The Religion & Sexual Abuse Project (R&SAP): an introduction

Amanda Lucia University of California, Riverside, CA, USA
Correspondence amanda.lucia@ucr.edu

Pages 761-782 | Published online: 17 Oct 2025

ABSTRACT

This thematic issue marks the culmination of the Religion & Sexual Abuse Project (R&SAP) (2019-2025), which fosters the understanding and redress of sexual abuse across multiple religious traditions. Some R&SAP sponsored projects are critical of how religious organizations collude with abusers; others show how religious organizations can provide forums for empowerment, liberation, and healing in the wake of abuse. For some R&SAP scholars, religious theologies and institutional structures are a part of the problem, while for others they are part of the solution. Still, themes emerge in this thematic issue, such as the denial of the possibility of consent across power differentials between religious professionals and laity. R&SAP scholars also reveal how religious institutional structures enable 'grooming' and silencing, and institute firewalls against accountability, such as mandatory NDAs, counter-lawsuits, and bankruptcy; these tactics enable abuse to persist. R&SAP scholars argue that sexual abuse in religious contexts *is religious*, meaning that perpetrators use religious spaces to abuse, enact, interpret, and defend their actions through religious doctrine. This thematic issue places sexual abuse at the center (and not at the periphery) of scholarship on religion, and endeavors so that survivors' voices will resonate in the hallowed corridors of the academy.

KEYWORDS:

- Religion
- sexual abuse
- spiritual abuse
- clergy abuse
- survivors
- Christianity
- Catholicism
- Buddhism
- Islam
- Gurus
- Yoga
- New Religious Movements

View issue table of contents Next article

This thematic issue marks the culmination of the Religion & Sexual Abuse Project (R&SAP), (www.religionandsexualabuseproject.org).Footnote[1] During its tenure, this six-year project (2019–2025) has supported financially and collaborated with five survivor advocacy organizations four of which are based in the United States: BishopAccountability.org, FaithTrust Institute,Footnote[2] Heartwood Center, and IntoAccount, and Inform, which is based in the United Kingdom. The efforts of these organizations are indefatigable and include advocating for survivors of sexual and spiritual abuse in religious contexts; helping religious groups to confront and recover from abuse; supplying the public with information; and providing counseling, therapeutic services, and legal advice for survivors. BishopAccountability.org has been named as a 'queer archive' by Anthony Petro, who notes 'its efforts to "liberate" victims from the clerical closet (transforming them into "survivors," the preferred term in this community) and its insistence on the political act of making these stories about sex public' (Petro Citation2015, 163). The unyielding efforts of IntoAccount in support of survivors of sexual abuse in religious contexts reveal the tenacity and resilience demanded in the fight against powerful religious institutions at the front lines for survivor justice. Heartwood Center is a coalition of scholar-practitioners and survivors healing in community from spiritual abuse in Buddhism. Inform functions as an archive of information about New Religious Movements (NRMs) – primarily those in the United Kingdom – that has provided evidence-based information to the public since the 'cult scares' of the 1980s. Through our conferences and collaborations, R&SAP has been honored to highlight the work of Ahimsa Collective, Awake Community, Baylor University, Collective Wisdoms, FACE (Facing Abuse in Community Environments), GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment), HEART Women & Girls (HEART), the Hurma Project, Project SATYA, Prosopon Healing, The Misfit Amish, Tears of Eden, The Dinah Project, Together We Heal, WATER (Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual), and Voices of Faith.

During its tenure, the R&SAP has supported financially eleven scholarly projects initiated by fourteen different scholars (some working in teams). These projects include the study of sexual abuse in Buddhism, Catholicism, Christianity, Hindu-inspired guru movements, Islam, modern postural yoga, and neoliberal capitalism. The scholarly team that initiated the R&SAP are all scholars located in the United States, and the grant is housed formally at the University of California, Riverside, where I serve as the principal investigator (PI). In the second year of our award, R&SAP initiated a call for papers soliciting proposals for six $20,000 subawards; we awarded a very diverse group of US-based scholars. When Michael Stausberg, editor at the journal *Religion,* suggested this thematic issue, we sent the invitation to our community of organizers, grantees, and collaborators who had attended R&SAP workshops; the articles included herein are the result of that invitation.Footnote[3] Our most significant international collaborations have been our standing partnership with Inform at King's College London (KCL), shared workshops with the Abuse in Religious Settings project at the University of Leeds (Co-PIs Gordon Lynch and Johanna Stiebert), and attendees at our conferences, who arrived at University of California, Riverside, from Argentina, Australia, Canada, Germany, Israel, Peru, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. This thematic issue addresses sexual abuse in religious contexts primarily in the United States but also in Europe, India, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, as well as in global religious organizations, such as Shambhala Buddhism.

*

Each of the R&SAP scholars (and in some cases, scholarly teams) applies a unique approach to this topic. From the outset, the R&SAP committed itself to fostering the understanding and redress of sexual abuse in religion across religious traditions and through various methodological approaches. Some projects are

critical of how religious organizations have colluded with abusers and maintained abusive institutional structures over time. Other projects show how congregations can form better responses to abuse, and can provide forums for empowerment, liberation, and healing. Some of our scholarly projects understand religious theologies and institutional structures as a part of the problem, while for others they can be a part of the solution. Some R&SAP funded projects intervene in well-established confrontations with abuse in religious institutions wherein criminal trials, grand juries, and national tribunals have been initiated. Other projects are opening new spaces for conversation in religious traditions wherein sexual abuse in religious contexts has not been addressed widely and, in some cases, are not legally recognized as such. In this desperately fraught and highly diverse field, we do not presume to offer singular analyses nor solutions. Insights that we have developed emerge from specific geographic, cultural, and religious contexts.

The academic study of sexual abuse in religious contexts

The R&SAP community of scholars, advocates, and organizations has developed partnerships and collaborations throughout its duration (2019–2025). But the research projects highlighted herein are individual and reflect differing views on the intentions of this research and the state of the field. There is strength in the differences of emphasis and view; we do not hold a unanimous voice, nor have we brought forward a singular solution to this enduring problem. However, taken collectively, the work of R&SAP researchers does raise and examine issues that emerge repeatedly. For example, readers will note that several articles herein question the possibility of consent in religious contexts wherein power differentials between religious authority and lay person are so pronounced. Along these lines, several authors note how religious institutional structures support 'grooming' practices that enable abusive relationships to flourish and abuse to persist. Multiple authors build on the ample evidence drawn from their field sites that the content of sexual abuse in religious contexts is religious, meaning that perpetrators use religious spaces to abuse, and they enact, interpret, and defend their actions through religious doctrine.

Sexual abuse refers to all sexual activity between adults and minor children, and all other sexual contact between adults that is committed or attempted without freely given consent or is a result of force, violence, threats, fear, or deception (Terry Citation2017). Although sexual abuse occurs in many environments, there are distinctive specificities of sexual abuse in religious contexts. For this reason, some scholars prefer the term 'spiritual abuse' (Oakley and Humphreys Citation2019), since it widens the frame beyond the sexual abuse (to include other forms of abuse, which often accompany it, such as financial, emotional, verbal, and physical abuse); 'spiritual abuse' also denotes the spiritual/religious context. Even in these naming preferences, R&SAP scholars are not unanimous. But we all recognize that the nexus of sexuality and religion has been a persistent site of dilemma and debate in many religious traditions for as long as the historical record reveals. Still, R&SAP scholars note that, in recent decades, multiple factors have once more ushered sexual abuse in religious contexts into the public imagination with renewed urgency.

Over the turn of the twentieth century and into the present day, there has been a public reckoning with sexual abuse allegations as they have proliferated in religious contexts (*The Boston Globe* exposé [2002]; #MeToo [2006]; *Children of ISKCON v. ISKCON* [2008]; the Australian Royal Commission of Institutional Responses to Child Abuse [2012]; Buddhist Project Sunshine [2017]; the Pennsylvania grand jury report [2018]; and the Southern Baptist Convention Abuse Report [2022], among many others). The sexual

abuse crisis in the Catholic Church has led the way, as the Church, parishioners, community members, and survivors have struggled to confront patterns of abuse – which became increasingly visible as the norm and not the exception to the rule. Public discourse about abuse in religious contexts emerged largely from the frontlines generated by feminist theologians, activists, advocates, and survivors – not from the academy (Berry Citation1992; Fortune Citation1983; Kramer and Alstad Citation1992).Footnote[4] When the academy did join the conversation, it was primarily the fields of sociology, psychology, and criminology that made notable contributions (Bromley and Melton Citation2002; Galanter Citation1999; Hawkes and Mallett Citation2017; Hayward and Chet Citation2017; Terry Citation2004, Citation2006, Citation2011). The discipline of the study of religion has lagged far behind critiques initiated by feminist-theologians and survivors of abuse in religious contexts. This is largely because of the discipline's commitment to historiography, and its penchant for doctrinal neutrality and moral relativism, the 'so-called "bracketing" of issues of truth and validity' (Donovan Citation1990, 109). Furthermore, despite numerous efforts to the contrary, the discipline of the study of religion is also stewarded by a tendency to view religion generally as a social good (Orsi Citation2008).

Navigating complex intersectionalities

Still, although as critical scholars of religion we have arrived somewhat late to this conversation, we have found that our expertise can be useful in these complex conversations. Scholars of religion are experts in the doctrinal, ritual, discursive, and embodied structures of religion, and we bring that expertise to bear in cases of abuse wherein religious doctrines and hierarchical structures are weaponized to great harm. Many of us have substantive experience in working alongside religious organizations and institutions, and as a result we can discern and evaluate their political and reputational strategies, as well as the stakes involved in their responses to allegation and evidence of sexual abuse. Many of us conjoin our study of religion with the study of race, gender, and class, and, as a result, we recognize that allegations of sexual abuse has often been misused against people holding minoritized religious, racial, and sexual identities and in service of cultural stereotypes, social exclusion, and carceral solutions that harm both victims and perpetrators (Gruber Citation2020; Horowitz Citation2024; Srinivasan Citation2021, 159–161). Following Manon Garcia, we believe that 'the law should be committed to sexual justice without exacerbating mass incarceration and racial injustice – a fraught terrain, as the prosecution of sexual violence and harassment often becomes a means for selectively punishing people of color' (Citation2023, 14).

Most importantly, as scholars of religion we are deeply aware that, while sexual violence in religious contexts has made media headlines in recent years, it is by no means a new phenomenon (Burrus Citation2008; Dabhoiwala Citation2012; Doniger Citation2000; Elliott Citation2020). It is much more likely that in many geographical contexts, particularly liberal ones, the shifting variable is our social (in)tolerance for various forms of sexual violence against certain bodies in only certain circumstances. As Talal Asad has argued, under liberalism, some bodies are rendered more deserved of violence than others, just as some affects of pain are more recognized than others, and some accounts of harm are believed more than others (Citation2007). Asad asks: What makes the suicide bomber's 'motivation – as opposed to the simple intent to kill – religious?' Similarly, we would highlight Anthony Petro's question: 'Is the abuse sexual or is it Catholic [qua religious]?' Such questions amplify an interpretation that intentionally 'resists pathologizing sexual abuse as a universalizable medical, psychological, or criminological condition while it insists on the continued interrogation of the very categories that define this crisis' (Petro Citation2015, 166). The academic study of sexual abuse in religious contexts demands

this interpretive move to question the very categories of abuse, calling to light the ways in which abuse is named in and through social and historical conditions. For many scholars of religion, including many authors in the R&SAP, this is the most urgent inquiry, and the primary intention behind their research. Stepping outside the critique of categories, R&SAP scholars also seek to understand through historical, psychological, and sociological theories how and why religious authorities engage in sexual abuse in religious contexts. Yet for other scholars of religion, who are also represented among R&SAP collaborators, such theoretical and contextual queries are important, but ultimately do not supply an immediate solution for the urgent practical work that needs to be done on behalf of survivors. For these scholars and scholar-activists, there is an urgent need to protect and defend the vulnerable through legal advocacy and abolitionist reforms levied at religious doctrines, practices, and the scholarly disciplines that ignore, suppress, and obfuscate sexual abuse in religious contexts.

Each of these perspectives are valued and validated in this thematic issue, as well as in the work of the R&SAP more broadly. There consensus, however, that scholars of religion and sexual abuse must remain deeply concerned with the secondary violence that can be created in attempting to root out this very real problem. That is to say that the current cultural understanding of nameable – meaning recognizable – sexual abuse is culturally and ideologically determined. It is mutually constituted through 'religio-racial' categories (Weisenfeld Citation2016, 1) and the construction of policed boundaries between normative and non-normative sexualities (Alexander Citation2005, 234). It is my hope that, as scholars of religion, we will bring to these conversations our expertise in uncovering the discursive functions that create socially recognizable violence and the legal structures that support it, including the historical construction of some people as criminal and others as innocent, some as violable and others as inviolable. That is to say that sexual abuse, allegations of sexual abuse, persecution for the crime of sexual abuse, and the production of statics on sexual abuse are all embroiled within social networks of power that produce and police normativities (Gavey Citation2019, 7). As scholars of religion, it is our role to 'disentangle this knot' (Gleig and Langenberg, Citation2025), and to question their epistemological foundations.

Beyond theoretical debates, in practice, too, sexuality and the normative assumptions surrounding it cannot be divorced from their social and historical context – nor the lenses of power through which they are interpreted. Socially marginalized persons are statistically less likely to disclose the experience or file a complaint than are socially dominant persons (Oza Citation2023; Wyatt Citation1992), while they are also more likely to have complaints filed against them than are socially dominant persons (Feimster Citation2009; Gavey Citation2019, 26). Sexual abuse and the discourses surrounding it make a highly intersectional field. This fact is proven by a series of moral panics emerging from largely Anglo-European heterosexual concerns about non-Anglo European heteropatriarchal sexuality, such as the Anti-Chinese hysteria surrounding Chinese female prostitution (Chen Citation2000, 75–87), the lynching of African American men as a result of allegations of rape of white women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Feimster Citation2009), the anti-LGBTIQ + panic of Lavender Scare of the 1950s (Johnson Citation2004), and sexualized ritual abuse of the Satanic Panic of the 1980s (Frankfurter Citation2006). These panics were generated by white heterosexuals who persecuted what they deemed to be the 'abnormal' sexual practices of nonwhite/nonheterosexuals, often justifying their campaigns with the rhetoric of protecting the sexual purity of white girls and women (Moslener Citation2015). Such cultural frenzies obscure the fact that women of color comprise the demographic most likely to suffer sexual violence – often at the hands of white male perpetrators. In fact, lynching campaigns intentionally

redirected the cultural conversation away from the routinized rape of Black women by white men (Feimster Citation2009; Johnson Citation2020) – while false rape accusations were a tactic of colonial rule in multiple geographies (Srinivasan Citation2021, 5f17).

Even today, Native American women are nearly twice as likely to suffer sexual assault as any other racial group in the United States (RAINN Citationn.d.b), and more than 67 percent of Dalit women have experienced sexual violence (Soundararajan Citation2022, 17). In her excellent book on rape in Haryana, India, Rupal Oza shows how those in subordinate positions struggle to make their own claims audible in 'a mainstream soundscape that denies the possibility of their existence as they see it themselves.' Instead, 'those in positions of power such as the police or dominant castes rehearse particular claims about Dalits (as untrustworthy, dirty, and criminal) and rape cases (as predominantly based on false allegations by unvirtuous women)' (Oza Citation2023, 11). *In Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Saidiya Hartman confirms the compounded inaudibility of Black and Brown women subjugated under the legally justified violence of Christian patriarchy and American chattel slavery in her account of the *State of Missouri v. Celia, a Slave*. Celia was purchased by Robert Newsome, who raped her thereafter for four years until she killed him. As an enslaved person, Celia could neither give nor refuse consent; the rapes to which she was subjugated were illegible under the law and her Blackness rendered her 'criminal' for defending herself. As Hartman writes, her 'black body was simply the site on which the "crimes" of the dominant class and of the state were externalized in the form of a threat. The criminality imputed to blacks disavowed white violence as a necessary response to the threatening agency of blackness' (Hartman Citation1997, 82). Under the moral compunctions of the era, Hartman writes that even 'to assert that Celia was raped is to issue a provocation' (Citation1997, 83). Such a declaration would render her captive body autonomous, 'free' to choose the deployment of her own sexuality – an impossibility under her condition of enslavement. In other contexts as well, it is largely inconceivable (or anachronistic) to assert the sexual autonomy of a sovereign body that does not identify as adult, male, and heterosexual. One might consider the Indian child bride (Pande Citation2020), the Dalit woman (Oza Citation2023), the enslaved (Hartman Citation1997), the colonized (Scheper Hughes Citation2023), the criminal (Gilmore Citation2007), or the queer (Mezey Citation2007), none of whom exists with human right to bodily autonomy and individual sovereignty. While this impossibility erupts most starkly when discussing these disenfranchised bodies, it also surfaces more generally for women and children under patriarchy.

Centering survivors

In this landscape, the feminist doctrine of centering survivors must include attention to not only those who remain living and have the strength, social capital, and cultural context to come forward and to be recognized, but also the survivors (and those who do not survive) who are erased, silenced, and inaudible in the record. If we are cognizant that only some bodies are visibilized as legible bodies upon which violence is enacted, then it becomes more understandable why, in the United States, white women and children dominate the most high-profile media court cases, author the most popular memoirs, and are most visible in the public exposure of suffering due to sexual abuse (Hawkes and Mallett Citation2017; Hayward and Chet Citation2017). This is the result of the fact that, throughout history, Black, Brown, and caste-oppressed women, transgender persons, homosexuals, sex workers, and the imprisoned have often been rendered as criminalized bodies – upon which sexual violation is the legal norm rather than the aberration (Boone Citation2014; Chen Citation2000; Hartman Citation1997; Levine Citation2003; McClintock Citation1995). To note this discrepancy in the

recognizability of suffering bodies is not to argue that white women who are abused in religious contexts do not suffer; rather, it is to suggest that they do not suffer alone.

Historically, established religions have played a close and often prescriptive role in governing sexuality in society by establishing moral doctrines, conventional social practices, and even legal foundations for its control. Because religion is often closely informed by heteropatriarchy, many religious institutions have asserted (and continue to assert) male authority to the detriment of the bodily autonomy of women, nonbinary persons, and children of all sexes and genders. This assumption of male heterosexual agency over others directly impacts notions of legitimized violence and sexual abuse. This heteropatriarchal legacy is embodied in persons as well as in communities, institutions, and governments. It is readily weaponized through empire, where it pressurizes the domestic spheres in both the metropole and periphery (Levine Citation2004, 134–155). M. Jaquie Alexander demonstrates how the policing of the boundaries of empire was enacted through the mutual constitution of colonialism and heteropatriarchy (Citation2005, 197–198). Jasbir Puar's concept of 'homonationalism' (Citation2007) approaches a similar concept from a different angle, showing how liberal politics seeks to define insiders and outsiders to the nation-state by policing sexuality. With regard to religion, Megan Goodwin argues that the United States deploys a form of 'contraceptive nationalism,' which she names as an ideological regime that aims to regulate the boundaries of the nation by limiting religious and sexual difference (Citation2020, 3–4). Goodwin raises rightful concerns that minority religions have been and continue to be unjustly persecuted for their sexual difference. As a result, minority religious and racial communities take pains to maintain a good reputation, a 'respectability politics' (Higgenbotham Citation1993) within the dominant society. This concern with reputation also functions to suppress survivors' experiences and enables the continuation of unchecked abuse in minoritized communities.

In fact, the statistics on sexual abuse in daily living are so consistently dismal that one might wonder why so much special attention has been given to sexual abuse in religious contexts. One in six women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime (14.8 percent completed, 2.8 percent attempted). Females ages sixteen to nineteen are four times more likely than the general population to be victims or rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault. Every sixty-eight seconds, someone in the United States is sexually assaulted. Every nine minutes, child protective services substantiates or finds evidence for a claim of child sexual abuse. Of all victims under the age of eighteen, two-thirds are ages twelve to seventeen. The overwhelming majority of perpetrators of child sexual abuse are related to the victim: 59 percent are acquaintances and 34 percent are family members. And though persons born female are the most common victims of sexual violence, one in ten rape victims is male. Transgender persons are also at increased risk for sexual violence, particularly on college campuses. Such statistics are commonplace, assumed social facts (Hawkes and Mallett Citation2017; RAINN Citationn.d.a). Due to limited reporting, they are also likely far below the actual figures; for example in India, if one includes marital rape, 99.1 percent of rapes are unreported; if one excludes marital rape 85 percent of sexual violence by someone other than the current husband is unreported (Kaushal Citation2020, 82). Recently, popularized forms of DNA testing (AncestryDNA and 23andMe) have confirmed feminist arguments that incest is far more common than was once presumed (Herman Citation2000; Zhang Citation2024).

Does the religious context of abuse matter?

But while abuse occurs globally and in every possible environment – from corporate offices to domestic bedrooms – in religious contexts there are distinctive characteristics in the tenor and impacts of the

sexual violence (Brown Citation2024; Choudhury and Hammer Citation2024; Clites Citation2019b; Hong et al. Citation2024; Lucia Citation2018, Citation2023, Citation2025a; Moslener Citation2025; and Moslener and House Citation2025). Survivor accounts of abuse in religious contexts often relate how religion (including its material, doctrinal, psychological, and communal facets) was a key agent in the story of their sexual abuse. In most cases, their abuser was a religious official of some sort (priest, nun, pastor, guru, lama, or teacher). In some cases, the physical environment where the abuse occurred was a religious setting (a confessional, altar, rectory, ashram, gurukula, shala, and so on). In some cases, their abuse was rationalized or justified communally through religious doctrines weaponized to support the abuser. In such cases, religious authorities may have used their sanctified position to coerce their victims; regardless, religious doctrines calling for submission within gender and familial relations are deployed to further spiritual abuse and to protect abusers. In other cases, abusers weaponized their own divine, semidivine, or authoritative position in the religious community to position themselves as beyond reproach. In yet other cases, the abusers deployed the religious conventions of the religious authority's 'crazy wisdom,' 'tantra,' or '*leela*' (divine play) to justify their nonconventional sexual demands of followers. In many cases, the spiritual path itself was weaponized in that the religious authority positioned the victim/survivor as needing cleansing, purification, healing, or spiritual growth in an attempt to justify sexual event as the solution.

In fact, the specificities of sexual abuse in religious contexts have so much cohesion that many scholars have found it useful to engage with the term 'spiritual abuse.' Spiritual abuse, as a category, attempts to extend the discourse of harm beyond sexual violence to include a number of practices that are commonplace in religious contexts and can be harmful, such as coercion, control, grooming, silencing, psychological manipulation, thought reform ('brainwashing'),[Footnote5] group conformity, shaming, discipline, ascetical practices, and heteropatriarchal domination (Oakley and Humphreys Citation2019). In his work with Catholic survivors, Brian Clites uses the term 'soul murder,' a term first put forward by his survivor informants to 'name the experience of child sexual abuse as the annihilation of a child's network of relationships and the ongoing loss as adults of basic relational skills such as intimacy and trust' (Clites Citation2019b, 268). Such a naming also invokes the catastrophic damage that spiritual abuse can have on adult survivors because of the disillusionment and loss of security (housing, familial relations, friends, employment, and so on) that apostates often face when they reject the communal norms that maintain their abuser as sacred, and/or above reproach. Add to which, in high-control religious environments isolation is commonplace and external (non-homeschool) education is curtailed or forbidden. Sometimes, as in among the Amish, there are even language barriers that add to further isolation. In many high-control religions, boundaries between believers and nonbelievers are heavily policed (Galanter Citation1999), and dissent is construed as immoral, sinful, forbidden, or against doctrine. In such environs, survivors often have very little recourse to seek justice or support.

In addition, revelations of sexual abuse in religious contexts are a communal event. The sexual harm affects not only the survivor but also the community that confronts feelings of betrayal, cognitive dissonance, disillusionment, and loss of faith. In such contexts, it is useful to invoke the notion of 'co-survivor,' a term created by gender-based violence activist movements used to show 'how violence tears apart those who know and love the person who has survived gender-based violence' (Soundararajan Citation2022, 101). In religious contexts, such a term extends throughout the community as it reckons with how to restore justice in the wake of communal harm, see Holly Gayley's contribution, ('The Arc of a Crisis: In the Aftermath of Sexual Abuse in Shambhala Buddhism,' Gayley

Citation2025). Survivors and co-survivors react to allegations and evidence of sexual abuse in myriad ways, with different aims and intents for retribution and restorative justice. While some are eager to remove the perpetrator and restore their faith, other survivors reject the religion entirely – often because of the secondary violence of institutional and communal cover-ups and gaslighting, which adds insult to injury. Lastly, sexual abuse is so endemic to religious contexts that many survivors and co-survivors no longer view religious environments as 'safe' spaces.

Naming sexual abuse in religious contexts

But naming sexual abuse in religious contexts is a fraught task for numerous reasons; I will briefly address three of them. First, experimental sexualities are a defining feature of religion. Religion is often an environment that supports distinctive sexual practices for religious adepts, with celibacy and polygamy as the extremes. Susan Palmer has argued that one of the key features of nondominant religious communities is the opportunity for sexual experimentation, a distinctive practice that she terms 'cocooning' (1993). 'Cocooning' practices include experimenting with sexualities that are often deemed unconventional among dominant majorities in most countries, like celibacy, polygamy, polyamory, and miscegenation. New religious movements are perhaps especially experimental with regards to sexuality. One might consider, for example, the Fundamentalist Church of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) or the Branch Davidians, both of which prospered through large-scale polygamy, with dozens of women married (or 'sealed' for FLDS) to the same man (Prophet). In other new religious movements devotees marry at the will of the leader – such as in the Unification Church, wherein Reverend Sun Myung Moon famously conducted mass-marriages among relative strangers; and numerous guru-led movements wherein the guru matched devotees in marriage and sexual unions according to his direction (such as Osho/Bhagwan Rajneesh and Kirtanananda Swami, initially of ISKCON/the Hare Krishnas, among many others).

But even in more dominant religions, Buddhists, Catholics, and many Hindu sects regulate sexuality among their religious exemplars through mandating celibacy, while the Catholic Church regulates sexuality for its parishioners through condemning birth control and abortion. In Evangelical Protestant denominations, heteropatriarchy and emphasis on virginal purity among teens (particularly girls) has led to 'purity culture,' which regulates male and female sexuality through a strict gender binary that attempts to replicate a biblical view of sexuality purity (House and Moslener Citation2025; Moslener Citation2025 and Moslener Citation2015). Caste practices in Hinduism, and in geographically adjacent religious and cultural contexts, globally regulate sex and marriage markets. Caste-based discrimination in South Asia continues to govern the valuation of a person and the recognition of sexual harm (Oza Citation2023). In Islam, *zina* laws (laws against sex outside of marriage) sanctify sexuality only within marriage (Mir-Hosseini Citation2011). And in most conservative religious contexts, regardless of faith tradition, LGBTQI + sexual expressions are still contentious, confined, and sometimes entirely disallowed. Altogether, religion has much to say about sexuality, and its rules and prescriptions vary. As a result, so too, moral evaluations of sexual violence and abuse vary widely in different religious contexts. This renders the valuation and naming of sexual abuse across religions challenging for the field of religious studies, both because of variances in international law and because of highly diverse religio-cultural sexual normativities between different religious contexts.

Turning to a second difficulty in naming sexual abuse in religious contexts, in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe many nondominant and non-Christian religions have been persecuted on

the basis of sex. Such critiques frequently derive from their presumed propensity toward patriarchal sexual violence (Islam, Hinduism, and Orthodox Judaism) or sexual 'deviance' (Mormonism and new religious movements). One of the reasons that the discipline of Religious Studies is so committed to moral relativism regarding religious doctrine and practice is because it continues to attempt to operate in resistance to the historical roots of the field that were seeped in Christocentric biases (Orsi Citation2008). Additionally, in the 1980s subsections of the discipline supported prejudices in the persecution of new religious movements (or 'cults'), which have been stereotyped as inherently abusive religions (Goodwin Citation2020). In 'Western' liberal democracies, many nondominant religions have become entangled with the law. None of their legal entanglements can be extracted from culturally situated moralizing about nondominant religions communities and their unconventional practices, doctrines, and sexualities. While some survivors, survivor advocates, and psychologists use the term 'cult' routinely to refer to abusive religious environments (Bernstein Citation2018-Citation2024; Galanter Citation1999; Gleig and Langenberg Citation2025; Langone Citation1995), many sociologists of religion continue to be wary of the moralizing value dichotomy between 'cults' (presumed to be bad) and 'religion' (presumed to be good).

In examining the historical record, particularly case law, it is very difficult to separate concerns about sexual violence and universal human rights from prejudices and critiques of nonliberal and non-Anglo-European Christian societies. Talal Asad's consideration of the liberal state's policing of legitimate and illegitimate violence (Citation2007) builds on his interventions that have attempted to rectify the biases inherent in the 'Western' academic discipline of the study of religion (Citation1993). Similarly, Saba Mahmood's refusal of Western feminism's judgments of the contours of 'women's liberation' (Citation2004) should give contemporary scholars pause in the project of normatively naming 'abuse' across cultural contexts. In both interventions, the authors show how the presumed universalism of 'liberalism' is, in fact, a resolutely situated political project. Even the concept of 'the child,' which might be imagined as a 'natural' category, is instead a highly *political* category, used during colonialism as a 'metaphor and a cipher for stagist understandings of human development' (Pande Citation2020). Likewise, arguments for the protection of women and children against sexual abuse have deeply colonial and homophobic antecedents, and they enact similar blind spots in their attempt to apply liberal feminist values universally. Unfortunately, decolonial resistance to this history has been mobilized to silence abuse claims in post-colonial contexts by suggesting that arguments against abuse are Orientalist and/or neocolonialist in spirit (see for example Jain Citation2020: 122). The R&SAP scholars featured in this thematic issue endeavor to support survivors, while also acknowledging the ways in which the naming of abuse has been deployed in ways that cause harm to minoritized communities, see Brintnall's contribution ('Certainty, Complicity, Complexity: Approaching Sexual Abuse,' Brintnall Citation2025) and Hammer's contribution ('Jagged Edges: Exploring Muslim Efforts Against Sexual Violence,' Hammer Citation2025).

Lastly, when sexual abuse involves a religious exemplar, it is extraordinarily difficult to name it from within the emic ideological and cosmological landscape of the religious context. Inside the religious context, such an event must be explained away, reframed, and/or recategorized to alleviate the cognitive dissonance between the sexual act and the religious worldview and tenets that would disallow such a sexual act. During and following abuse, this cognitive dissonance engulfs the survivor, but it also generates epistemological ruptures for those in whom the survivor confides – if the survivor overcomes the cognitive dissonance enough to confide in anyone at all. In response, survivors' experiences are

often denied and refused by their fellow religious, which for the most faithful includes most of their social networks: families, friends, teachers, mentors, and other religious leaders. In the most devout religious environments, social networks tend to be closed to outsiders, and there is substantive evidence that the devout are often those most likely to be subject to abuse. This fact has left many survivors without access to an outside beyond the routinized suffering of abuse. The imagined impossibility of abuse in religious contexts means that many survivors reject and are rejected by the religious communities in which the abuse occurred – on account of the irreconcilable differences between their experiences and communally approved doctrine and practice.

For many, the reckoning with abuse occurs only after they create space between themselves and the religious environment. As one survivor explained during her hosted session at the Religion & Sexual Abuse Project (R&SAP) Conference in Citation2022, her childhood took place on 'Planet Scientology' and it was only after she was able to leave that context ('planet') that she began to understand and articulate the gravity of her childhood experiences of abuse. Many deeply religious upbringings are socially sanctioned processes of isolation, indoctrination, and grooming, including only limited exposure to an outside world (see for example Bernstein Citation2024; Brown Citation2024; Guest Citation2005; Westover Citation2022). In La Luz del Mundo and the FLDS, some girl children are raised to idealize sexual relations with and/or marriage to a religious exemplar (prophet/apostle) from birth, which leaves very little ideological space for resistance. In Hindu-derived guru-led movements the faithful are taught from birth to idealize and desire proximity to the guru, including the guru's physical touch. Thus, it follows that to resist the guru's affections is an act of great anticulture, often framed as immoral and/or sinful. In boarding schools – whether Catholic, 3HO, or ISKCON – physical, psychological, and sexual abuse was often so routinized, and outside recourse so unavailable, that resistance often proved entirely futile. In such spaces, abuse is often internalized by victims, justified by perpetrators, accepted by communities, and theologized as doctrine. Voicing abuse is often a slow and lengthy process that occurs only after survivors cultivate psychological and physical distance and confront past experiences from new perspectives and with new systems of support. And to do so is not without severe consequences. Such voicings often include a necessary disavowal of family, friends, community, security, employment, and – importantly – one's self-understanding of one's position in the world and in the cosmos. This is why extending the statutes of limitations (SOLs) and fighting the distribution of nondisclosure agreements (NDAs) are core tenets in survivor-centered advocacy work.

The contributions to this thematic issue

With all this in mind, the scholars involved in the R&SAP are deeply aware that religious institutional practices and theological doctrines have been used to further routinize patterns of abuse and to obscure justice and accountability. Religion has been used in support and furtherance of sexual abuse. In their focus on religion and sexual abuse, the articles in this thematic issue represent a diversity of scholars and scholar-activists from a variety of academic disciplines, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, and degrees of advancement in academia. Their contributions are global and represent a wide variety of religious traditions and 'religio-racial' communities.

As scholars of religion, our academic training has conditioned us to subordinate our own morals and religious convictions to those of the interlocutors within our object of study. But this traditional epistemological stance of the academy belies the fact that our interlocutors are embroiled in power-affected conflict, and there are multiple voices with differing perspectives that scholars can and should

recognize. If the study of religion only amplifies institutional and doctrinal voices, then our scholarship will effectively align with dominant, oppressive, and sometimes violent forces. In recognition of this time-entrusted pattern, Ann Gleig and Amy Langenberg ('Listening *for* and *to* Survivors of Sexual Abuse and Misconduct in Buddhism,' Gleig and Langenberg Citation2025) roundly reject the conventional relativist posture of the discipline and write boldly on the side of feminism and survivors of sexual abuse. They write within a context wherein 'survivors of abuse were routinely dismissed, vilified, and silenced when they attempted to speak out about their experience' (#). In the American Buddhist religious context, these survivors suffer threats, criticism, and gaslighting from their fellow sangha members. Gleig and Langenberg write, 'As explained by Terra, one of a number of female students abused by the senior teacher in a Tibetan Buddhism community, "I still receive messages from people in [my former] community that imply that we are all suffering from PTSD, are unwell, and that we did not understand the teacher's 'blessing" or that our compassion has been insufficient. … [Our stories] are avoided, marginalized, or recrafted as the stories of crazy people. Anything but listened to"' (pers. comm., May 22, 2024) (#). Gleig and Langenberg's (Citation2025) monograph is field-defining in its focus on survivor-centered approaches to generative responses to sexual abuse in a variety of American Buddhist communities.

Gleig and Langenberg's research in American Buddhism builds upon work that Brian Clites has been doing in the context of Catholic sexual abuse since 2011. Clites has championed a survivor-centered approach throughout his research and has argued further that scholars 'need to listen to the ways that survivors have interpreted their own abuse' and to take seriously their interpretive literature (blogs, novels, memoirs, and so on). He argues that scholars should envision survivors as 'co-producers and close conversation partners in our own analyses' (Clites Citation2019a, 5). In his contribution to this thematic issue, Clites ('Priests on the Prowl: Monster Talk Within the Discourse of Clergy Sexual Abuse,' Clites Citation2025) tackles one of the thorniest discursive tropes that often emerges from survivor communities and runs contrary to scholarly conventions. Clites asks: '*Why is [monstrosity] such a durable and enduring scaffold? Which ideas, and whose interests, do these monsters serve?*' (#) in the framing and rhetoric surrounding sexual abuse? His answer is multipronged – but echoes a critique of twentieth-century criminology's reliance on theories of 'psychological deviance.' In *Restating Orientalism* (2018), Wael Hallaq states: 'The common explanation of unethical and criminal activity in terms of deviant psychology has been persistent because such discourse provides "a source of assurance" to society that it is not itself, as a "normal" phenomenon, infected with deviancy' (Citation2018, 193). Similarly, Clites writes, 'The monstrous bifurcates religion *from* sexual abuse, insisting that – whatever else it may be – "religion" is *not* that thing which abuses. The promise of this alterity-making, this project of *othering,* is to insulate the rest of the faith(ful) from the stain.' (#). He also warns that monster talk often supports carceral solutions, and 'blames individual bishops and priests for the abuse crisis, rather than interrogating the cultural systems that formed, enabled, and concealed those persons to the problem of clergy abuse' (#). This prescient warning rings true for theorists such as Aya Gruber, who argues that this kind of characterizing violence as a 'function of evil men rather than social decay' ultimately harms women and the disempowered who are most vulnerable to both domestic and state violence (Citation2020, 18).

In her piece, Juliane Hammer, ('Jagged Edges: Exploring Muslim Efforts Against Sexual Violence,' Hammer Citation2025) invites readers into the intensely personal and 'messy' spaces of research on sexual abuse in Muslim communities, deftly weaving a multivocal and interrupted narrative wherein

‘splinters and pieces with jagged edges that cut and poke and injure’ (#) erupt as emblems of the violence they describe. Written in the reflected violence of the Israeli-led genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, Hammer’s article addresses themes of silence, survivors, solidarity, anti-Muslim hostility, Islam, feminism, and patriarchy. Hammer’s research opens the discussion of what she calls the ‘double bind’ of researchers working on sexual violence in Islam, which can be applied more generally to researchers working on sexual violence in minoritized communities. She writes, ‘Muslim advocates against gendered violence and injustice inevitably experience the double bind: their efforts to raise awareness of and to end sexual violence in Muslim communities can, and are, utilized to feed anti-Muslim prejudice and discrimination’ (#). In recollecting her relationship with HEART to Grow (a US-based Muslim organization), Hammer notes how for her collaborators Islam is a *resource* for combatting sexual violence, a reality that confronts Anglo-European liberal feminist assumptions about Islamic exceptionalism and its ‘less redeemable’ patriarchal structures (#). Simultaneously, she shows how the advocacy organizations with which she writes in solidarity and works in collaboration – HEART, FACE, and the Hurma Project – have all encountered resistance from Muslim communities and their leaders, who are fearful about the repercussions of ‘breaking the silence on sexual abuse and sexual violence’ (#). Ironically, in addressing patterns of sexual abuse these Muslim advocates are often accused of being Islamophobes (#). A similar tactic has been used to silence those who would draw attention to sexual abuse in other postcolonial contexts, with leveled accusations of ‘Hinduphobia,’ ‘Orientalism,’ and ‘neocolonialism.’ Particularly interesting here is that ‘religious insider’ status does not wholly protect scholars and advocates from such coarse accusations, and many advocates, who are also survivors, run the risk of retraumatization.

This risk of retraumatization percolates at the surface of Holly Gayley’s contribution, (‘The Arc of a Crisis: In the Aftermath of Sexual Abuse in Shambhala Buddhism,’ Gayley Citation2025) and the emotion-laden personal and communal impacts of unfolding allegations of sexual abuse. As a scholar-practitioner, Gayley opens readers to the methodology of auto-ethnography as she charts the ‘fragmentation and divergent trajectories of a community in crisis’ (#). Gayley writes with attention to survivor-centered approaches, and in this article, she focuses primarily on ‘collective trauma and the community dynamics, competing narratives, and collateral damage’ that communities endure as allegations and evidence of sexual abuse becomes a crisis-level event. Her ‘flash auto-ethnography’ accosts readers with its raw intensity and evocative emotion as she distills her own memories and experimental writings in conversation with the media and institutional ephemera produced through ‘Shambhocalypse,’ the sexual abuse crisis in Shambhala Buddhism. Gayley reveals her personal journey as a devoted feminist practitioner through the tumult of fight, flight, or freeze responses; legalese-laden partial apologies; suspended animation; quiet talk; resignations; and blacklisting. Pulled and pushed through tides of communal acceptance and refusals, she invites readers into the microscopic view of events as they unfolded in community – reminding readers of the psychosocial impacts of sexual abuse on survivors and co-survivors. Most poignant in Gayley’s piece is how her commitment to staying to reform Shambhala and her loyalties made her a target of suspicion, if not derision, among other survivors and critics. Her experiences of exclusion in this ‘trauma minefield’ are not unique by far; there is considerable lateral violence in the field of survivor advocacy. Perhaps her experiences might alert readers to the variant modes of surviving – and encourage advocates to honor the broad spectrum of survivor experiences.

In Shambhala, American Buddhism more generally, and in the Muslim communities that Hammer discusses, sexual abuse most commonly affects adult women. In Evangelical Christian communities, too, most often the sexual abuse emerges from attachments to heteropatriarchal assertions of male dominance and female submission. While these structures also impact Catholicism, therein much of the sexual abuse includes homosexuality and pedophilia. In guru-led movements, including Hindu-inspired religions and adjacent spiritual movements centered on yoga, Tantra, alternative medicine, New Age, and Neo-Pagan religions – and many other 'spiritual' permutations – the sexual abuse tends to focus on adult females in transnational contexts, but there are also substantive practices of abusive homosexuality and pedophilia. Suzanne Newcombe and Sarah Harvey's contribution ('Hegemonic Masculinities and Sexual Abuse: Two Case Studies,' Newcombe and Harvey Citation2025) draws readers into these worlds of alternative healing and spiritualties, questioning the gendered aspects of sexual abuse through male exit narratives gathered by Inform, located at King's College in London. Newcombe and Harvey focus attention on two case studies involving groups surrounding a fitness instructor and an alternative healer, both of whom 'created patriarchal, misogynistic cultures in which women were inferior to men and the leaders used teachings to justify restricted gender roles and sexual activity and sexual abuse of women' (#). Their research is unique, however, in that they focus on male exit narratives, showing how the sexual abuses and routinized misogyny that defined these spiritual movements created harm for men as well in myriad ways, ranging from control of their sexual relationships to moral injuries sustained through repeated transgressions. In one of their case studies, they show that men experienced shame and regret for having supported the leaders and cited the mistreatment of women as a primary reason for their departure. Newcombe and Harvey's nuanced sociological research highlights the unique role of Inform as both a scholarly outlet and an advocacy organization in support of both survivors and new religious movements.

The body of this thematic issue closes with the problematization of categories, with Kent Brintnall's contribution ('Certainty, Complicity, Complexity: Approaching Sexual Abuse,' Brintnall Citation2025) introducing readers to the specter of the 'Child' over the entire discourse of sexual abuse. He argues that protective measures developed in service of this ethereal figure violently act upon nonnormative persons and sexual practices. Consider Ishita Pande's historical critique, which shows how 'the child was seized upon by many a political campaign and many an ideological agenda' and 'emerged as the crucial axis for the regulation of Indian sex life' (Citation2020, 2). Pande's research shows how in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Anglo-European Christians – she highlights Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1930) – trafficked in the image of childhood in order to disguise the ideology of colonialism as a pure – and universal – 'moral' position (Citation2020, 2–4). Even into the contemporary period, Anglo-European feminisms have been roundly critiqued for colonial impositions of purportedly universal moralizing discourses and judgments. In large part the study of sexual violence continues to be bifurcated between the tempered cultural relativism of scholars of religion, anthropologists, and historians and the solution-orientation of feminists and social-justice activists. Situated at the confluence between the two, research on sexual abuse in religious contexts stands in the center of this 'awkward relationship' (Strathern Citation1987) wherein the field holds dual motivations: (1) to understand how religion provides a distinctive frame that generates abuse, and (2) to prevent future abuse. I would argue that these are mutually constituted symbiotic goals, not a bifurcated choice.

Christa Brown writes in *Baptistland* (Citation2024) that the first person she told about her abuse was the music minister, because her abuser – the youth pastor – had convinced her that she harbored Satan

because she had tempted the pastor to drug her and rub himself against her fifteen-year-old naked body as she lay prone, face down, crying on his marital bed. Even then, what she reported to the music minister – to no avail – was that she had been having an 'affair' with the youth pastor. At the time her most pressing question was not about sexual abuse, legal justice, or carceral punishment, but rather: 'Will I go to hell?' (Brown Citation2024, 77). Sorensen and Snow (Citation1991) argue that the disclosure of child sexual abuse (CSA) should be understood as a process instead of as a one-time event.Footnote[6] In their review of 630 CSA cases, they found that survivors more commonly process their abuse through stages of denial, tentative disclosure, active disclosure, and recantation before finally reaffirming their experiences of abuse (129). The time demanded by these often-intensely unmooring psychological processes should raise alarms when states impose truncated Statutes of Limitations (SOL), and religious organizations demand Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs). Time alters perceptions of, memories of, and interpretations of abuse in all contexts. But this is particularly the case in religious contexts, wherein grooming, social isolation, indoctrination, and faith are highly impactful variables that drastically alter the individual's perception of events.

Though events in the past decade have ushered this topic into the public sphere, each religious context is at a different stage of reckoning with allegations and restorative justice measures. Scholars of Catholicism have been at the helm for decades, but some specialists now worry that the flurry of attention is beginning to subside – when there is still so much to be done (Downey Citation2023). Scholars of Protestant Christianity are only beginning to see concentrated attention to the abuses of members of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), while the diffused violence of Purity Culture and Evangelical patriarchy are increasingly being vocalized as sexual abuse. As Christianity expands rapidly in the global south, scholars are negotiating how distinctive geographical contexts impact how sexuality is taught in church doctrine and how it operates in local customs. In American Buddhist organizations, multiple credible allegations have erupted since Buddhist Project Sunshine began to unravel Shambhala Buddhism in 2018, and multiple dharma centers (including San Francisco Zen Center and Dharma Punx, among others) have been forced to confront survivors and to chart new paths forward. Similarly, in postural yoga, upon his death in 2009 Pattabhi Jois, who popularized Ashtanga (*vinyasa*) yoga, became widely criticized for his violent 'adjustments' and his sexual misconduct with his male and female followers; Sivananda Yoga has been in crisis since patterns of abuse erupted to the surface of public knowledge in 2019 (Kaur Citation2021).Footnote[7] On the other hand, in Islam and in Hinduism the public reckoning with sexual abuse in religious contexts has been slower to develop global attention and has emerged within ongoing Orientalist, Islamophobic, and imperialist neocolonial projects.

Scholars working in the Religion & Sexual Abuse Project focus on so many dissimilar religious, cultural, and geographical contexts that it is somewhat fruitless and potentially problematic to draw unified conclusions. To attempt to do so would obfuscate important disparities between contexts – which would create theoretical vulnerabilities in any overarching thesis. Still, collectively we note that the categories of 'sexual abuse' and 'spiritual abuse' portend to uphold proper modes of exercising sexuality and practicing religion according to an understated valuation of norms and expectations. Some scholars focus their attentions at this nexus and attempt to understand the religio-cultural values that operate in contradistinction to Western liberalist notions of human rights ideated in law. But there are already cultural differences in the law depending on geography, which also raises issues in the assertion of universal values. Noting the complications surrounding universal values, in the wake of #MeToo, there has been much optimism placed in the notion of consent as a means to protect from abuse (Fischel

Citation2019, 3; Garcia Citation2023, 16). But consent is a deeply inadequate barometer in religious contexts where lifelong grooming and indoctrination complicates – or eliminates – the possibilities of individual agency, free will, and personal choice. And consent does not guarantee pleasurable sexual experiences, and nor should undesirable or unpleasant sexual experiences – which are quite commonplace in heteropatriarchy (Gavey Citation2019) – be equated with rape (Fischel Citation2019, 20). Further still, in the archives there are to be found countless survivors of sexual violence in religious contexts whose consenting or nonconsenting experiences are wholly inaccessible, and whose lives are visible only in erasures, ruptures, fragments, and traces (Khanna Citation2008). All of this creates layers of complication in identifying sexual abuse in religious contexts and accessing the voices of survivors. Yet, in the present moment, countless survivors of sexual violence in religious contexts are coming forward with their experiences, and as scholars of religion we have power to render their experiences either visible or invisible.

Support and collaboration

Please consider supporting the following organizations in service of this important issue.

R&SAP partner organizations

BishopAccountability.org: https://www.bishop-accountability.org

Into Account: https://intoaccount.org

Heartwood Center for Body Mind Spirit: https://www.heartwoodcenter.com

Inform: https://inform.ac

R&SAP collaborators

Ahimsa Collective: https://www.ahimsacollective.net

Awake Community: https://www.awakecommunity.org

Collective Wisdoms: https://www.collectivewisdoms.org

FACE: https://facetogether.or

GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment): https://www.netgrace.org

HEART: https://hearttogrow.org

Hurma Project: https://hurmaproject.com

Project SATYA: http://www.projectsatya.org

Prosopon Healing: https://www.prosoponhealing.com

The Misfit Amish: https://www.themisfitamish.com

Tears of Eden: https://www.tearsofeden.org

The Dinah Project: https://thedinahproject.org

Together We Heal: https://together-we-heal.org

WATER (Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual): https://www.waterwomensalliance.org

Voices of Faith: https://www.voicesoffaith.org

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the Henry Luce Foundation for their $550,000 grant to support the Religion & Sexual Abuse Project. We are also grateful for the additional funding in support of this initiative provided by the Committee on Research (CoR), the Center for Ideas and Society (CIS), and the Health Humanities and Disability Justice (HHDJ) Lab at the University of California, Riverside.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1 I am very grateful to the survivors, scholars, advocates, and lawyers who helped me shape my thinking on this topic over the past six years. Undoubtedly, there is much of the Introduction and Epilogue in this R&SAP thematic issue that represent shared perspectives, still, only I am fully accountable for the sentiments expressed herein. I am very grateful to my fellow authors for all of their efforts in bringing these meaningful pieces into publication, and to Kirsten Janene-Nelson (www.the-editrice.com) for all her editing efforts which made this thematic issue significantly more legible and cohesive.

2 FaithTrust Institute folded in 2023, but interested readers can still access their important handbook *Responding to Spiritual Leader Misconduct* (2023) on the R&SAP website: https://www.religionandsexualabuseproject.org/current-research.

3 This thematic issue planned to include articles by Keunjoo Christine Pae (Denison University) and Abimbola Adelakun (University of Texas-Austin), but both authors could not contribute due to circumstances beyond our control. The unfortunate result is that this thematic issue is much more homogenously white than we would have preferred. As will be discussed later in this introduction, there are many reasons (historical and sociological) why the survivors who come forward and are spotlighted by the media, and the scholars who feel empowered to engage in this field are predominantly white. Still, this demographic imbalance in this thematic issue is regrettable, but could not be prevented while keeping to our publication schedule. R&SAP is pleased to have collaborated with and supported the publications of Adelakun Citation2023; Hong et al. Citation2024; Choudhury and Hammer Citation2024, the forthcoming manuscripts of Andrea Jain and Jack Downey, and Nivea Castaneda Acrey's ongoing work with Caminar Latino (highlighted in my epilogue to this thematic issue, ("Epilogue: Imagined Futures beyond the Religion & Sexual Abuse Project [R&SAP]", Lucia Citation2025b). For a current bibliography of supported research, see: https://www.religionandsexualabuseproject.org/current-research.

4 For a detailed bibliography of the early publications relating to clergy sexual abuse in Catholicism, see Clites Citation2020.

5 "Brainwashing" is a controversial and problematic term that has been used to unfairly critique "cults." For example, conversion is a benign and commonplace term that is often viewed positively, even though it denotes a very similar process of thought reform in mainstream religions. For a more detailed

discussion of “brainwashing,” see the articles by Margaret Thales Singer “The Process of Brainwashing, Psychological Coercion, and Thought Reform,” and James T. Richardson “A Critique of ‘Brainwashing’ Claims about New Religious Movements,” and Thomas Robbins, “Constructing Cultist ‘Mind Control,’” in Dawson Citation2003.

6 They build on the contributions of Roland Summit (Citation1983), the scholar who coined the term Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome (CSAAS), which is a psychological condition that makes confident unwavering disclosure of abuse highly unlikely, if not impossible.

7 See also Project SATYA: http://www.projectsatya.org, and in particular the three Investigation Reports produced by an esteemed team of scholars, survivors, and advocates: http://www.projectsatya.org/satya-investigation-reports/.

View issue table of contents Next article

References

- Adelakun, Abimbola. 2023. *Performing Power in Nigeria: Identity, Politics, and Petnecostalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Alexander, Jacqui M. 2005. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Asad, Talal. 2007. *On Suicide Bombing*. New York: Columbia University Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Bernstein, Rachel. 2018-2024. *IndoctriNation with Rachel Bernstein*. Podcast series. Available via Patreon. Accessed October 31, 2024. https://www.patreon.com/indoctrination(open in a new window).

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Bernstein, Rachel. 2024. “Escaping a Kingdom of Darkness with Judith Castillo.” *IndoctriNation.* Podcast audio, May 22, 2024. SoundCloud. https://soundcloud.com/indoctrinationshow/escaping-a-kingdom-of-darkness-wjudith-castillo(open in a new window).

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Berry, Jason. 1992. *Lead Us Not into Temptation: Catholic Priests and the Sexual Abuse of Children*. New York: Doubleday.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Boone, Joseph Allen. 2014. *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Brintnall, Kent. 2025. "Certainty, Complicity, Complexity: Approaching Sexual Abuse." *Religion*. This issue.
    - View

(Open in a new window)PubMed (Open in a new window)Web of Science ®(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Bromley and Melton, eds. 2002. *Cults, Religion & Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Brown, Christa. 2024. *Baptistland: A Memoir of Abuse, Betrayal, and Transformation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Lake Drive Books.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Burrus, Virginia. 2008. *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Chen, Yong. 2000. *Chinese San Francisco, 1850–1943*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Choudhury, Samah and Juliane Hammer, eds. 2024. *Sexual Violence in Muslim Communities: Towards Awareness and Accountability.* svmcproject.org.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Clites, Brian J. 2019a. "Our Accountability to Survivors." *American Catholic Studies* 130 (2): 4–7. https://doi.org/10.1353/acs.2019.0031.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Clites, Brian J. 2019b. “Soul Murder: Sketches of Survivor Imaginaries.” *Exchange* 48:268–279. https://doi.org/10.1163/1572543X-12341530.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Web of Science ®(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Clites, Brian J. 2020. “Breaking Our Silence: A Primer for Research on Clergy Sexual Abuse,” *American Catholic Studies Newsletter*, Vol. 47 No. 2 (Fall). https://cushwa.nd.edu/publications/american-catholic-studies-newsletter/americancatholicstudiesnewsletter-47-2/(open in a new window).

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Clites, Brian J. 2025. “Priests on the Prowl: Monster Talk Within the Discourse of Clergy Sexual Abuse.” *Religion*. This issue.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Dabhoiwala, Faramerz. 2012. *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution.* New York: Oxford University Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Dawson, Lorne, ed. 2003. *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader.* New York: Wiley-Blackwell.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Doniger, Wendy. 2000. *The Bedtrick: Tales of Sex and Masquerade*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Donovan, Peter. 1990. “Neutrality in Religious Studies.” *Religious Studies* 26 (1): 103–115.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Web of Science ®(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Downey, Jack. 2023. “Sexual Abuse and the Study of Religion: Where Do We go from Here?” Roundtable, sponsored by the contextualizing the catholic sexual abuse crisis seminar, American academy of religions (AAR) conference, San antonio, Texas (November 19).

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Elliott, Dyan. 2020. *The Corrupter of Boys: Sodomy, Scandal, and the Medieval Clergy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Feimster, Crystal N. 2009. *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Fischel, Joseph J. 2019. *Screw Consent: A Better Politics of Sexual Justice*. Oakland: University of California Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Fortune, Marie. 1983. *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin*. New York: Pilgrim Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Frankfurter, David. 2006. *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Galanter, Marc. 1999. *Cults: Faith, Healing, and Coercion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Garcia, Manon. 2023. *The Joy of Consent: A Philosophy of Good Sex*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Gavey, Nicola. 2019. *Just Sex?: The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape*. New York: Routledge.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Gayley, Holly. 2025. "The Arc of a Crisis: In the Aftermath of Sexual Abuse in Shambhala Buddhism." *Religion*. This issue.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 2007. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California.* Berkeley: University of California Press.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Gleig, Ann, and Amy Langenberg. 2025. "Listening *for* and *to* Survivors of Sexual Abuse and Misconduct in Buddhism." *Religion*. This issue.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Goodwin, Megan. 2020. *Abusing Religion: Literary Persecution, Sex Scandals, and American Minority Religions*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Gruber, Aya. 2020. *The Feminist War on Crime: The Unexpected Role of Women's Liberation in Mass Incarceration.* Oakland: University of California Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Guest, Tim. 2005. *My Life in Orange: Growing up with the Guru.* New York: Mariner Books.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Hallaq, Wael B. 2018. *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge.* New York: Columbia University Press.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Hammer, Juliane. 2025. "Jagged Edges: Exploring Muslim Efforts Against Sexual Violence." *Religion*. This issue.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Hartman, Saidiya V. 1997. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Hawkes, Gail, and Xanthé Mallett. 2017. "The Criminalization of Sexuality." In *The Oxford Handbook of Sex Offences and Sex Offenders*, edited by Teela Sanders, 541–656. New York: Oxford University Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Hayward, Dana, and Ross E. Cheit. 2017. "Child Sexual Abuse?" In *The Oxford Handbook of Sex Offences and Sex Offenders*, edited by Teela Sanders, 123–142. New York: Oxford University Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Herman, Judith Lewis. (1980) 2000. *Father-Daughter Incest*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Higgenbotham, Evelyn Brooks. 1993. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Hong, Christine J., AHyun Lee, Nami Kim, Boyung Lee, Junehee Yoon, and Keunjoo Christine Pae. 2024. “Roundtable: Sexual and Spiritual Abuse at the Covenant Fellowship Church: Korean and Asian American Feminist Perspectives.” *Feminist Studies in Religion* 40 (2). https://www.fsrinc.org/journal/volume-40-number-2/(open in a new window).

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Horowitz, Emily. 2024. *From Rage to Reason: Why We Need Sex Crime Laws Based on Facts, Not Fear*. London: Bloomsbury.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- House, Kathryn, and Sara Moslener. 2025. *Evangelical Purity Culture and Its Discontents*. New York: Routledge.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Jain, Andrea. 2020. *Peace, Love Yoga: The Politics of Global Spirituality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Johnson, David K. 2004. *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Johnson, Jessica Marie. 2020. *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Kaur, Ishleen. 2021. “‘Coercion and Rape’: Investigating My Yoga School.” *BBC.* https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-57400014(open in a new window).

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Kaushal, Tara. 2020. *Why Men Rape: An Indian Undercover Investigation*. New Delhi: HarperCollins.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Khanna, Ranjana. 2008. *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Kramer, Joel, and Diana Alstad. 1992. *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power*. Berkeley: Frog Books.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Langone, Michael, ed. 1995. *Recovery from Cults: Help for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse*. New York: W. W. Norton.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Levine, Philippa. 2003. *Prostitution, Rape and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire*. New York: Routledge.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Levine, Philippa. 2004. *Gender and Empire*. New York: Oxford University Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Lucia, Amanda. 2018. "Guru Sex: Charisma, Proxemic Desire, and the Haptic Logics of the Guru Disciple Relationship." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86 (4): 953–988. https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfy025.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Web of Science ®(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Lucia, Amanda. 2023. "Flooding the Web: Absence-Presence and the Media Strategies of Nithyananda's Digital Empire." In *Gurus and Media: Sound, Image, Machine, Text and the Digital*, edited by Jacob Copeman, Arkotong Longkumer, and Koonal Duggal, 271–297. London: KCL Press.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Lucia, Amanda. 2025a. "Epilogue: Religion & Sexual Abuse Project." *Religion*. This issue.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Lucia, Amanda. 2025b. "Waging War in *Wild Wild Country*: Regulating Sex and Nation in Osho's Rajneeshpuram." In *Mythologizing in South Asian Traditions*, edited by Diana Dimitrova, 103–134. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-76830-9_5.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Mahmood, Saba. 2004. *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- McClintock, Anne. 1995. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*. New York: Routledge.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Mezey, Susan Gluck. 2007. *Queers in Court: Gay Rights Law and Public Policy.* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Mir-Hosseini, Ziba. 2011. "Criminalising Sexuality: Zina Laws as Violence Against Women in Muslim Contexts." *SUR* 15. https://sur.conectas.org/en/criminalising-sexuality/(open in a new window).

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Moslener, Sara. 2015. *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence.* New York: Oxford University Press.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Moslener, Sara. 2025. *After Purity: Race, Sex and Religion in White Christian America*. New York: Beacon Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Moslener, Sara, and Kathryn House, eds. 2025. *Purity Culture and Its Discontents*. New York: Routledge Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Newcombe, Suzanne, and Sarah Harvey. 2025. "Hegemonic Masculinities and Sexual Abuse: Two Case Studies." *Religion*. This issue.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Oakley, Lisa, and Justin Humphreys. 2019. *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures.* London: SPCK Publishing.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Orsi, Robert. 2008. "The 'So-Called History' of the Study of Religion." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 20 (2): 134–38. https://doi.org/10.1163/157006808X283552.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Web of Science ®(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Oza, Rupal. 2023. *Semiotics of Rape: Sexual Subjectivity and Violation in Rural India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Pande, Ishita. 2020. *Sex, Law, and the Politics of Age: Child Marriage in India, 1891–1937*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Petro, Anthony. 2015. "Beyond Accountability: The Queer Archive of Catholic Sexual Abuse." *Radical History Review* 122:160–176. https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2849594.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Puar, Jasbir K. 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- RAINN. n.d.a. "Statistics." Accessed May 24, 2025. https://rainn.org/statistics(open in a new window).

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- RAINN. n.d.b. "Victims of Sexual Violence Statistics." Accessed May 24, 2025. https://rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence(open in a new window).

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Religion & Sexual Abuse Project. 2022. "Current Research from the R&SAP team." Accessed May 30, 2025. https://www.religionandsexualabuseproject.org/current-research(open in a new window).

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Scheper Hughes, Jennifer. 2023. *The Church of the Dead: The Epidemic of 1576 and the Birth of Christianity in the Americas*. New York: NYU Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Sorensen, Teena, and Barbara Snow. 1991. "How Children Tell: The Process of Disclosure in Child Sexual Abuse." *Child Welfare* 70 (1): 3–15. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/1997290/(open in a new window).

(Open in a new window)PubMed (Open in a new window)Web of Science ®(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Soundararajan, Thenmozhi. 2022. *The Trauma of Caste: A Dalit Feminist Meditation on Survivorship, Healing, and Abolition*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Srinivasan, Amia. 2021. *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Strathern, Marilyn. 1987. "An Awkward Relationship: The Case of Feminism and Anthropology." *Signs* 12 (2): 276–292. https://doi.org/10.1086/494321.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Web of Science ®(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Summit, Roland. 1983. "The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome." *Child Abuse and Neglect* 7 (2): 177–193. https://doi.org/10.1016/0145-2134(83)90070-4.
    - View

(Open in a new window)PubMed(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Terry, Karen. 2004. "The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States 1950-2002." Report by John Jay College of Criminal Justice. New York: CUNY. https://www.bishop-accountability.org/reports/2004_02_27_JohnJay_revised/2004_02_27_John_Jay_Main_Report_Optimized.pdf(open in a new window).

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Terry, Karen. 2006. "Supplementary Report to The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States 1950-2002." Report by John Jay College of Criminal Justice. New York: CUNY. https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/upload/Nature-and-Scope-supplemental-data-2006.pdf(open in a new window).

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Terry, Karen. 2011. "The Causes and Contexts of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010." https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/upload/The-Causes-and-Context-of-Sexual-Abuse-of-Minors-by-Catholic-Priests-in-the-United-States-1950-2010.pdf(open in a new window).

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Terry, Karen. 2017. "What Is Sex Crime?" In *The Oxford Handbook of Sex Offences and Sex Offenders*, edited by Teela Sanders, 3–20. New York: Oxford University Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Weisenfeld, Judith. 2016. *New World A-coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration*. New York: NYU Press.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Westover, Tara. 2022. *Educated: A Memoir*. New York: Random House.

(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Wyatt, Gail. 1992. "The Sociocultural Context of African American and White American Women's Rape." *Journal of Social Issues* 48 (1): 77–91. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1992.tb01158.x.
    - View

(Open in a new window)Web of Science ®(Open in a new window)Google Scholar

- Zhang, Sarah. 2024. "DNA Tests Are Uncovering the True Prevalence of Incest." *The Atlantic*, March 18, 2024. https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2024/03/dna-tests-incest/677791/(open in a new window).