

Soul Betrayal

Sexual abuse by spiritual leaders
violates trust, devastates lives, and tears communities apart.
No denomination or tradition is immune.

BY Anne A. Simpkinson

Common Boundary

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In the early 1980s, Jeanne Miller was a typical suburban mom. She did community work, served as PTA president, and helped produce plays in her school district just outside Chicago. She was also a devout Catholic. "My mother died when I was 14, and I went to boarding school," she recalls. "For a critical time in my life, the Church -- the nuns -- raised me and was my family."

This sense of family began to disintegrate in 1982 when another mother confided that one of the parish priests had, during a swim at a nearby lake, tried to strip off her son's bathing trunks when he was in the water. Thinking the accusation unbelievable, Miller initially proceeded, she admits, "to disprove what this woman had said." But instead of being reassured when she called the head of religious education at the parish, she was told that the church had a file of complaints against the priest. When she contacted the archdiocese, she was rebuffed by a chancery official, who told her that her motherly instincts were working overtime. She could not prove her allegations, he said; nothing was going to be done.

"I can't even describe how devastated, angry, and hurt [I felt]," says Miller, who ultimately discovered that the priest had provided alcohol and marijuana to the 13- and 14-year-olds he took with him to a lake house each Tuesday on his day off, let them drive a boat and his car, lied to parents -- and tried to fondle her own 14-year-old son. Miller contacted police and filed a lawsuit, mainly to force the church to deal with the priest's behavior.

"We didn't want him removed. We just said, 'Do something, find out what is wrong here, provide some counseling. Care about us.'" Instead, the church's law firm began fighting the lawsuit. Miller's legal bills grew steadily until she could no longer afford to continue the battle. She agreed to a small financial settlement -- \$15,000 -- which didn't begin to cover the \$35,000 legal bill.

"We were a Yankee Doodle Dandy family," Miller says. "We believed if you were good and gave to others, others would give back to you. We never expected the Church to come down on us like that."

Miller is not alone in the shock, betrayal, anger, and grief she experienced. One of the first to bring a lawsuit against the Catholic Church and a leading figure in the abuse-survivor self-help movement, Miller has helped bring awareness to the issue of abuse by spiritual authorities. The problem, however, is vast. For example:

- In July 1994, two lawsuits were filed against Swami Rama, the spiritual leader of the Himalayan International Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy in Honesdale,

Pennsylvania. The civil suits followed decades of reports of sexual improprieties, including a 1990 magazine article that detailed instances of sexual misconduct and several individuals' efforts to alert Himalayan officials to the abuses.

- In October 1994, Yogi Amrit Desai, spiritual director and founder of the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Lenox, Massachusetts, resigned after admitting to inappropriate sexual contact with three women. At the time, he told senior Kripalu officials that there had been no other instances of sexual misdeeds. Eight months later, two more women came forward, and the then 62-year-old spiritual teacher admitted that he had had sexual contact with them and one other woman.
- In July 1995, Harry Budd Miles, a 65-year-old retired Methodist minister, was sentenced to five months in jail after pleading guilty to charges of child abuse and perverted practice involving a Boy Scout in the 1970s. According to court documents, the Maryland minister had engaged the boy in kissing, fellatio, and masturbation in his church office, the basement of his home, and his summer house over a five-year period.
- In December 1995, what is thought to be the first lawsuit against a Buddhist teacher was settled through a mediation process. The civil suit, filed initially in November 1994, against best-selling author and Tibetan lama Sogyal Rinpoche alleged that over a period of 19 years he had induced female students "to have sexual intercourse with him . . . by preying upon their vulnerability and belief that they could only achieve enlightenment by serving the sexual and other needs of Sogyal, their enlightened master." In addition to intentional infliction of emotional distress and breach of fiduciary duty, the complaint included a count of assault and battery.
- In April 1996, 59-year-old Episcopal Bishop Edward C. Chalfant began a one-year disciplinary leave of absence after admitting to an extramarital affair with an unmarried woman. According to diocesan spokesperson Mary Lou Lavalley, following that announcement additional people came forward. Based on information provided by them and upon further consideration, the diocese's standing committee and the national church's Presiding Bishop Edmond L. Browning recommended that Chalfant resign, which he did in May, ending his 10-year tenure as Bishop of Maine.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, a rash of news articles detailing accusations and lawsuits against Catholic priests for molesting youngsters -- generally teenage boys -- unleashed a flood of revelations concerning sexual misconduct not only by Catholic priests but by spiritual authorities in virtually every religion. Regularly since then, reports of years-old as well as current sexual improprieties have surfaced, forcing religious organizations and churches to create codes of ethics, procedures for handling allegations, guidelines to deal with victims, and educational programs for clergy and spiritual teachers.

Hardly a month goes by without news of a priest, rabbi, minister, roshi, or swami being disciplined for, resigning because of, or charged with sexual misdeeds. Still, data that could precisely measure the prevalence of sexual abuse by spiritual authorities is difficult to come by. What research exists focuses solely on Christian denominations and is either years old or statistically "soft." For example, a nine-year-old survey of evangelical ministers conducted by the research department of *Christianity Today* magazine and published in the 1988 *Leadership Journal* found that 12 percent of clergy surveyed admitted to having sexual intercourse with someone other than a spouse; 23 percent stated that they had been "sexually inappropriate" with someone other than their spouse. A 1991 national survey of mainly

Protestant pastors by a group at the Center for Ethics and Social Policy, Graduate Theological Union, in Berkeley, California -- described by its researchers as "small and not scientifically controlled" -- uncovered similar findings: About 10 percent of those surveyed had been sexually involved with a parishioner. Another study published in the winter 1993 *Journal of Pastoral Care* found that only 6.1 percent of Southern Baptist pastor respondents admitted to having sexual contact with a person either currently or formerly affiliated with their church. In that same survey, however, 70 percent of respondents said they knew of pastors who had had sexual contact with a congregant.

A.W. Richard Sipe, a former Roman Catholic priest and current Baltimore, Maryland, psychotherapist, suggests that nearly 50 percent of Catholic priests break their vow of celibacy by engaging in some form of sexual activity. In his 1995 book, *Sex, Priests, and Power*, he estimates that 6 percent of priests have sexual contact with youngsters -- 2 percent with children under 10 years and 4 percent with adolescents. But, he writes, "sexual abuse of minors is only part of the problem. Four times as many priests involve themselves sexually with adult women, and twice the number of priests involve themselves with adult men."

Looking at the situation from another angle, the United Methodist Church sponsored a 1990 study that examined sexual harassment -- unwanted behavior ranging from suggestive looks and unsolicited touching to attempted or actual assault and rape -- within its ranks. Of the clergywomen surveyed, 41.8 percent reported unwanted sexual behavior by a colleague or pastor; 17 percent of laywomen said that their own pastors had harassed them.

Nevertheless, many researchers and professionals in the field are wary of citing statistics. According to Roman Paur, executive director of the Interfaith Sexual Trauma Institute in Collegeville, Minnesota, statistics regarding clergy sexual misconduct are "fundamentally guesses" because there is no hard research to back up the numbers. Father Stephen J. Rossetti, vice president and chief operating officer of St. Luke Institute in Silver Spring, Maryland, for example, says that while he respects his colleague's work, he is not confident of the source of Sipe's figures. Yet interviews with clergy, victims, and other professionals offer clinical and anecdotal evidence that challenge several popular perceptions related to clergy sexual misconduct:

- *That most sex-abuse cases involving priests are pedophilic.* In fact, only about one-third of priests who sexually abuse children are pedophiles (that is, they molest a prepubescent child). The rest sexually abuse adolescents, generally boys. The precise clinical term for their behavior is ephebophilia. Although few would dispute the fact that sexual violations against youngsters of any age are detestable, the distinction has important clinical implications related to prognosis and treatment. The term "pedophile priest" is an unfortunately memorable but often inaccurate appellation.
- *That Catholic priests become sexually involved with adolescent boys, whereas all other religious authorities become involved with adult women.* Stephen Rossetti says he's seen enough cases of Protestant clergy abusing minors and Catholic clergy abusing women to believe that it happens both ways. He uses the generally accepted estimate of 2 to 7 percent when speaking of Catholic priests who molest minors, and he points out that this is the same percentage as in the general population. That fact carries no comfort for survivors such as David Clohessy, a St. Louis political and public-relations consultant and national director of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests (SNAP). "It doesn't matter whether just as many

priests [abuse] as plumbers do," he says. "You can't take solace in that."

- *That clergy misconduct involves only heterosexual men abusing women and children.* According to social worker Melissa Steinmetz of the Holy Cross Counseling Group in South Bend, Indiana, sex abuse is not a males-only transgression. Because the feminist movement was largely responsible for awareness of sexual abuse, the original focus was solely on male perpetrators. But, says Steinmetz, experience has shown that some women, too, are guilty of abuse, especially of preadolescent and adolescent boys. "Probably there will always be more male sex offenders," says Steinmetz, but she notes that keeping the focus exclusively on male perpetrators does a disservice to the adolescent male victims of female offenders.

Pat Liberty, an American Baptist minister, also reports that she is beginning to see some grassroots organizations springing up for survivors of abuse by women religious and to hear about complaints against lesbian clergy. But regarding the latter, she says, "Gay and lesbian folk are not going to come forward to tell their story. They know that they are not going to get a fair hearing, because the Church will get lost in the gay and lesbian stuff rather than dealing with the power abuses and the other things that are at stake."

Despite the lack of reliable figures and the misconceptions, most professionals agree that the problem is far-reaching not only in Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish congregations but in Buddhist sanghas and Hindu ashrams as well. Abuse by spiritual leaders is nondenominational, and the dynamics between clergy and parishioners, between gurus and devotees, between spiritual teachers and students, bear striking resemblances to one another. From profiles of the perpetrators and victims to the impact on the spiritual communities and their ways of dealing with the situation, clergy sexual malfeasance is an ecumenical reality, one that has probably been with us as long as civilization and one that is not about to go away.

Through time immemorial, human beings have sought protection, salvation, and solace from deities -- from Shiva and Shakti, from Jesus and Jehovah, from Aphrodite and Zeus. For nearly as long as we have been petitioning and praising the gods, we have identified in our tribal ranks those who seem particularly attuned to or knowledgeable about guiding us in our search.

Anson Shupe, a sociology professor at Indiana University/Purdue University, reasons in his book *In the Name of All That's Holy* that if the priesthood emerged as a profession during the transition from a hunting-and-gathering to an agricultural society, then the ancestor of the priest is the shaman. Because Shupe believes that the shamanic craft is not without a certain amount of manipulation and sleight-of-hand, he theorizes that "clergy malfeasance, or something we moderns could recognize as such, is probably as old as practiced religion itself."

What is new, however, is the media coverage of abuse by spiritual authorities. In the not-too-distant past, a kind of embargo existed against publicizing what might at the time have been considered the "sexual shenanigans" of those in positions of leadership. Some offices carried such respect and weight that the persons occupying them were granted immunity from the scrutiny of their private lives. Sex scandals were seen as reflecting poorly on hallowed institutions -- the presidency in the case of John F. Kennedy's affairs, or the Catholic Church in the case of priests who might have been caught in flagrante delicto. Incidents were winked away or dealt with quietly.

Recalls Philip Jenkins, professor of history and religious studies at Penn State University and author of

Pedophiles and Priests: "I had a police friend in New York who would -- pardon the expression -- talk about all the times he had 'cut loose a faggot brother,' by which he meant he had arrested a priest or brother for a homosexual act and had let him go with a warning." For decades, it was impossible to write about church scandals due to publishers' fears of losing advertising dollars or of being boycotted. "Think what that must have done to people in the priesthood and in the seminaries," says Jenkins. "For a tiny minority who did have tendencies to any kind of sexual misconduct, it must have given them a sense of invulnerability."

That shield of immunity was shattered in the mid-1980s with the Gilbert Gauthé case. Gauthé was the pastor of St. John's Parish in Henry, Louisiana. According to journalist Jason Berry, who broke the story in a local weekly newspaper and who detailed Catholic priests' abuse of children in articles and a book, *Lead Us Not into Temptation*, church officials were aware of Gauthé's sexual propensities as early as 1974. Almost 10 years passed, however, before he was finally relieved of his priestly duties. Soon thereafter, in October 1984, Gauthé was indicted on charges relating to sexual abuse of minors and child pornography; a year later, the judge in his case agreed to a plea bargain. Gauthé pleaded guilty to 33 charges and was sentenced to 20 years without parole. He also lost a subsequent civil suit, which awarded \$1.25 million to a boy who claimed to have been molested and the boy's parents.

Since that time, gallons of printer's ink have splashed details of cases across the pages of newspapers and magazines. According to Marie Fortune, founder and executive director of the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence in Seattle, Washington, the prevalence of sexual misdeeds by those in spiritual authority is due to the fact that most organized religious groups -- both traditional and nontraditional -- are "fundamentally patriarchal in their history and contemporary in expression and practice." In her new book, *Love Does No Harm*, the United Church of Christ minister says that this paradigm, which is sometimes seen as "normative, even ordained by God," supports and reinforces a dominance/submission model -- with men dominant and women submissive. This power imbalance is then combined with a cultural assumption of male sexual access to women and children. The result: sexual abuse in epidemic proportions.

Shupe offers a different explanation of the problem: "The sociological reality is that all religions are hierarchies of social status and power." This power, he says, is undergirded by the "loyalty and respect of rank-and-file believers who are taught or encouraged to expect that their leaders possess in large measure some special discernment or spiritual insight and have benevolent, ethical treatment of believers always uppermost in their mind." It is this inherent structure of "trusted hierarchies," Shupe explains, that offers ample opportunities for abuse.

Spiritual authorities -- whether rabbis or roshis, priests or pastoral counselors, ministers or swamis -- all hold a special position in their spiritual community. Zen Buddhists, for example, bow to their teacher as a sign of respect. Some Hindu devotees stand as their guru enters the room and wait until she takes her place at the front of the room, often on a flower-bedecked dais or elaborate throne-like chair, before settling in for satsang (a spiritual gathering). Catholics are taught that a priest is "called" by God to his vocation. One California woman who was abused by a priest owns a missal, a gift for her First Communion. In it, a section reads: "My child: Someone has said it is a sign of salvation to have a great love for Priests. Why is this so? Because the Priest takes the place of our Blessed Lord on earth. . . . Jesus loved you so much. He wanted to be always near you. He wants to do many things for you. He does them all through His Priest."

While Catholics are taught that priests are representatives of Jesus on earth, devotees are often led to believe that their guru is a god, a perfected being, or Realized Self. In his 1971 book, *Guru*, Swami Muktananda declares: "The Guru is an actual embodiment of the Absolute. Truly speaking, he is himself the Supreme Being." The word "guru," derived from Sanskrit, means "one who brings light out of darkness." Generally, the term is translated as "teacher." Many religious traditions -- including Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam -- use the teacher-student relationship as a vehicle through which to impart spiritual knowledge and experience.

Speaking on an episode of the PBS series *Searching for God in America*, Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr of George Washington University argued strongly for having a spiritual teacher. Practices such as meditation, invocation, and concentration require the guidance of someone who has experience in them, he explained. But Nasr also cautioned against choosing a teacher too lightly; potential students need to exercise "a sense of discernment," he said.

Many believe that Americans sorely lack this quality. Our cultural conditioning encourages a fiercely independent, anti-authority stance, but the shadow of that self-sufficient lone ranger is a gullible idealist wearing rose-colored blinders. Yvonne Rand, a Buddhist teacher in the San Francisco Bay area, says that this tendency to "give ourselves away" is the source of enormous difficulty in the American Buddhist community -- so much so that the Dalai Lama, the Nobel Prize-winning leader of the Tibetan people, is said to be "particularly worried" and "deeply concerned" about the issue. He advises students to get close to the teacher, "spy" on him or her, watching carefully for at least three years to see if the person's teachings are congruent with how he or she behaves.

This advice can also apply to seeking a church. While there are numerous variables that go into finding a good fit, it is often the personality of the pastor or spiritual teacher that attracts parishioners and disciples. One personality trait to be wary of, experts warn, is charisma. Writing in his latest book, *Feet of Clay: Saints, Sinners, and Madmen: A Study of Gurus*, British psychiatrist Anthony Storr compares the original Greek meaning of "charisma" -- "gift of grace" -- with sociologist Max Webber's use of the term as "a special magical quality of personality by virtue of which the individual possessing it was set apart from ordinary men and women and treated as if endowed with supernatural or superhuman powers." In the former, the pastor's power is derived from a spiritual source; in the latter, his power comes solely from the force of his personality.

Charisma can be evident in the popular pastor whose dynamic sermons and impeccable people skills fill the pews and church coffers every week as well as in the guru whose mere presence induces altered states of consciousness. The problem comes, however, in mistaking a spiritual leader's persona and talents for holiness. This dilemma has been particularly troublesome in some Buddhist groups and Hindu yoga communities where religious practices -- meditation, yoga exercises, extended periods of prayer, chanting, and even silence -- can induce trance-like states of consciousness in which participants are highly suggestible and thus vulnerable. Furthermore, because of Westerners' inexperience with the mystical side of religion, they often become overly impressed by siddhis (psychic powers) and equate them with sainthood.

Biofeedback researcher and pioneer Elmer Green, formerly of the Menninger Foundation, part of the well-known midwestern psychiatric research and treatment center, has been involved for decades in investigating the mind's ability to control bodily functions, emotions, and consciousness. He has conducted many experiments on psychically gifted individuals, Indian yogis, and a Native American

medicine woman. In his estimation, paranormal abilities have nothing to do with spiritual development. For example, in the early 1970s Green conducted experiments on Swami Rama of the Himalayan Institute. Green found that the Indian swami was able to produce, among other things, an atrial flutter at will (a condition in which the heart rate flutters at four or five times its natural rate but doesn't pump blood), create a difference in temperature between the left and right sides of the palm of his hand, go into a sleep brain pattern while staying conscious and able to report what was being said in the room, and give indications of psychokinetic abilities. The swami's abilities, however, seem to have been matched by the size of his ego. In fact, Green recalls Swami Rama saying, "The greatest problem a person can have is ego. And nobody knows that better than I." Says the professionally active, 78-year-old Green: "There's a Hindu adage: 'Go through the garden, but do not eat the fruit.' Swami Rama enjoyed the fruit."

Some of that forbidden fruit was sex with female devotees. According to a 1987 dissertation, a 1990 *Yoga Journal* article, and court documents related to two lawsuits filed against him, Swami Rama apparently chose to sexually exploit a continuous stream of female followers beginning almost as soon as he arrived in the United States.

Accusations of Swami Rama's sexual liaisons with female followers swirled around his community for years. In 1974, four Minneapolis yoga students sent a letter to their teacher, a Swami Rama devotee, accusing the swami of sexual misconduct, falsification of his background, and financial improprieties. In the summer of 1975, a small group of disaffected students tried to alert disciples to these issues by setting up a "Truth Booth" at the entrance to Carleton College, where Swami Rama's organization was running a summer yoga retreat. In the early 1980s allegations again surfaced, and in 1990 *Yoga Journal* published an article that detailed instances of sexual abuse by the swami. Finally, in July 1994 two civil lawsuits against Swami Rama, the Himalayan Institute, and one current and two former institute officials were filed. Testimony given in sworn depositions taken last year indicates that one of the defendants, Rudolph Ballentine, M.D. -- a member of the institute's board of directors in the 1970s and institute president from 1987 to 1993 -- received verbal reports and letters referring to instances of sexual relations and sexual harassment between the swami and female disciples, including his personal assistants, for years. In case after case, Ballentine discounted the allegations on the basis of the swami's denials and Ballentine's own judgments about the character and motivations of those reporting the abuse.

Since the suit -- which is still pending -- was filed, Swami Rama has left the country and has not returned. Says one former devotee: "I think he intentionally misrepresented himself. He played the game very, very carefully." Sadly she concludes, "Instead of being a real guru, which is the light that dispels darkness, he was a maya [illusion] maker."

It may be tempting to point a finger at a particular group of perpetrators and say, "It's all their fault. If we could only round them up, maybe even jail them, we could eradicate abuse." In reality, this is neither a wise nor a feasible course of action. The reason abuse has persisted for so long and cuts across denominational lines is because the dynamics underlying it are universal -- varying only in the degree to which we are aware of them and in our ability to deal with them.

One of these dynamics is transference. The concept, which originated with Freud, refers to the process by which we transfer past feelings onto individuals in the present for the purpose of reliving and resolving painful experiences. Transference does not allow you to see the person as he or she is; rather, you see that individual through a screen of projections.

Father Stephen Rossetti explains that authority figures such as clergy are often figures of transference,

and as a Catholic priest he experiences it every day. Simply walking down the street, "half the people love and a few people hate me, and they don't even know me," he says. "They don't know Steve Rossetti."

Virginia Wink Hilton, a Costa Mesa, California, psychotherapist, agrees. In her opinion, a person who idealizes the minister, priest, or spiritual teacher or who has erotic feelings for him is not really seeing the clergyperson. The feelings are not for the minister but come out of unconscious material. If a clergyperson doesn't understand this, Hilton says, "it puts him in enormous jeopardy."

Hilton compares the transference that psychotherapists experience to that which a minister might encounter in his parish. Transference in a therapy setting is fairly clear and well-defined, she says: Psychotherapists meet with clients an hour a week, at the same time, in the same location. Ministers and priests, on the other hand, are "weaving in and out of the lives of parishioners all the time." The situation becomes complicated because of the play of both parties' unconscious dynamics and unmet needs roiling below the surface of their social personas.

For example, people may desperately crave a relationship with someone who is smarter, kinder, more spiritual, and more compassionate than they feel they are because they believe that association will quell their anxieties and afford them a measure of security in a seemingly unpredictable and dangerous world. They want heroes and saints to inspire, soothe, love them. Says one experienced spiritual seeker: "I've worked with enough New Age heroes in enough groups to know they aren't heroes; they aren't saints. But people don't want to see that. People want a hero. They want somebody who is a thousand times better than they are. They want a Pope."

In this way, disciples and parishioners can transform spiritual authorities into omniscient experts, the expectations of whom far exceed the leader's knowledge or experience. The basic function of a religious authority is spiritual direction, assisting individuals in forging a relationship with the Divine. But often there are pressures for them to do and be more. Yvonne Rand explains that students of Buddhism might go to their Zen teacher and ask him about their marriage, how to raise their children, what to do about their jobs. "Pretty soon the teacher starts to think, 'Oh, I really know a lot about everything.' Pretty soon the student starts projecting all-knowingness on the teacher, and the relationship gets way out of balance."

This human propensity to desire a savior, an unconditionally loving parent, a hero, or a saint can devolve into a dark pursuit with painful consequences. For example, if yoga devotees believe that the guru knows best, they may gradually allow the guru to guide not only their spiritual process but every aspect of their lives. This unbounded devotion can feed the guru's sense of power and can fuel a sense of grandiosity or invincibility. The guru may begin to sound like the Pope delivering opinions *ex cathedra*. He may also begin to feel that rules that apply to others don't apply to him. As Anthony Storr writes, "It is intoxicating to be adored, and it becomes increasingly difficult for the guru not to concur with the beliefs of his disciples." Furthermore, Storr reasons, "if a man comes to believe that he has special insights, and that he has been selected by God to pass on these insights to others, he is likely to conclude that he has special privileges." Often those privileges are sexual.

Some female parishioners and devotees all too willingly cooperate because they have turned the priest, minister, or guru into an object of adoration, flirtation, and sexual desire. One meditation teacher says that women approached him even in the middle of the night on retreat. Another male ashramite recalls one young woman who later accused her spiritual teacher of sexual misconduct: "She was a sexy young

thing, for sure. I remember sitting in the room and thinking that. But she wasn't giving me any attention." Her attention was riveted on the guru.

Despite these sexual come-ons, Peter Rutter, a Jungian-oriented San Francisco psychiatrist, argues that it is up to the spiritual leader to maintain the proper sexual boundaries. The task is difficult, admits Rutter, who has written two books on the subject of boundary violations, but he suggests that the ultimate protection against abuse is the leader's understanding of the harm he can inflict and his empathy with the woman.

Not all spiritual authorities have that capacity. Sometimes what psychologists call a personality disorder compels a person to exploit, manipulate, and hurt those in their spiritual care. While publicly charming, ebullient, devoted, hard-working, and inspiring, this leader proves himself cunning, slick, seductive, and cruel in private. Involved in multiple, simultaneous relationships, he can sweet-talk his victims into compliance -- "Our love is special and holy" -- or bully them into submission.

United Church of Christ minister Marie Fortune, in her book *Is Nothing Sacred?*, details the havoc and pain wreaked on individual women and the congregation by the sexual misconduct of one of the church's pastors. Fortune notes that sexual predators go to great lengths to choose women whose current circumstances might make them vulnerable: for instance, the death of a parent, a divorce, problems with children, or an illness. The situation that sends Fortune "over the edge" is one in which a congregant approaches a minister for help in dealing with childhood sexual abuse. Often that confidence is seen by the minister as a "green light" to seduce the person. One clergyman whom Fortune heard about told his victim that the way to heal from childhood sexual abuse was to re-enact the experiences with him. "I am amazed at the creativity that perpetrators have," Fortune says, "the manipulation of theology and scripture and ritual, the moral rationalization they bring to bear: `No, there is nothing wrong with this because God's love for you is flowing through me, and this is a holy kiss.'"

Because of the innocence and vulnerability of the victims, perhaps the most heinous crime perpetrated by sexual predators is the abuse of children. Trust, innocence, and sense of self all shatter, leaving behind shards of fear, shame, distrust, and self-loathing.

David Clohessy of SNAP, himself a survivor of abuse by a priest, describes the abrupt shift in perception this way: "It's like getting up one morning, walking outside, and all of a sudden the law of gravity isn't in effect anymore. It is something that is so far beyond the pale of expectation for a kid. . . . It is just a horrible, horrible betrayal."

Of course, the degree of damage to individual youngsters varies. For example, the closer the relationship of the offender to the child, the greater the trauma. The type of abuse (fondling versus intercourse, for example), its duration, the degree of violence, and the age of the child also figure prominently in the extent of the pain and damage inflicted. Young sexual-abuse victims inevitably suffer from what professionals call posttraumatic stress disorder, symptoms of which, says Judith Lewis Herman in her classic book *Trauma and Recovery*, are "both extensive and enduring." These include an extreme startle response, elevated arousal, sleep disturbances, deep distrust, sexualized behaviors, depression, withdrawal, eating disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicidal thoughts and actions. In fact, a survey described in the paper "In the Name of God: A Profile of Religion-Related Child Abuse" in the *Journal of Social Issues* (volume 51, number 2) reported that, of their sample, almost 20 percent of children abused by religious authorities subsequently considered suicide.

Not only is the pain inflicted on an individual child heartbreaking, but the scope of the problem is immense because each perpetrator generally has multiple victims. In *Slayer of the Soul*, an anthology whose articles focus on issues related to the Catholic Church and child sexual abuse, Father Stephen Rossetti cites a 1987 study that found that 377 child molesters whose relations with victims were not incestuous had victimized 4,435 girls and 22,981 boys. Pentecostal preacher Tony Leyva, for example, pleaded guilty to having abused upwards of 100 boys, although law-enforcement officials placed the number closer to 800.

Although youngsters who have been molested by clergy exhibit the same symptomatology as those violated by other trusted adults, there is an added dimension if the abuse is perpetrated by a spiritual authority. Developmentally, children often equate spiritual authorities with God. For this reason it's easy to see how a child might think sexual fondling is somehow supernaturally sanctioned. One case cited in the *Journal of Social Issues* article involved a priest and his wife who told the boys they abused that the abuse was part of the youngsters' religious obligation as "good Christians." The same researchers also noted that the opposite attribution can be made: One young girl who was sexually abused by both parents was placed with a minister who molested her as well, saying that the abuse was "God's punishment" for her "badness."

Because church is often thought of as a refuge, and God as someone to turn to in troubled times, a child who is molested may turn away altogether from spiritual pursuits even into adulthood. He or she may not attend church, pray, or otherwise participate in religious rituals. David Clohessy, for instance, says he no longer considers himself a Catholic. "In fairness, I want to say that I could be in this same spiritual position even if I never had been abused." Still, he says, "there are times when I am very envious of those people who have been able to separate out what one man with a Roman collar did to them as kids from the rest of the institution and the rest of religion. I am envious of people who still have their faith."

Outrage and anger are understandable, natural, human responses to sexual abuse of minors by clergy; the force of those feelings is needed to protect children. However, what often gets lost in the hue and cry resulting from news of such abuse is an understanding of the central character in the drama: the perpetrator.

Father Rossetti of St. Luke Institute takes a compassionate yet clear-eyed view of clergy child abusers. The institute, a 32-bed psychiatric hospital in the Maryland suburbs outside Washington, D.C., provides care primarily for Catholic priests with addictive disorders and psychological problems such as chronic depression. St. Luke also deals with sex offenders on a regular basis. While Rossetti does not condone their offenses, he does see their behavior as reflective of larger societal problems. He uses family-therapy and systems theories to explain how these offenders might be the "identified patients" of a dysfunctional societal "family."

"Child molesters don't drop down from Mars," he says. "They come from a society that produces that pathology. So if we want to get rid of this problem, we have to heal society."

Specifically what need to be healed, he says, are our flawed attitudes toward human sexuality and aggression. On the one hand, he explains in *Slayer of the Soul*, we as a culture are obsessed by sex; on the other hand, religious traditions, in not-so-subtle ways, condemn sexuality as unspiritual and even sinful. Pointing to increasing violence, he states that we know neither how to encourage healthy human aggression nor how to manage violence. We need to learn to become strong, he says, without being overly controlling or power-hungry, assertive rather than aggressive. We need to become fully sexual

people who are warm, compassionate, intimate, engaged, and empathic.

As for the molesters, Rossetti is surprised by the intensity of hatred toward them. He says he has heard people suggest castrating them, tattooing them on the forehead, even killing them. "You hear this said all the time by rather rational people. There is a well of hatred toward child molesters that goes beyond the heinousness of the crime." Furthermore, he notes, attention seems fixated on child abuse in the Catholic Church.

Another skewed public perception is that sociopathic predators are the sole perpetrators of sexual abuse. As clinicians who deal with sexual boundary violations have discovered, the profiles of perpetrators fall along a continuum. Many different personality types can violate boundaries, and ignoring this fact can jeopardize parishioners and devotees alike.

Psychologist John C. Gonsiorek has described the characteristics of clergy perpetrators (see box, "[Who Abuses?](#)"), as have Richard Irons, M.D., and Episcopal priest Katherine Roberts, distinguishing among them differences in age, experience, career development, clinical diagnosis, and prognosis. Their work in this area is important in terms of humanizing the perpetrators as well as communicating the message that factors such as stress, training and education, self-awareness, and peer relationships are significant elements in both the cause and prevention of clergy sexual misconduct.

Says David Clohessy: "The most notorious priest molester [of children] in history is James Porter of Massachusetts. He was clearly a predator; he abused anything with a pulse. But even though his behavior is predatory, I think that if you got inside his head and heart, you would find the same loneliness and woundedness that is more obvious in other priests who molest."

One of the most overlooked players in instances of abuse by spiritual authorities is the community. A good example of how a collective both contributes to and suffers from abuses by a spiritual authority is the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Lenox, Massachusetts, which is struggling to regain the vitality it lost two years ago when its founder, Yogi Amrit Desai, resigned his post as spiritual director after admitting to inappropriate sexual contact with several women.

Nestled in the Berkshires amid a host of cultural, arts, and outdoor attractions, Kripalu's combination of holistic programs and spa-like offerings such as vegetarian fare, saunas, whirlpools, and a private lakefront beach make it a desirable R-and-R destination for holistically minded individuals. Its peaceful location belies the major upheaval it endured, losing two-thirds of its residents, running monthly deficits of hundreds of thousands of dollars, and reorganizing its management structure.

The turmoil the center encountered clearly did not begin with Amrit Desai's resignation. With a core of 100 longtime residents -- some having been there for 10 years or more -- the community had been immersed in an individuation process in which midlife devotees were struggling to articulate and make conscious their growing discomfort with a system that on the one hand provided them with spiritual sustenance and a sense of belonging and purpose and on the other hand paid scant attention to the classic shadow bugbears of sex, power, and money.

The first Kripalu ashram, established by Amrit Desai in Sumneytown, Pennsylvania, in the early 1970s, was a small residential community that viewed itself as a religious order. With a skeletal core staff and affiliated members who worked in the town nearby, the ashram had an annual budget of less than \$100,000. Spiritual practice was the community's *raison d'etre*, and members participated in a stringent

yoga regimen -- wake-up at 4 a.m., with jogging, yoga, *pranayama* breathing exercises, and *satsang* (teaching session) all before breakfast. *Brahmacharya* -- a yoga principle akin to chastity or sexual modesty -- was strongly encouraged. In yoga the life force is seen as residing in sexual energy and sexual fluids. Yoga practice is aimed at raising that energy up the spine toward higher spiritual centers. Therefore, sexual activities -- masturbating or intercourse -- are seen as counterproductive to one's spiritual progress.

By all accounts, Amrit Desai was a gentle yet powerfully inspirational teacher. The pivotal moment in his own life had come during a morning yoga practice session in 1970 when, as he has described it, he was "flooded with bliss" and began spontaneously performing --- or being performed by -- yoga exercises with a newfound flexibility and fluidity. Not only was he drawn into an ecstatic state but those in the room with him -- his wife and two students -- were also drawn into a deep state of meditation. Inspired by this experience, Desai began to formulate a new method of "meditation in motion," which he called Kripalu Yoga in honor of his guru.

In the early years of the Kripalu ashram, it was not uncommon for residents to have strong *shakti* (energy) experiences, such as automatic movement and writing, speaking in tongues, and sharp increases in body temperature. These experiences in part solidified Desai's guru status among many of his students; some disciples took them to mean that the guru must be bona fide and therefore infallible. For too many devotees this reasoning translated as giving over their sense of judgment in major life decisions. One area that was affected was sexual activity. In a milieu in which "single and celibate" was the norm, many disciples did not marry or have children.

What community residents did not know was that, as they earnestly practiced *brahmacharya*, their guru was violating this yogic principle through sexual contact with female disciples. In 1986 a devotee made it known that she had had a sexual relationship years before with him. But when confronted in a community-wide meeting, Desai flatly denied the accusation. The upshot was that the community -- including her husband and son -- believed the guru. The woman left the ashram, staying in the area to be near her child. Eight years later, she was vindicated when another woman came forward and described to community members how Desai had used her sexually when she was his personal assistant in the 1970s. What devastated many of Desai's followers far more than the revelations of his inappropriate sexual relations was the fact that he had hidden them and lied about them for so long.

"I never would have said Kripalu was a cult," says Jean Matlack, a Washington, D.C., psychotherapist and a Kripalu Yoga teacher, "but now I understand that for people who lived there and were young and vulnerable, they were in a kind of trance. They gave over their lives in a way that is the hallmark of cults."

Another area where residents "woke up" was the financial one. Over the years the community grew both in numbers and in sophistication. In 1983, it invested \$1.25 million to purchase a former Jesuit seminary in Lenox. Situated on several hundred acres, the ashram grew to 300 residents and became a thriving retreat and holistic health center. In the late 1980s Kripalu residents, especially the old-timers, began feeling their oats. Desai was traveling a great deal, and the staff found themselves teaching the courses, handling administrative duties, putting out advertising -- in other words, running the center. With the flush of financial success and the sense of real-world achievement, many felt a need to "graduate" and to reap the monetary rewards of what was now a multimillion-dollar-a-year enterprise.

From the start, Kripalu was a religious order legally modeled on a Catholic monastery or convent.

"Vowed" members initially received no salary. If someone needed a pair of jeans or shoes, he or she would have to request them. Later, members began to receive a stipend of \$30 a month, out of which they had to pay for personal items such as shampoo. That money was not technically a salary and did not qualify them for Social Security benefits. On the other hand, Amrit Desai, who at the founding of Kripalu had a wife and children, received financial compensation from the beginning. At the time of his resignation, he was being paid \$155,000 annually, plus an additional \$15,000 to \$33,000 a year in royalties from the sale of his books and tapes. Although the words "financial exploitation" never crossed the lips of any Kripalu associates, the discrepancy between the remuneration of residents and the guru was obvious. When the community's cup began to run over, residents stood in line to share the bounty. "Appropriate" remuneration based on length of service was instituted. But even top-level stipends were no more than \$3,400 a year. A resident security fund -- a kind of retirement plan that set aside monies to provide for lifetime residents in their old age. The vesting period was exceptionally long -- 16 years. But in the meantime, certain amenities -- such as a new building with living quarters for longtime members and easy access to automobiles -- made life more comfortable.

One sticking point that remained unresolved, however, was the fact that some managers had been hired to work at Kripalu and drew salaries that seemed fairly competitive with professional positions in the outside world, while other vowed members, even though they may have been working for the community longer, received only the "appropriate" stipends. Many of the residents -- whether they have left or are staying in some relationship with Kripalu -- are now involved in a claims process that will work out a financial settlement between the center and longtime residents.

In an interview conducted in May 1994, Amrit Desai told *Yoga Journal* senior writer Ann Cushman that "we are in the process of dismantling the old form, which has served its purpose. We are now exploring new depths of the guru-disciple relationship." It's hard to believe that, as he spoke these words, he could have anticipated the chaos and disillusionment that would be precipitated five short months later when revelations of his sexual contact with female devotees would come to light.

Kripalu's general counsel, Daniel Bowling, is convinced that Desai's secret misdeeds did not explode into a conflict, but the conflict was there calling for integration; whatever was keeping the secret in place and unintegrated had to be exploded. Dinabandhu (Patton Sarley), past president of Kripalu and now executive director of the Omega Institute of Holistic Studies, states this same idea slightly differently: "Clearly, individuation needed to happen for all of us. You can't fool Mother Nature. Either you do it gracefully, which we attempted to do, or you do it ungracefully -- but you are going to do it."

Kripalu did it. For months, even while guest programs continued, intense catharsis was carried on in private behind closed doors, in community meetings, and in special workshops conducted by outside leaders such as spiritual teacher and author Ram Dass; Arnie Mindell, known for process-oriented psychology and his conflict-resolution work; and Elizabeth Stellas-Tippins of the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence. According to Daniel Bowling, it is difficult to "put words around the impact," referring to the windstorm of emotions -- anger, frustration, disbelief, disenchantment, grief -- that were unleashed. There were a rash of marriages, births, and many, many leave-takings.

Still, the community seems to have weathered the storm. A new executive director, with both corporate management experience and a personal understanding of the spiritual journey, has been hired; the quality of programs remains high; the claims process is nearly complete; and a new organizational structure has

been created: Whereas the Kripalu staff once consisted primarily of vowed members and 15 salaried employees, today 160 staff members are paid, and only 26 remain vowed. The managers are also working hard on a strategic direction for the center.

According to Daniel Bowling, what Kripalu has accomplished over the past two years "is not just Hatha Yoga on the yoga mat. We have done it under the most difficult of circumstances one can imagine, to bring about a healing in this three-way dynamic between individuals, teacher, and community."

While the problem of abuse by spiritual authorities threatens to overwhelm with its universality, prevalence, and magnitude of spiritual and emotional devastation, there are indications that with vigilance, systems interventions, and support for victims, perpetrators, and their religious communities, the tiger can be tamed.

At the organizational level, codes of ethics are being written clearly stating that sexual contact by a priest, pastor, guru, or roshi with a member of his or her flock is a breach of professional boundaries, that responsibility for maintaining appropriate boundaries lies with the spiritual leader, and that violations of such boundaries are both unethical and unacceptable. Policies and procedures for handling situations -- ranging from verbal accusations to formal, written complaints -- are also being put into place. Experience has shown that without them, the process of investigating allegations gets muddled in ways that can retraumatize the victim and upset the community. At present, a variety of institutions, from the Buddhist Peace Fellowship to the General Conference of the Seventh Day Adventists, have implemented such codes, policies, and procedures on sexual abuse and/or harassment.

But according to American Baptist minister Pat Liberty, "policies and procedures don't solve the problems"; what does is "shifting basic paradigms about ministry." One way to accomplish this is through education and training. Courses on sexuality, ethics, professional boundaries, and transference can help young men and women get a more realistic view of interpersonal problems and dynamics that go along with the ministerial territory.

Buddhist teacher Yvonne Rand also thinks that spiritual seekers need to be educated in how to find a teacher and what to look for if they think they may be getting into trouble. Asian teachers coming to the United States to lead Buddhist and Hindu spiritual communities are to some extent culture-bound to patriarchal systems. Rand believes that the best hope for diminishing sexual abuse in the American Buddhist communities is to educate students by speaking out, writing articles, and holding workshops on the topic.

In addition to self-help and support groups for victims (see box, ["Where to Find Help"](#)), an often effective avenue for healing is litigation or mediation. Many people in both the therapy and ministry professions believe that if victims feel that their wounds are acknowledged and that some restitution -- for example, payment for therapy sessions -- is made, litigation may be unnecessary. Marie Fortune maintains that victims generally have reasonable requests: an apology, acknowledgment from the perpetrator, a letter to the congregation that indicates what final steps have been taken around the complaint. But when institutions stonewall victims, many feel that they have no other option than to bring a lawsuit.

Of course, litigation is what brought the issue of clergy sexual misconduct into public awareness. Lawsuits against the Catholic Church alerted the media to the problem and resulted in large settlements for victims. Through this economic leverage, victims forced changes in institutional responses. However,

Kripalu's Daniel Bowling doesn't think healing and spiritual values are upheld by bringing in lawyers to rectify the power imbalance in this setting. In fact, he says, you can destroy everything in that process. Kripalu and its longtime residents are using mediation to resolve financial claims against the center.

Another area that can help guard against abuses is pastoral self-care. According to Liberty, the issue of workaholism is critical. "Basically, the lines between clergy personal life and clergy professional life are pretty thin. Historically, the Church is a place that has rewarded workaholism and called it devotion." She adds that for clergy and their parishioners to think that the former are on call 24 hours, seven days a week, is "nonsense."

Ministers need to have a life beyond their professional calling, experts say, a place to relax and renew themselves. One essential part of that life in order to stave off temptations to violate sexual boundaries is same-sex friendships. Jungian analyst and author Adolf Guggenbuhl-Craig is convinced that they are the single best antidote to ego inflation and self-deception. Friends point out our virtues as well as our ridiculous sides. Setting oneself up as a guru can preclude simple peer relations, and without solid friendships one begins to minister in a vacuum. Colleagues and friends keep us connected, honest, and in touch with reality.

Last, Fortune cautions that people who have come out of destructive family relationships often seek a haven, a safe and intimate family unit, like a spiritual community. Unfortunately, these desires might create unrealistic expectations of intimacy and an enmeshed system that is inappropriate to a faith community. Although people often refer to their spiritual community as a family, Fortune thinks they should look for a different metaphor and model. "Which doesn't mean that significant things won't happen," she says, but it all comes down to a sense of balance. "There are some things I do with my family and close friends. Other things I do with coworkers. There are still other things I do with my church. Occasionally there are situations where they blend, but I don't expect any one of those pieces of my life to meet all my needs."

Still, Liberty is convinced that "we have only seen the tip of the iceberg" with regard to abusive power by spiritual authorities; hundreds, maybe thousands, of men and women who have been wounded have not yet come forward to tell their stories. And, she adds, instances of abuse in which perpetrators are not being held appropriately accountable are still occurring. Far too many religious institutions are, she says, turning "a blind eye and a deaf ear to the reality of abuse."

The breadth of the problem and the depth of the suffering seem to require a constant vigilance from communities, spiritual seekers, and spiritual leaders alike because the problem is part and parcel of the spiritual search. As Carl Jung cautioned, we need to be aware that as we grow toward enlightenment, so too does our shadow grow. Thus, simple remedies consistently applied -- balance in one's life, deep friendships, a dedication to self-knowledge, integrity, a willingness to stand up and tell the truth, empathy, and a healthy exercise of inner authority -- all help counteract abusive behavior. For in the end we are all guardians of the gate. As Yvonne Rand reminds us, the dynamics of abuse are "in everybody's back yard. In fact, the critical thing to understand is that not only is it in our back yards, but it is in each one of us."

(For additional material, see box, "[Out of the Past.](#)")

Anne A. Simpkinson is editor of Common Boundary.

Who Abuses?

Although the work done by John C. Gonsiorek, Ph.D., and Glen O. Gabbard, M.D., in the area of typing exploitative professionals is based primarily on cases involving mental-health providers, their profiles are applicable to clergy with some caveats: For example, clergy roles are also inherently more complex, with boundaries that are less clear-cut than those of other professions.

While most people think that the sociopathic predator is the most prevalent perpetrator, Gonsiorek has found that "reasonably well-trained, responsible individuals" who are undergoing a stressful time are at greatest risk of violating boundaries. Almost without exception, these professionals have only one victim, are remorseful, and usually confess to authorities. Their prognosis is generally good.

There are also the perpetrators who are severely neurotic and whose problems are more long-standing and significant. Work tends to be the sole source for filling their personal needs, and transgressions by individuals in this group tend to recur every few years or so. They are self-punitive rather than motivated to change. Prognosis is mixed; rehabilitation may or may not be feasible.

Other categories include the impulsive, character-disordered perpetrator whose main problem with impulse control can lead not only to sexual boundary violations but to criminal activities as well; sex offenders who are clinically diagnosed as pedophiles or ephebophiles; the medically disabled who have impaired judgment and poor behavior control (those with bipolar disorder fall into this category); and naive individuals who lack training and experience.

The above information is based on "Assessment for Rehabilitation of Exploitative Health Care Professionals and Clergy," by John C. Gonsiorek, Ph.D., in *Breach of Trust* (Sage Publications). Another source on types of perpetrators is "The Unhealed Wounders," by Richard Irons, M.D., and Episcopal minister Katherine Roberts in *Restoring the Soul of a Church*, edited by Nancy Myer Hopkins and Mark Laaser (Liturgical Press).

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Where to Find Help

Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, 936 North 34th Street, Suite 200, Seattle, WA 98103; (206) 634-1903. Provides educational materials, resources, and workshop leaders for individuals, clergy, and communities -- all aimed at preventing and healing from clergy sexual abuse.

Interfaith Sexual Trauma Institute (ISTI), St. John's Abbey and University, Collegeville, MN 56321-2000; (612) 363-3931. Through research, education, and publications, ISTI promotes the prevention of sexual abuse, exploitation, and harassment. It also facilitates healing for victims, communities of faith, and offenders, as well as those who care for them.

Survivor Connections, 52 Lyndon Road, Cranston, RI 02905; (401) 941-2548. Provides support, education, and advocacy for survivors of sexual abuse, their support system, and professionals. Services include telephone peer support, educational forums and conferences, a quarterly newsletter, and a confidential database of perpetrators reported by victims. Also offers referrals to attorneys, psychotherapists, self-help books, and organizations.

Survivors and Victims Empowered (SAVE), (717) 569-3636. Created to help prevent neglect and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of children and to help adult survivors of childhood trauma. Offers the Survivors and Victims Resource Database, free Windows-based software containing worldwide resources to help those who work with survivors of childhood sexual abuse and to prevent sexual abuse.

Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests (SNAP), 8025 South Honore, Chicago, IL 60620; (312) 483-1059. Provides self-help support and resources, and organizes for political action.

-- Heather Pitzel

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Out of the Past

Sexual misconduct among the clergy may seem to be just one more symptom of today's declining moral standards, but many aspects of one 19th-century scandal have remarkable parallels to contemporary cases.

In 1872, Henry Ward Beecher was the world-famous minister of Plymouth Church (Congregational) in Brooklyn, New York, and widely regarded as our national chaplain. Married with children, the son and brother of preachers, and a sibling of novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*), he was accused of adultery with Elizabeth Tilton -- a wife and mother in her 30s who was an active member of Beecher's church.

"Lib" Tilton's view of religion was both emotional and sentimental. Throughout her ordeal, she held fast to the belief that serving God meant serving her pastor. Tilton's vulnerability was compounded by her troubled marriage to an ill-tempered, abusive man and by her knowledge that Beecher's marriage was also unhappy. She convinced herself that their stolen moments of joy were somehow part of the religious experience. When she eventually confessed her sin, Tilton told her husband, Theodore, that she had been persuaded by Beecher that their love, along with any expression of it, was right and good.

Beecher always denied the adultery charge, although he did confess to improper solicitations. As he told a friend, "I ought to have foreseen. I was the oldest man, the oldest person, I was the one that had the experience; she was a child."

So strong was Beecher's hold on Lib Tilton that she believed him when he termed her confession a betrayal. Under these conflicting pressures, Tilton grew increasingly depressed and suffered a miscarriage of what she called a "love-babe." Rumors circulated that an abortion had occurred with Beecher's knowledge.

Two separate actions against Beecher eventually were lodged. The first was a Church hearing, during which both parties denied any wrongdoing. Tilton retracted her admission, saying publicly that her husband had coerced her into it. Privately, she maintained her belief in Beecher, who told her that the confession would destroy his ability to serve God and man.

Beecher's own testimony was self-serving. Speaking of Tilton's "excessive affection" for him, he claimed that she was seeking separation from her husband and that she made a false

confession to obtain it. He called that confession "a needless treachery to her friend and pastor" and admitted only that "by blind heedlessness and friendship" he might have "beguiled her heart."

The Church committee report was a vindication -- some might say a whitewash -- of Beecher. The committee criticized Tilton for giving vent to her "inordinate affection." Others blamed her as well, especially when it suited their political beliefs. Antifeminists, for example, claimed that Tilton's fall was due not so much to the blandishments of her pastor as to the views of her husband's radical friends, who included suffragists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Beecher was blamed only for his generosity and love, which supposedly blinded him to the machinations of the Tiltons. Outraged, Theodore Tilton then sued Beecher in civil court for alienation of his wife's affections. Some of the arguments on both sides sound familiar today: Beecher's chief counsel insisted that no man of God could possibly commit adultery; he cited Beecher's past life as sufficient proof of his innocence and charged that a belief in Beecher's guilt would only prove one's own wickedness. Tilton's lawyer said that the real question was "whether the wealth and influence of Plymouth Church and the power of a great name shall overcome the force of proof, the lesson of the law, and the instincts of justice." After six months of press frenzy and national furor, a nine-to-three verdict in Beecher's favor was handed down in 1875.

The final irony is the indication that Beecher's affair with Lib Tilton was not his first offense. Rumors of improprieties with young women had begun as early as his first ministry in Indianapolis. And in 1862, a Brooklyn woman by the name of Lucy Bowen had made a deathbed confession to her husband of her affair with Henry Ward Beecher. Although her husband, Henry C. Bowen, did not make the story public -- possibly because of his numerous, profitable business dealings with Beecher -- several mutual friends knew of it. Thirteen years later, perhaps unwilling to see Beecher totally exonerated, Henry Bowen went to the Church Council and accused Beecher of several other adulteries within the parish. For those efforts, Bowen was expelled from the Church.

Henry Ward Beecher, although his reputation was tarnished, went back to his business of "serving God and man." Elizabeth Tilton, abandoned by her husband, withdrew from society and died forgotten in 1897.

-- Lois Bianchi

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