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Breaking the will: relations between mental mortification in monastic life and the psychological abuse of children in Catholic institutions

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This article will go into relations between mental mortification and the timely topic of abuse of children in Catholic institutions. Explorations are based upon qualitative research carried out at the University of Groningen. As unexpected as it may seem, in Dutch monastic life mortification was (still) being practiced during the 1950s and 1960s. Besides physical mortification that was primarily aimed at disciplining the body, members of religious communities also performed mental mortification to discipline their will. In this article the psychological context of mental mortification will be described in order to shed light on the topic of psychological abuse in particular. In the concluding section attention will be paid to parallels between mental mortification practices and experiences brought forward in testimonies of victims. In addition, the ways in which mental mortification may have caused abusive behaviour will be discussed.

Keywords: mental mortification practices; psychological abuse; humiliation; monastic life; psychology of religion

Introduction

In recent years many former residents of Roman Catholic institutions have given testimony to the abuse they endured as a child by members of religious orders and congregations to whose care they were entrusted. While isolated stories of abuse were known before, the huge scale of child abuse in Catholic schools and institutions of care became visible only recently. Since the year 2000 a great number of public testimonies were given in the United States, Ireland, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands (for research reports see, for example, Adriaenssens, 2010; Deetman, 2011a, 2011b; Jay, 2011; Murphy, 2009). Most of the testimonies and reports talk of sexual abuse in male institutions. Other less physical forms of abuse are also described and seem to have had a big impact as well, however; these are more difficult to understand. To the present-day public sexual abuse is a very clear violation of personal integrity. The emotional or psychological forms of abuse that are described by both male and female ex-residents of Catholic institutions are often more complex.

With this article I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the mental violations of children by describing some of the religious practices and related spiritual framework that provided the context, and perhaps the justification for these forms of abuse. This contribution is necessarily partial and modest since it is based on research that did not

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concern child abuse itself but religious practices – more specifically mortification practices – that may have a relation to the abuse. A central thesis in this article is that mental mortification practiced by male and female members of religious communities, was also passed on to little children. Therefore parallels can be drawn between the negative experiences of ex-pupils and comparable stories of members of religious communities that had to endure mental mortification. Furthermore, it will be argued that practices of mental mortification can sometimes have a causal link to psychological forms of child abuse.

After a description of methodology some background on the theological significance of mortification and on the relations between physical and mental mortification will be outlined. Subsequently, those practices will be described that provide the psychological context for understanding mental violations in particular. In the concluding section attention will be paid to parallels between mortification practices and experiences brought forward in testimonies of victims. The concluding section also offers a discussion of the ways in which mental mortification may have caused abusive behaviour. Three aspects of mental mortification seem to be of importance: (1) the daily practice of detachment, which may lead to a lack of emotional intimacy, (2) the practice of self-denial, which may lead to issues concerning self-worth, and (3) the space for abuse of power in a "culture of silence." Finally, some remaining questions about the timeframe of the decline of mental mortification and the peak of child abuse are formulated.

Method and analysis

The research

The PhD research on mortification on which this article is based took place from 2005 till 2009 (Bosgraaf, 2009, 2011). Its main subject was mortification or ascetic practices in Dutch monastic life around the 1950s and 1960s. Mortification derives from the Latin word *mortificatio* meaning "to kill/to die." Often mortification is only linked to bodily practices (e.g., Sabbatucci, 1995); however, mortification practices in Dutch monastic life were meant to discipline both body and spirit in order to reach spiritual growth. Examples of mortification practices are fasting; self-flagellation; sleep deprivation, but also the observance of silence; the Guilt Chapter; and refectory and novitiate practices (e.g., Curran, 1989; Eijt, 1995, 1998; Vandermeersch, 2002). From the late 1950s until the beginnings of the 1970s most mortification practices disappeared in Dutch monastic life. This process of disappearance was studied with diverse methods combining interviews with a study of spiritual literature. Design and analysis were interdisciplinary using both a historical and psychological approach, comparable to the "double perspective" in cultural psychology (Belzen, 1997).

Qualitative study design

The study on mortification was based on fieldwork that consisted of two parts: (1) a study of spiritual literature, (2) 18 qualitative interviews with male and female members of religious communities who personally performed mortification during their religious life. The literature study drew upon different Catholic genres such as memorial books, ascetic literature, rules and constitutions, church law, encyclicals, and monastic magazines with an emphasis on the 1950s and 1960s. Of the respondents who participated in the research nine were male, nine were female. The interviews took place between 2005 and 2007. The "youngest" participant was 65, while the eldest was 92. One of the respondents left his

religious community in the sixties; the others were all lifelong members. All participants were interviewed in the monastery or a home for the (religious) elderly. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were analysed by using qualitative analysis (and software: Kwalitan) in which different approaches and techniques were used for meaning generation such as inductive and deductive coding and discourse analysis (e.g., Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Selection of the respondents

In the selection of respondents the main goal was to find members of religious communities who personally practiced mortification practices and to establish a purposive sample of interviewees, reflecting the diversity in monastic life. Monastic life is very diverse in spirituality and ascetic tradition (e.g., Heimbucher, 1933). In addition to the aspect of gender, respondents had to come from both old (e.g., Benedictines) and new religious communities (often founded at the end of the twentieth century). A variation of respondents from contemplative, semi-contemplative, and active communities was sought.

Because the subject of mortification is not without controversy, a delicate approach of the field was necessary. This also meant that I needed to request permission from superiors for interviewees to participate. Part of the selection of respondents could therefore not be controlled. Superiors decided which of their members would talk about the topic of mortification. As a consequence the selection of interviewees is not a representative sample; there may have been (many) other members of the selected communities that were less able or willing to talk about past practices of mortification. Nevertheless, the selected group of respondents gave valuable insight in practices of mortification and in the diverse attitudes and experiences of those who performed them. In some cases it was clear that a respondent was chosen because the central topic was related to the function they had (had) within religious life, be it a novice master or a teacher in ascetic theology. However, in most of the interviews the selected respondents seem to be put forward for their ability to look at mortification from diverse perspectives (e.g., throughout time, insider and outsider point of view) and the fact that the majority had accepted mortification as part of their former spiritual training.

Interviews

Respondents were interviewed using semi-structured in-depth interviews (Kvale, 1996). The interview questions consisted both of more factual (historical) and more personal (experiential) open questions. The interview schedule consisted of three parts. The first part consisted of general questions, the second part of both factual questions such as "What kinds of mortification practices were being performed in your religious community?" and personal questions such as "How did you personally experience mortification?". The third section explored the issue of the disappearance of mortification. In the interviews participants were both treated as respondents, giving insight in their own perspectives and experiences, and as informed experts (Emans, 2004).

During the interviews efforts were made to address the distinction between past and present perspectives by asking respondents how they experienced mortification "back then" in "those days," etc. The topic of mortification calls for a sharp eye for what has been called "retrospective distortion" (e.g., Van der Vaart, 1996), because many respondents distanced themselves from their "former spiritual life" of which mortification was an integral part.

Spiritual literature

In the study of spiritual literature, the discourse on the topic of mortification was analysed. Especially in monastic magazines a lively debate on mortification can be found in which a medical, psychological and theological critique can be distinguished. Spiritual literature provided the necessary background for constructing a concise interview scheme and enabling a "sharedness of meanings"; both interviewer and respondent understand the context of the interview (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Four preliminary interviews were conducted as a pilot, before planning the other interviews.

Results

This section reports some of the central findings of the research on the psychological context of mortification in order to shed light on its possible relations with abuse.

Mortification in Catholic theology

The theological framework of mortification can be found in the spiritual genre of "ascetic theology" (e.g., Morel, 1979; Rodriguez, 1936; Tanquerey, 1923). As a consequence of original sin, human beings were in a state of disorder. Mortification was introduced as a means to restore order through controlling disorderly (or sinful) inclinations. Theologically speaking, mortification was seen as a necessary means to reach the primary goal of religious life, that is, perfection or self-sanctification. This is why we read in spiritual treatises that mortification "... helps Christians to wipe out their earlier sins, but foremost to armour oneself against faults in present and future by weakening our striving for lust, the source of our sins [transl. EB]" (Tanquerey, 1923). Whereas traditionally the body as the locus of lust is the most suspect, we read that the spirit can also lead human beings into sin. Mortification is therefore directed towards the bodily senses as well as fantasy, will and reason.

Mental mortification

In the spiritual literature mental mortification is also described as "interior" or "spiritual"; physical mortification is labelled as "exterior." The primary ascetic orientation therefore differs: the first is explicitly aimed at the will, the latter at the body. Physical mortification consisted of physical practices such as sleep deprivation, self-flagellation or fasting, whereas mental mortification entailed practices that involved training the virtues of obedience and humility. As one respondent, a male Redemptorist, said "These kinds of humility practices, there was not much physical about it."

Although bodily mortification was not experienced as humiliating by the respondents, performing bodily mortification does involve a psychological component. This is also reflected in the spiritual idea that the body has to be controlled by one's own will, and subsequently, one's own will has to be subordinated to the will of God (Flood, 2004; Newman, 2006).Thus despite a difference in primary ascetic orientation both physical and mental mortification are in the end directed towards the same goal, that is, disciplining the will to enhance spiritual growth. The difference is that the psychological component and impact of mental mortification was stronger and more straightforward because of the explicit focus on obedience and humility. Often, disciplining the will went as far as wanting to break the will of especially novitiates in order to "kill" their old, sinful self. All

attachments with the material world (e.g., family, preferences, and possessions) had to be mortified to reach the primary goal of religious life: perfection (see also Derks, Eijt, & Monteiro, 1997).

In daily monastic life the virtue of obedience consisted of (a) obeying a set of rules and constitutions in the religious community and (b) obeying God's representatives on earth, the superiors in the religious community. When rules were transgressed this was seen as an act of disobedience against God and a sign of a "disorderly" will that had to be punished by practicing mortification. Besides obedience, the virtue of humility plays a pivotal role. Superiors could enforce obedience by punishing disobedience, but obedience could also be "tested." Individuals could get a punishment without having transgressed any rule, as a way of trying their mental endurance. Training the virtue of obedience and humility had its culmination in the novitiate, the trial period of one or two years before taking the three vows (e.g., obedience, poverty and chastity). The emphasis on both virtues becomes apparent in the relational and hierarchical character of mental mortification: one individual is punished by another, frequently in a public setting. On the contrary, physical practices were often performed individually; moreover they were "designed" to have a physical effect like feeling pain (self-flagellation) or weariness in the case of sleep deprivation.

Examples of practices

In the interviews a wide variety of practices that were still performed in twentieth-century Dutch monastic life came to light. Specific mental practices included the practice of silence (*silentium*), but also less-known practices such as the Guilt Chapter, practices of penance, refectory practices, and novitiate practices.

Observing silence or *silencium* can also be described as "keeping one's mouth shut." In religious communities members were not allowed to speak unless superiors told them to. Keeping silence was a perfect training to mortify one's will, especially for individuals who were too critical. Breaking the silence was known as a "severe transgression" that often resulted in a confession of guilt and thereafter a punishment in the context of the so-called Guilt Chapter.

The Guilt Chapter, or what has also been called "the Chapter of Faults" was a form of public accusation primarily connected to transgressions of the rules and customs in the religious community. Violating the rules was seen as a serious offence. In most religious communities the Guilt Chapter was organised every week or month. Everybody would gather in a public setting, for example, in the refectory, including the abbot or abbess. Individual members then had to take initiative to step forward and kneel down and accuse themselves in front of the others with a certain formula "I accuse myself of. . ." Sometimes a person was appointed ad hoc by their superior to accuse oneself of a transgression, irrespective of the question whether this person had done something wrong. Most offences were not worth the name, like breaking a plate or a coffee cup during doing the dishes, breaking the silence, arriving too late, looking in a mirror (e.g., the sin of vanity) or having a row.

The practices of penitence that followed after the public self-accusation in the Guilt Chapter were quite diverse. One example is commanding the penitent to kiss the feet of all present fellow-members. A prayer on the ground in the form of a cross was also a popular penance. Various priests recalled the penance of forbidding a person to smoke for an unspecified length of time; in case of heavy smokers, this was a serious form of penance.

A category of practices that is less known can be denoted as practices of humility. These can be further distinguished in (1) refectory penances, and (2) novitiate practices. The refectory penances were mostly performed independently of the Guilt Chapter. These contained four variants that were all performed in the refectory; these are *oscularipedes* (kissing the feet of some or all present in the dining hall), *expansis brachii* (prayer on the ground imitating a crucifixion), *mendicari* (begging for food), and *parva mensa* (eating alone at a small children's table).

While most mortification practices followed a specific pattern, novitiate practices were completely dependent on the "creativity" and character of the superiors. Often the novitiate master used self-invented practices to try their novitiates. In the anecdote narrated below – about midway sixties –, a novitiate master had asked his novitiates to clear the leaves off the paths in the garden. They reacted with enthusiasm and got to work. However, the next morning the following happened:

> The next morning; however, this man had raked all the leaves back onto the paths. In accordance with the vow of obedience, he expected that we were obedient boys who would rake all the leaves off the paths a second time. This was one mortification too much. There was a sort of strike that only ended when he promised he would not play this trick again.

This is a straight forward example of a self-invented novitiate practice. In this case, however, the novitiates protested and became critical towards their novitiate master.

Psychological impact

Interviews show that mental mortification could have a big impact on the psychological well-being of members of religious communities. Nonetheless, the concern for mental health has long been focused on physical mortification. The study of spiritual literature revealed that mortification practices were increasingly criticised since the 1950s. One of the critiques was psychological. This critique can be related to post-war developments in the field of Dutch Catholic mental health-care (Ter Meulen, 1988; Westhof, 1996). Psychology, especially psychoanalysis, started to gain influence and professionals became aware of relations between suppressed sexuality, neurosis and practices of mortification. From the second half of the 1950s spiritual authors in monastic magazines show that they are also familiar with developing psychological insights when they write about mortification in connection to ideas such as suppressed "feelings of guilt," "neurotic self-torment," and "disguised masochism." Spiritual authors stated that there was nothing wrong with mortification *an sich*, but in case of "extraordinary" (read: neurotic) persons, mortification could be dangerous. Professionals in the field of mental health-care warned more generally against excessive mortification that could intensify or lead to neurotic disorders. When writing about "excessive" mortification, however, spiritual authors as well as health care professionals pointed primarily at (self-sought) physical mortification. Mental mortification, strangely enough, is rarely mentioned in the psychological critiques on mortification. By contrast, the interviews indicate that mental mortification could have a strong negative impact on mental health. Only after the second half of the 1960s a study group called "Social Implications" wrote a report on the impact of "unhealthy" hierarchical relations in female religious communities; however the underlying spiritual framework – of which mental mortification was a crucial part – was not examined (e.g., Heijst, Derks, & Monteiro, 2010, p. 858).

Central to understanding the psychological impact of mental mortification is the finding that a majority of the interviewees did not know before entering the novitiate that

they had to practice mortification. Of the eighteen respondents, only three respondents said that they knew what awaited them. The other interviewees were literally confronted with a variety of practices they had never heard of, or they thought that these already belonged to the past. Moreover, they chose a religious life, not *per se* an ascetic life that included mortification. However, because leaving the religious community was considered a taboo and they wanted to hold on to their vocation, many of them more or less accepted mortification. As a female member of the religious order of the Dominicans said: "You just did it, because it was asked. It was part of religious life, and I wanted to be part of that." And a male Trappist who wanted to get closer to God, said "All these other things, that could sometimes be rather difficult, you just accepted them along with the rest. It was part of it, of the spiritual education."

A majority of the respondents endured mortification for as long as it lasted, although it did not always have spiritual meaning to them. Others showed a coping strategy of humour and three respondents experienced in particular physical mortification as a challenge and moral achievement for God. Looking more closely at their experiences and the psychological impact of mental practices the following can be said:

(1) Observing silence

Several respondents stressed that not silence itself, but its consequences were hard to bear and could be far-reaching. During the observance of silence individuals were only allowed to talk to their superiors, but the topics had to be "purely spiritual." Especially in contemplative religious communities where a so-called "great" silence was obtained, members could not talk to each other and share their personal experiences. Even in more active communities where a "small" silence was practiced this could be difficult. As one Franciscan sister recalled:

> Even if you knew, for example, that a sister grieved over something to do with her family, you could not go to her saying "I'm so sorry for you, girl". Because then [during the observance of silence, EB] you had spoken at the wrong time which was forbidden

When the observance of silence was intense and all day long, this could lead to serious problems, as a monk from the religious order of the Trappists remembered. He stressed another aspect of not being able to talk to each other:

> It [the practice of silence, EB] functioned as a way to maintain silence in the community. But it was an enormous penitence to bear each other in silence, because you were confronted with the otherness of the other and you could not talk about that. At present we have communication training, but not back then. You could not talk about it and for monks who were psychologically not that strong this was really tough. And there were many monks in these former days, which could not cope with it and had to go to psychiatric hospitals.

This example makes clear that although people lived in a community, often they lived individually, without having someone to share thoughts with. Every personal contact or conversation was thought to divert attention from the primary spiritual goal of reaching perfection and coming close(r) to God. These spiritual ideas and practices could result in a lack of intimate relations. In the literature a lack of emotional intimacy has been connected to abusive behaviour. This relation will be addressed in the concluding section.

(2) Practices of humility or humiliation?

Practices of humility were explicitly designed to train members of religious communities in the virtue of humility. For example, the refectory penances all have in common the idea that lowering the body in public (kneeling, lying down, sitting behind a small table) has a

"belittling" effect and therefore offers individuals an opportunity to train themselves in humility. However, a majority of the respondents in the interviews did not mention the intended aim of humility but instead recalled the experience of humiliation during and after the practice. Although they "accepted" this kind of mortification, many interviewees did not endorse its spiritual underpinnings. In fact, some thought humility practices were absurd or ridiculous. In the case of mental mortification, the endurance of members of religious communities to perform these practices was tested to the limits and beyond. Not everyone could cope with that. Compare the following quote of a sister from the order of the Dominicans who broke the observance of silence and got a "fitting" penitence at the Guilt Chapter of her mother superior:

> I was given a penitence once when I worked with the sacristan in the chapel and mother superior said: 'Sister, until further notice you will leave the chapel and in the morning you will be of assistance in the laundry and in the afternoon in the sewing room'. Well, I thought, 'God rewards', and there you went until, '... until you don't hear anything else, it stays this way'. For a long time I had to work in the ironing room, but I could not cope with the fact that it was ordered as a penitence, I really thought that (raising her voice), I thought that was a terrible thing! I was thinking to myself: 'I am not in the monastery to perform only penitence. This cannot go on forever. I can't take it anymore'. Thus I went to sister X [the mother superior, EB] and I said to her: 'There has to be a change, because I can't take it any longer. I think this is terrible and it makes me unwell'. And then I started to cry and said 'this is not what I want', upon which the mother superior reacted that it was really a grave transgression I've committed. And I said 'Well, this has to stop, because it's too much'. And the mother superior said 'You can go and I will let you know'. The next guilt chapter I was officially discharged and I could continue my old work. Look, it was as if you almost had to doubt your vocation, because this was something so impossible, I just couldn't understand the seriousness of it.

Members of religious communities often did not choose to live an ascetic life and if they had to, they accepted it but with – to use the euphemism – a lot of "collateral damage." From a spiritual point of view this penitence had its mortifying effect, because the penitent was tested in several ways. This sister was commanded to do simple household work that could be experienced as humiliating. The strongest impact was evoked by the fact that mother superior left her in uncertainty regarding the timeframe of the penitence. The penance could go on forever or could be abrogated the following day. Here we encounter another theme, besides the lack of emotional intimacy that can be connected to abusive behaviour, that is, damaged self-worth. This will also be addressed later on.

In the above stated quotation, one clearly notices the hierarchical structure of monastic life in which mental mortification was deeply embedded. Novice masters, mothers superior or abbots had the power to "make" or "break" a person. The interviews show that the ascetic atmosphere within a religious community could be completely dependent on one person. As an ex-Redemptorist said "I really had bad luck, because this guy was a moralist, an expert in moral theology, already a bit older. He was a strange, strange man." If a superior was difficult to get on with, or had some kind of personal vendetta, members of religious communities could have a hard time. At least three respondents talked about being treated in an offensive way. For example, superiors had a specific strategy to provoke feelings of injustice: punishing identical transgressions in different ways without giving a reason for this difference.

(3) The ultimate test of obedience? Farewell to one's family

A final example is connected to the practice of saying farewell to one's family after entering the monastery, as was the practice in contemplative monasteries. A difference

with the other mortification practices is that people who wanted to become a member of a religious order or congregation knew beforehand that they had to leave their friends and family behind. However, the real test of obedience came later on, when one of the relatives got sick or passed away and members were not allowed to attend their sickbed or funeral. A sister from the Claris order said that in 1963 she could not go to her mother who died and she continued by saying: "Yes, that was really hard. And then, my dad died in 1967, at that time it was just approved that you were permitted to go home when your parents were sick or passed away." And a sister from the order of the Dominicans narrated the following anecdote that took place at the beginning of the 1950s: "I was informed of my mother's death without even knowing that she had been ill. Later on, I have had a rather heavy response to this, you know, psychologically, of course that was to be expected…."

Again, much depended on the superiors and how they dealt with it. There were no mechanisms of control to correct excessive use of power with regard to mortification practices. Some superiors were flexible with the rules others were stricter. Some superiors justified their strictness by stressing the rare spiritual opportunity: this was a true trial of mortification or self-denial that yielded spiritual growth. Without considering the psychological impact of their decision, they stuck to the rules. After the 1960s these rules were often softened.

Conclusions about mental mortification

A few general conclusions on the psychological context of mental mortification can now be drawn. Mental mortification is explicitly aimed at disciplining the will by training obedience and humility. In the case of excessive forms of mental mortification, not disciplining, but breaking the will is a more accurate description. A central characteristic of mental mortification is its relational character that is strengthened because of the public setting in which the mental practices took place. Obedience and humility could be trained to the maximum because mental mortification was embedded within a hierarchical setting in which critique was considered as a sign of a "disordered" will, in other words, a residue of the old sinful self. Repeatedly, it seems that extreme experiences with mental mortification depended on only one individual. However, it is important to note that the lack of interference or critique by others who did not call these individuals to account made excessive mortification possible.

Possible relations between mortification and abuse

As stated in the introduction, this article focuses on relations between mental mortification and psychological forms of abuse of children within Catholic institutions. Attention for psychological or emotional abuse is also part of processes of truth telling and restorative justice. Emotional abuse is mentioned in the Irish report on abuse (Murray, 2009) and the advice section of the Belgian report (Adriaenssens, 2010, p. 151). Moreover, the Dutch Deetman committee, which has mapped sexual abuse, now issued a new call for testimonies for women to step forward with testimonies on psychological abuse (Deetman, 2012).

Psychological maltreatment

Psychological abuse is a complex topic, and more difficult to identify than sexual violations. The paediatrician Vincent Palusci and psychiatrist Alan Frisch offer a working definition of psychological abuse in their diagnostic guide on child abuse (Palusci &

Frisch, 2010). This definition is also helpful in relation to the topic at hand, although the abuse takes place outside the family-situation. In addition to neglect, physical and sexual abuse, Palusci and Frisch distinguish what they call "psychological maltreatment (PM)." They write "By definition, PM is a repeated pattern of interaction between a parent [caretaker, EB] and child that harms the child's emotional well-being" (Idem, 2010, p. 6). Examples of PM are belittling, degrading or ridiculing a child. Moreover, the authors include terrorising, exploiting, rejecting and isolating children, plus inconsistency in parenting styles. The interaction between a parent and child is characterised by a denial of emotional closeness and feelings of insecurity. Such a definition of psychological abuse may also be applied to the context addressed in this article.

An important difference is that PM concerns the interaction between parent and child, whereas in Catholic institutions male or female members of religious communities replace the parent as the principal caretaker. However, the interaction seems to fit the definition of PM to a large extent (e.g., belittling, shaming, inconsistency in "parenting" style and denial of intimacy). What is more, caretakers or superiors sometimes interfered in family relations, isolating children from their family in crucial moments, thereby heightening children's sense of insecurity. All in all, PM seems to offer a basic framework for exploring relations between mortification and psychological abuse. In addition the literature on sexual abuse in Catholic institutions is also taken into account. Although this is a different form of abuse, it is important to include as a background to gain our understanding of mental violations of children in Catholic institutions of which still little is known.

The fundamental question addressed here is: can we understand the transgressions of those guilty of child-abuse against the background of the mortification they themselves had endured? First of all, many people have pointed to celibacy as the sole cause of sexual abuse in Catholic institutions (e.g., Hans Kung and the archbishop of Vienna Christoph Schonborn) – to which mortification is closely connected in the sense of "mortification of the flesh." Although this is an important topic, there is no research that has proven a direct link between celibacy and sexual abuse (Geerts & Morssinkhof, 2010). One of the basic ideas of this article is that it would be more clarifying to connect psychological forms of abuse of children to mental mortification that formed a crucial part of the spiritual training of members of religious communities. As noted before, most reports focus explicitly on sexual abuse. We should however not underestimate how serious psychological abuse can be (for an overview of consequences, see Palusci & Fischer, 2010, p. 6). As the examples in this article show, mental mortification can have a serious psychological impact on adults and maybe even more on children.

Parallels

Let us start with drawing some parallels: it is clear that mental mortification practices that were part of the spiritual training of members of religious communities were also passed on to children in Catholic institutions. Several national and international reports and articles on the topic of abuse in Catholic institutions indicate this (e.g., Dohmen, 2010; Heijst et al., 2010; Jorissen, 2010; Murphy, 2009). In addition to corporal punishment and observing a strict anti-physical atmosphere in which there was little room for tenderness, mental mortification comes to the fore in demanding strict obedience; demanding silence; threatening children that they will never see their parents again; and training children in humility. For example, one victim described the "constant humiliation" that especially bed wetting children were exposed to. The punishment for bedwetting was to stand stock-still

with the wet knickers draped around one's head (Dohmen, 2010), a practice that bears resemblance to the public punishments described earlier. In another testimony that is titled "Breaking the will" the author, who as a child spent time in a Catholic hospital run by the "Sisters of Love," narrates how children had to conform to the same spiritual requirements as the members of religious communities to whose care they were entrusted, such as self-discipline and following authority without questioning it (Jorissen, 2010). Similar to the training or spiritual education within religious communities, children were also trained in disciplining their will. Moreover, in a recent historical study on active female religious communities in the Netherlands the authors state that punishments and methods of humiliations that ex-pupils have described in their testimonies bear a striking resemblance with the kind of mortification that was imposed on members of religious communities (Heijst et al., 2010, p. 1038). Also in the report of the child abuse commission in Ireland we read about diverse forms of emotional abuse such as public humiliation and deprivation of contacts with family (Murphy, 2009). These are all aspects that can be more or less related to how members of religious orders and congregations back then were spiritually "educated."

Sources

When it comes to mental mortification as a source of causes related to abusive behaviour, three types of causes should be taken into account: the lack of emotional intimacy, the lack of self-worth, and excessive and uncontrolled power. These will be outlined below.

In academic literature, it has been argued that for perpetrators an important motive for abuse is often connected to a need for intimacy (e.g., Fehr & Hands, 1993; Ganzevoort, 2010; Hoenkamp-Bisschops, 1993). The theologian and psychologist of religion Ruard Ganzevoort (2010) who conducted research on trauma, religion and sexual abuse, calls this the third type of perpetrators in addition to "real" paedophiles and perpetrators whose primary motive is power. When people are not capable of, or have great difficulty engaging in personal human contact in which they are seen and accepted, the risk increases that they seek fulfilment for their psychological needs in transgressive behaviour. Within this setting, sexual abuse or other forms of transgressive behaviour can be a means to deal with the emotional deprivation. It may often be unclear to transgressors with what kind of deprivation they are dealing. Anselm Grün, for example, links the abuse of children in Catholic institutions among others to an interplay of unconscious wishes for intimacy, blindness and a lack of self-knowledge (Grün, 2010). The theologian and pastoral psychologist Anke Bisschops has done research on celibacy and emotional intimacy and she has supervised processes of dialogue about abuse in religious communities. In her work she also stresses the longing for emotional intimacy and points furthermore to the lack of education and specific training of male and female members of religious communities when it comes to the above-mentioned factors of abusive behaviour (Bisschops, 2010; for the lack of education see, for example, Bisschops, 2011, p. 237 ff; Deetman, 2011a, p. 690 ff).

The spiritual training and practices within monastic life described in this article provide a background against which to interpret abusive behaviour. Mortification prohibited intimacy and meaningful relations in many religious communities. The main goal of the spiritual training was to mortify one's will and leave all worldly attachments behind. This meant first of all that people were more or less estranged from their family, because these ties represented the old sinful world. Furthermore, personal relationships between fellow-members were suspect and diverted attention from the true goal of seeking God. This is

why in many religious communities it was forbidden for two persons to be together, with the exception of being together with one's spiritual advisor or superior. The observance of silence was a further mean to frustrate personal contact and need for intimacy because people were not allowed to speak with each other.

What is more, the capacity for emotional intimacy is strongly linked to a basic feeling of self-worth (Bisschops, 2010). Without a healthy feeling of self-worth people are more likely to have problems with emotional intimacy and feel a great need for acceptance and fear of rejection. Especially during the novitiate, but also afterwards, feelings of self-worth were the target of the described humility practices. Self-worth was seen as (or mistaken for) pride, a sin that was a spiritual obstacle in reaching the state of perfection. The self had to be mortified and denied in order to make a spiritual transformation possible. When humility practices really hit home, they could have an enormous impact on an individual's sense of self-worth, thus possibly creating the psychological make-up for people who resort to abusive behaviour in need of intimacy. Here one can think of members of religious communities who humiliated children because they had also been humiliated and had negative feelings of self-worth.

On the other hand, humility practices and the spiritual idea of mortification could also lead to narcissistic feelings of superiority (Bosgraaf, 2008b). Here we encounter a paradox of mortification: while mortification was primarily aimed at sin, it could also result in pride (considered as a "mortal" sin) when people thought they were "successfully" mortified. In this context self-worth was especially linked to "spiritual achievement" and had little to do with proper self-knowledge. In this case we could speculate that sometimes members of religious communities were convinced of their spiritual superiority and that in testing and humiliating children they were training children the virtue of humility as a way to get closer to God. This can be linked to the general finding that perpetrators often have the idea that they are good for children, and do not see the severe consequences of their deeds (Bisschops, 2010).

A related question concerns the relationship between the so-called "culture of silence" and taking responsibility when members of religious communities suspected fellow congregates of abuse. In the Deetman report, we read, for example, that in Dutch society in general there was a taboo on speaking about sexual abuse of children (see Deetman 2011a, p. 508 ff; see also Geerts & Morssinkhof, 2010, p. 9). Such a taboo was enforced within organisations, such as the Catholic Church, that did not want bad publicity and preferred "internal solutions." What impact did mortification have on taking responsibility when members of religious communities observed cases of abuse? For example, it is possible that the practice of non-criticism and obedience was applied to keeping silent about transgressions of fellow-members.

In testimonies we also see that one person in power abused victims and that no one intervened. A crucial point here is that the abuse should not only be considered as the result of just one individual, but that one also critically has to take into account the spiritual framework and institutional environment in which the abuse was embedded (see also Heijst et al., 2010, p. 1037. For a broader sketch, see Knibbe, 2007). At other levels, being loyal and keeping intact the collective holy stature of the religious community is of importance. Victims reflect this in their testimonies. In the rare cases that children dared to confide in their parents, they often encountered pure disbelief because their parents trusted Gods representatives blindly (e.g., Adriaenssens, 2010, p. 21, 66). As Bisschops writes this is the primary "situational factor" of the abuse of little children in Catholic institutions: extreme and often uncontrolled power (Bisschops, 2010), especially within the walls of an institution.

Conclusions and further questions

In this article possible relations between mortification and abuse have been outlined based upon my research on mortification, and literature concerning psychological maltreatment and abusive behaviour in Catholic institutions. The Murray-committee has described forms of abuse in Catholic institutions that can be seen as psychological maltreatment in the sense specified by Palusci and Fischer (2010). Furthermore, psychological maltreatment of children in Catholic institutions has gained attention in Belgium and the Netherlands as well. I argued that mental mortification provides an important background against which psychological forms of abuse of children in Catholic institutions can be understood. Practices of mental mortification gave rise to a psychosocial constellation in which a lack of intimacy, a lack of self-worth, and uncontrolled power were combined. Other scholars have related these conditions to abusive behaviour as well.

Finally, some important questions have not been addressed in this article. For a better understanding of the background of abuse in Catholic institutions, we also need to take a closer look at the changes that were taking place in religious life since the 1950s. It is difficult to relate the timeframes of peaks of abusive behaviour (both sexual and psychological abuse) to the timeframes of the changes in religious life; nevertheless, I would like to raise some questions about these relations.

In the Netherlands, practices of mortification lost their spiritual meaning and then disappeared in the period from the late 1950s until the beginnings of the 1970s (Bosgraaf, 2008a). Such rigorous changes must have had psychological impact. The experiences of members of religious communities with mortification may have become more awkward and painful with the loss of its spiritual legitimacy. Some members of religious communities may also have tried to give resistance to these changes by intensifying mortification practices in their contact with children. Reports from the Netherlands and Belgium indicate that the peak of abusive behaviour in Catholic institutions was in the 1960s of the twentieth century (e.g., Deetman, 2011a, pp. 60–61; Adriaenssens, 2010, p. 121). In other words, during the decline of mortification practices a peak of abusive behaviour occurred. Further research is needed to tease out the connections between these two developments. It would also be interesting to map the decline of mortification in the American context in which the peak of abuse occurred later, notably in the 1970s and the beginnings of the 1980s (Jay, 2011, p. 46).

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