

Masculinity and Post-Traumatic Spirituality

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ABSTRACT

Building on narrative empirical research and counselling with male victims of (sexual) violence, this paper explores post-traumatic spirituality. There is some convincing research to date that shows that traumatization is not always detrimental to spirituality but may even enhance the person's spiritual engagement and growth. Although many more factors are involved, one interesting aspect is the influence of gender in the process of traumatization and post-traumatic growth. In that process, the impact of gender messages, traumatization, coping strategies, and religion form an interplay of forces for which a heuristic model is developed, based on the axes of power-powerlessness and isolation-boundlessness. This research focuses on male victims in order to understand how masculinities may be involved in the process. Four forces in the heuristic model are identified: gender messages, traumatization messages, coping messages, and religious messages. The outcome of this force-field is different for men and women.

INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, we have witnessed the emergence of the new research field of sexual abuse and its consequences. Its development can be read from the number of publications on the topic, starting in the eighties, and multiplied since then.¹ This field of research has known strong influences from victim advocacy groups, or – put differently – the research itself has been important in lending a voice to the uncomfortably high number of victims that appeared from these

¹ Of the 5514 publications listed in the PubMed database on a search for the keyword 'sexual abuse', 37.5% are published in 2000 or later, 48.9% were published in the nineties, and 12.9% in the eighties, with only a few before that. In comparison, the keyword 'religion' returns 34088 titles, 29.4% of which were published since 2000, 28.8% in the nineties, 18.2% in the eighties, and 23.6% before 1980. Although the trend of increasing numbers of publications is the same for both topics, sexual abuse became an issue as late as halfway the eighties. Source: www.pubmed.gov, accessed 14-05-2006.

studies. Whereas sexual abuse, especially in the form of incest, had been a topic already in Freud's investigations, there has been a strong tendency to neglect these issues or interpret them differently (Herman 1993). Over the years, the feminist movement and other liberationist groups have contributed much to the present acknowledgment of the widespread reality of sexual violence. Their continuous appeal to governments and scholars has in the long run been met by scientific studies that lent validity to their claims. In fact, the publicity stirred by such studies and by mediatized cases, has resulted in an increase of prevalence rates, especially in formerly underreported groups like male victims, victims of female perpetrators, and victims from different ethnic groups. By now, it has become common knowledge – albeit easily forgotten or conveniently ignored – that some 10-30% of all women and some 4-10% of all men have experienced some form of sexual abuse, the precise percentage depending on how broad a definition is chosen and on the specific population. These figures still play an important role in raising awareness of the structural problem of sexual violence, especially within families, schools, and churches. The latter have their own specific issues around sexual violence in the form of the highly publicized cases of clergy sexual abuse. This area even yielded its own strand of research, often focusing on the psychological and sociological dynamics on the side of the perpetrator, but sometimes on the specific effects on the victim (Blanchard 1991, Brewster 1996, Camargo 1998, Davies 1998, Duckro, et al. 1996, Francis & Baldo 1998, Hopkins & Laaser 1995, Kaiser 1996, Krebs 1998, Laaser 1991, Langberg 1996, McLaughlin 1994). This area gained so much momentum, that my own research among sexually abused males often met the presupposition that I would be dealing only or mostly with victims of clergy sexual abuse, which was not the case (Ganzevoort 2001).

A second element of this common knowledge is that sexual abuse has major negative consequences for the victim's well being, physically, psychologically, socially, and spiritually. A range of issues has been addressed, including sexually transmitted diseases, depression and suicidal tendencies, substance abuse, marital problems, inability to keep a job, and loss of religious faith (Mendel 1995). Many of these consequences seem to be identical for male and female victims, but some differences have been observed. It seems to be the case that men tend to resort to externalizing responses like aggression, whereas women tend to choose internalizing responses. For that reason, it has been said that female victims are overrepresented in psychiatric hospitals, whereas male victims populate the prisons. Although this does not do justice to the fact that most victims of sexual abuse avoid both institutions, it points to a difference in consequences and (sometimes dysfunctional) coping strategies. The correlation between this difference and gender issues will be discussed near the end of this paper.

Awareness of these negative consequences has facilitated more appropriate support and (pastoral) counselling, but it runs the risk of rejuvenating stigmatizing views of victims of sexual violence in describing their problems rather than their virtues. When I was invited to a congregation to offer a lecture about sexual

abuse, the organizers asked me how they should arrange for pastoral counselling afterwards, because they expected that the victims would need that help. I tried to make them understand that these 'victims' would probably have a lot of experience in dealing with their pain, that they would be able to decide whether or not to attend the lecture, and that they could be seen as essentially strong persons for living with such a history and – generally speaking – live a fruitful life. Their well-intended care for the victims ran the risk of becoming condescending and paternalizing. It is for that reason that some scholars and advocates prefer to use the term 'survivor', so as to stress the strength and nobility of people instead of their frailty and deficiencies (Kelly, et al. 1996). This plea, however, does not in any way counter the claim that sexual violence is indeed a very damaging experience. Its association with diagnostic labels like PTSD make it possible that victims/survivors request and receive well-needed therapy and supports them in claiming compensation from the perpetrators, even though the prevalence level of PTSD among groups of sexual abuse survivors does not reach levels over 10-25% (Kleber & Brom 1992). Victims of violence can certainly develop serious problems, but that depends on more than the severity of the violence. Among other variables, social support, style of attribution, and coping mediate the effects of violent experiences on trauma-symptoms (Gold, et al. 1994, Holman & Cohen Silver 1996). Cultural and religious factors may also influence resilience to the effects of trauma (Doxley, et al. 1997).

All this is to say that the topic of sexual abuse cannot be isolated from a whole series of other influences. There is a strong interdependence between academic research in the field and the political aspects of advocacy, sometimes helpful, and sometimes problematic in terms of the scientific responsibility of establishing truth as objectively and impartially as possible. There is also a clear moral dimension to this line of research, that is sometimes rather unnerving, for example when it comes to research that shows that at least for some young males implicated in sexual activities with adults, the experiences and consequences seem to be neutral or even positive (Bauserman & Rind 1997), a viewpoint that should be unmasked as a socially constructed myth according to Harten (1995). All this shows that the matters under investigation are highly sensitive, which we should take into account when we are about to explore the possible positive effects of sexual abuse.

In this paper, I take my starting point in the emerging research into post-traumatic growth and spirituality and discuss some of the inherent problems in this kind of research. I will then offer some material from my own research into sexually abused males. In the final part, I will reflect on the aspect of gender that warrants more attention. My specific focus will be on the roles of masculinities on sexual traumatization, resilience, and post-traumatic growth and spirituality.

POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH AND SPIRITUALITY

The concept of post-traumatic growth has developed (in one of many synonyms) in the past few years to account for the observation that some people report positive life changes as the outcome of a trauma or life crisis (Linley & Joseph 2004). According to Christopher (2004), growth instead of pathology is in fact the normal outcome of traumatic stress. Congenial to 'positive psychology', researchers into post-traumatic growth are interested in the health promoting factors that may be called upon in coping with traumatizing events, in order to support coping efforts and resilience (Wilson 2006). According to Ai & Park (2005), mental health research into trauma and related fields would benefit from the complementary approaches of stress-related growth, positive psychology, and the recognition of the role of spirituality and religion. Linley (2003) notes three dimensions of 'wisdom' that support posttraumatic growth: the recognition and management of uncertainty, the integration of affect and cognition, and the recognition and acceptance of human limitation.

Research to date has focused on cancer patients and their relatives (Barakat, et al. 2006, Bellizzi 2004, Cordova & Andrykowski 2003, Mosher, et al. 2006, Schulz & Mohamed 2004, Weiss 2004), HIV-carers (Cadell 2003), sexual assault (Frazier, et al. 2001), accidents and disasters (Salter & Stallard 2004, Vazquez, et al. 2005), and terrorist attacks and war events (Ai, et al. 2005, Maercker & Herrle 2003, Pargament, et al. 1996, Powell, et al. 2003). Elements of post-traumatic growth are psychological strength, increased empathy, compassion, and connectedness, appreciation of the value and frailty of life, appreciation of new possibilities, and spiritual change (Tedeschi & Calhoun 1996).² Factors influencing post-traumatic growth include (among other things) perceived intensity of the event, active or positive coping, spirituality or openness to religious change, social support, and communal motives in identity-construction (Bellizzi & Blank 2006, Cadell, et al. 2003, Calhoun, et al. 2000, Cordova, et al. 2001, Ho, et al. 2004, Linley & Joseph 2004, Park, et al. 1996, De Turner & Cox 2004, Widows, et al. 2005, Woike & Matic 2004). Because the field is very young, theory is only beginning to be developed. Joseph and Linley (2006) suggest three major perspectives to be taken into account: the functional-descriptive model, the meta-theoretical person-centered perspective, and the biopsychosocial-evolutionary view (Christopher 2004). Researchers are at the beginning stages of developing models to understand the complex and sometimes contradictory phenomena (Zoellner & Maercker 2006), and most research to date is based on individual case studies and anecdotal material (Woodward & Joseph 2003), although statistically reliable instruments are being developed (Bates, et al. 2004, Tedeschi & Calhoun 1996) and internationalized (Ho, et al. 2004). Smith and Cook (2004) have started to assess whether current measures yield a positive bias and found that they actually

² A selfhelp test of the APA is found on www.apahelpcenter.org/ptgi/ (accessed 14-05-2006). An internet-based survey by an oncology research team is found at www.psyresearchonline.com/ptgstudy/irb.html. This survey includes a range of questions concerning religion and spirituality.

tend to underestimate growth. Although correlations with religion are found consistently, there are also studies that report little or no effect for religion (Krejci, et al. 2004). Whether such differences have to do with different definitions or with different dimensions being measured or with other factors remains to be investigated.

Some research directly addresses the correlation between religion or spirituality and sexual abuse. Negative impact of traumatization has to do with the ability to experience trust, hope, and intimacy, and with negative God images (Doehring 1993, Finkelhor, et al. 1989, Ganje-fling & McCarthy 1996). Frazier, Conlon, and Glaser (2001) conducted a longitudinal study with recent female sexual assault survivors. Most survivors reported positive change at 2 weeks postassault. Positive changes generally increased over time and negative changes decreased, although change in different domains followed different courses and there was significant individual variability in change patterns. Both positive and negative changes were associated with distress, although the relations with negative changes were stronger. The least distress at 12 months was reported by those who noted positive life changes at both 2 weeks and 12 months postassault. Positive effects can further be found in a growth in spirituality (Kane, et al. 1993), correlating with increased well-being (Kennedy, et al. 1998). For those with increased spirituality following trauma, the sense of well-being was usually restored, whereas others still suffered from diminished well-being. It is hypothesized that traumatization affects the sense of well-being, resulting in an increase in spirituality (based on an increased spiritual need), which in turn stimulates the sense of well-being up to the pre-traumatic levels. This is related to the functions of spirituality: a connection to more powerful elements, the offering of hope and encouragement, the satisfaction of important personal needs, and the relationship with others (Ganje-fling & McCarthy 1996). Moreover, where traumatization may result in isolation, this spirituality may enhance self-transcendence, thereby countering the effects of the trauma.

The observations that led to the development of concepts like post-traumatic growth or post-traumatic spirituality are not that new. Especially when it comes to the intersection with meaning, spirituality or religion, there is a long tradition of writing and research that explores something like spiritual growth following negative life events (Howe 1988, Shandor Miles & Brown Crandall 1986). Boisen (1970) already noted that crisis periods may be times of new interpretations, because people tend to limit their mental investments to what is needed, which means that they will contemplate the meanings of life only when they are challenged. That does not mean that every individual will show a change in the importance or meaning of religion (Croog & Levine 1972, Ganzevoort 1994), but it stresses the fact that these meanings may be pondered more in times of stress, crises, or trauma. This points to the inherent relationship of religion and coping with crisis, as is evident from the theoretical framework of Pargament's (1997) psychology of religion and coping. He describes coping as a search for significance in times of stress and religion as a search for significance in ways

related to the sacred. The shared notion of a search for significance supports the view that crises or traumatic events may give way to semantic innovation and thus growth.

This line of research – important and promising as it is – has several problems at its present stage. The first is related to my preliminary remarks and has to do with the stereotyped view of traumatization, a view that is kept in place by the political strategies of advocacy groups that fear damage to the victims' status and claims. Parallel to that, those objecting to victims' advocacy – for example out of loyalty with alleged perpetrators – may welcome any approach that nuances or breaks down this stereotyped view. In that sense, this type of research is prone to political misuse, especially in the field of human induced and thus culpable traumatization, as is the case with sexual abuse. Obviously, posttraumatic growth does not in itself disqualify the moral stance toward traumatization, but the sensitive nature of the subject should make us aware of possible misreadings. The second problem in this kind of research is methodological. It has to do with the fact that all reports are necessarily retrospective constructions as we are not able to do quasi-experimental studies with pre- and posttest measures. That means that the pre-traumatic position can only be accessed through the post-traumatic reconstruction. What we are measuring then is not the changes in spirituality or life view as such, but the post-traumatic narrative reflection on such changes (Denzin 1989). The idea that we can capture the 'real life' of the 'subject' and find the coherent story of that life is a 'biographical illusion' (Bourdieu). Furthermore, because traumatization may well affect the narrative construction and indeed narrative competence of the person (Gardner, et al. 1995), we should be careful not to misinterpret our findings: our data are by definition post-traumatic reconstructions themselves. The third problem (that will be an issue in the rest of this paper), is that we cannot isolate the growth that is possibly initiated by the trauma from the religious coping strategies employed in and following the trauma. If we see changes in spirituality following trauma, these are forms of religious coping. The benefit of that is that it allows us to connect to the literature on religious coping. The problem is that it may undermine the meaning of the whole concept of post-traumatic growth.

THE RELIGION OF SEXUALLY ABUSED MALES

In my own research into the narrative constructions of adult male victims of childhood sexual abuse I invited 12 participants to recount their story any which way they wanted, and asked them to complete a questionnaire (Ganzevoort 2001).³ In the responses to this questionnaire, we find that religious selfdescription and religious practice decrease when their reports about childhood and present are compared, but this decrease does not seem different from the secularization in the wider population and therefore need not be related to traumatization. It also cannot be explained by findings in other research that

³ One participant felt unable to complete the questionnaire.

sexual abuse is significantly correlated with a non-religiosity for men (Finkelhor, et al. 1989), because in this particular sample nine men continue some form of religious behaviour and a religious selfdescription.⁴ A (small) increase in religious selfdescription is found for only one participant, who already had a strongly protestant background. For four participants, we find non-religious elements of meaning (artistic and moral for example) that seem to fulfill some of the functions that were previously part of their religious expression.

The most interesting changes that we can observe in the material are not found on this layer of simple measures, but in the metaphors and narratives these men employ. When confronted with a series of metaphors for the relationship with God, many of them responded quite differently for their childhood then for their present life. Metaphors of Distance, Threat, and Submission are supported by nine men for their childhood, but only by four for their present life. In contrast, Proximity, Support, and Connectedness are supported by three men for their childhood and by six men for the present life. All in all, seven men associate with more positive metaphors for their present life than for their childhood, one gives identical answers, two disaffiliate from all metaphors and call themselves areligious, and only one describes more negative metaphors for his present life.

Obviously, such quantifying reports are unable to convey the depth of meanings in the narratives of these men, nor the complexity in the changes in their spiritual lives. I will therefore relate the story of one of these men, whom I call Frits, and describe his religious reconstructions.⁵

Frits was born shortly after World War II in a larger city in the Netherlands. Between his parents, semiactive Roman Catholic shopkeepers, much tension is felt. The second of three children, he is abused sexually by his father for two years, starting at age six. When the family doctor diagnoses the children with venereal disease, they are placed in a foster home. Several times, his mother takes Frits and his siblings away from this home, and they are returned by the police. Frits resorts to religious images of suffering for the sake of others, and plans to become a priest. In his university years, he is inspired by liberation theology, and ends up being a social worker. He has had heterosexual and same-sex relationships, and is still uncertain about his sexual orientation. A father of two children, his marriage ended in divorce after ten years. He now is living alone and he has a (female) partner. Frits has been in therapy for some years, in which he started painting and writing. At present he is no longer a member of the church, and he uses impersonal God image of cosmic processes of which he is a part, and where (dysfunctional) uniqueness is avowed. Instead, responsibility and autonomy are stressed. Frits still describes Jesus as an example, no longer in terms of suffering, but in terms of autonomy and connectedness.

⁴ My sample is rather religious, which is probably due to the selection process that included self-enrolment based on information that religion would be part of the study.

⁵ The case study has been reported with more detail in Ganzevoort (2001).

Let's take a closer look at his religious constructions. For Frits, religion functions differently in distinguishable parts of the story. The religious stories in his youth depend heavily on images and stories available in his religious tradition and socialization. He is impressed by stained glass windows portraying St. Sebastian and Jesus in suffering. Frits says: 'I am giving myself away, just like Jesus. You are suffering, that is by order of the Father, just like I am suffering by order of the father.' The importance of this story is that Frits is convinced that he will be saved after all, a conviction he describes in dreams of being lifted from a morass by Jesus. These stories produce the feeling of being chosen, and Frits reaches the conclusion that he should become a priest. In his school years, he is the most pious boy on his class. His interpretation seems meaningful to him as a child and helps him survive the sexual abuse and the threatening circumstances of its aftermath. As an adult however, he discovers it to be dysfunctional, as it prohibits intimacy and autonomy and maintains his isolation and conflicts.

Interestingly, Frits can find new religious images and stories as an adult. This may be due partly to his involvement in theology of liberation as well as to corrective experiences of intimacy with his partner and his children. Still, Frits also draws on reinterpretable older stories. A large part of this reconstructive process is conducted in painting. During the interview, he shows and describes one of these paintings in detail. The painting is inspired by the story of the binding of Isaac by Abraham. Frits says: 'But in the story it is Abraham who does not doubt, but simply carries out the order, because God has a purpose with it. And it is God, who eventually decides to send an angel and says: Abraham, you don't hesitate. Leave it now. But my father cannot use that as a legitimation. He can't wait for an angel to come and say: Stop. He is responsible himself. And in this version the angel comes and says: I will not interfere. Sort it out for yourself. He is looking the other way.' Although Frits does not use images of a personal God, and devalues personal images of Jesus, he describes experiences of intimate connectedness with God: 'It is a sensation of happiness. There are moments you feel completely part of the coherence of everything, you know.' All this supports him in developing a religious story that is meaningful for him as an adult.

In the various parts of this story, religious images and narratives can serve a range of functions. Religion (in a broad sense) provides structures and words for interpreting the events of life. It also legitimizes certain interpretations by connecting them to traditionally validated images and stories. In the process of rewriting, the constellation of story lines is reconstructed, and the religious perspective offers new interpretations. It also prohibits some interpretations or proves them inadequate in the reconstruction. Religion thus is a powerful dimension of symbolic meanings that can play a pivotal role in the coping process. Instead of measuring the impact of a religious system (thought to be stable and independent of the experiences), we need to analyze how people construct their stories – religiously and otherwise – in order to make sense of their life and cope with the abusive experiences. Post-traumatic spirituality therefore can be understood as part of the coping process.

THE ROLE OF MASCULINITIES

What role do masculinities play in this field? My aim with this question is not to stretch the gender differences between victims too much, but to explore the factors in this field. As I focus on sexual abuse and not on traumatic experiences in general, the gender issue warrants specific attention. Studying masculinities may therefore be relevant as a counterpart for research into femininities. Two studies can serve as a starting point for these explorations, next to the case described above. I have already mentioned the research by Finkelhor and others (1989) that found that sexual abuse is predictive for non-religiosity in men and not in women. Even when other factors are accounted for, this influence of sexual abuse on male religiosity remains. Finkelhor's team does not offer an interpretation for this finding but instead starts speculating on denominational differences in female victims. Similarly, it has been found that following traumatic events, women tend to report more benefits than do men (Bates, et al. 2004, Tedeschi & Calhoun 1996).

The second study I want to mention is a case study by Belitz and Schacht (1992) of ten adolescent boys who voluntarily joined a Satanist movement following childhood sexual abuse. The involvement in physical and sexual violence within the movement can be seen as a form of repetition, and the final effect of this religious involvement is negative. Still, these researchers claim, the choice of these boys is understandable in light of the fundamental experiences that are at stake. For these abused boys, betrayal, powerlessness, loss of dignity, anger, and feelings of guilt were central to their life story. They had learned that resistance would lead to punishment. That led them to believe that 'good' equals victimization, and 'bad' equals power. Given the fact that real power seemed unattainable, magical powers could be more tempting. At the same time, the boys felt that their masculinity was threatened by the abuse, and the use of violence and abuse of others would serve as a means to restore their own masculinity. The connection between sexuality and aggression is sanctified, and the homoerotic elements that are pertinent to this cult seemed to concur with the abusive experiences of these adolescents. The price for this religious commitment is a further impairment of self-confidence and openness for intimacy, which strengthens the feelings of isolation and vulnerability. These cases therefore can be seen as a form of dysfunctional post-traumatic spirituality, fuelled by the dynamics of gender.

If we want to understand studies like these – and the case described earlier – we need to explore the masculinities that are part of the equation. The term 'masculinities' is not taken here in an essentialist sense as referring to some innate qualities of male-bodied individuals, but in a constructionist sense as the messages and meanings that are projected onto a person because of his male body (and in an indirect sense onto female-bodied persons as a negative model). The male identity is constructed out of individual experiences and longings, idiosyncratic models and contexts, and the (sub)cultural meanings attributed to this complex, resulting in prescriptions of what it is to be a man. This is for every person a specific constellation of meanings, in which for example the body type elicits

messages of its own. Masculinity thus consists of the 'messages men hear' (Harris 1995). The central question in our exploration therefore is which messages are conveyed to men in the experiences of sexual abuse, in recovery, and in religion. In a heuristic model, I will describe these messages – albeit overgeneralizing – as mathematical vectors in an interplay of forces. The matrix in which I describe these forces consists of two axes. The first is about power and powerlessness, the second about isolation and boundlessness (Ganzevoort & Veerman 2000). For both axes, the ideal point is in the middle. Too much power is considered as problematic as too little power, because both distort the relation of the person to significant others as well as to the vicissitudes of life, that are fundamentally beyond our control. If a person lives his or her life as having too much power, an illusion of complete autonomy is upheld that hinders the person's openness to the uncontrollable exterior world. In the case of powerlessness, the person develops too little autonomy and becomes a plaything of others and of external forces. Too much isolation is negative, because it leaves the person deprived of significant relations and closes him or her in. Too much openness, as is the case in boundlessness, means that the person has no choice whether others are admitted to his or her private life. Boundless people are unable to protect their individual privacy. At the ideal point, the centre of the matrix, the person has adequate control over her or his own life and is able to acknowledge external influences. He or she is able to relate to other persons and to protect the hidden sphere of the personal identity. This ideal centre point, however, is difficult to find because of the various forces at play in the case of sexual traumatization.

The first vector or force line regards the gender messages per se. It is a vector that distinguishes between men and women and offers them opposite criteria or values by which to order their lives. Speaking generally, it is about domination versus submission, ratio versus emotion, hard versus soft, sexually active versus sexually receptive, and so on. Men thus are expected to be strong, self-sufficient, and autonomous. In our matrix they will score high on both power and isolation. Obviously, this is too general a statement, and in individual cases it needs amendments. The specific norms of masculinity are defined in part by the particular circumstances of class, family, and local issues. They may be recognized in different patterns, like the standard bearer, the worker, the lover, the boss, or the rugged individual (Harris 1995). In these patterns, the axes of power and isolation weigh differently, but the general image remains that men are strong and self-sufficient, and even if they connect to others they do so from their position of power, caring for others or fighting with them. In various shapes then, this message of power and isolation is a powerful part of men's identities, a standard that they try to live by so that they will be recognized by others and by themselves as 'real men'. For women, in comparison, submission and openness are the qualities by which they are measured.

The second vector, in principle identical to men and women, is the impact of sexual traumatization. The message inherent to this traumatization is one of loss of autonomy and forced boundlessness. The result of that is that for many victims

the capacity to guard the borders of one's identity and the capacity to cross these borders in the encounter with others are damaged. This can result in either too much or too little openness. Although this vector of meanings is basically the same for men and women, the combination with the gender-messages results in a different kind of conflict. One could say – more or less cynically – that sexual traumatization is a radical endorsement of femininity and an equally radical denial of masculinity. Or, put differently, sexual abuse is the final consequence of patriarchy. For men, the conflict is much more ambiguous because resistance against this kind of masculinity would mean that they risk losing their masculine status once more. Victimization is not something that fits in the canonical stories of masculinity, leaving the victim with a serious threat to his gender-identity: 'If men aren't to be victims, then victims aren't men' (Lew 1988). When traumatization occurs in the domain of sexuality, this is all the more true because sexuality and gender are closely related in our cultural meaning systems. Sexual abuse then is very threatening to the messages that many men hear in western societies, if not in all societies with a patriarchal inheritance. In historical and cross-cultural studies on homosexuality for example, we find that at least in some contexts, the passive role in anal sex is seen as incompatible with being male, whereas the active role is unproblematic. This indicates that in sexual issues masculinity implies actorship, power, independence, and control (Lisak 1995). The experience of sexual traumatization is a direct confrontation with these aspects of masculinity. This is probably related to the confusion over sexual orientation that is often found with victims of sexual abuse. Male victims (even more than their female counterparts) tend to question their sexual orientation, especially when the perpetrator was a man too. The specific dynamics at play remain a matter of debate. It may have to do with identification with the perpetrator, with making sense of one's own physical–sexual response to the abuse, with prior homosexual feelings that make the (juvenile) person vulnerable to abuse, or indeed with a challenged masculinity that may be reaffirmed in a gay identity.

The third vector regards the aftermath of sexual abuse, the coping strategies employed by the victim or survivor. For both men and women, survival strategies include a tendency to withdraw from others out of shame, protection, and/or fear of intimacy (Fischer & Good 1997), which strengthens the aspect of isolation. The difference between them is found on the axis of power. Men more often seem to develop survival strategies that restore their power and autonomy, sometimes in dysfunctional violent ways as in the Satanism case alluded to. Women seem to prefer strategies with less power and more servitude. This way, both incorporate taken for granted gender messages in their coping strategies. The effect of these tendencies is that for women a conflict rises with their gender messages in the requested intimacy that is downplayed in this coping pattern. For men, these coping strategies are consonant with the gender messages. In fact, one could argue that the prime purpose of these strategies is to restore masculinity. That interference of coping and gender sometimes leads to dysfunctional hypermasculinities that reiterate the violence.

The final vector describes the impact of religious messages. The general message of the dominant religious traditions summons the believer to surrender him or herself to God. This means abandoning the person's autonomy and instead opening up to surrender. For women, this message correlates with the gender messages, but for men it is contradictory. Here C.S. Lewis' dictum – 'God is so masculine that all of creation is feminine by comparison' – is indicative of the religious gender messages. In the more traditional religious groups, this threat to masculinity is countered by the power that is unequally delegated to the men, especially in ecclesial office. The religious message itself, however, runs the risk of siding with the messages of traumatization. We could therefore say that the general message of religion is a message of victimization, in that it does not foster a proper balance of autonomy and connectedness. Moreover, as in Lewis' saying, this message deprives the person of an affirmed masculinity. The message of religion might be characterized as a message of feminization, one that leaves little room for self-affirmation, strength, and pride. Of course, this may be a healthy counterbalance to damaging messages of masculinity, but in the case of victims of abuse, it may also strip these men of their last suggestion of masculinity.

Obviously, all this is too general a statement to be true in every corner. What I am constructing is a heuristic framework for understanding the different messages that confront the male victim of sexual abuse. In individual cases, we can develop a fuller understanding by exploring these vectors of meaning. In the case of Frits, we find these influences with more or less clarity, and sometimes departing from the general picture described. The gender messages in his story are ambiguous and in part troubling, and Frits shows a non-typical gender identity development. He initially chooses a religious career that perfectly brings together the imposed servitude and a restored position of power. Serving the world as a priest or missionary seems a respectably masculine way of dealing with unmasculine victimization. His passive role, however, proves dysfunctional in the long run, and Frits faces the challenge to develop a more autonomous attitude to life. His identification with others diminishes, which may open up new avenues of intimacy, but especially in the sexual dimension all this is unresolved and in the religious dimension it is depersonalized. The post-traumatic spirituality of Frits, his coping through religious imagery, functions on two levels. As a child, it counters the messages of worthlessness and powerlessness, in that he felt chosen by God for a special mission of suffering and serving his father. In a situation where the facts seemed unalterable, this may have been an adequate way of surviving. When he is in a foster home, distanced from his parents but still in upsetting circumstances, Frits' vocation is only strengthened, and his peers and tutors note his piety. This post-traumatic spirituality furnishes him with a positive – albeit one-sided – counter-story that helps Frits in building his identity. As an adult, he amends this identity by developing a more autonomous attitude, but here again his spirituality is part and parcel of the process. His religious imagery plays a central role in the change. That role is one of renewal, not so much of survival.

The metaphors for the relationship with God, that I described earlier, show a similar development for most participants. The increase in positive metaphors now can be interpreted as a form of spiritual change, but probably this change is due more to the process of coping than to the process of traumatization. In fact, the negative images for their childhood should be seen as caused by the traumatizing experiences. Still, it is interesting to note that we find an increase in metaphors of connectedness, and not in metaphors of autonomy. That seems to suggest that the vector of masculinity messages and the vector of religion are indeed not easily resolved. This might explain the finding that sexual traumatization is predictive of non-religiosity in men and not in women.

CONCLUSION

In the interplay of trauma and spirituality, coping and gender are important factors. Posttraumatic spirituality belongs to the realm of coping strategies and coping outcomes. Posttraumatic spirituality can be either functional and supporting a satisfying life, or it can be dysfunctional and contribute to self-harm or violence. The gender messages for men are contradicted by both traumatization and religion, which makes it more difficult to integrate them in a posttraumatic religious identity. Pastoral and spiritual counselling of male victims of sexual abuse therefore should address the issues of masculinity much more explicitly.

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