

The Church of England (CofE) as a closed community: Complicity and child sexual abuse

Kirsty Teague, *Centre for Criminology and Social Policy*, University of Derby.

Ian Mahoney, *Centre for Crime, Offending, Prevention and Engagement*, Nottingham Trent University.

Last week (7th November 2024), news emerged that John Smyth is believed to be ‘the [most prolific serial abuser](#) to be associated with the Church of England’ (CofE), following a long awaited [independent review](#) into his past conduct. Outrage adorned tabloid and broadsheet papers alike with headlines ranging from: ‘C of E covered up attacks by serial abuser John Smyth, review finds’ (The Guardian; 07.11.24) to the more pointed: ‘Welby’s ‘failings’ meant serial child abuser never brought to justice’ (The Telegraph; 07.11.24). Commonality in reporting centred around the CofE, and in particular Justin Welby, actively covering up Smyth’s abuse of young children that has been described in the review as ‘prolific, brutal and horrific’, with the nature being ‘traumatic physical, sexual, psychological and spiritual attacks’ (p.1).

For those who research child sexual abuse in closed communities, the crimes and cover up of John Smyth’s crimes will be equally unsurprising as they are galling. Over and above the profound impact upon victims and their families as they find themselves remembering and revisiting the physical, emotional and psychological traumas that in some cases date back decades, there are also profound institutional impacts. The actions taken to cover up and hide instances of child sexual abuse present not just a breach of safeguarding policies and practices, but also a gross irony. Cases are covered up to protect institutional reputations and avoid tarnishing others in an organisation, yet when allegations surface, the cases have a tendency to do precisely the opposite; further tarnishing organisations and institutions as has occurred here. The knock-on effects of this can be profound. The damage to institutional and organisational ‘brands’ can lead to a decline in donations, investment, sponsorship and membership as others seek to distance themselves from the toxicity of the ‘brand’, which can take years or even decades to recover from. Moreover, the CofE’s cover up of Smyth’s actions and subsequent failure to act mean that the public narrative has moved from one which centres Smyth as ‘one bad apple’ to one of systematic and cultural institutional failures. This echoes a 2020 report by The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse which published their [investigation report](#) into The Anglican Church. Early in the report, the authors stated that:

‘The Church has failed to respond consistently to victims and survivors of child sexual abuse with sympathy and compassion, accompanied by practical and appropriate support. This has often added to the trauma already suffered by those who were abused by individuals associated with the Church. This failure was described as “*profoundly and deeply shocking*” by Archbishop Justin Welby’ (vi).

Four years on, faux outrage again by the (now *former*) Archbishop Justin Welby has not been enough to differentiate himself from Smyth and his abhorrent crimes. Indeed, in his capacity as Archbishop, by virtue of his seniority and trusted position, he has been complicit in contributing to ‘the culture of the Church of England... becoming a place where abusers could

hide' (vi). In his resignation statement, Welby states that the report 'exposed the long-maintained conspiracy of silence about the heinous abuses of John Smyth'.

Culture of silences are not exclusive to religious communities like the Church of England. As we have documented elsewhere. Sporting communities, like other settings such as religious communities, can be considered as a type of closed community (Mahoney et al., 2024). Closed communities are a collective of people where joint sensitivities to the harm caused are not necessarily held (see: Denney, 2005). Given the narrative of morality and virtuousness associated with religiosity, these narratives can impact victims/survivors' ability to seek support through fear of being disbelieved, which in turn perpetuate a culture of silence around sexual abuse and allow it to continue unchecked for long periods.

Underpinning revelations of abuse across closed communities are renewed calls for revising safeguarding policies and practices. Indeed, across two 'learning themes' in the review into Smyth's crimes is 'leadership of, and accountability for safeguarding' and 'safeguarding systems and practices'. Concerns regarding the lack of effective safeguarding procedures often follow the publication of sexual crime related scandal. These calls for reform and change echo calls across other closed communities in recent years and highlight an important trend towards peeling back the veil of internal investigations hidden from public view, to enable independent external scrutiny. Independent reviews into sporting communities for example have showcased the prioritisation of other factors including institutional reputation and the very survivability of an organisation (Mahoney et al., 2024). Given the societal reach and influence of the CofE it is perhaps (in the present at least), unlikely that this presents an existential crisis in the survivability of the Church as an institution. However, with the significant decline in the proportion of people in England and Wales describing themselves as 'Christian' between the [2011 \(59.3%\) and 2021 \(46.2%\) census](#), the emergence of and public outcry around the protection of Smyth by the CofE will undoubtedly provide further challenges for the institution in making a case for its ongoing contemporary relevance, role and influence within society as a whole.

Last year, the government announced its statutory guidance on ['Working Together to Safeguard Children'](#) to inform practice of those who work with children. Key in the document is the imperative of multiagency working and knowledge exchange occurring in the active safeguarding of children. However, much more work is needed to support communities in the *prevention* of abuse, particularly in closed communities, and in supporting victims/survivors and whistleblowers of such communities should allegations of abuse emerge.

It is unlikely that the fallout from the Smyth case will go away anytime soon. The process of seeking forgiveness and redemption for the harms and wrongs perpetuated firstly by Smyth and secondly by those involved in covering up the abuse, is likely to be a long and painful one. Recognising the depth and breadth of the impacts of the case, the Bishop of Birkenhead believes that [more senior members of the clergy may need to resign](#). There is also a pressing need for a significant root and branch reform of the CofE both at home and abroad, particularly given that Smyth went on to live and work in Zimbabwe and later South Africa. This includes the CofE following the lead of other closed communities in opening itself up to greater external scrutiny alongside rapid implementation recommendations surrounding new and meaningful safeguarding policies, practices and training.

It is incumbent on academic and policy circles to continue to exercise their criminological imagination and inform best practice in the area of sexual abuse prevention. As anyone who has read victim impact statements of Smyth's crimes will know, academically engaging with this crime type can be difficult. However, it is necessary that this work is done to prevent future victims. A charitable organisation which seeks to prevent sexual crime by working with individuals who are at risk of sexual offending or who have been convicted of a sexual offence is the [Safer Living Foundation \(SLF\)](#). One of the challenges for the SLF, and others who work in this area, is to engage in public-facing work and challenge social taboos regarding sexuality and sexual behaviour, and to encourage people to seek support for such when it is problematic and/or criminal (Mahoney et al., 2022). This issue is important because it creates significant barriers for help-seeking among some who hold paraphilic desires, including towards vulnerable groups like children, due to the fear of stigmatisation and further isolation. Doing this work requires a [public criminology approach](#) (see: c.8) and a holistic and compassionate approach to ensure people get support *before* a crime has been committed.

Kirsty Teague is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Derby and Trustee of the Safer Living Foundation.

Ian Mahoney is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Nottingham Trent University and Deputy Director of the Centre for Crime, Offending, Prevention and Engagement (COPE).

Donations to the Safer Living Foundation warmly welcomed via:

<https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/p/safer-living-foundation-1155788-1>

Key reading:

- Jay, A., Evans, M., Frank, I., and Sharpling, D. (2020) *The Anglican Church: Safeguarding in the Church of England and the Church in Wales* [online]. Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse. 6 October. Available at: <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/document/anglican-church-safeguarding-church-england-and-church-wales-investigation-report.html>
- Makin, K. (2024) *Independent learning lessons review: John Smyth QC* [online]. 18 October. Available at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/independent-learning-lessons-review-john-smyth-qc-november-2024.pdf>

Further reading:

- Denney, D. (2005). *Risk and society*. SAGE.
 - Mahoney, I., Teague, K., Cunliffe, M. and Winder, B. (2024). Sexual abuse, safeguarding and prevention in sport. In: Winder, B., Hocken, K., Lievesley, R., Harper, C., Blagden, N., Swaby, H., and Banyard, P. (Eds.) *Sexual Crime: Victims and Survivors*. Cham: Palgrave, pp.67-92.
 - Mahoney, I., Teague, K., Long, M., and Winder, B. (2022) Populist and vindictive responses to sexual offending against children, pluralities of violence and the implications for criminal and social justice, *Archiwum Kryminologii [Archives of Criminology]*, 44 (1) pp.123-145.
-