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Vulnerability, Vulnerance and Resilience—Spiritual Abuse and Sexual Violence in New Spiritual Communities

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Abstract: In February 2017, Braz de Aviz, Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, acknowledged in an interview that some 70 “new spiritual movements” were under investigation for abusive behavior committed by their founders. The number of cases that remain undetected is probably large. This article uses the example of these communities to analyze the precarious tension between vulnerability, vulnerance, and resilience. It draws on Céline Hoyeau’s excellent study of those founders of new spiritual movements in France who were later exposed as abusers. It also presents my research on the sacred in its dangerous connection to the victimizing sacrifice. My basic thesis is that exploring the link between vulnerability and resilience is not enough. Rather, vulnerance needs to be systematically included in the analyses. This new approach opens up a more complex understanding of abuse, cover-ups, and disclosure. It can tackle both the vulnerable resilience of the perpetrators and the voluntary vulnerability of survivors in disclosing abuse.

Keywords: vulnerability; vulnerance; resilience; sexual and spiritual abuse; sacrifice; the sacred; non-survivors; spiritual communities; “other-power”; vulnerability paradox; expenditure paradox



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1. Introduction

The abuse of adult women and men is rampant in the Roman Catholic Church (Haslbeck et al. 2020). We can state this because the access to power that the church usurped (for a long time and still today) in general over the love lives of adults is an abuse of power (Keul 2021c). Banning the use of condoms despite AIDS and other dangers, subjugating sex outside of marriage or within the priesthood to confession¹, and even outlawing and anathematizing same-sex love—these and similar practices are abuses of the power that clericalism (Dreßing et al. 2018, p. 13; Leimgruber 2022a) has acquired in recent centuries and applied, at times, with brute force. The phenomena that are the subject of this Special Issue are located and made possible against this wide background. This background cannot be illuminated, but it should be kept in mind if we are to understand the complex dynamics that make sexual violence and its cover-up possible in the first place. Spiritual abuse and sexual violence in “new spiritual communities” are part of this system.

2. The Underestimated Power of Vulnerability and the Vulnerability Paradox

In the context of spiritual abuse and sexual violence, vulnerability is a decisive but often underestimated power. Many, partially non-transparent effects of power are operative here and demand a sharpened attentiveness. At first glance, the vulnerability of victims is easily perceived, but we should not underestimate the vulnerability of the supporters, witnesses, institutions, and even perpetrators. There is one’s own vulnerability, but there is also the vulnerability of others—and both enhance each other. This also applies to institutions that tolerate sexual abuse when covering it up. Already here, the institution’s own vulnerability exercises an unspeakable power that the concealment of sexual abuse by church leaders has revealed. Vulnerability has the power to enhance violence. What

the German discourse on vulnerability calls “Vulneranz” (Münkler and Wassermann 2012, p. 77; Keul 2021a, pp. 55–60) grows out of vulnerability. The new term “vulnerance” refers to the power to inflict harm. It means the special readiness to use violence, even explosive violence, in connection with vulnerabilities. In the case of cover-ups, this violence-enhancing power is volatile: it has shattered the church in recent years and has left it in ruins. Hedging strategies had the opposite effect—they led to destruction on a tremendous scale. How could that happen?

2.1. The Cover-up as Self-Protection: How Vulnerability Turns into Vulnerance

There is no doubt that ignorance, carelessness, and arrogance could be found among the leaders of the church in the cover-ups that took place. However, there was a stronger motive. Leaders tried to protect the Catholic Church—and thus their own religious community, as sacred for them—from any possible damage. They feared the damage that would result if the church was exposed in public as an institution that had brought evil into peoples’ lives. The desire to protect one’s own institution contains a potential for violence: one wounds the other to protect oneself from being wounded (Keul 2021a, pp. 105–12). Cover-ups as defense mechanisms harm victims of abuse, for example, by denying the crimes, excluding the victims from the community, accusing them of lying, placing them under suspicion. In a kind of preemptive strike, which would block the revealing of sexual violence, the survivors become the victims of further violence again. Both forms of vulnerance, abuse and cover-up, amplify each other, dealing immeasurable damage to survivors and non-survivors. In cover-ups, the vulnerability of one’s own institution operates as an unspeakable, violence-enhancing power. In vulnerant self-protection, the incredible power of vulnerability is at work: violence is released not by an actual wound, but by a *feared* wound, and thus by vulnerability. In recent years, we have had to learn not only how destructive the abuse itself is but also the cover-up. Ann Cahill, a US-American philosopher from Elon University, makes clear how crucial “the shimmering moment of disclosure” is (Cahill 2021). At this point, the healing process could begin—or the spiral of violence gathers speed.

Victims of sexual violence and spiritual abuse experience this destructive power of vulnerability painfully in other ways as well. For them, the actual harm caused by the abuse and the cover-up, which affects both body and soul, is at the center. Their human dignity is assaulted, and they struggle to have their dignity recognized by themselves and others. Vulnerance is voracious and eats its way through one’s entire life until, in the worst scenario, it pushes one to the brink of death. The damage does not remain in the present but extends into the future as well. This is where vulnerability once more comes into play. Violence continues to affect people even after the wounds have healed. A scar remains, marking one’s own vulnerability, and that scar is a constant reminder that a new injury is possible. However, this too concerns a *feared* injury that one wants to avoid. That is why some victims rely on hedging strategies and construct protective walls around themselves. Others close to the victim are prevented from getting the chance to hurt them again. That is the reason victims sometimes keep others at a distance. The fear of being hurt blocks potential (social, financial, cultural, political, natural, artistic) resources for life. But it is precisely because they are victims of violence that they need attention, love, and, in particular, ecstasy (Kerstner et al. 2016, pp. 202–6). So, hedging strategies can become devastating for intensive relationships and sexual relations.

The correlation between vulnerability and vulnerance also functions in other everyday contacts. Because survivors want to protect themselves, they run the risk of blocking that which could contribute to their healing. Not only the wound itself, but the vulnerability—the vulnerability that the wound “embodies”—also exercises a devastating power. The lifelong effects of abuse have their origin in this violence-enhancing power of vulnerability. The absent is still present and plays an important role. The scar that remains makes what is absent present. The perpetrator has perhaps not lived near the victim for a long time, or the violent acts happened long ago. However, what is absent remains present—this is the core problem of

trauma. An intense, happy love relationship can stabilize a life and even aid its recovery and animate it—but it is precisely this what victims of sexual abuse may find impossible. Thus, the violence affects—of all things—those very resources that are necessary to overcome the injury. The suffering in the past proves to be so overwhelming that people can still feel its effects years later. As long as this vicious circle continues, the survivors remain the victims of sexual abuse. But fortunately, the destructive power of vulnerability can be reversed. This point will be discussed later.

2.2. *Self-Protection through Cover-Up leaves the Church in Ruins: The Vulnerability Paradox*

The vulnerance in abuse and cover-up does not stop with the primary victims. It cannot be contained in its destructive effects but tends to become volatile (unless people and communities vigorously resist it). In the end, what was initially intended as self-protection turns out to be self-destruction. Covering up the abuse disrupts the trust in the salvific mission of the church and thus in the church itself. This also applies to the “new spiritual communities”. Their goal was “de faire émerger du neuf sur les ruines de l’ancien” (Hoyeau 2021, p. 64)—“to have the new rise up on the ruins of the old”. Because of abuse and cover-ups, however, it was precisely the opposite they achieved. The effects of power reversed and accelerated the decline of the church. This shows what vulnerability research calls the “vulnerability paradox”. This paradox deserves a closer look.

In the 1990s, security research established that ever-increasing security strategies, which are intended to avert damage in industrial societies, lead to even greater damage if the damage still occurs. This can be seen in the example of the power supply. A power failure at a crucial point could lead to chaotic conditions and violent outbreaks in well-secured societies within a few hours. This is paradoxical: the stronger the security strategies, the greater the vulnerability. Researchers dubbed this “the vulnerability paradox” (Steetskamp and Van Wijk 1994, p. 4). It states that hedging strategies in the event of damage increase the damage (Keul 2021a, pp. 25–27).

This paradox occurs in many contexts. It has become particularly visible in the church in recent years. Church leaders used every means available to prevent the disclosure of abuse and thereby protect the church from harm, and the means became more and more drastic. The Munich study on abuse and cover-up, carried out in January 2022, shows this in an exemplary way (Westpfahl et al. 2022). Clerics were relocated and then relocated again; files were manipulated or even destroyed; more and more money was paid out; deliberate concealment and small untruths grew into big lies. At the end there was even a discussion in Germany as to whether Pope emeritus Benedict XVI, who was not telling the truth, was lying (Deckers 2022).

But disclosure could not be prevented or stopped because sexual violence is a violation of human rights. In the long run, people in democratic cultures are not willing to accept such crimes, and violations of human rights were exposed, often with the help of journalism. What then happened—from the point of view of the cover-ups—is the damage event: what was absolutely necessary to keep secret became public. Not only the abuse but the cover-up itself was exposed. It was at this point that the vulnerability paradox kicked in. The vulnerance generated in the system became volatile and targeted the system itself.

One just needs to think about this briefly: if the abuse had not been covered up but had been consistently punished, made known and discussed publicly, the damage to the survivors would have been limited. Also, while the Catholic Church would have been damaged, that damage would not be as abysmal as it is the case currently. The enormous loss of credibility that church institutions have experienced in recent years and that challenges all members of the church, has resulted from the cover-up of abuse. The destruction increased exponentially. In Germany, this can be seen most clearly in the Archdiocese of Cologne, where the number of people leaving the church rose enormously in 2021 due to a lack of investigation into abuse and cover-ups (Jansen 2022). In the USA, since 2004 numerous dioceses have had to file for bankruptcy due to high compensation payments. If the church leaders had stopped the abuse early by disclosing it instead of

covering it up, the damage would not have been nearly as great. Cover-ups of abuse leave the church in tatters.

The processing of abuse and cover-ups requires complex analyses of the plural dynamics between vulnerability and vulnerance. This also includes deeper questions: Why is the church ready for security strategies that cause serious injuries? Why does it bring evil when it promises to bring salvation? This is where the category of the sacred comes into play. People and communities want to protect what is sacred to them at all costs. This connection between the sacred, protection strategies, and vulnerability is the focus of what follows. I will explain the problem by using the example of the “new spiritual communities”, in which adults also suffer spiritual abuse and sexual violence.

3. Vulnerance in Spiritual Communities: The Destructive Power of the Sacred

Many of the faithful and bishops, as well as popes, of the Catholic Church have set their hopes since the Second Vatican Council on “new spiritual communities”² that promised an entirely different spirituality and more communicative closeness and vitality, a spirit of community and physicality as well as a special contact with the sacred. But in recent years it has come to light that, of all people, several *founders* of such communities committed abuse of power and sexual violence themselves.³

In these communities, vulnerance was also directed against adults, especially women. Are these regrettable, isolated cases? Or is it a regular pattern in the system? Is it, in the midst of spirituality, about great power, unpaid sex and immense amounts of money? Is spirituality a principal tool here?

3.1. *A Church in Crisis, Especially Susceptible to the Abuse of Power, Sexual Violence, and Their Cover-Ups*

Several fundamental questions arise in this new field of research, which first appeared in theology and interdisciplinary research and whose extent could only be foreseen. In France, at any rate, Céline Hoyeau presented a first, very well researched study in 2021 on power and abuse by the founders of the “communautés nouvelles”, which also examined historical backgrounds and theological connections (Hoyeau 2021). She proves that this is not at all a matter of individual cases but a systemic problem. In her book, *La Trahison des Pères—The Treason of the Fathers*—she looks at how it could end in “la chute des étoiles” (ibid., pp. 19–52)—“the fall of the stars”. The height from which they fell is determined by the height the founders were raised to previously through combined forces. Hoyeau understands this exaltation in the context of the loss of power and authority that the Catholic Church underwent in the second half of the twentieth century. In a time of increasing secularization, rising competition with non-Christian religions, and a drastic decline in priests, the “new spiritual communities” appeared to be a new kind of panacea for saving the church. Church leaders let themselves be dazzled by the numerous successes of the movements. In the midst of all their uncertainties, the faithful longed once more for a clear explanation of doctrine, intensive experiences of God’s nearness, and sacred liturgy.

This analysis goes beyond France. The same problem can be seen in Germany, although it has only been discussed occasionally so far. In October 2020, Alexandra Teuffenbach published her research on the founder of the Schoenstatt movement, Father Josef Kentenich (1885–1968), who was accused of spiritual abuse and sexual assault (Teuffenbach 2020). Shortly thereafter, it turned out that the “Catholic Integrated Community”—in which Joseph Ratzinger was extremely involved for years up until his time as pope—, —was permeated by spiritual and human abuse; the community had to be dissolved by Cardinal Reinhard Marx on November 20, 2020 (Erzdiözese München-Freising 2020; Benz et al. 2020). In 2021, “Totus Tuus—Neuevangelisierung” in the diocese of Muenster was dissolved because of spiritual abuse, lack of insight into its mistakes and the unwillingness to change behavior (Bistum Münster 2021). Using her own life story, Johanna Beck demonstrated in 2022 the susceptibility to abuse present in the “Catholic Guides and Scouts of Europe (KPE)”, a youth organization in Germany and Austria that sees itself as part of the charismatic

movement and also as a training organization for the “Opus Sanctorum Angelorum” (Beck 2022). Some bishops are specifically supportive of the KPE because of its strict anti-gender policy. Though no analysis has been carried out for Germany as a whole to date, spiritual communities function in similar ways, and it is to be feared that, as in other countries, this is just the tip of the iceberg. To prevent further victimizations, it is necessary to make this iceberg visible and to subject it to interdisciplinary research.

According to Hoyeau, a deceptive hope for a “church spring” arose that led to the abyss because it blinded the church to the dangers that are associated with such movements. The supposed signs of hope of the church that shone afar should not be allowed to fade. These projects, which fit so well into the traditional or even traditionalist forms of the Catholic faith, could not be allowed to fail. Pope John Paul II “knighted” them (Hoyeau 2021, pp. 92–96). The fixation on the numerous successes wrapped the founders of the communities in a protective cloak that gave them all possible and impossible freedoms. Therefore these founders, who made the eyes of so many people light up, could not, by definition, be vulnerable criminals. The communities themselves also showed them unconditional trust, gushing admiration, and limitless veneration, because the founders embodied the hope of salvation that was directed at the communities and were almost deified for this. “Ces fondateurs [. . .] vont incarner non seulement une autorité spirituelle rassurante, mais aussi une nouvelle manière de croire, qui donne place à l’émotion, à l’affectivité, à la tendresse, au corps, à l’accueil de sa vulnérabilité” (Hoyeau 2021, p. 87)—“These founders [. . .] will embody not only a reassuring spiritual authority, but also a new way of believing, which gives way to emotion, to affectivity, to tenderness, to the body, to welcoming its own vulnerability.”

Hoyeau’s analysis suggests that, in times of crisis or even of decline, church institutions become especially susceptible to the abuse of power, sexual violence, and their cover-up. Do times of crisis therefore promote a special interest in a *concealed* vulnerability that should be covered up and suppressed? This question brings my own research on the underestimated power of vulnerability into play. In my studies on the theme “Vulnerability, Vulnerance, and Self-expenditure”, I researched three examples of volatile vulnerability. It turned out that they occurred in periods of decline (Keul 2021a, pp. 379–420). In addition to the case of the Catholic Church, there was also that of the serial child killer Gilles de Rais (1405–1440), and the case of sexual violence and its cover-up at the Odenwald school, a state boarding school in Hessen (Germany). Gilles de Rai was not only one of the cruelest criminals in European history, but he was at the same time an extremely pious soldier in the army of St. Joan of Arc (Bataille 1991). The Odenwald school, with Gerold Becker as a charismatic leader and the main perpetrator, was a “Lighthouse of Reform Pedagogy” (Keupp et al. 2019), even though the pedagogical concept had weakened considerably over the years. In all three cases, vulnerability exploded through abuse and cover-up when the institution was in decline. For Rais, it was feudalism; for the Oldenwald school, it was reform pedagogy; and for the Catholic Church of the present, it is the loss of power and authority in the second half of the twentieth century.

The phenomenon is striking in all three institutions. One can conclude from this that institutions in times of crises and decline are susceptible to abuse and cover-up, especially when a charismatic leader is involved. This also happens with non-church institutions and even political movements that have charismatic leaders and are susceptible (Bataille 2019). Hoyeau’s analysis reinforces the thesis of my study with respect to the church, which is at issue here. This connection is telling with respect to the theory of vulnerability and vulnerance. The decline leaves the Catholic Church in Europe wounded. The loss of disciplinary power and actual authority in church and society, an exodus en masse from the Catholic Church, a chronic lack of people, dwindling financial resources, the faded and scratched sheen of earlier times—all this damages and at the same time exposes the institution in its vulnerability. Because the vulnerability of institutions becomes visible in this way, it places its hope on leaders who come with grand promises of salvation and seem to protect the institutions. The institution should no longer be critiqued because it

already feels damaged and wishes to prevent further injuries. Forbidding criticism and the ideology of closing ranks are part of the safeguards that they set in place by means of rigid exclusion mechanisms. These mechanisms testify to fear in the inner circle and make it submissive. If the victims of abuse begin to resist and to speak about the abuse, they become part of the condemned section of the movement and thereby lose their voice in the system. In this way, vulnerance, which grows out of abuse, increases even more through cover-up and “blaming the victim”. The system, which does not wish to see the vulnerance of the perpetrators, thus becomes vulnerant in a double sense.

It is precisely these defensive mechanisms, however, that turn the church into a ruin. It becomes susceptible to abuse through the suppression of criticism and covering it up because these actions offer the perpetrators protection. The uncritical belief of the institution in utopian promises of salvation leads to the tragic opposite—in the first place, for the victims. As soon as the cover-up becomes public, it robs the church of its credibility and thus of what it needs to be able to convince people of its stated salvific significance. Thus, the damage that the vulnerability paradox describes occurs: the safeguards that should protect the institution and de facto the perpetrators turn against the church itself and reduce it to ruin.

3.2. *The Dangerous Power of the Sacred: Human Sacrifice*

In times of crisis and decline, accordingly, special care is needed with respect to promises of salvation that, in the end, serve to conceal the rampant vulnerance in the institution. Such promises of salvation are in turn intrinsically connected with the holy. In her study, Hoyeau argues that the sacred plays a special role in abuse in spiritual communities. Communities whose founders were abusers (Marie-Dominique and Thomas Philippe, André-Marie van der Borght, Ephraim, Thierry de Roucy and Jean Vanier) had made the “Retrouver le sens du ,sacré” (Hoyeau 2021, pp. 77–82)—the “Recovery of the sense of the sacred”—their main task. Hoyeau emphasizes those charismatic priests who were quite popular in their spiritual communities and enjoyed high prestige, but were later exposed as guilty of abuse.⁴ They were to lead the believers to the sacred and allow them to experience it more intensively in the liturgy as well as in their own lives. Hoyeau’s approach to the sacred is instructive. Because, from the perspective of the theory of religion, it can be stated on the one hand that their salvific promises stand at the center of the communities and thus what is sacred to them. On the other hand, it is especially relevant for abuse and its cover-up that there is a close connection between the promise of salvation, the sacred, and the victimizing sacrifice.

This thesis requires an explanation. Regarding the concept of the sacred, in my research I expand on two theories of religion that understand the sacred in a formal sense and not with respect to content. Thus, Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) determines three dimensions of the sacred, namely “*tremendum, fascinosum, augustum*”. It is about the incipient experience of a mystery that transcends language but at the same time inscribes itself “*als ein Wirkendes, Waltendes*” (Otto 1917)—“as an active, ruling force”—in human life. There is something incomprehensible about it that astonishes, even causes people to tremble and deeply frightens them, so that on the one hand they want to avoid it or even flee from it: *tremendum*, “eine ‘Furcht’, die mehr als Furcht ist” (ibid., p. 15)—“a ‘fear’ that is more than fear”. On the other hand, it is something one is fascinated by, it is irresistibly attractive: *fascinosum*, “das nun mit dem abdrängenden Momente des *tremendum* in eine seltsame Kontrastharmonie tritt” (ibid., p. 33)—“that now enters into a strange ‘contrast-harmony’ with the daunting moment of the *tremendum*”. And the sacred is something that not only affects single actions, but “*sein Dasein selber*” (ibid., p. 53)—“one’s existence itself”: *augustum*, a value that must be recognized unconditionally and gives orientation to life, “*zugleich sittliche Verpflichtung und Forderung*” (ibid., p. 54)—“simultaneously a moral obligation and a requirement”; and something to which one may devote oneself fully or even submit (Christian: election, vocation) because it lets life shine and happiness in life depends on it.

In turn, Georges Bataille (1897–1962) defines religion as “the search for lost intimacy” (Bataille 1989, p. 57) and analyzes experiences of the sacred at that point where “l’effervescence”—a flaring up of life—happens. The advantage of these approaches to religion lies in the fact that they are equally applicable to both religious communities and secular institutions, such as the above-mentioned Odenwald school. Experiences of the ambivalent sacred are not limited only to people who belong to a religious community (Keul 2021a, pp. 195–253).

What is sacred for people and communities, what represents a larger value for them, and to whose higher service they dedicate themselves, is worthy of unconditional protection: it should not be harmed and must be protected against damage. The willingness to sacrifice is generated from this soil. Whoever dedicates themselves to the service of the sacred, as people in these spiritual communities do, is willing to make sacrifices for this sacred—time, money, personal commitment, rigid restrictions on sexuality, proven friendships, even one’s own children under certain circumstances,⁵ and much more. Such sacrifice entails a loss that, on the basis of participation in the sacred, focuses on gaining something greater. Loss contains a hurtful element of victimization, without which there is no sacrifice (Keul 2018, pp. 108–14). It is from this that the ambivalence of “fascinatum et tremendum” arises. There’s a price to be paid for dedicating oneself to serving the sacred. People want to bring a sacrifice to the sacred. But the more sacrifices one makes, the more sacred that which is held dear becomes. “In the etymological sense of the word, sacrifice is nothing other than the production of *sacred* things. From the very first, it appears that sacred things are constituted by an operation of loss” (Bataille 2019, p. 119). The (victimizing) sacrifice and the sacred nourish each other. That is how highly destructive sacrificial spirals emerge that draw people and institutions into the abyss.

The fact that the victimization included in a sacrifice does not always involve one’s own life resources aggravates the issue. It quite often harms other people when, for example, a founder sets restrictive rules for the members that he himself does not adhere to. The victim element of a sacrifice can be brought about voluntarily by others, but it can also be demanded or forced under great pressure. The argument of the sacred is suited for this par excellence. Whoever submits themselves to the service of the sacred is ready to make a victimizing sacrifice for this.

In abuse and its cover-up, this connection between the sacred and the victimizing sacrifice functions in multiple ways, even today.

(a) In connection with acts of abuse: Charismatic priests such as Marie-Dominique Philippe are the high priests of the sacred on which the church, following Pope John Paul II, places its hope. They come specifically with promises of salvation that correspond exactly to the hope of salvation which both the faithful and the church leaders have. Because they dominate the range of the sacred in masterful fashion, they embody this sacred and thus become sacrosanct. When the charismatic founder of Arche died in May 2019, Thomas Isler headlined an article in the “Neuen Züricher Zeitung NZZ”: “Jean Vanier war ein Heiliger seiner Zeit” (Isler 2019)—“Jean Vanier was a Saint of his Time”; not much later, his spiritual abuse and sexual violence against women came to light. The perpetrators remain unchallenged, even in the event of budding rumors, and they can also rely on the protection of the system and seem invulnerable from the point of view of the victims. Their resilience is high as long as they manage to prevent the disclosure of their vulnerability through even more vulnerability. Their resilience thus arises from two sides: through the vulnerability they themselves exert and through the vulnerability of the system that protects them. With good reason, the resilience of the perpetrators in a system that protects them can therefore be called vulnerable. This works particularly easily in a community that gathers around the sacred. To attack the high priest is to attack the sacred. Finally, in this logic, the charismatic perpetrators obtain every right to demand (human) sacrifices. Here the reciprocity of the sacred and the sacrifice is at work. The fact that a spiritual community becomes a bubbling source of money in this way is less of a problem here, although it is important.

Even the abuse itself can be a victimization that occurs in the wake of a sacrifice (victimizing sacrifice). For the sake of the founder on whom all their hope rests, the malicious damage done to the victim appears negligible. In abuse, the sacred of the community mingles with the eroticism of the perpetrator and increases the damage. The possibility of inflicting violence on the members who live in openness and vulnerability, via their bodies and eroticism, is an experience of power and can become a special aphrodisiac for the perpetrator. Through the added violence, he acquires the “effervescence de la vie”, which belongs to the realm of the sacred. In the sacred itself, eroticism and religion are combined in violent fashion.⁶ The invulnerable high priest creates human victims when he shamelessly takes advantage of their increased vulnerability. His infectious power of persuasion, charm, and the vitality that he radiates are also nourished by the malicious side of the sacred.

(b) Among members who look away (guilty bystanders): The sheen of the sacred blinds the members who belong to the community, and because of that they do not want to and cannot see what is happening in their own ranks. Hoyeau calls them “l’entourage”. Instead of the members sacrificing the sacred that entralls them, they abandon the victims of the perpetrator’s vulnerance. The *fascinosum* character of the sacred makes it difficult to withdraw from the spell and to view reality clearly. The members have dedicated themselves to the service of the spiritual community, bring sacrifices themselves, and thus belong to the chosen, who will allegedly save the church. They also experience the “effervescence de la vie” of the sacred that approaches them in the liturgy and makes them flourish, and they do not want to give that up. Being chosen is an experience of hidden power. Members who look away do not want to trade this for that experience of the vulnerability, lack of power, insecurity, and fear that accompanies the exposure of abuse.

(c) Among the victims of abuse themselves: Active members of a spiritual community have an increased vulnerability with respect to abuse, for the spiritual guidance requires that people open themselves up unreservedly. But that openness is also accompanied by an increase in vulnerability. If a perpetrator exploits this openness, he can thus all the more easily carry out a surprising attack. This is what makes abuse in spiritual communities so perfidious. The victims cannot protect themselves because they have opened themselves up completely and therefore have no protection. This connection between spiritual guidance, vulnerability, and openness allows us to understand why nuns in orders or women in spiritual communities cannot defend themselves in the beginning against assault or even rape. In all their openness, the victims themselves are caught in the spell of what appeared to them, until that point, to be sacred. They believe the promises of salvation made by the spiritual community. Because they consequently include themselves among the chosen and thus experience the power of the sacred at first in an invigorating way, they are caught in its spell. They experience it as a great enrichment of their lives when they belong to a strong community, experience recognition, enjoy prestige and allegedly come into direct contact with the Holy of Holies. A special connection to the high priest of a community reinforces the consciousness of being chosen. With this, however, the willingness to sacrifice also increases. That is extremely dangerous because the willingness to sacrifice hides the danger of victimization. The abuser can gradually exploit this willingness to sacrifice, which increases the vulnerability of the members again and again. He can always demand more. That leads to a tipping point of vulnerance, where what was initially a strength becomes a weakening of one’s self-awareness, where, instead of flourishing, a life begins to be destroyed, and where an initial experience of power leads to powerlessness that constantly increases. Because one’s own election involves something that is sacred to them themselves, it is only with difficulty that adults can extricate themselves from a vulnerant relation with a perpetrator.

(d) In the cover-up of abuse by church leaders: With their promises of salvation that they would save the “Holy Mother Church” in a situation of a threatening decline—and in many places they still are⁷—spiritual communities are institutionally untouchable. “Sauver L’Église”—“Saving the Church”—is the title of the second chapter of Hoyeau’s

book (Hoyeau 2021, pp. 53–107). This describes both the self-awareness of the communities and the hope that many bishops place on them. To safeguard these desired signs of hope and not to permit any damage, the willingness of bishops and popes to cover up victimizations increases. They do not want to look too closely, do not carry out any inspections, and even permit fundamental rules for spiritual guidance to be suspended. The founders almost attained a position of omnipotence in which they could commit abuses with impunity, without meeting any resistance or actual church control. The vulnerability of the church that was increased by the crisis releases vulnerability into the system and increases it exponentially.

(e) In the systematic cover-up by the religious community: Furthermore, to be able to believe the promises of salvation made by the charismatic renewal, the terrible truth should be kept hidden. Even if the victimization is not targeted but *only* accepted, this victimization occurs actively through icy silence, a paternalistic laugh, an aggressive defense, arrogant ignorance. It is denied that there is vulnerability in the system, or it is trivialized or whitewashed because it concerns something sacred that is to be protected unconditionally. If victims make sexual and spiritual violence by a founder or a charismatic leader public—be this only internally in the community—they call into question the sacred that the high priest embodies. Thus, to protect the sacred at the center of the community, no (victimizing) sacrifice is too great. That is the heart of the gruesome truth: people become human sacrifices in the cover-up of sexual and spiritual violence; they are victimized to protect the sacred.

4. Vulnerability as Agency in the Resilience of Survivors: The Creative Power of the Sacred

What is sacred to people and their communities can produce destructive effects of power. Those who are victimized in spiritual communities suffer this destructive power. At first, they are enthralled by this sacred and cannot break free of its power that grips them in such a devastating way, even though they desperately want to escape. This is what women in particular keep saying: they could not actively defend themselves against the obvious vulnerability of the perpetrator when this perpetrator belonged to the realm of what they viewed as sacred. The book *Erzählen als Widerstand* (Haslbeck et al. 2020)—*Telling as Resistance*—provides numerous examples of this. The victims experience the “tremendum et fascinatum at the same time”, and it is about the “augustum”, about whether and how life can succeed in the midst of this suffering. The “fascinatum” in Rudolf Otto’s definition of religion means to be spellbound, enthralled, or even bewitched by something. Yet, people do not have to succumb to this destructive, malevolent power. Is there perhaps any way at all to turn the destructive into the creative so that the power of the sacred becomes a power that leads to life? Can it help stop the violence and even strengthen the resilience of victims? As will be shown below, dealing with vulnerability is a decisive factor here.

4.1. Breaking the Silence—Reconstituting Faith—Overcoming Victimization

A key phrase in the resistance to violence one has suffered is “breaking the silence”. Mary Hallay-Witte and Bettina Janssen coined the term “Schweigebruch” in German for this (Hallay-Witte and Janssen 2016). Hoyeau demonstrates that such a breaking of the silence is particularly difficult in spiritual communities if the perpetrators are “maîtres spirituels”. The spiritual masters are also “maîtres de l’emprise”—“masters of domination”—masters of power, influence, and manipulation (Hoyeau 2021, pp. 109–61). For the victims as well, they are first of all the masters, vested with divine authority. Whoever attacks the founder attacks Christ because the founder allegedly makes the immediate access to God they hoped for possible. He is “‘le visage concret’ du Christ pour les membres de sa communauté” (ibid., p. 138)—“‘the concrete face’ of Christ for the members of his community”. This places an unconditional silence about the abuse upon the victims in the space of the sacred that the community wishes to protect. Every child, woman, and man who breaks this

silence must face in a major effort the rejected part of her or his own life story, which is scarred by painful memories along with shame and feelings of guilt.

Whoever breaks the silence goes beyond the state of victimization. A person becomes a victim of violence and suffers a severe injury when something happens over which they have no control. During such an assault, people are passive, weak, without any power, humiliated, silenced—they are victimized. This is anything but easy. Not only for spiritual communities, but it is especially true of the latter that what is required is to push out of one's head those doctrines that the perpetrator had perhaps implanted over the course of years. To resist this is an extremely hard struggle. However, this struggle, this battle, can be won only if it is fought. The alleged authority of the perpetrator and the newly acquired authority of the victim cannot coexist peacefully. The one places the other in question.

A specific aspect of abuse in spiritual communities consists in the closed character of a perfidious belief system that leaves the victims no way out. This closed system knows of only one way to believe—all others are demonized. A bitter insight coming out of abuse and cover-ups is that such faith in spiritual communities has strengthened the resilience of the perpetrator but has weakened the resilience of the victim. As long as the cover-up system functions, the perpetrator is safe because the faith protects him. However, the faith of the victim is shaken, torn, wounded to the core.

Victims can, for good reason, thus turn their backs on the Christian faith. At the same time, many do not want to do that. Johanna Beck is an impressive example of this, precisely as well as the "Gottes-Suche" campaign.⁸ After Beck at first sought distance from the Christian faith, she became interested again after a few years and tried to rediscover her faith. That there was hardly any support from the church for this until now is a serious gap in her processing. But that may be no coincidence. A church that could provide such support has to surrender to the broken faith that the system of abuse and cover-up imposes on the victims. The church would have to ask why certain forms of faith, practices, and, not least, beliefs protect the perpetrators and increase their vulnerable resilience on the one hand, and hurts the victims and weakens their resilience on the other. Processing in Europe is not at that point yet.

Regaining one's wounded, broken faith can be a way to move beyond the passivity of victimization and thus overcome one's role as victim, a role imposed by the perpetrator. One must not only allow one's faith to be destroyed; instead, one must actively practice destruction. The destructive beliefs have to be ejected from the mind, the heart, the body. Survivors thus serve a theological resistance that is of great value for the church as a whole. "Mach neu, was dich kaputt macht"—"Making new what destroys you"—that is what Beck chose to call her book (Beck 2022). A renewal of one's Christian faith is only possible for those who have traveled this road. Beliefs that break when faced with abuse and cover-up are broken and can no longer be put back together. There is no going back to a time before the survivors speak.

Incidentally, academic theology itself is not unaffected by vulnerability, which is widespread throughout the religious system. Theology had already experienced cracks and breaks before the reports of abuse, but now the creeping erosion is steadily transforming into a rockslide because of new discoveries time and again. Entire landscapes of theology, which were considered to be the pinnacles of humankind, tumbled into the abyss of spiritual, sexual, and inhumane violence. What does it mean if speaking of grace serves to conceal the lack of grace in the perpetrators? To what extent can the concept of election be used if it is a decisive factor in abuse in spiritual communities? How can we move beyond the utopian formatting of ecclesiology, which conceals the vulnerability in the system and thus contributes to the cover-up? One answer from theology is: Do not avoid it! (Reményi and Schärtl 2019). To engage it, however, needs the voices of those who have suffered abuse and cover-up. It needs what has, in the meantime, come to be called in Germany "das besondere Lehramt der Betroffenen"—"the special Magisterium of the abused" (Schüller 2021).

4.2. *The Expenditure Paradox: As Survivors Use the Agency Potential of Vulnerability*

When survivors begin to speak, they dare to do something extraordinary. Although they are already wounded, they voluntarily make themselves even more vulnerable. Breaking the silence is not only exhausting, it is also risky, because it can hurt again and increase traumatization. In spiritual communities, survivors take a particularly great risk. They not only have to fear exclusion religiously and socially, but also from family. Spiritual communities are often structured through families whose members are part of the community as a unit. In this precarious situation, survivors rightly attack what is sacred to the community, and this is where the increased risk in spiritual communities lies. Nuns and monks who suffer abuse sometimes have a family as a retreat where they can find strength; if the family is a member of the spiritual community, however, no retreat can be found there, only increased danger.

4.2.1. Resilience through Increasing Vulnerability: The Expenditure Paradox

A person who is wounded often responds with protective and defensive strategies. She isolates herself perhaps, distances herself, withdraws, and makes herself as invulnerable as possible. Defense mechanisms are essential for people who have been hurt. Survivors nevertheless break the silence—and thus something paradoxical occurs. They have already been wounded often. Despite that, they do not seek protection and safety but take the risk of being wounded again. The philosopher Michel Foucault calls such behavior, in another context, “contre-conduite”—“counter-conduct”. Here, it concerns “the struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others” (Foucault 2007, p. 201; see Odysseos et al. 2016). In their disclosure of abuse and cover-ups, the survivors are responding to a power grab by the perpetrator or perpetrator organization with a surprising “counter-conduct”. Taking this risk into account, a risk that is connected with a feared loss of life, the danger of retraumatization, they hope to get their lives back. Beck expresses it as follows: “Und ich stelle immer wieder fest, dass auf eine oder einen sprechende(n) Betroffenen in der Regel mindestens eine weitere sprechende Person kommt, dass Darüber-Sprechen ansteckend sein kann, dass auch hier das Schneeballprinzip greifen kann. Je mehr Betroffene den Mut finden, zu sprechen, desto mehr können wir gemeinsam erreichen” (Beck 2022, p. 87).⁹ Resisting together connects and strengthens the survivors.

However, at the beginning, it is unclear whether comrades can be found to fight this battle. What is needed is a willingness on the part of survivors to take risks in breaking through the vulnerability of the perpetrators and to resist the command to silence that previously masked the acts of abuse. When one is caught in the closed space of abuse, resistance appears to be impossible. In spiritual communities, the whole community perhaps, together with a church that seems to need this community, are opposed to the disclosure. Whoever leaves the community is isolated at first because close ties to others are cut. For good reasons, many victims struggle for a long time with the question of whether they are able to take the risky step of disclosure. If the vulnerability in spiritual communities is not publicly discussed, it becomes all the more difficult. A good example of this is found in the disclosure of the vulnerability of the founder of the Schoenstatt Movement, Father Josef Kentenich (1885–1968), by the church historian Alexandra von Teuffenbach, who documented the testimonies of ten victims (Teuffenbach 2020). The accusations are as follows: a humiliating leadership style that demanded subordination; sexual assaults that led to distress; the abuse of spiritual power that disempowered people; a personality cult that, by claiming “Vater darf das”—“Father is permitted to do this”—allowed the outrageously impossible. After the first media reports in October 2020, the current General Superior of the Schoenstatt Sisters of Mary responded promptly by placing the victims themselves under suspicion: “Die Glaubhaftigkeit von Aussagen sowie eventuelle Motive, die zu einer Aussage führten, bedürfen einer umfassenden Untersuchung”—“the credibility of statements as well as possible motives that led to such a statement need a full investigation” (Neumann 2020). The secular institute of the Schoenstatt Sisters of Mary brought a suit against the publication of Teuffenbach’s work, but the Berlin court rejected the application

for an injunction a year later ([katholisch.de](https://www.katholisch.de) 2020). If the members of the Schoenstatt had the power, they would have pulled the publication from circulation. Instead of taking the documentation seriously, they accused the victims instead. Such victim blaming makes it difficult for people who are possibly experiencing violence today to speak up. As long as there are attempts of this kind at the highest level, it is quite possible that the largest part of the iceberg is still beneath the surface. Not only the Schoenstatt Sisters of Mary but other spiritual communities as well still have a long way to go obviously.

Given the need for protection and safety, everything argues against disclosure. Survivors have to deal with slander, libel, stigmatization, the withdrawal of affection, breaks in relationships, exclusion from the (spiritual) community. Right-wing media pillory victims who are not prepared to be silent. Given this problem, it is thus all the more astonishing that, again and again, there are those who are damaged who nevertheless find courage and speak of sexual violence, spiritual injury, and abuse of power. Doris Wagner and Johanna Beck are particularly well known in German-speaking countries ([Wagner 2014](#); [Beck 2022](#)). The effort required is enormous. Nevertheless, the necessary strength often appears suddenly, despite everything and after a long struggle. The philosopher Rita Bischof describes such a surprising moment with the following words: “der Augenblick, in dem das von Knechtschaft gezeichnete Leben seine Fesseln abschüttelt und in einen Bereich eintritt, der durch die Gegenwart des Göttlichen hinreichend bezeichnet wird. Es ist dies eine Sphäre, in der das Unmögliche plötzlich wirklich wird: *impossible et pourtant là*”—“the moment in which the life characterized by subjugation shakes off its chains and enters a space that is characterized adequately by the presence of the divine. This is a sphere in which the impossible suddenly becomes real: *impossible et pourtant là*” ([Bischof 1984](#), p. 12). Impossible, but nevertheless suddenly present. The victim transcends the law of the perpetrator in a sovereign act of self-expenditure. She sacrifices what appears to be the most important: safety, self-protection, not being wounded. She grows beyond her own boundaries and defensive strategies, and finally even beyond herself.

I call this the “expenditure paradox” (Verschwendungsparadox; [Keul 2021a](#), pp. 420–35); it is a counter-movement to the vulnerability paradox. Whereas in the vulnerability paradox the damage increases because of the defensive measures one takes, in the expenditure paradox people are placing their hope on the surrender of security that increases one’s own vulnerability, provides an advantage, and opens up life.

Victims emerge from their silent isolation when they open themselves up, speak, communicate, engage, and divulge something of themselves. Daring vulnerability is not easy for those who have been wounded. They have to sacrifice those defensive strategies that prevent participation in life itself. These strategies were initially important and valuable: they had a purpose. But it is precisely this aspect that must be given up, be “sacrificed” in the truest sense of the word, so that these people can once again take up communicative living. Survivors would like to cling to their defensive strategies perhaps, but they need to let them go. To break free from the grasp of victimization requires a self-determined sacrifice. And like every sacrifice, this one demands an offering as well. The discussion that Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) initiated with his “Essai sur le don” (The Gift) 1923/24 ([Mauss 2022](#)) on the social role of giving shows that dedication can be an active form of sacrifice in which someone, of their own free will, makes personal resources available for a higher purpose and offers them freely. This is by no means a sign of subservience but one of power. The voluntary risking of one’s own vulnerability can be a sacrifice that actually leads one out of victimization and even strengthens resilience.

Many survivors rightly say that they run this risk because they want to stop the violence and prevent other victimizations. This ‘for others’ motivates them, and the survivors profit from it at the same time. That is a stroke of luck in breaking the silence: it can make people who risk it strong and enhance their resilience. When the victims leave the closed space and are heard, are supported by others, connect with each other, plan and carry out campaigns, guide research, and promote processing, then they emerge from the passivity imposed on them by the perpetrator. The experience of self-effectiveness

makes increased resistance possible. And this resistance can in turn strengthen their own resilience. Here, the opposite of a spiral of violence occurs.

This point is interesting from the point of view of vulnerability theory. In vulnerability discourse, one often—especially in natural and life sciences—finds a contrariety between “vulnerable, unsure, imperiled, weak, attackable” and “resilient, sure, strong, durable, safe” (Keul 2021a, pp. 91–96). However, in the case of a successful “breaking of the silence”, resilience can even grow out of increased vulnerability if it is risked voluntarily and with good reasons. Making themselves vulnerable can set people free and release resilience. Vulnerability is not just suffered here, and it does not automatically weaken the victim. On the contrary, it can be used actively and brought into play by conflicting forces. Vulnerability has agency potential (Keul 2021b, pp. 85–140).

Judith Butler and her colleagues come to a similar conclusion in the volume *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Butler et al. 2016), with research on political resistance movements such as “Occupy Gezi” (Istanbul, Turkey, 2013). They speak of vulnerability as “one of the conditions of the very possibility of resistance” (ibid., p. 1). Butler formulates this actively in her contribution and calls such behavior “the deliberate exposure to harm” (Butler 2016, p. 20). From my perspective, there are also those who commit themselves collectively to the processing of abuse and the end of a vulnerant system, a resistant movement. *Erzählen als Widerstand (Telling as Resistance)* is the German title of a book that tells the stories of 23 women who suffered as adults from abuse and cover-ups (Haslbeck et al. 2020).

At bottom, resistance is bound up with voluntary vulnerability and is not even conceivable without it. If survivors break their silence, they utilize the agency potential of vulnerability. Resistance promotes openness, exchange, intensive communication, even if is a matter of finding support. At the same time, such openness is open to attack from many sides. Precisely spiritual communities that see themselves as the saviors of Catholicity and believe that the Holy of Holies is in their midst—the Schoenstatt Sisters of Mary call their first chapel in Vallendar the “Urheiligtum” (“Original Shrine”), a name that documents their claim to spiritual power—run the risk of becoming particularly vulnerant. Whoever exposes themselves against such a community increases their own vulnerability and can expect new vulnerance. However, only such self-expenditure that dares much can serve the resistance that puts an end to vulnerance.

4.2.2. The Sacred as the Driving Force: The Precarious Triad of Vulnerability, Vulnerance, and Resilience

Wounded people do not usually take such risks, which increase one’s own vulnerability, lightly. A good, even deeply convincing, reason is needed to travel this path that may entail new victimization. These reasons can be very different: because one wants to spare others this kind of suffering; because one wants revenge on a perpetrator; because one wants to save the foundational idea of the spiritual community; because one has fallen in love and this love requires opening; because one wants justice for oneself and others; and many other reasons. These very different reasons are interconnected, however, insofar as they refer to something that represents a higher value or embodies a larger cause that is worth the sacrifice.

People are prepared to increase their own vulnerability if it has to do with something that is sacred to them: this is the core of sacrifice (Keul 2021a, pp. 267–98). That also obtains for people who tell the truth about abuse and cover-ups. They place themselves and their life resources at the service of something higher, such as “Justice for the Victims”. The power of the sacred that, until then, had a victimizing effect, can then be turned around and pointed in a completely other—namely life-opening—direction. In this case, taking the risk strengthens resilience, which is also decisive for survivors. Admittedly, this does not guarantee a way out. “Voluntarily making oneself vulnerable” involves sacrifice. Survivors must give up their own protection and defensive strategies that they have maintained perhaps for years. This is also part of the expenditure paradox: the way out of victimization is through sacrifice.

Sacrifice: one is willing to give some resources for a higher cause, thereby risking injury or the loss of something. Here one is active. But the gift can come from one's own resources or from those of others. In both cases, one displays strength, power, and is assertive: one is capable of sacrificing something or someone. So, sacrifice also includes a potential victim because one gives something away; one risks making oneself or someone else vulnerable.

From a Christian theological perspective, what is decisive here is whether one sacrifices one's *own* resources or demands sacrifice *from others*, solicits it or even forces it, like the abusers do. However, the vulnerability initiated by perpetrators can also reach, via the survivors, those close to the survivors and those who want to support them. The vulnerability implanted in the system spreads easily. Some victims attempt to escape from the loss of life they have undergone by sacrificing other people to the goal of their own quality of life. This can happen either intentionally or not. Others are sacrificed unintentionally: when possible supporters are pulled, for example, into the spiral of victimization—families, close relations, or spiritual communities. Resignation, desperation and anger are contagious; they have a destructive potential that also affects the lives of others. The victim hopes for a better life, but in the end the spiral is accelerated when others are also drawn into the vortex. The vulnerability paradox can also appear among victims if their increased need for security leads to boundaries and protective measures that hurt other people and come back on the primary victims like a boomerang. Another example is revenge—open revenge or perhaps even hidden from oneself. It increases violence. Deep wounds can potentiate vulnerability in a number of ways, eventually becoming explosive (Keul 2021a, pp. 344–420).

The MHG study, "Sexueller Missbrauch an Minderjährigen durch katholische Priester, Diakone und männliche Ordensangehörige im Bereich der Dt. Bischofskonferenz" ("Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests, Diacons, and Members of Male Orders in the Area of the German Bishops' Conference") proposes "understanding cases of abuse in the context of constellations of vulnerability and resilience" (Dreßing et al. 2018, p. 63). In my view, this does not go far enough. What is the point of establishing that someone has a high resilience if it is not clear whether this resilience is caused by vulnerability? Within a protective system, abusers have a high resilience that can be restored via a constantly increasing vulnerability against their victims. Researching the duality of "vulnerability and resilience" entails the danger that both terms will be constituted as counter terms. Vulnerability is thus something that must be reduced, and resilience is something that is to be increased. The result is a zero-sum game that nonetheless falls short and does not cover the complexity of vulnerability. On the one hand, what is lost from view is that vulnerability can be used in a way that promotes life; thus, in solidarity where people freely share their own resources, they increase their own vulnerability, and thereby open up life. On the other hand, it is lost from view that resilience can also be increased by vulnerability—and who wants to promote the resilience of abusers, murderous assassins, or warmongers?

To grasp the complexity of the powerful effects of abuse, cover-ups, and processing, I therefore propose that not only vulnerability and resilience be systematically included in the analysis but vulnerability as well.

There is an immense complexity in these three elements. First of all, the vulnerability of the perpetrators and the covering-up institution is also present in spiritual communities. The effects of vulnerability are enormous and, for the most part, are still unknown. How many victims are not survivors? Not all victims survive. We do not know how many of them have committed suicide (Dreßing et al. 2018, pp. 143, 229f, 291f). There are indications of a higher suicidality among the Schoenstatt Sisters of Mary (Teuffenbach 2020, p. 232). But victims can also die from accidents as a result of carelessness. If someone is subjected to higher vulnerability and responds with internal doubt, a feeling of low self-worth, and constant resignation, her ability to protect herself often declines. The risk of an accident increases. Via her life story, Beck demonstrates convincingly how quickly it can come to death without any direct intention—she survived one such situation only by a hair. If she had ended up under the train, no one would have suspected that this death had to do with

vulnerance she had suffered earlier in a spiritual community (Beck 2022, pp. 57–59). With direct and indirect suicidality, one goes beyond the vulnerance of the perpetrators and the cover-up to a violent act that the victim commits against herself in a tragic way.

4.2.3. From a Christian Point of View: Where the Other-Power out of Vulnerability Becomes Effective

In the triad of vulnerability, vulnerance, and resilience, both the vulnerability paradox and the expenditure paradox play a crucial role. We focus on the latter in this final section and supplement it from a Christian perspective. How can the risk of vulnerability develop into strength and resilience? The apostle Paul already experienced this possibility. After his conversion, Paul ran the risk of vulnerability himself by renouncing his own vulnerance and thus discovered a special power. When he complained to God about a wound he had suffered, the famous “thorn in the flesh”, God encouraged him with the answer: “My grace is sufficient for you; for my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). This expresses the Christian belief that when you dare to be vulnerable, there is a completely different power at work than the power that comes with violence. This power cannot be produced but only received as a “mercy”, a gift, in resisting vulnerance. It takes effect where people break spirals of violence by relying on openness and vulnerability instead of isolation and vulnerance. This “other-power out of vulnerability”,¹⁰ as I call it, has no weapons and needs no weapons because it does not rely on violence. It awakens life, uplifts, and inspires. It knows no church boundaries and does not adhere to hierarchies. Christian faith starts with this “other-power”.¹¹ It is found in human vulnerability that leaves the unprecedented grip of vulnerance behind. Only those who, in the name of humanity, dare to be wounded can experience this totally different power.

The “other-power” that moved Paul long ago is being rediscovered today in the resistance movement against abuse and cover-ups. This is where people thrive by taking the risk of disclosure and thus bring their own vulnerability into the play of conflicting powers. They do this to put an end to vulnerance, to prevent further victimization, and to establish justice for themselves and others. Through their resistance, they erect a sign of humanity and thus open up space for the “other-power out of vulnerability”. They join forces in order to be able to survive this risk together. People today do not necessarily have to believe in God to rely on Paul’s power of life. The decisive factor is resistance to vulnerance that spreads through abuse and cover-ups and is slowed down by daring one’s own vulnerability. When one commits oneself to resisting vulnerance, and this is done in a self-giving mode, with dedication, passion, and perhaps together with others, life-giving power begins to flow out of the vulnerability.

The significance of this new discovery goes beyond the resistance movement. It reminds the church of what it is supposed to stand for, even though it does the opposite when engaged in cover-ups. In addition, the new discovery also has far-reaching relevance for society: It makes a serious difference in the turbulence of the present time as to whether a society is convinced that its own strengths can only be secured by hurting others, or whether such a society knows that creativity, strength, and resilience can grow out of vulnerability. The resistance movement against abuse and cover-up represents the latter.

5. Conclusions

- (1) In times of crisis and decline, spiritual communities (such as the church at large) are particularly vulnerable to abuse and cover-ups. For communities that promise to stop the decline become sacrosanct, and the church places its hope in them and constitutes them as something sacred that must be protected, even if this protection victimizes individuals. Taking advantage of the special, and also spiritual, vulnerability of members (children, young people, adults) who believe the sacred is in their midst, this vulnerance resides in the community and grows exponentially.
- (2) The sacred plays a special role in abuse and cover-ups in religious communities because it creates a willingness to sacrifice. The sacrifice can come from one’s own life

resources. However, it can also be demanded or even forced from the life resources of others (e.g., other members of the community). Sacrifice thus creates victimizations that are trivialized in the community—ignored, denied, covered up, and thus intensified.

- (3) The bottomless victimization that the willingness to make sacrifices has led to in spiritual communities leads them and the church as a whole into the vulnerability paradox: the strategies that should serve to protect the church leave it in ruins instead. Instead of more security, the interaction between abuse and cover-up causes increased damage.
- (4) A particular problem is the vulnerant resilience of the perpetrators. As long as people who, as founders of a community, embody the hope of the church are sacrosanct, the resilience of perpetrators increases through the violence they inflict on their victims. This vulnerant resilience is reinforced by the faith of the community, and at the same time this faith inflicts the most serious injuries on the faith of the victims. Once the system of abuse and cover-up is exposed, it will hasten the church's decline.
- (5) Vulnerability research on abuse and cover-ups shows that operating within a binary code of "vulnerability and resilience" is not enough. Rather, it is necessary to analyze the dynamic tension between vulnerability, vulnerance, and resilience. Without a systemic approach to vulnerance, the fact that perpetrators can increase their resilience by using violence is overlooked.
- (6) The disclosure of abuse and cover-ups by survivors highlights a counter-movement to the vulnerability paradox: the expenditure paradox. In the "shimmering moment of disclosure", survivors do something paradoxical. Deeply wounded, they leave safety behind and increase their vulnerability to put an end to vulnerance. They thus convert the destructive power of the sacred into a creative power. The act of expenditure releases that other-power that Paul already experienced in his wound, the famous "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor 12:7). The survivors counter the vulnerant resilience of the perpetrators with a resilience that grows out of the other-power of vulnerability.

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Notes

- ¹ The pastoral theologian Ute Leimgruber correctly states: "Das Institut der Beichte ist mit einer erhöhten Vulneranz behaftet" (Leimgruber 2022b, p. 194)—"The institution of confession is fraught with increased vulnerability".
- ² This is also revealed by the titles of German-language publications that express the euphemism towards the "spiritual communities" (see, for example, Hegge 2005; Poblitzki 2019; Thull 2017). Abuse and cover-up are not an issue here.
- ³ This seems to be a global problem, as the the following statement of Braz de Aviz shows: "Sono circa 70 le nuove famiglie religiose sulle quali abbiamo messo la nostra attenzione. Abbiamo fatto delle visite e alcuni stanno rivelando dei casi davvero preoccupanti, con gravi problemi di personalità nei fondatori e fenomeni di plagio, di forte condizionamento dei membri psicologici. Ci sono fondatori che si sono rivelati dei veri padroni delle coscienze." (de Aviz 2017)
- ⁴ Marie-Dominique Philippe (1912–2006), a major figure in Hoyeau's study because of years of abuse of women, was a Professor of Philosophy and Dogmatics for almost twenty years at Le Saulchoir, a college of "Nouvelle Theology." This theology was considered the most innovative of its time in Europe. What this abuse means for this theology is not yet clear, but it is imperative that it be researched.
- ⁵ When child abuse occurs in spiritual communities, parents who believe in the sacredness of that community tend not to believe their own children but the perpetrators and the institution covering it up. Instead of questioning what was previously sacred to them, they abandon their own children to the vulnerance of the perpetrator and the community.
- ⁶ The July 2018 "Pennsylvania Report" provides numerous examples of this: "Another priest, grooming his middle school students for oral sex, taught them how Mary had to 'bite off the cord' and 'lick' Jesus clean after he was born. It took another 15 years, and numerous additional reports of abuse, before the diocese finally removed the priest from ministry" (Grand Jury 2018, p. 5).

- 7 Despite the greatest concerns from many sides, also because of unresolved spiritual and sexual abuse, the German Bishops' Conference (DBK) recognized the KPE on December 9, 2021, as a private canonical association; this happened clandestinely without any press release by the DBK and first had to be made known by other media. The driving force was the bishop of the diocese of Augsburg, who believes in KPE's promise of salvation and, after its recognition, was able to firmly locate the movement in his diocese (Bistum Augsburg 2022).
- 8 www.gottes-suche.de is a platform for women and (since 2019) men who have experienced sexual violence and use the resources of the Christian faith for living with continuing trauma.
- 9 "And I have observed again and again that, in general, one victim who speaks is joined by at least one other victim speaking about the abuse, that speaking about it can be contagious, that the snowball principle applies here as well. The more victims find the courage to speak the more we can achieve together"
- 10 Sarah Coakley speaks of "power in vulnerability" but does not use the term to refer to challenges such as abuse (cf. Coakley 2002, p. 5). She advocates making oneself vulnerable in spirituality before God. She does not see that it can also be liberating to make oneself vulnerable before other people, as happens when we act in solidarity.
- 11 The reason for this is provided by the theology of the incarnation: God herself takes the risk of vulnerability when God becomes human. In Jesus, God comes into the world as a highly vulnerable child and thus exposes herself to physical, social, cultural, and religious vulnerability as well as human vulnerability (Keul 2017). The church ascribes salvific significance to this act of voluntary vulnerability.

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