factors in the punishment. However, this element of Jesus' mistreatment has been minimized in the artistic representations of the crucifixion. The inclusion of a loincloth in most images covers over the shame and humiliation that was intended by forced nakedness. In addition, the widespread but mistaken assumption that sexual abuse must be motivated by some form of sexual gratification prevents many people from seeing the sexual dimension of the stripping and forced naked exposure of Jesus. It is important to stress that sexual abuse, especially when it is part of torture, is often enacted because it is a highly effective way to humiliate and punish the victim. Torture does not need to be motivated by sexual attraction or erotic desire for it to take a sexual form.

In recent years other scholars working from independent and different perspectives, have also named Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse (Heath 2011; Gafney 2013; Trainor 2014; Edwards and Tombs 2018). Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse has also featured on some religious blogs (Iafate 2010; Pezzulo 2019). The survivor views which are presented below are offered as an important further contribution to this emergent discussion. It is not the intention of this article to repeat at any length the arguments or evidence which have been offered elsewhere for this reading of Jesus' experience (Tombs 1999, 2017; Trainor 2014). Instead, the wish is to extend the debate in conversation with a group of survivors to consider the pastoral and theological implications that might follow from it. In a brief discussion of theological and pastoral perspectives in the earlier article (Tombs 1999: 109) it was suggested:

At the pastoral level, confronting the possibility of sexual abuse in the passion of Christ could provide practical help to contemporary victims of torture and sexual abuse. Recognition of sexual abuse in the treatment of Jesus could bring a liberating and healing message to the women,

children, and men of Latin America and elsewhere who have also been abused. The acceptance that even Jesus may have suffered evil in this way can give new dignity and self-respect to those who continue to struggle with the stigma and other consequences of sexual abuse. A God who through Christ is to be identified with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned (Matt. 25:31–46) is also to be identified with those suffering abuse and torture in the modern world.

Attention to the voices of survivors does not replace the need for further work to weigh the historical and textual evidence carefully and critically, and to understand how it would have been viewed in the first century. However, it does provide a salutary response to sceptics who have dismissed the idea out of hand as absurd or insulting (see responses posted to Edwards and Tombs 2018). Whilst the findings cannot be generalised to survivors more widely, and our interviews are a very small study, it is important for survivor voices to be heard on this subject so that their responses can start to guide further research.

3 Sodalicio Survivor Responses to Naming Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse

The seven interviews presented here were held in 2018 (Figueroa and Tombs 2019) and followed an earlier set of interviews in 2016 with eight participants (Figueroa and Tombs 2016; 2018). Five participants interviewed in 2018 were also part of the earlier 2016 interviews. They are referred to by the pseudonyms Matias, Nicolas, Roberto, Santiago, and Xavier. There were also two new 2018 participants, who are referred to as Jeremias and Lalo. The possibility that Jesus himself was a victim of sexual abuse was not raised with the group in the earlier study. The 2018 interviews offered an opportunity to explore whether participants would agree, disagree or be neutral towards a reading that Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse, and whether they would see this claim as significant or unimportant for survivors and for the church. This second phase is a strand within the wider University of Otago research project 'When Did We See You Naked?' (2018–2020), which explores different aspects of reading Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse.

Sodalicio is known more formally as Sodalitium Christianae Vitae (Sodalicio of Christian Life or scv), which is a Society of Apostolic Life within the Catholic Church. It was founded by a lay man Luis Fernando Figari in 1971 in Peru. Sodalicio has a presence in schools and churches and runs retreat facilities and Youth

Centres with communities in Peru, and also in Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Italy and the United States. Although Sodalicio members are mostly lay Catholics, the society also includes clergy. In 2010 the Peruvian journalist Pedro Salinas, a former Sodalicio member, accused Figari and other leaders of the community of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. After five years of further investigation, he wrote the book *Mitad monjes, mitad soldados* (*Half monks, half soldiers*) which contained victims' testimonies (Salinas 2015). Sodalicio subsequently recognized 66 victims and set aside a fund of nearly 2.5 million US dollars for reparations (Figueroa and Tombs 2018: 157–159).

The seven 2018 interview participants were provided with a Spanish translation of the full article (Tombs 1999), as well as a Spanish summary of the article. Participants were asked to read either the translated article or the summary as preparation for their interview. The semi-structured interviews asked each survivor for his reaction to the reading, and sought his views on the difference it might make to sexual abuse survivors and to the wider church.

Each individual interview was conducted in Spanish and generally lasted for about forty minutes. The interviews were recorded on a digital audio system and all information was transcribed verbatim into Spanish and then translated into English and analysed. We then made a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts to examine perceptions of naming Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. The Spanish translation of the article was subsequently published more widely (Tombs 2018) and accompanied by a reflection and hermeneutical analysis by the biblical scholar Fernando Segovia (Segovia 2018). However, to avoid any influence that Segovia's reflection might have on participant responses, his contribution was not made public until after the interviews.

We had three goals: historical; pastoral; and theological. At an historical level, we wished to hear from survivors whether they found the argument in the article historically plausible and worthy of further investigation. We did not expect them to offer scholarly or professional historical opinions, but just to speak for themselves, and discuss how they saw the evidence and arguments presented in the article in light of their own experiences. We also wanted to get a sense of whether they had previously thought of this possibility, and how they first reacted to the suggestion that Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse. At a pastoral level, we wished to assess whether they felt that seeing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse might help survivors towards a fuller healing process. At a theological level, we wanted to explore whether the idea of the sexual abuse of Christ might deepen a Christian understanding of God's solidarity and compassion towards those who experience abuse, and how this might impact on the wider church and its understanding of its mission.

In the rest of this section we present some of the key findings of the interviews in relation to the four key questions we asked: (1) What was your first reaction to the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse? (2) What do you think about the historicity and evidence that Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse? (3) Do you think that the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse could help survivors? (4) Do you think that the idea could be useful for the wider church: hierarchy, theologians, priests and community? We then turn to some of the difficulties that participants identified as impeding a church response to Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse.

3.1 *Question 1: What Was Your First Reaction to the Idea of Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse?*

None of the survivors had encountered the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse before, or thought of it for themselves. Lalo's first answer was: 'to be honest I had not thought about this matter before'. It was also new for Jeremias and he suggests its unexpectedness by comparing it in his reply to Christa artworks. Christa figures typically show a woman on the cross or in a cruciform image. One of the best known of these is by Edwina Sandys in 1975 (see Clague 2005; Slee 2011). Jeremias states:

... the first time that I ever thought about the possibility of the sexual abuse of Christ was after reading David Tombs' text about the crucifixion. That text caused the same sensation in me as when I first saw the photo of La Christa. Perceptions are questioned, and prejudices fall, and that is good.

Nicolas' first reaction was also one of surprise: 'I had never noticed it, and I had never thought before that Jesus was actually sexually abused'. Xavier said that he remembered thinking about the nakedness of Jesus before: 'I had thought about the idea before but I never developed it in the way that the Tombs article did. I remember asking myself why Jesus was naked'. Santiago recalled that when he first read about the idea, he thought it was 'forced, unnatural and very disturbing'. His first impression was:

... like trying to read an event from the past with the eyes of the present. I thought that you were trying to sell the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. The second problem was that I usually considered sexual abuse as a sexual attack that includes penetration and it was absurd for me to consider that this had happened to Jesus. I was confused trying to understand sexual abuse in a broader sense.

Santiago said that when he initially thought of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse it caused him stress. However, when Santiago reread the material one month later, he completely changed his point of view. He said: 'I believe that it is right'.

3.2 *Question 2: What Do You Think about the Historicity and Evidence That Jesus Was a Victim of Sexual Abuse?*

In response to the historical evidence which was presented, most considered that recognising Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse was an appropriate conclusion. They saw it as consistent with the historical evidence of how the Romans used different types of violence, including nakedness, as a means to punish and humiliate the victim. Roberto says:

It seems plausible to think of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. It is consistent with the mentality of the time to think that the Romans, in their eagerness to humiliate Jesus Christ, also wanted to strip him naked and expose him publicly. How horrible it is to think of a naked man on a cross! As the Psalm affirms: 'But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people' (Psalm 22:6). He was treated like that. I would not be surprised if the soldiers even raped him. But we do not know that, and I think it is not important either.

Along the same lines Mattias states: 'The idea of considering Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse seems consistent with everything. Historically, in every procedure of torture or punishment or when someone was accused, there was always a sexual element ...' Mattias directly connects the historical evidence from the passion of Jesus to the sexual element present in many torture practices. At the same time, from his own experience, he can recognize how strategically important it is for a perpetrator to sexually humiliate his victims, he explains: 'because in that way their intimate identity is wounded'.

Regarding the historical evidence, Nicolas has no doubts about the historicity, but he considers that it must be treated in the larger context of the passion narrative. For him, Jesus' sexual humiliation is a very small detail in comparison to what Jesus suffered:

It is correct, but I have this strange impression that in the context of the passion, the abuse was very marginal. If he had been flagellated, imprisoned and crucified the reality of nakedness, to me, seems a small detail in contrast with what he suffered.

For Jeremias there is not enough historical evidence in what was presented to make a full connection. He pointed to differences as well as similarities:

I do not see enough evidence on the historical level, except from stories that coincide in some areas while contradicting or omitting data in others. That makes the big picture seem somewhat incongruous.

3.3 *Question 3. Do You Think That the Idea of Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse Could Help Survivors?*

Although most of the survivors agreed that the historical evidence supported the view that Jesus should be seen as someone who suffered sexual humiliation, they had different opinions on whether or not they found this helpful, and whether or not it would have meaning for other survivors. Three viewed the idea as irrelevant or unhelpful, whereas four viewed it as positive, or at least potentially positive.

Jeremias said that since he is no longer a believer, the idea had little impact for him. Jeremias previously had a Christian faith, but he lost it after his experience in Sodalicio. He answered: 'I do not have the vision of the believer. Therefore, that Jesus of whom you speak is not a reference for me. For me Jesus exists only on paper, literally. The victims I know are flesh and blood'.

Lalo is still a believer, but he is not sure that the experience of Jesus would help other survivors. He thought that the idea would probably not be helpful for survivors because most of the victims of sexual abuse within the church have abandoned the faith and it would be almost impossible to go back:

I don't think it would help. I don't know if it is possible to help a victim of sexual abuse within the church by considering a religious topic. It is more difficult to talk about Jesus' suffering with people that have been sexually abused (not just once like Jesus, but many times in their lives or for many years) by clergy or in a church setting.

Santiago was certain that the idea would not be helpful for victims. He thinks that the abuse of the victims is very different from Jesus' abuse:

The case of what happened to Jesus and what happens to victims is very different. In the case of Jesus, it was a punishment for affirming that he was God. It was a punishment conferred by the authorities of the time (whether it was fair or not). So, I do not feel Jesus' solidarity with me, nor empathy. I did nothing. I was not guilty of anything. I did not have any trial. I do not see the similarity.

On the other hand, four survivors thought the idea might be helpful, if it was addressed in an appropriate way. Nicolas answered:

I think that it could help depending on the victims. We must distinguish between victims who are still Christians and the ones who are not. I am agnostic. The idea doesn't move me. I have respect for the figure of Jesus, but this idea doesn't help me. I think that it could be a consolation for a believer and help them in the healing process. From my personal point of view, as an agnostic and ignorant, it would not help me.

In the interview Nicolas tried to be empathetic and put himself in the shoes of a believer, even though he did not consider the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse helpful for himself. He considered the possibility that the topic, if explained in the wider context of all the abuses that Christ suffered, could be helpful for those who are still Christians.

Xavier was positive that it would be a good topic for the victims: 'there have been so many victims of sexual abuse in the history of humanity. It is good to have Jesus in our ranks'. Likewise, Matias considered that it could help survivors because '... one feels identified.' One sees that it is a universal problem and not a unique case'. Xavier and Matias highlighted the importance of not feeling alone. By being able to identify with Jesus survivors can achieve a feeling of solidarity.

Roberto suggested that the topic could be helpful for victims, but he proposed some pastoral considerations. The first concern was that this suggestion should be directed at Christian victims, but only if they are prepared emotionally and intellectually to receive the concept:

I think that the idea of Jesus as a victim could help, but a lot of care needs to be taken to present this kind of proposal to victims. For example, I would not dare preach to any victim about Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. First, I would be sure that the survivor was a believer, and not only a believer but also one who was already instructed in the concept of the idea, because it is very shocking.

I think that to have such a conversation resilience is needed. Otherwise the person would just be too impacted by the image. It's like when someone throws sand in your eyes, you become unable to see.

Roberto's other concern was to stress that Jesus suffered different forms of abuse and not just sexual abuse. From his own path of healing he felt survivors should focus not only on the sexual dimension but on abuse as a form of power,

since 'sexual abuse is first and foremost an abuse of power'. He suggested that before addressing Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse he would first discuss abuse as an expression of power:

I would talk about abuse in general. In that way we also desexualize sexual abuse. Sometimes people just focus on the sexual dimension of abuse, and they forget that sexual abuse is, above all, an abuse of power. Jesus particularly suffered all kinds of abuse including sexual abuse. I think that is why a victim could feel solidarity with Christ who suffered all kinds of abuses: insults, isolation, slander, solitude, betrayal, abandonment and sexual humiliation.

Sometimes the church tries to give pastoral responses without knowing the real needs of survivors. Survivors need to be listened to, so they can reveal the path to their healing. Roberto explains that the focus must not be on the sexual dimension of abuse but on helping survivors to go to the roots of abuse as an abuse of power.

3.4 *Question 4. Do You Think That the Idea Could Be Useful for the Wider Church: Hierarchy, Theologians, Priests and Community?*

According to Roberto:

The idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse is mainly for them [the wider church]. Deepening the topic may help the church to understand the complex reality of sexual abuse. They need to understand that sexual abuse is primarily an abuse of power, a subjection of a vulnerable person by a powerful one.

According to Roberto, the main target of this theological topic must be directed at the ones who have responsibility as ministers within the church.

Matias considered that the problem in the church is that:

Sexual abuse has been seen from the perspective of the perpetrator for a long time. As if the perpetrator were the victim of a satanic temptation that seeks to tarnish his dignity as a representative of Christ. For example, in the stories preserved about the fathers of the Desert there was a story of a hermit. A young woman once visited his cell asking for help. He let her come into his cell. Here Satan intervened, and the hermit became tempted by the woman and finally ended up sleeping with her. When he felt remorse, he killed the woman and the monk left the hermit life and

went to the city. After a while, he reconsidered and returned to his cell and for years he made penance until he regained the state of grace.

This story is a story of a rapist and a murderer. And yet, the one who told the story is not interested in what happened to the woman, but what happened to the perpetrator. Apparently, these sins didn't stop him from reaching the peak of holiness.

Matias pointed out that one of the reasons that the sexual abuse crisis has never been addressed properly is that it has always been seen from the perspective of the perpetrators. In general, theological and spiritual narratives have been concentrated on the life of the clerics. In the example Matias offered, the interpretation of the facts is not centred on the victim but on the perpetrator. It is the perpetrator who is presented as the 'main' subject. Sexual abuse is seen as a sin of the perpetrator and not as a crime committed against a vulnerable person.

Perhaps one of the biggest difficulties is that the narratives continue focusing on the perspective of the perpetrators. So, the church has been more concerned for its priests instead of the victims. In Lalo's opinion:

I believe that the bishops have perceived their priests as sons and when faced with the accusations of abuse have treated them as 'sinners' and not as 'criminals'. They have looked at them with paternal compassion and forgiveness instead of looking at their abuses as a crime. A huge problem is that the bishops have not seen the victims also as their children. A bishop that has to face a sexual abuse case by a priest or cleric has also to realize that both the offending priests and the priest's victims are their children. So, if a bishop finds out that a priest or cleric has abused someone, he should also consider that it's as if a son is telling a father that he has abused his sister or younger brother. How would a father feel if the son came out and said that he had abused his daughter? I think bishops need to open themselves up to this new dimension of their real fatherhood that also includes the victims, and to see that sexual abuse is not only a 'sin' but a crime that has to be denounced by civil authorities.

Lalo's comments offer one explanation for why the sexual abuse crisis has not been properly addressed. He thinks that it is because it has not had the victims at the centre of the bishops' pastoral care. Bishops have covered up the abuses committed by their priests and they have not behaved as pastors with the victims.

Even though Santiago feels that this concept would not help the victims, he believes that it could help the wider church:

I think it would help the church a lot. It would help at the theological level because it would make the figure of Jesus more real, more historical. It would clarify what really happened to him: that in his passion he also suffered from sexual abuse.

Xavier offered a mixed response. He saw the potential value but was sceptical that the church would embrace it. This was not because the idea was wrong, but more because of the hardness of the heart of some of the listeners: 'I think it would not be useful for the hierarchy, but for those in the church that follow Jesus. Not for those who live as princes but for those who try to live the Gospel'.

3.5 *Difficulties in Addressing Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse for the Wider Church*

A number of interviewees addressed difficulties that might prevent the wider church from embracing the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse. Roberto's concerns are noted above as part of his response to the significance for survivors.

Lalo said that the first obstacle to accepting the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse is that people in general have a lack of comprehension of the meaning of sexual abuse. Lalo explained that this incomprehension initially makes it difficult to understand how Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse:

Many times sexual abuse has been wrongly understood in a very limited way as an act of sexual violence that implies intercourse, without considering that there are other acts that are sexually abusive behaviours and therefore also sexual abuse. In this light after reflecting what Jesus suffered during his passion and death, I think that what the Romans did with Jesus not only had the purpose of condemning him to capital punishment, but it was also the most shameful way to inflict a deep humiliation upon him by exposing his nude body to the public. Under this consideration we can say that Jesus suffered sexual abuse.

Lalo also points out another potential obstacle to the idea. In his opinion many people in the church are very puritan. 'Those people will not accept the idea of Christ as a victim of sexual abuse. For them it is too scandalous or even blasphemous to consider something like this. These people will not accept the idea of Jesus being sexually abused'.

According to Lalo, the problem is not about the topic or the historicity of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse but 'a puritan church is not able to face the full reality of Jesus' death and the humiliation he suffered, and that is why they have always covered Jesus with a cloth'.

He said that the idea of Jesus as a victim has to be proposed but 'it will take time. If they cannot accept the nude image of Jesus on the cross, I don't think they will be able to accept the idea of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse'.

Matias also addressed the wider context of sexuality in Christian thought. He suggested that the church's attitudes to sexuality will create obstacles to thinking of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse:

Raising the issue of Jesus being subjected to sexual abuse could be considered by many as scandalous and sensationalistic. This is mainly due to how sexuality has been handled in each era. Sexuality has been considered a taboo. Sexuality, even though it is an important, and even essential dimension of human nature, has been dodged in many Christian realms as something accidental or acceptable only for married people or, worse, as a dark source of a multitude of sins. It seems that when the Scriptures affirm that Jesus was 'tempted in everything except in sin' (Heb 4:15), all sexual dimension in the life of Jesus was excluded as if sexuality were a part of sin, incompatible with the figure of a holy and full man like Jesus.

To sum up, the interview participants found the suggestion new and were initially surprised by the idea (the first question) but they took the questions seriously. In response to the second question, six saw no problem in accepting the reading that Jesus' experience should be seen as sexual abuse, but one participant saw it as uncertain and in need of more evidence. On the third question, whether this awareness would be helpful to survivors, the participants were more evenly split. The three who felt it offered little help gave these reasons: Jesus and his passion has little impact on survivors who are non-believers; usually victims of sexual abuse have left the church and it would be difficult to help them with a religious or theological topic; and finally, the experience of abuse that Jesus suffered was very different from theirs. On the other side, the four participants who suggested that it could be helpful spoke positively of the connection it created between Jesus and survivors. On the fourth question, about the significance for the wider church, all of the participants agreed, without hesitation, that it could have a positive impact. All of them suggested that church ministries, clergy and lay, should embrace this topic. This would help the church to achieve more solidarity with survivors, and also, a more realistic and historic vision of Jesus. At the same time, if the wider church embraced this

concern and deepened it theologically, it is likely to have a positive impact on victims. It might help towards changes in the church which prioritise survivors and ensure they are treated with more compassion and solidarity.

Given the limited size of the participant group, it is not possible to draw generalizable conclusions, nor was this the intention. Furthermore, since all of the participants in this study are male it is also important that research should include female survivors, and their voices be heard (Durà-Vilà, Littlewood and Leavey 2013). Recent acknowledgment of the abuse of nuns and religious women by priests, first reported by Maura O'Donoghue in 1994 (Allen and Schaeffer 2001), requires urgent attention. How do women respond to the idea that Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse, and what significance do they see in this? Does Jesus' masculinity make a difference to this? For both male and female survivors, there are also questions around whether responses vary significantly from place to place, and how might social factors other than gender influence individual responses (such as ethnicity, culture, class, age)? Addressing these questions is beyond the scope of this paper and requires further work. The voices presented here cannot be seen as the final word, but they are a clear signal that acknowledging the history of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse deserves attention, and that this recognition can have a profound contemporary relevance.

4 Conclusions

Our intention is not to suggest a simplistic equivalence between Jesus and contemporary victims of sexual abuse, but to promote a more informed consideration of points of similarity that deserve to be explored further. Points of contact that invite particular attention include the social dynamics of power and control, humiliation and stigma, isolation and vulnerability, silence and denial.

Historically the voices of sexual abuse survivors have been silenced in the church, but survivor voices must be central to theologizing about the abuse crisis, and therefore to discussions of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse (Heath 2011: 123). A number of participants offered their thoughts on how the issue might be taken up and used, and gave advice on how this might be done best in pastoral work with survivors. It was suggested the idea should not be used indiscriminately, but was most appropriate for a sustained conversation with committed believers. Even with committed believers a high level of planning and care would be required. The topic should be explored gradually, and with sensitivity to avoid distress. It might be better to talk about Jesus' sexual humiliation within the wider context of his sufferings, and better to address all the

abuses that Jesus suffered, not just the sexual abuse. In that way, the sexual abuse of Jesus can be 'desexualised', to understand it as a form of punitive humiliation and abuse of power shaped by constructions of gender and sexual vulnerability.

Creating a safe and supportive space for this to begin will benefit from collaborative partnerships between academics, activists, support groups and religious institutions. It will also require a commitment to exploring sensitive topics and disturbing issues, and a willingness to bring lived experience to bear on biblical texts, theological reflection, and contextual hermeneutics. Work in these areas for this aspect of crucifixion is still at a very early stage, but the initial indicators point towards a profound paradigm shift in coming years on how the crucifixion of Jesus might be better understood.

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank all our participants and also thank our project consultants, especially Dr Tess Patterson, Dunedin School of Medicine, University of Otago, New Zealand, and Dr Juliana Martinez, College of Arts and Sciences, American University, USA. The project received approval from the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee Ethics Committee reference number 18/076.

References

- Allen, John L. and Pamela Schaeffer, 2001. 'Reports of Abuse. AIDS exacerbates sexual exploitation of nuns, reports allege', *National Catholic Reporter* (16 March).
- Brown, Joanne Carlson, and Carole R. Bohn (eds.). 1989. *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.
- Brown, Raymond. 1994. *The Death of the Messiah*, 2 Vols. Anchor Bible Reference Library, New York: Doubleday.
- Brownmiller, Susan. 1975. *Against Our Will. Men, Women and Rape*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Chapman, David W. 2008. *Ancient Jewish and Christian Perceptions of Crucifixion*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Chapman, David W. and Eckhard J. Schnabel. 2015. *The Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 344. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Clague, Julie. 2005. 'The Christa: Symbolizing My Humanity and My Pain', *Feminist Theology* 14:1, 83–108.

- Cook, John Granger. 2014. *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 327. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Crisp, Beth. 2010. *Beyond Crucifixion: Meditations on Surviving Sexual Abuse*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd.
- DeMuth, Mary. 2019. *We Too: How the Church Can Respond Redemptively to the Sexual Abuse Crisis*, Eugene OR: Harvest House Publishers.
- Durà-Vilà, Gloria, Roland Littlewood, and Gerard Leavey. 2013. 'Integrating Sexual Trauma in a Religious Narrative: Transformation, Resolution and Growth Among Contemplative Nuns', *Transcultural Psychiatry* 50:1, 21–46.
- Edwards, Katie B., and David Tombs. 2018. '#HimToo—Why Jesus Should be Recognised as a Victim of Sexual Violence', *The Conversation* (23 March); available at <https://theconversation.com/himtoo-why-jesus-should-be-recognised-as-a-victim-of-sexual-violence-93677>.
- Everhart, Ruth. 2020. *The #MeToo Reckoning: Facing the Church's Complicity in Sexual Abuse and Misconduct*, Downer's Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.
- Figuroa, Rocío, and David Tombs. 2016. *Listening to Male Survivors of Church Sexual Abuse: The Sodalicio Case in Peru*, Dunedin: Centre for Theology and Public Issues, University of Otago; available at <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/7052> (English); <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/7053> (Spanish).
- Figuroa, Rocío, and David Tombs. 2018. 'Lived Religion and the Traumatic Impact of Sexual Abuse: The Sodalicio Case in Peru' in Ruard Ganzevoort and Srdjan Sremac (eds.), *Lived Religion and Trauma: Transcending the Ordinary*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 155–176.
- Figuroa, Rocío, and David Tombs. 2019. *Recognising Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse: Responses from Sodalicio Survivors in Peru*, Dunedin: Centre for Theology and Public Issues, University of Otago; available at <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/8976> (English); <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/9222> (Spanish); <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/9386> (Polish).
- Gafney, Wil. 2013. 'Crucifixion and Sexual Violence', *Huffington Post* (28 March), https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/crucifixion-and-sexual-violence_b_2965369.
- Ganzevoort, Ruard, and Srdjan Sremac. 2016. 'Maculinity, Spirituality, and Male Wartime Sexual Trauma', in Yochai Ataria, David Gurevitz, Haviva Pedaya, and Yuval Neria, (eds.), *Interdisciplinary Handbook of Trauma and Culture*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016.
- Heath, Elaine. 2011. *We Were the Least of These: Reading the Bible with Survivors of Sexual Abuse*, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.
- Hengel, Martin. 1977. *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*. London: SCM Press, 1977.
- Iafrate, Michael. 2010. "Was Jesus Raped?" David Tombs on Sexual Violence and the Crucifixion', *Patheos: Vox Nova* (2 April 2010) available at: <https://www.patheos.com/>

- blogs/voxnova/2010/04/02/was-jesus-raped-david-tombs-on-sexual-violence-and-the-crucifixion/.
- Kelly, Liz. 1988. *Surviving Sexual Violence*, Cambridge: Polity.
- McFadyen, Alistair. 2000. *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and The Christian Doctrine of Sin*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine 6. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Reaves, Jayme R. and David Tombs. 2019. '#MeToo Jesus: Naming Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse', *International Journal for Public Theology* 13:4, 387–412.
- Salinas, Pedro. 2015. *Mitad monjes, mitad soldados: Todo lo que el Sodalicio no quiere que sepas*, Lima: Planeta.
- Samuelsson, Gunnar. 2011. *Crucifixion in Antiquity: An Inquiry into the Background of New Testament Terminology*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 310. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Segovia, Fernando F. 2018. 'Jesus as Victim of State Terror: A Critical Reflection Twenty Years Later' in David Tombs, *Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse: Text and Context*.
- Slee, Nicola. 2011. *Seeking the Risen Christa*. London: SPCK Publishing.
- Stiebert, Johanna. 2019. *Rape Myths, the Bible, and #MeToo*, London: Routledge.
- Tombs, David. 1999. 'Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 53:1–2, 89–109; available at <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/6067>.
- Tombs, David. 2014. 'Silent No More: Sexual Violence in Conflict as a Challenge to the Worldwide Church', *Acta Theologica*, 34.2, 142–160.
- Tombs, David. 2017. 'Lived Religion and the Intolerance of the Cross' in Ruud Ganzevoort and Srdjan Sremac (eds.), *Lived Religion and Politics of (In)tolerance*, Palgrave Studies in Lived Religion and Societal Changes. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 63–83.
- Tombs, David. 2018. *Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse: Text and Context*, Dunedin: Centre for Theology and Public Issues, University of Otago; available at <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/8558> (English); <http://hdl.handle.net/10523/8988> (Spanish).
- Tombs, David. 2019 'Confronting the Stigma of Naming Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Violence' in Clive Pearson (ed.), *Enacting a Public Theology*, Stellenbosch: SunMedia, 71–86.
- Trainor, Michael. 2013. 'Sexual Abuse and Luke's Story of Jesus' in Hilary D. Regan (ed.), *Child Sexual Abuse, Society, and the Future of the Church*, Adelaide: ATF Australia.
- Trainor, Michael. 2014. *The Body of Jesus and Sexual Abuse: How the Gospel Passion Narratives Inform a Pastoral Response*, Melbourne: Morning Star Publishing; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock.
- Zalewski, Marysia, Paula Drumond, Elisabeth Prügl, and Maria Stern (eds.), 2018. *Sexual Violence Against Men in Global Politics*. New York: Routledge.