Exploring a Christology of Safeguarding

David Tombs
University of Otago

Diocese of York Webinar
27 October 2026

Abstract

Two recent publications, *Surviving God: A New Vision of God through the Eyes of Sexual Abuse Survivors* (by Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, 2025) and *Made in God's Image: The Incest Survivor's Embodied Journey from Deicide to Resurrection* (Sumer Bingham Musick, 2026) take survivor perspectives as the starting point for constructive theological reflection. Both books identify the abuse and mistreatment of Jesus during crucifixion as an important Christological resource for further reflection in light of resurrection. This presentation will (1) examine the approach offered in these two works, (2) discuss the evidence of Jesus' abuse that they draw upon (3) explore implications for Christology and for Safeguarding,

Overview

1. Recent work on Jesus' experience of sexualised abuse

2. Examine the evidence for acknowledging Jesus' experience of punitive stripping and forced nudity as sexual abuse,

3. Explore a Christology for Safeguarding

4. Identify pastoral implications for Safeguarding.

Towards a Theology of Safeguarding

2026



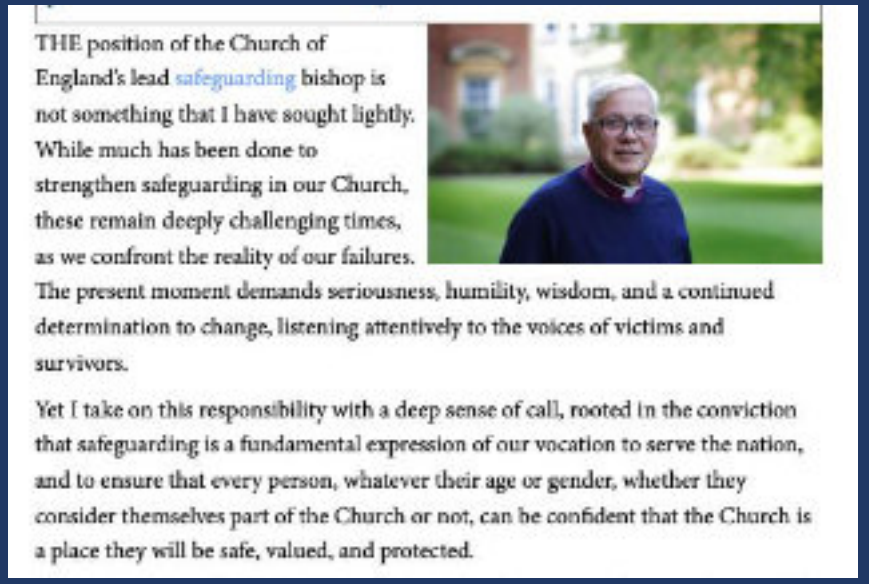
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Safeguarding needs theology

10 APRIL 2026

It is a reminder that this is integral to the life of discipleship, says *Robert Springett*



THE position of the Church of England's lead safeguarding bishop is not something that I have sought lightly. While much has been done to strengthen safeguarding in our Church, these remain deeply challenging times, as we confront the reality of our failures. The present moment demands seriousness, humility, wisdom, and a continued determination to change, listening attentively to the voices of victims and survivors.

Yet I take on this responsibility with a deep sense of call, rooted in the conviction that safeguarding is a fundamental expression of our vocation to serve the nation, and to ensure that every person, whatever their age or gender, whether they consider themselves part of the Church or not, can be confident that the Church is a place they will be safe, valued, and protected.

'safeguarding is rooted in the very essence of what it means to be the Church…To be clear, grounding our safeguarding in our theology does not make us a "special case"; nor does it mean that we approach safeguarding differently from other organisations. Rather, it reminds us that we do this work because it is integral to the life of discipleship — to following Jesus Christ, who gave his life that all might find life. (Rt Revd Robert Robert Springett, Lead Bishop for Safeguarding)

Robert Springett, 'Safeguarding Needs Theology', Church Times (10 April 2026).

Towards a Theology of Safeguarding



CHURCH TIMES

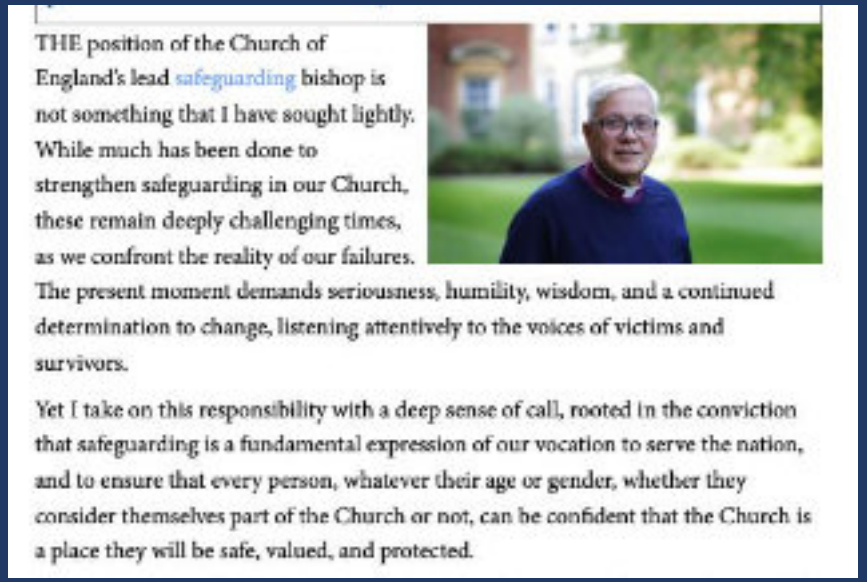
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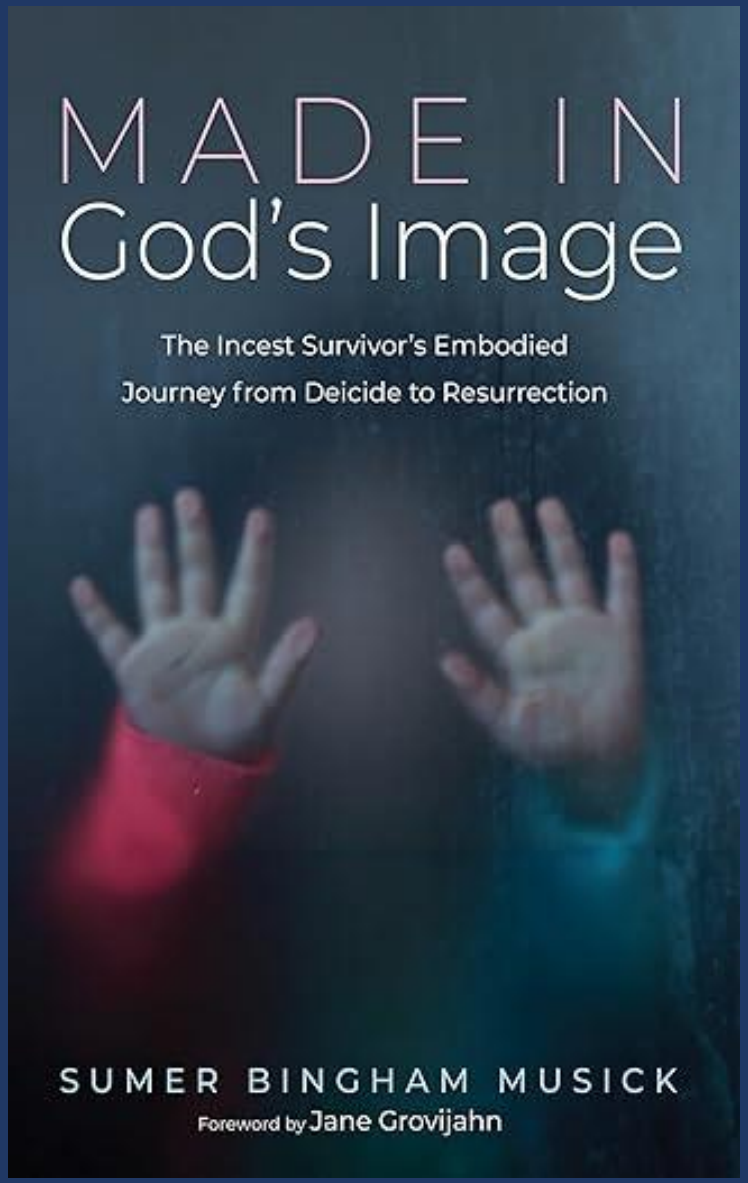
THE position of the Church of England's lead safeguarding bishop is not something that I have sought lightly. While much has been done to strengthen safeguarding in our Church, these remain deeply challenging times, as we confront the reality of our failures. The present moment demands seriousness, humility, wisdom, and a continued determination to change, listening attentively to the voices of victims and survivors.

Yet I take on this responsibility with a deep sense of call, rooted in the conviction that safeguarding is a fundamental expression of our vocation to serve the nation, and to ensure that every person, whatever their age or gender, whether they consider themselves part of the Church or not, can be confident that the Church is a place they will be safe, valued, and protected.

Such an approach also compels us to care for — and to listen attentively to — victims and survivors: those with lived experience of abuse, made in God's image, whom the Church has failed. (Rt Revd Robert Robert Springett, Lead Bishop for Safeguarding)

Robert Springett, 'Safeguarding Needs Theology', Church Times (10 April 2026).

2026





Sumer Bingham Musick, Made in God's Image: The Incest Survivor's Embodied Journeyfrom Deicide to Resurrection (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2026).



The claim that Jesus endured sexual abuse is often met with resistance, shock, and offense. A close reading of the text and analogous historical sources, however, proves the undeniable reality that the crucifixion of Jesus included a sexually abusive component in the form of public humiliation and threat.

Sumer Bingham Musick, Made in God's Image: The Incest Survivor's Embodied Journeyfrom Deicide to Resurrection (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2026), p. 75.



DEATH OF INNOCENCE

After Pilate agrees to the demands of the crowd, Jesus is handed over to be tortured and crucified. It is in this space that a death of innocence occurs as Jesus is stripped, beaten, and publicly sexually humiliated. Matthew states:

Sumer Bingham Musick, Made in God's Image: The Incest Survivor's Embodied Journeyfrom Deicide to Resurrection (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2026), p. 75.



Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus in to the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They *stripped him* and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. They spit on him and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, *they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him*. Then they led him away to crucify him. As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. They came to a place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull"). There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. When they had crucified him, *they divided up his clothes* by casting lots.[20] (Matt 27:27–35)

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In both Matthew and Mark, Jesus is violently and publicly stripped three times. In the Gospel of Matthew (included above), emphasis is added to highlight this public stripping. First, Jesus is stripped and clothed in a scarlet robe. A crown of thorns is placed upon his head as he is mocked, spat upon, and beaten. He is then stripped a second time. The scarlet robe is torn from him and he is dressed again in his own clothing. He is then led away to be crucified. At some point, likely just before he is crucified, he is stripped again for the third time and crucified nude. Matthew states, "When they had crucified him they divided up his clothes by casting lots" (Matt 27:35).

Sumer Bingham Musick, Made in God's Image: The Incest Survivor's Embodied Journeyfrom Deicide to Resurrection (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2026), p. 76.



While the biblical text clearly states that Jesus is publicly stripped three times, it also states that Jesus is led into the Praetorium and the "whole company of soldiers" gathered around him. He is a grown man, publicly stripped, beaten, spat upon, mocked, and surrounded by a company of soldiers. It is not outside the realm of possibility that he also endured sexual assault. Sexual assault (that is, physical sexual violation) was another standard practice in crucifixion.[27] It was not the exception. The social awareness of this context "was often an important part of this humiliation."[28] There is not enough information from the biblical text to determine if Jesus did, indeed, experience sexual assault. At the very least, the threat of this type of violence was palpable.

Sumer Bingham Musick, Made in God's Image: The Incest Survivor's Embodied Journeyfrom Deicide to Resurrection (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2026), p. 77.



The public stripping of Jesus is a violation of his body intended to invoke feelings of fear, vulnerability, and shame. It was an attempt to emasculate, humiliate, and degrade him. While common interpretations often minimize the element of public sexual humiliation, it should be noted that if this act occurred in modern society, it would quickly be labeled as sexual violence. And, contextually speaking, the sexual threat was all too real. The sexual abuse of Jesus is a truth hidden in plain sight that has gone ignored for centuries. Even artistic representations of the crucifixion commonly depict Jesus covered in a loincloth to preserve his dignity and shield human sensibilities.

Sumer Bingham Musick, Made in God's Image: The Incest Survivor's Embodied Journeyfrom Deicide to Resurrection (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2026), p. 77.



The body of Jesus is God incarnate. As such, Jesus is commonly associated with elements of purity, holiness, goodness, innocence, and chastity. Jesus was also human, and in the passion, he suffered some of the worst abuses of human power. What did his body endure in these moments? As blows rained down upon him and insults were hurled in his direction, did he stay present? Did he feel every strike and every bead of blood as it carved a path down his body? Did he try to hide his nakedness from onlookers? From family and friends? Could he feel his wounds throbbing under the sun as he stumbled toward Golgotha? Or did he dissociate? Did he simply endure, placing one foot in front of the other as well as he could, marching toward his death?

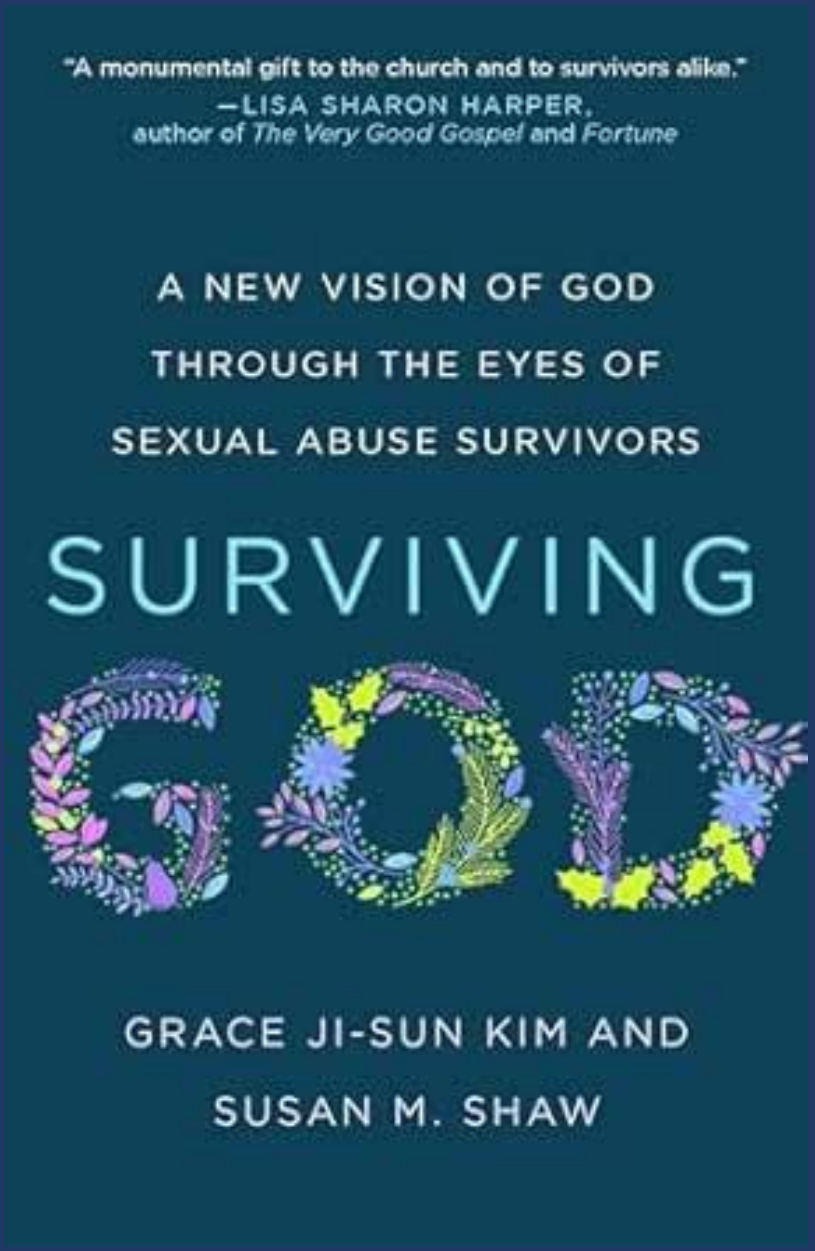
Sumer Bingham Musick, Made in God's Image: The Incest Survivor's Embodied Journeyfrom Deicide to Resurrection (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2026), pp. 77-78.



The chaste innocence and purity associated with God incarnate are wounded at this moment. The techniques of the oppressor aimed at violating and dehumanizing the body are effective. His nakedness and supreme vulnerability are largely met by a taunting crowd that does not see him as pure, innocent, or godly. They do not see him as made in God's image. Does this dehumanization leave him feeling broken, dirty, less than, and ashamed? Victims of incest report strongly experiencing these feelings. A companion can be found here in Jesus.

Sumer Bingham Musick, Made in God's Image: The Incest Survivor's Embodied Journeyfrom Deicide to Resurrection (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2026), pp. 77-78.

2024





Grace Ji-Sun Kim



Susan M. Shaw

Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, Surviving God: A New Vision of God through the Eyes of Sexual Abuse Survivors (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2024).

CHAPTER 8

Jesus the Survivor

Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, Surviving God: A New Vision of God through the Eyes of Sexual Abuse Survivors (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2024), p. 177.



Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan Shaw discuss Surviving God on the Madang Podcast

https://youtu.be/KeDpWmsdCMc

The chapter on Jesus as a likely sexual abuse victim was devastating and yet, in the end, offers believers another reason to love him and to seek to co-create alongside this suffering one a world where no one is ever again abused. … I do say, with all my heart, that Surviving God is an essential book for everyone who cares about the suffering of the innocent and the moral worthiness of this religion called Christianity.

—David P. Gushee, author of Changing Our Mind, After Evangelicalism, and Defending Democracy from Its Christian Enemies

Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, Surviving God: A New Vision of God through the Eyes of Sexual Abuse Survivors (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2024), Endorsements.

Shaw, 'Why has no one ever told me this before?'

Susan: In all my years in church, in seminary, in teaching religion, no one ever suggested to me that Jesus had experienced sexual abuse and sexual assault. The first I heard of this was when I started researching this book and read the historical scholarship on crucifixion. Realizing that Roman soldiers in all likelihood sexually assaulted Jesus was like a gut punch. My sorrow for the beaten, battered, crucified, and sexually assaulted Jesus nearly overwhelmed me. He had suffered the humiliation and trauma of sexual abuse amid his torture, and I felt a new kind of grief for him . . . and another layer of anger at what the church had covered up. I felt again like my students in Feminism in the Bible who often ask, "Why has no one ever told me this before?"

Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, Surviving God: A New Vision of God through the Eyes of Sexual Abuse Survivors (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2024), p. 177.

Kim, 'It would be sacrilegious to even consider this as a possibility'

Grace: Sexual abuse was never talked about in the church or home. It was a taboo subject in Korean American churches and within immigrant homes. Abuse and sexuality are topics which are pushed aside as unimportant. It was believed that if you don't talk about it, it will "just go away." People just felt it was unnecessary to share their own stories of sexual abuse or assault as it would bring shame to them and their families. Due to shame associated with sexual assault, it was never discussed in the church. Everyone was ashamed to talk about such a terrible subject in the church.

Topics surrounding human sexuality, sexual violence, and rape are taboo topics, and as a result, they will never be talked about or associated with Jesus. The mere possibility of sexual violence committed against Jesus was unimaginable. It would be sacrilegious to even consider this as a possibility of what happened to Jesus during the physical abuse before he was nailed to the cross.

Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, Surviving God: A New Vision of God through the Eyes of Sexual Abuse Survivors (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2024), p. 177.

Kim, 'It would be sacrilegious to even consider this as a possibility'

Why hadn't either one of us ever heard that the Romans more than likely would have sexually assaulted Jesus? Why hadn't Sunday school teachers, seminary professors, or pastors talked about this? We imagine a number of reasons behind this, reasons that continue to affect today's survivors—from Christian shame around sexuality to fear of violated masculinity to disbelief that Jesus would have experienced such a thing.

Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, Surviving God: A New Vision of God through the Eyes of Sexual Abuse Survivors (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2024), p. 178.

Kim, 'It would be sacrilegious to even consider this as a possibility'

God does not want us to suffer. God did not want Jesus to experience sexual shaming and assault, and God does not want us to experience these things either. God wants us to flourish and to thrive. God wants to repair the damage we've experienced because of sexual violence. We cannot say that since Jesus suffered it is all right for us to suffer. Rather, we must say that because we see the injustice in Jesus's suffering, we also see it in our own.

Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, Surviving God: A New Vision of God through the Eyes of Sexual Abuse Survivors (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2024), p. 183.

Overview

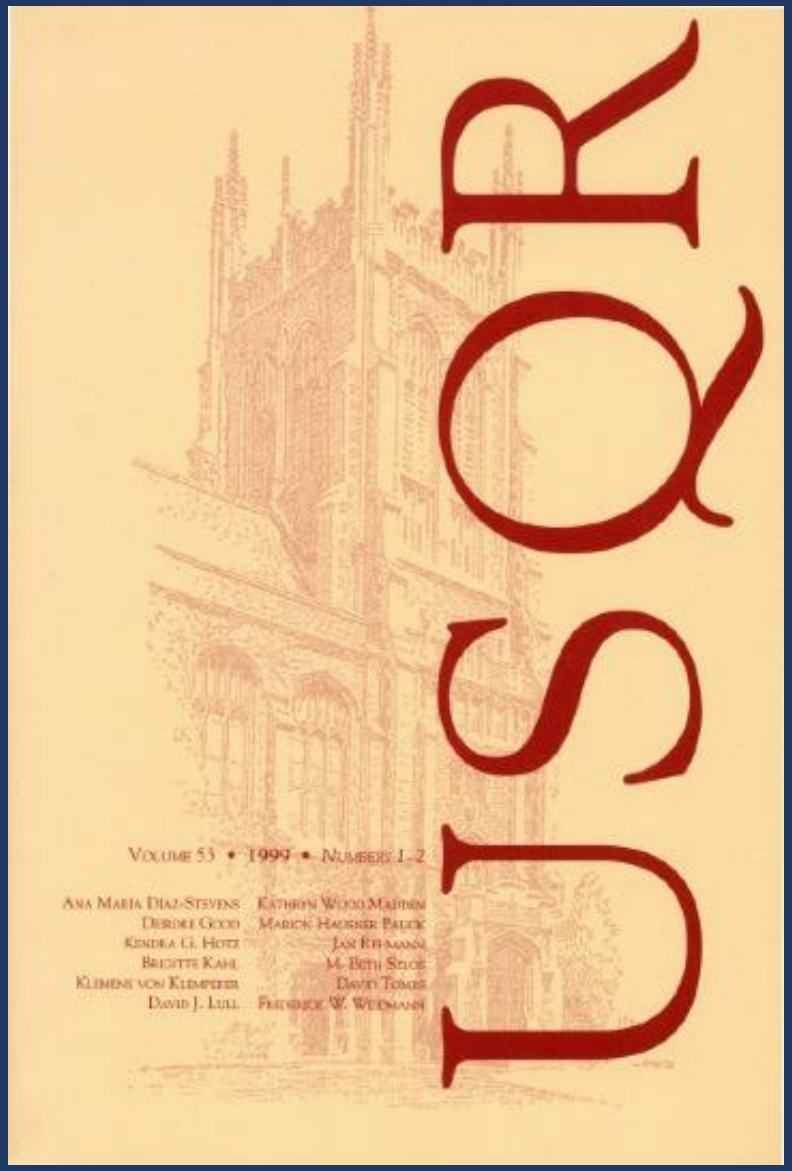
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1999



Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse[1]

David Tombs

THE BIBLE is always read with a context in mind. Assumptions are made about the original social context of the text and these are most often derived—consciously or otherwise—from the current social context of the reader or critic. In recent decades the positive value of recognising these connections has been advocated by contextual theologies in Latin America and elsewhere. Although some critics have rightly cautioned against temptations to superficially equate contemporary social contexts and the biblical world, those committed to a contextual approach have maintained that, when used appropriately, a serious engagement with current social contexts can offer insights into the biblical context and hence into neglected aspects of the biblical text.[2]

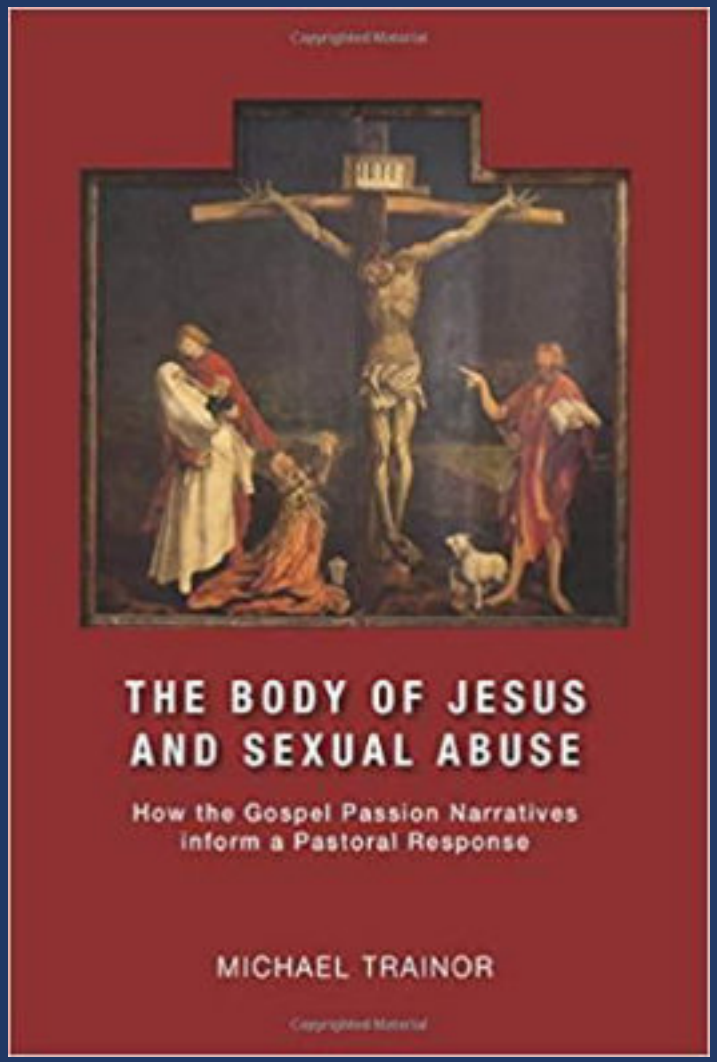
One area in which I believe that shared similarities between past and present contexts can be most usefully investigated is the political arena of state terror and the use of torture for this end. To illustrate this, I suggest that an understanding of how recent Latin American regimes used terror to create fear and promote fatalism provides a context to recognise Jesus' crucifixion in similar terms to state terror. Furthermore, the use of sexual humiliation and violence in Latin American torture raises questions as to

1. A version of this paper was first presented under a different title at the SBL International Conference, 20 July 1998, Cracow, Poland. I am grateful to all those at the conference—and others since then—who have commented on it at different stages.

2. For one of the most sophisticated and sustained developments of a contextual hermeneutic, see C. Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (trans. R. R. Barr; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987 [1978]). Boff's approach recognises both the similarities and the differences between the contemporary Latin American context and the biblical world.

David Tombs, 'Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse', Union Seminary Quarterly Review 53 (Autumn 1999), pp. 89-109.
Open access https://doi.org/10.7916/d8-wypm-vt48

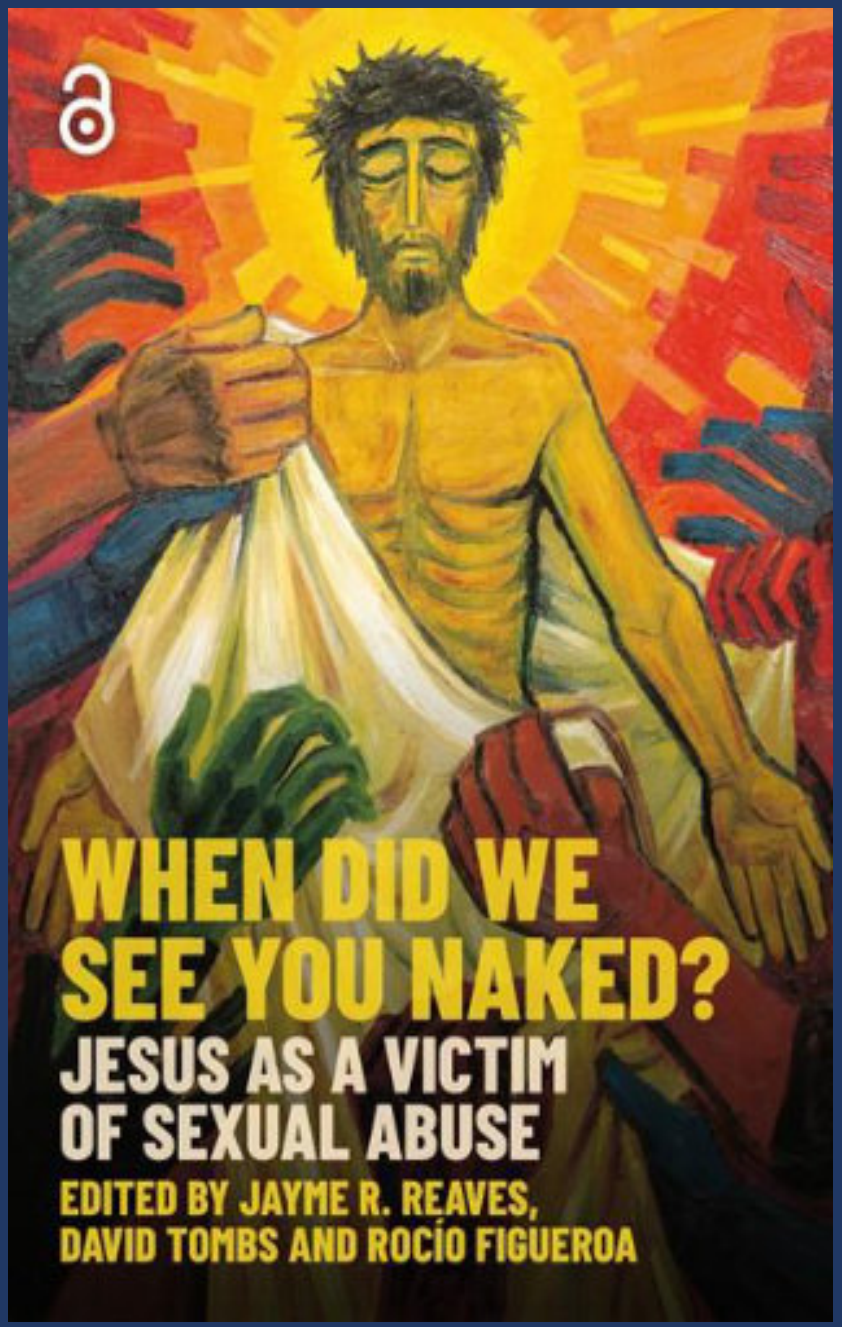
2014





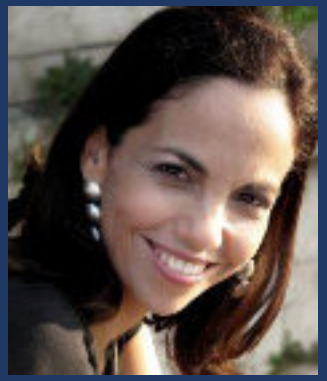
Michael Trainor, The Body of Jesus and Sexual Abuse: How the Gospel Passion Narrative Informs a Pastoral Approach (Melbourne: Morning Star Publishing; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014).

2021





Jayme Reaves



Rocío Figueroa



David Tombs

Jayme R. Reaves, David Tombs and Rocío Figueroa (eds.), When Did We See You Naked?': Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse (London: SCM Press, 2021). Open access https://scmpress.hymnsam.co.uk/media/75584/print_whendidweseeyounaked.pdf

26 So he [Pilate] released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus,
he handed him over to be crucified. 27 Then the soldiers of the
governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they
gathered the whole cohort around him. 28 They stripped him and put a
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Matthew 27:26-31 (NRSV)

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An attentive close textual reading shows:

- Repeated strippings, both explicit and implied
- Organised and orchestrated
- Involved approximately 500 soldiers
- The soldiers were not at a distance but 'on/around/against him'
- Associated with mockery, humiliation, degradation and accompanied by threat of further abuse

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Jesus' Experience and Safeguarding Concerns

1. Punitive stripping and forced nudity
   a) Stripping in the praetorium
   b) Forced nudity at crucifixion

2. Possible further sexualised violence
   a) In the praetorium
   b) At crucifixion

Red = contextually plausible and well-attested

Orange= possible additional abuse, contextually plausible but not directly attested

Overview

1. Recent work on Jesus' experience of sexualised abuse

2. Examine the evidence for acknowledging Jesus' experience of punitive stripping and forced nudity as sexual abuse

3. Explore a Christology for Safeguarding

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A Christological challenge:

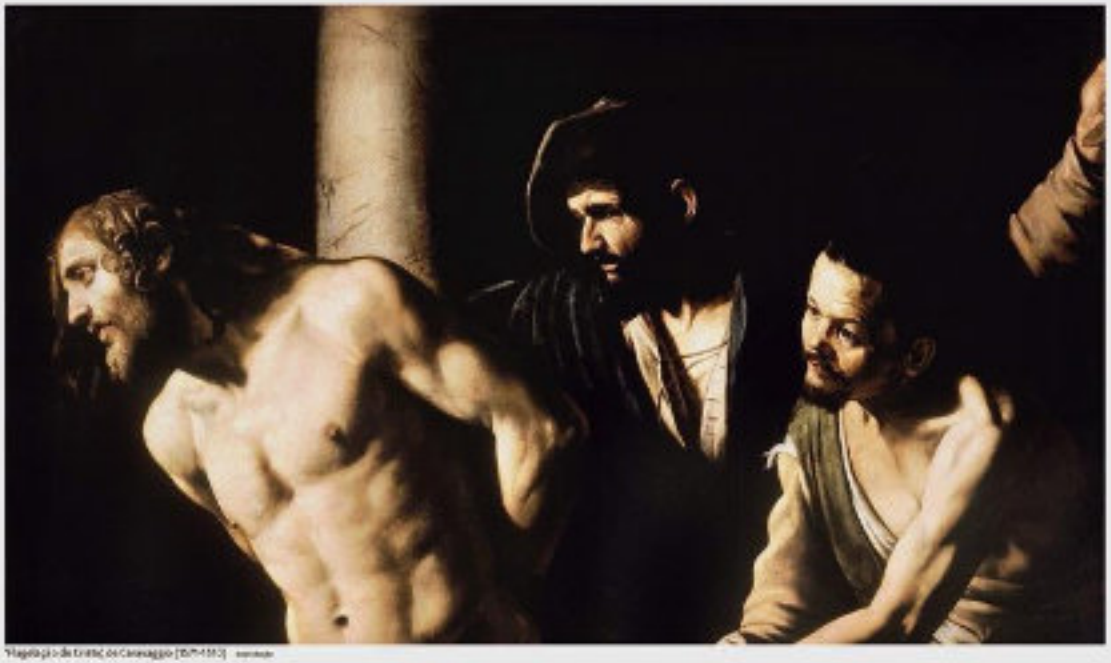
Does an abused Jesus lose his worth?

2022

Corpo, cruz e abuso

[RESUMO] Teólogo inglês defende a tese de que Jesus Cristo foi vítima de abuso sexual antes de ser crucificado. Relacionando os maus-tratos a prisioneiros da era romana e práticas de ditaduras latino-americanas, ele estuda a dimensão sexual da tortura e propõe nova postura das igrejas cristãs

Por **Márvio dos Anjos**



"Flagelação de Cristo", de Caravaggio (1571-1610)

Márvio dos Anjos, 'Corpo, cruz e abuso', Folha de S.Paulo 10 de Abril de 2022 [Sunday 10 April 2022], ilustríssima. pp. C8-C9.
https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrissima/2022/04/jesus-sofreu-abuso-sexual-antes-de-ser-crucificado-defende-teologo.shtml

Folha de S.Paulo
@folha

Ilustríssima: Jesus sofreu abuso sexual antes de ser crucificado, defende teólogo

Translate Tweet



folha.uol.com.br
Jesus sofreu abuso sexual antes de ser crucificado, afirma teólogo - 09/04/20...
Professor inglês usa trecho bíblico e comparação com torturas modernas para abordar sexualização do martírio de Cristo

2:08 PM · Apr 10, 2022 · Folha com welcome-app 1.0

11:08 pm 9 April Folha tweet (2:08 pm 10 Apr NZ time)
https://twitter.com/folha/status/1512975664059670533



Costa✨Luz da Verdade 🇧🇷
@LuzdaVerdade7

Replying to @andreporci

O ataque ostensivo à figura de Jesus e a fé cristã é pura perversão e expressão do Mal 😖
A horrenda e ofensiva matéria não encontrará eco, pois a Divina Luz 🔑 dissipará esta nuvem trevosa do caos.
Compartilho esta procissão de Domingo de Ramos hoje em Bocaina de Minas-MG 🙏🏆

Translated from Portuguese by Google

The ostensible attack on the figure of Jesus and the Christian faith is pure perversion and expression of Evil 😖
The hideous and offensive matter will not find an echo, for the Divine Light 🔑 will dissipate this dark cloud of chaos.
I share this procession of Domingo de Ramos today in Bocaina de Minas-MG 🙏🏆



folha.uol.com.br

Jesus sofreu abuso sexual antes de ser crucificado, afirma teólogo - O...

Professor inglês usa trecho bíblico e comparação com torturas modernas para abordar sexualização do martírio de Cristo

477 183 426

Lúcy
@Lucia75882649

Replying to @folha

Jamais Deus iria permitir isso, Jamais!!

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Adilson Fabossi
@FabossiA

Replying to @folha

Por que não falam isso de um certo profeta ?
Que Deus lhes traga terror noturno até se arrependerem dessa heresia e blasfêmia.

Translated from Portuguese by Google

Why don't they say that about a certain prophet?
May God bring them night terrors until they repent of this heresy and blasphemy.

12:54 AM · Apr 11, 2022 · Twitter for Android

← Tweet



André Porciuncula ✓
@andreporci

A Páscoa se aproxima e a Folha de São Paulo, como organização criminosa que é, promove esse ataque imundo contra a fé cristã. Farei uma denúncia criminal.

Translated from Portuguese by Google

Easter is approaching and Folha de São Paulo, as a criminal organization, promotes this filthy attack against the Christian faith. I'll file a criminal complaint.

Folha de S.Paulo ✓
@folha

Ilustríssima: Jesus sofreu abuso sexual antes de ser crucificado, defende teólogo

← **Tweet**



Diego Barbosa Fortunato
@DiegoBarbosaFo1

Replying to @folha

Heresia

8:49 AM · Apr 11, 2022 · Twitter for Android



Renata Barbosa
@RenataB88555866

Replying to @folha

Início da semana mais importante pra os cristãos católicos e vcs metem essa! Vcs são DIABÓLICOS! Que desrespeito! Deus fará JUSTIÇA! Eu creio!

Translated from Portuguese by Google

Beginning of the most important week for Catholic Christians and you put this one! You guys are DIABOLIC! What disrespect! God will do JUSTICE! I believe!

1:31 AM · Apr 11, 2022 · Twitter for Android



Michelle Bolsonaro
@MiBolsonaro

Insanidade, cristofobia e falta de escrúpulos.

Não se deixem enganar: de Deus não se zomba. Pois o que o homem semear isso também colherá.

GÁLATAS 6

Translated from Portuguese by Google

Insanity, Christophobia and lack of scruples.

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked. For whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.

GALATIANS 6





Michelle aparece ao lado do marido, o presidente Jair Bolsonaro
Imagem: Reprodução/ Flickr Palácio do Planalto

Conteúdo publicado há 2 meses

Michelle critica teólogo que disse que Jesus sofreu abuso: 'Insanidade'

Do UOL, em São Paulo
11/04/2022 10h07

A primeira-dama Michelle Bolsonaro repostou hoje o print de uma reportagem publicada pelo jornal "Folha de S.Paulo" e criticou a opinião do teólogo inglês David Tombs, de 57 anos, que defende a tese de que Jesus Cristo foi vítima de abuso sexual antes de ser crucificado.

These responses are supported by a Christology that undervalues the humanity of Jesus and assumes the divinity of Jesus must be incompatible with an experience of abuse. The acknowledgement of Jesus as abused is therefore seen as a sacrilegious attack motivated by hatred and 'Christophobia'.

The assumption seems to be that if Jesus was abused then Jesus would no no longer be worthy. He would be damaged and devalued. Rather than seeing the abuse as the problem, this attitude focuses negative judgment on the survivor and reinforces the damage done by abuse.

In response to this Christology, what is needed is a Christology that can recognise Jesus as...

- fully human
- vulnerable
- abused

And despite this…

- Fully divine
- Beloved by God

This Christology would support an honest and compassionate response to abuse in a Theology of Safeguarding.

Overview

1. Recent work on Jesus' experience of sexualised abuse

2. Examine the evidence for acknowledging Jesus' experience of punitive stripping and forced nudity as sexual abuse

3. Explore a Christology for Safeguarding

4. Identify pastoral implications for Safeguarding

Pastoral messages

Messagessome survivors find helpful in a Christology of the abused Christ

- You are not alone
- You are not to blame
- You are made in the image of God and you are beloved by God – and no mistreatment can stand in the way of God's love for you (Rom. 8. 38-39).

Challenges churches might address in response to a Christology of the abused Christ

- Instinctive denial of abuse
- Fear of honest conversations on abuse
- A bolder Theology of Safeguarding

Hope for healing and resurrection



There are no easy answers and quick solutions but …

> But if the Son of God found new life with his wounds, and humanity is made in God's image, then this means we can also flourish. Like the resurrected Christ, we can experience the liberating knowledge of ourselves made in God's image. It is an authoritative embodied truth, made known even in the throes of memory. The *imago Dei* within reminds us that our capacity to remember, know, and love God has not been destroyed by sexual violation. Like the resurrected Christ, it equips one with the power to transform the world. Returning to wonder, the sexually abused survivor meets the resurrected Christ in his lingering wounds.

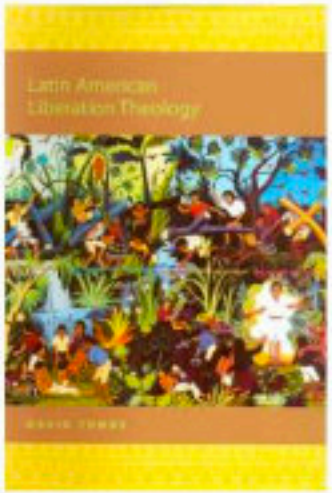
Sumer Bingham Musick, Made in God's Image: The Incest Survivor's Embodied Journey from Deicide to Resurrection (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2026), pp. 165.

Welcome



www.david-tombs.com

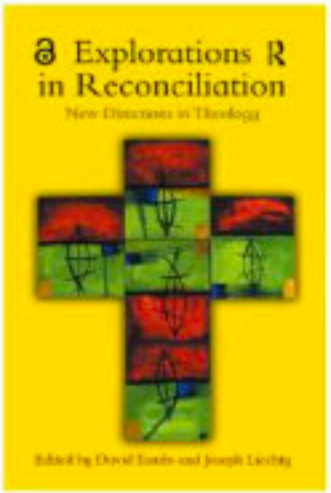
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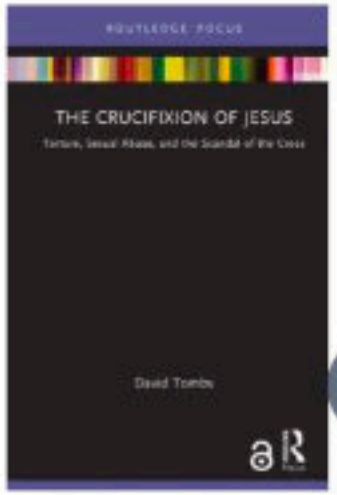
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