

Researchers reveal patterns of sexual abuse in religious settings

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A recent literature review by a University of Alberta cult expert and his former graduate student paints a startling and consistent picture of institutional secrecy and widespread protection of those who abuse

children in religious institutions "in ways that often differ from forms of manipulation in secular settings."

It's the first comprehensive study exposing patterns of sexual [abuse](#) in [religious settings](#).

"A predator may spend weeks, months, even years grooming a child in order to violate them sexually," said Susan Raine, a MacEwan University sociologist and co-author of the study with University of Alberta sociologist Stephen Kent.

Perpetrators are also difficult to identify, the researchers said, because they rarely conform to a single set of personality or other traits.

The findings demonstrate the need to "spend less time focusing on 'stranger danger,' and more time thinking about our immediate community involvement, or extended environment, and the potential there for grooming," said Raine.

Raine and Kent examined the research on abuse in a number of religious denominations around the world to show "how some religious institutions and leadership figures in them can slowly cultivate [children](#) and their caregivers into harmful and illegal sexual activity."

Those institutions include various branches of Christianity as well as cults and sectarian movements including the Children of God, the Branch Davidians, the Fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints as well as a Hindu ashram and the Devadasis.

"Because of religion's institutional standing, religious grooming frequently takes place in a context of unquestioned faith placed in sex offenders by children, parents and staff," they found.

The two researchers began their study after Kent was asked to provide expert testimony for a lawsuit in Vancouver accusing Bollywood choreographer and sect leader Shiamak Davar of sexually abusing two of his dance students in 2015.

Kent realized that although some scholars had written about sexual abuse in religion, "They had not identified the grooming process and the distinctive features of it." After the lawsuit was settled out of court, he approached Raine to take on the project.

"The two of us had worked on projects before (including the successful book *Scientology in Popular Culture*) and I knew that she wrote fluently and quickly," said Kent. "I provided her with initial ideas and suggestions, and she did most of the writing."

The result is "the first of its kind to provide a theoretical framework for analyzing and discussing religiously based child and teen sexual grooming," he said.

One of the best-known cases of such grooming in the Catholic Church was uncovered by the *Boston Globe* in 2002 and dramatized in the 2015 film *Spotlight*. The *Globe* revealed that John J. Geoghan, a former priest, had fondled or raped at least 130 children over three decades in some half-dozen Greater Boston parishes.

Eventually a widespread pattern of abuse in the church was exposed in Europe, Australia, Chile, Canada and the United States.

More shocking than the abuses themselves, said Raine, was the systemic cover-up that reached all the way up to the Vatican.

"And the relocation of priests to other churches, I think that was devastating for Catholics—a major breach of trust," she said.

Abuse of authority

Raine and Kent define sexual grooming as the gradual sexualization of a relationship between a person with religious authority and a child or teen, "beginning with non-sexual touching that progresses over time to sexual contact, whereby the child may not even understand the abusive and improper nature of the behaviour."

Perpetrators—who may include religious and spiritual leaders, volunteers, camp counsellors in religious-based camps, staff in religious schools and others associated with religious communities—prepare the child and significant adults and create the environment for the abuse, said Raine.

In addition to gaining access to a child, they aim to earn trust and compliance while maintaining secrecy to avoid disclosure. Often by the time the abuse actually happens, the child feels they have given consent, said Raine.

"Abusers draw not only on their positions of power and authority as adults, which is potent in and of itself, but also on assertions about God's will—the ultimate unquestionable authority for religious adherents—and a figure that can inspire fear as much as it can awe and love."

When abuse is disclosed, it is often met with skepticism or denial, even by the child's family, she said.

"Because devotion to the institution shapes social identity, especially for more devout individuals, members of a religious community may be entirely suspicious of the victim's claims, favouring instead the religious figure and his or her status and perceived credibility."

In some cases, an entire society may be groomed, said Raine. She points

to Ireland, where "a whole nation exhibited a 'culture of disbelief' towards abuse claims" after widespread revelations of abuse in the 1990s: "Members may have a greater loyalty to the institution than to the abused victim."

In Nigeria, the researchers found that some Pentecostal pastors groomed children under the pretext of freeing them from demonic possession, using "exorcism" as a euphemism for sexual assault. The pastors were protected by "the absolute trust that the community has in them," said Kent and Raine.

Family members without religious authority may also exploit the family's faith in grooming a child, using familiar religious rhetoric and convincing the child that the abuse is perfectly acceptable in the eyes of God, said Raine.

While much of their evidence is disturbing, Raine warns against creating a "moral panic."

"You don't want people to start assuming that every hockey coach, priest, pastor or minister is going to try and groom and assault your child," she said.

"But it's important for people to understand that most [sexual abuse](#) doesn't happen because somebody abducts your [child](#) from a public park. It's usually a family member, extended family member or somebody they know in the community, whether religious or otherwise, who is most often responsible."

More information: Susan Raine et al. The grooming of children for sexual abuse in religious settings: Unique characteristics and select case studies, *Aggression and Violent Behavior* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.avb.2019.08.017](#)

Provided by University of Alberta

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