

# Witnessing Wounds

Towards a Trauma-Sensitive Theology After  
Sexualized Abuse

Marie Christine Hansen-Couturier

Layout and design: Jacolijn de Krom, [persoonlijkproefschrift.nl](http://persoonlijkproefschrift.nl)  
Printing: Proefschriftspecialist, [proefschriftspecialist.nl](http://proefschriftspecialist.nl)  
Published by Uitgeverij Zilt, [www.uitgeverijzilt.nl](http://www.uitgeverijzilt.nl)  
ISBN: 978 94 9319 880 7  
DOI: 978 94 9319 881 4

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The publication of this dissertation has been made possible with the help of:  
Dr. M. van Wichen Stichting; Jurriaanse Stichting; Stichting Zonneweelde; Vrijzinnige Fondsen; and Vicariefonds van de Ridderlijke Duitse Orde (RDO) Balije van Utrecht.



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# WITNESSING WOUNDS

TOWARDS A TRAUMA-SENSITIVE THEOLOGY AFTER SEXUALIZED ABUSE

GETUIGEN VAN WONDEN

RICHTING EEN TRAUMA-SENSITIEVE THEOLOGIE NA GESEKSUALISEERD MISBRUIK

(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor  
aan de Protestantse Theologische Universiteit te Utrecht,  
op gezag van de rector, prof. dr. M.T. Frederiks,  
ingevolge het besluit van het college voor promoties  
in het openbaar te verdedigen te Utrecht  
op dinsdag, 24 maart 2026, om 15.00 uur

door

MARIE CHRISTINE HANSEN

geboren op 12 februari 1991 te Flensburg (DE)

Promotor: prof. dr. H.E. Zorgdrager  
Tweede promotor: prof. dr. L. du Toit

To those who told me their stories –  
and to those whose stories still remain silent

*What will become of this story  
inside my chest?  
Will I excavate it from my bones  
give it light  
and water  
and air?*

*Let it bloom into  
a garden of flowers  
in your name?  
Or will I let it stay  
and let you  
bury me?*

*This is the question  
I am always asking myself:*

*what will become of my stories –  
gardens  
or graveyards?*

- The photosynthesis of healing, Emory Hall & Trevor Hall

## Acknowledgements

Writing a dissertation is a labor of love, as Jennifer Baldwin rightly stated. ‘Labor’ can indicate a process of working hard but can also refer to the process of giving birth. Giving birth can be painful yet at the same time it can be extremely empowering. Similarly, I have found the process of writing a dissertation one of high highs and low lows. To me, the process has been both extremely painful and extremely empowering. The book that now lays before you is the result of years of development – both on an academic level and on a personal level. All of this I could and would not have done alone, thus at this point I would like to extend a ‘thank you’ to those who have supported, helped and held me through this journey.

First and foremost, I would like to thank the brave respondents who have shared with me their stories for this dissertation. ‘Thank you’ feels like too small a phrase to express the gratitude I feel for each and every one of you, for opening up and for daring to be vulnerable with me. I am honored to have been a witness to your stories and to your strength.

This research project also could not have happened without the help and support of the founders and organizers of the VPSG-course. Thank you, Judith, Mirjam and Riëtte, and others at VPSG who have made this possible.

As a PhD-student, you are supervised, and I was lucky enough to have two very smart and talented ‘Doktormütter’ by my side. Prof. dr. Heleen Zorgdrager and prof. dr. Louise du Toit, Heleen and Louise, thank you for your time, your dedication and most of all, thank you for believing in me every step of the way. I look back fondly on all the conversations that we had, mostly online but during a few instances also ‘live’- great times! Without your guidance, I believe I might have given up on this project all together years ago. Heleen, thank you for your loving support and the various walks we took together during hard times. Louise, thank you for committing to this project in its very early stages and for never giving up on me or this research.

To my colleagues at the PThU: thank you for your support, your humor and your collegiality.

Many people have dedicated their time to this research project. I would like to thank the members of the reading committee: prof. dr. Juliana Claassens, dr. Danielle Tumminio Hansen, prof. dr. Adriaan van Klinken, prof. dr. Dorottya Nagy and prof.

dr. Erik Olsman, for dedicating their precious time and energy to the manuscript and for helping me make it better with sharp questions and insights.

Making a dissertation into a book is, so I learned, a whole different playing field. Thanks to Jeanet Hamstra from Uitgeverij Zilt and to Jacolijn de Krom from PersoonlijkProefschrift.nl for showing me the ropes and for helping me make this book into a book!

Writing a theological dissertation with two theologians as parents could have been a challenge – alas, it was not. Mom (Katrin) and dad (Ed), thank you for believing in me and for taking me seriously as I engaged on this journey with all its ups and downs. Thank you for giving me the space to become my ‘own’ theologian yet never withholding your love, support and insights when I asked for it.

I write my dissertation on embodied theology. In my personal life, it has been (and continues to be) a journey to become more ‘embodied’. I am eternally grateful for body-oriented psychotherapy for helping me engage on this journey time and again. Wenneke, thank you for helping me land and for being a loving rock during tough times. Kim, thank you for teaching me that I can do it, and for supporting me through moments where I believed I couldn’t.

Many people have surrounded me, stood by me and checked in on me over the past seven years. To my friends and family, first of all: thank you for bearing with me while I worked on this book! Thanks for standing by me through the depths of it and for celebrating the highs with me. And a special thanks to my precious mother-in-law Karien, for all the hours you spent taking care of our children, allowing me to work on this project while you looked after them.

When I started working on this dissertation, my ‘home front’ consisted of two people: my wonderful partner Isabelle and myself. During my PhD-trajectory, two tiny miracles joined our family. First our son Amos, then our daughter Elin. The both of them are now old enough to understand that mami has “written a book” and that we are happy that it is finished. Somewhere in the future, maybe I can explain a bit more about the contents of this book. For now, let me say: Amos and Elin, even if you drive me crazy at times - you are my lights. Your energy and innocence make me see the good in the world, each and every day. And last, but certainly not least: dear Isabelle, my wife, my love – thank you for holding me up through the toughest parts of this process. Thank you for believing in me and cheering me on, always – I love you with all of my heart.

Writing this dissertation has shaped and changed me. It was a process that continued through the COVID-19 pandemic and through personal highs and lows. Celine Cairo sings it well:

*I thought that I was drowning  
But if there's a God then I know She's been watching me  
And I thought I'd lost a lifetime  
But I found a light down on the bottom of the sea  
And I took it with me*

I am thankful for what this research project has brought me – even if it took me to ‘the bottom of the sea’ at times – and I hope that this book may help and inspire others, as writing it has helped and inspired me.

Houten (NL), January 12<sup>th</sup> 2026

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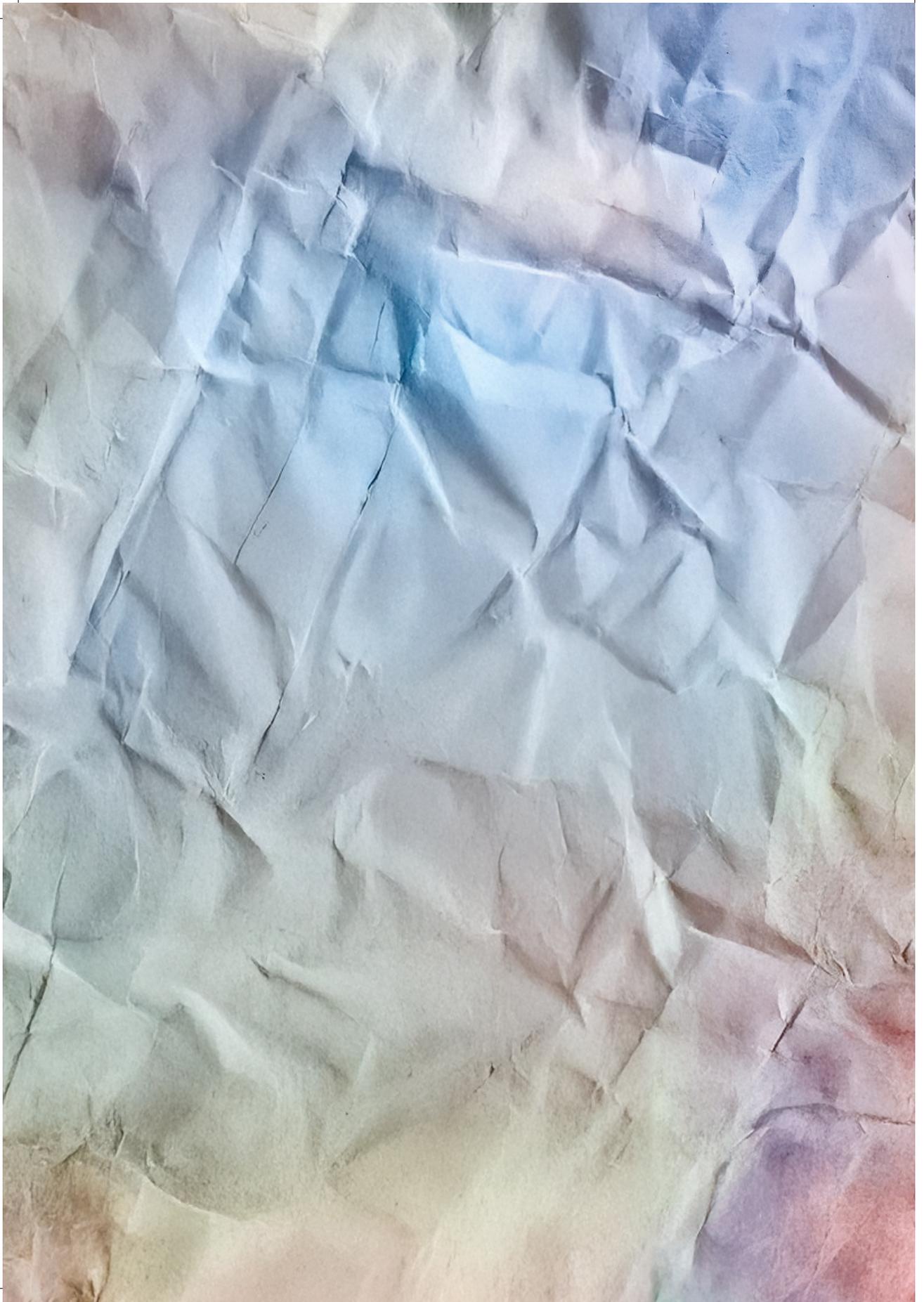
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# 1

## Sexualized Abuse in Christian Contexts: An Introduction

Theology has always been concerned with significant human life events: birth, death, and everything in between. Its focus has been on meaning-making around these events and around life as a whole—the good and the bad. Thus, it is not surprising that theology is concerned with the subject of trauma. Questions of suffering and grief are not new to theology. This, however, does not mean that theology has always responded to these questions in a trauma-sensitive way. Not long after the #MeToo movement gained momentum in 2017, #ChurchToo also became a popular hashtag.<sup>1</sup> Stories of sexualized<sup>2</sup> abuse within religious organizations had gradually begun to surface more clearly and systematically since the notable publication by the *Boston Globe* in 2002 of an investigation into the sexualized abuse of minors in the Roman Catholic Church. Ever since, more and more cases of sexualized abuse in organizations, both religious (in a broad sense, i.e. not confined to the Roman Catholic Church) and secular, have been brought out into the open. These developments show that sexualized abuse happens everywhere, even (or: especially) in places where one would perhaps least expect it. As it turns out, there are many *me, too*'s to be heard in many different places.

From #MeToo to #ChurchToo, stories of survivors are shared on public platforms and have been raising awareness. Although all these personal accounts have intrinsic value, they also convey something beyond individual experience: they show the sheer scale of sexual violation globally, and they draw our attention to the complicity of institutions in covering it up, trivializing, denying, and enabling it. Moreover, when sexual abuse happens in a religious context, somewhere along the line, God-talk is bound to become involved, whether this be a survivor asking herself 'where was God' during her abuse or a perpetrator claiming that 'God is okay with this'. Sexual violation in religious settings has deep implications for people's faith journeys and deeply wounds their trust in religious institutions. Too often, religious communities have been complicit in covering up stories of abuse or in silencing the victim(s), and therefore their theology-in-practice has not always been trauma-sensitive. This has led to institutional complicity in (covering up and enabling) sexual violence against members. The Faith Trust Institute makes this point very clearly in a statement defining the #ChurchToo-movement:

*#ChurchToo is a movement that started on social media to bring to light the sexual harassment, abuse, and assault that happens within churches/faith communities. It is a collective story of individuals who have been harmed. It is also the story of the failure*

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- 1 The term 'MeToo' was coined in 2006 by activist Tara Burke. In 2017, it became trending on Twitter through a tweet of Alyssa Milano (Garcia 2017). The hashtag 'ChurchToo' was also created in 2017, shortly after #MeToo. #ChurchToo was coined by Emily Joy Allison (Alexieff 2022).
  - 2 I speak specifically of 'sexualized' abuse instead of 'sexual' abuse. For further discussion hereof, see section 1.4.3.

*of religious communities and institutions. It is a testament to institutional betrayal, victim blaming and shaming, and the silencing of victims/survivors. (FaithTrust Institute 2018)*

Sexualized abuse is never just an individual problem. It is also a telltale sign of institutionalized abuse of power and a maldistribution of power within relationships. As the above quote states, religious communities and institutions have often failed in regard to survivors. More often than not, this results in survivors (understandably) turning away from everything that is associated with church, faith, and God.

Churches and the theologies they subscribe to have indeed been complicit in creating situations in which abuse can occur, and in covering it up afterwards. That Scripture and theological tradition can easily be misused for these purposes, is what feminist theologians – amongst others - have long pointed out. Phyllis Trible's early feminist classic, *Texts of Terror*, is a well-known example of a critical theological work dealing with misogyny in Scripture and Scripture's (mis)use in churches and academies (Trible 1984). However, over the past few decades theology has increasingly concerned itself with trauma and with sexualized abuse<sup>3</sup>, as stories of survivors are becoming the hermeneutic lens through which tradition and/or Scripture are interpreted and criticized. This has led to renewed interpretations of tradition(s), dogmatics and Scripture – interpretations that prioritize the viewpoint of survivors and aim to be of service to them. It is in this context of critical interpretation that the idea for this research project arose, and it is toward this context that I aim to contribute with this study.

In this first chapter, we will explore the questions of this research project and the contexts in which they are posed, in six sections. The first section considers Christian contexts as a space in which stories of sexualized abuse survivors can be heard. In the second section I sketch the main research question, which will serve as a guiding thread for this study, as well as the aims of this project. In the third section, we look at a brief overview of sexualized abuse in popular and academic discourse, which will help us to understand the broader context of this topic. In the fourth section of this chapter, I elaborate on the origins of this research and on myself as a researcher: how did this project come to be, where am I starting from, and what are some preliminary choices I make when it comes to terminology? In addressing these questions, the fourth section aims to familiarize the reader with the broader context, so that they are better able to

3 Notably, this started with the work of Cathy Caruth in the 1990s. For a further discussion of the development of the field of trauma-sensitive theology, see section 1.3.3.

understand my methodological choices (which will be further explained in the second chapter). In the fifth section, I describe my understanding of (lived) theology and the importance of circular hermeneutic meaning-making. In the last section of this chapter, the chapter structure of this dissertation is outlined.

## **1.1 Sexualized Abuse and Church, a Problematic Combination**

Theological concern with trauma and sexualized abuse is important to survivors of sexualized abuse and to pastors/ministers/chaplains (i.e. all those who encounter and work with survivors of sexualized abuse in church contexts). However, Christian tradition(s) are not always a good starting place for this kind of trauma-sensitizing work. Sexualized abuse and its aftermath inevitably have to do with bodies and with sex. And while these themes have arguably been quite central to the Christian tradition – for example in the regulations around marriage, premarital sex, and sexual orientation – Christianity’s general tendency has been to treat bodies and sex in a negative way, either by ignoring their existence altogether or by framing (female) bodies as oppositional to the spiritual and thereby as ‘lesser’. Thus, it can be argued that Christian theology has always been ‘embodied’ in the sense that it is concerned with bodily notions like creation, incarnation and resurrection (Isherwood and Stuart 1998, 11) – but ordinary bodies and their sexuality have seldom been acknowledged and affirmed by theology and theologians. Put differently, we might say that there is a longstanding problematic tradition in Christian theology to cast bodies and sex as both feminized (in a negative way, as deviant or lacking) and as sinful and dangerous - to women’s souls and to others (males). When bodies and sex become ‘things’ that need to be regulated and restricted, a climate is fostered in which shame and a general institutional silence go hand in hand with bodies and sex. This, in turn, makes it more difficult to voice issues concerning bodies and sex in religious contexts – issues such as sexualized abuse.<sup>4</sup>

Amongst others, Adriana Balk-van Rossum has noted a lack of (positive) attention to bodies and sexuality in Christian churches in general – both Protestant and Catholic (Balk-van Rossum 2017). Her research has shown that this is one of the factors

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4 This is a compelling illustration of what Miranda Fricker has called ‘hermeneutic injustice’ (Fricker 2006; Fricker 2007). Fricker addresses the issue that topics or phenomena that are disproportionately experienced by marginalised groups, get silenced and repressed. This leads to epistemic injustice, which in a specific form is hermeneutic injustice, defined as “[...] the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization.” (Fricker 2006, 102). This hermeneutic injustice can be individual or systemic. In either case, Fricker’s observation rings true that: “Hermeneutical lacunas are like holes in the ozone – it’s the people who live under them that get burned.” (Fricker 2006, 103).

contributing to the difficulty survivors have in voicing their experiences in churches (Balk-van Rossum 2017, 520). Similarly, Elaine Heath found that churches often fail to speak about sexual abuse from the perspective of survivors, which oftentimes leads to alienation of survivors from the church (Heath 2019, 6). I think it is safe to say that in general, survivors of sexualized abuse and those close to them don't really feel at home in churches – or even in a Christian tradition altogether – when it comes to that specific part of their life stories. Of course, this becomes all the more difficult when the church has contributed to the abuse in some way. How, then, could we benefit from a theological perspective that focuses on the trauma and thus on the victim of sexualized abuse? Wouldn't a Christian theology be the least trustworthy source to turn to for survivors and those who work with them?

Distrust of theology and churches due to their complicity in facilitating and covering up situations of abuse, is certainly appropriate. There is no easy way around this. However, theology may still have something to offer here. After all, the Christian faith confesses to a God who, as Scripture tells us, 'became flesh' in the person of Jesus Christ, Jesus of Nazareth. This Jesus was born, he lived, breathed, loved – and died a violent death. But the story did not end there. After three days, the resurrected Christ appeared to his disciples. Not only in spirit, but in flesh, in body. According to the Gospel of John, the resurrected body of Jesus still bore the marks from his violent death (John 20:27). Even in something as miraculous as life 'after' death, the marks<sup>5</sup> of violence remained. A Christian faith is a faith that revolves around a God who became a vulnerable body, a body that was wounded and ultimately lived *through* and *with* the evidence of these wounds. There was life through death: embodied life that bears marks of what has passed. Shelly Rambo has demonstrated the relevance of this Gospel story when it comes to theologizing after trauma (Rambo 2015; 2017). In the story of Jesus's resurrection as narrated in the Gospel of John, we find an example as to what such an embodied theology might look like, as opposed to the 'disembodied' theology of the

5 In different translations, we find 'wound' (NLT, NET Bible, Weymouth New Testament) or 'scar' (Contemporary English Version, Good News Translation). The Greek word used in this passage is τύπος (John 20:25), which is most accurately translated as 'imprint' or 'mark', which is also found in many translations (NIV, ESV, NASB, ISV). For a brief discussion on whether to translate τύπος as 'wound' or 'scar', see chapter 5, p. 236. At this point, it is also worth briefly pointing out that in Christian tradition (more specifically: the Roman-Catholic tradition) the crucifixion wounds of Jesus, which are sometimes replicated in the faithful, are referred to as stigmata. The Greek στίγματα (plural, singular: στίγμα) is only found in the New Testament once, in the letter of Paul to the Galatians (Galatians 6:17: "From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus."). A στίγμα is a "physical mark or brand used to identify slaves, soldiers, or criminals. It signified ownership, loyalty, or punishment..." (Biblehub, last accessed 12-12-2024). The stigmata signify exceptional loyalty of the faithful to God. In chapter 5, we will briefly return to the stigmata, as one of the respondents refers to the wounds of Jesus as stigmata (chapter 5, p. 210).

dominant tradition. First, there is the concreteness of Jesus's flesh. As we have seen above, 'becoming flesh' – incarnation, birth – marked the beginning of Jesus's story, but in his resurrection, it is no different. Jesus appears to his disciples in a physical manner, albeit strangely so, since he appears to enter the room through the locked doors (John 20:19). Nevertheless, he appears 'in the flesh', as a concrete reality. Jesus' flesh is what marks his dwelling on earth, which allows him to love, to heal others, to cry – to connect with others and share life with them. His marked flesh also tells the story of his resurrection, of life after death. The story of the upper room furthermore tells us that Jesus' resurrected body still bears the marks of his violent death. What has transpired is not left unnoticed, nor does it miraculously disappear. The marks are there, and they can be seen and touched.

The story of Thomas and Jesus is a story about trauma, about embodiment, and about bearing witness. It is also a story that speaks of the 'afterlife'<sup>6</sup> of trauma, of a life that is marked yet not arrested by traumatic experiences. Given the problematic perspectives Christian traditions tend to have toward bodies and sexuality, it would be well worth our time to take cues from stories such as this one. Given how widespread the problem of sexualized abuse is, both within and outside of Christian contexts, something needs to change in our theological meaning-making around the 'afterlife' of this specific trauma. It has long been argued by feminist theologians that we need a new hermeneutic, one that reads the Bible in such a way that it becomes a liberating force—again (cf. Heath, 6). We need ways of interpreting tradition that are liberating, in order to create spaces that are safe for survivors of sexualized abuse – in our churches and in our theological thinking. With this research project, I seek to demonstrate the value of 'doing' theology in a trauma-sensitive way, which means that it takes concrete, fleshy, and vulnerable embodiment seriously.

## 1.2 The Research Question: Toward a Trauma-Sensitive Theology

Theological meaning-making can be a wonderful source of insight on how to deal with life in all its messiness. And, as I have argued above, we need theology that is trauma-

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6 For this term I am indebted to Shelly Rambo, in whose work it plays a pivotal role. 'Afterlife' denotes more than just the 'aftermath' of a traumatic experience. Rather, the term conveys two things at once. On the one hand, it bears the acknowledgement that life has changed and remains marked by the traumatic event. On the other hand, it denotes the *beyond*, the re-figuring, the ongoingness of life without denying the suffering (past and/or still present) (Rambo 2017, 4-5). Both trauma and its afterlife require a multi-sensory approach, Rambo argues: "If we conceive of trauma as a 'death' involving a multisensory shattering of meaning, then its afterlife will require a multi-sensory reconstitution of life." (Rambo 2015, 266) This is a point we will return to extensively in chapters 4, 5 and 6.

sensitive. In this research project, I focus specifically on the trauma of sexualized abuse. I do so from a systematic-theological point of view. The research question guiding this study, then, is:

*What does a systematic, trauma-sensitive theology, informed by the narratives of survivors of sexualized abuse, look like?*

In what follows, I will unpack the elements of this research question one by one, before turning to the aims of this study.

For what a ‘systematic’, ‘trauma-sensitive’ theology may look like, we may take some clues from a quote by Karen O’Donnell, in which she explains the aims of trauma (-sensitive) theology<sup>7</sup> very clearly:

*The aims of trauma theology are largely to bring to light experiences of trauma (often taking place within the church and other Christian communities) and to highlight the ways in which established and traditional theologies do not necessarily do justice to, or take into account, the experiences of the trauma survivor. This witnessing to trauma is then joined with a reimagining of theology that seeks to create a theological groundwork from which pastoral practice might, ultimately, be able to draw. (O’Donnell, 2023)*

In this quote, we see that trauma-sensitive theology is concerned first and foremost with bringing to light the experiences of trauma – which are often hard to voice, as we will see. Furthermore, a trauma-sensitive theology needs to be able to hold itself and other theologies/traditions accountable: justice and a platform for survivors of trauma should be amongst its core values. This might involve critiquing and de-constructing some established theologies/traditions. Giving a platform for survivors of trauma is what O’Donnell here calls ‘witnessing to trauma’, which is an important step in healing

7 I speak of ‘trauma-sensitive theology’ whereas Karen O’Donnell here employs the term ‘trauma theology’ (meaning: theology informed and reformed by experiences of those who are traumatized). Both ‘trauma theology’ and ‘trauma informed theology’ are terms that can be used (and are sometimes used) as synonyms for ‘trauma-sensitive theology’. Karen O’Donnell distinguishes ‘trauma informed theology’ from ‘trauma theology’. ‘Trauma informed theology’ implies that, “theologians (and therefore theologies) should be informed about trauma and the impacts it has on people and potentially on their faith-lives too. So any theology could potentially be ‘trauma-informed.’” ‘Trauma theology’, on the other hand, is theology “that is directly dealing with trauma experiences and trauma survivors. This kind of theology is obviously also ‘trauma-informed’ but it is theology directly working in the field of trauma as opposed to be any kind of theology which can also be appropriate trauma-informed.” (e-mail conversation with Karen O’Donnell, 28-11-2024). As we will see, Jennifer Baldwin uses the term ‘trauma-sensitive theology’ and since I rely on her definition of what this term means, I choose to use the term ‘trauma-sensitive theology’ in my dissertation rather than ‘trauma-informed theology’ or ‘trauma theology’.

from trauma – a point we will return to extensively in chapter 6. However, the work of trauma-sensitive theology is not only to de-construct but also to re-imagine, to re-construct, and to create a (new) theological groundwork. Implications for theological praxis may then follow from the act of de- and reconstructing.

My research is a systematic-theological project in the sense that I will look at certain concepts/dogmatic loci from theological tradition (these concepts being: wounds, resurrection, and witness)<sup>8</sup> and will aim to reimagine these concepts from the perspective of a trauma-sensitive theology. This does, ultimately, have consequences for theological praxis, but the aim of this study is not first and foremost to evaluate this praxis and make proposals for change – my focus lies on interrogating the theological concepts and the reimagining thereof.

Furthermore, the research question asks what it means for a systematic, trauma-sensitive theology to be ‘informed by the narratives of survivors of sexualized abuse’, which is a specific kind of trauma. We will see that trauma-sensitive theologizing needs the inclusion of our bodies into our theological meaning-making, and the bodies of those who have suffered the trauma(s) of sexualized abuse have specific stories to tell. Trauma-sensitive theology must be theology from the perspective of the traumatized – in the case of this research project, the perspective of survivors of sexualized abuse. It must be theology that seeks to do justice to perspectives that have been undermined in the past. The perspectives of survivors of sexualized abuse will be a common thread throughout chapters 3 – 6, where we will explore how their perspectives contribute to a theological re-shaping of the concepts of wounds, resurrection and witness.

Seeing as the narratives of survivors of sexualized abuse are central to this research, it may come as no surprise that the first step toward answering the research question (and the first main aim of the project) is to give a platform to survivor voices and invite them as sources for theological meaning-making. As a theologian, I am motivated to look at theological concepts that can help us with meaning-making in and about life. What do our beliefs about God, humans and life tell us about our everyday existence, and how might these beliefs help us navigate difficult stages of our lives? In this research project, it is my aim to explore these questions together with survivors of sexualized

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8 The concepts of ‘wounds’ and ‘resurrection’ emerged from the story that was central to the last session of the VPSG course: John 20: 19-29, the story of Thomas wanting to touch the wounds of the risen Jesus. This session and the development of these concepts in the current research project was also inspired by the work of Shelly Rambo, particularly her *Resurrecting Wounds* (2017). The concept of ‘witness’ emerged during the research process from both literature study and the empirical data (participant observation and interviews). See also chapter 2, p. 88.

abuse. Too often, their voices have been silenced, which is why their narratives, and their meaning-making will be the focus of this project.

Highlighting the perspectives of sexualized abuse survivors leads to the inclusion of the stories that their bodies tell. The second aim of this project is therefore to demonstrate that our bodies contain wisdom and knowledge which sometimes reaches beyond our intellectual capacities, and that we should therefore ‘do’ theology with both mind and body. When it comes to sexualized abuse, I will argue that we need a different way of looking at (and listening to) bodies, namely in a way that will help us move beyond a Cartesian dualism and the dogmatic notion of the essential sinfulness of the flesh, the carnal.

My third aim is to provide a resource that is relevant for both academics and pastors/ministers/chaplains alike. Whether you are a professor teaching a class on dogmatics and are looking for a contemporary interpretation of wounds and resurrection, or a pastor who has recently found out a parishioner of theirs has a history of sexualized abuse and wonders what theology might offer to her – I hope this book provides insights and sharpens your thinking. Moreover, I hope to demonstrate the relevance of implementing a trauma-sensitive theology for the questions and challenges we face today.

### **1.3 Historical Perspectives and Looking Toward the Future: Context and Prospects of this Research Project**

The topic of trauma has been trending since the previous century. Karen O’Donnell rightly remarks: “Of course, trauma was not invented in the twentieth century, rather it is the century in which it has been defined (to some extent) and often medicalized.” (O’Donnell 2023, 4) Research on sexualized abuse in Christian contexts, the specific type of trauma which this research project focuses on, has increased over the last three decades. This increased attention has happened in tandem with the traction this topic has gained in women’s movements. Before academic interest in the topic could arise, a cultural change had to take place, in which sexualized abuse could be addressed to begin with. Many insights have since been formulated and shared, generating change in (church) praxis. In this section, we look at the developments that took place in churches, culture and academia – settings that are intertwined and are mutually influencing each other. Sketching out an overview of these historical developments will help to situate the topic of sexualized abuse in its historical context. My attention herein lies on the

developments within the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN)<sup>9</sup>, since this is the context in which this research takes place.

### 1.3.1 A Changing Awareness in Churches and Culture

It was not until the 1970s that sexual abuse in a church context gradually became a topic of discussion in churches and academia, both in Europe and in the United States. Of course, this does not mean that sexualized abuse did not happen before that time. Gary Schoener for instance notes several American novels from the 19<sup>th</sup> century that mention sexual relations between pastors and their congregants (Schoener 2005, 5 – in: Van den Berg-Seiffert, 84). It did, however, take considerable time before some of these ‘relationships’ came to be seen for what they actually were: forms of emotional and/or physical abuse, instead of the narrative of deviant women seducing their pastors. We will come back to this point in section 1.3.2 in the discussion of the work of Alexander Veerman.

Attention around sexual abuse in churches follows a more general acknowledgment of the problem outside of churches. In the United States, we see this illustrated in, for instance, the work of Marie M. Fortune, who – following a period of volunteer work at a rape crisis center – identified a huge silence around the topic of sexual abuse in the congregation where she served as a minister at the time (1976) (‘FaithTrust Institute’). Her aim then became to equip ministers to talk to their congregants about sexual abuse that they might have experienced. As a result, the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence (now known as the FaithTrust Institute) was founded at the end of the 70s. In the late 1980s, the work of the Center became all the more important when several stories of sexual abuse *within* churches (by clergy themselves) were published (Fortune 1989; Rutter 1989). Raising awareness around this topic became a more urgent priority.

A similar timeline can be observed in the Netherlands. Here, the women’s movement was also influential in making sexual abuse a topic of discussion, inside and outside of churches. In 1983, the VSK (Vereniging tegen Seksuele Kindermishandeling) published a book containing 19 life-stories of women who had suffered incest, many of them in a faith-based context (Vereniging tegen Seksuele Kindermishandeling 1983). This book shocked the general Dutch public and sparked conversations about the topic. In direct response this, Annie Imbens and Ineke Jonker published *Godsdienst en Incest (Religion*

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9 The PCN was created through a fusion of the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland and the Evangelisch-Lutherse Kerk, who had worked together under the name of ‘Samen op Weg-kerken’ (SoW) since 1961. May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004, marked the official start of the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland. I will refer to this denomination mostly with the English abbreviation ‘PCN’ throughout this text.

*and Incest*) in 1985, which tells the stories of women who had suffered incest in their families and how this was related to their faith (Imbens and Jonker 1985). Imbens and Jonker thereby demonstrated the complicit role that faith can play in fostering incest, resulting in a ‘faith trauma’ within survivors, in addition to the trauma of the abuse. In this study, we will see that this ‘faith trauma’ is a large aspect of the trauma that the respondents deal with. Additionally, Imbens and Jonker also emphasized in their study that preaching in churches should be inclusive and empowering toward women, instead of fostering a climate in which women are seen as inferior and thereby become easy targets of abuse.

With their book, Imbens and Jonker inspired women to form peer-to-peer networks to provide counseling, advice and guidance. With the guidance of Annego Hogebrink and Donne Schmaal, the peer-to-peer group VSG (Vrouwenpastoraat en Seksueel Geweld) was initiated. This grew into a foundation that is now known as Stichting VPSG, which provides guidance, counseling and advice around sexual abuse and faith. In 1989, Joke Kappner was one of the first women to publicly speak about the abuse she had suffered at the hands of her pastor. She initiated the foundation of SMPR: an interdenominational initiative of churches working together against sexual abuse in pastoral relationships<sup>10</sup> (Seksueel Misbruik in Pastorale Relaties, see: ‘Geschiedenis van SMPR’). In 1994, Gideon van Dam and Marjo Eitjes published a book containing the stories of victims (of abuse in the church), perpetrators and partners of both victims and perpetrators (Van Dam and Eitjes 1994). In the following decades, more first-person accounts were published (Selles 2001; Zomer 2004). All this work could not remain unnoticed by church organizations in the Netherlands. In 1999, the General Synod of the SoW churches<sup>11</sup> stated in a report that churches should always side with victims: “Sexual abuse is sin: it is evil in God’s eyes and injustice against fellow humans. Churches should unequivocally side with the victims.”<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands founded ‘Hulp en Recht’ in 1995, where victims could file their complaints and get adequate help. Hulp en Recht later came to be known as ‘Meldpunt Seksueel Misbruik Rooms-Katholieke Kerk’ and

10 For a definition of ‘pastor’ and ‘pastoral care’, see footnote 46, p. 46.

11 The abbreviation ‘SoW’ stands for Samen op Weg, which preceded what since 2004 is known as the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (PKN/PCN).

12 Original text: “Seksueel misbruik is zonde: kwaad in Gods ogen en onrecht tegen de medemens. De kerk dient onomwonden te kiezen voor slachtoffers”. (Limpt 1999). The scandal of a youth pastor abusing teenager boys in the period between 1982-1985 on the Reformed camping place Het Grote Bos in Doorn urged the Protestant Church-in-the-making to take this stance.