

‘Sorry seems to be the hardest word’

an exploration of a case of emotional abuse by church hierarchy

“You will never know what it took to tell you, but you will also never know the hurt you and your suffragan have caused me by doing absolutely nothing about it.”

Matthew Ineson

### **Waiting for apologies**

Many victims of abuse in the church have not been properly heard or responded to when they disclosed; there are a number of reasons for this including ignorance, fear, disinterest, or there may be collusion with the perpetrator. In the case of the church hierarchy any of these may apply, but I am suggesting there are also deeper reasons, and it is these that I look to explore in this paper. Baffled by what seems such inhumane behaviour one can oversimplify, reducing explanations ‘just’ to external events with associated solutions. A ‘lessons learnt review’ might advocate for example, further safeguarding training, however, often there is a more complex mixture of the personal and collective going on which includes the psychological, sociological, and cultural. My suggestion is that the not responding appropriately, or, even at all, is a form of dehumanisation, where the person who has been abused is ostracised in the mind of the person hearing about the abuse. The member of the church hierarchy immediately dissociates themselves from the disclosure; there is a moral disengagement. This paper explores why, and as illustration draws extracts mainly from the experiences of Matthew Ineson as reported in the IICSA hearings of July 10<sup>th</sup> 2019, because this represents an especially painful example.<sup>1</sup>

Ineson firstly disclosed in 2012 that he had been raped in 1984 by the Revd Trevor Devamanikkam, a Church of England vicar. When he disclosed to the church hierarchy Ineson was himself a vicar, and he told the following bishops: Peter Burrows (June 2012), Steven Croft (December 2012), Martyn Snow (January 2013), Steven Croft (February 2013), Steven Croft (June 2013), John Sentamu (June 2013), and, Glyn Webster (June 2013). Ineson said, ‘None of them took appropriate action on my disclosure. The re-abuse I have suffered as a result of the negligence of some of these bishops since my disclosures can only be described as wicked.’ He continues:

The only person who did respond was the Archbishop of York, who wrote back and said, “Thank you for copying me into the letter, which I have read. Please be assured of my prayers and best wishes during this testing time”, and he did nothing.

In 2017 Ineson wrote to Justin Welby, the archbishop of Canterbury, for the 13th time, saying:

The Church of England has made me fight at every step to try to achieve both justice and the further prevention of abuse by my abuser. By doing this, you have added to my abuse. The bishops have actively colluded together to attempt to ignore, discredit and get rid of me.<sup>2</sup>

Because of this inaction and before the trial against his abuser, (abandoned because of Devamanikkam's suicide), Ineson made a number of complaints under the Church of England Clergy Discipline Measure (CDM) against the bishops to whom he had disclosed, and who had taken no action. These were dismissed for being filed outside a time limit of one year; worth noting is that each bishop objected to any time extension. One incident, amongst many, was the admission by the Bishop of Doncaster who in November 2017 was heard in a café discussing and laughing about Ineson's abuse; Peter Burrows then blamed Ineson for this 'lapse of judgement'. This became a separate CDM complaint under a breach of the Data Protection Act, but the Archbishop of Canterbury decided to take no action.

### **Dehumanisation, moral disengagement, ostracism**

Ubuntu: "It is about the essence of being human . . . my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours. When I dehumanize you, I inexorably dehumanize myself."

Desmond Tutu (Bantu philosophy)

Child abuse is by definition an abuse of power, and the lack of response and apology by the church hierarchy to victims classifies as emotional abuse which also is an abuse of power. The way the church hierarchy often responds to disclosures replicates the mind-set of the original perpetrator of the abuse. As has been discussed elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> such abusive power includes personal narcissism, and in the institutional church this can be seen as collective narcissism. Similarly, the individual solipsism of the abuser is replicated in episcopal solipsism in dealing with events; there is both personally and collectively a fall-back position of self-justification.

Dehumanization has been defined as the denial of uniquely or fundamentally human characteristics to another. It is well documented in a range of contexts including moral atrocities, and, as the quote by Desmond Tutu highlights, has also a corrosive effect on the perpetrator. For the Bantu word "Ubuntu" means "I am because we are." It highlights the fact that not only do we exist in relationship with others, but we need others to feel that they are human so we can feel human too. If we treat others without respect or harm them, then one's own humanity is reduced. The way that the bishops and archbishops responded to Ineson says much about their own qualities: personally, and as a collective.<sup>4</sup>

Dehumanization is also about moral disengagement. Traditionally, churches have been marked out by their explicit moral purpose, and clergy – especially bishops – been widely perceived as beyond reproach. The experience of many survivors, including Ineson is that:

In the context of child sexual abuse, the church's neglect of the physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of children and young people in favour of protecting its reputation was in conflict with its mission of love and care for the innocent and the vulnerable. ... Senior church leaders were now "saying the right things, but lasting change will require more than platitudes".<sup>5</sup>

Moral disengagement was demonstrated by all those to whom Ineson disclosed. Bishop Peter Burrows ('all the time he's clock watching') said, "Well, thank you for telling me", and left'. With Bishop Steven Croft, on the first occasion Ineson said,

"Did Bishop Peter tell you about ... my own disclosure to him of my own abuse?", and he used what I call the stock Anglican answer: "I can't remember". Because they can never remember anything when it chooses. And I told him everything. ... and he said, "I'm sorry, I've got a meeting to go to, I've got a meeting to go to", and couldn't get off the phone quick enough.

The second time Ineson repeated the disclosure to Croft he claimed not to remember the first, stating: "I can't quite remember". So I told him everything again, and he did nothing.'

Such shocking moral disengagement from the apparent arbiters of morality suggests that at that moment the bishops convinced themselves that ethical principles did not apply in that particular context, and mentally disabled any self-criticism. Moral disengagement is the process by which an individual convinces themselves that ethical standards do not apply to them within a particular situation or context. For example, the lack of response when disclosed to, and the later inability of John Sentamu to apologise when invited to do so during the IICSA hearings, illustrates a process of cognitive re-framing to turn the destructive non-responding into somehow being morally acceptable by employing a number of manoeuvres. One was to obscure his personal responsibility by displacing the responsibility onto someone else. Sentamu states: 'and the responsibility actually did lie with the Bishop of Sheffield ... I assumed that the Bishop [of Sheffield, Steven Croft] was going to be doing it'.

Another mechanism for moral disengagement was for Sentamu to obscure the issue by seeing his own behaviour as appropriate and justified. Ineson recounts a meeting with Sentamu following a General Synod presentation where he (Ineson) asked for an apology.

I was approached by John Sentamu [Archbishop Sentamu], who grabbed me by the shoulder and spoke right in my face. He said that one day we should talk. I responded by saying I was happy to talk and, as I lived only half an hour away, I would be happy to come to him. He then said we should pray together. I told him this would never happen, but I would be happy to talk to him. He then asked me what I wanted and I told him an apology. He said apologies mean different things to different people and that I had put a boulder between him and I. I told him that the only thing in front of him was the hope that he would one day answer for his actions. He shrugged, let go of me and walked away.

Questioned about this encounter at the IICSA hearing Sentamu answered:

If that's how I behaved, it's totally inappropriate. It would be totally inappropriate. But I – the room was a very small room and there were about probably 40 people there, a room which should be occupied by around 15 people. I was on my way out, but, as you know, with people so close to one another, he said to me – I said hello, and then he said to me, “All you need to do is apologise. Apologise. Apologise”. And I said, “Well, I hope one day we will be able to sit down and say a prayer together”, in a sort of a – maybe I think I shouldn't probably have done it. I took him to be an honourable man, and so I put my hand on his shoulder and said, “I hope one day we will be able to meet and say a prayer together” and I left, and there were witnesses there that day.

This account not only reveals a further abuse of episcopal power, but also excusing the behaviour by details (the size of the crowded room) that minimize and obscure the central issue. Sentamu employs what is called ‘euphemistic labelling’ by using language to reshape Ineson’s experience and associated emotions, and disguising any harm done by giving his – Sentamu’s actions – a respectable status, (“I took him to be an honourable man”). In the final questioning, a panel member at the IICSA hearing asks Sentamu: “is there any impediment in the collective church mind that prevents an apology to Mr Ineson for that original abuse?” Sentamu, in his response, uses the classic mechanism of moral disengagement by attributing blame and so dehumanizing the victim: ‘[T]he review hasn't happened. ... It's still, I think, waiting on Mr Ineson agreeing the terms of reference for this particular review.’

No actions were taken after any of Ineson’s disclosures. There was silence and he was ostracised by the church hierarchy in the sense that his disclosures of abuse were ignored, and his calls for help were rejected. Ostracism is seen as a silent, cold, violence as the person is given little or no attention, and it is a favourite tactic of workplace aggression. It has been described as ‘an invisible form of bullying’ and research shows that ostracization is contagious.<sup>6</sup>

### **Why does the church hierarchy behave like this?**

Ineson, when seen as an ordained colleague elicited relationship with and empathy from the church hierarchy: for example, at the IICSA hearings Ineson describes the archdeacon’s and bishop’s sympathetic responses and appropriate reactions to a break-in at his home, however, once Ineson was seen as a victim of clergy abuse the empathy stopped. Why? Research suggests that having concern for another person’s well-being is stronger when the cause of a person’s need is attributed to external factors, and so beyond their control – such as a burglary. This leads to a desire to affiliate with the victim – perhaps there for the grace of God syndrome. However, the empathetic response may not be present when what has happened is consciously or unconsciously ‘judged’ as internally attributed, which may elicit a ‘they deserved it’ attitude.<sup>7</sup>

Does this mean that the church hierarchy have a victim-blaming mentality? In other words, these members of the church hierarchy disclosed to could not, or would not connect with what had happened to Ineson, and instead distanced themselves by seeing Ineson the victim as 'other'/less human. The 'other' against which the bishops defined themselves. Thus, the part in each bishop that might have identified with Ineson as he disclosed, was immediately repressed, denied and projected back into Ineson. It was also a collective episcopal denial of responsibility, and a group think that precluded any moral engagement. By 'othering' Ineson as victim in contrast to when he was seen as purely a colleague, he was no longer a responsibility.

Keeping emotional distance from someone in this way means that the perceived identities remain static: the victim remains victim, and the bishop remains bishop, locked in an unequal relationship where the social hierarchies of the institutional church are both explicit and also inherently assumed, and by which each role and identity is defined. Interestingly, such a process of creating emotional distance (referred to as distantiation) is both psychological and social, whereby some quality in the 'other' or group of others – in this context as victim of clergy abuse is seen as undesirable. 'Othering' thus sets up a superior self/in-group of important bishops who are not sexually abused (or who have not acknowledged their own trauma), in contrast to an inferior other/out-group of unimportant or undesirable people who have been sexually abused, perhaps this helps explain the poor collective response of the church hierarchy. There is a strong need for self-affirmation and self-worth amongst the bishops that seems to have driven the process of 'othering', and so dehumanising someone whose disclosure appeared to threaten each individually, and in some way collectively threatened the established order.

By 'othering' Ineson the bishops did not need to think about the disclosure at all, and so did not need to feel empathy or have any insight. After all, thinking about someone is in itself an emotional experience involving trying to understand and know the other person, and in turn knowing a bit more about oneself. If someone is thinking about us as we speak or meet with them, and is paying attention and trying to understand, then this transforms the conversation. In turn we pay attention, listen and try to understand their response, and this means there is a dialogue and relationship. If the victim discloses and the person does not listen, think or respond then – so, as with the original abuser, the victim is left entirely feeling the distress – it remains uncontained. For disclosing is an attempt to find somewhere to contain and manage the violation that has taken place. Without this there is a state of further confusion and disintegration, where the victim is left in despair, and, isolated in what has become an abusive universe.

The bishops seemingly full of moral superiority by their non-response made any thoughtful connection impossible. The implicit assertion of moral superiority but without any morals, further interferes with any thinking about what is happening. As with the abuser, so the bishops not hearing Ineson were full of themselves, and their needs, and so once again an

abuse of power took place. This state of mind has been referred to as ‘viewing events from a god vertex’.<sup>8</sup> There may also be a link to a crude fallacy found in parts of the Old Testament that people in some way ‘deserve’ what happens to them because they are ‘sinful’, and therefore other people have the right to make such judgement. Jesus firmly negates such assumptions in Luke 13, 4-5. The bishops would deny such atavistic fallacies, but is it perhaps possible that hearing a disclosure of sexual abuse by a clergy colleague leads to such anxiety that crude assumptions reassert themselves? Or is the subject of sex so problematic/embarrassing for the church that it obscures the crime that has taken place? Is there an unconscious wish to punish the victim who raises the subject of abuse? People who know little on the subject of sexual abuse (despite probably having done a basic safeguarding training) can sometimes make ignorant and immediate judgements – such as the abuse could have been stopped, why didn’t the victim say something before, did they lead the abuser on, is it made up and so on. This is not thinking but prejudice, and a defence against making connection with the victim and having a ‘felt’ experience of the pain of the other person.

The lack of response by *all* the bishops and archbishop disclosed to by Ineson can be seen as unpremeditated group think. It is almost as if there was an episcopal collective consensus without any critical reasoning or evaluation of the consequences or alternatives, but based on a common desire not to upset the status quo and reputation of the church. As has happened in so many similar situations in the church, an apparently well-intentioned group ignored the ethical and moral consequences, and so participated in further emotional abuse. It could be said that the house of bishops as a body suffers at times from group think which has been defined by Irving Janis as ‘a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members’ strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.’ This is characterised by illusions of invulnerability, alongside a belief in the inherent morality of the group justified by collective rationalisation and practice of out-group stereotypes (in this context attitudes to victims of clergy abuse).<sup>9</sup>

## **The implications**

‘Silence is the most perfect expression of scorn.’

George Bernard Shaw

The implications of non-responding for the person disclosing are inevitably entirely negative; this is because ignoring and non-recognition are clearly and essentially hostile and destructive. The one giving the silent treatment, whether it’s not answering a letter or email, turning away in the middle of a conversation, or pretending not to hear gets to feel in control. One difficulty is also that there is an inherent ambiguity for the victim who may not be certain about whether a response will eventually happen, or whether the situation is due to a misunderstanding or communication difficulties, and, if ignored, what the underlying motivations might be. In not explaining why they are behaving like this the perpetrator delivers particular pain. The message is loud and clear: “You do not matter.” The emotional

abuse that results have significant psychological consequences which include lowered self-esteem and a lessoned sense that life is meaningful.

Williams in his research on the process of ostracism describes three stages: the initial acts of being ignored or excluded, coping, and, resignation. The initial response is painful as it threatens a sense of belonging alongside self-esteem; it is also humiliating. Coping is the second stage where perhaps the victim tries harder to be noticed; but many may not have the will to continue coping as the pain lingers and so they give up. The third stage is called resignation when anger and sadness increase; but this in the long term can lead to feelings of alienation, depression, and helplessness.<sup>10</sup>

The implications for those who are not responding are also serious, and can be explored in a spiritual sense as individual wrong-doing, and, also, what appears to be a state of collective corruption. If the dehumanisation and ostracism of survivors by the church hierarchy is looked at as wrong-doing, as a sin, they are sins that have been collectively repeated and deepened over time. Fr Jorge Bergoglio, before becoming Pope Francis, wrote about sin and corruption seeing the latter as unforgiveable, because at its root was a refusal of God's forgiveness. The corrupted person or organization sees no need for repentance, and their sense of self-sufficiency gradually comes to be regarded as natural and normal. Such collective corruption deepens over time, with those involved completely caught up by money, power, honour or privilege.

To conceal this enslavement, the corrupt energetically cultivate an appearance of righteousness and good manners. Always justifying themselves, they finally become convinced of their own moral superiority.... Enclosed by their pride, they shut out the possibility of grace.<sup>11</sup>

The corrupt in high positions of responsibility are 'triumphantly shameless' offering others the same feeling of superiority and self-satisfaction. Dialogue would only feed the corrupt person or group's self-justification, and so such corruption can only be cured through a crisis which breaks down these defences, defences which Pope Francis referred to as 'a suit of armour and means of self-defence'.

### **Why is it that 'sorry' *seems to be the hardest word*?**

If we say sorry to someone we are recognising and accepting the existence of the other person, and also acknowledging a relationship with them. When we accept the other person, we show respect and see our shared humanity, and see that there is a connection between us. The non-response by the church hierarchy to people when they disclose is a denial of relationship, and a denial of the person's integrity, who is then being given no emotional valence and minimal value. Are those who cannot say sorry on behalf of the church substituting hostility for hospitality, and seeing the other as enemy rather than neighbour? The need is for those in the church hierarchy to reflect on their own preconceptions and those

of the episcopal group, so that if an apology is finally given it is meant and felt rather than ‘just words’.

In June 2021, the current Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, visited Ineson and privately offered a generic apology, but would not agree to have this put in writing and so give a formal public apology on behalf of the church until after a review had taken place<sup>12</sup> – a review that would be controlled by the church and so be ‘a biased internal audit’ rather than set up, as Ineson suggests, in a genuinely independent format agreed by all parties.<sup>13</sup> As Ineson stated: “How on earth can those being investigated appoint the person investigating them and write the terms of reference for that investigation into themselves?”<sup>14</sup>

At the November 2021 meeting of the General Synod of the Church of England Justin Welby stated that the church is a church that apologises when it gets it wrong. If so Ineson comments, ‘where is the personal, long promised, apology for the abuse and treatment I, and many others have suffered? I’ve waited for years. It is shabby and shambolic’.<sup>15</sup> In his attached document he writes of the sadly typical way that victims are treated. In his case it also includes promises of apologies from the archbishop of Canterbury which never occurred, and promises of letters never written.

Whilst sorry *seems* to be the hardest word, it belies a deeper and harsher subtext which is the moral disengagement of the church hierarchy from any meaningful involvement with the intricacies of understanding and appropriate responding to safeguarding and accepting the complex needs of victims and survivors. In the end a sincere apology may just *not* be enough, but it could *just be* the very beginning of a dialogue.

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