

Schedule: Faith and spirituality in the wake of scandal
Erfurt, Germany 26th–27th June 2025

Thursday 26th June

9:00 Arrival, welcome

Session 1 – Church and society in the UK

9:30 Naomi Thompson (Goldsmiths University, London) **‘Faith’ in funerals – but not in churches.**

10:10 Alex Fry (Bournemouth University) & Sharon Jagger (York St John University) **The scandal of a classed Church: Using cultural and social capital to explore how working-class clergy navigate diminished wellbeing in the Church of England (Online)**

10:50 Tea and Coffee

Session 2 – Testimonies and lived experience

11:20 Tanya Riches (Eastern College, Australia) **Scandal or Crime? Media Narratives and Survivor Complaint Testimonies in Australian Megachurches**

12:00 Elizabeth Lee (Pilgrim College University of Divinity) **Just Hospitality Amid the Broken Body of Christ**

12:40 Lunch

Session 3 – Papal communications

13:40 Damian Guzek (University of Silesia in Katowice) **Negotiating Pope Francis's Agency Through the Lens of Scandal and Division**

14:20 Renáta Sedláková & Veronika Mullerová (University Palacký in Olomouc) **From Denying to Apology: The Evolution of Papal Communication Strategies on Sexual Abuse Cases**

15:00 Tea and coffee

Session 4 – Questioning and transformation

15:30 Cath McKinney (University of Divinity, Melbourne) **Knowing and Not Knowing: The Pursuit of Certainty as a Resistance to Good Work.**

16:10 Larney Peerenboom (Deakin University) **What Now?: Women's Spiritualities after Church Hurt at Hillsong Church**

18:30 Evening Dinner at Pier 37

Friday 27th June

Session 5 – Inquiries and commissions

9:30 Christopher Longhurst (Catholic Theologian, Aotearoa New Zealand) & Michelle Egan–Bitran (Foundation for Equity and Research New Zealand)

Post-Whanaketia: New Zealand Catholic Church Response in Wake of Abuse in Care Inquiry (Online)

10:10 Kelsey Fitz-Gerald (University of Newcastle) **The practices and management of child safeguarding in Australian Evangelical churches in light of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA) (Online)**

10:50 Tea and coffee

Session 6 – Biblical framings

11:20 Jonathan Cahana Blum (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) **Is this God or is this Horny Old David? Branch Davidian Responses to David Koresh's Sexual Exploits**

12:00 Nikolaos Garaounis (Catholic Marcianum, Venice)

Reevaluation of the Christian witness that bear victims of sexual abuse by denouncing the suffered abuse

12:40 Lunch

Session 7 – Digital dynamics

13:40 Jobson Joshwa (University of Kerala) **Who is Afraid of the Raped Nun? Scandalous Publics and the Curious Case of Bishop Franko Mulakkal**

14:20 Veronika Müllerová & Jaroslav Franc (University Palacký in Olomouc) **Crisis is not a disaster: Communication of popes about crises in the era of the internet**

15:00 Tea and coffee

Session 8 – New spiritualities

15:30 Tova Makhani-Belkin (Ben Gurion University) **From Catholicism to the Bahá'í Faith: Spiritual Renewal in Post-Catholic Ireland (Online)**

16:10 Closing discussion

18:30 Evening Dinner at Ecke Kornack

Saturday 28th June (optional)

Sightseeing in Erfurt

Abstracts

Cahana Blum, Jonathan (Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

Is this God or is this Horny Old David? Branch Davidian Responses to David Koresh's Sexual Exploits

Immediately upon his return from Israel in March 1985 – and shortly after his legal wife, Rachel Jones, bore his first son – David Koresh flabbergasted his congregation (not to mention his wife), saying that he had received a divine command to father a child with his wife's younger sister, Michele. While being on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, Koresh went on to argue, a vision revealed him as the end-times Christ mentioned in the Book of Revelation, charged with the duty to beget the 24 elders who surround the throne (cf. Revelation 4:4). As this could hardly be achieved by having one partner, he declared all unmarried Branch Davidians women to be his women for procreation purposes.

It took another three years before Michele, then only 15, would actually bear him a child, but in 1989 Koresh went on to claim that this "New Light" revelation was now to also include married women in Mt. Carmel, who should now be considered married solely to him.

These controversial actions profoundly affected the cohesion of the Branch Davidian community and rippled through its members: while some members interpreted these developments as divinely ordained stumbling blocks and chose to remain, others became disillusioned, leaving the group and attempting to alert family members and law enforcement authorities to his misconduct.

This paper will examine how members of each group rationalized their actions both before and after the fiery demise of most of the Branch Davidians, including Koresh, during the conflagration that ended the 51-day FBI siege of Mt. Carmel in 1993.

Fitz-Gerald, Kelsey (University of Newcastle)

The practices and management of child safeguarding in Australian Evangelical churches in light of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA)

The understanding and implementation of measures to protect children from harm in institutional settings, particularly religious institutions, has experienced significant change over the past two decades. Within Australia there has been multiple public inquiries, including a landmark Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA).

RCIRCSA exposed systemic and widespread failures of religious institutions resulting in the abuse of thousands of children across Australia. The Royal Commission provided recommendations for establishing safeguarding infrastructure in all institutions, particularly religious institutions, which were the worst offenders of child sexual abuse. This paper seeks to explore the development of child safeguarding as a concept throughout RCIRCSA. This paper also seeks to consider how RCIRCSA's recommendations, and subsequent legislative changes in Australia, may be impacting Evangelical religious institutions.

There has been limited focus on Evangelical church responses to child safeguarding in the literature. There is little information about how child safeguarding is understood within this community, who decides what safeguarding is and how it is measured, and how individual churches are interpreting RCIRCSA and government safeguarding advice and guidelines. These questions are the focus of my current research as I engage with Evangelical Christians and seek their perspectives and experiences of child safeguarding within their local churches.

Fry, Alex (Bournemouth University) & **Sharon Jagger** (York St John University)

The scandal of a classed Church: Using cultural and social capital to explore how working-class clergy navigate diminished wellbeing in the Church of England

The intersection of class and Christianity is the subject of recent academic discussion (e.g., Guest, Page & Taylor, 2017), though remains under-researched. As the Established Church, the Church of England is strongly associated with elite groups (Guest, Olsen & Wolffe 2012). Clergy have public, visible roles within this politically privileged context, yet those clergy identifying as working class often find themselves socially and culturally at odds with the Church environment. Recent research examines such class experience: Rooms and Wort (2021) examine the ways churches in the North of England leverage working-class cultural capital; McKenzie (2016) discusses how working-class leaders within evangelicalism navigate mixed social and cultural capital; and Page (2017) studies how working-class clergy spouses are excluded from cultural resources in church contexts. Our research adds to this work. It uses semi-structured interviews and focus groups to draw out the voices of working-class clergy, whose stories call attention to classism within the Church. We ask how the emotional labour of managing mismatched cultural and social capital in a privileged arena impacts on the sense of belonging and thriving of clergy hailing from a different socioeconomic background to the majority of their ordained peers and, crucially, how they respond to such experiences.

Garaounis, Nikolaos (Catholic Marcanum, Venice)

Reevaluation of the Christian witness that bear victims of sexual abuse by denouncing the suffered abuse

At the scale of the proposed remedies against sexual abuse committed by the clergy the spiritual input and the personal Christian faith of the victims themselves scores usually very low. That as the issue of Christians, often even only children who entrusted themselves to God, yet were still sexually abused by the very people who were formally dedicated at his service, quasi automatically raises besides the question of theodicy, the doubt over God's existence. Impulse, for still yet, choosing a topic that concerns faith was the observation by an old monk that nevertheless, the strongest weapons to fight against the sexual abuse in the Church will always be primarily, the victim's personal faith in God and his or hers developed like that spiritual strength. That, as he commented the gospel stresses how God reveals his truth to the small and the weak (Mt. 11:25). By the example of the beheading of the John the Baptist, the gospel underlines furthermore how for Jesus denouncing the injustice equals for giving testimony of his name (Jn. 5:30-38). In that perspective, coming out and reacting against the suffered abuse, becomes hence a way of bearing witness to Jesus Christ not only to the world but also to the Church, even if it concerns the denunciation of a priest or other religious figure. Given, that it is Jesus who chooses and assigns us to his mission (Jn. 15:16), it is therefore a call for the victim to overcome so too the terrible shame provoked by the abuse as the testimony for the true God has to stand over personal shame (Rm. 1.16). Instead, it will be the diligence and the courage that the victim demonstrates, which will indicate his true worth for the Church (2Jn. 1:1)

Guzek, Damian (University of Silesia in Katowice)

Negotiating Pope Francis's Agency Through the Lens of Scandal and Division

Pope Francis, as the first pontiff fully implementing the post-Vatican II shift within the Roman Catholic Church, has notably embraced significant changes, including open communion for divorced individuals and blessings for same-sex couples. His transformative agency, amplified by widespread media and social platform coverage, has reshaped perceptions of the Church and its leadership. This new image of the Roman Catholic Church resonates differently across diverse audiences.

Drawing on 30 digital media diaries and 30 in-depth interviews with traditional pre-Vatican II Catholics and post-Vatican II media users from Poland, this conference paper employs discourse theoretical analysis (DTA) to explore the multifaceted reactions to Pope Francis's leadership within the context of scandal. It highlights the tensions between two contrasting yet interconnected strands of Roman Catholicism: traditionalists, who view the Pope's actions as a departure from Christ's teachings, and progressives, who critique the pace of reforms addressing equality, homophobia, and women's rights.

The findings reveal that the negotiation of Pope Francis's role and agency is deeply influenced by how media resources are interpreted and utilized by different factions within the Church. The study underscores the crucial role of algorithmic communication in shaping contemporary religious authority.

This conference paper emerges from the broader research project titled *Papal Authority Transformed by Changes in Communication* (National Science Centre, Poland) and offers insights into the evolving dynamics of institutional leadership in the digital era within the marginalized context of peripheral Poland.

Jobson,Joshwa (University of Kerala)

Who is Afraid of the Raped Nun? Scandalous Publics and the Curious Case of Bishop Franko Mulakkal

This paper is an attempt to critically parse the rape scandal that shook the Syrian Catholic Church in Kerala. In the year 2018, a nun who resides at the Kuravilangad convent, in Kottayam, lodged a complaint against Bishop Franco Mulakkal of the Jalandhar diocese, accusing him of raping her thirteen times between 2014 and 2016. While Bishop Franco was arrested on the basis of the FIR filed against him, prompting the larger public in Kerala to extend their support to the victim and the four nuns who stood by her, who went on to organise a public protest, transgressing the proscriptive religious spaces. The court verdict that was pronounced on 14 January 2022, acquitting Bishop Franco of rape charges, came as a massive blow to the fight against sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. This 'scandal' drew a specific kind of religious-moral public to the fore, with digital media serving as the primary site of engagement. By situating these contraventional digital engagements this paper argues that the rape scandal and path-breaking, first-of-its-kind public protest organised by a group of Catholic nuns against a bishop accused of rape, attains a discursive and affective potential that would allow one to reframe the fault lines of gender discourses in Kerala Church. This paper will also extend its scope into exploring how the 'appellative energy' of scandals constitute a unique social phenomenology.

Lee, Elizabeth (Pilgrim College University of Divinity)

Just Hospitality Amid the Broken Body of Christ.

Responding to the recommendations flowing out of The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse, denominations have developed and implemented safeguarding policies, practices and training to reduce the risk of future abuse of children and vulnerable individuals. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Elizabeth Lee, 2023), little attention has been given to the needs of congregants and communities harmed by sexual or other traumatising violence.

In this presentation I will briefly describe both the contemplative, participative theological inquiry I facilitated, and offer some preliminary findings. While the findings themselves are significant for faith and spirituality of the community given the prevalence of individual and communal trauma, the contemplative participative approach has much to contribute to ecclesial research and practice.

Venturing beyond the safeguarding approaches adopted by the institutional Church we reimagine a trauma-sensitive ecclesial practice of hospitality. Located in a LGBTIQ+ affirming Uniting Church

congregation, this doctoral research brings the expertise of participant's lived/living experience into conversation with interdisciplinary trauma scholarship and feminist trauma theology to critically reflect on and reimagine liturgical, pastoral and administrative practices along with their theological underpinnings. Recognising ourselves as the broken body of Christ, we are envisioning how just hospitality may manifest.

Longhurst, Christopher (Catholic Theologian, Aotearoa New Zealand) & **Michelle Egan–Bitran** (Foundation for Equity and Research New Zealand)

Post-Whanaketia: New Zealand Catholic Church Response in Wake of Abuse in Care Inquiry

Religious institutions and congregations hold significant influence on societal morality. They are often perceived as a source of ethical guidance and values due to their teachings and the trust placed in them by their followers. On 24 July 2024, New Zealand's Abuse in Care Royal Commission of Inquiry (Inquiry) released its final report, Whanaketia – through pain and trauma, from darkness to light. The report revealed a dark, deep history of the misuse of power, moral authority, and trust in religious settings throughout New Zealand. A key finding of the Inquiry was that Catholic institutions, including schools, were found to be the highest perpetrators of sexual abuse compared to State institutions and other faith-settings.

The Inquiry's analysis of survivors' experiences found that "Catholic Church leaders have not been accountable or transparent to their congregations and the broader community about the nature and extent of abuse and neglect by their members." Institutional interests were prioritised, and perpetrators of abuse were protected over the safety and wellbeing of victims. The impact of abuse on victims and their families remains deep and profound, including a shaken sense or complete loss of faith and spirituality, often central to their identity.

This paper investigates how Catholic Church leaders have responded in the wake of the Inquiry's report. It analyses data from survivors who lodged reports in the Church's redress scheme and their experiences of church responses. It also addresses church reporting on their actions post-Whanaketia in relation to working with survivors to support redress and healing.

Makhani-Belkin, Tova (Ben Gurion University)

From Catholicism to the Bahá'í Faith: Spiritual Renewal in Post-Catholic Ireland

The Catholic Church's authority has been deeply challenged by a series of high-profile scandals in the wake of widespread scandal, notably the clergy's sex abuse crisis, which has led to a profound reevaluation of the Church's role in Irish society. These scandals have had a profound impact, expressed in deconversion, secularization, and the development of new religious identities, thereby reshaping Irish society's religious and cultural landscapes.

This paper addresses this issue by examining how Irish individuals leaving Catholicism find new spirituality in the Bahá'í Faith. These personal narratives highlight a collective response to a crisis of legitimacy in Irish society, focusing on their personal narratives and community practices. Unlike traditional conversion models emphasizing rupture, Bahá'í narratives of spiritual progression reflect an inclusive and continuous approach to faith, emphasizing a sense of belonging that transcends religious boundaries.

The Bahá'í community has offered an anthropologically significant model of spiritual renewal and moral accountability in Ireland's shifting religious landscape. As trust in traditional authority has eroded and many individuals have distanced themselves from institutionalized religion, the Bahá'í community

provides an alternative framework that addresses these challenges by prioritizing inclusivity, accountability, and collective moral responsibility. Such a case invites a broader anthropological reflection on how new religious movements respond to crises of faith and legitimacy and create communal belonging in post-institutional and secularizing contexts.

McKinney, Cath (University of Divinity, Melbourne)

Knowing and Not Knowing: The Pursuit of Certainty as a Resistance to Good Work.

A primary question present for me in the context of my role is “what gets in the way of people doing good work — together?” The Royal commission into Institutional responses to Child abuse in Australia exposed the shocking presence of systemic Child abuse within the context of institutions that have been thought about – historically, as trustworthy. This a reality that continues to be experienced as a living and present scandal and a question that permeates our communities is who can be trusted?

Drawing on Wilfrid Bion’s concept of ‘hatred of task’ and the Winnicottian posture of ‘good enough,’ this paper will address my working hypothesis that:

a retreat into (the fantasy of) certainty is a response to the very real and present danger of being in a state of un-knowing. This state of unknowing is getting in the way of ‘good work’ and is contributing to an existence measured by binaries where collaborative endeavour is understood as working in agreement rather than an alignment to the service of a purpose.

Müllerová, Veronika & Jaroslav Franc (University Palacký in Olomouc)

Crisis is not a disaster: Communication of popes about crises in the era of the internet

The concept of crisis is a cognitively engaging aspect of social reality. Dramatic technological advancements and the acceleration of information transfer affect not only technological progress and modernization but also the crisis communication of church leaders. As connectivity in the digital environment grows, crisis communication is adapting, embracing new realities of crises and sudden changes as opportunities for a new style of engagement with an increasingly connected and participatory “we”. This phenomenon is particularly evident during major crises, which have recently accumulated into multi-crises. Our study examines how popes over the past quarter-century have communicated crisis-related topics as communication channels have expanded into virtual spaces and social networks. Since 1998, most of the world's institutions have reached out to communities through online platforms. This shift has also influenced the language of church leaders. In previous studies, we observed that the pronoun “we” has gradually become dominant. Using NVivo software for analysis, we demonstrate a co-occurrence between the frequency of the word “crisis” and the occurrence of the pronouns “we” and “our.” In years where the use of “we” increases, we also observe a rise in the use of “crisis.” Moreover, the meaning of “crisis” evolves with each pope — from a situation to be overcome, as seen in the texts of John Paul II, to a challenge through which Jesus acts, as described by Pope Francis.

Peerenboom, Larney (Deakin University)

What Now?: Women’s Spiritualities after Church Hurt at Hillsong Church

2020 began a multi-year period of crisis for Australia’s largest megachurch, Hillsong Church. During this period, scandals plagued the church, as did reports from congregants and ex-congregants about their experiences of (often gendered) mistreatment and harm. While significant focus has been given to leadership misconduct and institutional decline, less attention has been given to the spiritualities of

individuals – particularly women – who have been affected by “church hurt”. Located in the sociology of religion, this doctoral research explores the ways women navigate their spiritualities and healing after experiencing church hurt at Hillsong Church.

Utilising a constructivist grounded approach, this research draws on semi-structured interviews with 25 women who self-identified as having experienced church hurt at Hillsong in Australia. Rooted in a critical feminist and lived religion framework, this research challenges the often-binary treatment of faith and spirituality; that is, either ‘in’ or ‘out’ of the church, or still ‘Christian’ or not). Instead, it highlights the liminal, evolving, and deeply personal ways women reimagine spirituality.

While data analysis is ongoing, early insights suggest that many participants engage in a process of spiritual transformation that includes questioning institutional authority, shifting spiritual beliefs and/or practices, and seeking new forms of community.

By centring the voices of these women, this study contributes to scholarly discussions on gender and power dynamics in religious institutions, and the emergence of new spiritualities in the wake of institutional crises. The findings will also offer insights for fostering healing, ethical church leadership, and more inclusive religious communities.

Riches, Tanya (Eastern College, Australia)

Scandal or Crime? Media Narratives and Survivor Complaint Testimonies in Australian Megachurches

Hillsong Church, an Australian contemporary Pentecostal megachurch, is globally recognized for its worship music, large-scale gatherings, and influential charismatic leadership. As an iconic representation of the global Pentecostal movement, Hillsong initially positioned itself as a youthful, democratically structured congregation, emphasizing accessibility and broad appeal. However, over time, this focus shifted toward centralized authority, aspirational lifestyles, and the prominence of its founders and celebrity pastors – reinforced by Pentecostal theological understandings of divine authority, loyalty, and spiritual discernment.

Through ethnographic observation and theological reflection, this presentation examines the tensions between charismatic leadership, institutional narratives, and congregational voice. The scandals of 2022, which surfaced through media outlets such as Vanity Fair, Rolling Stone, The New York Times, Christianity Today, and Crikey, highlight the varied ways survivor testimonies and complaint collectives have been amplified.

This presentation explores how large Pentecostal institutions navigate internal complaint-raising, where informal pastoral channels and formal legal processes intersect with journalistic narratives. As leadership crises continue to unfold across denominations and global contexts, this presentation contributes to broader discussions on institutional accountability, resilience, and the role of survivor testimonies in shaping the future of ecclesial practice.

Sedláková, Renáta & Veronika Mullerová (University Palacký in Olomouc)

From Denying to Apology: The Evolution of Papal Communication Strategies on Sexual Abuse Cases

Based in the theory of crisis communication this paper examines the communication strategies employed by the last three Popes in response to cases of sexual abuse of minors within the Catholic Church. The study focuses on how this sensitive issue was addressed in official papal documents and how the Holy See's discourse on sexual abuse has evolved over time since the cause was opened in The Boston Globe paper by the Spotlight group of investigative journalists in 2002.

Through content and thematic analysis, the research investigates more than 4 000 official Vatican texts signed by John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis, considering historical events and used communication strategies. Particular attention is paid to crisis communication strategies and their application in managing this highly controversial topic. The findings reveal a significant shift in the Vatican's approach: John Paul II largely avoided explicit engagement with the issue in official discourse; Benedict XVI framed it within the broader narrative of the decline of the faith; and Francis contextualized it as a systemic problem rooted in clericalism and the abuse of power.

By tracing this transformation from the topic avoidance to the apology and explicit acknowledgment and institutional accountability, the study provides insights into the changing dynamics of Vatican communication.

Thompson, Naomi (Goldsmiths University, London)

'Faith' in funerals – but not in churches.

The 'Faith in Funerals' project explored the fusion of religious, spiritual and non-religious content in UK funerals led by independent celebrants. We analysed 1000 celebrant-led funeral-services, conducted a survey of funeral directors and interviewed independent celebrants, funeral directors, and people who had organized funerals for loved-ones. Additionally, we interviewed church ministers about how the church might respond to the changing funerals landscape.

We found most funerals led by independent celebrants include some religious content. 76% included at least one of a hymn, prayer or reading from scripture. This demonstrates people's desire to engage with religion whilst not expressing loyalty to religious institutions which have lost credibility. It reflects a departure from Grace Davie's (2007) 'vicarious religion' in that people no longer see the church as acting on their behalf in times of crisis. In grief, people no longer look to the church for support whilst they seek to meet their spiritual needs. This may represent people's loss of trust in religious institutions and quiet transition away from affiliation, in the wake of high-profile scandals in churches over recent years.

Most funerals did not fall into binaries of either traditional religious services or entirely secular 'celebrations of life'. For some, there was a sense of obligation to incorporate religious content. For others, it reflected a belief their loved-one was living on in some way.

The research reflects the loss of the church monopoly whilst recognising everyday funerals are not secular events. It provides important implications for churches and the funerals industry.