H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tracy J. Trothen. *Shattering the Illusion: Child Sexual Abuse and Canadian Religious Institutions.* Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012. xiii + 197 pp. $32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55458-356-0.

Reviewed by Jonathan Anuik (University of Alberta)
Published on H-Histsex (April, 2013)
Commissioned by Timothy W. Jones

Earlier this year, a student shared a story of her experience as a volunteer in a church summer camp, working with a child who suffered sexual abuse. On reflection, the student drew on her own faith to make sense of the encounter. Our conversation was one part of a longer journey that believers undertake to confess, admit culpability, and learn from the legacy of child sexual abuse in Canadian religious institutions.

Tracy J. Trothen argues that Canadian religious institutions conveyed until very recently an image of moral purity and decency. Their clergy and congregations were the moral compass of Canadian society for hundreds of years. It is an illusion in her opinion that needs to be shattered to overcome revelations of child sexual abuse in media, through formal inquiries, and at court. Amid the growth in public awareness, and her own role as a researcher on religious institutional responses to incidents of child sexual abuse, Trothen took inventory of religious institutions and approaches by faith-based corporate structures to child sexual abuse. The table of contents of *Shattering the Illusion* suggests to this reviewer that the book will collapse the unshakeable belief in the rectitude of staff and volunteers in religious organizations through analysis of policies and procedures developed since 1960. Trothen goes beyond policy analysis to show that effective practice to address child sexual abuse came as clergy, lay staff, and volunteers in religious institutions attacked and dismantled the illusion.

After setting the context for the investigation, including a Cornwall, Ontario, Canada, inquiry to recommend interventions and supports for families affected by child sexual abuse (the inquiry that drew her in to the project as a researcher of sexual abuse policies in Canadian religious institutions), the book's next three chapters set up the corporate structure of the three most predominant Christian churches in Canada: the Roman Catholic Church, the United Church of Canada, and the Anglican Church in Canada. Trothen justifies her focus on these churches: they have the largest following among Canadians, with 43.2 percent identifying as Catholic, 9.6 percent as members of the United Church, and 6.9 percent as Anglican. The faith traditions focused on in the next three chapters were selected by the author for reasons other than numbers. The Mennonites are investigated because of what the author calls "progressive policies" on restorative justice in the context of child sexual abuse; Islam because it is the fastest growing non-Christian faith group in Canada; and the Unitarians/Universalist congregations as another prominent and non-Christian faith community. To ensure consistency, every chapter depicts the religious institution's governance structure; provides a short history of its presence in Canada; documents its responses and approaches to child sexual abuse through its statements, policies, and practices from 1960 to 2009; and summarizes major policy, procedural, and practical issues. Cognate topics include educational resources on child sexual abuse for clergy, lay staff, volunteers, and parishioners; theology curricula; application of disciplinary action to staff and volunteers once a civil investigation concludes; reintegration of those persons who offend into the faith community; and healing. The reader sees in every chapter how religious institutions face, assess, and handle acts once unspeakable like child sexual abuse. The reader also comes to understand how the sacred interacts with the secular on controversial issues and in cases of criminal behavior.

There are few published scholarly works on religious institutions and child sexual abuse policies. Therefore, Trothen relies heavily on institutional archival and online resources, published reports and manuals by the faith communities, and interviews with staff and legal counsels to argue that awareness of child sexual abuse is recent in all of the religious institutions, going back no longer than thirty years. However, awareness of child sexual abuse followed years of discussion of family violence, sexism and sexuality, pornography, and patriarchy. Initially, child sexual abuse was seen as part of

violence against women and within the family. The turn to a global discourse of children's rights emerged by the end of the 1980s, when Canada voted for and adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The convention signaled a paradigm shift from children under the direction of parents, clergy, lay officials, etc., to children as rights-bearing individuals able to respond to circumstances within their faith communities. Clergy and lay officials began to think of themselves in relation with their congregations, and parishioners began to speak openly on issues of violence and sexuality. Religious institutions as corporate bodies confessed to abuse and their complicity in acts of abuse. Amid such confessions and exchanges, lawsuits and criminal charges were brought against the Canadian government, religious corporations like dioceses, and clergy and lay staff for physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse at Indian Residential Schools and boarding schools, perhaps speeding the requirement that religious institutions develop policies and procedures to deal with historic and current cases of child sexual abuse if for no other reason than to obtain liability insurance. Child sexual abuse was not an isolated incident, and similarly, religious institutions were complicit in its sordid history through attempts at cover-up. The strength, though, is the grounding of resources and practices in statements of faith that hold believers together.

The book's strongest and surely to be its most lasting contribution is its enumeration of religious institutional policies and procedures to handle complaints. Its focus on development of child sexual abuse policies in twentieth-century Canadian religious institutions makes it original. Trothen sees religious institutions from the inside, attempting to understand why child sexual abuse happened and how it can be stopped, much like my student was doing. Specifically, it is clear that there are dedicated staff and volunteers who have worked tirelessly to build safe faith communities for children and youth, parents, families, women, the elderly, and people of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered sexualities. Although beyond the scope of the book, Trothen recognizes that future researchers must question how recommendations, statements, and policies are applied at the local, diocese, church, and mosque levels. Also they must examine effects on parishioners, particularly in the determination of a complaint's substance and validity and in the aftermath, when clergy, lay staff, and congregants try to heal.

However, Trothen's thesis and title *Shattering the Illusion* is not the thread that connects the parts of the book. In the beginning, she thinks of the revelation of sexual abuse and religious institutions's complicity in it as a shattering of an illusion of moral rectitude. The rest of the book documents the path to confession and development of policies to alleviate incidents of abuse. The thesis gets lost in the details on policy. The theme of children's rights as codified in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child dots the text but is never adequately addressed in relation to the religious policies on child sexual abuse.

Trothen misses factual points in her history of the Roman Catholic, United, and Anglican churches. In the twentieth century, governance changed to a diocesan system and moved away from an evangelical foundation. Such a fact may help to explain how the Christian churches could address, in a systematic way, women's rights, patriarchy, sexism, racism, homophobia, and other injustices. She neglects to mention another important fact: the United Church of Canada formed in 1925 as a result of a merger of select Methodist and Presbyterian churches and all Congregationalist churches.

The author could have used some of the groundbreaking books in the history of child sexual abuse and family violence to contextualize her study: Linda Gordon's *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence: Boston, 1880-1960* (1988); and J. R. Miller's *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (1996). Although her focus is on policy, she assesses religious institutional action and inaction in terms of gender inequity but yet declines to consider, without reason, the involvement of women religious, specifically Catholic nuns, in child sexual abuse, and initiatives connected to alleviation of occurrences of such abuse as perpetuated by women. Miller documents cases of sexual abuse involving nuns in Canadian Indian Residential Schools. Trothen could have clarified her title to inform the reader of her focus only on English Canada. She mentions on page 159 in note 1 that she and her research assistants were unable to contact French Catholic dioceses in French. I wonder if she and her assistants could have at least commissioned a translator for e-mail contact to see if there were differences in approaches between Anglophone and Francophone dioceses.

A firmer editorial hand is necessary. There are several surface errors. Similarly, the information given on sexual orientation, while interesting to this reviewer, appears as a red herring and does not strengthen the book. In chapter 5, on the Mennonite Church in Canada, Trothen mentions that "in 2000 sexual orientation issues became explosive," resulting in withdrawal of churches from the Mennonite Church Alberta conference (p. 109).

This small paragraph is not followed up and could have been dropped in the final draft. A page with a list of acronyms at the start of the book would have helped to refresh the reader. The book originates in a report to the Cornwall Public Inquiry, but the author fails to share with the reader the questions and research performed beyond it, even though she says that she has done so.

The criticisms on style and omission of facts aside, I applaud Trothen and her research assistants for their conversion of this inventory of policies and promising practices on child sexual abuse in religious institutions into a book-length study. It sheds light on how believers, such as my student earlier this year, confess, acknowledge, accept, and overcome the painful consequences of child sexual abuse in their faith communities. There is a sense of hope in the prose that faith communities may indeed become safe and affirming spaces for all Canadians and that the policies and procedures in religious institutions are a brave first step.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Jonathan Anuik. Review of Trothen, Tracy J., *Shattering the Illusion: Child Sexual Abuse and Canadian Religious Institutions*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. April, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37432

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.