Introduction

Each of the categories ‘religion’ and ‘sexual violence’ is complex. Predictably then, the varied dynamics between them are also complicated. It is necessary, therefore, at the outset to provide some parameters. After outlining ‘religion’ and ‘sexual violence’ for my purposes here, I will identify and describe three examples that are indicative of some dimensions of the varied ways religion and sexual violence come together. These examples focus on sexual violence in sacred texts, in contexts of religiously motivated warfare, and in religious institutions. My conclusion is that while religion is widely sidelined in discussions of gender-based and sexual violence, ‘religious sexual violence’ is a legitimate designation for a complex and variegated phenomenon.

Religion

William T. Cavanaugh points out, ‘what is meant by “religion” is by no means clear . . . Most scholars who write on religion and violence give no definition of religion. Others will acknowledge the now notorious difficulty of providing a definition of religion’ (2009, p. 16). I will also resist an attempt at providing a definition.¹ In this chapter ‘religion’ will refer to manifestations of ‘the big five’ religions, or the world religions: namely, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism.² Focus will be on ‘human experience of faith and religion, what people believe and how they practise their beliefs, as well as the relationship between their religion to society and culture’ (Greenough 2019, p. 4). This emphasis on human actions accounts for my deliberate decision to avoid entering into any discussions about either doctrine or ‘true’ religion: because, particularly when it comes to a topic such as violence, it is common to hear such claims as ‘real Buddhism is peaceful’ or ‘true Islam is not violent’, and so on. For the purpose of this discussion, religion is what its adherents express and do in pursuit of, or as motivated or enabled by, their faith or its religious institutions. Moreover, while Cavanaugh makes a compelling case against such a thing as ‘religious violence’, because, he argues, ‘there is no trans-historical and transcultural essence of religion’ (2009, p. 3), I argue here that entirely separating ‘religion’ from the violent ideologies and practices, to be described later, is just as misleading as suggesting that ‘religion’ alone accounts for all of this violence.
Sexual violence

The World Health Organization defines ‘sexual violence’ as

Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic or otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.

(WHO 2012)

There is acknowledgement that sexual violence ‘encompasses acts that range from verbal harassment to forced penetration . . . from social pressure and intimidation to physical force’ (WHO 2012). In this chapter I will be focusing most on physical forms of sexual violence that entail injury to the body—though invariably not the body alone. Although the definition does not make this explicit, sexual violence is heavily gendered with ‘those occupying feminized bodies bearing the brunt’ (Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019, p. 4, emphasis original). The majority of perpetrators of sexual violence, meanwhile, are male.

Religion and sexual violence

The connections between ‘gender’ and ‘violence’ are widely researched but the dimension of ‘religion’, which is frequently, and in significant and influential ways, present alongside them, is often neglected. To give one example of this: The Routledge Handbook of Gender and Violence, which contains 23 chapters, provides a nuanced overview of multiple interplays between gender and violence—but religion is not the focus of any of the chapters and the index cites only seven references to religion, all of them very fleeting (Lombard 2018). And yet, religion and sexual violence do coexist in multiple ways, and none of the world religions is exempt from facilitating sexual violence in one way or other.

Next, I will turn to three case study examples in order to demonstrate the following: (1) sexual violence is depicted (and sometimes condoned and even sanctioned) in canonized, sacred texts (Kalmanofsky 2017); (2) what journalist Rukmini Callimachi (2015) aptly calls ‘a theology of rape’ has justified large-scale atrocities of sexual violence, particularly in contexts of war; and (3) religious institutional structures have been found to condone and sometimes even profit from sexual abuse. I will next give brief examples of each of these, choosing a discrete world religion of focus under each heading.

Sexual violence in sacred texts

Here I focus on Jewish sacred texts. Some Jewish sacred texts, such as the Tanakh, are authoritative also to Christians; others, such as the Mishnah and Talmud, are particular to Judaism.

To be noted at the outset is, first, that there is mention of sexual violence also in sacred texts of other religious traditions. Hence, the supersessionist notion that the New Testament, in contrast to the Old Testament, is not violent, or even markedly less violent, is false. There is plenty of violence, including examples of sexual violence, also in the Christian scriptures (see Matthews 2017). To give another example, from another tradition, the Hindu story of Rama and Sita, recounted in the Ramayana, is, in large part, a tale of unwanted sexual menace and of sexual jealousy. Particularly in recent years, since a number of brutal rape cases in India have received widespread prominence and met with considerable public outrage, there has been a surge of explorations of Hindu mythology as a way to probe the deep-rootedness of Indian
women’s sexual oppression and exploitation (e.g. Doshi 2013; Kumbhar 2015). From a position of affirmation, on the other hand, Hindu goddesses have been mobilized by women in India, including by Hindu feminists, as empowering symbols to campaign against gender-based violence (Smears 2019).

This brings me to the second point to note, which is that the sacred texts of all the major world religions also contain injunctions against violence, including sexual violence.15

Turning focus to Jewish texts, sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls is not rare in the Tanakh. There are numerous examples of metaphors depicting God as executing or condoning sexualized violence against an entity (usually a nation) depicted in feminized terms (e.g. Hosea 1–2; Jeremiah 13:22–27; Ezekiel 16:37–42 and 23:28–29), as well as references to women (Deuteronomy 21:10–14) and even young girls (Numbers 31:18) raped in warfare, and narratives of how the rape of a daughter leads on to family disputes (Genesis 34; 2 Samuel 13).16

Particularly gruesome is the account of the gang rape of a Levite’s17 unnamed wife (Judges 19). In this story a Levite retrieves his wife who had left him to return to her father’s house. As they journey back towards the Levite’s home in the region of Ephraim, they decide to stay the night in a town in Gibeah where they are given shelter by an old man who is also from Ephraim. While they are making merry in the evening at the old man’s homestead, a group of thugs surround the house and pound on the door. They demand to ‘know’ the visitor—which is most probably a threat of male–male rape. The old man tries to deter the thugs and offers them his own virgin daughter and the Levite’s wife as substitutes. But the thugs will not listen. Next, the Levite casts out his wife to the thugs, and they rape and abuse her all night until morning. This horrible event transpires in the woman’s death: the Levite, in a rallying cry to war, states that she had been raped to death (Judges 20:5). He sends her dismembered body to all parts of Israel. This—understandably—is met with horror and the tribes unite against Gibeah to redress the disgrace by going to war (Judges 20:9–11).

This grisly story is sparsely told—and this applies particularly to its most violent components.18 It is aptly called a ‘text of terror’ (Trible 1984). There is no ambiguity that a dreadful deed has been committed: the rapists are called thugs, or perverse (Judges 19:22); the call to war is sent and received with outrage (Judges 19:30; 20:10); the act is identified as a crime (20:3) and a disgrace (20:10). There is no suggestion that the gang rape is in any way acceptable or pardonable. The story is shocking and above all descriptive, as opposed to advocating, let alone prescribing, such acts of horror.19 Perhaps it describes an actual event that led to civil war; perhaps it is above all indicative of the escalation into violent chaos that exemplified Israel in the days before there was a king (Judges 21:25). Commentators are divided as to whether the text is damaging for women (as opposed to ‘just’ about women). Phyllis Trible (1984, pp. 79–82) argues that the narrative is told in a way that expresses some compassion for the Levite’s wife—particularly through the detail of her gesture after the rape, of laying her hands on the threshold of the old man’s house (Judges 19:27)—while depicting the Levite negatively as a heartless and cowardly character. But for Anne Michele Tapp (1989) the narrative speaks only of unmitigated misogyny, of what she calls ‘an ideology of [women’s] expendability’.

Yet more distressing and problematic perhaps than this biblical narrative is a passage from the Babylonian Talmud (Niddah 45a). This passage records a lengthy rabbinical discussion about the age at which a girl may be ‘betrothed through intercourse’20 or ‘laid’21—which arrives at the conclusion that this should be no earlier than at three years and one day old. The discussion then moves on to whether the hymen is restored if intercourse occurs prior to this age, and whether absence of blood emitted following intercourse with a girl after the age of three years signifies that the girl has been defiled by intercourse with another man. There is also discussion as to the youngest age for a pregnancy (determined as being 12 years and one day old), prior to
which a girl may use contraception to prevent pregnancy, and whether a person raped at age three who comes to feel pleasure in intercourse can marry a priest. The discursiveness of the discussion is typical of the Talmud. The content, however, is—certainly to modern sensibilities and conventions—startling and acutely distressing. Nowhere is sex with a small child prohibited or designated rape or cruelty; nowhere is the man abusing a small child condemned. Instead, shockingly, the preoccupation is with whether virginity is compromised or whether a girl has become defiled. The onus is placed on a small child not on a depraved abuser. Sarra Lev, too, has questions to ask of the rabbis absorbed in the discussion: ‘Are they so conditioned by the norms in which they are educated that the grievous harm caused by those norms becomes invisible? Is it their own insensitivity? Their avoidance?’ (2017, p. 67). It is not known if sex with very young girls was ever encouraged or widely practised in Judaism, but the assumptions of the Talmudic text—namely, that sexually violating a young child can be reconciled with the law, that young children can come to find pleasure in intercourse, that female virginity and purity are paramount—are acutely disturbing—especially so in a text that is, in Lev’s words, ‘in search of holiness’ (2017, p. 53).

This example has served to demonstrate that sexual violence features in and is not always condemned by sacred texts.

Sexual violence in contexts of religiously motivated war

Rape and other forms of sexual violence are a prominent feature in war, and this includes warfare that has explicit religiously motivated dimensions, or warfare where religious identity is used to whip up ferment against a group targeted for sexual violence by casting them as ‘other’ and, consequently, as deserving of punishment, brutality and humiliation (Fallon 2018). As with sacred texts, sexual violence in religionized warfare is not limited to just one of the world religions (Lamb 2020). While I will go on to focus on examples of Islamic perpetrators, sexual violence is also perpetrated against Muslims, as well as by members of other religious traditions. There is, for example, strong evidence, as compiled in a recent United Nations report by the Women’s Refugee Commission (WRC, 2018), that members of the armed forces of Myanmar, who are predominantly Buddhist, have perpetrated sexual violence against predominantly Muslim Rohingya men, boys, women and girls on a large scale. The majority of rapes during the Bosnian War (1992–1995), estimated to be in the many tens of thousands, was perpetrated by Serbians (the majority of whom were Christian and affiliated with the Serbian Orthodox Church) against Bosnian Muslim women (Lloyd-Roberts and Morris 2016, pp. 235–254).

Let me turn next to examples of sexual warfare perpetrated by Muslim-dominated armies, or by militias motivated by Islam. During the 1971 Bangladesh war for independence, members of the Pakistani armed forces and of the Razakar, a Pakistani-organised paramilitary group, are said to have raped and sexually enslaved hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi women in a systematic campaign of sexual violence (Saikia 2011). Some have claimed that this large-scale brutality was inflamed by a fatwa—that is, a ruling, based in Islamic law delivered by a figure of recognized religious authority—that designated Bengali freedom fighters as ‘Hindus’ and their women as legitimate war booty. This would mean that imams or other Muslim religious leaders supported and even incited the rape of Bengali women. Similar accusations have also been levelled at leaders of Islamic parties, such as the Islam Jamaat-e-Islami (D’Costa 2011, p. 108). Others have pointed out that not only Bangladeshi Hindus but also Bengali-speaking Muslims were targeted for and terrorized by mass rape. Moreover, both Indian soldiers and Bengali nationalists (i.e. Hindu fighters) also committed rape against ethnic Bihari Muslim women (Saikia 2011).
While the 1971 war and its ensuing genocide, which led to the death of hundreds of thousands and the displacement of millions, had political and ethnic dimensions, it is none the less clear both that rape and other forms of sexual violence were used as a strategic weapon of war and that religious leaders, adherents and groups participated in atrocities and utilized religious fervour as a tool (D’Costa 2014). As human rights advocate Irene Khan puts it, the war crimes of the Bangladesh war are ‘mired in the politics of religious fundamentalist parties’ (cited in Roy 2010). And it is also the case that religious conservatism in both Pakistan and Bangladesh led to ‘a veil of negligence and denial’, which ‘allowed those who committed or colluded with gender violence to thrive, and left the women victims to struggle in anonymity and shame and without much state or community support’ (Khan, cited in Roy 2010).

Another example comes from more recent times and concerns the mass sexual abuse perpetrated by members of Da’esh (also known as ISIS). This group has been designated both Islamist and terrorist-militant and came to worldwide prominence in 2014 when its forces took over cities in Iraq and began to form a proto-state grounded in a fundamentalist form of Islam also known as jihadist-Salafism. Not long after its violent emergence, reports began to emerge of crimes against women, including kidnap, rape and sexual slavery. One organized and large-scale form of this abuse has been inflicted on the Yazidi community. The Yazidi are an endogamous and monotheistic religious community centred historically primarily in Iraq. Callimachi describes the ‘detailed bureaucracy of sex slavery, including sales contracts notarized by the ISIS-run Islamic courts’, as well as recourse to the Qur’an in order to recruit soldiers ‘from deeply conservative Muslim societies, where casual sex is taboo and dating is forbidden’ and to justify the mass rape of non-Muslims (2015).

While there may be dispute as to whether Da’esh is truly Islamic, its foundations in and profession of Islam are not in dispute. Da’esh also justified the sexual enslavement of Yazidi, as well as Christian and other non-Muslim women and girls in religious terms: for instance, by designating the Yazidi idolaters and through prooftexting with recourse to Hadith and to Qur’anic verses.

Sexual violence is a horribly common feature of war—both civil war and international war (Lloyd-Roberts and Morris 2016; Sjoberg 2016; Lamb 2020). Religious factors also sometimes play a part in facilitating and justifying sexual violence.

**Sexual violence in religious institutions**

Institutions are founded for educational, professional or religious reasons, sometimes for a combination of two or all three. Secular institutions, too, can exert violence, but religious institutions can be particularly prone to endemic sexual abuse and to condoning and covering up sexual violence—often, moreover, while publicly upholding a façade of respectability, including with regard to sexual conduct. Again, this is found to be the case in numerous religious institutions and by leaders of many faiths (Fortune 2005). There have been very many and serious allegations of sexual abuse made against Tibetan Buddhist leader Sogyal Lakar (Baxter 2018), and there are reports of extensive sexual misconduct in Jewish yeshivas (Stasi 2019). The digital activist #MeToo movement, moreover, has spawned hashtags such as #ChurchToo, #TempleToo and #MosqueToo, for Christian, Hindu and Muslim victims, respectively, who have suffered sexual harassment and abuse in their religious and worship communities (see Stiebert 2020, p. 75, n. 25).

My focus for this section is on sexual abuse in Christian institutions. Very many scandals have come to light over the past years, disclosing the considerable extent and duration of this abuse.
(Everhart 2020). This is borne out by both multiple historical investigations and the ongoing work of IICSA, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse.

Emerging findings of Gordon Lynch’s research (2019) disclose systemic features characteristic of Christian religious institutions that enabled sexual abuse of children—particularly vulnerable children, such as child migrants and orphans—to continue virtually unchallenged over many decades. One reason abuse was able to thrive, Lynch demonstrates, is because of widespread double standards, because different standards of care than those recommended by rigorous research were widely tolerated with regard to religious institutions. The Report of the Care of Children Committee of 1946, for instance, determined that raising children in a home-like environment was more important and should therefore supersede accommodating children’s religious background and denomination. Nonetheless, the 1948 Children Act sided with the minority view, which meant that home-like care was widely passed over in favour of church-run homes, which were permitted to run children’s homes their way, with little or no oversight or interference from the state sector. Religious authorities were instead widely trusted and presumed to ‘do right’—without monitoring. The enormous damage this has caused is now clear (RCIRCSA, IICSA).

Investigation into such abuse is also now being conducted from within Christian contexts. Hence, ‘that sexual violence is a problem within western Christianity’ is becoming acknowledged also by theologians, who regard the Church as ‘systemically complicit with and responsible for perpetuating sexual and gendered forms of violence’ (Scarsella and Krehbiel 2019, pp. 1, 3). Such theologians do not only, like Lynch, cast a light on the extent of abuse, they also probe the underlying theological reasons that contribute to the existence and perpetuation of such abuse. Hilary Scarsella and Stephanie Krehbiel, who are both theologians and activists, comment that the ‘willing, violent, abusive self-sacrifice [of Jesus] is held to be the source of salvation, the quintessential expression of Christian piety’, which, they argue, can lead to ‘the self-preserving steps necessary for resisting sexual violence becoming heretical by relation’ (2019, p. 4). They conclude from this that ‘representatives of the Church have directly perpetrated, justified, and enabled sexual violence’ (2019, p. 6), as is confirmed by Lynch’s research also.

**Concluding comments**

This very brief indicative and selective survey shows that religion plays a part, sometimes a significant part, in depicting or enabling sexual violence. That sexual violence is a gendered phenomenon is widely acknowledged (e.g. Lombard 2018)—including when there is a departure from the most prevalent dynamic of male perpetrator and female victims. When victims of sexual violence are male (e.g. see WRC 2018) or perpetrators female (e.g. Sjoberg 2016), gender remains a significant category. Religious dimensions are, however, widely neglected or even ignored in discussions of gender-based and sexual violence (e.g. Lombard 2018).

While Cavanaugh (2009) has cautioned against essentializing ‘religious violence’, this chapter argues that the category of religious sexual violence can be helpful and pertinent. As demonstrated, the interactions between sexual violence and religion are multiple and, with qualification, the connectedness is evident. While religion alone does not account for sexual or other forms of violence, its contribution or complicity can be significant and deserves exploration.

This chapter has demonstrated that sexual violence features in some sacred texts. Sometimes depictions of sexual violence may be primarily descriptive, but occasionally there are suggestions of prescriptions of sexual violence also. While sacred texts of all world religions also contain inculcations of non-violence, having a fixed and canonized text can transpire in using that...
text to address or justify events and actions as circumstances arise, including with violent effect. In this way, as discussed, the practice of prooftexting has been used by Da’esh to legitimate sexual slavery.

Sexual violence is a feature of both war, including war that has religious motivation, and institutionalization, including of religious institutions. Again, this kind of violence is not confined to any one religious tradition. Moreover, while settings of war may give rise to extreme forms of violence, widespread sexual abuse has also existed in peace times, such as in children’s homes and laundries run by religious orders during the post-war years (Lynch 2019). It is impossible to characterize sexual violence as indicative or characteristic of only religious extremism or fundamentalism—the evidence suggests something much more nuanced.

Emerging fields, such as the study of trauma theology (O’Donnell 2018) or the application of religious texts and motifs in digital activism (Stiebert 2020), show that religion continues to play a dexterous and ubiquitous part in numerous and diverse societies. It also features in sexual violence, and such violence, too, is multifaceted and of global reach. What religion is is indeed difficult to define or generalize about but religion must certainly be a significant part of any attempts to understand and account for sexual violence. The role of religion in examinations of gender or sexual violence is therefore ignored at our peril.

Notes
1 Smart’s characterization of ‘the world’s beliefs’ remains a good analysis for coming to understand what is meant by ‘religion’ (1998).
2 While the first four world religions are listed in order of numbers of adherents, Judaism has a very much smaller number of followers. Moreover, Chinese traditional, as well as primal indigenous and African traditional religions, as well as Sikhism, have more adherents. Judaism nevertheless features among the dominant world religions because of its disproportionate impact, certainly in Western contexts. This impact is due in no small part, first, to the influence of Judaism on Christianity and Islam, and second, to the geographical spread and influence of Judaism. All of the world religions are internally variegated.
3 Clinical studies on sexual violence, such as those of Herman on incest ([1981], 2000) and domestic abuse (1997), provide extensive data on the wide-ranging and long-term injuries to the psyche and emotional development and well-being of victims. Within the discipline of religion, such is beginning to be explored in the nascent field of trauma theology (e.g. O’Donnell 2018 and O’Donnell and Cross 2020).
4 Women and girls experience sexual violence at higher rates than men and boys do. Sexual violence against males is also acutely damaging but remains ‘a very sensitive and neglected area of study’ (WHO 2012; cf. WRC 2018). For abuse of nonconforming ‘male’ bodies see Pascoe (2005) and for trauma of male-male rape see Javaid (2018).
5 But as Sjoberg, in her book on female perpetrators of sexual violence in wartime makes clear, ‘men do not have to be the perpetrators of sexual violence for it to be a gendered phenomenon’ (2016, p. 50). Sjoberg gives numerous examples of female wartime rapists and cites a survey of 2010, conducted in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, according to which 29.5% of women and 15.2% of men disclosed exposure to conflict-related sexual violence. Of these ‘41 percent reported a female perpetrator, most typically a female combatant’ (cited in Sjoberg 2016, p. 121).
6 The three-volume work Rape Culture, Gender Violence, & Religion (ed. by Blyth, Colgan and Edwards, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c) contributes 35 essays on the intersections between ‘sexual violence’, ‘gender’ and ‘religion’. Not many of the world religions are, however, represented here, and there is strongest emphasis on ‘Christian Perspectives’ (the subtitle of one of the volumes). Another volume is on ‘Biblical Perspectives’. The third, on ‘Interdisciplinary Perspectives’, also focuses predominantly on Christian settings and themes—with one exception focusing on rabbinic understandings (Rethelyi 2018). These volumes are trail blazing in terms of exploring religious underpinnings and dimensions of sexual violence in a range of texts and settings. They also, in a welcome way, give a forum to numerous Global South scholars whose contribution is too often marginalized. More of such work focused on world religions other than Christianity is still needed.
Johanna Stiebert

7 For one stark example see Numbers 31 in the Bible. Here Moses, the preeminent prophet, following divine instruction (31:1), orders the Israelite army to kill all Midianite males and all women who have ‘known a man’ (31:17). But he adds, ‘all the young girls who have not known a man by sleeping with him, keep alive for yourselves’ (31:18). As Michel points out, ‘in a horrifying way there is no limitation of age in the direction of small children. The lack of such a limitation, the clear sexual connotation (“who have not known a man”) together with the “for you[rselves]”, and additionally the fact that this is a positive instruction or permission given by Moses characterize the verse in the context of sexual violence against children as markedly harsh’ (2004, p. 57).

8 The contributions in Kalmanofsky’s edited volume discuss sexual violence vis-à-vis the sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The contributors’ shared aim is ‘to identify methods of interpretation that could engender a process of healing from sexual violence and abuse perpetrated in and through sacred scripture’ (2017, p. 1).

9 ‘Tanakh’ is the name for the Jewish sacred scriptures called ‘Old Testament’ in Christian traditions.

10 According to Jewish tradition, the written material contained in the Mishnah was transmitted first as oral Torah, or oral Law. Its primary purpose is to elucidate the written Torah, which makes up the first section of the Tanakh.

11 The Talmud incorporates Mishnah and records yet more material that was first transmitted orally. Notably, this material consists of discussions and theological explanations by Jewish sages, or rabbis. Talmud interprets Mishnah. There are two Talmudic traditions: the Palestinian, or Jerusalem, tradition and the Babylonian tradition. The Babylonian Talmud, or Bavli, is the more authoritative of the two.

12 Ibrahim states the ‘Qur’an does not narrate any explicit episode of sexual violence against women’ (2017, p. 80).

13 Ravana desires and abducts Sita, the beautiful bride of Rama. Proverbially faithful Sita is eventually freed without having been molested, but Rama suspects her of infidelity. To prove her innocence, Sita has to walk through fire.

14 Most notable here is the violent gang rape and torture of Jyoti Singh on 16 December 2012 in Delhi. Deepa Mehta’s film drama Anatomy of Violence (2016) focuses on the values and conditions of Indian society, including religious ones, that perpetuate violent misogyny.

15 In regard to Jewish sacred texts, to become the topic of focus next, it is the case that rape, like domestic violence, is typically couched in negative terms, particularly in Talmudic traditions (see Rethelyi 2018c). Peace and non-violence are an ideal promoted by all the world religions.

16 For a full discussion with numerous examples, see Stiebert 2020, pp. 19–32.

17 ‘Levite’ refers to a member of a tribe of Israel claiming descent from the ancestor Levi. This tribe is designated the priestly tribe. ‘Levite’, therefore, is a designation that denotes elevated status.

18 The beginning of the story, up to the departure of the Levite from his wife’s father’s home, takes up some space (vv. 1–9). The journey, up to the merrymaking in the old man’s house, takes the story up to v. 21. Negotiations with the thugs take up three more verses. The rape and its immediate aftermath, however, are recounted in just two terse verses (vv. 25–26).

19 For a redemptive reading of this violent story, see Moyo (2017) who argues, ‘We can [not] change . . . the Judges 19 narrative . . . however, by reading . . . using C[ontextual]B[ible]S[tudy], we can break the silence around sexual and gender-based violence and work toward a culture of justice’ (2017, p. 139; cf. Paynter 2020 for a reparative reading).

20 This is the translation of Sefaria.

21 Lev apologizes for her ‘lewd language’ but explains that this colloquialism better captures ‘the rabbinic sense of the word’ which expresses not mutuality (in the way ‘to have sex with’ does) but instead, ‘a subject-object relationship’ (2017, p. 61, n. 22).

22 I am here following Lev who writes, ‘I recognize that terms such as rape . . . may be an imposition of a value system that is absent from the [rabbinical] text itself. I am proposing, however, a hermeneutic that both recognizes and confronts that but does not exclude the anachronism from its interpretive framework’ (2017, p. 69, n. 29).

23 Fallon’s chapter begins with a summary of rape in war, inclusive of reasons for using rape as a weapon (2018, pp. 71–72). The remainder of the chapter explores testimonies of rape survivors of Rwanda’s genocide, in particular Christians’ spiritual responses to sexual violence, inclusive of assertions of rape transpiring in both injuries to and affirmations of faith (2018, pp. 74–83). This provides a helpful reminder that there is no one ‘script’ for responding to rape. Further discussion of spiritual responses to sexual violence would be valuable but is beyond the scope of this chapter (see trauma theology, e.g. O’Donnell 2018 and Scarsella and Krehbiel 2019).
Religion and sexual violence

24 In Western settings Muslims are more likely to be perceived in negative terms than members of other religious groups (Pew Research Center, 2014). This extends to Muslim men being perceived as more inclined to commit acts of physical violence, including sexual violence against women and girls (Ibrahim 2017, p. 89). Validity for such perceptions is not borne out by research, just as the sacred Jewish texts discussed earlier do not point to higher incidences of gang rape or abuse of very young children in Jewish than in other religious communities.

25 An estimated 90% of the population of Myanmar professes Theravada Buddhism.

26 The recent case in India, involving the kidnap, rape and murder of a Muslim nomadic girl, was noteworthy not only for its violence but also for the role religion played in heightening tensions (Schultz 2019). The New York Times reported on the atrocity under the heading ‘Indian Court Convicts 6 Hindus in Rape and Murder of Muslim Girl, 8’. The child had been targeted to instil fear in her Muslim minority community and was locked up and abused in a Hindu temple. Moreover, prominent members of the governing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party obstructed legal proceedings. Like the Rohingya and Bosnian examples, this story of sexual violence, too, shows religion serving as a flashpoint.

27 Estimates range from 200,000 to 400,000 (Roy 2010). Saikia’s publication, based on extensive fieldwork, breaks through the mind-numbing numbers by giving a forum to the survivors themselves.

28 It took decades for the Bangladeshi government to set up an International Crimes Tribunal, which investigated a number of people because of their actions, including rape, during the conflict of 1971. Some of them went on to be sentenced but very many more went unpunished (Roy 2010; D’Costa 2014).

29 ISIS stands for ‘Islamic State of Iraq and Syria’. ISIL substitutes ‘the Levant’ for ‘Syria’. The group is also known as IS ‘Islamic State’. The name Da’esh is derived from its Arabic-language acronym.

30 The term was coined by Kepel (2002) to describe a hybrid form of Islamist ideology that justifies violence and terrorism as a means to realize political objectives grounded in a very literal interpretation of Islam’s sacred texts and in absolute commitment to jihad. Jihad, meaning ‘striving’, refers to the effort to conform to God’s will. Da’esh accentuates a military dimension of this term and directs it particularly against any ideologies deemed by them un-Islamic and infidel, including Shia Muslim sects, other religious traditions, liberalism and humanism.

31 For a careful discussion of whether Da’esh is ‘Islamic’, see Emon (2015). As stated at the outset, this chapter offers too little scope for exploring notions of ‘true’ or ‘rightful’ manifestations of any one religious group.

32 Prooftexting is the (usually highly selective) practice of using excerpts or quotations from authoritative texts while ignoring others and without heed to context, for the purpose of supporting a particular agenda. In 2014 a group of Islamic scholars wrote ‘Letter to Baghdadi’, an open letter to Da’esh’s then leader seeking to refute the group’s interpretation of Qur’an and Hadith, stressing that both must be considered in their entirety (see also Jacoby 2019).

33 While the Qur’an is the primary religious text of Islam, held to be direct divine revelation, Hadith refers to the prophetic tradition: the record of the pronouncements, actions and silent approvals of Islam’s preeminent prophet, Muhammad. Hadith is a source of both religious law and guidance and second in authority only to the Qur’an. According to Da’esh interpretation of one Hadith, slavery is a precursor to the end of the world. This would mean that sexual enslavement (such as of the Yazidi) would hasten the prophetically foretold end of the world and Day of Judgment, thereby advancing divine will.

34 This is set out in the Da’esh English-language digital magazine Dabiq 4. Here it says that taking non-Muslim women ‘as concubines’ is enshrined in Sharia (i.e. Islamic canonical law derived from Qur’an and Hadith) and that ‘if one were to deny or mock, he would be denying or mocking the verses of the Qur’an and the narration of the Prophet . . . and . . . apostatizing from Islam.’ For a full discussion of the 15 issues of Dabiq published between June 2014 and July 2016, see Jacoby (2019).

35 There are credible reports of mass detention and other forms of violence targeted by the secular ruling communist party of China against Uighur (or Uyghur) Muslims of Xinjiang (Ramzy and Buckley, 2019). The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, moreover, explores abuse in a variety of religious institutions among other, secular, ones (IICSA).

36 Two particularly shocking examples here are first, the Magdalene Laundries of Ireland, which were run by Roman Catholic orders for over two hundred years until the late twentieth century. The Laundries facilitated the abuse, including sexual abuse (Lloyd-Roberts and Morris 2016, p. 55–79) and exploitation, of tens of thousands of women (Clough 2017). A second example is the findings of
the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which analyses
the experiences of 6,875 survivors of abuse. More than 8,000 individuals reported their experiences in
private hearings (RCIRCSA). The majority of those who reported were male and abused as minors.
The majority of abusers were Catholic priests (Peters and Besley 2019, p. 459).
37 IICSA was established to ensure child protection, including in the context of the policies, practices
and procedures of religious institutions, organizations and settings, such as in places of worship, faith tuition
and recreation. IICSA was ‘set up because of serious concerns that some organisations had failed and
were continuing to fail to protect children from sexual abuse’ (IICSA).
38 This report is widely known as the Curtis Report.
39 Both are on the board of directors of Into Account, an organization that provides ‘support for survivors
seeking justice, accountability, and recovery in Christian contexts’ (Into Account).

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