

Sexual abuse: Faith can silence victims or provide solace

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Childhood sexual abuse victims with a strong religious upbringing often report feeling terrible guilt about their assault, which doesn't surprise Jean-Guy Nadon. A professor of theology and religious sciences at the Université de Montréal, Nadon has conducted dozens of interviews with women who were sexually abused as children and found the impact of religious beliefs can produce varying reactions.

Nadon interviewed one woman, who as a child was physically and mentally abused by her mother, yet followed the 10 Commandments to the letter. That meant she could not rebel because she'd been taught to honour her mother and father. Indeed, as a child, the woman felt she had to forgive her mother's behaviour otherwise she'd go to hell.

Another child, sodomized by her father, also felt she had to forgive him or burn in hell, which her abuser used to his advantage. Another woman, who was raped by a neighbor, was blamed by her mother who claimed the victim provoked the assault.

"A child's God can be kidnapped and exploited by an adult, often by the very adult who taught the child about God in the first place," says Nadon. "It's the victims, not the aggressors, who find themselves silenced and overwhelmed by guilt, pain and isolation."

Kids sometimes deny the existence of a God that doesn't protect children, while others pray their abuse will end and some pray or get through the ordeal. The common thread is that religion is an important resilience factor in abused children. Many kids recite the 21st Psalm, the Lord is my Shepherd: "Yeah though I walk through the shadow of the valley of death, I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me."

Depending on what part of the world they inhabit, Nadon cautions that victims feel differently about

their sexual abuse. In the northern United States, abuse can weaken a victim's faith whereas a southerner can strengthen their belief in God following abuse.

Nadon plans to further investigate how religion affects people. He is currently interviewing victims of post-traumatic events such as rape, life-threatening illnesses, accidents or war. He is collaborating with Denise Couture, a Université de Montréal professor of theology and religious sciences, as well as researchers from the Netherlands, Belgium and South Africa.

Source: University of Montreal

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