

A Safeguarding Review – the Church of England as Scandal

Introduction:

As the Civil Rights campaigner John Lewis, “there is never a wrong time to do the right thing”. All Synods, an opportunity to re-engage with the foundations of the Church, test its stability and flexibility, and if needed, do some re-founding. The closeness and intimacy of the Synod provides a regulated space for what Michel Foucault termed *parrhesia* – meaning ‘free speech’, or speaking candidly, and in so doing, seeking forgiveness and a new way forward.

Prior to becoming Pope Francis in 2012 Jorge Mario Bergoglio served as Archbishop of Buenos Aires from 1998, having been a Jesuit since 1958. Bergoglio was born and raised, in Buenos Aires, Argentina. As Bishop and later Archbishop, Bergoglio spoke out against the military Junta and the so-called ‘Dirty War’ (Spanish: *Guerra Sucia* 1974-1983).

The regime was party to the death of some 12,000 writers, activists, dissidents, clergy, politicians and protesters. Many others were executed in secret and became known collectively as ‘the disappeared’. With many bodies never recovered, this was one of the most intense episodes of state-sanctioned murder in the post-war era. Synods of course confirm the past, but they are also honest about things – and that is why they need this simple voices of courage and conviction to face reality whilst being faithful to tradition. So the words I offer here are in a sense a plea for a fusion of emotional and ecclesial intelligence, in order that the Church can rediscover its prophetic edge, and own a proper place for righteous anger – as needed. I make no apology, therefore, for dwelling on the corruption and collusion we find in our church safeguarding cultures, and for considering this as an ecumenical matter, and a prophetic calling for justice.

As Peter Drucker’s famous maxim has it, “culture eats strategy for breakfast”. Bergoglio suggested that while sin could be forgiven, corruption should not be granted the same grace. Bergoglio held that at the root of corruption was the refusal of God’s forgiveness. Because the corrupted person, institution or organization denies the need for repentance, and with that, correction. The body that refuses to repent will usually also believe it is near-perfect. Or perhaps worse, must maintain the appearance of that perfection.

In safeguarding we find this in announcements and speeches at General Synod. “We have set up an Independent Safeguarding Board” (ISB) recently comes to mind. The gullible are fooled, but victims of abuse and endlessly inept processes are not. For the culture is the same, and remains intact and immune to true change.

Likewise, bishops are exactly the same when they say they will do better with safeguarding, or announce another review, or try and distract and dilute the deep, boiling anger of victims with some other new initiative. Corruption, unless named, acknowledged and corrected, only grows – like a slow cancer. Those who – it must be said, usually unwittingly – become the guardians of such systems of abusive culture have forgotten their shared humanity and Christianity.

The Church of England’s safeguarding culture ensures that all power differentials remain in place, including secrecy, unsafe and unlawful processes. The Church of England’s culture of corruption has sired a body that has no accountability, scrutiny, fairness, transparency or external regulation. We find the same fear-driven self-sufficiency baked in with moral superiority. That is a form of corruption.

Jesus had to reject the religious elites of his day, because they had taken possession of the law and tradition, its meanings and applications. We have an old saying: “possession is nine-tenths of the law”. By claiming ownership of faith, religion and morality, the religious elites of Jesus’ time were able to remain aloof. These religious leaders could issue edicts. They could decide if and when they went into “dialogue”, and with whom.

Most difficult questions could be left unanswered, and difficult questioners were censured and censored. By purloining religion – in theory to protect it, but in the end to possess it – the religious elites of Jesus’ day were able to put themselves above others. The elite were not like the people. These leaders could not be weighed, cross-examined, investigated, inspected or judged. Anyone who joined this elite acquired power and privilege, with immunity from accountability.

Jesus, by walking with the poor and outcast, befriending them as valued equals in the Kingdom of Heaven, simply destroyed the wall that prevented them from coming close to God. Lest there be any doubt here, remember Jesus’ words in Matthew 18: 6-7 – “whoever causes one of these little ones...to sin, it is better for them that a heavy millstone be hung around their neck, and that they be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to those through whom they come!”.

On the face of it, this issue is apparently a ‘tripping point’. Romans 14: 13 bears that out: “let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve to not put an obstacle or a stumbling block in the way of a fellow believer”. Yet a millstone around your neck is a pretty heavy block. However, our term “stumbling block” is not what it seems. It comes from the Greek word *skandalon*, (used 15 times in the New Testament) and the source of our word *scandal*. The related verb (“to cause to stumble”) is *skandalizō*, (used 30 times in the NT) from which we get *scandalize*.

To us moderns, a scandal is just toxic gossip and tabloid-tittle-tattle – and might summon memories of some celebrity libel trial or more serious courtroom drama that might involve loss of life, or some failure of government. However, to the ancient Greeks, a scandal was the functional trigger mechanism for a baited trap. Later, it came to mean the actual trap as a whole, or something that tripped a person up, causing them to stumble and fall. In the Bible, a stumbling block is anything that causes a person to fall – be that into sin, false teaching or unbelief.

But there is another side to this. Jesus Christ was a *skandalon*: “we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to gentiles, foolishness” (see I Corinthians 1: 23). Pope Francis argued that the merciful response to the corrupt is to place a stumbling-block, a *skandalon*, in their path, which is the only way of forcing them to seriously contemplate taking a different road. One thinks of the rich man who obeys all the law, and excels at good works. What else is he to do? A *skandalon* is placed before him. Jesus tells him, “If you want to be complete, go *and* sell your possessions and give to *the* poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me”. But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he owned much property and had enormous wealth (Matthew 19: 21-22).

Jesus Encounters Corruption:

Yet the Jesus who is the true *skandalon* is not the usual Christ that first comes into our minds. Sometimes the expression of passionate anger and acting it out is important, and even prophetic. What are we to make of Jesus driving out the money-changers and traders from the temple precincts, recorded in the Gospel of John (2: 13-16)? Jesus creates mayhem in the temple, and upsets all the people going about their lawful trading in dubious religious tat. And he goes to the whole hog too, driving them out with a whip that he made himself. Jesus doesn't do things by halves. Jesus' apparent rush of blood to the head in this temple story, where he not only conducts himself like a teenager in-line for an anti-social behaviour order, but also goes on claim the Temple for his own ends. So Jesus' action in the Temple – reckless, violent and apparently intemperate – contains a strong message.

It is a message of wisdom. Breaking oppressive frames of reference requires dramatic action. This is about smashing a culture of corruption. There is really no point trading up from a pigeon to a dove. Neither sacrifice brings you closer to God; both are a waste of your money. There was no point in going for the “three for two” offer on goats; nor this month's “buy one get one free” offer on lambs. And this is why Jesus' ‘anger’ in the gospel is so interesting. For it seems not be a hot, quick irrational ‘temper-snap’; but rather a cold and calculating anger. There is a difference between hot anger and cold, perhaps righteous anger. The latter is a derivative of passion and virtue. It has a deep ethical intentionality.

John's gospel records that Jesus saw what was going on in the Temple. He then left, went away and *made* the whips of cords. Then he returned. This is a cold premeditated attack; not a rush of blood to the head. He has, as the Epistle to James puts it, "been slow to anger" – but he's got there. This is how to disrupt a corrupt culture. Dialogue won't suffice. Like Arnold Schwarzenegger as the robot from the future in *The Terminator*, Jesus has seen the Temple, and says to his puzzled audience, "I'll be back". We can no longer ignore the pain and alienation that others in the church experience – and especially when this is *because* of the church. Indifference is arguably the true original sin. The vice of corrupted culture must be broken.

The scandal of safeguarding in the Church of England is one of learned indifference; double-standards; strained gnats, then camels swallowed whole; beams and motes; the amount of money spent on process, but not people; the lies, secrecy, double-speak, "PR and Comms"; the offer of dialogue that leads to no change; picking off victims one-by-one; endless, slow, treacle-like procedures; gross misconduct; even grosser incompetence; the hypocrisy and the hype. I believe we can get beyond enduring this. Yet this can usually only be done by bringing religious leaders to their knees. Not, initially, for them to be asking for forgiveness. That is for later.

Only bringing the presiders of safeguarding to their knees is can break a corrupt culture with *skandalon*, and that (alas) must be financial and reputational. In Canada, Australia and the USA, denominations with significant histories of abuse only began to repent when the financial consequences became extremely serious. Up until then, it was decades of victims being given the run-around in the search for truth, justice and redress. And the churches (or church schools) going through the gears of NDA's, endless reviews, false promises, blaming the past, blaming the victims, and doing this all so very, very slowly.

As Harvey Cox noted in *On Not Leaving it to the Snake* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1968), the first and original sin is not disobedience. It is, rather, indifference. We can no longer ignore the pain and alienation that others experience from within the church – and especially when this is *because* of the church, and its sins in safeguarding and abuse. Indifference is pitiful, and it is the enemy of compassion. Abuse is a shared problem, and we must address this together.

There are three things to say in relation to Jesus' emotional temperament here. First, what is Jesus so upset about in the Temple? It seems to me that it lies in assumptions: about the 'natural order of things'; about status and privilege; about possessions; about prevailing wisdom. This is, in other words, un-examined lives and practices lived in unexamined contexts. Everyone is blind. Jesus' action forces us to confront the futile sight before us. His anger forces us to look again. (On this, see Lytta Bassett's excellent *Holy Anger: Jacob, Job, Jesus*, London: Continuum, 2007).

Second, the story chides us all for that most simple of venial sins: overlooking. The trading has been happening for donkey's years. It is simply part of the furniture; it barely merits a look, let alone comment. Jesus, of course, always looks deeper. But the lesson of the story is that, having looked into us with such penetration, his gaze then often shifts – to those who are below us, and unseen. That is, those with less wealth, health, intelligence, conversation and social skills; or just less life.

Third, the besetting sin is that the Temple traders accept the status quo. The story has one thing to say about this: *don't*. Don't accept that a simple small gesture cannot ripple out and begin to change things. Don't accept, wearily, that you can't make a difference. You can. Sometimes the change may be radical; but more often than not, change comes about through small degrees. Reform can be glacial, and adaptationist. We need to stop waiting and start acting. Nigel Biggar writes that,

“True prophets are ones who don't much enjoy playing prophet. They don't enjoy alienating people, as speakers of uncomfortable truths tend to do. They don't enjoy the sound of their own solitary righteousness and they don't enjoy being in a minority of one. True prophets tend to find the whole business irksome and painful. They want to wriggle out of it, and they only take to it with reluctance. So beware of those who take to prophesy like a duck to water, and who revel in the role. They probably aren't the real thing.” (Nigel Biggar, ‘On Judgment, Repentance and Restoration’, a Sermon preached at Christ Church Cathedral, 5th March 2017, and quoted in Martyn Percy (ed.), *Untamed Gospel: Protests, Poems, Prose*, London: Canterbury Press, 2017).

True prophets can be thoughtful, cautious creatures. Caricatures of raging fire-storm preachers should be set aside. True prophets are more emotionally integrated. They are pastoral, contextual and political theologians. They care about people and places. They have virtues such as compassion, care, kindness, self-control, humility and gentleness. But they have passion and energy for change too; often reluctantly expressed, and only occasionally finding voice in anger. Pure compassion can actually be quite ruthless. (Ask any parent who loves their child).

A thorough practical-prophetic-pastoral theology always seeks change. We need an ecclesiology that is soaked in parrhesia, and capable of speaking truth to power – in life, and capable of shaking the foundations of complacency in order to re-found the true Church. Such a vocation requires energetic, mindful and prophetic visionaries, who are unafraid, and yet remain in a relationship with the churches, with constant attentive love for the Church they seek to reform. But such theological outlooks need to be rooted not just in frustration, but also in hope. Indeed, in the hope of the Kingdom of God that is to come, and so critical of the institution in the present. That is why we pray, so often, and so much, “thy kingdom come”.

No Cure for Corruption:

As Bergoglio observed, Jesus does cure the corrupt. Yet not through acts of mercy, but rather through engineering major trials and the deliberate infliction of disturbing trauma. In Luke 8, Jairus is made to wait for Jesus to heal his daughter. Jesus, running late, and quite deliberately so, does nothing to prevent her untimely death. But in the act of healing the woman with continuous menstrual bleeding, he enables her to participate in synagogue worship once again. She is healed. Her stigmatisation is taken away by Jesus' touch. No longer impure, she has her status restored.

Jairus, a synagogue ruler, would have been instrumental in excluding this woman from such worship. The healing of the woman, and the raising of Jairus' daughter, is both a blessing and a trauma for Jairus. It is bitter-sweet. For Jairus must now face the culture of exclusion he was instrumental in upholding. He must face this woman. To get Jairus to this point, he is, arguably, made to lose and grieve for his daughter. She dies. The moral lesson of the miracle lies in the judgment it makes against the culture of exclusion in ritual purity. Only when the culture is exposed to trauma can it change. Jairus may now repent of his participation in decades of structural oppression. But it is only the trauma of his daughter's loss that got him there.

Such traumas have the potential to pierce the armour of corruption and allow grace to enter. To treat faith as a suit of armour – a means of self-defence – is to deny the possibility of God surprising us with amazing grace, the compassion of the stranger, and the revelation of Christ in the prisoner, hungry, sick and homeless. If we encase ourselves in our own armoured-personal faith, we will only mummify ourselves. But never enough, so our body soon degrades and decomposes. The body that we armour too tightly becomes pallid, compromised, corrupted – and eventually stinks.

Throughout the gospels, we see Jesus *not* forgiving the sins of the Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees. Their culture is a bellwether indicator of a religion that regards itself as morally self-sufficient and superior to others. Jesus' caustic castigations – straining gnats whilst swallowing camels, or picking out specks in someone else's eye when there is a plank in your own – are *unforgiving*.

Those who are corrupt will always try and justify themselves with comparisons to others. The parable of the Pharisee and sinner in the gospel of Luke (18) comes to mind, with its hints of smug triumphalism. In the parable the latter articulates not only their guilt, but also their sense of shame. In contrast, the corrupt will usually be shamelessly and morally smug. The agents of this culture of corruption can easily recruit more accomplices, as they are offering them an experience of graduation into moral-spiritual superiority, self-satisfaction and self-sufficiency. This culture eats all nascent initiatives designed to correct it. In the end, it will of course consume itself.

Jesus had to reject the religious elites of his day, because they had taken possession of the law and tradition, its meanings and applications. We have an old saying: “possession is nine-tenths of the law”. By claiming ownership of faith, religion and morality, the religious elites of Jesus’ time were able to remain aloof. By purloining religion – in theory to protect it, but in the end to possess it – the religious elites of Jesus’ day were able to put themselves above others. The elite were not like the people. Leaders could not be weighed, cross-examined, investigated, inspected or judged. Anyone who joined this elite acquired power and privilege, with immunity from accountability. Here, Bishops, the National Safeguarding Team (NST) and others in power are the direct descendants of Pharisees and Sadducees.

As Pope Francis noted, Jesus, by walking with the poor and outcast, befriending them as valued equals in the Kingdom of Heaven, simply “smashed the wall that prevented [them] from coming close to God”. So we are back with the necessity of creative rage and constructive destruction. Why? Because the offer of dialogue by those remaining in power can never heal corruption. The only way to deal with corruption is to cause the powerful serious trials, tribulations and traumas, so that grace can finally break through; light pierce the fog of bureaucracy; and the winds of the Spirit scatter the secrets shrouded in darkness.

It is well-known – especially by those who are suffering with incurable conditions – that sometimes it is the giving up hope leads to unexpected release and joy. The loss of hope, or a deliberate parting with it, is seldom done in an instant. It happens over time, as we struggle for any and all routes to what we hope for. But giving up hope is not necessarily an act of despair. It can be creative and freeing. In giving up hope of a miracle recovery from imminent death (your own, or someone else’s), or of some other amazing cure, we embrace our identity and learn to live with and accept what we have, and what we are. This is the essence of C. S. Lewis’ *Surprised by Joy*. His acceptance of his own tragic loss and grief allows him to rediscover joy. In so doing, he finds his way back to gratitude and grace. The lesson here is that if you want to give, you have to let go. When God gives his only Son, God lets go. Likewise, in kenosis, Jesus does not cling. Only then is Jesus gift.

So letting go of hope can be a pathway to joy. But let me also say that hopelessness is a freedom and position few possess. Because it only works if there is a safety net that can save you from utter despair. Those grieving, or living with chronic conditions, or degenerative disabilities, or for that matter, the scars of abuse, need to be loved, supported and held as much as any other person. You can therefore depart in peace from what you had yearned and hoped for. But only if there is enough hope and joy around you to sustain you in your identity, and with the experiences of loss, pain, trauma and trial that you carry.

Terms and Conditions Apply (always read the small print):

Something has to give. The victims of cruel, unaccountable and indifferent process came together and litigated. Ultimately, there is always a body liable for such corruption, abuses, harm and cover-ups.

With the Redress Scheme in the Church of England perpetually delayed, diluted and dispersed across dioceses once again, we are increasingly of the view that all the survivors, victims and respondents (also often abused by very bad, incompetent or unlawful processes) will not secure any redress or justice until we bring some kind of class action. Films featuring abuse in the Catholic Church (see ‘Spotlight’ ‘Sins of the Father’; and related films such as ‘Dark Waters’ and ‘Erin Brockovich’) chart the plight of the abused who are made to wait years and years for justice.

But as the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston and the Anglican Churches of Australia and Canada found to their (great, considerable) cost, somewhere in these places, ultimately, there *is* to be found responsibility and liability. This has led to church buildings and church land being sold for redress and compensation. It means victims can finally get the therapeutic care they need, and perhaps investment leading to new work. They can get their legal fees back. And their lives. The falsely accused drummed out of the church without trial or rights can feed and house their families.

So, what is to be done about the Church of England and its wretched, self-perpetuating litany of excuses for safeguarding? We know that it can do better, as the same church recently announced it would make £100 million available in redress for victims of slavery. The rough places need levelling, and the oppressed raising up. This must mean a different approach to the current impasse. This corrupt culture must be broken. As it must be in all our denominations.

In contrast the Church of England has so far only managed to find £1.2m in compensation for over 60 victims of sexual abuse. That averages out to around £20,000 per victim, which is hardly adequate for more than five-dozen ruined lives, marriages ended, health destroyed, lost homes and careers terminated by the effects of the abuse trauma.

Meanwhile, the church has ploughed tens of millions of pounds into speculative new initiatives designed to attract younger people. It doesn’t seem to have occurred to the hierarchy that by denying truth, justice, redress and support to abuse victims it renders the church as utterly untrustworthy.

The sums of money that will work for a comprehensive redress scheme will be in the nine-figure range: over one billion pounds. Yet £1.1 billion is less than 10% of

the wealth of the Church Commissioners. If the Church of England is serious about redress, those who pave the way in a class action on behalf of others should probably argue for that final number to be a whole tithe of the Church Commissioners' wealth (calculated as over £10 billion). Furthermore, the Church of England could also take out another loan. Just as there was a recent £550 million "Sustainability Bond" for the Church of England, so there must now be a "Redress and Reconciliation Bond". This would therefore raise the Redress Fund to £1.6 billion.

Why would this sum be needed? The answer lies in the other numbers. In 2019, the Church of England estimated that there were at least 3,300 victims of sexual abuse (see: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/19/church-of-england-reveals-50-rise-in-abuse-claims-and-concerns>). On any decent guesstimate there are comfortably several hundred clergy victims of false and vexatious allegations, or of poor process, who have been unable to work again as a result of mercurial episcopal decisions, opaque investigations and the like. IICSA have demanded action.

If there are, as we suppose, 5,000 victims of abuse and abusive safeguarding processes, then we can arrive at the £1.6 billion sum for the compensated victims. Perhaps we can now see why the Church of England has continued to dither, deny and delay (see: <https://www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding/redress-scheme>). Earlier, and before doing its sums properly, the Church had thought or imagined that £200 million might resolve the issues for the claimants and victims. That now seems like a very, very low estimate, and so the time for a Class Action to secure proper compensation and redress for victims is surely dawning (see: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7985367/Church-England-faces-possible-200million-compensation-payout-survivors-child-sex-abuse.html>).

Many clergy and their families have suffered breakdowns, and lost their homes, vocations and faith. Marriages have ended, and once-valued clergy turned into pariahs. Victim-blaming has also been extensive, and visited upon those traumatized by the sexual abuse they have endured. Some have waited over a decade for a "review", "findings" and justice. Compensation has been withheld, or if given, is meagre and begrudging, and often capped or covered by disabling non-disclosure agreements (NDA's).

A proper Redress Scheme would need to have the kinds of funds within it that could pay for the therapy, support, resettlement and compensation for victims. The comparative examples from across the Anglican Communion (e.g., Australia) show that a £1.6 billion fund is a reasonable and proportionate sum. Furthermore, the access to and control of this fund, and its pay-outs, must be independent of the Church of England, with claimants only subject to a bar of civil proof.

Developing a Response:

I have only commented on the Church of England here, but all denominations could pay into a scheme that aided, compensated and supported victims of abuse, and those abused by the processes of the church (e.g., false accusations, botched investigations, etc). If this were ecumenical, and shaped by prescient-prophetic initiative, then the churches might – just might – survive as communities of character, virtue and formation into the next century. My fear is that without proactive remedial action and redress, nobody will want to know the church in the future. It will be a scandal to belong to and support it. But not in the way the gospels envisaged Christ being a stumbling block. The church will be a millstone.

Victims will still be coming forward for the first time in the decades ahead. This means taking on the body that is ultimately responsible for the gross negligence, indifference, obfuscation, misconduct, corruption and other failings we see all the time in safeguarding. The fund will need to be very large, carefully set up, completely out of the hands of the Church, and able to compensate, support and help other victims in the future, yet to emerge.

That is a major work (see <https://www.cityam.com/exclusive-uk-becomes-europes-leading-jurisdiction-for-class-action-lawsuits/>). However, the precedents and templates already exist in English law (see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Group_litigation_order). Clearly, achieving the goal of establishing a well-funded and completely Independent Redress Scheme could take years. There are already beacons to guide us, and to aim for (<https://anglican.org.au/our-work/professional-standards-commission/national-redress-scheme/>). There are other examples too for the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches. This may not take years to achieve, especially if this is a prophetic-ecumenical action brought by victims, with support from within the churches and worshipping communities of Great Britain. My reasoning is as follows:

1. No denomination in the world facing a group claim/class action or its equivalent has won, or come out on top... In a Court, collusion, cover-ups and incompetence are exposed.
2. Bishops and Archbishops have not and never will warm to being "defendants", especially if they are not the actual perpetrators of direct abuse. But they don't want to carry the reputational can for others, and defend the abuses of others, and their consequences.

3. Missional damage – as defendants, bishops, church leaders and denominations cannot really get their messages of growth, loyalty and evangelism out there. Eventually a penny drops: pay out or lose more. Even the little you have will be taken away from you.
4. History - there are just about enough intelligent people left in the Church of England who will realise that their losses will be of a colossal nature to fight a group of organised victims in a class action or group litigation order. Other denominations also have intelligent realists.
5. Vanity – bishops and church leaders like to be liked. Currently, the churches are extremely fragile, and at present the leadership have little air left to breathe financially and fight on in litigation they cannot win.
6. Church leadership could and should conclude that fighting is going to be cheaper than settling. The problem they will have as being defendants, and the negative PR-missional impact, is not worth it.
7. The political and constitutional damage to the Church of England will be unwelcome, and bring the Bishops into the spotlight for scrutiny and governance. It is hard to see an established church surviving intact – charitable status and other privileges – if it continues to spurn victims.
8. Never underestimate how vain and Machiavellian some church leaders and bishops are. We may reach a significant settlement sum in a Redress Scheme in exchange for Bishops taking the credit.

At present, victims of sexual abuse and safeguarding processes are all picked off one by one; and always at the mercy of endless delays, false promises and silences. This needs to change, and by making the Bishops and Archbishops defendants, it becomes harder for them to live with such strains. Currently, it is far too easy for them to express apparent empathy, sympathy and pastoral concern for victims in public, whilst privately permitting the underlying culture to work against victims. The bishops are not accountable. No bishop is.

An important step forward for the Church of England will be the complete adoption of the Human Rights Act 1998, the Equality Act 2010, standard employment law, full compliance with Freedom of Information requests and legislation on data (GDPR), and underpinned by the seven ‘Nolan Principles’ for conduct in public life. The Seven Principles of Public Life provide a framework of integrity for institutions.

Universities, schools, hospitals, county councils, government and other public bodies have adopted them. These seven principles are:

1. Selflessness.
2. Integrity.
3. Objectivity.
4. Accountability.
5. Openness.
6. Honesty.
7. Leadership.

The Seven Principles of Public Life provide a framework of integrity for institutions. Universities, schools, hospitals, county councils, government and other public bodies have adopted them. The ethical standards set out in the Nolan Principles were a response to various scandals in public and parliamentary life under the government of John Major. This included misconduct that might not have been technically illegal, but was nonetheless regarded as corrupt and self-serving. Those working in the public sector are expected to adhere to these standards. They were first set out by Lord Nolan in 1995 in the first report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life and they are now standard in a range of codes relating to proper conduct across public life, and beyond.

Yet these are nowhere to be found in the Church of England, where secrecy, conflicts of interest, favoritism, obfuscated processes and self-protection reign untrammelled. Without any external regulation – the Church of England is virtually “a law unto itself” – human rights, basic employment rights and other protections for clergy and laity are simply not present. True, many examples of misconduct are innocent mistakes covered up, and unaddressed. For example, complaints procedures and investigations in which the complainant is not interviewed or consulted, but told (eventually) “there is nothing to see here”. If the Church of England still desires to be a public body in the future, then it will have to model a level of fairness, justice, equality, accountability, transparency and integrity that at present, it shows no sign of wishing on itself. Bishops and their staff can do as they please to whomsoever they please (within reason), and there are few, if any, internal mechanisms within the Church of England to bring them to account.

This inevitably fosters a culture resistant to openness, honesty and objectivity. Episcopal mercurial and monarchic decisions can rarely be challenged. Perhaps the only way forward is to regulate the Church of England to prevent abuses of power and authority. The alternative is to no longer regard it as a public body, and allow it to gradually deflate into becoming a members-based network of congregations.

The Church of England's safeguarding endeavours represent a doomed project that aspires to self-sufficiency, and magpie-like, misappropriates secular terminology for camouflage and self-deception. The field is littered with terms – 'Core Groups', 'independent' and the like – that are immediately devalued inside the Church.

The United Kingdom's recent and long-running Independent Public Statutory Inquiry examining the circumstances in which men, women and children treated by NHS in the UK were given infected blood and infected blood products, is now nearing its end. The Hillsborough victims took years to get the justice that they sought for those who lost their lives.

That is the journey victims of abuse and safeguarding processes in the Church of England are currently on. Only when the journey ends can there ever be closure. When we arrive at that terminus, there will be some peace – and perhaps new hope.

Prophetic Challenge and Change:

Without yielding to God, we will not experience true grace, illumination and transformation. We will, instead, invest our energies in being what God has *not* called us to be: self-sufficient, self-reliant and self-perpetuating. Sometimes accepting God's demolition of us, and the possibility of a complete reconstruction, is better than preservation, conservation, repair and resistance to God's work. Our besetting sin in the church – with us for well over two centuries and more – is our buy-in to endless models, visions and programmes of self-help and self-improvement. But first and foremost, God wants us with as little baggage as possible.

Adam and Eve give us a familiar paradigm for individuals and institutions. Thinking that they might know more than God, they succumbed to temptation. Blame and denial is passed around, and no one takes responsibility. In an otiose effort to cover their shame, they sew fig leaves together to cover their sense of disgrace and nakedness. If you ever want to run a Bible study on the early chapters of Genesis, a compelling exercise for attendees is to give them a needle and thread and some fig leaves, and see what they come up with. It is futile and very funny. For this is midrash – a kind of espresso shot of dark humour. Only when Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden do they get to wear proper clothes – and even these are made and tailored by God from animal skins. The fig leaves are not mentioned again.

The first sin was indifference, but it was also a kind of contempt. That God need not be relied upon, or even trusted. That we could do better if we helped ourselves a bit more and depended upon God a little less. That God might think our self-motivated attempts at self-improvement would not amount to a breach of covenant. That we could blame a third party (a serpent) for our hubris or blame each other

(s/he made me do it). The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. When we lose that humility, foolishness finds a home. A ready one too, with vacant possession – for wisdom has been evicted.

In Malcolm Gladwell's compelling sociological monograph, *Tipping Point* (Boston, 2000), he remarks that ultimately it is contempt that finally destroys an institution. When we cease to respect the leaders, symbols or very foundations of any institution – its purpose and values – the ensuing lack of trust is deeply corrosive for all future relationships. (This is what topples regimes, leads to revolutions and revolts, or simmering socio-political resentment and rebellion). Hannah Arendt made similar remarks in her Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen in 1975. What was so striking about those on trial for the holocaust was not so much their collusion or agency, but their sheer thoughtlessness. They never thought about the victims. They had shut down as thinking-feeling humans, so they could just “obey orders”.

When the people sense their government or leaders are choosing to regard and treat their fellow citizens with contempt, the seeds of uprising are planted deep. When Bishops and church leaders treat the laity as mere pew-fodder, as mere numbers in pi and flow charts flush with potential, then perhaps as malleable consumers to merchandise and experiment on with new products and ideas, or just another round of disappointing statistics, you can begin to scent rebellion. When clergy are treated as though they don't matter, and as merely expendable employees who need to be kept in line, then the very womb of the church begins to groan with insurgency.

The institution – whether it be a government, parliament, the police, a university, school, health or social service, church, or indeed a marriage – can survive most crises. It can usually cope with competing convictions and can even flourish with them if each party stays faithful and true to one another, their greater good, and the future and integrity of that institution. But it cannot survive the contempt it breeds. That is, contempt for its public and the people it serves. It cannot survive if it shows contempt or duplicity towards its core values, or mainstay people, companions, colleagues or partners. It cannot explain away its hypocrisy, or blame others for its own failures, as that only adds to the sense of an institution serving itself. Reputation management is as futile as clothes made out of fig leaves.

Yes, contempt is a step towards self-destruction, and institutions that have the contagion are mostly destroyed from the inside out. The Church of England's safeguarding work represents a doomed project that aspires to self-sufficiency, and magpie-like, misappropriates other language for self-comfort. The field is littered with terms – ‘Core Groups’, ‘independent’ and the like – that are immediately devalued inside the Church. The long-running Independent Public Statutory Inquiry

examining the circumstances in which men, women and children treated by NHS in the UK were given infected blood and infected blood products, is now nearing its end. The Hillsborough victims took years to get the justice that they sought for those who lost their lives. That is the journey we are now on with victims of abuse and safeguarding processes in the Church of England. Only when the journey ends can there ever be closure. When we arrive at that terminus, there will be peace and joy. And new hope.

An Anatomy of Authentic Remorse and Redress:

As Wade Mullen notes in his prescient *Something's Not Right: Decoding the Tactics of Abuse and Freeing Yourself from its Power* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2020), those who need freeing from abuse need the very threads that bind them to be undone, or to be cut. Prophetic ecumenism has a vital role here. As Mullen notes, too often the words “we are sorry” are casually offered and easily accepted as if they possess a supernatural power to resolve every grievance and heal any wound.

Yet, in his own experience working with abuses in organizations, and indeed my own as well, this short statement, offered as a bridge of reconciliation, is often surrounded by other messages that serve a very different purpose. Above, underneath, and all around this single bridge are numerous walls of defence. These walls are established to repel the shame that threatens from without and to protect the legitimacy hoarded within, ensuring that the bridge of apology allows no shame to enter and no legitimacy to exit.

Many public statements of apology quickly pitches for why organizations and leaders are still worthy of support from the followers, and the wider public. Far too often. Churches only appear to apologise in order to survive the scandal. There is never any hint of genuine repentance and the making of true amends. The church thinks that “the show must go on”. In truth, it is now unwatchable, as the hypocrisy, scandals and abuse have ruined the rest of the acts on the programme. Worse still, the institution in the wrong might ask their victims to carry their shame so they can retain legitimacy in the eyes of their followers, unwilling to fully acknowledge that the shameful behaviour belongs to them and the legitimacy belongs to the ones speaking the truth about their behaviour.

Why are authentic apologies so feared? Perhaps because the shame would expose their illegitimacy, and they would lose what is no longer their right to have: following, influence, power, status, (and what is often most important to them): money. The simple truth is that many organizations will not apologize as they ought because their leaders fear being seen as unqualified (an identity crisis), and because they fear costly lawsuits or loss of a following (a monetary crisis). Wade Mullen argues that out of that fear emerges the following kinds of non-apology:

1. *The apology that condemns.*

The apology offered in anger or frustration will often condemn the other person. The classic example of this is the apology that says, “I’m sorry you feel that way.” This is not an apology, but a condemnation.

2. *The apology that appeases.*

There are times when a person apologizes simply to appease the demands of others. They determine an apology will be in their best interest because it will disarm a threat. When organizations and their leaders apologize in this manner, it is often after an outcry or pressure from external forces.

3. *The apology that excuses.*

Mullen refers to this kind of apology (i.e., an excuse) as an “apologscuse.” The apologizer knows an apology is needed, but fears the consequences, and so attaches excuses. Excuses can take various forms, but here are some of the most common.

- a. “It was never our intention to . . .” This is the most common excuse, driven by a desire to minimize fault: people tend to excuse innocent mistakes.
- b. “Mistakes were made . . .” In its most basic form this excuse removes an actor from the language of the apology, and deploys a passive and weak substitute for the more forceful, “I or We . . .”
- c. “This is not in accordance with our values . . .” Apologies often include attempts to dissociate the behaviour from the apologizer’s typical conduct.
- d. “Had we known then what we know now we would have made a different decision.” This excuse denies foresight. The organization or leader claims they didn’t have any knowledge of the harm, and thereby fails to acknowledge whether they could have known or had opportunity to know, but chose to look the other way instead.
- e. “It was outside of our control.” The organization claims it did not have the authority to prevent injury to another, or that they were acting under the direction of another authority. Organizations sometimes use this excuse to argue why certain injuries were outside of their ability to prevent.

4. *The apology that justifies.*

Sometimes the wrong behaviour is clearly exposed and undeniable. If that is the case, then the institution might attempt to justify the behaviour. There is a fine line

between excuses and justifications as both serve a similar purpose, but one way to distinguish them is to think of excuses as attempts to shape your perception of the wrongdoer while justifications are attempts to shape your perception of the wrongs. Some common examples of justification include:

- a. “The wounded are complicit.” This is one of the most egregious and damaging attempts at justification, and can include victim-blaming, or trying to say it was “six of one and half-a-dozen of the other”.
- b. “No real harm was done.” The gravity of trauma caused by institutional abuse is often minimized by uninformed or callous individuals who do not see “what the big deal is.”

5. *The apology that self-promotes.*

Even if an organization is willing to bear the shame of their wrong without excuses or justifications, they often cannot finish the apology without laying claim to their legitimacy. Many public statements of apology put out by organizations quickly become pitches for why they are still worthy of continued support from their followers. A statement of apology should never double as a medal. An institutional apology should not include assurances that the institution and their leaders are on the same side as the victims, especially if the actions of the institution have demonstrated the opposite.

6. *The apology that asks for sympathy.*

It is shameful how often we read or hear “we’re hurting too”, as though somehow the ones who have caused the wrong will displace the pain of the wounded with the pain of the wounder. Such messages cause the recipients to misplace compassion and reveals an inability on the part of organizational leaders to get outside of themselves. The churches are expert in such pleadings.

These forms of faux-apology are far too common in churches, and they lack the integrity of honesty and genuine repentance. They suggest that there will be no change in the prevailing culture. As such, they perpetuate ongoing corruption.

Mullen proposes in place of this ‘An Apology SCORE Card’. He argues that if the institution has the moral courage to give an authentic apology, then this SCORE card might provide a helpful test. It is in no way comprehensive. Relationships are complex. We can’t create blueprints that tell us precisely what to do and how to do it. Relationships don’t work that way, and neither do the apologies that are inevitably needed within them. They are acts that ought to be highly contextualized to meet the needs of the situation.

1. ***Surrender:*** The hardest step in the process of apologizing is to give up your desire to defend yourself using any of the non-apologies. We have to surrender our legitimacy and exchange it for what will undoubtedly feel like shame. When we analyse statements of institutional apologies, we often observe what remains when every blame, excuse, justification, and self-promotion is crossed out..
2. ***Confession:*** Surrender paves the way for a confession. Each wrong must be rightly named. “We were wrong when . . .” A good confession serves as a mirror that reflects back to the wounded all the actions that produced hurt. Sometimes this needs to become more than just a mirror that reflects what is known to be wrong, but a spotlight that acknowledges both known and unknown wrongs.
3. ***Ownership:*** The organization in the wrong must acknowledge their active role. Passive apologies like, “mistakes were made” seek to avoid shame by avoiding ownership. Therefore, the institution should take ownership by saying something like, “We take complete and full responsibility for . . .” Another way an organization demonstrates ownership is by inviting their own penalty.
4. ***Recognition:*** Out of ownership should flow recognition, and specific harms identified. “We recognize that our actions resulted in . . .” If confession and ownership says, “We acknowledge the illegitimacy of our actions,” recognition says, “And we will take upon ourselves all the shame that our actions produced.” Here, all the walls of defence are now removed and the wrongs of the organization are laid bare.
5. ***Empathy:*** It is at this point that the organization has finally absorbed the truth of their wrongdoing and the gravity of their wrongs. They feel the weight of the hurt and the shame, and know they are defenceless, at the mercy of others, and must begin the difficult work of restitution and restoration. They feel it. And out of that broken place of surrender, confession, ownership, recognition, and empathy might emerge the authentic words, “We are so sorry.”

Conclusion:

Reform takes time to arrive. It takes moral courage and compassion to do the right thing, and this seems to be absent among our church leaders. Victims of abuse will only secure justice when the Church of England accepts that it will always have an inherent conflict of interest in trying to self-correct its failings, corruptions and abuses whilst simultaneously preserving its reputation. It needs to hand over all responsibility for safeguarding cases to a proper professional regulator with the

teeth, clout, resources and fearless courage to speak truth to power, and bring the Church of England to heel. There is no other way.

When transparency, honesty and integrity are absent, all that is left to victims is legal action. Repentance and redress must precede any attempt at reconciliation. At present, we have victims of abuse waiting many, many years for investigations to start or conclude. These investigations are often half-baked, and lack the resources, expertise and regulatory framework to compel subjects to engage with them.

The scandal of our churches is that we prefer to survive rather than be true; we choose optics over justice; we pride our reputation over honesty and integrity. To Jesus, this is a scandal. To the world, it is a scandal. For emerging generations, it means a long sojourn for the churches in a wilderness of worldly indifference. Few will care for a church that refuses care for others. We are in exile of our own accord. It is time to repent, and only then can we return to the public square. Until then, we have all the shame we deserve. Do not let you bishops or church leaders kid you otherwise. This is on them, and on us all.

So let us cast aside these works of darkness, deception and denial and that are baked into our churches, and prevent us from embracing that precarious incarnational risk – the calling of Jesus we were called take-up, inhabit and embody. Sometimes less is so much more. It is where Jesus begins his life and will later continue in his ministry; the where, with whom and in what Jesus abides. Be there.

The Very Revd. Prof. Martyn Percy, Harris Manchester College, Oxford.