Webs of Harm?
Online Child Sexual Abuse and Theologies of the Digital

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This article points to the darker side of our digital era. It explores the escalating reality of online child sexual abuse around the world as a key concern for many actors. There is increasing pressure on faith actors to respond effectively, especially in the light of damaging public revelations in recent years around wider child sexual abuse within faith institutions and by prominent faith leaders. This article argues that faith actors must be better engaged and appropriately equipped to use their social capital to disrupt these patterns of harm and create safe spaces. This also offers opportunities for deepened theological engagement with faith's spiritual capital in the light of commitments by senior faith leaders to address this issue. Reshaping faith communities as safe spaces requires breaking the silence on patterns of sexual abuse and reimagining testimonial spaces where children's voices and agency are respected.

1. Introduction

Despite the many benefits that the digital era has brought into many human lives in the last few decades, there is also a darker side to its realities. Digital technologies play an increasing role in enabling 'webs of harm' – virtual realities that are abusive and exploitative of other human beings, for example through cyberbullying or the online sexual abuse or exploitation of women and children. This paper focuses on one

example of this 'web of harm' – namely online child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSEA), an increasing global concern in today's world. Offline child sexual abuse and exploitation offline has been the subject of increasing concern by many faith leaders around the world in recent years, especially in the light of damaging public revelations from within faith communities themselves, particularly, but not only, in the Catholic church, as harbouring unaccountable sexual perpetrators, being havens of institutional abuse, and failing to safeguard the children in their care. In the light of these disturbing realities, churches around the world have been confronted with this spiritual and social failure and need to understand how to respond in ways that 'do no harm' for the future. However, the *online* aspects of child sexual abuse and exploitation often still remain hidden despite statistics that show that this area of abuse has rapidly grown and expanded in the last decade.[1] A survey of 124 faith leaders from seven major faiths (54% were Christian) across 29 countries carried out by the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities in 2018[2] highlighted that faith leaders currently feel ill equipped to engage with online CSEA despite a strong consensus that faith spaces can, and should be, platforms for its prevention. This is both a risk and an opportunity.

The rapid rise of online CSEA alongside its offline forms is increasingly documented as a harmful reality and a global concern as the 60-country study entitled 'Out of the Shadows' shines a light on. [3] The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and current social responses to it have also led to an escalation of this form of abuse with a much larger number of children being online for longer periods, including very young children, with risks of online CSEA increasing further as a result. This online presence is increasingly taking place in unsupervised ways due to parents being put in positions of unofficial home-schooling de to school closures under COVID-19 whilst also trying to work from home themselves. Technology companies themselves are recognising these dangers, and the *#WeProtect* alliance[4] seeks to build multi-sectoral collaborations to end online CSEA. Faith communities have been identified as having an important role to play in these alliances too.

This paper explores how faith leaders can be equipped to play a part alongside others in disrupting and reimagining these *digital webs of harm*. While the *access* and *social capital (*or* influence) that many faith leaders have around enabling or tackling child*

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[1] See www.thorn.org for more details around these statistics.

[2] Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities 2018b.

[3] Economist Intelligence Unit 2018.

[4] See https://www.weprotect.org/ for more information.

sexual abuse has been recognised, arguably not enough attention has been paid to date to the spiritual capital *which they may bring, in both positive and negative ways, to this task. Recent research has challenged local faith actors who are seeking to end violence against children to engage more deeply with their spiritual capital as a theological task.[5] This paper raises questions about the unique roles that faith leaders can play to disrupt and reconfigure underlying theologies and beliefs that contribute towards these webs of harm in the light of online CSEA. It offers, as an example, some contours for engaging with key theological beliefs within the Christian tradition in ways that can nurture more emancipatory, liberating child-centred theologies within digital spaces. Increasingly harmful social norms, often shaped by underlying beliefs, have been recognised as playing a key role in the deformed hierarchical relationships that still underpin some forms of violence against children, for example ideas that 'children should be seen and not heard' or that to 'spare the rod is to spoil the child'. The impact of these distorted relational assumptions on children must be acknowledged, made visible and transformed if they are not to underpin continued silence around 'webs of harm' for children within our expanding digital realities.

2. When Reality does Harm – Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

Child sexual abuse is a worldwide problem with estimates suggesting that up to 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 10 boys will have experienced contact forms of sexual abuse by the age of 18. Lack of reporting means however that it often remains obscured.[6] However online child sexual abuse and exploitation (exploitation includes where a perceived benefit is received in return) is even more hidden from view. The organisation End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism (ECPAT) highlights that the volume and scale of online child sexual abuse material has reached unprecedented levels. For example, in 2014, INHOPE, the association of INTERNET hotlines, assessed that 83,644 URLs containing child sexual abuse material exist worldwide, a 64% increase from the year before. The National Centre for missing and exploited children's Cybertipline has received more than 70 million reports of online child sexual abuse since 1998, with their figures showing a rapid escalation of this abuse in the last decade. Child abuse material is also being circulated by offenders through hidden platforms, such as peer-to-peer file sharing networks. the 'Dark Net' or encrypted software. This shows the dark side of the technological revolution:

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[5] Palm / Eyber 2019.
[6] See Lucy Faithfull Foundation 2021.

> Although information and communication technologies (ICTs) are an important and positive component of modern life, their rapid expansion is making more children vulnerable to online sexual exploitation. The swift evolution of technology is leading to a terrifying growth in online child sexual abuse material as well as new emerging threats to children.[7]

Reports of online CSEA are increasingly positioning this growth as an inevitable consequence of countries gaining broadband access. For example, a National Centre in the USA seizes 480, 789 online CSEA images per week. Research by the Canadian Centre for Child Protection suggests that the vast majority of these images are of children under the age of 12 (78%) with over half of these of children under 8. Over 80% of these images are of girls and 20% of boys – showcasing the gendered realities of online CSEA.[8] The same children are often seen in multiple images over time, suggesting a pattern of continued abuse. As a result, organisations such as Thorn are insisting that all sectors of society must take pro-active steps to open up difficult conversations about this reality.[9] If they do not, child abuse and oppression will continue in hidden forms where perpetrators remain invisible, even if many are extended family, guardians or trusted adults known to the child. This grim reality makes reporting even more unlikely as children are groomed by adults they trust not to see what is happening to them as abuse.

ECPAT highlights five main types of online child sexual abuse and exploitation which are prolific in our digital realities; sexual extortion, online live child sexual abuse (CSA), sexting, online grooming for offline abuse or trafficking and digital CSA materials, (often labelled as 'pornography') They showcase evidence around why and how each of these types is enabled, and how they create patterns where children are first involved, and then blackmailed into silence (e.g. around sexting) or where parents can also be involved in enabling sexual exploitation (by using live webcams) as well as highlighting typical patterns adopted by perpetrators.[10] These insights, if better understood by all, can be identified and disrupted by multiple actors, including faith communities if they are educated, capacitated and supported. While stereotypes of evil paedophile rings and gangs of traffickers still predominate in our media-infused imaginaries, these misrepresent the disturbing reality that online CSEA (like its offline forms) is far more likely to be perpetrated or facilitated by someone that the child

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[7] Lai-Smith 2016.
[8] Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2020.
[9] See https://www.thorn.org/child-sexual-exploitation-and-technology/ for more information on this area.
[10] ECPAT International 2020.

knows and trusts. ECPAT calls this the 'circle of trust'. This means that faith communities, such as church, mosque or temple gatherings, faith schools and religious spaces such as orphanages are high risk spaces as they often work in closed settings on a regular basis with vulnerable children. They also hold a high level of trust from communities, families and children themselves. In online CSEA, extended family members are also often directly involved. Online child sexual abuse also cannot be detached from its offline forms or from other forms of child abuse and violence. This was highlighted by a faith leader who is working on child protection issues at community level who notes:

> Child sexual abuse does not exist in a vacuum, kids who are sexually abused are often abused in other ways. There is a tremendous intersection with other kinds of violence. It becomes a baseline for conversation while looking at the broader spectrum[11]

ECPAT highlights that as part of the online grooming process, perpetrators can make gifts or payments to children to gain their trust and convince them to share material of a sexual nature of themselves. Or, as part of financially driven forms of (sexual) extortion, after obtaining compromising photos or videos of a sexual nature, they pressure the victim by threatening to disclose the images on the Internet or saying they will send it to the child's peers or relatives if they do not comply. Some offenders use multi-user gaming platforms to access children and become virtual 'friends' and then 'progressively sexualise the interaction.'[12]

While technology companies are under increased pressure to prevent these patterns, this is not something they can resolve on their own. Techniques such as blocking, online safety report tools, and splash pages urging perpetrators to seek help and support for behaviour change are seen by experts to have some deterrent effect but they can also potentially send this activity even further underground. Collaborative partnerships are required with all sectors of society, particularly those in long-term trusted relationships with children and their families. The gendered realities of this sexual abuse must also be acknowledged, with men overwhelmingly identified as the perpetrators (only 3% of online perpetrators are estimated to be women), and with girls as the predominant targets. However, boys are also victims and evidence is emerging of female involvement in enabling online abuse and exploitation, sometimes for financial

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[11] Cited in Palm 2019b: 7.
[12] Lai-Smith 2016: 8.

gain.[13] An intersectional approach to gender dynamics is required to address all genders and ages to look critically at roles that many stakeholders play in enabling webs of harm.

Global economic disparities also play a role in these webs. Patterns such as live-streaming children involved in sexualised acts are often shaped by underlying structural realities of socio-economic poverty and the relative low cost of producing and viewing this type of material. For example, the Philippines has been identified (by EC-PAT) as a hub for this specific type of online abuse where many involved adults do not even see sexual live-streaming as 'real' abuse because of its virtual dimensions. Social norms constructed around this acceptability can make it hard for children to report or even perceive what they are doing as abusive. Faith leaders in settings like this often hold significant power and influence and yet they often fail to speak about this harmful reality, seeing discussions of sex and sexuality as taboo in their faith contexts and perpetuating invisibility. It is to this specific connection between online CSEA and faith actors that this paper now turns.

3. Online Child Sexual Abuse & Exploitation and Faith

Public revelations around the sexual abuse of children by numerous faith actors, for example within Catholic spaces in Ireland and the USA, and around the Salvation Army in Australia are just two prominent public examples which form the tip of a larger iceberg of sexual abuse seen as still sitting beneath the surface that the *#metoo* movement has begun to surface. The recent speaking out by sexual survivors of charismatic global Christian leaders such as Pentecostal minister Ravi Zachariah, and Catholic priest Jean Vanier only after their deaths are forcing the ministries set up in their name into more in-depth theological reflection as well as into legal investigation. As a result, many faith communities around the world are increasingly having confront their historical perpetration, complicity, silence and failure to act to safeguard the children in their care from sexual abuse. Confession and confrontation of this difficult reality, must be the starting point for any transformational engagement in this area. Faiths may also be doing good work around child protection on the one hand, while at the same time, be unwittingly inculcating harmful myths and beliefs about children that continue to fuel abuse, such as purity, silence, obedience and sexual shame. Children with diverse sexual orientations or gender identity or expression are often particular at risk of both abuse and of harmful faith beliefs.

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[13] Lai-Smith 2016: 34.

The ambiguous role of churches on this topic is highlighted in a study done for UK faith-based organisation *Tearfund* on sexual violence in South Africa.[14] In this empirical study, sexual violence survivors across multiple communities highlighted how inadequate they felt the churches response currently was to sexual violence in their contexts. It was noted that faith leaders were at times also perpetrators who were not held to account by faith systems and that most churches failed to be safe refuges for survivors:

> The church is an anchor for the community, it is their refuge, it is actually the only refuge in the world that we are now living in, and if the church have such things going on, the pastor sits on the internet the whole night and looks at pornography, and Sunday morning he preaches so he gets his salary, who will then be interested in the church, because I mean, there are no examples[15]

A 2019 research study on violence against children and local faith communities around the world identified sexual violence against children as the second largest concern in faith settings by child protection experts who were interviewed across diverse faith communities. Sexual violence formed 20% of all direct perpetration reported in the secondary literature review on faith.[16] This took a number of forms. First, child sexual abuse within religious institutions of care and education, but also within families of congregants. Second, commercial sexual exploitation and child trafficking, especially, but not only, in Asian contexts. Third, harmful practices, such as forced and child marriage or female genital mutilation, was often tied into religious and cultural justifications.[17] A concern was expressed in this 2019 study that due to an increased focus on girls only in many global circles, the ongoing vulnerabilities of boys to sexual abuse could be overlooked.

This study also highlighted the need to better understand and engage with hidden and emerging forms of violence against children, such as its online and digital forms, to effectively prevent it both within religious institutions and beyond. For example, one Buddhist expert in Thailand noted: "...for example, there are so many monks using Facebook sometimes they can use Facebook to get children to come in for sexual things."[18] Parents and faith communities were often not adequately equipped to

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[14] Le Roux 2013.
[15] Le Roux 2013: 14.
[16] Palm 2019b; Rutledge / Eyber 2019.
[17] Le Roux / Palm 2018.
[18] Palm 2019b: 25.

respond to these new threats and often believed unhelpful myths about who perpetrators were. Sexual abuse by individual religious leaders was a main issue raised by faith experts interviewed, as was sexual abuse within religious institutions, often connected to residential care and education. Religious leaders, staff and volunteers were, and still can, hold special coercive power over the children they interact with because of their perceived spiritual and social authority and the trust placed in them. Religious spaces for care and education have been shown up as often potential 'havens' for abusers, who may target these spaces due to their easy, trusted access to children. Religious institutions were noted as often exempt from enforcing minimum standards of child care, due to their perceived voluntary or spiritual nature. Sexual abuse here is further silenced and hidden due to religious taboos around sex in general. Religious institutions were identified in this study as using their spiritual power or capital in both positive and negative ways. A worrying disconnect was seen between what is preached and what is practised. In the light of the *#metoo* campaign, further media coverage and legal evidence is emerging of the historical perpetration of sexual abuse, as well as complicity in covering up sexual abuse allegations by many religious leaders and faith institutions. A failure to respond to sexual abuse happening to children within families, was also noted with some faith leaders aware, but not equipped, to engage effectively as first responders. Another dimension of concern was a rise in child sexual abuse images, both involving and targeting children, but also by children being increasingly exposed to explicit sexual imagery in public spaces at young ages, especially through online dimensions, as also seen as a form of child sexual abuse.

As a result of these concerns, certain faith-based organizations have come together in the last few years to focus more attention on faith and online CSEA. In 2016 ECPAT collaborated with *Religions for Peace* to develop a manual for faith leaders around responding to online CSEA. Since 2014, *Arigatou International* (as a member of the *WeProtect Global Alliance)*, has intentionally engaged with diverse faith communities to help protect children from online CSEA. They have led the adoption of the 2017 Panama Declaration on ending all violence against children, supported the organization of a 2018 Child Dignity in the Digital World Forum in Abu Dhabi and co-led regional interfaith workshops and a survey with over 124 faith leaders across 7 major faiths on this theme. This work highlights strong support for the idea that places of worship and faith gatherings should be used as platforms for the prevention of online CSEA but also shows that currently faith actors are not equipped to do so. Further engagement is identified as being needed to tackle this sensitive area leading to the de-

velopment of a global interfaith alliance on this issue.[19] At the same time, UNICEF has pioneered the *Disrupting Harm* and *Global Kids Online* projects which insist on the importance of centering the voices of children, a theme that is also being developed by Christian ethicists working on developing child-centred digital realities.[20] This focus on the authentic representation and voices of children is essential to avoid fear-based parental protective mechanisms emerging around sex and sexuality often shaped by religious and cultural norms that ignore child agency and can reinforce new patterns of harm in the name of 'protection' e.g. by marrying daughters off early. This is an important insight for faith actors to consider.

During the 2018 Abu Dhabi Forum, Father Hans Zollner, from the Centre for Child Protection of the Pontifical Gregorian University, noted that there was an urgent need to better identify effective child safeguarding measures, both online and offline, noting, "When you talk about safeguarding, everybody wants to improve children's situations but scientifically, until this day, we don't know what really works better."[21] Faith communities need to learn more about what works to ensure that they do not 'do further harm' by responding inappropriately or without challenging their underlying assumptions. They need to learn from practices and ideas emerging from other sectors. Studies by *Arigatou International* in 2019 point to important common ground between child rights, ending child violence and core religious beliefs.[22] Since 2006 onwards, many faith actors have mobilised internationally to reflect on their roles in ending violence against children. The 2017 Panama Declaration, signed by diverse senior religious leaders from around the world, committed their religions to play an active role in ending all forms of child violence. A focus on online CSEA must build on those global commitments to make them locally embedded realities.

4. Tackling Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation - Faith in Action

Currently, faith communities remain a predominantly untapped resource to prevent and deter online CSEA. They have unique access to more than three quarters of the world's population, strong influence in shaping social norms and behaviours, and have influence and status as highly trusted community actors in many regions. However, disturbing revelations over the last decade by many adults who were abused as chil-

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[19] Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities 2018b.

[20] Ott 2019.

[21] Internal communication to author, 2021, Arigatou International.

[22] Arigatou International 2019.

dren within their faith communities (often by faith leaders) also reveals that spaces of faith have often been unaccountable places of child sexual abuse and silent complicity. Online CSEA takes place in many settings, including within faith communities. However, as faith spaces such as churches are also turning more and more to digitalized faith experiences for their followers, especially under the COVID-19 pandemic and for a younger generation, it is critical that faith actors are better equipped and enabled to support safe digital experiences for children and to think more creatively about how to nurture healthy forms of spirituality within online networks. According to Cornelius Williams, Associate Director of Child Protection at *UNICEF*:

> Violence seriously jeopardizes children's growth and development. Religious leaders and faith based communities are uniquely positioned to address violence in society and challenge social norms that are harmful to children, and promote positive, protective norms. UNICEF looks forward to continued collaboration with religious leaders and faith-based communities to harness each other's strengths for a joint vision to protect children.[23]

Online CSEA is also not merely the responsibility of global crime organisations such as *Interpol* or of large technology companies. It requires careful collaboration across all sectors of society, including faith actors. It is also not something that happens far away. Its webs of harm reach across all borders and boundaries and enter into all local realities. For example, in 2017, a 29-year-old white male church youth leader based at the church down the road from my own local congregation in South Africa where I worked as a youth leader, was accused of 47 online sexual abuse charges related to 7 boys aged between 12 and 17. He had posed as a young women online to secure sexual images, and then used them to sexually blackmail boys across 9 church congregations and in local schools, whilst holding a trusted role as a church youth worker. He had begun as a church volunteer in 2012 and became a full-time employee in 2015. Only in 2019 when he was convicted and sentenced to 15 years did details of his online abuse become public including online child sexual abuse materials and online grooming of boys in his care through the use of simple social media tools such as Instagram and Whatsapp.[24] This story offers a sobering reminder of the ubiquity of global 'webs of harm' within local faith communities. It places a responsibility by all faith leaders to ensure that staff, children, parents and volunteers are equipped in this area.

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[23] ECPAT International and Religions for Peace 2016.
[24] Chambers 2019.

An opportunity exists here as many senior faith leaders are making formal public commitments on child abuse and developing systems to also take action to stop the harm of online CSEA. This momentum can be built on to offer deeper understanding and capacity development in this area, to share promising practices and new ideas and to engage those faith leaders across the globe who are willing to learn and address this issue, as a positive way of starting to change other faith leaders for whom sex and sexuality is still a deeply taboo topic. Faith communities should always be safe spaces for children, both online and offline and not safe spaces for perpetrators, where CSEA in its online and offline forms is silenced, hidden and/or overlooked. This needs to be framed as a primary ethical and spiritual imperative, not a secular imposition, and requires deliberate action to disrupt the chain of harm from online CSEA within local faith communities, as well as ways in which online engagement contributes to grooming children for offline abuse.

Faith spaces are currently often a ambiguous resource or a 'mixed blessing' in relation to ending violence against children.[25] They can play a key role in safeguarding children but they can also become complicit havens for abusers. A binary separation into good and bad spaces is also unhelpful. Faith spaces such as churches can sit at various points along a spectrum with excellent formal programs on child protection but no deeper engagement with underlying spiritual assumptions about children or about sex. They also exercise significant influence in families, especially with parents and can, if equipped, play important roles in disrupting offender pathways, and recognising and referring children-at-risk. Many children spend regular time in faith spaces. As a result of COVID-19, many faith spaces are developing online activities, creating additional risks on top of their existing failure to respond effectively to many forms of offline sexual violence. Palm and Le Roux point to the complicit role of churches in sexual violence across six communities in South Africa and the need to do more. They note that:

> When asked to reflect on how their churches were responding to sexual violence, participants were unanimous: very little. This is seen as a result of churches not seeing sexual violence as an issue it should be addressing, as it is only concerned with so-called 'higher' matters, such as prayer and Bible reading. According to participants, churches do not take sexual violence seriously and do not apply the Bible contextually to the issue. Participants consistently spoke of the misogyny of churches and their theologies, their complicity not only in ignoring the reality and silencing those who speak out, but their own role in perpetration.

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[25] Eyber / Palm 2019.

> According to the majority of participants, many church leaders were themselves guilty of perpetrating sexual violence. However, they remained unconfronted by wider church leadership because these perpetrators were persons with authority.[26]

Churches (and other faith spaces) can only build credibility to address sexual violence within the wider community if they publicly confront and eradicate forms of sexual violence in their own congregations. This often requires a paradigm shift in the mindset of how relationships between genders and between adults and children are spiritually understood. Entrenched beliefs around relational hierarchies and patterns of one-way respect, silence and obedience by children can be used to underpin and enable both online and offline patterns of abuse. Key stories from their sacred texts have to be reinterpreted in ways that shed light on the patterns of sexual child abuse that they endorse. Evidence shows that faith leaders often know of instances of child abuse in their congregations, but fail to respond effectively. A similar pattern may happen with online CSEA. Coordinated action is urgently needed to translate commitments made by faith leaders at global level around online CSEA to "commit to form and engage effectively in partnerships with leaders of every faith to address the religious implications of online child abuse and exploitation"[27] into targeted local strategies and interventions that do no harm. Their commitments to protect and nurture children with specific responsibilities for the most vulnerable children as a core faith mandate must be expanded to the digital realm. Faith actors cannot do this alone and need to be equipped to recognise and refer cases to other specialist services and work with the technical experience gained from policymakers, law enforcement and child-focused experts to ensure this violence stops.

Many senior faith leaders are increasingly accepting their ethical responsibility to protect children: they are still perceived as safe spaces for the social/spiritual development of children and can be equipped as platforms for preventing online CSEA. However, without capacity building, currently these spaces may exacerbate risks of CSEA, offline and online, due to low levels of understanding. While faith actors can play important *access* roles as community gatekeepers, and hold significant *social* influence in communities and even nations, further attention needs to be paid by each faith to engage their *spiritual capital* to reaffirm faith imperatives for protection and stand against the perpetration, enabling or silencing of online CSEA. This is required to

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[26] Palm / Le Roux 2018: 142.
[27] Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities 2018a: Commitment 4.

both disrupt current harmful beliefs about children, and to offer positive theological resources that can support a commitment to child dignity and voice within both faith spaces and our wider digital realities.

4.1 The Social Roles of Faith Leaders

A "Guide to Action for Religious Leaders and Communities to Protect Children from Online Sexual Exploitation" developed by ECPAT and Religions for Peace was launched at the Global Network of Religions for Children Panama Forum in 2017.[28] It highlights a number of important social roles that faith actors can play in preventing online CSEA, including;

Raising awareness. Faith leaders are often turned to for moral guidance and advice and must be comfortable discussing online CSEA issues, breaking taboos and opening up conversations about how their faith tradition views sexual abuse and exploitation both online and offline. This creates awareness, disrupts perpetration and helps prevent children from exploitation or abuse.

Empowering children to feel safe and given voice by creating a confidential, nonjudgmental culture to encourage them to discuss issues around sexual abuse and exploitation, using targeted age-specific campaigns for children and child-friendly tools. This equips children to protect themselves and helps tackle rather than reinforce internalised shame if something bad happens.

Breaking the silence to avoid forms of complicity by faith groups. Faith leaders must bring a strong message around ending the silence around sexual violence because sex is often still a taboo in faith settings. By opening up conversations and educating followers about the risks, it encourages children and community members to be able to report cases within these spaces. Faith groups can also create safe dialogues during meetings or integrated in their specific child-related faith programs.

Setting up a policy and advisory group for a child-safe faith environment, including the participation of children and families to discuss the risks of online sexual exploitation and develop safeguarding policies. Training programs that highlight child protection standards for new volunteers are key and also form a deterrent for potential perpetrators. This should include a Code of Conduct on how staff members and volunteers contact and communicate with children electronically and how they use

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[28] ECPAT International and Religions for Peace 2016.

digital images of with children, as well as agreeing standards for their own social media usage.

Recognising, reporting and referring all cases of sexual abuse rather than seeking to 'protect' your faith community or its members by hiding the issue and avoiding either formal reporting or going to the police. This can lead to entrenched patterns where abusers are moved within the faith system rather than reported externally, which leads to more harm for more children.

Providing survivor support to help all boys and girls understand that violence and abuse against them and other children is always wrong and how to learn to recognise and tell a trusted person (adult or peer) about physical, sexual or emotional abuse, in both offline and online spaces. This can help children know that places of worship and religious institutions should be safe places. Phone helplines for children are a key part of child protection services.

Engaging perpetrators. Leaders in faith communities may find themselves in situations where they must confront a colleague or member who is a sex offender or who is at risk of offending. To prevent further exploitation, they must report any criminal behaviour and also support them to recognise their behaviour as abusive or potentially abusive and to seek help. It is important to remember that many adult perpetrators were also abused themselves as children, creating a vicious cycle out of our historical failure to protect children. They also need safe spaces to heal without compromising child safety requiring education across the faith community around prevention.

The above seven suggestions offer helpful, practical ways for faith leaders seeking to navigate current digital realities of abuse and exploitation. However, they draw primarily on the *social capital* of faith actors and their trusted *access* to communities, families and children. While these are important contributions, a need remains for faith leaders to also engage theologically with their underlying spiritual beliefs and ethical values if the root causes of many forms of violence against children are to be tackled. One child protection expert from Panama states:

> We need to involve faith leaders not only because they are influential but first and foremost because ...in many cases, there are underlying beliefs and social norms and values that are somehow highlighted in or by the religious sector that need to be changed.[29]

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[29] Palm 2019b: 29.

This paper's final section reflects on this theological task within the Christian tradition to point to some contours of 'spiritual capital' that could be brought to bear on these digital realities of child sexual abuse and exploitation.

4.2 Nurturing Theological 'Webs of Life' – the Spiritual Role of Faith Leaders

Faith's religious resources and mechanisms in the form of doctrines, practices, rituals, experiences and sacred texts and structures can play an important role in the formation of protective norms, beliefs and attitudes about how children are seen and treated both online and offline. Faith communities should not just be instrumentalised to access wider communities and run secular programmes, but they also need to nurture spiritual beliefs and values that protect and empower children and shape how children are seen by adults. This often involves disrupting historical theologies, adultist assumptions and taboos that still underpin many existing patterns of violence and abuse for children.[30]

At the heart of Christian faith is a deep commitment to human flourishing and life in abundance for all, adults and children alike. The Christian story makes grand statements about relational anthropology, connectedness to the divine image and sinful falls into distorted, violent and patriarchal relationships. It also makes incarnational claims about God's entry into our human world as a vulnerable child who, as he grows up, also places a vulnerable child at the centre of his vision of the kingdom of God and also as the touchstone of our adult moral behaviour in God's eyes. Online child sexual abuse and exploitation require a deep confession of faith's failure to embody these values of human dignity for all children within our digital world. Public theologians have worked in recent years with the concept of human dignity. However, without care these insights can hover above our lived harmful realities as unreal, utopian abstractions that mirror a God who requires our unquestioned obedience to maintain his dignity. In reality, our own world is still shaped by hierarchical forms of dignity tied to status, power and position. These also play out in the toxic power dynamics that underlie online child sexual abuse and exploitation. If theologians are to speak meaningfully about human dignity for the most vulnerable, a *cruciform theology of human dignity* is essential, which situates God on the cross of the current reality of online CSEA and at the places of pain in deep solidarity with all children whose dignity is currently denied, instead of merely hovering above it as a violent parent who is prepared to sacrifice his child. Faith leaders who are human rights activists such

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[30] Palm / Eyber 2019.

as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Dr Martin Luther King Jnr have insisted that we are all deeply connected in a web of mutuality and 'ubuntu' and must take seriously the ongoing ethical question – who is my neighbour? How can our relational anthropology and spiritual webs of interconnection be taken more seriously within our networked digital webs in ways that engage healthily with human and sexual embodiment in virtual forms? How can online sins be better named by faith leaders as real human entanglements in digital webs of harm that deform and dehumanise vulnerable others as sexual objects? Digital technologies offer promising ways to reimagine churches as networked webs of connection that recalibrate relations between adults and children away from the mono-vocal voice of a single male preacher who holds unaccountable power in the name of a male punitive God-figure in whose name children are often punished. A cruciform, child-centred theology of human dignity that refuses to see children as merely 'not-yet adults' repositions God within this web of life as a vulnerable child who also talks back to his parents with moral authority.

A set of seven controversial child 'crucifixions' images have been produced by Cuban photographer Erik Ravelo as part of a 2018 art project with the Brazilian director/editor Daniel Ferreira entitled "Los Intocables (The Untouchables) — The Right to Childhood Should Be Protected."[31] One of these icons depicts the theme of child sexual abuse visually by showing a naked child who is being 'crucified' on the back of a Catholic priest. This disturbing image highlights an important starting point for genuine engagement with child sexual abuse by faith actors, an open confession of the failure of many faith communities to protect children in their care.[32] It offers a visual indication of the need for a cruciformed theology in this area by asking viewers to reflect on where is God present in this image?

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If Christian theologies in particular are to nurture webs of life about this issue, three areas need to be carefully re-examined within churches to start to root out damaging myths and patterns of toxic theology that have been identified as causing harm to children. First, feminist and queer theologians show that many Christian theologies about both sexuality and gender remain outdated, sex-negative, oppressive to both women and children and nurture deep communal patterns of hiding, silence, shame

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[31] Art image accessed on 15 March 2021 at https://www.iloboyou.com/controversial-art-los-intocables-erik-ravelo/.
[32] Palm 2019a.

and guilt around sex.[33] These fail to 'get real' and connect to the serious questions of sexual harms in our world today by silencing important conversations about adult and child sexual desires, orientations, curiosity, exploration and fears as taboos or sins. Marriage and procreation issues often predominate in heteronormative faith narratives to the exclusion of wider sexual questions of pleasure, sexual diversity, loneliness, desire, abuse and consent. Traditional faith beliefs are often ill equipped to explore love in an online age of Tindr and believers often inherit a sex-negative tradition that they can pass on to a younger generation who quickly learn that sex is not something that can be talked about honestly in the church. This harmful body/spirt divide and spiritual taboos around God-given sexualities can create damaging hidden, silenced spaces around sex and sexuality in faith-families and faith spaces that can indirectly drive children and adults to the internet to find out more, where they then encounter new risks that they are rarely equipped to navigate safely. For example, the church's long historical obsession with gendered sexual purity and virginal girls and its sacred text's entanglement in patriarchy and intergenerational sex also reinforces a culture of oppressive gendered patterns of sexualization, male entitlement and body negativity that needs to be urgently addressed. Many feminist theologians have made important contributions here that need to be practically engaged in the spiritual formation of boys and girls from early on if a positive theology of sexuality and embodiment is to be offered in ways that are non-abusive but this is beyond the scope of this paper. Religion contributes to a set of social taboos about gender, sex and sexuality which become a source of harmful beliefs, especially but not only for queer bodies. Engaging religious leaders to reject these taboos and speak out in new integrated spiritual ways is important. Without this reimagining, the online realm will continue to become a place where repressed sexual desires within faith spaces find anonymous and often abusive digital enactment with those who are most vulnerable being harmed.

Second, embodying liberating theologies of children that place the child at the centre of churches as both seen and heard is urgently required.[34] Children have not always been served well by religious precepts. The expression 'children should be seen and not heard' is an old English proverb dating from the 15th century, recommended by religious leaders of the day and transported globally on colonial ships. This harmful legacy of quiet obedience by children who were expected to 'know their place', much like the adult workers violently colonised here through slavery, was often accompanied by religiously-infused moral dictates that 'to spare the rod would spoil the child'.

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[33] Tonstad 2018. See also Palm /Le Roux 2018.
[34] Palm 2020.

Sexual violence in both its online and offline forms, takes place primarily by people who are already within a child's circle of trust. Faith leaders can reinforce their existing social power with spiritual power by making children feel bad, guilty or ashamed or by suggesting that this is something God allows. This is often underpinned by a theology of the child which forms a root cause of violence against them and which assigns children to an inferior position compared to adults, with fewer social rights and less legal protection. This prevalent hierarchical belief forms a root cause of many forms of violence against children including sexual and online aspects and faith communities must take responsibility for their role in indirectly perpetuating these relational norms and take steps to change this.[35] Behind these theologies, sits the spectre of God imagined as a violent parent, and this image must be deconstructed at its roots by theologians if adults are not to feel justified in reinscribing these hierarchies in their own lives.

Promising initiatives are emerging in this respect. For example, the World Council of Churches has invited all its members worldwide to create local child-friendly congregations that place child protection, participation and creation of a world fit for children as its centre.[36] Spiritual rituals with, and for, children such as baptism, eucharist and confirmation can also be used as places to reinforce these child-centred messages, as well as refuting religious messages and dogmas about silent obedience to family adults in the light of the realities of child abuse. Faith leaders must better recognise that children's perceived religious duties to 'always honour your father and mother' must never be interpreted in one-way forms that become harmful to the child but must be situated within a two-way commitment to mutual respect. Family is seen as 'sacred' in many religious traditions, creating unregulated spaces for abuse by parents or extended family and preventing reporting by others.

Third, faith leaders have access and influence not only to children but also to those who are potential and actual perpetrators. They hold unique spiritual authority to speak about sin, to engage perpetrators for change and to break the silence on these issues in ways that centre the safety, dignity and participation rights of all children. Many members of faith communities still hold harmful theological beliefs about children and their badness, proper place or need for silence that perpetuate violence.[37] As a result, faith leaders can play an authoritative role in dismantling entrenched beliefs that some forms of violence are acceptable, that the online realm is somehow not 'real'

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[35] Ibid: note 9. Palm 2019b: 1.
[36] World Council of Churches 2018.
[37] Trofgruben 2018.

violence, that children should be seen and not heard, or that unquestioning obedience to adults is required. However, to do this, faith leaders will have to be equipped to reinterpret many stories within their sacred texts which treat children as disposable possessions of their parents and other adults. They need to find new ways to read these stories with children to develop liberating theologies of the child. The opportunity exists to develop positive connections between child protection and participation and faith that enables sacred text reflections on dignity, justice and peace with children involved as a central part of these moral reflections.[38] Faith communities can help develop alternative religious and cultural rituals that do not endorse harmful practices but place the best interests of the child at the centre and change the hierarchical paradigms of adult power-over children as God-ordained:

> The way that certain patriarchal religions conceive the world is that there is a hierarchy... someone at the top...in charge, they are punitive, powerful, in control and if you don't do what they say you are going to get thumped in one way or another[39]

At the heart of reshaping the underlying attitudes and behaviours that often lie beneath patterns of violence against children, is making a shift away from hierarchical relationships of fearful respect, ownership and power over children who are still often seen as second-class persons who are 'less than' or beneath adults to instead build trusting relationships of child nurture and growth. These can open up spaces for children to participate safely in their families, communities and nations and to enable them to speak up in both online and offline spaces without the fear of punishment or abuse. Ingrained notions of one-way respect and obedience shaped by religious and cultural scripts need recalibration into new patterns of mutual respect, seeing and listening between adults and children within a commitment to do no harm.

Faith traditions have the potential to nurture children's voices and their active participation as part of enabling spiritual and moral responsibility as well as supporting a participatory intergenerational approach between adults and children, especially in families. However, much current religious engagement with children still revolves around the spiritual requirements of passive, respectful behaviour towards all adults (and God). Social norms are a key factor underpinning the social tolerance of, or silence around, violence against children, especially taboo areas such as family-related

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[38] Ott 2019.
[39] cited in Palm 2019b.

sexual violence. These norms can act as a major factor in the vulnerability of children and the continuation of violence. Jamieson et al. note that:

> Social norms that consider children as the property of their parents and not as rights holders can place children at risk of physical violence and promote a culture of silence that hinders reporting. The low status of children, evidenced by the widespread belief that children should not question the authority of their elders, disempowers children and leaves them vulnerable to abuse and neglect[40]

At the centre of Christian faith, is the bold confession that God became a vulnerable child and experienced human life, including the early terrors of a refugee childhood at risk of violent death and abuse. This God then not only welcomes children but makes the child a 'sacrament' or sacred symbol of the kin-dom or community of God. Jesus insists that it is only when adults honour and respect children and identify with the child in themselves that they can learn how to participate in kin-dom existence which turns existing patterns of power in his society upside down.[41] In this way, Jesus also makes the child's status the touchstone for all Christians seeking abundant life. If we take seriously Jesus' words to receive each child in his name as Christ, then all Christians share responsibility for the fate of all children. This child-centred theology has practical spiritual implications for child protection and for freedom from child abuse and violence in its offline and online forms. In Jesus's own violent death, he stands in solidarity with all victims of violence and abuse to remind survivors they are not alone, and that new life is possible. At its heart, the church founded in his memory is called to be a networked community of care that places those that society deems as weakest at the centre. Its vision stretches beyond the 'local' neighbour only beyond borders considered inconceivable by his own religious tradition – to encompass foreigners, prostitutes, eunuchs, slaves and gentiles. Churches become testimonial spaces for the social freedom that these groups found 'in Christ' and the recalibration of power as a result. The legacy of this subversive spirituality and its contemporary inspiration in the lives of those such as Tutu and Luther-King holds promise for the recognition of churches as testimonial spaces where children's voices and stories are taken more seriously and where bridges not walls emerge between bodies and spirituality.

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[40] Jamieson et al. 2018: 38.

[41] Nessan 2018: 12.

Conclusion

> Safety and security don't just happen, they are the result of collective consensus and public investment. We owe our children, the most vulnerable citizens in our society, a life free of violence and fear[42]

The expanding reality of online and offline child sexual abuse and exploitation can be hard to face. It requires faith communities to confront and confess their own historical failures at times by forming havens for sexual abuse, targeted because of their easy access to children and trusted roles. But this is a hard conversation that must be had, especially since sexual violence has often been further hidden and silenced in this space – due to a history of religious taboos and toxic theology. Breaking the silence is a critical first step if faith communities are to 'do no harm' in this emerging area and instead contribute to nurture human flourishing and moral connectedness in a digital age. The temptation to sweep these hard issues under the rug must be acknowledged as creating silent complicity with patterns of sexual abuse.

However, faith leaders are not alone in this difficult task. They can work together across denominations and faiths, and with other child related sectors to listen and learn from what other experts already know.[43] In fact, faith leaders trying to tackle this issue merely 'in-house' is one of the quickest ways to do more harm. This involves humility. Rather than pointing fingers elsewhere, faith leaders are invited to acknowledge that this challenge affects all faith communities and seek to change together. Religious leaders can play roles across the child protection system especially around prevention at child, family and community levels. They can use spiritual occasions, such as childbirth, baptism or marriage, to involve children's voices, to provide children and parents with information on abuse and neglect, and to incorporate spiritual messages around the protection of children. They can offer ongoing pastoral support for overstretched caregivers and connect them to informal support or formal services. Opportunities for caregivers to share challenges and accomplishments and to support each other can also be rooted in faith communities. At the same time, theologians must critically explore how different forms of violence against children are understood in their traditions, highlight sacred texts and teachings that promote the protection of children and challenge those which can be misused to do harm.

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[42] Mandela 2002.

[43] Ligiero et. al. 2019.

Finally, faith leaders can use not only their access to communities and their social resources, but also engage the spiritual aspects of this issue as a unique theological task. The spiritual power of *God* has at times been misused as a form of blasphemy that is still harming children today. This image of God as a violent adult needs to be deconstructed and reconstructed in ways that stretch into digital realities today across theologies of human dignity, sex and gender and liberating child centred theologies including the spiritual endorsement of harmful patterns of sin, suffering, obedience and submission.

This paper concludes with some final questions for future engagement. Do people feel less accountable to God or others for their behaviour *online* due to its hidden nature and the idea that it is 'not real' but merely fantasy, even if there are real children being harmed in these interactions? How do long-established hierarchical power dynamics around God and humans, men and women, adults and children, rich and poor play out in new ways in these online spaces and how can these be first confessed, understood and recalibrated in the light of global commitments by senior faith leaders to end online child sexual abuse? How does increased access to sexualised, digital images by, and of, children shape children's own understanding of sexual realities in potentially harmful ways for their embodied sexual development? Can healthy spiritualities be developed within digital realms that offer a more networked, fluid and interactive engagement between adults and children seeing them both as full participants in this web of connection in ways that disrupt our digital webs of harm. The reality of online CSEA confronts faith communities with hard questions for 'theologies of the digital' to engage.

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