

Article

# Narrating and Remembrance in the Face of Abuse in the Church

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**Abstract:** Contrary to the priority of protecting the institutional Church and its clergy, prevailing for decades and centuries, today the testimonies of victims of sexual abuse are increasingly being heard. This article focuses on autobiographical accounts of women, published in recent years, who as adults suffered from sexual and spiritual violence within the Catholic Church. It analyses characteristics of spiritual and sexual abuse, identifies specific constellations and a misogynistic theology. Complementary to this, traumatic experiences of flight and expulsion, as described by the theologian Katharina Elliger, are examined. Thus, this article describes the meaning of narrating one's traumatic experiences for the authors themselves and suggests collective remembrance as an appropriate reaction of the Church and the society.

**Keywords:** sexual abuse; spiritual abuse; abuse of adult women within the Catholic Church; trauma; narrating; remembrance; communicative and collective memory; Silesia

## 1. Introduction

“Stories that count” is the leitmotif and creed of the Independent Commission for the Examination of Child Sexual Abuse in Germany, founded in 2016. The stories told by victims are the primary source for understanding the “extent, nature, causes and consequences” of sexual abuse of children and young persons (Unabhängige Kommission 2019a, p. 21; see *Gemeinsame Erklärung* 2020). Every publication of the Independent Commission appears under this title, and the first report on its work during the years 2016–2019 was supplemented by a second volume with testimonies by victims from various contexts (Unabhängige Kommission 2019b; see *Unabhängige Kommission et al.* 2022).

In January 2022, the Commission launched an online portal with stories of people who have experienced sexual violence in families and institutions. The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has also published around 4000 short stories about the fates of victims: “The purpose of the narratives is to give a voice to survivors, inform the community and ultimately help make institutions safer for children.” In Europe, for example, the French CIASE places the testimonies of victims at the centre of its own work: “Libérer la parole, entendre les victimes, recueillir les témoignages est au cœur des missions de la commission” (“Liberating speech, listening to victims, and collecting testimonies is at the heart of the commission’s work”). CIASE also publishes some narratives of victims. Internationally and interdenominationally, such narratives are booming today—after all, they are the only way to know what happened and its consequences, to uncover structural dangers and to acknowledge the injustice empathetically and in solidarity. Those affected give their testimonies in order to clarify and prevent abuse.<sup>1</sup>

In the Roman Catholic Church, the testimonies of victims of sexual abuse are increasingly being heard. This is nothing less than the beginning of a cultural change, because for centuries and decades, until the recent past, the protection of the institution and its clerical personnel was consistently placed before the interests of victims (see *Elliott* 2020; *Langlois* 2020). Moreover, hermeneutical and testimonial injustices (*Fricker* 2007) make it difficult to speak; the well-educated perpetrators who belong to the inner circle were and are more likely to be believed in the same inner circle than those affected.



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The accounts of victims thus represent an epistemological necessity for analysing any form of abuse, since predators are careful not to leave any traces and force their victims to remain silent about the deeds rather effectively. Among those in charge within the Catholic Church, there often has been or still exists complicity with the perpetrators: files were destroyed in accordance with canon law (cf. can. 489 § 2 CIC) or protocols were not even drawn up, in violation of canon law, or were not passed on to the competent higher authorities.

Abuse leaves profound and lifelong scars on the victim, whose mental and sexual integrity has been infamously violated. The fact that abuse is fraught with shame and guilt makes it even more difficult to talk about what had happened; victims telling their stories often struggle for every single word. Yet every single survivor's story broadens the understanding of the traumatising experience of abuse and prepares the ground for further stories. From a scientific perspective, it makes sense to consider various reports and narratives on abuse and to put them in context with those files that are now being evaluated and at least partially published in the course of the expert reports on abuse in individual countries or dioceses. Even if the aspect of a teleological self-construction within autobiographical accounts must always be taken into account, the results are very clear: abuse is frighteningly stereotypical.

This paper stresses the significance of narrating, both for the victims themselves as well as for the Church as a community of memory and narration. On the one hand, the analysis is based on narratives by women who experienced spiritual and sexual abuse as adults—published in the volume *“Erzählen als Widerstand”* (Haslbeck et al. 2020). On the other hand, the article refers to publications by the Catholic theologian Katharina Elliger (1929–2019), who reflected on her memories of flight and expulsion from Silesia and their contemporary impact in two books (Elliger 2004, 2015). Elliger's account is chosen from many reports on flight and expulsion from Eastern Europe because she tells of various episodes that have a clear connection to a Catholic community of memory. The common thread of these texts is the narration of traumatic experiences and the ethical appeal to the reception within a specific community.

## 2. Rendering the Unbelievable Believable

“I noticed that all those who had stayed here told their stories, but there was silence about ‘the horrific’. Perhaps, like me, they were still afraid of a dam bursting that could tear away the survival constructions. I always had to be careful that my memories did not resurface too intensely, so that I could keep control over them. I still felt I had to justify myself for what I had experienced. How could I make the unbelievable believable? Wouldn't my experiences be immediately put into perspective? I still felt as if my fate was worth nothing. In any case, the fear of hurting reactions and the incomprehension of others was still so great that I too preferred to say nothing. For if the injustice suffered was not seen and acknowledged, it often hit me even harder than the injustice itself.” (Elliger 2004, p. 212)

The theologian Katharina Elliger, born in 1929 in Bauerwitz in Upper Silesia, describes how she reflected on the occasion of a trip to her homeland Upper Silesia in 1999 on her own remembrance (and its repression) of flight, deportation and expulsion, which she had experienced as a young woman from 1944 onwards. In 2004 she published the impressive autobiographical volume *“Und tief in der Seele das Ferne. Die Geschichte einer Vertreibung aus Schlesien”* (“And Deep in the Soul the Faraway. The Story of an Expulsion from Silesia”). The first, event-historical narrative strand spans from “everyday life as a child” during the war to the “time afterwards.” A second narrative sequence is devoted to “two journeys to Silesia,” which she undertook in 1987—abandoned after a few days—and in 1999. For a long time, Elliger had “blocked out Silesia out from her memory” (Elliger 2004, p. 201) and avoided contact with expelled persons, had disposed of material objects of remembrance and concealed her past because she had already experienced immediately after the war that

her speaking provoked incomprehension, misunderstanding or accusations of lying. It was only some 40 years after the traumatic events, at the age of almost 60, that she consciously reintegrated Silesia into her identity: “In 1986 [ . . . ] I broke the spell and for the first time declared without necessity on the cover of a book that I came from Silesia. This meant a lot of courage, but now I was free enough to stand by my origins” (Elliger 2004, p. 201).

The passage cited above belongs to the narration of the 1999 trip and Elliger’s associated reflection on individual and collective memory. On this occasion, Elliger stayed several nights with sisters from Silesian-Polish congregations who had been subjected to inconceivable suffering at the end of the war. Her hosts recounted these events meticulously, sometimes with precise dates, but they could not talk about “the horrific:” the abuses, rapes resulting in death, and murders, mostly committed by Russian soldiers. The fear of intrusion and loss of control was too great. “All the women and girls around her had been raped,” Sister Josefa told her (Elliger 2004, p. 210s). Yet Sister Josefa’s personal fate remains hidden in the general narrative. Rape is the shame-ridden taboo within trauma.

In the Federal Republic of Germany, the basic data on forced migration from the East were well known. Nevertheless, the individual fates of expelled refugees, just as those of Holocaust survivors, had no place in the communicative and collective memory of the German society until the 1980s (see Kuropka 2017). According to Kien Nghi Ha, this “consensual silence” of society is a “dominant articulation of power” and prevents individual fate from being given meaning (Ha 2006). The “unbelievable” remains misunderstood and unbelievable because a social and intellectual resonance space is missing.

Those who tell their story, construct an identity and claim meaning for their own experiences. Telling one’s traumatic story is a way of regaining agency, and at the same time of making oneself vulnerable once more: the narrators depend on being believed; they hope for resonance and for belonging to a community with their respective concrete stories. Those who remain silent, as Elliger did for a long time, also construct an identity—dominated by the fear of hurtful reactions that reinforce the injustice suffered a long time ago.

Katharina Elliger’s reflections coincide, often even down to the choice of words, with those found in the volume “Erzählen als Widerstand” (“Narrating as Resistance. Reports on spiritual and sexual abuse of adult women in the Catholic Church,” Haslbeck et al. 2020). A total of 23 women write about spiritual abuse, sexual abuse and abuse of power that they themselves suffered as students, as parish members or pastoral workers, as family women or as members of a religious order. After years and more often after decades, they break the spell and report what happened to them, some for the first time.

Several authors share with the readers their reflections on why they are now speaking about the long-hidden. By narrating the hurtful events, they integrate this part of their personal story—in the double sense of integrating a traumatic experience into their own biography and interpreting their own biography: “To tell what I have experienced helps me to solve my confusion [ . . . ]. I begin to trust my own feelings again instead of believing the interpretations by the men of the Church. By telling my story, my experiences become a real and living part of my life” (Althaus, pseudonym, in: Haslbeck et al. 2020, p. 40). The authors break away from the manipulative interpretation of their lives by the perpetrators, which are to be found in every single contribution within this book; there is not a single text in which sexual abuse is not linked to spiritual abuse. Additionally, the authors work out a new freedom. Katharina Hoff, for example, writes about her motivation to narrate that for her this creates the possibility “to accept these terrible experiences [ . . . ] as part of my life and to identify with the young woman I was at that time. [ . . . ] It seems equally important to me to distance myself all the more clearly from what happened to me and to no longer allow it to have power over me. [ . . . ] I am accompanied by the words of Jesus: ‘The truth will set you free.’ (Jn 8:32)” (Hoff, pseudonym, in: Haslbeck et al. 2020, p. 107). As for Elliger, so for the authors of “Erzählen als Widerstand,” freedom is at the same time the precondition and the result of telling one’s story, and being “free” is often an integral part of the authors’ self-image.

### 3. Realms of Memory and the Hope for Resonance

“I went back to our cemetery [ . . . ] To the left of the entrance, the Russians shot by the German escort soldiers on the Death March from Auschwitz had been buried in a mass grave. Nothing, no trace of them anymore. [ . . . ] Back in Bauerwitz I finally wanted to see the church, but it was locked. The priest still lives in the house of the choir rector. He finally let himself be persuaded to unlock the church for us. [ . . . ] When I asked the priest—I tried in Latin because of the language difficulties—if I could see the church book with my baptismal register, he replied that church books have only existed since 1946. His clear lack of interest annoyed me. What I did find, however, to my delight, was a memorial plaque in honour of our prelate who had baptised me.” (Elliger 2004, pp. 220, 228s)

Unsurprisingly, the cemetery and church in Bauerwitz are significant and overlapping “sites of memory” (*lieux de mémoires*, see Nora 1984) for Katharina Elliger. Elliger’s commemoration in the cemetery is solidary and concrete; she remembers the Russian prisoners murdered on the Death March from Auschwitz. This is compassion according to the understanding of Johann Baptist Metz, the recognition of the concrete other and the injustice he has suffered—an injustice that continues when the traces of his suffering are destroyed (Metz 2006; Haker 2017). Just like the mass grave from the last year of the war, the old church books are missing. The parish priest’s terse statement that they were only available from 1946 reminds Elliger, without her having to say it at this point, of the reorganisation of the Catholic Church in the Oder-Neisse areas, which the Polish Cardinal Hlond had ruthlessly enforced from 1945 onwards by unlawfully forcing German officials out of their functions and replacing them with Polish administrators. With his information and demonstrative lack of interest, the priest not only denies Silesian Catholicism as such a significance worth remembering, but also Elliger’s traumatic loss of her homeland. Elliger, on the other hand, had hoped for a response to her history in this place: a recognition of the injustice that had happened to her and a recognition of her ideational right to a homeland and roots. Neither the pastor nor Elliger herself would have denied that the church in Bauerwitz is a site of memory for expulsion and the loss of homeland in multiple and transnational respects—for the Silesian expellees; for the Silesian Catholics who remained in Poland and who had to accept the ban on their mother tongue in 1945, including the practice of religion; for the new inhabitants of Bauerwitz who had resettled from eastern Poland and for whom the church perhaps became the most important place of refuge. Conflicting communities of memory refer to this place, the ambiguity of which can only be adequately responded to through remembrance and compassion for the concrete suffering and injustice.

The victims of sexual abuse still have to reckon with the fact that there are no “church records” for the deeds, but all the more strategies to ward off the stories of survivors. The strategies of the perpetrators and the defence mechanisms of the environment correspond to a large extent: denial (“it never happened”), minimisation, doubts about the credibility of the victim, victim-blaming, solidarity with the perpetrator (“such a good father,” “such a good sister”), denial of responsibility (“the hand of evil”) or denial of relevance (see Kühner 2007). When the victims tell their stories, they make themselves vulnerable anew. The female abuse commissioner of a male religious order, e.g., told Ellen Adler “that abuse of adult women could not exist.” She “must also understand the religious order; they are like a family and protect each other” (Adler, pseudonym, in: Haslbeck et al. 2020, p. 31s). She is indifferent to Ellen Adler’s individual fate, while implicitly demanding understanding for the cover-up by the community. The victims remain “the others” and are often implicitly thought of as not belonging to the Church. Frequently the victims are met with disinterest, which hurts them anew, silences them and isolates them: “I simply could not believe that a member of an order could so shamefully abuse the enormous trust I had placed in him and be so cruel to me. So I fell silent again. This also applied later to the behaviour of his confreres. I could not believe that one could lie so flatly and that they did not care at all that a fellow brother had destroyed a human life. [ . . . ] Through all this,

I lost my faith in God. [ . . . ] For me, that also means no longer having a foundation for my life" (Eiche, pseudonym, in: [Haslbeck et al. 2020](#), p. 63).

Like many victims, the two women quoted have sought a response where they have been harmed, but the behaviour of the religious communities is defensive. Ellen Adler's accusation is a priori dismissed because the abuse commissioner has no categories for dealing with the abuse against adult women. Adler's allegation is seen as implausible, reinforced by the piquant reasoning that the accused "is not attracted to women" (Adler, pseudonym, in: [Haslbeck et al. 2020](#), p. 31). Her narrative is not meant to gain any meaning for the community; resonance and compassion are excluded from the outset. In dealing with the abuse suffered, the women are thus just as isolated as in the original abuse situation itself; they once more experience an asymmetry of power as well as depending on the community's reaction. The former nun Momo Eiche describes how the abuse shattered her basic convictions ("shattered assumptions" are a well-known consequence of trauma).<sup>2</sup> In religious contexts, these acts not only—following a classic definition of psychotraumatology—permanently shake "self-understanding and understanding of the world," but also fatally affect faith and trust in God. If spiritual abuse is a strategy for initiating sexual abuse, then the traumatic event is not only a "man-made disaster," but also, as I would like to call it, a "God-made disaster." Thus, the perpetrator also assured Momo Eiche: "This is quite pure, quite clean. God wants to help you with it, but no one can know. This remains our secret" (Eiche, pseudonym, in: [Haslbeck et al. 2020](#), p. 59).

Trauma is always a loss of belonging. Elliger and the authors of "Erzählen als Widerstand" show how this belonging is at risk when they tell their stories. This belonging could at least partially be regained by a compassionate surrounding, willing to listen to the stories of survivors and to make their suffering part of the communicative and collective memory.

#### 4. Acknowledging the Injustice Done

"According to Hans the Poles had the right to bring their culture with them and live according to their ideas, because they now owned the country. Somehow Hans was right, and yet I suddenly had the impression that he understood the Poles better than me. [ . . . ] I don't have Hans' neutral perspective. [ . . . ] Sometimes I wished for someone to confirm that everything has really taken place and to acknowledge how bad it has been. Instead, these endless attempts to make myself understood to other people and yet ultimately being alone with it." ([Elliger 2004](#), p. 231)

Past injustice cannot be undone and it is difficult to properly communicate it. Katharina Elliger naturally recognises the right of the Poles to the territories east of the Oder-Neisse line, which had been confirmed as the state border by West Germany and Poland in 1970 and finally by the Two Plus Four treaties in 1990. What she hopes for is not a neutral perspective but one of solidarity—an acknowledgement of the terrible events. Instead, she repeatedly experiences that the burden of making herself understood is placed on her and that these attempts at communication continue to isolate her.

In "Erzählen als Widerstand," Susanne Gerlass describes similar oppressive situations when she tries to have her experience of sexual abuse examined. She sees herself confronted with a Church that she compares to a "doorless and windowless fortress" (Gerlass, pseudonym, in: [Haslbeck et al. 2020](#), p. 87s). In the unequal struggle between institution and victim, her perspective cannot penetrate the walls of this fortress. The representatives of the institution entrench themselves behind church walls and use eloquent images for this: "waves of news about abuse" or "waves of indignation, anger and bitterness" crash against the thick walls of the "church fortress" ([Zollner 2022](#), p. 43s). The victims, such as Susanne Gerlass, do not find the hoped-for "fair and sensitive treatment," or "good and empathetic treatment" (Gerlass, pseudonym, in: [Haslbeck et al. 2020](#), p. 88).

All research agrees that the recognition of the injustice as injustice, both by one's close environment and by society (see [Stahl 2019](#)), is constitutive for overcoming trauma. Judith Herman is convinced that victims of sexual violence need to share their traumatic



experience with others in order to regain trust in the world—and thus their belonging to a community. This can only be achieved if communities and society acknowledge the traumatic event and take action—an action that also includes the integration of the repelled trauma into the community’s history (Herman 1992, pp. 51–73).

Maybe the most comprehensive way of action and social recognition in the face of trauma is remembering the injustice done, that is, integrating the repelled trauma into the community’s history and thus mirroring at a societal level what individuals do when coming to terms with their trauma. This will go beyond the trauma work of professional therapists. Since memory is always transmitted within a community and formed by consensus, it establishes social belonging. Uncovering and coming to terms with abuse necessarily leads to the question of what role individuals played in the events: Were they perpetrators, victims, bystanders? Victims who break the silence always shake the self-perception of a group and disturb existing social connections, because the identity is also formed in listening or not to such stories. Narratives produce competing communities of memory—in families and organisations, in congregations and in communities, in the Catholic Church as a whole. Many faithful may remember, e.g., positive experiences with a priest who was exceptionally committed to youth work or with a charismatic religious sister. The new, dark narratives do not fit into these memories. For Christian communities or the Church, it cannot be a solution to give in to the temptation of collective amnesia. Not only would it blind them to future abuse, but the price would be paid by the once more isolated victims. Part of the credibility of the Church is to publicly acknowledge the injustice done and the credibility of those who have been wronged. As with the case of Katharina Elliger, this will not undo the injustice done, but it will enable the victims to find a different place within the community.

##### **5. “Hermeneutical Injustice” to Adult Victims of Sexual and Spiritual Abuse**

In one respect, narratives of traumatic events in the context of forced migration differ significantly from reports of sexual abuse; even if the individual tragedies were faded out, the forced migration of millions of Germans from the East took place under the eyes of the world public and was part of the collective knowledge in the Federal Republic of Germany and the GDR. This is not the case with sexual abuse, which occurs in secrecy and is tabooed both by the perpetrators and society or Church. “Who would have believed me?” is a question that victims ask in unison. If the victims are adult women, this question is even more pressing. Some doubt that sexual abuse of adults can exist at all, others insinuate that the women concerned could have said no. Too often, the environment or those responsible have no understanding of the psychodynamics, constellations and characteristics of the abuse of adult persons. In the following, a definition will therefore be proposed in order to prevent hermeneutical injustice. According to Miranda Fricker, this injustice, like testimonial injustice, is not intentional but structural: individuals have less chance of adequately expressing their own experiences and consequently of being believed if there is a hermeneutical lacuna with regard to their experiences (see Fricker 2007, pp. 147–52). Fricker illustrates this with the concept of sexual harassment, which was formed in the 1970s and enabled women to make their experiences intelligible. Hermeneutical injustice reproduces on the linguistic level the discrimination experienced.

To apply this concept of hermeneutical injustice to the topic of spiritual and sexual abuse, the term “spiritual abuse,” which has been used in the Anglo-Saxon world since the 1990s (see Oakley and Humphreys 2019), was not widely received in the German-speaking world until much later. In Germany, with its still-denominational publishing landscape, it was initially in evangelical and Protestant-oriented publishing houses where corresponding publications appeared (see Wilbertz 2006; Tempelmann 2007). In the Roman Catholic Church, it is thanks to Doris Wagner’s publication of 2019 that the term “spiritual abuse” is present and has become an interpretative resource for the victims—due to the heuristic quality of the term (Wagner 2019; see Kerstner et al. 2016; Timmerevers and Arnold 2020). Essentially all publications on spiritual abuse work with narrative examples, because the

conceptualisation is based on experience. Already here, an essential difference between narratives from the Protestant churches and those from a Catholic context should be hinted at: Catholic examples are often more concrete because the Roman Catholic Church is larger and thus actors are less easy to identify (or, if the perpetrators have already been sentenced, may be identified).

“Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church” has so far been a powerful frame, which makes one think primarily of boys and male adolescents as victims and at the same time of male perpetrators. In fact, unlike in all other contexts, around two-thirds of the victims within the Catholic Church worldwide are male. Girls and, even more so, adult women, on the other hand, have long been considered neither as victims nor as perpetrators. In addition, while with children and adolescents the criterion of age is sufficient to clearly define sexual acts as abuse, with adult victims a qualification of the acts, constellations and contexts is necessary to distinguish consensual from abusive interactions. Victims will only be believed if there is at least a basic understanding that spiritual and sexual abuse of adults does exist and which characteristics of the offence are to be assumed. A new conceptualisation and definition are therefore a matter of “hermeneutical justice” for adult victims. Two considerations will be outlined in the following—a description of criteria for when to speak of sexual and spiritual abuse of adults, and the constellations in which this abuse takes place.

### 5.1. *Sexual and Spiritual Abuse of Adults—Terminology*

The 23 reports in “Erzählen als Widerstand” can serve as a basis for a grounded theory of the phenomena of spiritual and sexual abuse. Sexual abuse occurs when perpetrators act against the sexual self-determination or integrity and against the will of the person concerned (non-consensual)—when they use physical, psychological or emotional violence and exploit their position of power and authority. Analogously, spiritual abuse is acting against the spiritual self-determination and the will of the persons concerned, involving violence and coercion and taking advantage of positions of power and authority. In “Erzählen als Widerstand,” perpetrators have, for example, forbidden specific devotional practices (against spiritual self-determination), encouraged the accompanied female to make life decisions such as ending an engagement and joining a community (against their actual will), forbidden the free choice of confessor or forced them to celebrate the Eucharist in a confined space on the morning after the rape (violence and coercion) and, as superiors, undermined the separation of forum internum and forum externum (a position of power and authority).

### 5.2. *Constellations*

A common thread running through the accounts in “Erzählen als Widerstand” is that abuse happens where needs and distress or longing are greatest. The mourning for a loved one, the exhaustion of a doctor after two years of the COVID-19 pandemic or an unhappy marriage make one just as vulnerable as the longing to realise one’s life’s dream, for example, by applying for a professorship, the longing for spiritual experience or a life in a religious community. Religious contexts differ from other contexts only insofar as specific “promises of healing” are effective in each case. This reflection represents a paradigm shift from many legal texts and ecclesiastical norms that take an essentialist approach, trying to identify vulnerable persons. My argument is that in specific biographical constellations, each persona can be vulnerable. Vulnerability thus is considered not as a deficit, but as a form of affectability, which may be perceived as threatening (e.g., hunger or illness) or as a resource (e.g., love, the experience of resonance) (see Bieler 2017; Rosa 2016). For the identification of sexual abuse in particular, it can therefore be decisive to look not only at the above-mentioned definitions but also at specific constellations of offences.

*Initial constellations in cases of continued abuse:* Sexual abuse is present when the beginnings of a sexual “relationship” are characterised by asymmetries in power, e.g., in professional contexts, but also in spiritual guidance. A previously good cooperation or relationship of trust between spiritual companion and accompanied person always becomes

abusive through sexual interaction. Initial constellations can also be characterised by a particular biographical vulnerability of the person concerned, as is the case, for example, with grief, loneliness, exhaustion or in the phase of entering a religious order or seminary. In these constellations, as in psychotherapy, the responsibility for sexual abstinence lies always with superiors, supervisors or accompanying persons.

*One-time abuse:* When women were violated once, this usually occurred in specific pastoral situations such as confession, bridal exams or retreats. It may be assumed that the acts were carried out by multiple-perpetrators.

*Spiritual abuse in connection with sexual abuse:* It is a specific characteristic of sexual abuse in the Church that spiritual abuse serves as a grooming strategy and reinforces the asymmetries between perpetrator and victim. Whenever spiritual justifications are supposed to legitimise sexual interactions, sexual abuse is to be assumed in principle—the spiritual manipulation is only expedient because the acts are directed against the sexual self-determination and the will of the persons concerned. While it has become self-evident today to speak of spiritual abuse as a grooming strategy in religious contexts, the reports of adult victims show a further point: spiritual abuse is furthermore on the one hand a performative strategy, for example when a perpetrator codes the sexual interaction as “praying together,” and on the other hand a coping strategy, when the victim later receives absolution in confession or is asked to pray (see [Pesneau 2020](#)).

### 5.3. The Theology of Abuse

The reports in “Erzählen als Widerstand” show a further point: the spiritual or theological justifications differ depending on the constellations. In the case of vocational abuse or guidance abuse, to put it mildly, it is especially the love of God or Jesus Christ, the will of God and the obedience owed to God to which perpetrators manipulatively refer and which naturally create a resonance in the victims who are longing for a deeper relationship with God. Often enough, the perpetrators first diagnose a deficit in order to then declare the abuse as a therapeutic, healing or liberating means. “The novice master said that [ . . . ] I could not yet really recognise what gift God gives us with human closeness. [ . . . ] I learned a lot about obedience and the will of God, which had to be done instead of my will” (Ellen Adler, pseudonym, in: [Haslbeck et al. 2020](#), p. 30). One person concerned is deluding herself about the “game of sexualised closeness in the context of spiritual guidance:” “God delights in people who risk love. [ . . . ] I tell myself that the physical closeness of this man has to do with the healing and liberating love of Jesus Christ for me. I create a spiritual superstructure to explain it all; and he allows this explanation, never contradicts it” (Edith Schwarzländer, pseudonym, in: [Haslbeck et al. 2020](#), p. 169).

Where women, on the other hand, are the one-time victims of verbal or physical sexual violence, the perpetrators always refer to a misogynistic theological gender anthropology that devalues female sexuality or limits it to its reproductive function. The fact that these views were also partly culturally sanctioned does not make anything better. Characteristic places of offences are bridal examinations or marriage preparation, sermons for married women, confessions and retreats: The wife must “be obedient to her husband [ . . . ] if he wants something from his wife,” Barbara Müller learnt at her bridal examination in 1910. She gave birth to 16 children, whereby the midwife decided three times during the birth for the life of the mother and against that of the child. After the Second World War, a missionary’s sermon (re-)traumatises the over-60-year-old Barbara Müller. He takes advantage of the spatial staging and thunders from the pulpit over the heads of his female listeners, all married and mothers: “Please, what would it have been if the mother had died in childbirth? ( . . . ) That wouldn’t have ruined the world either!” (Katharina Aufroth, pseudonym, in: [Haslbeck et al. 2020](#), p. 45).

Assaultive confessional dialogues are a further occasion when women are marginalized and reduced to the duty to (frequently) give birth. Priests acted without any knowledge of the personal circumstances of the women’s lives. Lisa Schäfer recounts an episode from the communicative memory of her family: when asked in confession, her mother



answered that she had one child. The Father reacted “excitedly:” “You must have more children! There should at least be another one on the way!” (Lisa Schäfer, pseudonym, in: [Haslbeck et al. 2020](#), p. 161). Similar confessional dialogues, oscillating between pastoral power and voyeurism, took place countless times up to the 1960s and even afterwards; the confessors as potential victims of encroaching enquiries were, as it were, “interchangeable.” Pope Francis has rightly denounced the exclusive moral fixation on the sixth commandment in confession as a dimension of clericalism (see [Pope Francis 2019](#)).

The authors of “Erzählen als Widerstand” not only report verbal sexual assaults, but also several brutal rapes—perpetrated during retreats or marriage preparation. With each account, the reader is haunted by the depressing suspicion that there could be other victims of the same perpetrator. Theresia Kiebler was on a retreat “when the priest and his sister came into the room. I had to lie down on the bed because they wanted to cast out this devil in me.” The sister cheered the priest on as he perpetrated the rape—“Each time he kept going. Then they said a prayer, gave me a penance and disappeared in a flash” (Elisabeth Hägele, pseudonym, in: [Haslbeck et al. 2020](#), p. 99). Saskia Lang is raped after her confession during marriage preparation. She had already been abused by a priest as a young woman and had come into contact with “patriarchal patterns of interpretation” of female sexuality: “Very early on in my life I have learned that the Church sees women as the source of sin. Again and again I was examined by a priest to find out where exactly this source was located. The priest used his penis as an object of examination and for my purification, because as a woman ‘I needed that’” (Saskia Lang, pseudonym, in: [Haslbeck et al. 2020](#), p. 116s). These internalised patriarchal patterns of interpretation weaken Saskia Lang’s defence in the context of her marriage preparation, and it is fatal that perpetrators can rely precisely on the effectiveness of these misogynistic patterns. Apart from the last-mentioned argument, the woman as the source of sin (see Sirach 25:24; 1 Timothy 2:14), perpetrators usually find their justifications and practices beyond doctrinal or university theology as well as beyond canonical, moral and pastoral norms. They can nevertheless frighteningly easily perpetuate and instrumentalise a fundamentally misogynist theological tradition for the manifestation of power, the sexual exploitation of women and the cover up. An “unholy theology” or “dangerous theologies” legitimise the abuse of power and the abuse of conscience, often by recourse to biblical texts; they create an asymmetry of authority between clergy and laity, and between men and women; they disguise power and call it service (see [Reisinger 2021](#); [Striet and Werden 2019](#)).

As a misogynistic theology, the tabooing of sexuality favours abuse as well. The authors in “Erzählen als Widerstand” write and speak—not unlike the women who experienced sexualised violence in the context of flight and expulsion—only in allusions or in a distant, matter-of-fact manner about “the horrific.” In conversations, however, individual authors mentioned humiliating details of the sexual abuse that go far beyond the ideas evoked by the written contributions. The victims themselves suspect that their own inability to speak about sexuality first prevented them from warding off the act and saying no, and then prevented them from reporting the shameful assault or revealing its worst details. Church socialisation, which emphasised purity and chastity and declared everything a “grave sin” when it came to the sixth commandment, also played a part in this. Talking about sexuality—paradoxically only outside the confessional and instructions by priests—had the reputation of being unchaste. Even the call to chastity was a classic double bind; only those who knew what was to be avoided could have an idea of the concept of chastity—and necessarily had also developed an idea of the concept of unchastity. One could only know what chastity meant when one had already “sinned in thought.”

## 6. Narrating

In the wake of the #MeToo movement that emerged in 2017, numerous other narrative contexts emerged in which predominantly women reported sexual violence—also in religious contexts. Under #SilenceIsNotSpiritual and #ChurchToo, numerous women from Southern Baptist Convention congregations who had suffered repeated domestic violence

raised their voices. When the women approached the pastors of their congregations in order to seek counselling, the pastors recommended that they continue to endure the abuse and remain in their marriages—referring to Ephesians 5:22–25. In France, numerous autobiographical works by former members of religious communities have been published in recent years and are regularly presented on the homepage of the Association d'aide aux victimes des dérives de mouvements religieux en Europe et à leurs familles (Association for the support of victims of deviant religious movements in Europe and for their families) ([www.avrf.fr](http://www.avrf.fr), accessed on 25 February 2022). Currently, there is undoubtedly a kairos for the public reception of such narratives. Through hashtags, websites, publications or public hearings, new communities of narrating are emerging today. They connect individual biographies, because “two or three witnesses” increase the likelihood that the victims will be believed and that investigations will be initiated. These narrative contexts also show that the abuse always follows specific cultural and denominational enabling logics. This is why an analysis of the systemic factors within a specific denomination is so indispensable.

## 7. Remembrance

Victims who speak about their experiences have the right to be listened to. Of course, like every person, they also have the right not to tell their story or to decide when to tell it and who should listen to it. These reports will necessarily lead to the conviction that victims are not an identifiable group alongside or beyond “the Church,” but are members of the Church in the same way as all the faithful. How can a Church that includes victims and persons who have not been victimized, those in charge and perpetrators—to name only a few possible categories—respond appropriately to the narratives of the victims?

Victims who tell their stories question authority, knowledge and interpretive competences within the Church (see [Sander 2021](#)). By breaking their silence, they abandon the role assigned to them by the perpetrator, which was then consolidated by the cover-up of those in charge. These former “experts” have now become listeners and learners. Those in charge and theologians are confronted with a new, biographical knowledge that for a long time had no actual relevance in the theological system. Centre and periphery are measured anew. The wounded body of victims of sexual abuse (and of other victims of violence) becomes the unbendable locus theologicus (see [Fuchs 2015](#), p. 70). A theology considering the narratives of victims is challenged to reformulate not only ecclesiology and the theology of ministry, but also the hermeneutics of the Bible.

How can a church respond appropriately to the narratives of victims of abuse? Today, the fact that sexual abuse happened in the midst of the Church is now part of the communicative and collective knowledge and memory of the Church and of society. This memory is more often than not an unwanted memory and does not only provoke different and vehement forms of defence, but often also divides communities and parishes. However, the Church can also perceive itself, in concrete congregations, communities and dioceses, as a community of remembrance and intentionally create resonance spaces for “stories that count.” Remembering is then action; when the Church faces up to what has happened, comes to an understanding about its relevance as a community of solidarity in remembrance and bears witness to it, it will constitute its identity on the basis of “stories that count.” This remembrance is action because it names the abuse and identifies the injustice as such. It may thus reconnect victims with the Church and with society. This remembrance could be the beginning of a fundamental change.

## 8. Conclusions—Encounter in Dobischau

“I wanted to go on to Dobischau. That’s where we had driven the cows before Maria’s father took us home and saved us from deportation. [ . . . ] Suddenly, already at the end of the village, the view to the right widened and an unusually large estate spread out in front of us. That was it. Here the hundreds of cows had been standing with a few female herders and the armed soldiers. [ . . . ] Hans listened attentively to my story—scarse words, measured against my agitated

feelings. He said nothing—what could he say? He could not take anything away from the force of these sudden memories. I had to endure them alone—but he was there.” (Elliger 2004, p. 223s)

Katharina Elliger is uncontrollably assailed by memories of a traumatic event that she can only describe in scant words. Readers learn that she and her friend Maria were picked up by a Pole in their hometown of Bauerwitz and had to drive a herd of cows from there to Dobischau, seven kilometres away, together with other captured women. On a farm, the two girls were saved from deportation by Maria’s father. The memories seem hardly communicable; Katharina Elliger has to “bear them alone” and at the same time is grateful for Hans’ silent presence. He cannot do more for her; that is all it takes.

The mysteries of this episode are only solved in another volume published by Katharina Elliger in 2015: “Eingraviert. Reflektierte Erinnerungen an Flucht und Vertreibung aus Schlesien” (“Engraved. Reflected Memories of Flight and Expulsion from Silesia”). In this book she writes about another trip to Silesia in 2006, combined with memories of her homeland and of the events at the end of the war. Again she is drawn to the estate in Dobrosławitz, which is now referred to by the Polish name—“one of my darkest places of memory” (Elliger 2015, p. 16s). In Dobrosławitz, her companion Reinhard is interested in the events at the end of the war: “I couldn’t explain it to him. He had never heard anything like it” (Elliger 2015, p. 18). “As if from nowhere,” a woman approaches the travellers in this moment. The conversation between Elliger and this woman eventually reveals that this woman suffered the fate Elliger was spared; together with about twenty other women, she had to herd the cows from Dobischau to Russia, lived in a camp, did forced labour and was only released years later. She was one of only two women who survived the deportation and returned to Silesia.

Like the reports of victims of sexual abuse, Katharina Elliger’s texts are written against her own silencing. Her words shall conclude this article:

“I stared at her and could no longer move. I would have been there too . . . Suddenly the woman turned around and ran away. As she did so, she said: ‘This is a miracle, this is a miracle!—No one believed me!’

I could well understand the woman, because it had been the same for me. Ever since . . . ever since the class had laughed and the teacher had said: ‘Imagination is also a talent’, after I had told about the Death March as a war experience, ever since then I had fallen silent. [ . . . ] From then on I told nothing more. But later I began to write.” (Elliger 2015, pp. 18s, 26).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/narratives>; <https://www.ciase.fr/mission-de-la-commission/>; <https://www.ciase.fr/auditions-de-victimes/>. Grassroot projects are, e.g., the website “Everyone’s invited” against “rape culture” <https://www.everyonesinvited.uk/>; the interdenominational project “Our stories untold,” which is partly related to Mennonite contexts in the US and Canada (<http://www.ourstoriesuntold.com/>) or a padlet initiated by the feminist theological group “tras las huellas de Sophía:” “Convocatoria: Violencias que padecen las mujeres dentro de la Iglesia católica” in occasion of 25 November 2021 (all websites accessed on 25 February 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the classical definition of trauma by Fischer and Riedesser as “ein vitales Diskrepanzerlebnis zwischen bedrohlichen Situationsfaktoren und den individuellen Bewältigungsmöglichkeiten, das mit Gefühlen von Hilflosigkeit und schutzloser Preisgabe einhergeht und so eine dauerhafte Erschütterung von Selbst- und Weltverständnis bewirkt” (“A vital discrepancy experience between threatening situational factors and individual coping possibilities, which is accompanied by feelings of

helplessness and defenceless abandonment, thus causing a long-lasting shattering of the understanding of the self and of the world") (Fischer and Riedesser 2020, p. 88).

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