

## Tragedy and Ethics: Responding to the Crisis of Historic Sexual Abuse

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*Issues of child sexual abuse currently loom large in the life of a number of churches. This article draws on the insights of the late Donald MacKinnon, who viewed tragedy as a vital component of ethical reflection, to explore the human dimensions of a Christian response to abuse in such a way that the needs of survivors are paramount, perpetrators are challenged by the message of God's unconditional love to repentance and transformation, and churches and institutions do not put their corporate needs over those of individuals and families.*

### Introduction

If one issue in particular has shamed the Christian church in the last decade or so, it is the revelation of sexual abuse which has occurred in so many countries and denominations. In Australia, our national news has been dominated by the reporting of historic child sex abuse. A number of Royal Commissions<sup>1</sup> have examined, and continue to examine, allegations of abuse in churches and other institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Australian context, a Royal Commission is a "formal independent public inquiry instigated by a state government or the federal government . . . typically called whenever there is ongoing impropriety, illegal activity or gross administrative incompetence in any area of Australian life." Anthony Sharwood, "Yeah, But What Actually IS a Royal Commission?," news.com.au, November 13, 2012; www.news.

Such abuse is not, sadly, a modern invention, nor is it confined to a few cultures or countries.<sup>2</sup> The immediate concern dates back to the 1980s and the revelation of abuse within the Roman Catholic Church. Since then it has engulfed many Christian denominations and other (non-Christian) faith communities.<sup>3</sup> Further, the ways in which perpetrators of abuse were often protected by institutions has meant that this is a matter of both public and private morality. Such actions highlight a tendency noted by Jon Sobrino: “For some reason it has been possible for Christians, in the name of Christ, to ignore or even contradict fundamental principles and values that were preached and acted upon by Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>4</sup> We need look no further than a straightforward reading of Mark’s Jesus blessing the children he welcomed (9:36–37, 10:13–16) for confirmation of such a verdict,<sup>5</sup> one which becomes even more damning if Jesus’ teaching is seen as both a reinforcement of desirable behaviors regarding children and a rejection of pejorative values and imagery.<sup>6</sup>

Current events thus mark an ethical crisis for many churches: how could this happen when it is clearly contrary to teaching preserved as authoritative in both scripture and tradition? But this is not just an ethical crisis, it is also a tragedy. While ethics can sometimes become a clinical or dispassionate analysis, handled in a detached philosophical manner, tragedy is a reminder that broken humanity lies at the center of actions gone wrong. This shift changes the response to the crisis. The reflections that follow explore what difference a tragic lens makes

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com.au/national/yeah-but-what-actually-is-a-royal-commission/news-story/0127c724e746874398fd1c75225b09ef.

<sup>2</sup> See Beth M. Schwartz-Kenney, Michelle McCauley, Michelle A. Epstein, *Child Abuse: A Global View* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Among others, see Candace R. Benyei, *Understanding Clergy Misconduct in Religious Systems: Scapegoating, Family Secrets, and the Abuse of Power* (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 1998); Robert A. McMackin, Terence M. Keane, and Paul M. Kline, eds., *Understanding the Impact of Clergy Sexual Abuse: Betrayal and Recovery* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1978), xv.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2011), 145–46, 151–152.

<sup>6</sup> James M. M. Francis, *Adults as Children: Images of Childhood in the Ancient World and the New Testament*, Religions and Discourse, vol. 17 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 104–106.

to responses to this crisis. The essay starts with a summary of the issues raised by the crisis, and moves to a description of the value of the tragic lens in considering ethical issues, one which was recognized by the late Donald MacKinnon. These, finally, are applied to a tragic reading of the historic sexual abuse crisis in our own time.

*The Tragedy and Crisis of Historic Sexual Abuse*

In his 2003 book, *God in All Things*, Gerard W. Hughes drew attention to the damage which child abuse scandals were having upon the Roman Catholic Church and their consequences:

It will probably take us decades to unravel the complexities and to understand more clearly the underlying reasons for the crimes, for the nature of the public reaction to them, to learn how to protect children without afflicting them with paranoia, and to know how to act justly and effectively with the offenders so that they do not offend again and are offered hope for the future.<sup>7</sup>

He has been proven right. Many of his sentiments would provoke a near universal agreement, free from controversy. That last clause, “and are offered hope for the future,” might meet with less approval.

A number of factors may intrude at this point. The first is whether there are actions which are beyond forgiveness or punishment, what Arendt has called “radical evil.”<sup>8</sup> Yet Arie Nadler’s summary of this debate would suggest that this is not viable within Judeo-Christian traditions, citing both Desmond Tutu’s and Primo Levi’s rejection of the thesis, and noting the demands for “radical empathy,” “radical forgiveness,” and “radical reconciliation” in response to “radical evil” like the Rwanda genocides.<sup>9</sup> So, the first point is that no perpetrators

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<sup>7</sup> Gerard W. Hughes, *God in All Things* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), 228–231.

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1961); Marguerite La Caze, “Promising and Forgiveness” in *Hannah Arendt: Key Concepts*, ed. Patrick Hayden (New York: Routledge, 2014), 209–222 at 213.

<sup>9</sup> Arie Nadler, “Intergroup Reconciliation: Definitions, Processes, and Future Directions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Intergroup Conflict*, ed. Linda R. Tropp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 291–308 at 303–304.

of abuse are to be viewed as irredeemable on account of the scale of their actions.

Given then that abuse may be addressed by either punishment or forgiveness, the next concerns the shape of the response. Hughes's reflections draw on the particular perspective offered about Christianity's crucified founder by René Girard on the human tendency to scapegoat.<sup>10</sup> Girard's treatment is essentially sociological: societies react to threats by transferring frustrations, anger, and other negative emotions onto a minority in a process he identifies as mimetic violence. This results in a long-practiced tendency to blame minorities for the ills of society, and to pretend that their banishment or exclusion will somehow resolve all problems. Yet scapegoating may also be approached from a psychological perspective.<sup>11</sup> Irrespective of whether the sociological or psychological approach is preferred, the consequences are the same: these actions are ultimately damaging and unproductive, no matter how justified they claim to be, and simply perpetuate destructive behaviors.

In Hughes's analysis, there is a danger that sexual abusers will become the scapegoats of modern society. While in no way condoning their behavior, he notes that scapegoating will lead to a number of consequences: "When the scapegoat mentality takes hold in a country it destroys any sense of proportion, threatens to banish the rule of law, tends to demonise any who are suspected, and frightens people from speaking the truth, lest they are accused of colluding with the accused."<sup>12</sup> Such an impoverishment of society is to be rejected.

The second is based on the wider consideration of what the judicial process is meant to accomplish. It is a debate in which scripture has often departed from the norms of the times. So, what is justice for? A number of possibilities are found. Justice provides a means for revenge.<sup>13</sup> The concept of punishment as retaliation has sometimes been identified as the *lex talionis*, after the Roman *Twelve Tables* (circa 450 BCE).<sup>14</sup> The Jewish scriptures refined a similar

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<sup>10</sup> René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University Press, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> Benyei, *Understanding Clergy Misconduct in Religious Systems*, 85–100.

<sup>12</sup> Hughes, *God in All Things*, 228.

<sup>13</sup> Charles K. Barton, *Getting Even: Revenge as a Form of Justice* (Chicago, Ill.: Open Court, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> *Si membrum rupsit, ni cum eo pacit, talio esto* (if s/he has damaged a limb, let there be retaliation, unless s/he makes a settlement with her/him). Latin text from

principle. The Tanakh's injunction of an "eye for an eye" (Exodus 21:23–24; Deuteronomy 19:19–21) is intended to set limits on the scope of retribution.<sup>15</sup> Bloch goes further, suggesting that there is no evidence in the Bible or Talmud that the *lex talionis* of the Pentateuch was ever implemented literally: punishment was usually commuted to the payment of damages.<sup>16</sup>

The New Testament moves even further away from retribution in Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:38–42), but it does not discuss justice as much in a judicial system as in the context of the eschatological Kingdom.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the New Testament raises significant concerns about practices of exclusion, sometimes identified and practiced as excommunication.

If excommunication is exercised as exclusion from communion, it becomes difficult to warrant its practice on scriptural grounds. Matthew 18:15–17, often used to support such practice, really deals rather with expulsion from the community rather than exclusion from the eucharist.<sup>18</sup> Those excluded are treated as non-believers,<sup>19</sup> and the practice is a temporary measure intended to bring about repentance:<sup>20</sup> a corrective measure. Similarly, 1 Corinthians 5:1–13 is more about expulsion from the community than excommunication from the eucharist.<sup>21</sup> Whether or not the punishment is considered

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E. H. Warmington, *Remains of Old Latin, Volume III: Lucilius, The Twelve Tables*, ed. G. P. Goold, Loeb Classical Library 329 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), 476–477; translation mine.

<sup>15</sup> Richard H. Hiers, *Justice and Compassion in Biblical Law* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 150.

<sup>16</sup> Abraham P. Bloch, *A Book of Jewish Ethical Concepts: Biblical and Postbiblical* (New York: KTAV Publishing, 1984), 67.

<sup>17</sup> James F. Davis, *Lex Talionis in Early Judaism and the Exhortation of Jesus in Matthew 5.38–42*, Library of New Testament Studies (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 167.

<sup>18</sup> Thus, Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 33b (Dallas, Tex.: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 534; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 453.

<sup>19</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2010), 221.

<sup>20</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Volume II, Matthew 8–18*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 785.

<sup>21</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Function of 'Excommunication' in Paul," *Harvard Theological Review* 73.1–2 (1980): 251–263 at 253; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First*

as illness or physical death,<sup>22</sup> a curse,<sup>23</sup> or the excising of one's physical (worldly) nature,<sup>24</sup> the banishment is temporary rather than permanent, designed to save the malefactor from ultimate destruction.<sup>25</sup> First Corinthians 16:22 is irrelevant, as it addresses exclusion at the Parousia, not from the eucharist or the community.<sup>26</sup>

The episode which appears potentially closest to a discussion of excommunication is found in John 13, and it too raises significant questions about the practice. These depend on the meal which sets the scene in John 13, and the particular action of John 13:26, being identified as eucharistic. Such a connection is argued on the grounds of vocabulary: the use of *trōgō* (John 6: 54, 56; 13:18),<sup>27</sup> *Lambanei* (John 13:26, but only in some manuscript traditions)<sup>28</sup> and *didōsin* potentially tie John 13 and 6 together: they are also found in John 21:13.<sup>29</sup> The actions of taking and breaking are common to all three in some versions of the gospel text. If these mark a shared eucharistic identity,<sup>30</sup> we are left with a dominical example of extending communion to the known sinner, exemplified by Judas. This raises the possibility that refusing communion may contradict the very practice of Jesus himself—a further twist on Sobrino's remarks above.

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*Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 415.

<sup>22</sup> Thus Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*, 16–17; David Raymond Smith, 'Hand This Man over to Satan': Curse, Exclusion and Salvation in 1 Corinthians 5, Library of New Testament Studies 386 (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 7–14; Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1976), 97.

<sup>23</sup> Yulin Liu, *Temple Purity in 1–2 Corinthians*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe 343 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 143.

<sup>24</sup> Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 396.

<sup>25</sup> Liu, *Temple Purity in 1–2 Corinthians*, 145; Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 418.

<sup>26</sup> Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1348–1352, esp. 1351.

<sup>27</sup> Francis J. Moloney, *Glory, not Dishonor: Reading John 13–21* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 21.

<sup>28</sup> *Lambanei* is omitted in the SBL text; see Michael W. Holmes, *The Greek New Testament: SBL Edition* (Atlanta: SBL, 2010), 223. It is bracketed [*lambanei kai*] in *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Fergus J. King, *A Guide to St John's Gospel*, International Study Guide 51 (London: SPCK, 2015), 266.

<sup>30</sup> Note the controversy over eucharistic interpretations of John 6, well set out in Paul N. Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1996).

All the texts cited, whether referring to expulsion or excommunication, aim at correction and reform: none suggests a final and irrevocable state of affairs. In John's gospel, it was not too late for even Judas to change course.<sup>31</sup> Paul recommended a disciplinary method better identified as temporary expulsion from the community, aimed ultimately at the saving of the wrongdoer.

All this means that churches need to engage in practices which recognize the severity of the offenses committed, but avoid scapegoating. It would be much easier to operate on a basis of permanent exclusion and isolation; it would also be much more popular, and would certainly resonate with public discourse. Ultimately, though, it would mark a departure from the principles and actions (if the above reading of John 13 is accepted) of Christ as much as the abusive behavior which is so rightly condemned. Christians remaining true to the principle of God's unconditional love and a core set of activities centered on reconciliation need to find a set of mechanisms which, without absolving perpetrators of culpability or the need for restitution, will allow offenders the potential for conversion and transformation by continued access to both word and sacrament. All this needs to be done without provoking risk for others, or offering the potential for re-offending. Any such ministry must avoid, even for the best of intentions, putting any at risk, as well as distancing those who might re-offend from such temptation through laxity or lack of diligence. The church must not provide an environment in which sin may abound.

There is an even more serious consideration which Hughes identifies in his concerns that aversion therapies used in popular practice lock perpetrators into a set behavior and suggest they are beyond the possibility of reform or transformation: "To keep convincing myself that I am an abuser, alcoholic, etc. is itself a form of abuse because it is to deny my true identity and deprives me of all hope."<sup>32</sup> Gerald May shares these concerns, with the further concern that some therapies may indulge bad theology: "If the person is sophisticated in the language of Alcoholics or Narcotics Anonymous, she is likely to try and convince herself that this, finally, is the

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 452–454.

<sup>32</sup> Hughes, *God in All Things*, 230.

rock-bottom surrender that will somehow save her. But the ‘higher power’ to which she is surrendering is not God: it is the addiction itself.”<sup>33</sup>

Additionally, perpetrators may identify themselves as victims. This behavior may be prefaced by some general comments on the behavior of perpetrators in response to what they perceive as threats to themselves. They may fear being viewed as morally deficient and open to exclusion from society, thus forfeiting their needs of belonging and acceptance. They may cope with such threats by a number of strategies, which include distancing themselves from their actions and victims to the point of disengaging from what they have done, and minimizing all of the seriousness, the consequences, and the responsibility for their acts.<sup>34</sup> This can happen when perpetrators themselves have also been victims: a process in which they are commonly thought to “minimize their responsibility.”<sup>35</sup> However, here our concern is that theology and praxis may allow the manipulative a further way of portraying themselves as victims.

This conflation of victims and perpetrators is a reminder that this issue does not involve easy and clear-cut separations and distinctions. A further complication comes from the role taken by the institutions involved. Churches which have contributed to the crisis by attempting to manage it, or by being preoccupied with issues like their reputation or damage control, have often treated the crisis as a reified ethical, social, or management problem. Yet this is a tragedy, and tragedy has humanity—real people and real pain and loss—at its heart, not simply issues, problems, and solutions. A tragic view will differ from an ethical one, even if they, at times, agree on certain points: the tragic viewpoint brings to the fore a different set of concerns, and a different attitude. Given this, it is worth asking what difference a tragic approach might make in shaping a response to issues of abuse.

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<sup>33</sup> Gerald G. May, *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 48. More aggressive responses may be equally useless, serving as “simply another ploy to continue the addiction” (48).

<sup>34</sup> Nadler, “Intergroup Reconciliation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Intergroup Conflict*, 298–299.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Petrunik and Adina Ilea, “Forgotten Victims, Unforgiven Perpetrators,” in *New Approaches to Social Problems Treatment*, ed. Stacy Lee Burns and Mark Peyrot, Research in Social Problems and Public Policy, Volume 17 (Bingley, U.K.: Emerald Group Publishing, 2010), 77–114 at 82.

This idea is not new, and the work of Donald MacKinnon serves as a starting point for such an exploration.

*Ethics, Tragedy, and the Antigone*

That ethics and tragedy are inextricably linked was a theme repeated often by Donald MacKinnon, the highly influential but often underappreciated<sup>36</sup> Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at Cambridge from 1960 until 1978. The themes recur in a number of his writings. They dominate two substantial essays: “Tragedy and Ethics”<sup>37</sup> and “Creon and Antigone,”<sup>38</sup> the latter his lectures on the ethical dilemma posed by the proliferation of nuclear weapons, one of the most significant moral debates of the late twentieth century. Other works include incidental references.<sup>39</sup> Given the fluidity with which ethical debates move, sustained reflection on Greek tragedy and nuclear weapons would appear to have run its course. Nevertheless, MacKinnon’s observations are worth applying to a problem of equal magnitude in our own age: that of child sex abuse and the church.

To modern audiences, the *Antigone* is the last of Sophocles’ Theban plays, following *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. Historically, it was the first of the plays to be written, either in 442 BCE,<sup>40</sup> or 438 BCE,<sup>41</sup> followed by *Oedipus Tyrannus* (430–25 BCE) and then *Oedipus at Colonus* (401 BCE).<sup>42</sup> The play takes up the Theban legends from the point described in Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes*, albeit in a revised form.<sup>43</sup> The play is set after the battle for control of the city. The two sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polyneices, have both died in battle, fighting on opposite sides. As a result, the new ruler of

<sup>36</sup> John McDowell, *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty: A Donald MacKinnon Reader* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), vii–viii.

<sup>37</sup> Donald MacKinnon, *Explorations in Theology 5* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 182–195.

<sup>38</sup> Donald M. MacKinnon, *Creon and Antigone: Ethical Problems of Nuclear Warfare, The Boutwood Lectures for 1981* (London: The Menard Press, 1982).

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, MacKinnon, *Explorations in Theology 5*, 6, 103, 162–63; McDowell, *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, 6, 61, 97–98, 103, 112, 117, 195, 199, 284, 285, 286, 289, 295, 302, 303.

<sup>40</sup> Ruby Blondell, trans., *Sophocles’ Antigone* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Focus Publishing, 2012), 3.

<sup>41</sup> William Blake Tyrrell and Larry J. Bennett, *Recapturing Sophocles’ Antigone* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 4.

<sup>42</sup> Blondell, *Sophocles’ Antigone*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Tyrrell and Bennett, *Recapturing Sophocles’ Antigone*, 1–3.

Thebes, Creon, decrees that Eteocles will be treated as a hero and buried with full state honors. His brother, Polyneices, on the other hand, is treated as a traitor; his body will be left unburied. A political point is being made: the postmortem desecration of Polyneices is *pour encourager les autres*.

However, the neglect of Polyneices' corpse brings pollution and disaster on the city.<sup>44</sup> Antigone (the daughter of Oedipus) returns with her sister, Ismene, to find both their brothers dead. Antigone arranges the burial of Polyneices, breaking Creon's edict, and is imprisoned. Antigone's fiancé, Haemon (also Creon's son), the blind seer Tiresias, and the chorus plead with Creon for her release, unaware that she has taken her own life. Creon eventually agrees to both the burial of Polyneices and to Antigone's release. When Antigone is found dead, both Haemon and his mother (Eurydice—Creon's wife) take their own lives. The play offers a sustained reflection on religious and political values. The drama that plays out raises questions about political power exercised in a vacuum, without wider considerations, presenting the choices to be made on either side as complex, and, ultimately, tragic. Tyrrell and Bennett add an additional layer of meaning to the interpretation of the text by fixing it firmly in the Athens of the mid-fifth century BCE, when the claims of the Athenian state to control the funerals of the war dead marked an infringement of the usual funerary roles of Athenian families and women. Antigone thus becomes a spokesperson for those marginalized by current political practice, an advocate for a practices diminished by the aspirations and agenda of the establishment.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the *Antigone* addresses two concerns: the tension between the religious and political, and between the institution and the family.

MacKinnon's Boutwood Lectures for 1981 were entitled "Creon and Antigone: Ethical Problems for Nuclear Warfare." Despite their title, these lectures contain only two citations of the *Antigone*. The first is a general remark, to the effect that "the conflict of Creon and Antigone is still with us,"<sup>46</sup> a reference to "power realities" which are both "intractable" and "tragic."<sup>47</sup> The second occurs in his final paragraph, and is worth quoting in full:

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<sup>44</sup> Tyrrell and Bennett, *Recapturing Sophocles' Antigone*, 137.

<sup>45</sup> Tyrrell and Bennett, *Recapturing Sophocles' Antigone*, 5–7.

<sup>46</sup> MacKinnon, *Creon and Antigone*, 24.

<sup>47</sup> MacKinnon, *Creon and Antigone*, 24.

Sophocles certainly portrays the woman as the nobler; but the statesman's responsibilities are real, and if we suppose them over-ridden, we must acknowledge they are genuine, and that the cost of over-riding them may in the immediate future require to be paid. There is no escape from risk, and risk must always be taken not in a mood of self-indulgence, but in one of disciplined self-knowledge. There is call here for the exercise of rationality that is aware at once of its authority and of its limitations.<sup>48</sup>

MacKinnon uses the plot of the *Antigone* to highlight the fact that the debate about nuclear disarmament revealed a tension between the political and the religious. This is a theme found not only in his use of tragedy, but in his repeated criticism of Constantinianism.<sup>49</sup> MacKinnon always remained a keen observer of the subtle shifts and tensions between the church and the political, between Creon and Antigone. If the additional significance of context recognized by Tyrrell and Bennett is added, MacKinnon's use of the *Antigone* gains an additional layer of meaning: it speaks directly to a bifurcation of family and state, of religious and political interests. His work is a salutary reminder that any Christian response to an ethical crisis or issue is based on a different foundation from the purely political: Antigone's voice must be heard as much as Creon's, and they will not be one in a chorus.

#### *Antigone and Creon: Responding to the Tragedy of Abuse*

History demands that reflections on good practice cannot be allowed to remain purely theoretical for the present or the future. Right thinking is all well and good, and so are good intentions, but more is needed. The ancient Christian *lex orandi statuat legem credendi* (the law of prayer constitutes the law of belief) has a third element, *lex bene vivendi* or *operandi*. The whole then means: "the law of prayer and right ethics constitute the life of faith," in which all are mutually causative.<sup>50</sup> Orthodoxy has to be made real in the behaviors which are adopted by churches and Christian groups (orthopraxis). The protocols

<sup>48</sup> MacKinnon, *Creon and Antigone*, 27.

<sup>49</sup> McDowell, *Philosophy and the Burden of Theological Honesty*, x.

<sup>50</sup> Fergus J. King, "Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi: Worship and Doctrine in Revelation 4–5," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 67.1 (February 2014): 33–49 at 37–39.

adopted by the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle (New South Wales) in Australia as it seeks to address significant instances of historic child abuse highlight a number of issues:

- The handling of historic abuse within a framework shaped by the gospel mandates;
- The reporting of cases through safe and trustworthy channels;
- Restitution for hurts;
- Healing for victims of abuse;
- Transparency and a firm intention to recognize the potential for, and avoid, conflicts of interest;
- Means for perpetrators to enter into a process through which the true nature of abuse is recognized (which must work in tandem with state and federal law) and conversion is possible;
- Which demands a means for perpetrators to continue to worship and share in the life of the community without license to put others at risk or to re-offend;
- In which the fears of all parties (victims, perpetrators and bystanders) are minimized.<sup>51</sup>

The protocols mark an attempt to give a concrete manifestation of gospel and pastoral principles in the service of God who is always on the side of the innocent and oppressed. These principles demand a duty of care for perpetrators and victims alike, but without denying the reality of risk and its minimization. Such a shift may also represent the voice of Antigone over against Creon, who is often heard asking victims' families if they are satisfied with the sentence delivered to those who have harmed, maimed, or killed their loved ones: the retributive justice sometimes favored by politics, society, and much popular morality. They also reveal points at which the voice of Antigone is distinguished from the voice of Creon. For her, both deceased brothers, the "victim" and the "perpetrator," demand due care: the justice of the gods. However, this shift in emphasis should not be seen as making concessions or as soft, for at its heart lies a gritty reality.

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<sup>51</sup> *The Diocesan Safe Ministry Policy 2013* is available, along with a large number of relevant provincial and diocesan documents, including protocols, in "Exhibits for Case Study 42, August 2016, Newcastle," Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, at [www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/exhibits/2e6839f5-220a-4e3d-b92c-461bbe74ad34/case-study-42,-august-2016,-newcastle](http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/exhibits/2e6839f5-220a-4e3d-b92c-461bbe74ad34/case-study-42,-august-2016,-newcastle).

The approach of Creon might well be identified with alienation and excommunication of perpetrators. It is appealing, because it appears to deliver a suitable level of justice for those who have committed the unspeakable: “tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime,” in recent popular parlance.<sup>52</sup> It makes clear the rejection of abhorrent behavior, and sends all the “right messages.” However, such an approach may be counter-productive, and undermine the very stuff of Christian faith and practice: the core business of reconciliation, repentance, and revealing the true nature of sin and corruption.

Let us imagine a scenario in which a church has “acted tough.” Perpetrators might portray themselves as separated from the love of God by an unforgiving, and by implication, unchristian or ungodly, church establishment, irrespective of the events which have led to such banishment. Now they present themselves as the victims, shorn of any reason to address the behaviors which brought them to this point. They can blame this state of affairs on the action of the church, not their own behavior. The self-absorbed picture of self as victim, a variation of the victim mentality, will expand to push away any ethical implications for the now self-proclaimed victim. Those caught in this kind of behavior will typically feel themselves as powerless compared to others, assume that there is nothing they can do to change the balance of power, and deny responsibility for their own actions.<sup>53</sup> Abusers with a victim mentality, reinforced by excommunication or expulsion from the church, may thus see themselves as powerless and not responsible for their actions. In so thinking, they further justify their inaction in seeking any meaningful expression of reconciliation or repentance.

If churches practice permanent exclusion, they function as the body which ultimately determines what sins might be unforgivable. Whether any evil is unforgivable has already been considered problematic (above). However, it must be recognized that there is reference to unforgivable sin in Hebrews 6:4–8. These verses need

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<sup>52</sup> A phrase used by the British Prime Minister Tony Blair to criticize certain approaches to the maintenance of law and order. Tony Blair, “Leader’s Speech, Brighton 1995,” *British Political Speech*; [www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=201](http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=201).

<sup>53</sup> June Hunt, *How to Rise Above Abuse: Victory for Victims of Five Types of Abuse* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 2010), 218–219.

careful handling. Commentators such as Harold Attridge<sup>54</sup> and David deSilva<sup>55</sup> consider that only one human activity is unforgivable: apostasy. It alone leaves believers condemned, inasmuch as they have separated themselves from Christ, the mediator of salvation. “Being beyond forgiveness” does not depend on some scale of offense, but on the relationship which the believer or the apostate has with Christ. When the church proclaims other evil actions as unforgivable, it adopts the “scale of values” approach, and makes its ethical pronouncements, not the relationship with Christ, the grounds of forgiveness and salvation. When the church acts thus, the excommunicated may then seize the opportunity to deny any role in their condemnation. Why? Because they have already minimized their own responsibility, and can now, in addition, convince themselves that it is the institution, the church, and not their own actions, which has caused their exile. In other words, they can use their exclusion by the institution to present themselves further as victims, not perpetrators. Thus discipline becomes not a means to repentance, but an agency of denial. It is, and this bears repeating, counter-productive.

An inclusive policy, one more akin to Antigone’s duty of care to both brothers (hero *and* villain), which always admits God’s unconditional acceptance, closes down these lines of thought and forces perpetrators to address their own culpability and responsibility. This is a particularly Christian activity given that the work of redemption and reconciliation recognizes that sin must be taken seriously, that culpability must be recognized, and that these are vital prerequisites to healing and transformation, sometimes described as “eternal life.” John’s gospel makes this clear: the gaining of eternal life involves a judgment, *krisis*, a recognition of the need of God made by the believer, and a faith in Christ as the one who offers a means to transcend one’s former, broken existence. It must be stressed that it is believers who judge themselves, and neither God nor the church, against the standard of Christ in the Johannine tradition (John 3:17–20).<sup>56</sup>

So far, the points made appear to refer predominantly to individuals. However, given that Christian soteriology has been held to

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<sup>54</sup> Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1989), 168–69.

<sup>55</sup> David DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews”* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 234–235.

<sup>56</sup> King, *A Guide to St John’s Gospel*, 39.

include individual, social, and indeed cosmic dimensions,<sup>57</sup> it is worth also considering the application of these insights to our society and communities.

A pattern of inclusion offers groups and communities, not just individuals, some hope that there is no inexorable necessity, no grim fatalism, which demands that abuse is inescapable. Equally, society is not indulged to the point where it can absolve itself from the need to make the societal and structural adjustments which would combat abuse. If abuse is not inevitable, societies and communities can and must be shaped to minimize or eliminate the conditions which allow for abusive behavior, not least churches and Christian groups, which are meant to be the visible manifestation of Christ's saving work in action.

A further observation might usefully be made, one more closely linked to the tension between the concerns of institutions and families. It could, in certain circumstances, be possible for the institution in which abuse has taken place to also begin to think of itself as a victim. Indeed, there may even be a measure of truth in this regard. However, any church which begins to consider itself in this way needs to remember that the healing of human survivors is always to take precedence over the predicament of the institution *as an institution*. If care is not taken in this regard, the church may find itself caught in a vicious circle, in which it portrays damage to, say, reputation, as evidence of victimhood. It resembles Creon, concerned with social and political matters, primarily its own business, rather than the stuff of God, or the needs of families. The chief irony is, of course, that it was often those same institutional concerns which formed responses that did not expose and deal swiftly with abuse, but rather condoned and exacerbated it: the dog may return to its own vomit (Proverbs 26:11; 2 Peter 2:22). There is more. Churches, given the fact that they may represent themselves as fictive families,<sup>58</sup> may additionally conflate and validate their institutional concerns with those of nuclear and extended families caught up in abuse, a move which might make them consider the resolution of institutional issues to be on a par with the familial. Like Creon, they risk destroying families because of an

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<sup>57</sup> Robin Ryan, *Jesus and Salvation: Soundings in Christian Tradition and Contemporary Theology* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2015), 193.

<sup>58</sup> A group with an identity founded on a shared worldview or faith rather than genealogy, thus King, *A Guide to St John's Gospel*, 95. For a psychological description, see Benyei, *Understanding Clergy Misconduct in Religious Systems*, 1–19.

obsession with the political. To pile Pelion on Ossa, this may even create situations in which the healing of families who are members of the church may be set against those of the institutional church: a pattern which has, in the past, been observed in the ostracism of families or individuals who have called out instances of abuse by hierarchy and/or laity. This is no vague theoretical concern, but one which, regrettably, is founded on observable data.<sup>59</sup> It must be resisted: the needs of survivors are always paramount. Antigone's focus on the religious and the familial affirms these priorities.

*A Conclusion (both Sophoclean and Christian)*

Sophocles' *Antigone* centers on the burials of two brothers: one (Eteocles) might be deemed a victim, the other (Polyneices) a perpetrator. The play makes explicit the ethical conundrum of dealing with human beings, not abstract entities, in the midst of tragedy. Any human response to tragedy must engage with both: neither is cast aside. However, the ethics of this are tragic in the full sense, and complex.

Tyrrell and Bennett suggested that Sophocles wrote to address a particular problem within the Athens of his day: the usurpation of the family role in burying the dead by the state. In so doing, they identify a state of affairs in which a significant ritual and activity have been hijacked by political and ideological concerns. The dead's primary value, and that of their burial, is used to bolster the myth of the state, which the powers that be wish to promulgate. However, this is done at a human cost: the very hopes, needs, and expectations which a family expect to address in the burial of a loved one.

When child abuse is addressed, an analogous set of circumstances may arise. This is an issue which is of great political and social importance, one which demands the action of the state, the church, and other institutions in addressing a significant problem. Institutions have much invested in addressing the issues of the past, and in ensuring that they do not recur in the future. In so doing, they risk acting like Creon, and making the issue and its ideological and political function and resolution paramount. They may do so by making the redress of their own situation a priority: a process which may degenerate

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<sup>59</sup> For example, Benyei, *Understanding Clergy Misconduct in Religious Systems*, 90–96.

into an ethic which, in the worst-case scenario, is little more than a public relations exercise. Such responses are understandable: a real and genuine set of concerns, as MacKinnon pointed out. But “being understandable” is no grounds for legitimacy. If the concerns of the institution (Creon and the state) predominate, the tragedy of resolving the issue may leave families and individuals (Antigone and her siblings) behind, their personal problems and grief unresolved, as that same institution deals with these issues on its terms. As the *Antigone* sweeps to its tragic *denouement*, actions which reduce people to ciphers in the service of an ideology or institution, no matter how noble or well-intentioned, and decisions made in the institution’s interests that ignore the human dimension rip the very heart out of the societies they purport to redeem and transform, and end in death and loss.

There is a warning here. *Caveat ecclesia*: let the church beware. Does not Christian faith put right at its heart the need for a response to human, not institutional, need (Luke 6:3–4, 6–11; 13:10–18; 14:1–7)?<sup>60</sup> For it is in God becoming human, a kenotic action so central to MacKinnon’s theological vision, that the work of redemption is performed. It is in human responses that the tragedy of abuse finds its best resolution, and these are best expressed by a faithful enacting of the values and practice of the God–Man of Nazareth.

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<sup>60</sup> Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2015), 96–99, 217–20, 225–226.

