

## ***Editors' Introduction: Religion, Gender and Violence***

### ***Introduction***

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### ***Feminist Approaches to Religion and Gendered Violence***

Gender-based violence has and continues to be a focal point of feminist research and activism (Kelly 1988, 2011). The second wave women's movement identified violence against women as a key factor in women's oppression and over the last 60 years feminists have worked to address this across social policy, research and activist agendas, carefully documenting the multiple sites in which women and girls are most likely to be affected by forms of violence, including domestic abuse, sexual assault and sexual harassment (Bromfield, Hirte, et al. 2017; Heing 2017; Kelly 1988, 2011). Despite this work and the important impacts of feminist action, rates of violence against women and gender diverse groups remain significantly high, indicating that gender violence and misogyny is deeply entrenched in social and cultural life. This applies particularly to religious organisations where rates of gender-based violence are likely significant. This special issue is spread across two issues (ADD ##) and aims to make a contribution to knowledge on the cross-cultural and multi-faceted spheres of gender-based religious violence. The articles analyse specific areas of concern, such as priesthood, child abuse and domestic violence, while utilising feminist, anthropological, sociological and theological methodologies. Gender is at the centre of analysis.

### ***Research on Religion, Gender and Violence***

As noted, despite the depth of feminist scholarship on gender-based violence in general, far less attention has been paid to how this intersects with religion. Religion is rarely taken as the explicit starting point for study. Although important scholarship on this relationship has been achieved, it remains a niche area of scholarship. This can best be explained by the focus of secular feminism on secular institutions which were understood as capable of institutional reform (McPhillips, 2016; Sands, 2008) as opposed to the perceived inherent patriarchal character of religious groups. This has been emphatically analysed and corrected by feminist scholars working in the field of religion and feminism who have demonstrated the social and historical construction of religions and the significant theological and institutional developments across modernity and post-modernity challenging the idea that religions are bound by adherences to timeless requirements of tradition (McPhillips & Goldenberg, 2021; Sands, 2008; Scott, 2018). Indeed, the construction of religion as

being anti-modern and unprogressive reifies the idea that sexual and gendered oppressions solely emerge from religious contexts, thereby denying the diversity, historicity and nuance within and between religious traditions (Scott 2018). This also has the consequence of aligning secular contexts with enlightened gender reforms, despite the evidence that secular and state-based practices are typically misogynist and underpinned by sexist principles (Scott 2018).

With regards to documenting the relationship between religion and gendered violence, important early social research was fostered by a number of feminist scholars particularly Nancy Nason Clark (2000, 2003) and Marie Fortune (2005) who opened the area to analysis. Their research and activism expanded knowledge of how faith traditions, particularly Christianity, failed to respond adequately to disclosures of sexual, physical and psychological abuse. Nancy Nason-Clark made an influential contribution, producing extensive research over some decades on gender violence and religion in the North American context, with a predominant focus on Christian congregations. Nason-Clark and her colleagues have undertaken multiple studies utilising various methodologies producing careful and detailed evidence-based accounts involving abuse survivors, religious leaders and agency workers as well as perpetrators (Nason-Clark et al. 2018) and has revealed pertinent insights regarding the relationship between religion and abuse.

In particular Nason-Clark demonstrates that although those in religious communities are no more likely to experience or perpetuate abuse than those in non-religious environments, there are singular issues that mark out religious communities and institutions as culturally specific, making this an important area of study. For example, in religious communities where the family is accorded sacred status, the idea of abuse is anathema to that image, meaning that disclosing abuse becomes challenging (Nason-Clark 2000; Nason-Clark 2018). On the one hand, a woman experiencing domestic violence may believe that because her marriage vows were said before God, that she must endure the abuse, or tear asunder her sacred commitment (Nason-Clark et al. 2018). At a personal level, women in faith communities can therefore be very hesitant to speak out about abuse (Nason-Clark 2003). There is therefore a deep-rooted fear that a woman leaving a marriage and seeking a divorce because of abuse would revoke her spiritual status with God; it is therefore more palatable to contend with the violence. This can occur even in religious communities where leaving would be advocated and encouraged (Nason-Clark 2003). As Nason-Clark et al. argue,

Religious women seem to wait longer than other women to leave an abusive marriage. The focus on *family values* in many large evangelical congregations can be a double edged sword

to women ... often there is a tendency to deny or minimize the negative side of family life... For complementarians, wife battering in a religious home happens because individual men act in sinful, unloving ways toward the wives over whom they should exercise loving authority, not because of an improper understanding of how wives and husbands should relate to each other as equals in a Christian marriage (2018: 30, emphasis in original)

Meanwhile there is a legitimate fear that she will not be believed by her faith community, and that the congregation will pledge their allegiance to her abusive partner (Nason-Clark, 2003). This becomes especially pertinent in cases where the perpetrator is perceived as an upstanding and dedicated member of the religious community, such that congregation members would struggle to associate abusive behaviour with someone they have such a positive impression (Nason-Clark 2003). This becomes even more fraught when the abuser is a religious leader (Nason-Clark et al. 2018). There are also compelling issues regarding religious women's access to secular support services, and they may feel the need to hide their religious identity so that they are not judged or misunderstood (Nason-Clark 2003; Nason-Clark et al. 2018). Meanwhile religious leaders often do not have the skills or training to provide an adequate response and lack the ability to offer robust support processes to those experiencing domestic violence (Nason-Clark et al. 2018).

Recent research has built on Nason-Clark's evidence, to look at parallel case studies in other countries, such as Aune and Barnes' study of major Christian churches in the UK (2018) and Powell and Pepper's study on intimate partner violence in the Anglican Church of Australia (2021). Aune and Barnes undertook a large survey amongst congregants in Anglican, Methodist and Catholic churches in Cumbria, UK. Results indicated that women were four times more likely to experience sexual, physical and spiritual abuse than men and that women were far less likely to report this to a Church leader, preferring an outside support service. Given that churches are key institutions in UK society, the level of awareness of gendered violence was low, and support systems inadequate (Aune and Barnes, 2018). Powell and Pepper's three-part study of intimate partner violence in Anglican communities across Australia in 2021 found that prevalence of violence was the same or higher than in the wider community and women were much more likely to be victims than men. When victims sought help they relied much more on external support services, and less on disclosing to the Church. These results are similar to those found by Aune and Barnes (2018) and indicate a low level of confidence in Church responses to disclosures of abuse.

Developing theoretical responses to the issue of gender-based violence across religious traditions, Blyth et al. compiled a significant three-volume edited collection called *Rape Culture, Gender Violence, and Religion*, focused on Biblical Perspectives (2018a), Christian Perspectives (2018b) and Interdisciplinary Perspectives (2018c). This broadens the scope, not only beyond Christianity, but also cross-culturally, although the predominant focus remains on Christianity. Gathering together numerous projects, studies and perspectives, Blyth et al. consider a range of issues such as HIV, rape, child abuse, child abuse inquiries, colonialization, genocide and war, and consider how religious communities can perpetuate rape culture through, for example, sermons and self-help books, and embedded in powerful theological ideas such as headship and complementarianism. Chapters also consider violence against men. At the same time, religious conviction and belief can offer deep forms of comfort to those recovering from trauma, such as Fallon's (2018) work examining belief in God as a means of recovery for women who had experienced atrocious abuses in the Rwandan genocide.

Blyth et al. (2018a, b, c) have made a significant contribution in mapping the existing scholarship, primarily from a theological and religious studies perspective. This is a really worthwhile resource in exploring the depth and breadth of the issues pertaining to religion in relation to gender violence. But it is clear that more research has emerged from the global north, Christianity remains the religion of focus and women are the central focus of victims of violence.

Studies of violence against women in non-Christian religions, particularly Hinduism and Islam, are lacking and have had to contend with ideologies which have typically aligned these religions with stereotypical, neo-colonialist accounts depicting Islam and Hinduism as inherently patriarchal and in need of civilising influences. This produces an ongoing orientalist discourse that has been difficult to deconstruct (Dhaliwal 2021; Carland, 2017; McPhillips, 2021). Yet, as the articles in these two special issues demonstrate, gender-based violence and specifically violence against women, occurs across multiple faith traditions and cultural contexts. Gleig and Langenberg's work on the sexual abuse crisis in Buddhism (2021) along with organisations such as Sakyadhita<sup>1</sup> have drawn attention to the emerging issue of violence against women in Buddhist organisations. There have been multiple accounts of gendered violence in Jewish communities, including evidence presented at the RCIRCSA concerning the Yeshiva orthodox schools in Melbourne and Sydney where victims were shunned and stigmatized for disclosing abuse (RCIRCSA 2015a).

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<sup>1</sup> Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women <https://www.sakyadhita.org/>

Lacking as well are studies of gendered violence in smaller Christian groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Salvation Army (RCIRCSA 2014). Recent evidence suggests that in such groups the distinction between institutional and familial contexts tend to merge into each other as organisational structures mirror the family where narratives of headship dominate and men are leaders. These sects also tend to be closed to external influences, making it extremely difficult for victims to seek help. RCIRCSA (2015b) examined the process by which complaints were managed within the Jehovah's Witnesses and found that victims were treated poorly. The organization held over 1000 complaints of sexual abuse against children dating back to the 1950s, none of which had been referred to external authorities, instead being handled in-house by all-male committees (RCIRCSA 2015b). As religious groups, there are poor regulatory mechanisms and a lack of transparency and reporting to independent bodies. In effect, for most of the twentieth century to current times, religious organisations have managed investigations into allegations of violence themselves, leading to a clash of interests and ongoing practices of cultures of gendered abuse.

#### *Public inquiries as significant sites of evidence*

Public inquiries have been important emerging sites of data and analysis on gender-based violence in religious communities. Beginning in the 1990s, a series of public inquiries across the globe into the impacts of domestic violence and institutional violence on women, children and gender minority groups highlighted the high rates of prevalence across religious institutions (Wright, Swain & McPhillips, 2017). These inquiries continue to produce valuable and important data regarding the particular ways in which religious institutions produce cultures of gendered violence both in organisational and familial settings. Investigations have focused mainly on the Catholic and Anglican churches in Ireland, the UK, Europe, Canada, New Zealand and Australia where public inquiry mechanisms are well-established through parliamentary regulatory processes (Wright, Swain & McPhillips, 2017). The outcomes of these inquiries have been extremely effective in detailing the prevalence and types of violence as well as the specific institutional mechanisms which embedded cultures of gendered violence in everyday religious practices (Salter, 2018). Inquiries and associated research have revealed the devastating impacts of abuse on victims/survivors (Blakemore, Hirte, et al, 2017) and in particular drawn attention to the ongoing sexual physical and psychological abuse against children in religious communities for much of the twentieth century (McPhillips, 2018). More recent research is demonstrating that the abuse of children in larger Christian groups was organised in networks between (mostly) clerical perpetrators and Church leaders and carefully managed to avoid public scrutiny and police detection (Death, 2018).

A central question is why religious organisations were not identified earlier as a primary site of gender-based violence particularly given the widespread sexual abuse of children and women? A number of answers are proffered in the articles of this special issue. Without doubt, the particular relationship between church and state in western democracies where religious organisations tend to enjoy independence from financial and statutory responsibilities is a key factor. For example, in Australia, institutions that are legally identified as religious faith traditions enjoy an array of exemptions from human rights laws and financial obligations through their status as charity organisations (McPhillips, 2015). Until recently the Catholic Church in Australia was legally unincorporated meaning that it did not have the financial and legal responsibilities of mainstream institutions. It was not possible to sue the Church, which for survivors of institutional child sexual abuse was deeply frustrating and problematic (Gleeson, 2017). The state allowed religious organisations to operate as semi-independent bodies that do not require formal state-based types of regulation, organisational transparency and accountability (McPhillips & Goldenberg, 2021). Yet, as we have seen in places such as Boston in the United States and Ireland, the Catholic Church had immense social and economic power and was rarely questioned about its inner workings. In England where the Anglican Church is formally aligned with the state, gendered abuse was rife in certain schools and parishes, with entrenched clericalism<sup>2</sup>, and buttressed through social connections and links to the establishment (IICSA 2019). Clericalism was also demonstrated as a powerful mechanism of gender oppression in the Catholic Church (IICSA 2020). In short, mainstream Anglican and Catholic institutions operated with impunity and were rarely questioned, and this was supported through the sacred status accorded these religious organisations. As Lynch (forthcoming) argues, religious figures such as priests and bishops were perceived as closer to God; Church apparatus such as impressive places of worship and elaborate vestments cultivate an impression of heaven on earth, thus rendering it inconceivable that crimes against children could occur in this context. And because of the theological focus on sin and redemption, as well as forgiveness, this made the churches inept at foregrounding victims, instead protecting the interests of perpetrators. The focus on the child abuse crisis as a moral failing of Church leaders and clerics was at the expense of viewing it as criminal activity.

#### *Methodological approaches to the study of Research into Gender Based Violence*

Methodologically, feminist approaches to the study of gendered violence in religions have been interdisciplinary and emphasised violence not as an unusual aberration but built into the very fabric

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<sup>2</sup> Clericalism is the misapplication of clerical authority. It functions to afford clerics superior status as unique and nearer to God than non-clerics (Plante 2020).

of women's lives in patriarchal societies. Such an approach builds on the early studies into gendered violence such as by Brownmiller (1975) who examined rape as a social control mechanism which keeps women in a state of fear, whilst others have focused on the gendered dynamics of domestic violence (Dobash and Dobash 1980). Moving beyond analysing different forms of violence as separate phenomena, researchers such as Elizabeth Stanko (1985) and Liz Kelly (1988) undertook important work in the 1980s to map the different kinds of violence women had experienced over the course of their lives. Undertaking such a collective approach emphasised the persistent and pervasive nature of violence against women, the various forms that it took, and how this violence typically started in childhood. In her retrospective introspection, Kelly emphasises that 'it was the everyday and every nightness of violence that was foregrounded, that these more mundane encounters with gendered power relations were connected to the extremes which are deemed worthy of legal regulation and media attention' (2011: xxi). Such projects emphasised a need to move beyond any understanding that gendered violence was due to individual 'bad apples' but emphasised how gendered violence was embedded in societal structures. As Stanko argued,

Women... are specialists in devising ways to minimise their exposure to the possibility of male violence... Old and young, rich and poor, white and black, no woman is immune from men's intimidating, threatening or violent behaviour. If one is young, poor or from a minority, though, chances of being affected... are increased (1985: 1).

Relatedly, such studies have emphasised how impactful gender-based violence is, and the negative consequences caused by violence in all the forms it takes (Blakemore, Herbert, et al 2017; Heing 2017; Kelly 1988). Prioritising the narratives of survivors, and taking their accounts seriously, has changed many previously-held assumptions about violence, for example, the perception that seemingly lower-level forms of gender violence, such as street harassment and flashing, can be laughed off and easily dismissed (Kelly 1988). Such a focus also takes seriously the acute harms and trauma caused by violence and how this impacts broader wellbeing, as the threat of further violence and general concerns about safety pervades one's everyday life (Kelly 2011). Even innocent behaviour such as a woman experiencing a man walking behind her, can raise anxiety, due to the unpredictability of the situation and the threat of harm. As Stanko (1985) argues, although this may be interpreted as paranoia, it is actually a reasonable response to the general intimidation women experience on a day-to-day level.

Obtaining accounts from victims directly regarding how they experienced violence has done much to disrupt preconceived ideas about gender violence, such as the idea that women entice men into violent behaviour (Kelly 2011). Indeed, the current reliance on victim testimony in public inquiries

and court cases is relatively new and reflects a change in public understanding about the causes and impacts of gendered violence. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, testimony from victims was either disregarded or ignored and victims were often stigmatized and blamed for their situation (Swain 2018). A slow change brought on largely by the work of lobby and activist groups has effected new understandings of violence. Public inquiries into institutions also emphasise how violence occurs at the organisational level. This expands the remit beyond a focus on individual violence to understand how violence is enabled through particular systems and processes and has revealed how religious organisations are culpable alongside secular institutions (Salter, 2018). Such investigations have also emphasised variable levels of commitments from organisations to alter practices, with evidence of resistance to change (Page and Shipley, 2020).

The impetus generated through various inquiries has indicated the large research gaps that remain. There remains a dearth of information about religious gender-based violence in countries where there has not been a practice of public inquiries or research and this is particularly the case in South East Asia and Africa. Like the broader field of research on gendered violence, it is important that the research on religion becomes more intersectional (Kelly 2011) and expanded to incorporate the variety of forms gender violence can take, including, for example, in relation to trafficking, refuges, and sex work. It is important that such research involves a broader range of perspectives on violence from a wider array of geographical contexts, also understanding how violence is mediated in relation to trans and non-binary individuals (e.g. Blyth 2018). Furthermore, greater insights have been garnered regarding violence towards men including for example the widespread sexual abuse of boys in congregate Christian settings throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Swain 2019). However, more research is needed.

### *Introducing the Themes of the Special Issue*

This first in a double special issue on gender, religion and violence contributes four papers which develop various themes in this field of study. The articles demonstrate that religions have been sites where different forms of violence are perpetuated, whether through certain theologies, or organising systems. Religions play a role in upholding violent norms, whether through the disciplining of the body (Gott) or through discursive control (Beecheno, Shorter, Jagger) that may lead to women being harmed physically sexually psychologically and spiritually. Typically, faith traditions moralise against gendered violence yet at the same time, support it through patriarchal interpretations and practices (Beecheno). In some cases, the gendered violence is explicit and made legitimate and seen as a deserving punishment (Gott). In other contexts, violence is concealed



through other practices which may even be deemed kindly (Jagger, Shorter). While religions have been sites of harm, Beecheno notes how this can lead to negativities in secular agency responses to gendered violence, who can assume religions are inherently problematic, without recognising the faith resources that religion can offer survivors. While it is important to call out and specify the negative interactions between religion and gendered violence, we also need to recognise the importance of religion at the level of identity, and how religion can also be a resource in challenging gendered violence.

Chloe Gott's article, 'Productive Bodies, Docile Women and Violence: Exploring "Respectable Work" as Physical Abuse within Ireland's Magdalene Laundries', examines how violence is part of a disciplinary process in an institutional religious context of the Irish Magdalene laundries. In examining the various testimonies emerging from those connected with the laundries – mainly survivors of the brutal regimes, but also others – reveals the violent norms of the organisation, and how the will of the organisation is enacted on the bodies of young women who are forced to conform through disciplining processes. This article identifies violence constructed in the laundries as an inherently good thing, as a productive form of discipline, which moulds the body as morally acceptable and as the central site for penance for perceived previous wrongdoings. Violence in the Magdalene laundries was experienced as normalized, wide-spread and ordinary. Work becomes synonymous with faith and abuse and the outcomes of this combination have been devastating on survivors.

Sharon Jagger's article – 'Mutual Flourishing? Women Priests and Symbolic Violence in the Church of England' – focuses on Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence – violence that is hard to immediately recognise and can often be obscured and unrecognised. This contrasts with the more overt and explicit forms of gendered violence, such as evidenced in Gott's and Beecheno's articles. Jagger examines a group of Anglican women priests in the UK and through interviews and analysis demonstrates how violence can be perpetrated in unseen and seemingly innocuous ways, with what she notes as 'relational warmth'. In her sample of women priests, violence does not typically take physical forms, but is enacted through verbal interactions and discourse and driven by a belief that women cannot legitimately be considered priests, a category of person that is held to be different to the non-ordained. This is often endorsed through kindly-seeming words and support, but the intention is to strip women of their priesthood. Such symbolic violence is poorly recognised and understood in Church and domestic settings and thus makes it difficult to make meaningful interventions. The use of the Duluth Prayer Wheel as a method for bringing attention to the reality and impacts of symbolic violence against women priests is a creative and generative move on

Jagger's part and makes an important contribution to the more subtle types of gendered violence that circulated in faith traditions.

Shorter's article on 'Rethinking Complementarianism: Sydney Anglicans, Orthodoxy and Gendered Inequality' examines the links between complementarian theology and gendered violence. Male headship and authority and wifely submission are valorised in complementarian theology, yet domestic violence is condemned by religious authorities, raising a contradiction in these communities. Shorter addresses the issue as a politico-religious discourse, rather than assessing the theological validity of complementarianism. Drawing on interviews with an evangelical community in Sydney, Shorter interrogates the impact of specific theological ideas related to women's position in complementarian theology and explores the extent to which such ideas tacitly support forms of gendered violence. Shorter argues that complementarianism acts as a discursive process, or lived narrative, which acts to iteratively construct orthodoxic positions and beliefs and ultimately impacts on the gendered identity of Anglican men and women by constructing ways in which speech authorizes inequality and violence.

Finally, in Kim Beecheno's article, 'Conservative Christianity and Intimate Partner Violence in Brazil: Using Feminism to Question Patriarchal Interpretations of Religion', domestic violence is examined in the context of community intervention and how secular agencies help religious women seek out support services. Beecheno offers useful insights regarding best practice when religion is taken into account as a legitimate part of a woman's identity, offering fruitful insights for contexts where secular norms underpin support agencies, and do not accord religion any status (Nason-Clark et al. 2018). However, when religion is taken seriously and intervention and social policy respond carefully, this increases the likelihood of women being able to use their faith as part of a critical intervention and healing practice. Support workers who became more mindful of the benefits a religious identity can offer survivors of abuse as part of the healing process, were able to work with affected women and this generated greater take-up of support services by religious women. Both were able to recognise that it was not religion per se that was the source of violence but rather, a patriarchal interpretation of the bible and gendered relationships. Beecheno suggests that other countries could make good use of this social practice in Brazil, and indeed other women-centred practices such as women-only police stations (Macdowell Santos, 2005).

### *Conclusion*

The importance of analysing the complexities of gendered violence comes through strongly in these four essays. All authors show clearly that violence can be normalised in wider cultures and religious

communities and through discursive embodiment, accepted as ordinary and even essential. The articles also address key questions about where violence is located, and that violence can be misread and misunderstood, especially in contexts where it takes subtle and less overt forms. The articles also raise important questions about the relationship between so-called secular and religious spaces on the issue of violence, and the problems that arise when erroneous assumptions are made about religion, such as the inadequacies of secular agencies in managing religious-based gender abuse. This speaks to broader issues regarding the artificial separation of religious and secular spheres, and a need for a more complex understanding regarding their interrelationship (Scott 2018). All articles emphasise the injurious nature of violence, and its long-lasting impact. Disrupting gendered violence in religious organisations has become crucial to many women who struggle to maintain faith in such cultures, and who can be deeply hurt and traumatised. The need for continuing intervention, inquiry and analysis is as urgent today as ever, and hence the value of the two special issues on this topic. We recognise that while we are capturing some international diversity, all four papers are focused on Christian contexts. The second part of this special issue will address other religious faiths on the issue of gendered violence. Stay tuned.

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