

PROBLEM-SOLVING HAS LITTLE TO OFFER IN THE FACE OF EVIL
A BOOK REVIEW

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Gerald A Arbuckle SM, *Abuse and Cover-Up: Refounding the Catholic Church in Trauma*, Orbis Books, 2019, footnotes, index, 226 pages, pb.

Two preliminary comments

The first comment arises from my own experience of appearing as a witness, together with Fr David Ranson, at the Royal Commission on the afternoon of Monday 6 February 2017. Before we took the stand that day, Senior Counsel assisting the Commission, Ms Gail Furness, tabled statistics relating to sexual abuse within the Catholic Church in Australia. Mr Francis Sullivan then responded, representing the Australian Catholic Bishops' *Truth, Justice and Healing Council*. Sullivan broke down more than once as he endeavoured to say what had to be said.

It was a numbing experience. Nothing could have prepared me for that darkest of mornings. And I hasten to add, it was dark primarily because we were confronted by the terrible truth of the many thousands of victims and survivors who had been condemned to shattered lives of pain. It was also dark because the dreadful acts and omissions of people representing the Catholic Church were laid bare for all to see. How could it have come to this?

Many years prior to that morning – in the late nineties – I had begun to question whether or not there was anything about the “Catholic system” that might have been an essential part of the dark reality of sexual abuse by representatives of the Catholic Church. I read and thought and began to write some notes to aid my questioning. I posted some of those early notes on the Aquinas Academy web site – where someone from the Royal Commission found them. That was why I was invited to give evidence. The preliminary headings on those notes seem even more pertinent now, although I have not had the chance to develop them as I would like and as they need to be explored and developed: “Constantinianism”, “Docetism”, “Moralism”, “Clericalism”, “Objectivism” and “Voluntarism”. Each of these headings – and

others I did not write about – demand multi-disciplinary lines of research that are crucial to any understanding of the Church we have inherited, its particular flaws – such as those pertaining to sexual abuse – and the way we might respond to promote reform and renewal. Each of these headings also points to some very complex and, at times, incomprehensible human realities.

The second comment is related to that phrase – “incomprehensible human realities”. There is so much about life in general and sexual abuse in particular that defies our understanding. I was speaking with a forensic psychologist recently who has had over thirty years of experience in this field. He cited a psychiatrists’ text book from 1977 in which the expert said that sexual abuse of girls was very rare, perhaps “one in a million”. We should tread warily, cautiously, when it comes to understanding human beings and their behaviour – especially in matters of sexuality. Dialogue – persistent dialogue – is crucial. Up until the middle of last century, the Catholic Church saw no need for dialogue. We had “the answers”. All the more reason now to search long and hard for the questions, to be wary of having “the answers” in our attempts to address the tragedy of sexual abuse and the need for renewal and reform within the Catholic Church.

Two axioms

One of the facts of life today is the explosion of knowledge and the various disciplines of serious study. There is both danger and opportunity in this. T S Eliot asks good questions:

“Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information.”
(T. S. Eliot, "Choruses From 'The Rock'").

In this context, when we are examining the Church and searching for ways to recover the essence of our faith, there are two particular axioms we ought to bear in mind:

- ***First Axiom: We must listen to the information made available to us from the human sciences***, such as sociologies, psychologies, anthropologies, comparative religion studies, fields of medical research, histories, environmental studies etc. Typically, the Church in the past

has resisted listening to the data coming from these sources. If you already have “the answers”, why do you need to listen to those “outside”?

- ***Second Axiom: We must not let those human sciences define the Church and its path to renewal.*** At the moment, the human sciences have gained the ascendancy as we attempt to deal generally with renewal of the Church and specifically as we face the sexual abuse tragedy. Theologies, biblical studies and spirituality are largely sidelined in the public discourse.

I have it on sound authority, that the Royal Commission, for example, set aside any *theological* contributions. In fact, short of employing theological experts, they had no competence in this area and were therefore entirely correct in setting aside the theological contributions. The Commission was, after all, a legal entity set up by the federal government. Contributions that came, for example, from legal experts and psychologists, were thus readily taken on board. This inevitably shaped the perspective of the Royal Commission and limited its contribution to our efforts at renewal within the Church.

I have continued to explore the theme of “Moralism” from within my field of spirituality. The more I know of it the more I am convinced that it is a crucial factor in the sexual abuse tragedy. It is a massive issue for the Church, with consequences that go to the very heart of what it means to be the Body of Christ in the world. Massimo Faggioli notes one of the implications of moralism:

“The recent attempts to erase synodality from the institutional memory of the Catholic Church are a consequence of the attempts to reduce Christianity to a moral code for the Western world. This moralization of Catholicism entails a certain kind of individualism in Catholicism”
(Massimo Faggioli, “Pope Francis and the Synod: Recovering our History to Reform the Church”, La Croix, Saturday 19 October 2019).

Moralism reduces Jesus to a moral teacher and the Bible to a moral map and all the essential preaching and teaching of the Church becomes focused on “right behaviour” – whatever that might mean. This way of thinking promotes a consciousness dominated by reward and punishment. This is closely related,

both as cause and effect, to our losing contact the mystical heart of the Christian life. Moralism demands a forthright and intelligent response which – while it will necessarily include more than one of the human sciences mentioned above – is first and foremost a matter for the spiritual guides and theologians. Renewal within the Church in general, and the response to the sexual abuse tragedy in particular, will be severely hamstrung if we do not acknowledge and effectively address the destructive forces of moralism. Those forces have dominated the Church for too many generations. The contributions of cultural anthropology in this regard will be useful and welcome.

The book

Arbuckle makes a useful contribution to our efforts to honestly and intelligently address the sexual abuse tragedy and the need for reform and renewal in the Church. The overwhelming number of references he gives is evidence that he has gathered the thinking of many in producing this compendium.

The book, however, claims to be much more than a compendium of information and opinions from the perspective of a cultural anthropologist. The sub-title – *Refounding the Catholic Church in Trauma* – the manner of presenting the material and especially the content of the final chapter – “Refounding the Church: Action Plans and Strategies” – suggest an all-encompassing program for dealing with the tragedy of sexual abuse and renewal and reform within the Catholic Church. There are two main reasons why the book falls short of that aim.

First of all, the book’s problem-solving approach has serious limitations. The renewal of the Church in general and our addressing the awful human tragedy of sexual abuse in particular, cannot be reduced to problem-solving exercises. Any problem-solving we must do, has to be kept in tension with the fundamentally incomprehensible reality of both sexual abuse – survivors and perpetrators – and the Church. The former – the survivors and perpetrators – are not problems to be solved. They are human beings. The latter – the Church – is not an organization just like any other organization. We are the Body of

Christ. We all have lives ultimately far beyond the capacity of any human being to understand in any but a partial way.

The multifaceted, highly complex and as yet not fully understood pathology of sexual abuse within the Church and beyond, will need much more than strategies and action plans. One necessary manifestation of the Church – one that allows it to be viewed like any other institution – is its organization and administrative structure. Problem-solving and coming up with answers can be effective here. In fact, it is urgently needed at the moment. Rightly, there is a search for some answers. But Arbuckle’s book has too many “answers”. It shows little openness for serious dialogue as distinct from merely gathering quotations and references from multiple sources. In particular, the book does not show what Pope Francis calls a “closeness” to or feel for the human. The huge challenge facing us – a challenge that I believe we will be still endeavouring to understand and respond to for generations to come – demands more questions than Arbuckle seems willing to allow.

Secondly, and more importantly, the book fails to engage in substantial dialogue with those fields of knowledge and research that lie beyond the realm of the human sciences. Whilst there are a number of biblical references cited in the book, there is no substantial engagement with biblical scholarship. The critical field of ecclesiology is missing. Spirituality – which is the discipline *par excellence* that deals with the embodiment of the Christ Life – is also missing. These gaps in the book can be seen, for example, in the failure to look more carefully at the meaning of “clericalism”. Under the heading, “Clericalism Defined”, Arbuckle cites the Royal Commission:

“Clericalism is ‘the idealisation of the priesthood, and by extension, the idealisation of the Catholic Church” (p.50).

The Royal Commission’s statement gets nowhere near the heart of the matter. To say that “clericalism is the idealization of the priesthood” is hardly telling us much. The Royal Commission can be excused for its limits in this regard. Arbuckle cannot. We should be able to expect, in a book that purports to comprehensively deal with the sexual abuse tragedy in the Church, that clericalism would be thoroughly examined in its roots and manifestations.

Conclusion

The following statement on page 128 of this book may help to explain some of the difficulties indicated in the foregoing:

“(R)enewal relates to the symptoms of problems, but refounding goes to the root causes”.

A substantial dialogue with the Sacred Scriptures would reveal how facile this statement is. For example, in Ezekiel 36:26 we read God’s promise: “I will create in them a new heart and put my spirit within them”. This theme emerges powerfully at the beginning of the Gospels. An essentially untranslatable word is used: *metanoia*. (I could not find this word in Arbuckle’s book.) We are called by grace to a transformed and transforming life in Christ. This is what Baptism – being “baptized into his death” (cf Romans 6:3) – makes possible. This is our privilege, our responsibility and our possibility. This graced dynamism is very the heart and soul of our life as the People of God.

There is nothing quite like an encounter with a survivor of sexual abuse to give us some perspective here. In the presence of their pain, confusion, anger, sadness, grief, longing and inexpressible suffering, strategies and action plans – necessary and valuable as they might be – seem pathetically inadequate. I conclude with the voice of one such survivor. His name is Graham Caveney. He was abused by Fr Kevin O’Neill SM. Caveney recalls:

“Dealing with abuse means talking about something you don’t want to talk about, telling people things you’d rather they didn’t know. It can feel like a violation, or coercion. It can feel like abuse” (Graham Caveney, *The Boy with the Perpetual Nervousness*, London: Picador, 2017, 233).

He comes to a point in his late adolescence at which he is prepared to speak with a friend about it:

“I mumble something about being in a relationship that I hadn’t wanted to be in. Or had wanted to be in, but only at the beginning. Or not really a relationship, but sort of. But then it went wrong. I went wrong. It got all fucked up. It was my fault” (Ibid).

The friend's response – inarticulate and not the sort of thing said in polite company – means everything to Caveney:

“There's a pause that lasts for about a minute but feels like ten. And then he says, 'Fuck.' 'Fuck' felt right: it still does. It captures the mixture of outrage and futility, an excuse for the jaw to drop and the mouth to remain frozen. It was a 'fuck' that registered disbelief even as it registered the truth of what I was saying, a 'fuck' that acknowledged the impossibility of saying anything else. I've had my share of therapists over the years and not enough of them have said 'fuck'. A few have said 'bastard', which sidesteps the ambiguity and makes me feel bastardized. Most, at some point, have said, 'I'm sorry,' to which I always want to say, 'It's OK, it wasn't you that fucked me.' Their sorrow can often feel like a burden, uncomfortably close to pity. It can float around my digestive tract producing stomach acid, or replay itself resentfully at the back of my eyes. 'Fuck' I still find the most therapeutic, a singular declaration with lots of room for manoeuvre” (Ibid).

We have to spend a lot more time listening to the Graham Caveney's of our world. They are bearers of wisdom that is born of unbearable pain that they must somehow find a way to bear.