

No Religious Exemption When It Comes to Abuse



Robert Stolark for The New York Times

Yeshiva University High School in Manhattan let rabbis accused of sexual abuse "go quietly."

By MARK OPPENHEIMER
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Just as we think we know what an abuser looks like, we think we know what an abusive religious community looks like. We may think it is highly insular — like the Satmar Hasidic community in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, a prominent member of which was [convicted last month of sexually abusing a young girl sent to him for help](#). Or it is hierarchical and bureaucratic: if the Roman Catholic Church did not have so many bishops and archbishops who refused to dismiss or defrock molesters in their ranks, would so many pedophile priests have been able to carry on for so long?

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But we don't know a thing. Consider [Yeshiva University](#).

As [Paul Berger](#) reported last month in the Jewish newspaper [The Forward](#), two rabbis at the Modern Orthodox high school run by the university were accused of sexually abusing students in the 1970s and '80s. Leaders, Mr. Berger wrote, responded by "quietly allowing them to leave and find jobs elsewhere." The university president at the time, Norman Lamm — until last month a titan of contemporary Judaism — told Mr. Berger that he had let the staff members "go quietly."

"It was not our intention or position to destroy a person without further inquiry," Dr. Lamm said.

Enlarge This Image



Chip Litherland for The New York Times
The Clearwater, Fla., headquarters of the Church of Scientology, which is known for secrecy and insularity.

But Yeshiva University is supposed to be modern, engaged, contemporary. Its rabbis are not treated as

infallible demigods. The school's graduates work and live in the secular world. The culture of Yeshiva is supposed to permit, even encourage, argument, not punish or ostracize critics. So surely there were no impious skeletons in the closet, right?

But the truth is, there are not two kinds of religions — the enlightened and the medieval. Every religion has evildoers stalking its corridors. They just survive, and thrive, with different strategies.

Take Zen Buddhism, the paragon of open, nonhierarchical spirituality. Anyone may practice Zen meditation; you do not have to convert, be baptized or renounce your old religion. Yet leaders of major Zen centers in Los Angeles and New York have recently been accused, on strong evidence, of exploiting followers for sex. This weekend, Zen teachers ordained by [Joshu Sasaki](#), the semiretired abbot of the [Rinzai-ji Zen Center in Los Angeles](#), are holding a [retreat](#) to discuss sexual harassment accusations against Mr. Sasaki. The Zen Studies Society, in New York, is under new leadership after its longtime abbot, Eido Shimano, was [forced out](#) after he was accused of inappropriate sexual liaisons with students and other women.

Paul Karsten, a board member of the Rinzai-ji Zen Center, said the intense relationship between Zen teacher and student can be trouble. For example, in private meetings, some teachers touch students. The touching is never supposed to be sexual, but there can be misunderstandings, or outright abuse. "I know of stories I have heard," Mr. Karsten said, "where people feel like this experience has been very important to them, and others where they feel like it has been the opposite."

Mr. Karsten acknowledged complaints against Mr. Sasaki — largely on the Internet, some anonymous — that the teacher went beyond what most reputable teachers would consider appropriate. But Mr. Karsten seemed torn between valuing extremely close teacher-student relationships and acknowledging the dangers.

"People see there has been something going on with students that on the one hand has been remarkable, and on the other hand has been inappropriate in teacher-student practice," Mr. Karsten said. "And consensual, or nonconsensual?"

Questions e-mailed to Mr. Karsten for Mr. Sasaki, who is 105, were not answered.

Some churches have checks and balances that discourage unethical behavior. "A lot of it is secrecy versus transparency," said Hugh Urban, author of "[The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion](#)."

"If you have a church like the Episcopal Church, with a fair degree of transparency, that is going to make a difference," he said. "But Scientology — almost every aspect of it from early on has tended toward secrecy."

Scientology is known for both secrecy and, at the highest levels, extreme insularity. Committed Scientologists may fear that if they complain about abuses, they will lose their friends, even their families. Mr. Urban mentioned one woman who had told him about human-rights abuses at the church headquarters in Clearwater, Fla.

"I said, 'Why don't you go down the street and talk to the police?'" Mr. Urban said. "Her answer was, once you are so deep in, invested in that community, it doesn't seem like a real possibility to go talk to the police."

Then there is the fear of bringing shame on the community, particularly prevalent in minority groups. "When I started in 1982," said Phil Jacobs, the editor of *Washington Jewish Week*, "there was an 11th commandment — 'Thou shalt not air thy dirty laundry.'" He learned that commandment in Baltimore, writing about the high percentage of Jews in a treatment program for compulsive gambling. "When I started calling people, they said, 'You're not going to put this in the paper, are you?' So I found out Jews didn't get AIDS, didn't get divorced, didn't abuse their wives or children."

That fear of embarrassment may be why Dr. Lamm — who is still at Yeshiva and declined to be interviewed — stayed quiet about the abusive rabbis at Yeshiva. Perhaps he loathed what they had done, and wept for their victims. But, he also may have thought that people shouldn't hear bad things about Jews. People shouldn't know, in other words, that Jews are just like everyone else.

That is everyone else, not just religious people. The Satmar Hasidim may have wanted to protect a beloved member, the Modern Orthodox administrators probably worried about their community's reputation — and the Penn State loyalists enabled Jerry Sandusky. Somehow, the victims never seem as important as the rabbi, the Zen master, the coach. In the words of a once-revered rabbi, Norman Lamm, may as well let the perpetrators "go quietly."

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