

Abuse of power and sexual violence in the Church - what does theology have to do with it?¹

by Doris Reisinger

1. Obvious answers

1.1. Sexual violence as a subject of research in theology.

What does academic theology have to do with abuse of power and sexual violence in the Church? There are initially some very obvious answers to this question. One answer might be: sexual violence in the Church is an object of research in theology. There have been a number of publications on the subject in recent years. One might argue whether there are enough of them and whether they are sufficiently revealing in terms of the insights they bring to light. Considering the importance that cases of abuse and cover-up have had and continue to have for the Church, it seems to me that there have not only been too few contributions in absolute terms, but in particular that there is a lack of deeper, systematic-theological analyses.

1.2. Theologians as victims or as perpetrators

A second answer to the question would be: Among theologians there are also victims. From a purely statistical point of view, each and every teaching staff member present here today has encountered a victim - or a perpetrator - in the course of his or her own teaching activities among his or her own students, but also among colleagues and co-workers. - How do you deal with this? - Have you ever thought about it? Perhaps you should also be aware that - probably without exception - all clergy who have sexually abused children once studied theology. What does that mean for teaching? I don't know. But it might be worth thinking about it.

1.3. Theologians as advocates

Theologians can not only be victims or perpetrators, but also advocates: As a student, I was fortunate to have a professor who was not only sufficiently sensitized to perceive me as an abuse victim, but who also used her knowledge of canon law to quite literally stand by me as an advocate in the denunciation of my perpetrators. I can hardly put into words what this has meant to me. I am convinced that I owe a good part of my current mental health to this circumstance.

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Unfortunately, I had no professors who supported me with their knowledge of systematic, moral or biblical theology. I would have wished for them urgently. I wish for them until today ...

To this day I have the feeling that I am alone with the theological analysis of my own history of suffering and that I somehow have to cope with it with the few theological tools I took with me from my studies. It feels like trying to clear a mountain with a teaspoon. I can only guess that those affected, who themselves have no theological knowledge to fall back on, must find it many times more difficult to untangle their own ecclesiastical socialization, their original spiritual home in the Church, and their own experiences of abuse. Many of us would be very relieved if experts would support us in this difficult process with their scholarly knowledge and possibilities.

2. A theologically based culture of violence can only be rejected theologically

In addition to "Abuse is a subject of research" and, "Even among theologians there are perpetrators, victims, and advocates," there is another possible answer to the initial question. It is this other answer that I want to focus on. First, because it is spoken entirely from my perspective as a victim *and* a theologian. On the other hand, because I believe that we will not really get a comprehensive view of the difficult relationship between theology and violence in the Church until we engage with this dimension.

2.1. Rape as Metaphor

I begin with a warning. What comes next might trigger people who have had traumatic experiences with sexual violence.

Let me briefly describe what it feels like to be raped. Imagine: Someone takes advantage of your vulnerability in a particular situation, forcibly restricts your freedom of movement, openly overrides your will, your objection and your fear, undresses you and penetrates you - and you have no one within reach to help you. If it is really bad, you live in a context in which, on top of that, nobody believes you even afterwards - and you know this already at the moment when violence is done to you - that nobody will believe you. You know that the person who abuses you also knows that - and that person knows that you know that.

When I experienced this, I was scared to death. Not because I could have actually died, but probably because I instinctively understood what was happening to me: It was the erasure of myself as a person. At that moment I was at the mercy of someone who did what he wanted with me, who didn't care about me and who violated my intimacy. And I couldn't get through to him with my words or my fear because he simply wasn't interested in my perspective.

Later, this experience has become a metaphor for me for many other abuses I have experienced in the Church. In addition to sexual abuse, there are other forms of abuse in the Church. In my

most recent book² I define spiritual abuse as the violation of spiritual autonomy. I believe that there is at least one other form of abuse in the Church, and one that particularly affects theologians: the violation of intellectual autonomy.

Let me first tell you about my own history. After joining a Catholic community, a so-called “new form of consecrated life”, I first experienced abuses for which I now have the term spiritual abuse: Obligatory confession once a month to a priest prescribed for me, not being allowed to freely choose my spiritual director, having to say prayers in which I called myself "proud" or prayed for "deliverance from the desire to be loved." - To name just a few examples.

At the same time, I have also experienced incursions that can be described as violations of intellectual autonomy: the radical restriction of my reading. The only books I was allowed were the Book of Hours, the Bible, the Catechism, and a selection of texts by the Foundress. Even when I had to prepare spiritual talks on a psalm, for example, I was not allowed to use Bible commentaries or any other literature. The topics I was allowed to speak about with others were also radically restricted: nothing personal, no criticism, no doubts. What was said and done by the superiors I was to "accept with confidence"; if I found it difficult to accept, I was to turn to my superiors with equal confidence to have them explain it to me again. If I asked more than once because I simply could not accept something and considered my objections completely legitimate, I was confronted with the displeasure of my superiors, who showed themselves "disappointed" in me and more or less subtly hinted at sanctions or issued threats.

2.2. Violence in theological discourse

When I started studying theology at the University of Freiburg in 2010, I was initially overwhelmed by the freedom of thought I enjoyed there. Apparently, all thoughts were allowed to be thought, all questions asked, and all topics discussed. Critical questions and disputes were not only allowed, but theological answers given to them should also be able to withstand secular criticism and rational examination. Objections were possible and had to be answered. Soon, however, I also noticed that this intellectual freedom seemed to apply only to the protected space of intra-theological exchange. Apparently, there were even consensuses among theologians that were rather not published or expressed too publicly, such as the one that there are of course no theologically sound objections to the ordination of women to the priesthood, remarriage after divorce, or homosexual partnerships, or that there are good theological reasons for democratic structures in the Church or for democratic control of ordained ministers.

² Doris Wagner (2019), *Spiritueller Missbrauch in der katholischen Kirche*, Freiburg.

When in 2011, shortly before I left that community, I was given the Instruction *Donum Veritatis*³ on the ecclesial vocation of the theologian by a superior who was to "accompany" me in my studies, I experienced a nasty déjà vu. Everything about this text shocked me: the condescending tone of the Instruction, the spiritual phrasal flowers, the Scripture quotations scattered like sugar sprinkles over the text (with which what is said to theologians is surely hardly meant to be seriously affirmed), the fact that limits are set not only to freedom of research (12), but also to human rights (37) as unapologetically as explicitly in the name of the Magisterium. Above all, however, it was the speech of a "genuine faith" (14) and a "revelation [...] as it is transmitted in the Church under the authority of the magisterium [...]" (12), which was apparently not taken as requiring justification, that appalled me. For this theologically more than questionable speech was used to justify the instruction according to which theologians who come to a view that differs from the opinion of the Magisterium should not make it public (27), preferring to question their own conclusions (29) and finally not to discuss their argumentation publicly, but submit them to the judgment of the Magisterium (30), and then, if they cannot be convinced by the Magisterium, prefer to suffer in silence and prayer from their "dissenting" opinion (31) rather than put it up for discussion in professional circles or even in the ecclesiastical public.

Several years have passed since the publication of this letter. In substance, little has changed. We all know that the most recent papal letter on the subject, the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*⁴, follows the same logic in its second part.⁵ The Wucherpfennig case⁶, which took place just a few months ago, is still fresh in everyone's memory.

Without being ironic, quite literally: when I read such texts, I feel sick and begin to tremble. Because: I encounter the same logic here with which I have been abused over the years. Freedom of movement is unapologetically restricted, rights are taken away, the claim is made that it is the duty and obligation of thinking people to willingly let the body of thought of the Church's teaching authority penetrate and be absorbed, regardless of whether it proves to be rational or ethically acceptable, what one thinks of it oneself, and what that means for one's own thinking and life. There is a message being sent here: We are in control, we dominate and you do not count. We determine what truth is, and you have to make this "truth" your own, or at least not publicly contradict it. And if you suffer in the process, then do so in silence.

³ AAS 82 (1990) 1550–1570.

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.html

⁴ AAS 110 (2018) 1-41. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20171208_veritatis-gaudium.html

⁵ This is exemplified, among others, by Article 38 § 1, 2b, which states that „true freedom in research is necessarily based upon firm adherence to God's Word and deference to the Church's Magisterium, whose duty it is to interpret authentically the Word of God.“

⁶ <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/10/10/questions-surround-future-german-jesuit-rector-over-lgbt-comments>

2.3. Another name for violence in scientific discourse is fundamentalism

You can guess what I think this has to do with sexual abuse: I believe that getting over others, thinking in terms of authority and subordinates, and violating others' autonomy are systemically grounded in the Roman Catholic Church, and that it is always the same dynamic that underlies the violation of sexual, spiritual, or intellectual autonomy in any Church: Some people consider themselves, their person, their views and actions unassailable, no matter what they do and what they do to others with it, and no matter how good or bad their viewpoints and actions are ethically or rationally justified, because they have the firm and completely ludicrous view that they are acting in the name of or even as God's representative. (Gerhard Ludwig Müller's manifesto "Euer Herz lassen sich nicht verwirren" ("Do not let your heart be confused")⁷ is an impressive example of this, which takes on almost satirical features. He speaks of God, of truth and revelation and does not even seem to notice how much his formulations suggest that there is no difference between God and him).

This is also called fundamentalism.⁸ The antidote to fundamentalism is knowledge. The antidote to religious fundamentalism is academic theology. That is why it is particularly worrisome when theologians bow to fundamentalist presumptions raised by religious leaders. For when they bow, they fail to exercise the control function that they have by virtue of their expertise and teaching office, and that they morally owe to the community of believers.

2.4. Coping Strategies or: When Self-Protection is Legitimate

The restriction of intellectual freedom in the Church is not a new phenomenon. Theologians are all too familiar with it. In the way they deal with it, the same strategies can be observed that are used by victims of sexual violence. They are strategies of repression and avoidance. There is shame and relativization and escape. Many shift to harmless fields of research (just look at the titles of current dissertation and post-doctoral projects), in other words: they opt for an existence in the ivory tower. One could also say: They live and work as if theology basically had nothing to do with Church institutions or the religious practice of believing people. Others perfect their ability to navigate the decidedly narrow canyon between what one can still say and what makes one vulnerable, as if between Scylla and Charybdis. In such thoroughly witty and impressive maneuvers, they consider themselves enlightened, critical and courageous. In doing so, however,

⁷ <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/column/53977/manifesto-of-faith>

⁸ Although Catholic fundamentalism is by now an established concept, it is at the same time a phenomenon that has so far been researched only in fragments. Cf. Wolfgang Beinert, *Katholischer Fundamentalismus. Häretische Gruppen in der Kirche?* Regensburg 1991; Kurt Remele, *Katholischer Fundamentalismus. Unterscheidungen – Erklärungen – Anfragen*, in: Clemens Six, Martin Riesebrodt, Siegfried Haas (Hg.), *Religiöser Fundamentalismus. Vom Kolonialismus zur Globalisierung*, Innsbruck/Wien 2004, 53-68; Stephan Goertz, Rudolf B. Hein, Katharina Klicker (Hg.), *Fluchtpunkt Fundamentalismus? Gegenwartsdiagnosen katholischer Moral*, Freiburg 2013; Hermann Häring, *Versuchung Fundamentalismus. Glaube und Vernunft in einer säkularen Gesellschaft*, Gütersloh 2013; siehe auch einschlägige Beiträge in: Sonja Angelika Strube (Hg.), *Rechtsextremismus als Herausforderung für die Theologie*, Freiburg 2015.

they never cross the line beyond which they would actually risk anything, and thus do not fulfill their control function, precisely because they can thus never really become dangerous to perpetrators and can never really stand by victims. Some of those who have seriously tried the latter for a while have become cynics in the face of the hopelessness of the endeavor, resignedly and bitterly complaining about the situation among their colleagues, and can only bear the all too vain hopes of others, which seem to be sparsely sown anyway, by mocking them.

2.5. Theological duties of care and a new academic culture of resistance

All of this is all too familiar to you. I don't need to tell you about it. Nor do I want to launch a cheap appeal to finally come out boldly and openly and change everything. I am well aware that the situation is more complicated and more difficult to resolve than a superficial glance might suggest. As a conclusion to my contribution, I would like to say only one thing: If the coming to light of the countless cases of abuse and cover-ups has made one thing clear to us, it is this: The victims of the Church's abuse of power and hostility to autonomy are not primarily theologians, but they are above all people who are intellectually, spiritually and emotionally so much less defensible than we are. They are especially children, youths and marginalized or dependent people. In view of this, theologians can no longer take the path of self-protection without at the same time explicitly looking away from the violence that other people in the Church suffer. For these people, you, all of us who are more defensible, have a duty of care. Moreover, people who have theological expertise, who are called to research and teach, have a control function vis-à-vis those who theologially justify their offices and the power they exercise by virtue of these offices - and who sometimes do not shy away from justifying even the clear abuse of this power theologially.

It is quite clear: If theologians do not look away, if they call this violence by its name, they will inevitably be confronted with the fact that they themselves are also victims of this ecclesiastical logic of violence. They will be confronted with more or less subtle threats, they will have to face confrontations with Church superiors. This is not easy, and this may be the reason why some seem to avoid it so far. But as theologians, you of all people in this Church are the ones who are best equipped for this confrontation. For you can show that and why the logic of violence, as it is still all too often found in Church practice, cannot be theologially justified under any circumstances.

In short - and this is my conclusion - in view of the suffering that ecclesiastical abuse of power causes in the lives of people who are really helplessly at its mercy, any academic cynicism and any theologial ivory tower culture is unacceptable. In the face of this suffering, it is necessary to create an academic culture of resistance. It seems to me that today we are already witnesses to its emergence.

