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# **SILENT NO MORE: SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT AS A CHALLENGE TO THE WORLDWIDE CHURCH<sup>1</sup>**

## ABSTRACT

The Tearfund report *Silent No More* (2011) challenges the worldwide church to respond to sexual violence in conflicts. This article argues that a church response should have pastoral, biblical and theological dimensions. Starting with the *Silent No More* report it examines the prevalence of sexual violence in conflict and the silence of the churches on this subject. Building on feminist readings of sexual violence in biblical narratives it then explores sexual violence referenced in the death of Saul (1 Samuel 31) alongside news reports of the death of Muammar Gaddafi in October 2011. It also suggests that sexual violence is a key to understanding the scandal of the cross and the death of Jesus of Nazareth. It concludes that if biblical scholars and theologians give more attention to sexual violence within the bible they can offer positive help towards a more constructive response to sexual violence by the churches.

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1 This article draws on a public lecture “Recent Scholarship in Religion, Ethics and Reconciliation: Shame, Silence and Human Dignity”, at the Faculty of Theology, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, 29 August 2012. Special thanks to Francois Tolmie, Rian Venter and Anlené Taljaard who arranged this visit, and to everyone who has commented on the presentation and subsequent drafts of the paper.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

At one level, the prevalence of sexual violence in conflict has been well-known for centuries.<sup>2</sup> However, powerful silences around it remain in force and in many cases it has long been a taboo subject.<sup>3</sup> The United Nations Factsheet for Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict states: “War-time sexual violence has been one of history’s greatest silences.”<sup>4</sup> In recent years there has been a renewed international commitment to exposing and ending conflict-related sexual violence.<sup>5</sup> Recent Human Rights reports have thrown the spotlight on the prevalence of sexual violence during conflict in Syria, Sri Lanka, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and many other countries.<sup>6</sup> International conferences have

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- 2 For a variety of historical examples, see Elizabeth D. Heineman (ed.) (2010).
  - 3 On the silence around sexual violence that accompanied wars in the twentieth century, see especially the classic work by Susan Brownmiller (1975:31-113). For more recent work, and the breaking of this silence, see Dubravka Zarkov (2007); Janie L. Leatherman (2011); Inger Skjelsbæk (2012); Maria Eriksson-Baaz and Maria Stern (2013).
  - 4 United Nations Development Group, *Trust Fund Factsheet for the UN Fund for Action against Sexual Violence*; available at <http://mptf.undp.org/factsheet/fund/UNA00>. UN Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict (UN Action) was launched in March 2007, to coordinate the work of UN bodies in their response to UN resolutions on sexual violence and to support national efforts to prevent sexual violence and respond more effectively to the needs of survivors.
  - 5 See, for example, Anne Llewellyn Barstow (2000) on the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, September 1995.
  - 6 For example, Human Rights Watch, *Syria: Sexual Assault in Detention* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 15 June 2012); International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), *Violence Against Women in Syria: Breaking the Silence*, Briefing Paper Based on an FIDH assessment mission in Jordan in December 2012 (Paris: FIDH, April 2013); Human Rights Watch, “*We Will Teach You a Lesson*”: *Sexual Violence Against Tamils by Sri Lankan Security Forces* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2013); Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, “*Now the World is Without Me: An Investigation of Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo*” (Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and Oxfam International, April 2010); Human Rights Watch, *Soldiers Who Rape, Commanders Who Condone: Sexual Violence and Military Reform in the Democratic Republic of Congo* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009). Recent reports and analysis on sexual violence in conflict more generally include: Human Security Research Group, Simon Fraser University, *Human Security Report 2012: Sexual Violence, Education, and War: Beyond the Mainstream Narrative* (Vancouver: Human Security Press, 2012); Dara Kay Cohen, Amelia Hoover Green, and Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Wartime Sexual Violence: Misconceptions, Implications, and Ways* (Special Report 323; Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, Feb 2012); Save the Children (2012); Nobel Women’s Initiative (2011).

challenged governments and international organisations to do more to take action. Non-governmental organisations and civil society initiatives have sought to promote a more open public debate.<sup>7</sup> Against this backdrop, the report, *Silent No More: The untapped potential of the worldwide church in addressing sexual violence* by Tearfund UK should hold a special significance for the churches.<sup>8</sup>

This article offers an overview of the *Silent No More* report, and its challenge to the worldwide churches to address sexual violence. Then, building on work by feminist scholars to expose and address sexual and gender-based violence in biblical narratives, it offers two further examples of this that are frequently overlooked: the death of Saul, and the Passion of Christ. It suggests that these passages, and especially the Passion of Christ, might help the churches to identify sexual violence as a genuinely theological issue as well as a pressing pastoral concern.

## 2. SILENT NO MORE

Tearfund's *Silent No More* report presents research on sexual violence in DRC, Rwanda, and Liberia, and highlights the need for a church response.<sup>9</sup> The three case studies are all African conflicts, but as the reference to the worldwide church in the sub-title indicates, Tearfund see sexual violence as a global challenge. The estimated figures given in the report offer a sense of the problem. The Report states:

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- 7 See for example, the Women Under Siege Project established by the Women's Media Centre in February 2012; <http://www.womenundersiegeproject.org>. Gloria Steinem attributes her role in helping to establish the project to reading two recent work that exposed sexual violence in areas rarely discussed: Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Sidel eds. (2010); and Danielle McGuire (2010).
  - 8 Tearfund (2011). The report has led to the formation of the *We Will Speak Out* coalition of Church organisations and international agencies committed to bringing an end to sexual violence, and is available at the coalition's website <http://www.wewillspeakout.org>.
  - 9 The three case studies were undertaken in 2010 by Elisabet Le Roux based at the Unit for Religion and Development Research at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. The report presents the findings of Le Roux's research with an Executive Summary by Isabel Carter and a call to the worldwide churches for action. Copies of Le Roux's original reports are available through the We Will Speak Out site, and give greater detail and more nuanced perspective than is possible in the *Silent No More report*. For Le Roux's wider discussion of her research and its significance, including the work Tearfund subsequently commissioned her to undertake on Burundi (co-authored with Denise Niyonizigiyein in 2011), see Le Roux (2012). A further case study by Le Roux on four communities in South Africa has been published by Tearfund, *Sexual Violence in South Africa and the Role of the Church* (Tearfund 2013).

Estimates vary, but it's believed that hundreds of thousands of women, girls and babies were raped in these three conflicts alone. Men and boys were also assaulted. In the war in DRC some 200,000 women and girls were raped. In the Rwandan genocide in 1994 between 250,000 and 500,000 were sexually assaulted, and in Liberia sexual violence was a recognised weapon of war (Tearfund 2011:6).

In this context, Tearfund highlights three key points for the worldwide church to address:

1. Sexual violence is endemic to many communities across the world but its scale and impact are largely hidden.
2. Many churches deepen the impact of the sexual violence crisis through silence and by reinforcing stigma and discrimination. Action is needed to overcome this.
3. Churches worldwide, and especially in Africa, have huge untapped potential to respond to the crisis, as they are a key part of community life (Tearfund 2011:4).

In the conclusion to the report, these points are presented as a threefold challenge: first, speaking out; second, helping to change entrenched attitudes; third, providing practical care for survivors of rape (Tearfund 2011:14).

A distinction may be drawn between two types of concern that might motivate the churches to take up these three challenges. For want of better terms, it is convenient to designate one type of concern as “pastoral” and the other type as “theological”.<sup>10</sup>

The more pastoral type of concern, which appears to be the most prominent type in *Silent No More*, sees church action on social issues as an expression and outworking of God's love and care for the world. Thus the pain and suffering caused by sexual violence is a reason for social action by the worldwide church. The report rightly states that an adequate response by churches needs to include both compassionate care for victims and a commitment to wider prevention.

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10 This distinction is problematic to the extent that any properly Christian approach to pastoral concerns has a theological dimension, and vice-versa, any properly Christian approach to theology has pastoral implications. However, although the pastoral and the theological cannot be fully separated, a difference in emphasis is often understandable and convenient. *Silent No More* is more of a pastoral document than a theological document. Le Roux has a background in pastoral theology but her primary work is as a sociologist.

There is much to be said in support of this call on the worldwide church to make sexual violence in conflict a priority pastoral concern.<sup>11</sup> If it is approached with pastoral sensitivity and professional care this could make a real difference to the suffering of many people exposed to conflicts. However, even though *Silent No More* puts this challenge in a persuasive and powerful way there is no guarantee that it will lead to concerted action by the churches. As the report itself recognises when it cites an interviewee from the DRC: “Churches do know what is happening. But when it comes to doing something, they are lethargic” (Tearfund 2011:9).

Sexual violence is an issue that many people, including people in the churches, prefer to avoid. *Silent No More* notes that church members will often not see sexual violence as a church concern.<sup>12</sup> When sexual violence is not linked directly to theological or spiritual concerns it is easier for churches to maintain their silence. If the motivation of the churches for their engagement with sexual violence is addressed in exclusively pastoral terms, then a church response may be harder to evoke and more difficult to sustain.

The challenge presented by *Silent No More* might therefore be strengthened and deepened if it is taken up by theologians as a distinctively theological concern. If sexual violence is seen as only a pastoral concern it is more likely to be treated as separate from the theological heart of the church and its spiritual concern. Even if a campaign to incorporate it as a pastoral concern is successful, if the underlying attitude does not change it is likely to remain just one social issue amongst many others. As such it will always have to compete with other issues to be at the forefront of the social agenda, and will always be in danger of being displaced by issues which the churches might find more comfortable. By contrast, if the pastoral motivation is integrally linked to a more explicitly theological motivation, and linked more directly to spiritual concerns, it is much more likely to become, and to remain, central to the long-term concern of the churches. It is also more likely to release the powerful energies and resources available in the global church community that might help to address the issue in a more concerted way.

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11 Gloria Steinem suggests that for this reason the term “sexualised violence” is better than the term “sexual violence”, as it emphasises that its primary feature is that it is violence expressed in a sexual way, rather than sex expressed in a violent way; see Lauren Wolfe (2012). However, in this article the term “sexual violence” is used to maintain consistency with the title of the Tearfund report.

12 “If the church breaks the silence, it will enable them to talk about what happened too. But so far, most church leaders and members see addressing sexual violence as being outside the church’s mandate. In most contexts, it’s not perceived as the church’s concern”, *Silent No More*, p. 8.

Distinguishing the terms “pastoral” and “theological” from each other in this way is admittedly problematic. It is not intended to suggest that pastoral and theological motivations need necessarily be in opposition to each other, nor even that they can be fully separated. On the contrary, a Christian approach to the pastoral should always be theological and vice-versa. Nonetheless, drawing a distinction between them can point towards a genuine difference in emphasis. *Silent No More* seems to frame church motivation primarily in what appears to be a pastoral framework.<sup>13</sup>

If public awareness is to improve there needs to be a more informed public conversation, but the report indicates that churches are not providing leadership for this. *Silent No More* suggests that those affected by conflict often look for church leadership on sexual violence. As it says in its Foreword:

This report, *Silent No More*, calls all churches to account and to action. It paints a painfully honest picture of the way churches have perpetuated a culture of silence around sexual violence and have largely failed to respond to the crisis and may even worsen the impact by reinforcing stigma and discrimination experienced by survivors. Yet communities continue to look to their churches for leadership and care to transform this devastating situation (Tearfund 2011:3).

This desire for church leadership is reasserted in the section of the report on the untapped potential of the church. Of particular importance is the statement that:

When asked, people told Tearfund’s researcher that the church had more potential than any other organisation to address sexual violence effectively (Tearfund 2011:10).

This sense of unfulfilled potential highlights the problem. At present, silence usually typifies the churches as much as it governs wider society, perhaps even more so. As the report puts it:

In Rwanda, Liberia and DRC, instead of being part of the solution, Tearfund’s research found that the church has largely been part of the problem. Very often it’s remained silent on the issue of sexual violence. It’s closed its eyes to the very real problem that is within its

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13 After the conclusions to the Report are stated on p.15 there is a section entitled “Using biblical stories to break the silence”, which mentions materials developed by the Tamar campaign by the Baptist Community in the Centre of Africa, but it does not address the biblical material in any detail. On the Tamar campaign, which addresses the rape of Tamar by her brother in 2 Samuel 13, see Gerald West and Phumzile Zondi-Mabizela (2004).

four walls as well as in the wider community. In doing so it's failed the communities that it's meant to serve (Tearfund 2011:8).

The result of this is that despite the progress made in recent decades towards a better understanding of sexual violence in some circles, for many in wider society and in the churches false assumptions on sexual violence remain widespread. Although the churches should be in a position to address this, and although initiatives like *Silent No More* provide strong pastoral reasons for doing so, the responses remain limited and small scale.<sup>14</sup> A much wider transformation is required within the church and within wider society.

This raises a question as to whether more specifically theological approaches might strengthen the commitment of the worldwide church when responding to sexual violence as a conflict issue. The next section explores how this theological dimension might draw on stories of sexual violence in the bible.<sup>15</sup> It argues that sexual violence in conflict can be found at many points in the bible, including at the very heart of the Christian story, the cross of Jesus of Nazareth. Since the churches do not normally recognise sexual violence in their own story and Scripture, opening up this discussion may prove painful and disconcerting for the churches. If it is to be a constructive process, the churches will need to be willing to confront disturbing questions and address difficult issues. Biblical scholars, theologians and ethicists need to join together to address the pastoral, biblical and theological challenges that are raised in this process. Feminist biblical scholars have developed a significant body of literature on sexual violence against women which is often missed or downplayed in reading the bible.<sup>16</sup> Extending these hermeneutical insights into readings of the

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14 Tearfund, *Silent No More*, p. 3 cites the example of a joint letter to the churches of the Anglican Communion.

15 For those interested in distinctively theological reflection, as distinct from biblical interpretation, the theological reflection in the latter sections of this article may appear quite thin. What sexualised violence indicates in relation to the nature and work of God, and the questions it raises for Christology, the cross and reconciliation, needs to be examined more systematically. I hope to contribute towards this discussion in future work, which will address human dignity and God's solidarity with victims in more directly theological terms.

16 See especially the classic work by Phyllis Trible (1984). For the creative use of the Tamar text (2 Sam. 13 1-22) to address sexual violence through a contextual biblical hermeneutic, see especially the Tamar campaign originating in South Africa in 1996; Gerald West and Phumzile Zondi-Mabizela (2004). Biblical passages on sexual violence have also been a significant concern for the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.

death of Saul and the death of Jesus can further highlight the prevalence of sexual violence in the ancient world.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. DEATH OF GADDAFI AND DEATH OF SAUL

The death of Col. Muammar Gaddafi offers a stark contemporary image of the once mighty now fallen. It has some significant parallels to the death of Saul and his sons told at the conclusion of the first book of Samuel (1 Sam. 31).<sup>18</sup>

According to the text, the Philistines defeat Saul and his army at Mount Gilboa. Saul, his three sons and what remains of their force seek to flee. They are overtaken and the three sons, Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchishua are killed. Saul is spotted by archers and they manage to wound him. With no chance of further escape Saul turns to his armour bearer and commands him (or maybe begs him) to take his sword and kill him before the Philistines can get to him. Saul's language suggests that he fears both the swords of his enemies and acts of sexual violation that might accompany them:

Draw your sword and thrust me through with it, so that these uncircumcised may not come and thrust me through, and make sport of me. (1 Sam. 31.4)

The armour-bearer is too terrified to obey, so Saul takes his own sword and falls on it.<sup>19</sup> When the armour-bearer sees that Saul is dead he also falls on his sword and dies with him. The next day the Philistines come to strip the slain. They cut off Saul's head, strip him of his armour and put it in the temple at Ashtaroth. Saul's headless body is fastened to the wall at Beth-shan to be displayed along with the bodies of his sons.<sup>20</sup>

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17 The passages on sexual violence against male victims discussed here are not intended as an oppositional alternative to the better known works on sexual violence against female victims. On the contrary, they are presented as further evidence of the dynamics of gender and power illuminated in feminist analysis, and as further confirmation of how these are typically neglected in the reading of biblical passages.

18 2 Sam. 1 has a slightly different version reported to David by an Amalekite camp follower of Saul.

19 The fate of the Amalekite camp follower (2 Sam. 1.13-16) suggests that the armour-bearer's fears were well grounded.

20 The name "Beth-shan" means "city of peace" or "city of refuge". It may have taken its name from the practice described in Numbers 35:6 as a place where the accused or endangered could flee to receive shelter.

Their disgrace and humiliation is made public for all to see.<sup>21</sup> The violation would have been added to as birds (and possibly dogs or other animals) fed off the decaying bodies.<sup>22</sup> Though according to the text, upon hearing the news of Saul's death and disgrace, the men of Jabesh-Gilead arise and travel all night to retrieve the bodies and bury them with dignity.<sup>23</sup> In the first chapter of 2 Samuel, David grieves the death of Saul and Jonathan, and offers his famous lament "How are the mighty fallen" (2 Sam 1.25-27). Then, after David is made King over all Israel (2 Sam. 5.3), he takes his vengeance over the Philistines (2 Sam 5. 17-25).

On 20 October 2011, when Gaddafi's stronghold, his hometown of Sirte, was on the point of falling he tried to flee. NATO fighter planes tracked the small motor convoy and attacked it before it got too far. Gaddafi survived the attack and took refuge in a large concrete pipe that served as drain underneath the road they were travelling on. When Libyan opposition forces arrived on the scene they celebrated that the one who had insulted them as "rats" was himself now hiding in a drain like a rat.

They pulled him out and initial video footage from mobile phones shows Gaddafi injured, disorientated, pushed, shoved and surrounded. At one point Gaddafi is heard to say: "What you are doing is forbidden in Islam!" After a gun is pointed at his head, he says, "Do you know right from wrong?"

His killing attracted international criticism and calls for an investigation. Initially the Transitional National Council (NTC) of Libya said that he died when the ambulance he was in was caught in crossfire. It subsequently became clearer that he was most likely shot by his captors. His body was taken back to Misrta and displayed in a refrigerated meat container. Visitors were allowed to view his body which showed bullet wounds to his side and his thorax.

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21 The Jewish historian Josephus refers to the display of the bodies as crucifixion (*Ant.* 6. 374).

22 Earlier in 1 Sam. 17.41-47 Goliath and David swap threats that they will leave each other's bodies for the birds and the beasts. In the event, David unexpectedly kills or stuns Goliath with a stone from his sling and then uses Goliath's own sword to behead him (1 Sam 17.51). David is then said to take Goliath's head to Jerusalem (v.54), presumably for display. However, commentators point out that the chronology may be confused here since Jerusalem at this time was still controlled by the Jebusites.

23 A little later, when Rechab and Baanah brought David the head of Saul's son Ishbaal, David protested that they had killed an innocent man. David then ordered his men to chop off their hands and feet and display their bodies, whereas Ishbaal's head was buried with dignity at Hebron (2 Sam. 4.5-12).

He was buried on 25 October at an unidentified desert site outside Misruta. On the same day, new cell-phone footage obtained by the *Global Post* correspondent Tracy Sheldon appeared to show disturbing information on a previously unknown part of his treatment before death.<sup>24</sup> As Channel 4 news presenter Krishnan Guru-Murthy put it on British television:

Now it had been revealed that Muamar Gaddafi's final moments were even more gruesome than we first thought. It appears that he was sexually assaulted by one of the men who captured him alive.<sup>25</sup>

Channel 4 did not play the whole video-recording. Guru-Murthy explained that it was not appropriate for TV screening, especially for a 7pm programme. However, Guru-Murthy assured readers that he has seen the full video and told viewers to watch the man in grey to the left of Gaddafi. Playback was frozen a second or two into the clip and the image cropped to focus on the man in grey and exclude the rest of the scene to his right. Guru-Murthy explained that this man “appears to sexually assault Gaddafi with what looks like a metal pipe”. He adds that the assault looks “absolutely deliberate and clearly caused injury”. He goes on: “and it may offer an alternative explanation for those last words Gaddafi uttered on the video “What you are doing is forbidden”.

Channel 4's decision to leave the assault off-screen is understandable and appropriate. The horrific violence is “obscene” in the classical sense of belonging “off-scene” (*ob skene*).<sup>26</sup> However, this does not mean that important questions about the sexual assault and sexual humiliation of Gaddafi should not be taken up elsewhere. Despite the Channel 4 piece, and the availability of the full video on the internet, there was relatively little mainstream media commentary on this part of the story.<sup>27</sup> A lot remains unclear and is likely to stay this way since the calls for a full investigation into the death went unheeded.

For example, some British newspaper reports suggested that the instrument of assault was a knife or bayonet rather than a pipe.<sup>28</sup> The possibility

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24 See “Decoding a Death: What happened to Muammar Gaddafi?”; <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/africa/111021/Gaddafi-news-globalpost-videos-photos-dispatches>. *Global Post* is a Boston-based online news agency.

25 Channel 4 News, 25 October 2011. Channel 4 is a well-respected TV Channel in the UK, and the News (broadcast at 7 pm weekdays) is one of its flagship programmes, <http://www.channel4.com/news/>.

26 This classical sense covered scenes of high emotion as well as sexual scenes.

27 An exception to this was BBC Radio Ulster which invited me to discuss it on their Sunday morning show *Sunday Sequence* on 30 October 2011.

28 See, for example, Martin Chulov (2011).

that a bayonet is attached to the instrument is very plausible but hard to verify from the jerky, low-resolution and short *Global Post* video. Even a frame-by-frame analysis leaves a lot of the details about what happened unclear. The video starts with Gaddafi already captured and being escorted by a small group of men. After a second or so it skips to a chaotic melee. When the sequence of frames is slowed it looks like a metal pipe (or bayonet), has been thrust into Gaddafi's rectum from behind, and has caused bleeding in his trousers. It also shows a gun placed to one side on the ground whilst this is happening. The video does not capture the initial assault, or show what the instrument is, but it does very briefly show the instrument in place, and being held and apparently shaken or pushed by the unidentified rebel fighter in grey standing to Gaddafi's left.<sup>29</sup>

Gaddafi's own use of rape and sexual violence against those who he saw as his enemies received coverage earlier in the conflict. The International Criminal Court chief prosecutor, Luis Moreno-Ocampo, claimed that Gaddafi was authorising the distribution of Viagra to his troops with orders to use it for rape.<sup>30</sup> An earlier allegation of gang rape by forces loyal to Gaddafi had made international headlines when a distraught woman, Iman al-Obeidi, burst into an international press conference at a hotel in March 2011. She claimed that she had been selected for rape by fifteen men over two days because she was originally from Benghazi which had become a rebel stronghold. After a struggle with hotel staff and security minders she was silenced and bundled away into a car.<sup>31</sup>

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29 It looks like this is the same rebel fighter dressed in grey as the one a little bit further to the left of Gaddafi in the first frames of the video. The piece by Guru-Murthy explicitly identifies the two together. However, the break in the footage makes it hard to know with certainty whether the figures are a precise match or if they might be different. Likewise, whilst Gaddafi is clearly recognisable in other parts of the video record, in the assault frames his face is not visible. Whilst the sequence of events, the clothing he is wearing, and a blood-stained sleeve all strongly suggest that it is him, the video on its own does not guarantee this.

30 Owen Boycott, "Libya mass rape claims: using Viagra would be a horrific first", *Guardian* (10 June 2011), Main section, p. 19. This story was widely reported at the time, though a follow-up investigation did not locate victims who could directly testify to it. The extent of the practice may have been quite limited or part of intentional disinformation; see David D. Kirkpatrick and Rod Nordland, "Waves of Disinformation and Confusion Swamp the Truth in Libya", *New York Times* (24 August 2011), p. A9.

31 Imam al-Obeidi (sometimes translated as Eman al-Obeidi) was released after a few days and gave further details of the rape in interviews with US media including CNN (7 April) and National Public Radio (11 April). In May she escaped from Libya to Tunisia and received help for a move to Qatar. However, after an

Likewise, if Saul was a victim of sexual violence by the Philistines he was also a perpetrator. In 1 Sam 18 he uses the engagement of his younger daughter Michal to David as a way to exact vengeance on the Philistines. He has his servants tell David that the only wedding present he would like from David is a hundred Philistine foreskins. He seems to have hoped that this would be David's undoing and probably his death. However, David and his men carried out the task successfully and returned to present the hundred foreskins to Saul as a wedding gift.<sup>32</sup> It is therefore little surprise that Saul foresaw and feared sexual violence when he faced capture by the Philistines at Gilboa.

Despite the evocative parallels in the deaths of Saul and Gaddafi, the sexual assault against Gaddafi did not prompt the churches to contribute to a public debate on sexual violence in conflict. This was partly because awareness of the assault and the video on Gaddafi remained fairly limited. This reflects a tendency for media avoidance of sexual violence which does not fit certain conventions. In this case the fact that the victim was male not female, and that Gaddafi was the victim not the perpetrator, probably mitigated against media coverage. The lack of mainstream media coverage meant that public knowledge and church awareness was correspondingly limited. Many people remain unaware of this part of the Arab Spring. However, even if there had been more awareness of the video evidence, it is unlikely that the churches would have made it a priority issue. It is not just a matter of knowing about an issue, it is also a matter of feeling it is relevant and seeing it as a direct concern to central values. It is more likely that the assault on Gaddafi would have been seen as theologically irrelevant, and in some circles any discussion of it would probably be seen as distasteful and maybe offensive or irreverent, too scandalous to be addressed as a theological issue.

Yet there is a theological paradox here, which should go against a quick dismissal of sexual violence as a topic as too scandalous for church concern. The crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth stands at the centre of Christian theology, yet the cross is explicitly described by Paul as "a

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initial welcome in Qatar she was deported back to Libya in June. She applied for asylum in the US and after a period in a refugee centre in Romania moved to Denver, CO at the end of July 2011; see Moni Basu, "A symbol of defiance in Gadhafi's Libya, Eman al-Obeidi just wants to be left alone", *CNN* (9 April 2012), <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/04/08/us/colorado-libyan-rape-victim/index.html>

32 Michal subsequently helped David escape from Saul (1 Sam. 19.11-17), and Saul gave her in marriage to Palti son of Laish (1 Sam. 25.44). After the death of Saul, David demanded the return of Michal as part of a peace covenant with Saul's son Ishbaal (2. Sam. 3.13-15).

scandal” (1 Cor. 1.23).<sup>33</sup> Paul’s language of scandal – or stumbling block – is not just incidental. It points to the offensiveness of speaking about the crucifixion. The next section argues that the full scope of this offence and scandal has been avoided for two thousand years, and a proper understanding of the scandal of the cross is only possible through a recognition of the links between crucifixion and sexual violence.

#### 4. THE SCANDAL OF THE CROSS AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The sexual violence in the torture and execution of Jesus, which is attested in the bible, is never mentioned in church, or in theology, or in Christian ethics. It is hardly surprising then, that after sanitising the scandal of the cross so thoroughly as to remove any sense of sexual violence, Christian theologians and biblical scholars usually have little to offer the churches on sexual violence in contemporary conflicts.

My own awareness of the sexual violence of crucifixion has grown and developed over a number of years. In the mid-1990s I was studying the work of the church in Latin America.<sup>34</sup> In my reading I was struck by a particularly graphic account of a sexualised execution in El Salvador in the early 1980s.<sup>35</sup> Although I had been aware of sexual violence in the Salvadoran conflict before reading this story I had not attempted to understand it more deeply or systematically. This story made me aware that acts of extreme sexual violence should not be dismissed and ignored as unexplainable horrors. Instead they needed to be examined as intentional

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33 “but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block [skandalon] to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” 1 Cor. 1:23.

34 See David Tombs (2002). On the whole Latin American liberation theology has been reticent on issues relating to sexuality, though the work of Argentine theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid is a clear exception to this, see for example, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Marcella Althaus Reid (ed.) (2009 [2006]). Even so, there is relatively little in her work focussed on sexualised violence and its significance within the Christian story.

35 In the early 1980s Brenda Sánchez-Galan was a teenager training as a medical assistant at a refugee centre near San Salvador. One day one of her women co-workers was abducted, raped, tortured and then executed by a public act of extreme sexualised violence. She was dragged into the town square and forced to bend over, then a machine gun was pushed into her rectum and discharged. This prompted Brenda and her one-year-old daughter to flee north to the United States with help from the Lutheran church. She was met in Texas by church workers in the Sanctuary Movement. The story is told in Renny Golden and Michael McConnell (1986).

acts with layers of meaning. It was researching the use of sexual violence in torture and counter-insurgencies in Latin America that led me to see crucifixion in new ways.<sup>36</sup> Developing this new perspective remains a work in progress, but its key features can be summarised in four brief points.<sup>37</sup>

First, that the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth was a form of sexual humiliation, since a key part of crucifixion was to strip the victim and display the victim in public. Second, this enforced nakedness and humiliation needs to be named as “sexual abuse” if its significance is to be understood. Third, this sexual abuse was not accidental or incidental to crucifixion as a form of torture and execution, but rather it was intentional and integral, and crucifixion should therefore be recognised as a form of sexual torture and sexual violence. Fourth, it would not have been unusual if Jesus’ crucifixion had been preceded by other forms of sexual violence, such as rape with an object or other physical forms of sexual assault or mutilation.

In terms of evidence and support, the first claim, in relation to sexual humiliation, rests on direct evidence from the Gospels as well as from a wider study of Roman practices. The second claim, in relation to sexual abuse, is primarily a claim about terminology and language, and was reinforced by the Abu Ghraib scandal in which humiliating photos of naked Iraqi prisoners were readily, and rightly, recognised as photos of sexual abuses.<sup>38</sup> The third claim, that crucifixion should be recognised as a form of sexual torture, also involves a claim about terminology, and a greater awareness of how crucifixions operated in practice, and is significant in linking crucifixion to the many different forms of sexual torture that are documented by human rights observers today. The fourth claim, that Jesus may have suffered prisoner rape or some other form of violent sexual assault preceding crucifixion is more speculative and open-ended than the first three claims. It is a claim about a possibility to be taken seriously but qualified with the recognition that the Gospels do not provide direct evidence to confirm or to refute what may have happened, and therefore no definitive judgement can be offered. There is substantial evidence that prisoners in the Greco-Roman world often suffered sexual violence of many different sorts. It would not have been unusual if Jesus had suffered in this way, on the contrary, it is better to see it as unusual if he did not suffer in this way. Whilst a definitive conclusion cannot be offered, it is a much more likely possibility than is normally acknowledged.

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36 For more on my work as it relates to Latin America, see David Tombs (2002, 2006).

37 These are drawn from Tombs (1999) David Tombs (2004). I am currently working on a book that will develop these points in more detail.

38 See Tombs (2008).

Why is research into the sexual violence of crucifixion worthwhile? What does it offer as a service to the church? The shame and silence around the sexual violence of crucifixion are not just past history. Sexual humiliation, sexual abuse, sexual torture and sexual assaults remain frequent events, but the shame, stigma and silence associated with them impede an effective response from the churches. A better understanding of Saul's death and Jesus' torture and crucifixion may give the churches greater insight into what is really happening in today's world, just as an understanding of what is happening in the world can give the churches greater insight into Saul's death and the crucifixion. This would strengthen the theological basis for a sustained engagement with sexual violence by the worldwide church, and might mean that the churches could bring important insights to facilitate a more sensitive and informed public awareness.

Theologians and biblical scholars, along with the churches and Christian believers more widely, need to do more to recognise and understand the varied forms of sexual violence within their own Scriptural tradition.<sup>39</sup> They also need to become more aware of the prevalence of sexual violence against women, men and children in current conflicts, and to consider what more might be done to understand and respond to it. This might involve reflection on the sinful power dynamics behind the violence, meaningful actions to prevent it, and support for pastoral strategies that mitigate the impact of the trauma on those who have suffered such violence.

## 5. CONCLUSION

For the churches to meaningfully engage with public issues it is important for them to have credible insights to offer on what is involved. Examining the sexual violence in biblical passages and at the heart of the Christian story would be a helpful starting point towards this.

Sexual violence is a disturbing and dehumanising feature of war which is commonly accompanied by a painful silence, as documented in *Silent No More* and other human rights reports. The high sensitivities which typically surround sex in general and sexual violence in particular make it a difficult topic for any wider conversation. This makes the challenge raised in *Silent No More* even more significant. For the churches, the temptation to choose

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39 For an example of how this might be done, see Juliana M. Claassens (2012). Claassens argues that books like *The Girl with a Dragon Tattoo* can be used to develop awareness of gender stereotyping and gender violence, but a critical reading needs to be attentive to "resisting rape scripts" (pp. 16-18). Theologians and biblical scholars working on biblical passages of rape might be attentive to similar ethical principles in reading biblical passages of rape.

silence should be resisted. Leaving sexual violence unaddressed does not help to bring it to an end. Realities of war and conflict need to be faced not avoided. Only then can action be taken to end them and take care of those who have suffered from them. The false innocence of avoidance leads to an unintended complicity for which a level of responsibility must eventually be owned. If the Christian message of hope and healing is to have integrity it cannot avoid the unspeakable.

This is not likely to offer an easy theology or any cheap comfort. If the churches are to contribute to this transformation there needs to be a radical change in their approach and their theology. Building on feminist interpretations of sexual violence in the bible, this article has explored two further passages that might be added towards this discussion—the Death of Saul (read in the context of the death of Gaddafi), and the torture and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth (read in the light of sexualized violence by authoritarian regimes in Latin America). These two examples add further weight to the feminist argument that sexual violence is disturbingly prevalent in biblical narratives but is often neglected, and also suggests that readings might be attentive to male victims as well as female victims.

*Silent No More* shows that the temptation within churches to remain silent on sexual violence remains strong, but if the church is to offer an informed pastoral, biblical and theological response, and provide effective public leadership, this temptation to silence must be resisted. By facing the biblical and theological questions more openly, the churches can expect to clarify and deepen their pastoral, biblical and theological responses to sexual violence.

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