

Theological Anthropology in Light of #MeToo

by Megan Kathleen McCabe

We are in the midst of a significant rethinking of social norms and expectations regarding sexuality and gender. In recent years, survivors of campus sexual assault have become activists who have pushed for change not only in how we, as a society, think about sexual assault on campuses, but also at the level of policy and federal law. This movement is shaping a greater social awareness regarding sexual violence. More recently, a series of allegations of sexual harassment and assault against Harvey Weinstein have opened the floodgates of women sharing their own stories of sexual violence and violation. After the social-media hashtag #MeToo took off in the United States, it spread to eighty-five other countries. At the 75th Golden Globe Awards on January 7, 2018, celebrities represented Times Up, an effort from many in Hollywood to combat sexual harassment, by wearing pins and black attire. These efforts have centered on women of privilege, celebrities who have public appeal and (mostly white) college women, and men who are public figures. Still, the implications of these movements are broader: women from many areas of work, including hotel housekeepers and farmworkers, have spoken out about sexual harassment in the workplace, and there has been a shift in the public consciousness regarding both the prevalence and the injustice of sexual violence. Many women, and some men, are raising their voices to expose and condemn the culture that allows for rape and sexual harassment.

It is perhaps unsurprising that these efforts have also prompted a backlash. Critics have raised concerns that this women-led movement has gone or is in danger of going too far. One concern is that the current movement is erasing important distinctions between criminal acts of sexual violence and otherwise crude or distasteful behaviors. As they highlight, not every instance of “bad sex” is rape, and not every poor attempt at a joke or come-on is harassment. Another related concern is that men are being talked about as somehow inherently predatory and violent.

These critiques represent both an important insight as well as a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of sexual violence. On the one hand, it is true that there are necessary distinctions that need to be made when certain behaviors and actions are being called out and condemned. Consequently, it is important to recognize that most men are not predators like Larry Nassar, the doctor for the US women’s gymnastics team who abused more than 150 women and girls over a twenty-year period. On the other hand, behaviors that do not meet legal standards to count as criminal forms of sexual violence should not be dismissed as “mere boorishness.” What we are seeing is

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women naming a range of experiences, including those that may not be criminal, as violating and, thus, unacceptable. It is a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of sexual violence to view only the most extreme cases as experiences of violation or to maintain that only the most predatory of men can be perpetrators.

Instead, what this cultural movement is demonstrating is how normal it is for women to experience some kind of sexual violation. In fact, when #MeToo took off, my own news feed was full of women—just about every woman I know—noting that yes, they too had some experience of sexual violence or violation. Tina Fey, in her comic memoir *Bossypants*, highlights this common experience for women when she recounts attending an event for women in which all agreed that they first knew that they were a woman when they experienced a man doing something “nasty” to them. Sociologist Liz Kelly argues that most women have had experiences that belong somewhere on what she calls a “continuum of sexual violence,” which includes rape, stalking, and sexual harassment. The current context is bringing other forms of violation to the fore. For example, women have begun to talk about sexual encounters that they may have consented to, but in which their availability was assumed, and they were treated as objects to be acted upon. To highlight this range of experience is not intended to flatten everything into one level of seriousness and erase distinctions. Such distinctions are crucial, especially for delineating whether a crime has been committed. At the same time, recognition of the continuum of sexual violence allows us to highlight that various experiences share the failure to respect women’s full human dignity and autonomy.

If this is a fairly common experience for women, it no longer makes sense to suggest that only the worst perpetrators are responsible. Indeed, it can no longer be held that sexual violence or violation is perpetrated by men who are obviously bad and somehow “deviant” from other, good men. This way of thinking is flawed in several ways. First, it presumes that women are safe with men who are otherwise known and seem trustworthy. Women who experience violence at the hands of otherwise “nice men” may not be able or willing to even recognize or name their experiences for what they are. It also prevents us from being able to name, as third party “observers,” the violence perpetrated by somebody we may know in a positive context.

While not immune from this problem, Christianity brings a distinctive worldview to this conversation and offers a richer way of understanding the reality of sexual violence. A Christian theological anthropology understands human beings as created *imago Dei*, with inherent value and dignity while simultaneously being susceptible to sin. Any instance of sexual violation or harassment undermines the dignity of the person who experiences victimization and is antithetical to human flourishing. It is sinful in that it is a failure to love one’s neighbor. In addition to instances of violence that meet criminal standards, women are currently naming forms of violation that also undermine their dignity and are a failure in the demand to love. Such forms of violation may be characterized as *immoral* even as we attempt to maintain a distinction between the worst kinds of criminal violence and these other experiences that many women are opposing. We are not stuck limiting our analysis to either “criminal” or normal acceptable, albeit crude. And we should not be; the dual command to love God and neighbor demands more.

By identifying human beings as sinful, a Christian worldview recognizes the way that human beings fall short and do damage to one another. However, along with naming sinfulness as a reality comes the recognition that all persons are sinners, not only those who are seen as particularly monstrous by the community. Awareness of sinfulness in light of sexual violence can be helpful when thinking about perpetrators of sexual violence. Perpetrators do not have to be monsters to be sinful in this way; we may even experience them (or ourselves) as good in other respects. But the recognition of the ways in which we and others fall short and err can make room for the self-critique needed to begin to respond to the problem of sexual violence.

This self-critique and awareness of sinfulness is also necessary for the rest of us who are not perpetrators of sexual violence. Sin is also a social reality. In this instance, rape culture is appropriately named as a social sin. In this current cultural moment, we are seeing many women name the ways that what has been allowed by many others to go on will no longer be tolerated. These actions can include the worst instances of cover-up or choosing to ignore what is going on, like in the cases of those who worked with people like Weinstein and Nassar for decades. It is also present in less direct forms. We as individuals, even those who otherwise mean well, participate in rape culture when we write off experiences that women name as violating as if it is merely “boorish,” or suggest that women should be romantically or sexually available to men. By identifying this situation as an instance of social sin, we can look to the broader reality that manifests itself in sexual violence and that has allowed us to tolerate it for so long. We are able to recognize our own sinful participation in a culture that promotes violence and undermines the full human dignity of women. In such a culture, we fail in our responsibility to love our neighbor. This situation demands an active response. As the Jesuit theologian James Keenan states, our sin may be found in our “failure to bother to love.” We bear sinful responsibility for our failure to bother to respond to and resist this rape culture.

Lest this reflection end on a note of theological pessimism, it is worth observing that we are in a social moment of hope. It is a hopeful manifestation of love that we are, as a collective, starting to uncover and no longer tolerate the social sin of a rape culture. We have witnessed the interruption of suffering into our social context. People are beginning to ask how they might stand with survivors of a broad continuum of sexual violence. And we are beginning to ask how we might develop a communal conscience that allows experiences of sexual violence to shape the way we might live as a community going forward.