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The grooming of children for sexual abuse in religious settings: Unique characteristics and select case studies☆

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the sexual grooming of children and their caregivers in a wide variety of religious settings. We argue that unique aspects of religion facilitate institutional and interpersonal grooming in ways that often differ from forms of manipulation in secular settings. Drawing from Christianity (Catholicism, Protestantism, and Seventh-day Adventism) and various sects (the Children of God, the Branch Davidians, the Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints, a Hindu ashram, and the Devadasis), we show how some religious institutions and leadership figures in them can slowly cultivate children and their caregivers into harmful and illegal sexual activity. A number of uniquely religious characteristics facilitate this cultivation, which includes: theodicies of legitimation; power, patriarchy, obedience, protection, and reverence towards authority figures; victims' fears about spiritual punishments; and scriptural uses to justify adult-child sex.

1. Introduction

The grooming and sexual abuse of children occurs in a wide variety of social and cultural contexts. Establishing reliable statistical data on the rate of sexual abuse of children is contingent upon careful analyses that account for abuses that occur across childhood *and* adolescence.[2] Moreover, *defining* sexual abuse varies in different data sets as does the inclusion of various categories of *perpetrator*—i.e. adult or child, the latter not always being included (see Finkelhor et al., 2014). Consensus exists, however, in expressing the global magnitude of the problem (Collin-Vezina, Daigneault, & Hebert, 2013; Darkness to Light, 2018a; Levesque, 1999; Pereda, Guilera, Forns, & Gomez-Benito, 2009; Stoltenborgh, van Ijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011).[3]

Perpetrators of child sexual abuse do not conform to a single set of personality or other characteristics, thus confounding attempts to establish a recognizable profile. Initial research on child sexual abuse focused almost exclusively on the perceived menace of persons unknown to the children, or, 'stranger danger.' Subsequent studies, however, from around the 1980s onwards, shifted attention away from this stereotype to address the reality that most abused children are violated by someone they know (Craven, Brown, & Gilchrist, 2006; Finkelhor, 2008; Lanning, 2005. See also Darkness to Light, 2018b, about perpetrators) and oftentimes by someone whom they trust (Bottoms, Shaver, Goodman, & Qin, 1995; Lanning, 2005; van Dam, 2001). Hence, in addition to abuse that sometimes occurs at the hands of strangers, children may be sexually abused by family members—familial abuse; by known individuals outside of the family—extrafamilial abuse; and in other settings such as in schools, sports teams, daycare facilities, and

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[1] The authors express gratitude to the University of Alberta Library for access to the Stephen A. Kent Collection on Alternative Religions.
[2] Finkelhor et al.'s recent American study found that girls especially are at an elevated risk for sexual abuse between the ages of fifteen and seventeen (Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2014).
[3] The *Lantern Project* in the United Kingdom reports that almost 25% of British children are sexually abused by either an adult or a peer (The Lantern Project, 2012). Darkness to Light (2018a) estimates that one out of every ten children in the United States is sexually abused by age eighteen. Both organizations reveal that 90% of children who are abused are violated someone whom they know. In Canada, the organization, *Little Warriors*, states that one in three girls and one in six boys experience sexual abuse and that 95% of victims know their abusers (Little Warriors, 2018). In Australia, as many as 35% of women and 16% of men are subject to child sexual abuse (Plummer, 2018). Moreover, a recent Royal Commission study in Australia identifies the need to understand the dynamics of grooming in institutional contexts (see O'Leary, Koh, & Dare, 2017). UNICEF's study, *Hidden in Plain Sight,* reported that, worldwide, 120 million girls under age of twenty have experienced some form of sexual violence in their lives. The figure for boys is difficult to determine because they are less likely to report abuse. Moreover, the organization states that the *actual* figures for girls also remain unknown due to underreporting (UNICEF, 2014).

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religions—institutional abuse (Lanning, 2005; McAlinden, 2006, 2012; Pilgrim, 2018; Williams, 2015). Furthermore, Kenneth Lanning emphasizes the importance of research on abusers whom the child knows—persons he defines as "acquaintance molesters" (Lanning, 2005, p. 529). Critically, offenders may occupy more than one social role simultaneously (Lanning, 2005), such that, for example, the sexual offender may be both the child's sporting coach and fellow church member.

Increasingly, researchers also have identified the need to examine the process of *grooming* children for abuse—a practice that is part of the entire "offence chain" when the sexual abuse of children occurs (Williams, 2015, p. 31). This vitally important feature of the abuse process now receives more academic and legislative attention than in the past, although additional research and legal development and application is needed (McAlinden, 2012). Of course, not all sexual offenders groom their victims prior to abusing them. For example, "chance/opportunistic" offenders do not typically use grooming strategies as their contact with, and subsequent assault of, children, is unexpected and therefore unplanned (Ward, Louden, Hudsen, & Marshall, 1995, cited in Williams, 2015).

The goal of this article is to examine the grooming of children for sexual abuse in religious settings—a context that is scarcely addressed in the literature. We propose that in addition to the many features that the broader literature on grooming has identified already, grooming in religious settings requires a discussion of the very specific elements of this context—characteristics that likely are not present in other grooming situations. Therefore, to expand upon current understandings of grooming techniques, we integrate extant findings on grooming with some of the specific features of religious environments. Although some other scholars have written about sexual *abuses* in religion, they have not identified the *grooming* process and the distinctive features of it. Thus, our work adds to the literature on grooming as well as to sociological (and other) research on abuse within religious settings more broadly.

To this end, first, we provide a synopsis of the grooming literature. Second, we present a discussion of the religious context of grooming. This segment comprises a general overview of the relative importance of religion in many people's lives in addition to an examination of some of the distinctive features of religious settings and how they may influence grooming. Third, we examine some specific case studies in which this grooming process is evident.

2. Grooming: defining and understanding the process

Defining 'grooming' has been a complex task for researchers of child sexual abuse and exploitation. Moreover, relatively little research on this process exists (Craven et al., 2006; Williams, 2015; Winters, Kaylor, & Jeglic, 2017),[4] despite the large body of literature on child sexual abuse and child sexual offenders. The term 'grooming' often appears in media headlines and accounts of the sexual abuse of children, and this popular usage of it has resulted in stereotypes about what it is and where it takes place (McAlinden, 2012; Ost, 2009). Specifically, contemporary media directs its focus mostly to online grooming, but the process of grooming is a substantial component of abuse that takes place in the offline environment too (Fernandez, 2006, cited in McAlinden, 2012); indeed, research indicates that "many more offenders make contact with victims and gain acceptance via off-line methods" (McAlinden, 2012, p. 12). Therefore, this type of grooming requires academic and policy attention.[5]

Despite the paucity of research on grooming, several definitions and approaches to understanding it do exist (see for example Craven et al., 2006; Lanning, 2005; McAlinden, 2012; Ost, 2004; Plummer, 2018; Salter, 2013; van Dam, 2001; Williams, 2015; Winters et al., 2017) and the origins and history of the concept have been documented (Lanning, 2018).[6] Moreover, a growing body of research contributes to the development of the concept, and, clearly, a great deal of consensus has emerged around several significant features within the process, although some definitions and approaches contribute specific additional nuances. Craven et al. (2006) identify grooming as:

> a process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for the abuse of the child. Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child's compliance and maintaining the child's secrecy to avoid disclosure. This process serves to strengthen the offender's abusive pattern, as it may be used as a means of justifying or denying their actions (Craven et al., 2006, p. 297).

The authors distinguish three types grooming: "self-grooming, grooming the environment and significant others and grooming the child" (Craven et al., 2006, pp. 291, 297). First, self-grooming pertains to the way in which the child sexual offender denies the behavior as abusive or rationalizes and excuses it. Second, when abusers groom the victims' significant others and the broader environment, they usually do so by occupying a position of trust. Sometimes this form of grooming is sufficiently effective that parents and other caregivers place so much faith in the character of the offender that if a child does reveal that he or she has been abused, then the adults may not believe the revelation (Craven et al., 2006). Grooming the family (via befriending them) often is a common means to access children (Plummer, 2018).

Finally, the most frequently acknowledged form—grooming the child—involves both psychological and physical dimensions. Physical grooming refers to the "gradual sexualization of the relationship" beginning with non-sexual touching that progresses over time to sexual contact whereby the child may not even understand the abusive and improper nature of the behavior (Berliner & Conte, 1990, in Craven et al., 2006, p. 295). At the same time, the offender employs psychological strategies to groom the child, gaining the child's trust (trust that they later breach[7])– making the child feel good, increasing compliance, and ensuring the child's silence around the abuse.[8]

More recently, McAlinden (2012) proposes a definition that incorporates the following criteria: "(1) the use of a variety of manipulative and controlling techniques (2) with a vulnerable subject (3) in a range of interpersonal and social settings (4) in order to establish trust or normalize sexually harmful behavior (5) with the overall aim of

[4] Some research examines the specific nature of online grooming versus face-to-face grooming practices (for example, Winters et al., 2017). This article does not examine online environments.

[5] Aside from popular usage and misperceptions of grooming, Anne-Marie McAlinden proposes that academics in a range of disciplines including psychology, sociology, criminology, and legal studies often do not understand the process very well. Moreover, at the legislative level, only a few countries have introduced measures to deal with grooming, and again, the focus is on the online environment (McAlinden, 2012).

[6] Lanning traces the use of the term 'seduction' in law enforcement and criminal justice agencies and institutions through to its eventual replacement (starting in the mid-1980s) by 'grooming.' Lanning proposes that the two terms essentially refer to the same process and have been used interchangeably over several years, although 'grooming' is now the dominant term. Knowledge of the process (whether one names it seduction and/or grooming) percolated from law enforcement to academia, media, and the general public (Lanning, 2018, pp. 9–10).

[7] For a discussion of the importance and dynamics of trust, see McAlinden (2012).

[8] Lanning (2018) proposes that most sexual offenders who are known to the child do not usually use violence because effective grooming strategies are less likely to lead to the child telling another person about what is happening (Lanning, 2018). Offenders typically avoid using threats and violence, resorting to them only if they fear exposure or if they believe the victim is going to end contact with the offender (Lanning, 2018).

facilitating exploitation and/or prohibiting exposure" (McAlinden, 2012, p. 11). Both Craven et al. and McAlinden offer comprehensive definitions that are applicable in numerous settings, including religious ones.

Existing research acknowledges the variety of locations in which grooming might occur and explains also the diversity of specific means the perpetrator may use to secure the child's trust and compliance. Common practices include gift giving, attention, touching, massage, hugging, praise etc. (Lanning, 2005; Salter, 2013), as well as specifically showing an interest in the child, establishing a friendship—which in some cases may lead to trips with the offender (Plummer, 2018). The offender may even establish a "pseudo-parental role" (Powell, 2007, cited in McAlinden, 2012). Offenders may also groom the child with access to prohibited activities—ones typically engaged in by adults—for example, drug and alcohol consumption and the viewing of pornography. Touching, however, is an especially common grooming strategy—one that capitalizes on children's innocence. Using touch:

> The offender will exploit the child's naivety and trust by introducing increasingly intimate physical contact such as play acting, tickling or wrestling and even hugging to gradually sexualize contact with the child. The use of touch is particularly important as this determines whether or not the child is receptive and begins the process of desensitization—gradually the abuser will escalate the boundary violations of the child's body which eventually culminates in enticing the child to acquiesce to engaging in sexual activity (McAlinden, 2006, p. 347).

Research indicates, "that for the child one of the consequences of this desensitization and relationship building process is that by the time the child knows that abuse is taking place …, the child may feel she has given consent (e.g., because she did not say no when the back of her head was rubbed) to the abuse" (Conte, Wolf, and Smith, 1989, p. 300). Touch in the form of tickling and playing may even occur in the presence of the child's parents as it seems like innocent fun (van Dam, 2001). Furthermore, Lanning characterizes some acts of grooming as comprising sexual acts in and of themselves when they cause sexual pleasure for the offender. Hence, in at least some cases, grooming is not a means to sexual activity, but *is* the sexual activity (Lanning, 2018). Additionally, the grooming process involves "symbolic as well as practical dimensions," as they contribute to the objectification of the child. Hence, children are stripped of their agency (Salter, 2013 p. 128).

When grooming and abuse take place in institutional contexts, then offenders have exploited their social roles and the trust therein. They have "violated inter-personal relationships and defaulted on their moral obligation and commitment to ensure the care, safety and well-being of the children for whom they are responsible" (McAlinden, 2006, p. 345). Research on institutional grooming has been limited—a problem that McAlinden's (2012) recent work addresses. Moreover, her discussion of Catholicism clearly invites further examination of religiously situated grooming.

A caveat to consider in all research on grooming: many behaviors that are a part of the grooming process are *not* considered grooming when they occur in the *absence* of abuse (McAlinden, 2006). Thus, acts of affection, the provision of gifts, spending time together, and an array of other typical adult-child behaviors are not *necessarily* indicative of an adult grooming a child—indeed, typically, they are not. This proviso applies to religious settings also.

3. What makes grooming in religious settings unique?

3.1. Religion and legitimation

A variety of social and cultural factors influence child sexual abuse and hence the grooming process, and, as Tishelman and Fontes (2017) note, "religious influence constitutes one of the *most understudied* cultural issues in CSA [child sexual abuse]" (Tishelman & Fontes, 2017, p. 120 [emphasis added]). From their interviews with nearly forty individuals who work with victims of child sexual abuse, they found that the religion in which the child victims were raised affected the children throughout the entire victimization process (Tishelman & Fontes, 2017).[9] For researchers of religion, this finding may be unsurprising, given the well-recognized influence that religious institutions often have on the perceptions and meaning-making processes of adherents (and of course, younger children especially may be less likely to have access to other conceptual frameworks).

Many religions are major social institutions—although, as this article demonstrates, not all religious settings exhibit the typical or perhaps expected features of the religious institutions with which most people are familiar. Moreover, not all religious rationalizations for abuse occur within religious *institutions* per say. An individual, such as a family member, may not occupy a religious position of authority, but may still use religious rhetoric to groom a child.

Religious institutions and religious ideologies and doctrines incorporate a range of specific features that shape the grooming process in several unique ways. Religion is, fundamentally, a foundation for human interaction and association: it fosters the establishment of communities that allow for the "expression of shared meanings" (McGuire, 2002, p. 25). Hence, situated within the religious group, individuals interpret their life experiences by drawing on the dominant meaning-making systems that the religion provides (Hood Jr., 1998; McGuire, 2002). Religious institutions are adept at maintaining their belief systems as the *only objective truths*, and they normalize their beliefs and practices inter-generationally via religious socialization.

This process of legitimation whereby religions posit their unique relationship to the supernatural realm (Berger, 1967/2011, p. 10) is vital because it allows religions to confer a high level of status and capital to their worldviews. Critically, when attempting to understand the world, events that occur in it, as well as their own experiences, religious adherents are likely to turn to this worldview above others.[10] Drawing on Peter Berger, McGuire states, "The provision of meaning is particularly important for an understanding of religion because of the ways that meaning links the individual with the larger social group. *Meaning is not inherent in a situation but bestowed*" (McGuire, 2002, p. 27, [emphasis in the original]). The bestowal of religious meaning is critical to our discussion. Children especially may not have the wherewithal to access alternative meaning systems when confronted with abusive behaviors that offenders bestow with religious significance. And, as Malcolm Hamilton notes, "religion does not simply legitimate and make sense of the social order. It makes sense of experiences which might otherwise be disruptive and disordering" (Hamilton, 1995, p. 162). That is to say, religions offer *theodicies* to their adherents—explanations for why terrible things can happen to individuals, despite the existence of God.

3.2. Religious power, authority, and patriarchy

Because "*religious groups and institutions can be understood as hierarchies of unequal power*" (Shupe, 2007, p. 6 [italics in the original]), congregants and especially children have little to no access to religious power. Furthermore, those who occupy a lower status typically are

[9] The research incorporated findings from a wide variety of faiths, including Amish, Baptist, Catholic, Evangelical, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jewish, Mormon, Muslim, Pentecostal, and others (Tishelman & Fontes, 2017). Likely, one could identify cases of the sexual abuse of children in most, if not all, faiths. Though this reality may be difficult to accept, it is not unusual, given the rate of sexual abuse of children across society more generally. It would be imprudent to assume that religions are immune to such crimes against children.

[10] Commitment levels may vary a great deal among religious adherents, especially within larger denominations and world religions. Children often are influenced by their parents' or other caregivers' levels of commitment, although other factors may influence.

taught to credit the institution as being entirely compassionate, caring, reliable, and altruistic; religious leaders are supported as trusted and as possessing great spiritual acumen and knowledge. These dynamics allow religious leaders and authority figures to use their "moral persuasion" within a unique set of "special 'opportunity structures' for potential exploitation, abuse and mismanagement" (Shupe, 2007, p. 6).

Religious power, authority, patriarchy, and opportunity coalesce to foster conditions that some individuals exploit to groom and sexually abuse children. In their brief discussion of religious grooming, Tishelman and Fontes (2017) found that sexual offenders used "the authority of the religious institution to groom the child and justify CSA [child sexual abuse]" (Tishelman & Fontes, 2017, p. 123). They reported that in one case, the offender referred to God's authority, stating that God had "ordained me to do this." They found that offenders who used appeals to religious authority made the child more "compliant" to grooming. Moreover, in some cases, abusers used religious narratives to legitimate the grooming and abuse as part of the child's religious "education." For example, this focus was evident in a family where the adoptive father, a devout Mormon, wanted to keep the "teaching and training at home" (Tishelman & Fontes, 2017, p. 123). By drawing on the religious meaning system and the importance of religious "teachings," offenders such as this one can present grooming behaviors to children as uniquely legitimate religious "lessons."

In some cases, the grooming process even rests upon the pretext of freeing the child from spiritual malaise. In Nigeria, for example, some Pentecostal pastors frequently groom children and their families on the premise that they will help to free children from demonic possession. The pastors then perform 'exorcisms' on them—a euphemism for the subsequent sexual assaults. The pastors realize the absolute trust that the community has in them and therefore are able to effectively groom families to accept their claims to 'helping' their children (Agazue, 2016).

Most religions offer the promise of salvation in the form of an afterlife. This assurance is an extremely potent motivator in terms of religious behaviors—especially for those individuals with high levels of commitment to their faith. As Anson Shupe notes, "the power of religion as a symbolic, salvation-promising enterprise resides in its authority to create and shape reality for believers and command their obedience" (Shupe, 1998a, b, p. 1). The anxiety of not acting in accordance with the requirements of one's faith and hence jeopardizing one's place in heaven may foster compliance to grooming and subsequent abuse. Children often are fearful of disappointing adults and incurring punishments. When the punishment is the withholding of the rewards of heaven, then one can imagine the trauma that children might experience. God or other deities supposedly grant access to heaven or other supernatural dimensions, and the presumed presence of a higher power is a significant feature of most religions. One cannot overstate the importance of it in guiding religious members' behaviors and fostering compliance in them.

Prakashanand Saraswati, leader of the Barsana Dham ashram in Texas in the United States illustrates these features well. At his trial, the court heard that two of the underage girls he abused revered Saraswati as a god and could not question his acts. The first accuser, age 30 by the time of the trial, said that the abuse began when she was twelve years old. She said that "'she thought it was impossible to outcry against a god'" (Assistant Criminal District Attorney Amy Lockhart, quoted in Kimmons, 2011). Furthermore, "'she was told that it was a test and if she failed she would go to hell'" (Lockhart, quoted in Kimmons, 2011). The children of the ashram loved Saraswati. A former member recalls, "'…he seemed like an Indian version of Santa Claus,'" and "'…he was really, like, cuddly and he'd give you hugs and kisses that just felt like your grandpa. But then sometimes his kisses got weird'" (Kate Tonnessen, quoted in CNN, 2015).

3.3. Compliance in authoritarian religions

Authoritarian religions in particular may foster conditions that instill high levels of compliance during the grooming process. Such religions are extremely conservative, adhere to literal readings of religious texts, self-identify as uniquely legitimate, require absolute obedience and loyalty to authority (and may use fear to engender conformity), and place the standing of the religion over the needs of individual members. Hierarchal and comprising many regulations (Heimlich, 2011), in this context, leaders may identify members of their community as 'specially chosen' for particular tasks and roles. Fear of religious punishments for rejecting this role may be devastating. Religious obedience to patriarchy is a compelling feature and almost all religions are patriarchal to a lesser or greater extent, but authoritarian religions are especially so.

A compelling illustration of the power of religious authority and patriarchy occurred in the grooming of young girls in the Branch Davidian movement led by David Koresh (b. Vernon Howell, 1959–1993).[11] In this group, almost all members lived communally near Waco, Texas. Kiri Jewell grew up in the group, and at age 14 gave testimony to U.S. Congress, describing the way in which her mother had prepared her to become a child bride (at 10 years of age) of Koresh's, considering it an honor. Koresh raped her in a motel room to which her mother had taken her (ABC News, 2003). During her testimony, Jewel also spoke of the rapes of other young girls (Committee on Government Reform and Oversight, 1995; Jacobs, 2000).

One member of the religious community explained her reservations about the ages of Koresh's child wives, noting that they looked "really young." She rationalized his abuses by saying that at the time, she thought he was just "getting them ready" (ABC Primetime, 2003, p. 4). The adults in the community appeared to accept his sexual relationships with children. Koresh used scripture and his religious status to groom the parents: in this case, not to make Koresh seem likeable or helpful (as is often the case with child predators), but instead to ensure that the parents *consented* to his sexual abuse of the minors—framing it as he did as a religiously significant event. Koresh had proclaimed that, as a messiah, God had ordained him to take multiple wives.[12] Koresh used many religious justifications whilst grooming his community to accept his abuses, such that they became "gatekeepers of access" (McAlinden, 2012, p. 18). In one sermon he stated that, "As the lamb of God he was entitled to have all the women and girls sexually" (Tabor & Gallagher, 1995, p. 86). Worth noting here is the religious history of regarding both women and children as sexual property. During earlier periods in both Judaism and Christianity, men engaging in sexual acts with girls was normalized (Rush, 1980, cited in van Dam, 2001), and it seems clear that in many religious settings this legacy continues.

David Finkelhor (2008) notes that a "generally overlooked but very important reason that children are at high risk for victimization, one that has to do with the conditions of children's social lives and their living arrangements: children have comparatively little choice over whom they associate with" (Finkelhor, 2008, p. 10). This situation is applicable in terms of their families, schools, and other institutions, including religious ones. This inability to make specific choices regarding affiliation—in this case religious communities—means that children like Kiri Jewell and countless others may have to endure contact with their sexual offenders on a regular basis and over a protracted period, especially when the importance of religious belief and

[11] See Jacobs (2000) for a discussion of the relationship dynamics between charismatic authority, power, and "male entitlement" in religious movements. She proposes that such conditions can foster an array of sexual abuses.

[12] In 1984, Koresh legally wed a fourteen-year-old. Subsequently, he illegally "married" another fourteen-year-old and a twelve-year-old. Additionally, he married other teens—a sixteen and seventeen-year-old as well as a twenty-year-old young woman (Tabor & Gallagher, 1995, pp. 41–43).

community to the children's families are high. Moreover, as we discuss, in some cases (including the Branch Davidians and the Children of God), children are raised in families that reside in, and are a part of, the religious community. In these cases, the religious group may be relatively or even totally socially and or geographically isolated from society, thus decreasing the child's opportunity to reach out to others for help.

3.4. Family rhetoric

Sometimes the religious group also even may mimic aspects of and operate in similar ways to the institution of family (Cartwright & Kent, 1992). The use of familial language may be especially prominent and even institutionalized, as in Roman Catholicism: 'father,' 'brother,' 'sister,' 'mother' etc. (Pilgrim, 2018). Informal familial language is just as powerful in its consequences—for example, David Berg as 'grandpa' in the Children of God and Donn Ketchum as 'uncle' in Association of Baptists for World Evangelism (both discussed later). During the grooming process, the convergence of religious and perceived familial authority may be especially formidable: the abuser as both religious figure and 'family member' may command obedience and respect *and* foster love and a certainty that this person could do no wrong.

Together, these aforementioned features of religion: the presumed presence of a powerful God or other entity in the supernatural realm, religiously defined meaning-making, worldviews, theodicies and legitimations, as well as salvational status, familial language and practices, power, patriarchy, obedience and loyalty, and fear of incurring spiritual punishments—are a part of all religions to greater or lesser extents. The perceived unquestionable authority of religious figures and their claimed unique and vital relationships to the divine realm is a feature of religious authority—one that plays an important role in the grooming of children in religious settings. Finally, the way in which religious identity acts as a powerful master status for many individuals, coupled with the often over-arching presence of religious teachings and ideas at all levels of one's life, truly sets it apart from other institutions.

4. Case studies

4.1. Definitional considerations

Thus far, we have referred to 'religion,' 'religious institutions,' and 'religious movements and groups' in the very broadest of terms, but of course, religions are not homogenous. It is beyond the scope of this article to articulate the entire spectrum of religious categories in detail, and not all religions neatly fall into such classifications. Moreover, academics and others often disagree on the labelling process, and, more generally, scholars of religion are familiar already with the limitations of the conceptual boundaries of religious categories.[13] Nonetheless, to aid in the understanding of different religious dynamics, we classify our case studies into *Church* (the Roman Catholic Church), *Denomination* (e.g. Conservative Protestantism), *Sect* (Seventh-day Adventists), and *Cult/New Religious Movement* (the Children of God).[14]

[13] For example, the Branch Davidians are a schism of the Seventh-day Adventist faith, which in turn is a Christian sectarian movement. Media and many scholars typically label the Branch Davidians a cult. Likewise, one can identify the Children of God as a Christian sect; given, however, many of its characteristics scholars often label it a cult or new religious movement (as we do here).

[14] Generally, *church* refers to large organized religions that count the masses of society as members. Usually they possess a great deal of power within society or formerly did and now are integrated without much tension. Examples include Roman Catholicism and the Church of England. Denominations typically are accommodating of society (although not always) and are not cohesive enough or large enough to dominate society. Examples include Protestant and Jewish reform religions. Sects, having split from mainstream religions, are

4.2. Church: the Roman Catholic Church

An immense body of academic, journalistic, autobiographical, and government literature exists covering child sexual abuses within the Roman Catholic Church in numerous locations around the world. Although a Canadian study about child sexual abuse in St. John's, Newfoundland at a local orphanage was published in 1990 (Winter, O'Flaherty, Kenny, & Scott, 1990), much of the North American public—and indeed the general population of many countries—paid attention to such crimes when, in 2002, the *Boston Globe* reported its investigation into pervasive child sexual abuse in the Boston area by numerous Roman Catholic priests. The archbishop of Boston, Cardinal Bernard Law, and his predecessors, had allowed priests to continue to sexually abuse children after becoming aware of the misconduct when allegations started to surface (Dale & Alpert, 2007). Prior to this national and international exposure, some academics (for example, Sipe, 1995) and investigative journalists (for example, Berry, 1992) already had published books detailing what had occurred in a number of dioceses. In other cases, local newspapers had reported incidents within their communities. None of this material had reached a large audience, though, and had little to no impact on the Church. The *Globe*'s investigation brought worldwide attention to the issue—as did the Internet (Podles, 2008).

We do not provide a history of the abuses; nor do we catalogue the cases and statistics (see Wright, Swain, & Sköld, 2017). Other research, reports, and investigations have done so already (for example, see Dale & Alpert, 2007; John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004; Pilgrim, 2018). Rather, we focus on the quite unique power and status that priests enjoy within the Catholic faith and how this prestige is integral to the grooming process.[15] As Pilgrim (2018) discusses, Catholic priests and other figures of standing in Catholicism command an "ingrained reverence" that "put[s] religious staff beyond critical scrutiny" (Pilgrim, 2018, p. 65); similarly, Shupe identifies this veneration as "the iron law of clergy elitism" (Shupe, 2007, p. 56). Clearly, this elevated standing has implications at the level of grooming. Moreover, the structural conditions of Catholicism offer protection through a "subculture of secrecy concerning sexual abuse" (White & Terry, 2008, p. 672; see McAlinden, 2012) that priests and others can capitalize on during the grooming process.

Research details how priests, and in some cases nuns, progressed from spending time with children, making them feel special, to touching, and then sexual assault. In one case, Jeanne M. Miller describes how her 13-year-old son—an altar boy—caught the attention of their local associate parish priest. The priest invited him and three other altar boys to a lakeside cottage for two days. Miller explains that she was thrilled that her son—who wanted to become a priest—had this opportunity (Miller, 1998). Several weeks later, Miller and her husband

(*footnote continued*)
insular, distancing themselves from society. Typically, they offer what they identify to be uniquely legitimate truths. Structurally, they are conservative and demand high levels of commitment. Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) all are Christian sects. Finally, cults are unique religious movements having no official ties to organized religion. Cult movements usually are high demand and frequently are socially and sometimes geographically isolated from society. Cults (and sects) often emerge around a (usually male) charismatic leader. Heaven's Gate, Scientology, the Order of the Solar Temple, and the Peoples Temple are examples of cult movements. Worth noting also is that despite the scholarly legitimacy of the label 'cult,' many scholars of religion prefer the label 'new religious movement' or simply 'alternative religion,' due to the pejorative connotations the label 'cult' may infer. For a full discussion of religious categorizations and typologies see McGuire, 2002.

[15] The 2018 Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report investigating six dioceses in that state contains numerous specific references to priests grooming their child victims.

heard from one of the other boy's parents that the priest had made sexual advances towards the boys. First, he gave the boys alcohol, played pornographic movies,[16] and permitted the boys to drive both his speedboat and his car. He indicated to them that they were mature enough to do so and that he understood them better than their parents did. Miller reflects, "the boys knew that Father had his authority from God. We, the parents, had taught them that" (Miller, 1998, p. 156). Though the people involved and the specific details vary, Miller's account is reflective of common themes: the importance of priests in Catholic communities and the absolute trust bestowed upon them by parents, children, and others. In the United States, most cases have involved clergy (priests, deacons, and bishops—but especially priests) and victims from among their congregants. In other cases, the abuse has occurred in Catholic schools, Catholic orphanages, and, in Canada, in residential schools (Doyle & Rubino, 2004).

In their research into sexually abusive priests, Thomson, Marolla, and Bromley (1998) identified that priests use what the authors term "credentialing disclaimers" in order to legitimate behaviors that could potentially discredit them. Hence, when victims questioned priests about the sexual acts, the priests legitimated them as having "divine approval" (Thomson et al., 1998, p. 177) that need not be explained to outsiders (Thomson et al., 1998), thus ensuring compliance for sexual abuse (and as we argue, for the grooming process). Moreover, as the authors note, Catholic children are "unlikely to challenge such authoritative pronouncements" (Thomson et al., 1998, p. 186). Doyle and Rubino report that protracted periods of grooming occur in most Catholic sexual abuse cases (Doyle & Rubino, 2004) and that although clerical abuse "is always an aggressive act," many offending clerics do not acknowledge the aggression inherent to the grooming of children—in some cases, even viewing it as beneficial to children (Doyle & Rubino, 2004, p. 562). This rationalization may exemplify the process of self-grooming (Craven et al., 2006).

Podles (2008, p. 5)[17] notes that in Catholic school settings, the physical abuse of children "prepares victims for sexual abuse" through "intimidation." Moreover, in his thorough and unremitting catalogue of sexual abuse cases, he found numerous forms of grooming tactics, including normalizing physical contact and creating secrecy around prohibited behaviors. Moreover, Catholic families clearly have been trusting of the institution and of individual priests to the extent that environmental grooming is evident.

In some cases, priests would overcome the boys' inhibitions to create a "transgressive spirit" using drugs, alcohol, and pornographic materials in addition to capitalizing on the boys' natural physical urges (Podles, 2008, pp. 48, 253). Some priests even had the boys steal small items so that their morality was compromised further. These forms of grooming also fostered a sense of co-conspiracy in the boys, thus ensuring their silence (Podles, 2008; see Lanning, 2005). Nudity (Podles, 2008), touching, masturbation (Podles, 2008), and nude swimming (Podles, 2008), all are examples of grooming techniques; and, in some cases, the priests framed the abuse as "sex education" or "counseling" (Podles, 2008, pp. 253–255). All of these (and many other) activities took place in secret and were legitimated with religious narratives. The grooming and abuse sometimes involved multiple boys simultaneously, and priests groomed the boys so effectively that one victim stated that the molestations were a regular part of what being an altar boy meant. He said, "'I thought it was normal'" (quoted in Podles, 2008, pp. 254–255).

The Catholic Church is an extremely hierarchal institution that is very much integrated into many communities globally. Priests mediate Catholics' relationships with God, thus they occupy immense positions of trust—positions that in some cases afford "opportunity structures" (Shupe, 2007, p. 6) for grooming. Their authority is unquestionable, allowing them to offer explanations—or, religious legitimations (McGuire, 2002) for their behaviors. Obedience to religious authority characterizes the hierarchy (Shupe, 2007) where children have no power. Fearful of disobeying God (and his representatives—priests) and mindful of otherworldly punishments—going to hell—children are especially vulnerable to manipulation. To question that which has been bestowed with religious meaning and significance often may be difficult if not impossible.

4.3. Protestant denominations

Since the initial exposure and the ongoing revelations of the extent of child sexual abuse (and the official cover-up thereof) within the Roman Catholic Church, it may appear that it is the 'worst offender' at the level of mainstream religions. These abuses, however, have resulted in an increased focus on Protestant Churches in the United States in an attempt to assess their child sexual abuse rates; very little research exists, with most information coming from the media and insurance companies delivering coverage for churches (Denney, Kerley, & Gross, 2018).

Andrew S. Denney, Kent R. Kerley, and Nickolas G. Gross suggest that the probability of ongoing sexual abuse of children in Protestant denominations is great (Denney et al., 2018; see also Joyce, 2017), meaning that issues of grooming within Protestantism also requires attention. Unlike Catholicism, Protestantism is not subject to a centralized authority like the Vatican; nor do its religious leaders (some of whom are women) operate under the expectation of celibacy. Instead, globally, there exists thousands of Protestant denominations, camps, ministries, outreach programs and so forth; thus, no umbrella authority is able to potentially monitor, report, and amend the problems of sexual abuse within the faith (Joyce, 2017). Indeed, Evangelical Protestant, Boz Tchividjian, proposes that the situation in Protestantism is likely more severe than in Catholicism. The Executive Director of Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment (GRACE) and grandson of renowned Evangelist Billy Graham, Tchividjian and his organization are calling for reform and open discussion in a faith that is characterized by fragmentation and independence (Pulliam Bailey, 2013). The disparate nature of Protestant denominations stymies meaningful discussion and progress within Protestant communities—something that GRACE and similar organizations are trying to rectify.

Cases of child sexual abuse in Protestant communities appear in media coverage at times, but academic research or extended investigative journalist accounts are scarce. A recent investigative piece in *New Republic* by Joyce (2017) examines the decades-long sexual abuses that children suffered at the hands of Donn Ketchum (b. 1930) of the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism (ABWE), a Protestant movement that offers missionary opportunities for Baptist leaders and congregants.

A married man whom many thought of almost as a member of their own families, Ketchum used his authority both as a religious figure *and* as a medical doctor to groom and sexually abuse children. Indicative of the familial environment within the ABWE, the children knew him as "Uncle Donn" (Joyce, 2017, p. 39)—a friendly and trusted "family" member to all (see Cartwright & Kent, 1992). Joyce's research catalogues Ketchum's grooming and abuse in this conservative religious environment. In one case, Ketchum's grooming progressed from touching, to unnecessary pelvic and breast exams (which he legitimized as a medical requirement), to raping his victim after threatening to harm her family if she said anything to them (Joyce, 2017). Clearly, in this case, Ketchum moved beyond typical grooming behaviors to the use of

[16] "The use of pornography or sexually explicit imagery often has a role to play in the sequential process of grooming" (McAlinden, 2012, p. 9).

[17] Podles's book, *Sacrilege: Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church*, is a deliberately detailed and comprehensive account of the numerous sexual, physical, emotional, and spiritual violations that priests and other clergy perpetrated against children in the United States. A practicing Catholic, Podles wants readers to understand the full extent of the violence and pain children endured in addition to the extent of the church's reprehensible actions in failing to act. This book identifies many examples of grooming and abuse.

threats and force to silence her (see Lanning, 2018).

Given the diversity of Protestant denominations and their various forms of governance, hierarchy, levels of commitment and so forth, it seems likely that grooming in Protestant settings is also diverse in its manifestations, and, as Denney et al. (2018) argue, more academic research is required to unearth the extent and types of abuses that occur in Protestantism around the globe.

4.4. Sect: Seventh-day Adventists

At age 14, Cheryl Cooney was abused by her Seventh-day Adventist pastor. She described the pastor of the Christian sectarian movement as a "charismatic minister [who] used the Bible to manipulate and control me sexually for more than ten years" (Heimlich, 2011, p. 167). Her trust in the pastor grew as she saw and spent time with him in various locations including in chapel, at school, on the train, and in his office where she did some work for him (Heimlich, 2011). Cooney recalled that, "'[h]e built up a really strong friendship and spiritual connection where, when he started to cross over the line, I had already gained so much trust in his relationship with God and his 'holiness,' if you want to call it that'" (Cheryl Cooney, quoted in Heimlich, 2011, p. 168).

When the pastor first kissed her, she was 16, and Cooney panicked but did not feel that she could tell anyone, whilst he insisted that he "had been 'led by God, so, therefore, it wasn't wrong'" (Heimlich, 2011, p. 168). Manipulating her further, the pastor convinced her "to go along with other types of sexual activities" (Heimlich, 2011, p. 168). Cooney was not able to extricate herself from entanglement with the pastor until she was 26 years old, and even then, did not understand that she had been groomed and abused until she was in therapy two years later. Previously, Cooney had conceptualized the abuse as an "affair" (Heimlich, 2011, p. 169) demonstrating the pastor's ability to bestow a level of legitimacy (McGuire, 2002) on his abusive behaviors. This story highlights a grooming process that went on for an extended period of time. Having successfully elevated his religious status in her eyes, he escalated his advances as he justified and sanctified his actions by invoking God. Such "moral persuasion" (Shupe, 2007, p. 6) indicates both his religious power and her obedience to it.

Taylor and Aronson Fontes (1995) report that the sexual abuse of children in Seventh-day Adventists likely is more prevalent than one might assume. They identify that because of the extremely high level of loyalty that this religion requires, coupled with the focus on *forgiveness*, many abused children do not come forward (even when they reach adulthood). Indeed, they found that those individuals who did report their abuse to their pastors were met with a reminder of the importance of forgiveness to the faith (Taylor & Aronson Fontes, 1995). Due to the group's very closed environment and the fact that the religious community is experienced as an *extended family*, victims remain silent (Taylor & Aronson Fontes, 1995). Compounding this situation, religious leaders and other Seventh-day Adventist adults instill complete, unquestioning obedience in children from a very young age (Taylor & Aronson Fontes, 1995). The family-like structure (Cartwright & Kent, 1992), deferral to the absolute authority of male figures at all levels of the hierarchy (Heimlich, 2011; Shupe, 2007) and the relative conservatism result in the potential for abusers to religiously legitimate (McGuire, 2002) their actions. Taken together, these features of the religious organization and community contributes significantly to the ability for offenders to groom already obedient and compliant children for their sexual advances. The tight knit nature of the community affords offenders frequent access to children over an extended period, allowing them to exploit the religion's structural conditions during the grooming process.[18]

[18] The Seventh-day Adventist website, AdventSource, includes a page identifying the need for parishioners to be vigilant against sexual abusers, stating that child sexual abuse is not just a "Catholic problem" (AdventSource, 2019). Given a lack of more recent research, it is impossible to estimate the extent to which this warning has had any impact. In March 2018, a former Seventh-day Adventist sued the faith for failing to dismiss one of its pastors after he had been accused of child sexual abuse. Instead, the pastor was transferred to lead one of the biggest Adventist congregations in Oregon in the United States (Shepherd, 2018). *Abuse Guardian* is an American legal organization that specializes in assisting victims of sexual abuse. Its website recounts similar Adventist cases in numerous global settings, indicating an institutional pattern. Furthermore, it identifies that child sexual abuses frequently have occurred not only in Adventist communities but also in Jehovah's Witnesses, Amish, Mormon, and Hassidic Jewish groups where a common theme is covering up abuse and a specific rejection of law enforcement interventions (Abuse Guardian, 2017).

4.5. Cult: the Children of God

Emerging in the 1960s, The Children of God (COG hereafter) headed by leader and prophet David Berg (1919–1994) offered a profoundly different image of Jesus. Departing from mainstream Christianity Berg (who had been a Christian and Missionary Alliance pastor) proposed a revolutionary Jesus--one that spoke to the goals and needs of the disenchanted youth of the American counterculture (Kent, 2001). Despite requiring chastity in the group's early incarnation, Berg developed a belief system over many years that encouraged open sexual relationships among adults, among children, and eventually among adults and children (see Chancellor, 2000; Kent, 1994; Williams Boeri, 2005). The COG differs from most other religions because of its focus on "sexual liberation" (Williams Boeri, 2005, pp. 165–167, 174). The grooming and abuses of children were open (within the movement) and actively encouraged.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Berg wrote and transmitted thousands of publications—known as *Mo Letters*—to his followers around the world (most of whom lived in communal group homes in the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia, the United States, South America, the Philippines, and elsewhere). These illustrated letters contained Berg's theology on many subjects including sexual practices. Some publications documented adult/child and child/child sex in Berg's own home, including his sexual abuse of his granddaughter (Kent, 1994; Lord Justice Ward, 1995; Williams Boeri, 2005). The *Mo Letters* sanctioning sexual relationships with children offered followers legitimations (McGuire, 2002) for these and other behaviors.

In the *Mo Letter*, "The Devil Hates Sex," Berg (1980) discusses his incestuous relationship with his daughter, Deborah (Davis with Davis, 1984, pp. 204, 244). In it, he includes a dialogue between himself and his adult lover, Maria, in which they discuss societal taboos against incest. Maria stated, "'Well, we'll just have to tell the kids that it's not prohibited by God …'" (Maria, quoted in Berg, 1980, p. 7696). Later, Berg added "I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE HELL AGE HAS GOT TO DO WITH IT" (Berg, 1980, p. 7697).[19]

Some publications on sex—for example, the comic series, "Life With Grandpa," were written specifically for children. This series relates how "Grandpa Berg" (note the familial term) taught children about sex (Williams Boeri, 2005, p. 171). Both "The Little Girl Dream" (Berg, 1976) and *Heaven's Girl* (Berg, 1987) include images of Berg with children. In the former publication, he described being in bed with a "dark haired little girl of about 10 or 11" (Berg, 1976, p. 391) who he claims seduced him (Berg, 1976). He alludes also to the grooming of young girls to become Flirty Fishers[20] (Berg, 1976, p. 396). *Heaven's Girl* tells the story of a young girl who fights the end-time armies of the antichrist and in the process allows them to rape her so that she might

[19] All capitalizations, underlining, and other emphases are in the original Berg publications.

[20] Flirty Fishing was a recruitment practice whereby many women of the group were expected (and in many cases, required) to engage in, various levels of intimacy and sexual contact with men as a means of converting them to the movement and/or acquiring resources from them (see Raine, 2007; Williams, 1998 and Williams Boeri, 2005).

share God's love with them. Following her gang-rape, instead of killing her, the soldiers keep her because as one of them states, "**SHE WAS FANTASTIC!**—Why not keep her in one of the empty cages for our own use!" (Berg, 1987, pp. 70–71). Former COG members identify that this story paved the way (i.e. was a grooming tool) for the role of teenage girls as Flirty Fishers (CounterCOG, 1999, p. 9).

Berg (1982) published *The Story of Davidito*, a collection of letters about Maria's son. The publication depicts Davidito in mock sexual encounters with other children, and several of the images show him in bed with an adult woman. A British court found that *The Story of Davidito* contains countless, often explicit, examples of Berg's promotion of adult-child and child-child sex, and that the movement's leadership knew that this book was a guidebook for members (Lord Justice Ward, 1995). Then, in the mid-1980s, the group made videos of women and children dancing nude in a sexually suggestive manner. The British court agreed with a child psychiatrist that the numerous erotic videos were "part of the process of grooming children for sexual exploitation by adults. The effect of the open acceptance of this kind of video was gradually to erode the sense of taboo about the sexuality of children …" (Lord Justice Ward, 1995, p. 60).

Evidentially, using written and video materials, Berg institutionalized the grooming process for dissemination to his followers.[21] Berg used his theology to frame sex with children as a divine right bestowed upon him by God. He groomed the community not only to legitimate his own sexual abuse of children, but also to re-socialize (groom) adult members so that they would engage in it themselves with their own and other children. James Chancellor notes that, "sexual activity between adults and children was an accepted practice in a number of [COG] communities" (Chancellor, 2000, p. 223). Not all members, however, became abusers: some reported not witnessing abuses in their locations, whilst others left because of it (Williams Boeri, 2005).

Often, religions offer legitimations for practices that may either justify or challenge the normative social order. As the leader of a religious sub-culture, Berg challenged normative sexual and familial practices, grooming his followers with religious rhetoric and justifications. The effective grooming of the community resulted in adult-child sex losing its taboo status. Moreover, a common motif of millenarian movements such as COG (and the Branch Davidians) "is the frequent abolition of conventional morality… Believers set themselves above and outside of society's laws … When the normal constraints that some millenarian groups ignore include sexual taboos and laws, then children and teens often become predatory targets" (Kent, 2012, p. 57). Clearly, however, the grooming of the COG communities around the globe was not entirely effective, since not all members subscribed to Berg's theology.

[21] This institutional level of legitimation exists also in the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) where (in very insular, isolated communities) young girls are taught from an early age that the world outside of their communities is evil. Consequently, when underage daughters are married off to (often much) older men in polygamous marriages, they have no choice in the matter and few options for recourse (Guiora, 2010; Kent, 2006, 2011). Moreover, even when such crimes become known, there is usually "difficulty to convince child brides" to "testify against their parents and community" (Guiora, 2010 p. 406). Following the raid on the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Yearning for Zion Ranch in Texas, officials found that the young boys there "were at risk of being groomed to be future sexual abuse perpetrators" (Lukefahr, 2011, p. 575).

In southern India, the Devadasi (servants of god) are young, pre-pubescent girls whose parents sell them to be temple prostitutes for wealthy upper-caste men. The girls are forbidden to marry and their virginities are auctioned off. The Goddess Yellemma is used as a justification for the practice—the girls are doing 'service' for her. The girls have no say in the matter, and, once their roles as Devadasis are over, they usually end up becoming street prostitutes (Barry, 1995; Shingal, 2015).

5. Conclusion

As this article demonstrates, the grooming of children for sexual abuse occurs in a variety of religious settings and the offenders may comprise a diverse array of individuals, including "religious and spiritual leaders, volunteers, camp counselors in religious-based camps, staff in religious schools, and others associated with religious communities" (Tishelman & Fontes, 2017, p. 122). Moreover, because of religion's institutional standing, religious grooming frequently takes place in a context of "unquestioned faith placed in sex offenders by children, parents and staff" (McAlinden, 2006).

Our work here exemplifies the many types of grooming that the existing literature details, combined with the specific features that characterize religious settings. Therefore, desensitization practices such as touching, exposure to illicit material and substances, and establishment of friendships with families all are part of the process. At other times also, perpetrators may use "inducements and emotional manipulation to coerce a child into sexual abuse" (Salter, 2013, p. 128). Our examples illustrate that offenders direct grooming at themselves, at family environments, and towards the children. The cluster of unique religious attributes that we discuss—including obedience, patriarchy, claims of divine justification, appeals to God and salvational outcomes, the use of familial language, and closed communities (plus many other religious features)—have played significant roles in the grooming processes. Furthermore, because of the inherent nature of trust within many religious organizations and communities, parents and other adults often have been "enthusiastic supporters" (van Dam, 2001, p. 38) of the offending individuals. And, of course, when children perceive this level of support for their abusers, it makes it much harder for them to divulge what has happened to them. This situation is compounded because many religious leaders experience "the *walk-on-water-syndrome*" (Bratcher, 1984, cited in Shupe, 2007, p. 61 [emphasis in original]), such that ministers, pastors and other clergy appear to transcend laity in all matters.

In some cases—for example, Ireland—an entire society may be groomed. So revered was the Catholic Church in that country, that the whole nation exhibited a "culture of disbelief" (O'Malley, 2009, cited in McAlinden, 2012) towards abuse claims. In Ireland and elsewhere, Catholic priests and other offenders in that faith appear to have explicitly exploited the church's standing and silence during the grooming process. In Protestant denominations, a range of grooming contexts and tactics likely exist, but, as discussed, little research exists on sexual abuse in this diverse branch of Christianity, making analyses of grooming difficult. More generally, when grooming and abuse occurs in mainstream religious settings, then secrecy may ensue so that the institution's reputation (as well as the status of individual clergy) is put before the needs of the children and the requirements of the legal system.

Sectarian groups like the Seventh-day Adventists, but also movements including the Jehovah's Witnesses, Jewish Hassidism, and Fundamentalist Mormonism are categorized by high levels of insularity in many respects. These and other conditions result in a distrust of societal authorities and an unwillingness to seek secular help for abuses. Sectarian movements are more likely, therefore, to deal with abuses internally—meaning that they may not be dealt with at all. Moreover, as is the case with the Seventh-day Adventists, institutional protection of clergy emerged as the children were encouraged to forgive their abusers and move on. Like mainstream religions, secrecy often shields the communities from criminal prosecution.

Cultic movements including the Branch Davidians and the Children of God establish religious communes where the boundaries between religious group and the family are blurred. By establishing strong affective relationships, clear rules of behavior, and identifiable roles for members that are similar to family dynamics, these types of religious movements function as proxy families (Robbins, 1988, p. 46). The two entities—family and religion—enmesh such that the religious

community entirely is subject to the grooming process as a part of the religion's theology. When many sectarian and cultic movements remain on the periphery of societal norms, the tendency may be towards insularity and non-reporting to authorities. When the community is groomed successfully, observers of the abuse may not even perceive any wrongdoing.

Finally, outside of the religious institution, offenders may draw on religious rhetoric well-known to the child as part of the grooming process. As such, family members, neighbors, or other members of the community can use religious beliefs and language familiar to the child to justify their actions and establish compliance as a part of their grooming strategy. As with all religious grooming, institutional or otherwise, the characteristics of *being* religious and of obedience to religious authority and power often compel children to comply to their adult perpetrators.

In examining the hindrances to the reporting of child sexual abuse in religious settings, Harper and Perkins (2018) link research on some of the social-psychological dynamics of group allegiance to the religious context. They report that in institutional settings, members may have a greater loyalty to the institution than to the abused victim. This dynamic allows observers of abuse to diminish the victim's experience (Backenbridge, 2001, cited in Harper & Perkins, 2018). Furthermore, because devotion to the institution shapes social identity (especially for more devout individuals), they may be entirely suspicious of the victim's claims, favoring instead the religious figure and his (or her) status and perceived credibility. Thus, when the abuser is a member of the institution responsible for the observer's selfhood, social identity and even purpose in life, then the observer is more likely to deviantize the child victim than the offender (Minto, Hornsey, Gillespie, Healy, & Jetten, 2016, cited in Harper & Perkins, 2018; see also Craven et al., 2006).

In sum, many of the unique features of religion and religious belief contribute to an extraordinarily powerful grooming process. Abusers draw not only on their positions of power and authority as adults (which is potent in and of itself) but also on assertions about *God's will*—the ultimate unquestionable authority for religious adherents—and a figure that can inspire fear as much as it can awe and love.

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