Introduction

Religion, Gender and Violence, Part 2

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The first publication (Vol 11, Issue 2) of the double special issue on gender, religion and violence introduced the field of analysis in an extended introductory essay and four articles that addressed the intersections of gender, religion and violence from different perspectives and disciplines. Previously, we explored feminist approaches to religion and gendered violence, noting that religion is not always factored into the analysis, but emphasising some key studies where religion was the point of departure. Indeed, we contend that religion needs to be taken seriously as a research focus when considering gendered violence, but that significant knowledge gaps remain, especially regarding experiences beyond Christianity. We noted the rise in public inquiries to investigate abuse, and where religion is implicated, such as the Royal Commission in Australia and the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales. Christianity has been the principal religion under scrutiny. We also noted the importance of getting the methodological approaches right when investigating gendered violence, advocating a survivor-centred approach and taking their accounts seriously. Articles in the first issue focused on the interconnections between theology and ideology and their role in the perpetuation of gender-based discrimination and violence in Christian traditions. A central conclusion was that gendered violence is consistently normalised in the everyday practices of faith traditions and accepted as ordinary and even essential. Disrupting such processes has become the aim of feminist research and activist agendas.

Building on this analysis, the three essays in this issue move away from the focus on gendered violence in socio-theological perspectives to broader issues
in religion and gender, looking at current issues of abortion activism, witchcraft in Nigeria and institutional child sexual abuse.

In the first article, Sarah-Jane Page and Pam Lowe report on their research into anti-abortion activism in the UK, focusing on those activists who are motivated by highly conservative religious theology. The authors re-frame typical kinds of activism away from a narrow view of individual harassment to one where activist behaviour is part of the continuum of gender-based violence, with prayer at one end of the spectrum and graphic images at the other. In doing so, they reposition normative forms of religious practice—particularly prayer and counselling—as embodied forms of activity aimed at causing violence to those seeking abortion services. Meanwhile the display of graphic images at clinics is also positioned on the continuum of gendered violence. Understanding violence as a continuum is helpful in re-framing abortion activism as harmful to women utilising these services, and an explicit form of gendered harassment, whatever form it takes. This contributes to arguments for changes to the law, such as legally enforceable buffer zones around clinics.

Judith Bachmann’s close ethnographic study of witchcraft amongst the Yoruba people in Nigeria demonstrates the complexity of the term witchcraft or àjé as a gendered phenomenon. While traditionally witchcraft is seen as an evil force active between genders, it has more recently been tied historically to women’s experience and subjectivity and colonial processes have introduced forms of patriarchy which suggest that men are in fact controlling the ways in which àjé is managed and understood. Little research has been undertaken on women’s experience of witchcraft and Bachmann’s study carefully examines how women respond to knowledge of and accusations of witchcraft. Bachmann identifies the specific production of knowledge which links women with witchcraft as one of epistemic violence and examines the ways in which religion contributes to epistemic violence via the practices engaged by Muslim and Christian leaders in managing claims of àjé in local communities.

The final article by Kathleen McPhillips, Tracy McEwan, Jodi Death (pronounced Deeth) and Kelly Richards examines narratives of gender in the prevalence and disclosure of child sexual abuse in religious organisations with a particular focus on the Catholic Church. Although girls are far more likely to be at risk of sexual violence in familial settings, in religious organisations this is less clear, with significant numbers of boys being identified as victims through recent public inquiries into institutional child sexual abuse in the UK, Australia, New Zealand and the US. This article explores the ways in which gender is a central factor in the disclosure, prevalence and trauma of institutional child sexual abuse. Further, the article explores whether gendered forms of religious based violence relate to Catholic socialization processes and identifies five spe-
cific mechanisms whereby Catholic culture produces the conditions that facilitate child sexual abuse.

Across all three articles, themes of context and power come to the fore, as religious authorities attempt to control the space deemed irreligious and dangerous—for Bachman, this is àjé or witchcraft, whereas for Page and Lowe, this is the site of the abortion clinic. Different religious constituents set themselves up as being able to offer a positive intervention—‘helping’ to stop someone from having an abortion, or having the necessary skills set to ‘heal’ a woman of witchcraft. Yet such narratives are at odds with how those impacted by these interventions—the women accused of witchcraft or those accessing an abortion facility—view them. Instead, the authors argue, violence is invoked in these processes. Meanwhile for McPhillips, McEwan, Death and Richards, the site of harm stems from dominant discourses within the religious institution itself, with sexual violence against children being enabled through the theological and cultural practices of Catholicism. Again, authority and power come to take a significant role as the influence and status of clergy enabled them to evade detection, especially given that those abused would often be disbelieved.

The issue of the gendering of abuse is prevalent in all three articles. For the anti-abortion activists, their views are rooted in essentialized understandings of gender—that a woman’s primary purpose is motherhood—and to seek an abortion is an aberration of the natural order. This motivates prayer and graphic imagery activism outside clinics, directly impacting those seeking abortion services. Meanwhile Bachman argues that witchcraft itself is gendered, and associated with females. Like the anti-abortion activists specifically targeting those who they already see as mothers, religious leaders in Nigeria specifically target women in their efforts to rid society of àjé. McPhillips, McEwan, Death and Richards assess and unpack the gender assumptions around prevalence and disclosure rates of sexual abuse, arguing that gender makes a difference in these factors as well as shaping trauma experience. For example, given the anti-homosexual discourse operating within the Catholic Church, boys who are victims grapple with the implication that they will be accused of being homosexual should they disclose their abuse. Meanwhile girls are more likely to think they will not be believed due to entrenched attitudes that assume they led the abuser on. Whatever one’s gender, shame pervades the experience of abuse, meaning that disclosure can take decades.

Such insights reveal there is still much work to be done to deconstruct the relationships between religion, gender and violence, and understanding how particular religious discourses contribute to lived experience of violence and abuse.