

Church.Power.Abuse.

Sociological Approaches

Udo Kelle, Andreas Schmitz & André Armbruster

Much is known about abuse in religious institutions: We are aware of the details about the extent, duration, procedure, and settings of sexual abuse of minors by clerics and other function holders in religious organizations. We know how the (overwhelmingly male) perpetrators proceeded or still proceed. The mechanisms were uncovered by which they, with the help of other clergy or clerical power elites, managed to abuse minors unchallenged for years or even decades. While we can monitor primarily the sexual abuse of minors, a variety of other forms take place in religious contexts: e.g., emotional and spiritual abuse. Thereby, not only the Roman Catholic Church is affected, but also numerous other religious organizations, institutions, and settings. Overall, it appears that abusive practices occur on a mass scale and in all areas of religious life.

Knowledge about abuse stems especially from lawsuits, investigative journalism, and commission reports, where disciplines like history, theology, psychology, and jurisprudence are in the lead. Nevertheless, an all-encompassing explanation of the abuse complex in organized religion has yet to be found. There are certainly various attempts to explain the phenomenon by drawing on characteristics, or (psychological) features of the perpetrators or to blame cultural phenomena, historical circumstances (such as "the '68 generation") or wrong moral ideas. However, such explanations and approaches, which externalize the causes of sexual abuse to individual perpetrators or to incorrect cultural concepts, cannot satisfy from a sociological perspective, since they ignore structural conditions. The same holds true for accounts which blame the cultural surroundings of church and societal ethics and expectation with regard to sexuality. With the special issue of the *Journal for Religion, Society and Politics*, we want to adopt a decidedly sociological perspective as a starting point: because abusive practices occur in huge numbers, in many regions of the world, in almost all forms of institutionalized religion, and show similar dimensions and patterns, abusive practices can be understood as *recurring, systematic, if not systemic structural moments of institutional and organized religion*. Abuse is not a random accident of religion, but religious structures, church systems and culture(s) are themselves conditions and/or forces that enable abuse and (re-)produce abuse practices.

This in mind, we call for proposals for contributions that, drawing on different theoretical and/or empirical studies, address different practices of abuse in their praxeological, cultural, and institutional, contexts and systematically relate such accounts to the logic of religion. Although research on the abuse complex has yielded some insights, the treatment of the phenomenon under a social science perspective is still in its infancy. We ask for contributions from a broad pluralism of disciplinary viewpoints so that the phenomenon of abuse can be addressed with various aspects and a broad range of questions:

- Sociological and theological aspects on the religious dimension: to what extent do religious ideological concepts (e.g., Christian dogmatics or ethics) contribute to abuse? Do various beliefs and normative concepts prevent the exposure of abuse and thus tend to contribute to its perpetuation? What role do notions of chastity and purity of clerics or laity play as structural conditions? In which ways do conservative and traditional forms of social organization, which still play a crucial role in many religious organizations, encourage various forms of abuse? To what extent does a "clerical culture" hinder an open discussion and treatment of abuse?

- Institutional and organizational aspects: to which extent does church organization, hierarchy, doctrine, and culture foster abusive practices and their treatment? How do institutional and structural characteristics support or impede abuse? Which impact has abuse, on institutional settings, hierarchies, and practices? How does the structure religious organizations contribute to the reproduction and repetition of abuse by encouraging cover-up strategies (e.g., by merely dislocating perpetrators)?
- Power aspects: to what extent does sexual abuse (re)produce more general relations of power and dominance, e.g. between perpetrators and victims, between ministers and laity, but also between representatives of different hierarchical levels? How do power differences contribute to the continuity of abuse practices? In which way does the power and prestige of churches and their representatives influence measures taken by authorities?
- Comparative and historical aspects: in which ways does sexual abuse differ from other types of abuse, such as moral abuse, emotional abuse, or spiritual abuse? Can abusive practices be differentiated according to the denomination or type of organizations in which they occur? Can these differences be described in transnational, regional, and local terms? Is there a postcolonial perspective on sexual abuse? Can historical continuities be identified which explain the extent and manifestation of abuse?
- Aspects of gender, sexuality, and violence: which role do (specifically religious) constructions and perceptions of gender and especially masculinity play in abusive practices? How can conceptions of sexuality contribute to the understanding of abusive practices? Are some forms of sexuality more legitimate than others? How can a sociological perspective on violence and the body, which considers the perspective of victims' suffering of violence, contribute to the understanding of abusive interaction structures and their consequences?
- Methodological aspects: which methodological challenges must be met in accessing the actors' (victims' and/or perpetrators') perspective? How does the fact that access to the field often is regulated (by religious organization themselves), or that research has to rely on archives that are maintained by the perpetrator organization does affect research processes? What are the potentials and limitations of certain methods and their combination?
- Aspects of modern society: in which ways do other realms of society, such as politics and law, have a favorable, enlightening, preventive, etc. effect on abuse in religious organizations? Which effects have scandalization processes which take place in social media play in exposing and classifying sexual abuse? How are different forms of abuse addressed, criticized, scandalized, or even trivialized in church organizations and in public?

The special themed issue "Church.Power.Absuse. Sociological Approaches" will be published in 2025 in the *Journal for Religion, Society and Politics* (<https://www.springer.com/journal/41682>). We request abstracts of about one page in length by **November 30, 2023** to the following addresses: kelle@hsu-hh.de, andreas.schmitz@ovgu.de, and andre.armbruster@uni-due.de. After reviewing the abstracts, we invite the submission of full manuscripts of 60,000 to 80,000 characters by **June 30, 2024**. Submissions will go through a double-blind peer review process; all outcomes of the review are possible: from minor to major revisions to rejection of the manuscript. A call for submission of a full paper does not constitute a promise of publication. We look forward to receiving your contributions!