

Trials and Tribulations

*Professional and Pastoral Challenges in Prosecuting
Church of England Clergy*

Edited by

Martyn Percy and Anthony Bash

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Prosecuting Church of England Clergy

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Dedicated to Clive Billenness (1954-2025)
and Bishop Alan Wilson (1955-2024),
in gratitude for their tireless campaigning, care, faithfulness,
integrity, and prophetic witness in the Church of England.

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Editors and Contributors

Editors:

Anthony Bash and Martyn Percy co-wrote *Forgiveness, Reparation, and Remorse: Reckoning with Truthful Apology* (Ethics Press International, 2025). They are both Anglican clergy who have written on law, church, polity, moral reasoning and pastoral practice.

Martyn Percy is a Research Professor, Institut für Christkatholische Theologie, University of Bern, Switzerland. He writes on church abuse, including essays on IICSA, Bishop George Bell (Carlile Report, 2017), the Australian Royal Commission (2017), and in *Letters to a Broken Church* (Ekklesia, 2018).

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Contributors:

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Third Reich: Church, State and the Judgement of Nations (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Revd Canon Rosie Harper. Alongside a career in Opera and then Parish Ministry, Rosie Harper has a lifelong commitment to justice, equality, and accountability within Church Structures. She has written, broadcast and lectured in the UK and around the world.

Sarah Horsman MB ChB is a founder member of the Society of Mary and Martha and currently serving as Warden of Sheldon. As part of the charity's work supporting people in ministry at Sheldon and online, she led the campaign "Project CDM – restoring humanity to clergy discipline" which included the research that led to "I was handed over to the Dogs" and ultimately the replacement of the Clergy Discipline Measure. Co-authors are Dr Maureen Wright a historian who holds an MA in Theology, Imagination and Culture from Sarum College (University of Winchester), Rev Canon Dr Lynda Barley PrD in Practical Theology (Anglia Ruskin University) and former Head of Research and Statistics Archbishops' Council, Dr Carl Senior Reader in Psychology in the School of Life and Health Sciences at Aston University and Dr Alena Nash Research Fellow at Northumbria University.

Sister Frances Dominica trained as a nurse at Great Ormond Street and The Middlesex Hospital, and also joined an Anglican religious community, eventually becoming the Mother Superior. In 1982, she established Helen House, the world's first children's hospice, offering respite care, end-of-life care and long-term bereavement support.

Revd Dr Johnny Douglas is an ordained parish priest, researcher, and organisational development practitioner. His doctoral work examines ecclesial health, seeking to understand why some faith institutions flourish while others falter, engaging insights from organisational psychology, trauma studies, and practical theology. His writing combines critical reflection on service, trust, and power with a hope-

ful vision for renewal and reform. He has led across church, charitable, and commercial sectors and is a mediator and executive coach.

Martin Sewell was a solicitor specialising in child protection until his retirement. He served on General for ten years campaigning for proper process for complainants and respondents alike. Pessimistic about the necessary cultural change occurring, he resigned in 2025.

Clive Billenness was a passionate and tireless campaigner for safeguarding reform in the Church of England. A forensic auditor by profession, he used his expertise and positions to question the hierarchy of the Church of England on their safeguarding failures. In particular, Clive challenged the Archbishops' Council's statements on the status of the Independent Safeguarding Board (ISB), long before the Archbishops' Council dissolved the ISB for "being too independent". Clive was a member of the Archbishops' Council audit committee, prior to his death in 2025. His primary concerns remain unaddressed and unresolved.

The Revd. Robert Thompson is a member of the Church of England's General Synod, and priest-in-charge of St James' and St Mary's churches in West Hampstead and Kilburn. He currently serves as a Labour Councillor for Kilburn on Camden Council, London. He is a noted campaigner on LGBTQIA issues and was formerly a Labour councillor in Kensington and Chelsea. He chaired the Grenfell Recovery Scrutiny Committee in the aftermath of the disaster in 2017, which looked at the work of the salvage, reconstruction and renewal programmes.

Foreword

Anthony Bash and Martyn Percy

I have to manage my rage daily and have for some time now been able to contain the boiling fury to a discrete time each day, usually first thing, in order that I can then function for the rest of the day. This does require daily management and is not easy. I still don't know what it is I am meant to have done. I try to put on a brave face for the children, but it's obvious they know something is wrong.

The hard thing in this is that I know the Bishop has joined with my accusers in the parish about the nonsense they claim, and he has not bothered to check with me about what they say. It's lies, all of it – but he won't listen to my side. It's because he wants to get me out.

To be truthful, I admit I daydream about knocking the stuffing out of him. But in my saner moments, I also know that he and the people in the parish are all products of their cultures. They might be monsters in my head, but on the ground, they are flawed, weak people made and formed by the backgrounds and (in the case of the bishop) the weird institution he's part of.

This doesn't excuse any of them one iota from responsibility or liability. But behind all this, giving it oxygen to keep going, is a sick institutional structure run by people who just don't know any better (though God knows, they should!).

I don't know what the future holds for my family or for me, or what the outcome will be, or whether I will just give up and go back to teaching because I can't stand the waiting any longer.¹

¹ The testimony of one clergy survivor of the CDM process in personal correspondence to Anthony Bash and used by permission.

We hope this book serves as a wake-up call to appropriate officers of state and to the Church of England that systemic, structural change is urgently needed in the governance of the Church of England.

The scandal of abuse perpetrated by clergy is well-known. Equally scandalous but less well-known is the way the church² has been dragging its feet in dealing with adequate compensation and justice for the victims of clergy abuse.³ The focus of this volume is on another scandal – the abusive way some clergy have been treated by the church when it comes to (sometimes spurious) allegations of misconduct, and what some regard as the institutional weaponisation of allegations against clergy about safeguarding. The three scandals are interconnected, arising largely from systems of governance, regulation, and oversight that are not fit for purpose.

The scandals reinforce the case for changing the church’s legal framework, as it is not promoting safe governance. In 2024, *The Economist* noted that the 27 recommendations in the *Makin Report* echoed similar suggestions from numerous safeguarding reports over the past 40 years, which the Church of England had either ignored or dismissed.⁴ A few changes have been introduced in recent years, such as the more widespread use of checks with the Disclosure and Barring Service (popularly called “DBS checks”). However, despite the church’s public statements that sometimes consist of no more than well-meaning generalities, there does not appear to be much appetite for swift, measurable reform, even though the church has the legal power to

² By “church” we primarily refer to the Church of England. Some of what we say also applies to other denominations. We make it clear when we are referring to or including other denominations.

³ We discuss this in Bash, Anthony and Percy, Martyn (2025), *Forgiveness, Reparation, and Remorse*, Ethics Press International, pp. 71-74, 102-7, 206-7.

⁴ <https://www.economist.com/britain/2024/11/12/the-archbishop-and-the-abuser>, 12 November 2024. See also Martyn Percy, <https://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/ideas/religion/church-of-england/68523/welby-is-gone-but-trust-in-the-church-is-broken-beyond-repair>, 12 November 2024.

make it and has known for long enough that it has needed to make it. Abuse is still happening.

Good news tends not to make headlines, and no doubt there are pockets of good practice, despite the absence of a robust regulatory and governance framework for the church. Nevertheless, as this volume amply demonstrates, there is plenty of seriously defective practice, suggesting that the church is still not equipped or competent to run and manage its own affairs when it comes to dealing with abuse. The critical reports about the abusive way the church treats its clergy that we include in this volume – the Sheldon Report, the Carlile Report, the Coroner’s report into the death of Fr Alan Griffin, for example – barely made waves and seem to have been institutionally forgotten about. The result is that little seems to change, existing dysfunctional systems have mostly been left in place, and what there is sometimes is not fit for purpose. It doesn’t *have* to be this way, and it seems that for too long the church has failed to take note of what its critics are saying and to introduce in a timely way change that makes a difference.

The seeming uninterest of the church in responding with focused, urgent reforms highlights that the legal framework that sets out how the church governs itself can no longer be relied on as safe and that the church seems to have little inclination to change it. We therefore suggest that it is now up to Parliament to intervene and introduce much-needed systemic, structural change to the church’s governance and legal framework.

More specifically, we propose that the government establish a statutory Public Inquiry (governed by the Inquiries Act 2005) or a Royal Commission to advise on a new governance and legal framework for the Church of England that aligns with contemporary best practice. At the very least, the church needs to be made subject to many of the statutory obligations and duties that are now regarded as essential for regulating good practice and from which the church is currently

exempt. These include the Equality Act 2010, GDPR, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, and the Nolan Principles of Public Life. In addition, the issues highlighted in this volume indicate that the way allegations of clergy misconduct are handled needs radical reform and should be included within the purview of a government enquiry. So too should be the way the church handles allegations of and compensation for sexual abuse by clergy. Overall, the changes must include the church being subject to independent professional scrutiny, oversight and regulation external to the church. The church can't say it hasn't first had its chance to put things right: the critical reports we alluded to above seem to have sunk without a trace, and lessons from previous enquiries into clergy sexual abuse have not been learned. As the pace of change is too slow or not in evidence, it's now up to Parliament to introduce the changes.

We suspect that many of the specific issues we discuss in this volume are common to all churches, as are the issues relating to clergy sexual abuse. Sadly, the Church of England is not alone in having dilapidated governance structures. Perhaps the government can help set the pace for change not only for the Church of England, over which the government has legal oversight, but also for churches independent of the Church of England.

The damage and the human suffering caused by abusive behaviour by the church are scandalous. We hope this book adds to the impetus for government-introduced changes – and justice for all victims of clerical abuse, whether lay or ordained and whether in the Church of England or in another denomination.

Anthony Bash and Martyn Percy

Introduction: Context and Crucible

Martyn Percy and Anthony Bash

“Once a great wrong has been done, it never dies. People speak the words of peace, but their hearts do not forgive. Generations perform ceremonies of reconciliation, but there is no end.” – *Paule Marshall*

Testimonies of sexual abuse perpetrated by clergy are now emerging as a major stream within academic study, popular fiction, history and autobiography. Major inquiries (e.g., such as the *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse*, chaired by Alexis Jay, and the Australian *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* and the Carlile Report into the post mortem (mis)treatment of Bishop George Bell etc.) have exposed and interrogated the failings of churches to safeguard children and adults at risk (also referred to as “vulnerable adults”). To some observers, it may appear as though “the things once hidden in darkness have come into the light” (1 *Corinthians* 4:5).

We are profoundly aware of the lasting damage that clergy abuse has caused to victims, and we are equally aware that no denomination has been left untouched by the scandals of clergy abuse. In our different ways, we have been directly and indirectly involved in supporting victims for more than a decade. The matter is now of widespread public awareness and has been highlighted in books and films. Frederic Martel’s book (2019) *In the Closet of the Vatican* was a major international bestseller. Films such as *Spotlight* (2015), looking at *The Boston Globe’s* work on exposing paedophile priests in the USA, and the *Magdalene Sisters* (2002) have dramatised some of the systemic

abuse perpetrated by churches, and the attempts of churches to direct their resources towards damage-limitation and maintaining their own power and reputation. Another film, *Priest* (1994) dwelt on the tangled inter-weaving of secrecy, sexual orientation and appropriate responses to sexual abuse, when posited in priestly-clerical pastoral responsibility.

However, the burden of this book is somewhat different, as it focuses on the unwarranted prosecution – some might say persecution – of *clergy* when falsely accused, or subjected to the torment of ecclesiastical trials and tribunals that purport to be “due process”. Sometimes, the allegations clergy face are entirely false and motivated by malice. On occasions the ecclesiastical hierarchy will collude with such vendettas out of expediency for the supposed good of the church, apparently following the example of Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest who said of Jesus, “It is better for one man to die for the people than for us all to perish” (*John* 11:50). The complaints clergy sometimes face are arbitrary, petty and trivial, yet the trials and tribulations they are subject to will amount to a process that “strains the gnat whilst swallowing the camel” (*Matthew* 23: 24).

Flawed Processes

The history of denominations in the last thirty years suggests that few denominations, if any, are capable of handling the mistreatment and abuse (sexual and otherwise) of the laity, including children and adults at risk, in a way that is wholesome and just, and that comes close towards being identified as pastoral good practice. Clergy sexual abuse was often swept under the carpet when it was encountered in the church, and victims were subjected to further detriment by denials of responsibility.

Faced with incontrovertible evidence of actual abuse, and with a context in which those claiming abuse must also be heard, many denominations struggled to develop adequate systems of investigation, justice, proportional action and appropriate remedy. The response of churches was often over-hasty and ill thought through. Systems of justice and remedy that are morally, legally and pastorally deficient were set in place. Such systems often make rash presumptions of culpability and guilt (i.e., about the accused) before (or without) due process and weigh up evidence in ways that are naïve and untrained. We recall one very senior Law Lord in England observing that “churches and bishops should not be let near legal processes, as they don’t understand what constitutes evidence”. Several recent studies have explored flaws in current procedures: chief amongst them is the study carried out by the Sheldon Community, which is presented in full in this volume.

Although there are studies that engage with sexual abuse and other kinds of harm allegedly perpetrated by priests and pastors, there are virtually no studies that explore the improper, inappropriate, false or wrongful indictment of clergy. It is not that to indict clergy is wrong; it is that the processes pertinent to the indictments are, as this book will show, deeply flawed and unjust. The result is that those clergy who are innocent of the wrongs they are charged with will suffer grievous injustice through palpably flawed processes. Such indictments can sometimes be just as traumatic for clergy as for those who have been impacted by the perpetrators of clerical abuse in other contexts. The results are similar too: personal harm, pastoral breakdown, loss of livelihood, reputational damage and vocational crisis. In some cases, clergy have self-harmed or taken their lives. Indeed, what some clergy go through amounts to persecution, with a seemingly never-ending litany of prosecution processes that appear to be designed and implemented to break the accused.

More specifically, our focus in this book is on the Church of England's processes, although we hold that most, if not all, mainline denominations in the developed world exhibit comparable problems when weighing allegations made against clergy. Perhaps the pendulum has swung too far the other way? We have noted that there are numerous instances of clergy being treated as guilty unless they can prove their innocence, sometimes even before an allegation is put to them, let alone an investigation or tribunal has taken place. We note that in all of this, there are parallels in other vocational professions. Laura Kipnis' *Unwanted Advances* (Verso Books, 2018) examines how easy it can be for unfounded sexual allegations to be used to terminate the tenure of academics, or to remove students from degree programmes, campus life or courses. As portrayed in Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* (1953), it does appear that in some situations within the churches, the mere act of asserting wrongdoing will be presumed sufficient to infer the guilt of the accused.¹

When it comes to clergy, and especially clergy who are falsely accused, the processes that they encounter will often be unfair and at times downright unjust. Churches invariably demonise that which they discern to be deviant. In such a complex field as an allegation of abuse of any kind, whether sexual or otherwise, it is too easy to develop an ecclesial pathology as a primary lens for regarding the accused, irrespective of fault. The "scapegoating mechanism" at work within an ecclesial polity will, unconsciously, afford churches the opportunity to transfer their own sense of sinfulness and unworthiness onto a "victim" who will serve as both a warning to others and an expedient sacrifice.

¹ Miller's play centred on the story of John Proctor, a settler in the Massachusetts Bay Colony during the Salem witch trials of 1692-93. Hanged for witchcraft, Proctor opposes the use of "spectral evidence" in trials, arguing that it lacks material proof. The play depicts the tragic journey of a principled nonconformist – Proctor is outspoken and refuses to conform to societal norms and the dark, sinister theological constructions of reality that eschew principles of natural justice – to facing execution.

Accused clergy frequently find themselves caught in multiple complex investigative, legal, disciplinary and sometimes even court proceedings. In many denominations, clergy will not enjoy conventional employment rights. Departments of Human Resources (i.e., HR) and the basic employment law frameworks are often not in place. Clergy will often find themselves in situations where the allegations made against them lack the quality and stature of evidence that would conventionally be relied upon in secular courts to successfully bring a civil or criminal case. Furthermore, clergy may find that the very structures of investigation to which they are subjected, together with the consequential discernment, judgment and penalty, are confused and conflated within their ecclesial polity. A Church of England bishop, for example, may be simultaneously the pastor to the accused, a conduit for the accusation, potentially party to the complaint, in a role of judgment, and also required to it, impose sanctions and enforce them.

It is widely acknowledged that in matters of safeguarding, the Church of England should *not* be “marking its own homework”. The same is true when it comes to whether and how to respond to alleged clergy misconduct. However, attempts to introduce robust independent external scrutiny to bear upon the mechanisms and decisions of the Church of England’s hierarchy are resisted, with opposition to accountability and transparency led by some of the bishops. In June 2023, this hypothesis was “road-tested” by using a conjured email account from a (so-called) “safeguarding specialist” and therapist who had received a disclosure about a bishop committing a serious sexual misdemeanour. This was disclosed to the National Safeguarding Team (NST). Inevitably, the allegation was immediately passed to the Church of England Secretariat in Lambeth Palace, and no move was made to suspend the supposed bishop. The alleged victim was offered an internal investigation and church-based support. The NST and Secretariat handled the allegation as one might expect, with the result that

the Church of England's safeguarding response apparently sought to prevent public scandal about senior clergy and to subordinate the needs of victims.

Harms Caused

A recent in-depth study from the Centre of Criminology at the University of Oxford² highlighted similarities between the experiences of those who had actually been abused and those falsely accused of abuse. These included marginalisation by peers, physical and psychological symptoms (e.g., the excessive loss or gain of weight, depression, trauma, etc.), loss of role or job, loss of trust, marital breakdown, alienation by family and friends, and more besides. Comparable trends have been noted by scholars tracing patterns of spiritual abuse and domestic violence in clergy households.

Most will be aware that Jesus was stigmatised by his opponents. We are naturally alive to how clergy, even when falsely accused of abuse, will be subject to the marks of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person. This invariably leads to social isolation, reduced opportunities, and significant mental health issues for those affected. This volume explores dynamics that are rarely spoken of, and even more rarely written about. The “silent witnesses” of clergy who have been judged and misjudged – the abuse of clergy through legal, ecclesial and deficient pastoral processes of the church – often include spouses, partners and laity. They witness the destruction and gradual erasure of a priest or minister. The secrecy of many ecclesial legal processes, coupled with the recent adoption of secular “non-disclosure agreements”, has also meant that some clergy who

² Carolyn Hall, 2025 – <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/content/impact-being-wrongly-accused-victims-voices>.

become victims through the processes of the church are unable to hold to the truth of their testimony within their own churches.

In making these observations, we are resolutely clear that we do not, in any way, diminish the suffering caused by predatory clergy who have acted in an abusive way and caused damage and detriment through their behaviour. What we want to highlight, too, is that in a litigious, risk-averse society and amid increasing demands for transparency and accountability in institutions, clergy can find themselves vulnerable to a legal apparatus that may seem archaic, excessive, unjust, brutal, and disproportionate.

In short, one context of abuse does not justify another. Neither is it right to correct the (hopefully, former) injustices faced by the victims of clergy abuse but introduce another – the failure to ensure just processes for accused clergy. In this context, “two wrongs do not make a right”. The church that once turned a blind eye to its clergy who abused some of the church’s own members is now turning a blind eye to its officers (clergy and others) who abuse accused clergy by arcane, vindictive, and prejudiced processes. Justice and fair process matter for *all*. As Girard (1982) noted, the prosecution and judgment of some offences is a form of “scapegoat mechanism” (a phrase in fact coined by Kenneth Burke), in which the deficiencies and taboos of the collective are transferred to an individual, who is made to suffer on behalf of the collective. Understandably, this scapegoating dynamic can be bewildering for clergy to encounter, who are ill-prepared to bear the shame and blemish that those they minister to may project onto them.

It is hardly surprising that in the face of accusations – sometimes even those that are vexatious or spurious – clergy choose to leave their churches and congregations altogether. In some cases, the laity will follow the clergy, disenchanted with the judicial-ecclesial processes they have witnessed. Recent research by the Sheldon Community (Exeter, 2020; in Part Two of this volume in full) recorded clergy in the

Church of England who were the subject of the [2003, and amended 2016] Clergy Discipline Measure and reported high percentages of clergy who as a result were suicidal, depressed, unable to work or minister again, and with ongoing mental health issues, and subject to symptoms commonly associated with post-traumatic distress. In all cases, the body perceived to be harming the clergy was the church. Those most damaged by the processes were the clergy who had given their lives for their vocations and depended entirely on them for their livelihood. In psychotherapeutic terms, this perceived rejection-expulsion dynamic can have a long-lasting impact on individuals, households, friends, congregations, and marriages.

Some clergy do contextualise the accusations they face and can be restored to ministry, though it is rare for them to remain in office long-term. Here, we think of Bishop Michael Perham and Bishop Chris Lowson, Dean Christine Wilson, Sister Frances Dominica – now President of FACT (Facing Allegations in a Context of Trust). However, we remain acutely aware of the unevenness of church justice.³ Most clergy, even when faced with false or baseless accusations, will be encouraged or pressurised to resign. Many take this course. And as we have already noted, a number have taken their own lives.

Parallels with Injustices at the Post Office

Some who watched the TV docudrama *Mr. Bates v The Post Office* (and recounted in Nick Wallis' *The Great Post Office Scandal*, Bath Publishing, 2022) noted close parallels between the injustices perpetrated by

³ See the case of the Revd. Helen Percy vs Church of Scotland (<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldjudgmt/jd051215/percy.pdf>) where the plaintiff successfully argued in the High Court that the Church of Scotland was more lenient in its disciplinary proceedings against male clergy than female clergy. (NB: The Revd. Helen Percy is not a relative of Martyn Percy, and her legal case concerned the Presbyterian Church of Scotland.)

the Post Office (i.e., the needless prosecution of sub-postmasters due to faulty Horizon IT accounting software) and the unresolved scandals in the Church of England. The common denominators include institutional denial, minimisation, self-serving reviews, aggressive legal strategies, promises made and not fulfilled, “non-apology apologies”, non-disclosure agreements, and independent recommendations rejected. In both the Church of England and the Post Office, victims of false accusation have encountered similar treatment, and neither group sees an end in sight.

Yet the parallels do not end there. Like the sub-postmasters in Wallis’ study, some clergy have suffered nervous breakdowns and permanent health damage, or some have even taken their own lives. This is well documented, although it is very rare that those causing such harm or deliberately perpetrating the abuse will ever be brought to justice in the church. This especially applies in cases where the senior officers and clergy of the church have knowingly perpetrated what amounts to abuse (typically through unjust and flawed processes) against their colleagues. We are mindful of cases where clergy have been hounded and harassed out of office or pressed into resigning or removed from post when the evidence against them was thin.

The Focus of This Book

This major study focuses on clergy who are both judged and misjudged by tribunals, trials and investigations overseen by the church. Uniquely, it has some focus on those who are innocent of the charges and allegations laid against them, or who are the victims of false allegations or found themselves persecuted by vexatious litigants, with often tragic consequences. It also dwells on clergy cases in which the punishment is disproportionate to the issue(s) that led to the tribunal.

We therefore turn to issues such as clergy rights, fairness and due process; the nature of scapegoating and victimhood; the roles and responsibilities of those in authority; Human Resources, and the role of mediation in conflict resolution; the nature and purpose of justice within the church; the functions for accountability and oversight in developing adequate systems for the prosecutor and defendant, and the role of judge and jury; the need for pastoral care and remedial restoration; and the resources required to develop a polity of trust, truth and justice within ecclesial contexts.

The volume also explores some of the confusing hinterlands and ambiguities that clergy struggle with across ministerial contexts. For example, the different definitions and nuances in terminology, such as “adult-at-risk” versus “vulnerable adult” (or dependant), and the pastoral and legal issues that might arise in cases of “harassment” (either by or towards clergy).⁴ Necessarily, the volume explores the complex inter-dependencies that emerge through projection, sacrifice, conflation and rejection, which sometimes cause clergy to be misunderstood and misinterpreted, with pastoral relations and encounters consequently re-narrated in ways that are damaging and detrimental to the clergy and congregations alike.

We are aware that our volume is unusual. It offers a kind of “meze” of essays, first-hand accounts, primary-source materials, reflections (i.e., personal, theological and spiritual), legal commentary, reviews, homilies and other resources. We have consciously opted for this approach because the personal, moral, ecclesial, social, and ethical issues we address are complex and multifaceted. As such, a “meze-type” approach seemed the best way forward. It is especially helpful for identifying the categories of victim, persecutor, judge and pros-

⁴ For a satirical approach on the lack of definition in Church of England safeguarding terminology and policy, see ‘A Safeguarding Quiz/Exam for Christmas’, *Surviving Church*, 19 December 2021: <https://survivingchurch.org/2021/12/19/a-safeguarding-quiz-exam-for-christmas/>.

ecutor, which in an ecclesial context often blur and are complex to navigate.

We believe that this is an important and timely book. The text deals with real cases in “real time”, and some of them remain unresolved. Where possible, we have included details of specific cases, especially in relation to the way allegations about safeguarding have been weaponised against clergy – “weaponised” in the sense of being used to cause those accused personal, financial, and professional harm.⁵ The allegations often rest on whispering campaigns and gaslighting (e.g., the case of the Revd. Alan Griffin), and in another case on unreliable written evidence (e.g., the highly questionable and irregular “risk assessments” leveraged in church proceedings against Martyn Percy). The way allegations of safeguarding were used against Martyn Percy – some say they appear to have been “weaponised”⁶ – remains one of the best-documented cases in recent times, and for this reason alone, it forms some of the primary-source material relied upon and cited in this volume. It is held to be putatively relevant to other cases referenced. Nobody is held accountable for these actions perpetrated against clergy, and the Church of England’s hierarchy seems to be primarily invested in cover-ups and damage limitation. Truth and justice are denied.

Inevitably, this volume touches on deeply disturbing material. This includes accounts of those who take their lives as a result of poor or malign church processes. These processes remain uncorrected, and so the likelihood of there being more innocent victims remains high. We know that the majority of prosecutions involving Church of England

⁵ In 3.6 the report, *The Future of Church Safeguarding*, Alexis Jay describes safeguarding as weaponised when safeguarding concerns are used “as a pretext for removing people on the basis of moral judgements”.

⁶ See the view of Clive Billenness referred to in “Sentence First – Verdict Afterwards’: The Red Queen and the Church of England” by Anthony Bash, later in this volume.

clergy are necessary for justice, and that, in the course of investigation and hearing, some will be found guilty. However, we are also aware that a significant number of cases brought against clergy are groundless or vexatious, or sometimes merely used as threats and forms of intimidation, and can even be initiated by bishops. Most of the latter group of cases never come to any kind of hearing, yet the clergy concerned will either be sacrificed for expedient and pragmatic reasons or due to the failures in legal and HR processes within the church. This book is mainly concerned with such cases – what happens when justice fails the clergy, or the course of justice is perverted. Or are clergy simply victimised through poor or corrupted church processes? Cover-ups are legion, as the church consistently prioritises its reputation over justice. The continued use of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) – denied by the church, but plainly still relied upon – is a further blight on the claims of the church to be an exemplar of truth and transparency.

Some of the material in the book will therefore be harrowing. It covers the trials and tribulations Church of England clergy can experience at the hands of the church and its leadership, as well as the real trauma of being subject to procedures with little or no accountability. This book is effectively an extended essay, where readers may well feel, at times, that they are reading a dark postmodern tale titled *Christ Meets Kafka*.⁷ Unfortunately, this is not a novel. It is a record of the systems of justice in the Church of England, which can be truly appalling for those who encounter them. It stands as a testament to some dreadful injustices, and these will continue to be perpetrated as long as the Church of England remains in charge of its own legal systems, functioning as “a law unto itself”.

In summary, this book covers the trials and tribulations Church of England clergy can experience at the hands of the church and its

⁷ The German-speaking Jewish Czech novelist Franz Kafka (1883-1924)

leadership, as well as the real trauma of being subject to procedures with little or no accountability. Its aim is to cast some light on these matters. However, careful steps have been taken to ensure that the first-hand accounts relied upon are either historical (i.e., in the public domain) or carefully anonymised. The book also draws on a wealth of experience and knowledge from scholars and practitioners across a range of fields: biblical, pastoral, personal, media, synodical, historical, jurisprudential, and ecclesiological. Taking Anglican polity as the main (but by no means exclusive) paradigm for case-studies, we believe this book to be the first of its kind, and a valuable contribution to scholarship for decades to come.

Martyn Percy & Anthony Bash

wrote *The Trial* (German: *Der Prozess*) between 1914 and 1915, and it was published posthumously in 1925. One of Kafka's best-known works, it is a dystopian tale that tells the story of Josef K., a man arrested and prosecuted by an inaccessible authority, with the nature of the crime he is accused of revealed neither to him nor to the reader. We note that Church of England clergy can be suspended from duties during disciplinary proceedings and subjected to preliminary prosecution procedures without the alleged offence or the identity of the accuser being disclosed.

Part One

Pain in Perspective: Case Studies

Writers reflect on the injustices of the Church of England's safeguarding and legal processes.

When Shepherds Scatter: Broken Trust in Sacred Places

Johnny Douglas

“The most dangerous thing in the world is the sin of not being alert, not quite awake.”⁸

There is a particular kind of silence that settles over institutions when something fundamental breaks. It is not the peaceful quiet of contemplation or the reverent hush of prayer, but something altogether more disturbing: the silence of wilful blindness, of people who have chosen not to see what stands plainly before them. In the echoing halls of ecclesiastical power, this silence has become deafening.

The story I have to tell is not uncommon, though each iteration carries its own particular anguish. It is the story of what happens when those entrusted with shepherding souls become persecutory instead, when systems designed to protect become instruments of coercion, and when communities of faith choose compliance over courage. At its heart, it is an experience of a devastating form of betrayal by those we trust.

As the organisational psychologist Adam Grant observes, “You cannot fix a problem that you refuse to acknowledge.”⁹ Yet in the institutional life of hierarchical religious organisations, the very act of acknowledgement becomes heretical, and those who dare to name problems become problems themselves.

⁸ O'Connor, F. (1979). *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 124.

⁹ Grant, A. (2021). *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*. New York: Viking, p. 78.

The architecture of expectation

“Stop expecting that man to do right by you,” whispered my spouse in the weariness of another looping conversation. The words hung in the air like incense, bitter and lingering. They marked the moment when hope finally surrendered to reality, when the gap between expectation and experience became too wide to bridge with faith alone.

But how does one simply stop expecting righteousness from those who claim to represent the divine? How does one recalibrate a lifetime’s worth of trust built upon the assumption that those who wear the robes of office will embody, however imperfectly, the values they proclaim? The answer, it seems, is slowly and with great pain.

As Margaret Heffernan notes in her analysis of organisational dysfunction, “Where power induces silence, it leaves decision-makers blind.”¹⁰ In religious institutions, this blindness is often wilful, a comfortable myopia that allows leaders to maintain their positions while avoiding the uncomfortable truths that challenge them. The episcopal silence was experienced as something beyond mere neglect, each ghosted email and unanswered plea carrying the cumulative weight of abandonment, whatever its cause. Whether it arose from indifference, institutional strategy, or simple administrative dysfunction, the effect on those waiting for a response was the same. With measured precision, the machinery of institutional power ground forward, teaching a parish to lower its expectations, to accept that shepherds might choose not to see their flock.

In the parish where I served, there had been seven years of faithful ministry. Seven years of baptisms and funerals, of hospital visits and marriage counselling, of standing with families in their darkest hours

¹⁰ Heffernan, M. (2011). *Wilful Blindness: Why We Ignore the Obvious at Our Peril*. London: Simon & Schuster, p. 143.