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Powerful Perpetrators

Religious leaders and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature

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Powerful Perpetrators is a five-year project (2023-2028) looking at sexual misconduct and abuse perpetrated by professionals, and the regulatory and administrative justice mechanisms used to investigate and sanction their behaviour. The project team are Dr Natasha Mulvihill (principal investigator); Dr Nathan Birdsall; Dr Emma Yapp and Dr Hannah K. Richards. More information is available at: www.powerfulperpetrators.org

Stage 1 of the project (May 2024 to October 2024) involved searching and synthesising the available literature on professional sexual misconduct. This work is collated in the following open access briefings:

- Yapp, E., Birdsall, N., Mulvihill, N., and Richards, H. 2024. *Doctors and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
- Richards, H., Yapp, E., Mulvihill, N., and Birdsall, N. 2024. *The legal profession and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
- Richards, H., Yapp, E., Mulvihill, N., and Birdsall, N. 2024. *The military and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
- Birdsall, N., Mulvihill, N., Richards, H., and Yapp, E. 2024. *The police and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
- Mulvihill, N., Richards, H., Yapp, E., and Birdsall, N. 2024. *Politicians and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
- Mulvihill, N., Richards, H., Yapp, E., and Birdsall, N. 2024. *Religious leaders and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
- Richards, H., Yapp, E., Birdsall, N., and Mulvihill, N., 2024. *Professionals (general) and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.

The briefings and our 'literature summary interactive tool' to compare our findings for each profession is available on our website: www.powerfulperpetrators.org/publications



What is the nature and extent of sexual misconduct and abuse by religious leaders in the UK and internationally?

The academic literature on sexual misconduct by religious leaders is dominated by Christian clergy abuse of children (1). Minimal work refers to sexual misconduct against adults (2,3) or to leaders of established faiths outside Christianity (4) (excluding cults (5) and new spiritual movements (6)). The invocation of spiritual authority to abuse has a distinct and harmful impact for victims (7–10). The extent of religious leader abuse has been measured using population surveys (11,12); religious leader self-report surveys (13–15); treatment programme data (16,17), disciplinary data (18); or local records (15).

What administrative justice mechanisms do religious groups currently have in place to respond to sexual misconduct and abuse by their members?

The weight of literature here relates to the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches. Anglican and Catholic clergy are accountable under their respective bodies of canon law, administered by separate legal systems (19). A range of actions, including no further action, deferral, penance, rebukes/censures, injunction/orders, prohibitions/deprivations are offered (20,21). Religious legal processes do not preclude or substitute secular criminal or civil proceedings (22–25). In the Anglican Church, allegations of misconduct are managed under the 2003 Clergy Discipline Measure (CDM) (21,26–28). The most serious sanction is ‘defrocking’, a lifetime ban on a priest being able to officiate (CDM section 24(1)(a) (28)), although the status of priest is retained. The Bishop has significant decision-making power within the CDM process in how allegations are triaged. Sexual misconduct allegations relating to adults require the President of Tribunals to make an assessment of the victim’s ‘vulnerability’ (21). In the Roman Catholic Church, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) exercises disciplinary responsibility and oversight for canonical crimes and related moral issues. These are managed through a penal process (29). The ultimate sanction for a Catholic priest is laicisation, which means losing all rights of the clerical state but remaining ordained. Guidance issued in 2021 by the Catholic Church in England and Wales makes specific reference to adult victims, and not just adults deemed ‘at risk’ (30).

How do (a) perpetrator characteristics; (b) victim characteristics; and (c) the context of sexual misconduct and abuse, compare across religious leaders?

Sexual offenders who are religious leaders could have similar risk profiles to offenders in the general population (31,32). Pre-seminary sexual or dating experiences may indicate perpetration risk (16,33). Offenders are likely to have served at an above average number of places of worship (14); display particular character traits (14–16); and are commonly termed ‘situational’ offenders (15,34). Work on female perpetrators is required (35). Identified victims in the Catholic Church were disproportionately male and adolescent, reflecting in part the opportunity structures presented by female separation and exclusion. However, recent research recognises victimisation of adult women and girls (7,36–40), including sexual relations leading to pregnancy (41), and within the confessional space (42,43). At all ages, and across faiths, victims describe confusion and a struggle to identify or report abuse (44) since perpetrators commonly inspire reverential fear (45,46), groom their victims over time (32,47,48), and enjoy trust and respect from the family and wider faith community (49).



How do social relations of power operate and intersect with context and opportunity at the (a) individual (b) organisational-professional and (c) socio-cultural level, to account for the perpetration of sexual misconduct and abuse by religious leaders?

Research on religious leader misconduct has often focused on individual characteristics and psychological interventions (17). More analysis is needed at the systemic and institutional level (50–55). Religious leaders are unique in their ability to leverage divine authority and compound sexual misconduct with spiritual abuse (1,56). ‘Clericalism’ describes both the exercise of power by religious leaders, and the instrumental deferral to - and deepening of - that power, by lay members operating in the clerical orbit. Clericalism relates to hierarchicalism (57) and lack of democratic accountability (58). The commission and/or concealment of sexual misconduct have been linked to purity cultures (59), vows of celibacy (60), belief in complementarianism (61) or the fetishisation of suffering or sacrifice (6). Secrecy and minimisation can be enhanced where the faith community is isolated or marginalised, and speaking out risks undermining the group reputation (62–65). The requirement to comply with secular regulations does not necessarily reflect a change in community beliefs (62). Focus on abuse of adult women has increased since #MeToo, #ChurchToo (66,67) and #UsToo (68), but there is a tendency to position adult sexual relationships foremost as ‘affairs’ (2) rather than abuse of power (69). Recent work suggests that religious organisations may need to adopt a more radical understanding of vulnerability, which is not prescribed by legal characteristics, but is a common human condition (53,70).

How effectively do current administrative justice mechanisms (a) sanction past sexual misconduct and abuse and (b) seek to deter future sexual misconduct and abuse?

The volume of sexual misconduct cases reaching formal proceedings in the Anglican and Catholic churches each year is low. In relation to the Anglican Clergy Discipline Measure, some critical commentary focuses on the role of Bishops in the disciplinary process and issues of procedural justice (71–75). In the Catholic Church, the entire tribunal process is subject to secrecy (76), including between parties to the tribunal (77). Victims have often been asked to sign non-disclosure agreements (3). The bishop places papers either relating to cases not actioned or not required for the penal process in the secret archive of the curia (Canon 1719 (20)). No public transparency is required - except in cases involving credible allegations of child sexual abuse - although there are recent efforts at change (58). The position of adult victim-survivors remains unclear (3). The use of civil law (22,78), including mass tort (79), and appeals to other forms of justice (80–85), suggest that victim-survivors believe prevailing tribunal structures are neither sufficiently effective nor deter (79,86,87). Preventive efforts have focused on selection (34,88,89) and training (90) for the religious life, but others argue that ongoing formation post-ordination is required (91), as well as action within faith communities (92–96). There is little evidence of monitoring recidivism, despite evidence that high repeat offenders (31) account for a disproportionate share of abuse overall (97).



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