

How purity invites fraud

By [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#)

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What explains the deep relationship between sex abuse, charlatanism, and religious purity movements? Sarah Posner, writing on [the Duggar family and its connections to the world of separatist Christian homeschooling](#), details not just the accusations of sexual misconduct made against Josh Duggar but also those made against Bill Gothard, the leader of the fundamentalist movement with which the family has long been closely associated.

Gothard, who founded the Institute for Basic Life Principles and its homeschooling arm, the Advanced Training Institute, is accused by dozens of female former staffers of inappropriate and abusive behavior; he stepped down last year. The details of the complaints against Gothard are more squalid than horrifying. We see in them the marks of an organization with a narcissistic central figure unconstrained by dissent or oversight. More troubling, however, are the [stories of young people victimized](#) by family members or friends and blamed, in accordance with Gothard's "principles" of female modesty, for their own assaults.

The revelations of ATI's culture of abuse and victim-blaming are of a piece with emerging stories of abuse and cover-up in the wider evangelical and fundamentalist worlds, and they come after more established stories of abuse and complicity in the Catholic Church. But Gothard's ministries were focused especially on sexuality. This fact forces the question of how abuse and fraud flourish in those corners of the church most devoted to an ethic of sexual purity.

A common thread in reporting by Posner and others is a credulous constituency. People have fears and anxieties—not necessarily ludicrous ones, at that—and are very eager to believe that an authoritative figure teaching an authoritative method can relieve those fears. The promise of perfect separation from an overly sexualized mass culture is part of this appeal. And there is, moreover, the problem of layering a Pelagian approach to moral purity over a more Augustinian conception of human nature as depraved and inclined toward sin. (No disrespect to Augustine or Pelagius,

neither of whom would have signed on to an organization peddling “Life Principles.”) People, males most especially, are sinful beasts who mustn’t be provoked in the least—and yet with the right application of teaching and paternal authority, all can be well.

There is no internal account of the failure of the system, because the system promises results. And of course there is patriarchy, always patriarchy—increasingly, a klaxon signaling that abuse is happening and being hidden.

Part of the problem, however, is undoubtedly the sheer insularity of the institutions involved. Abuse and fraud happen everywhere, we know, but in secular and mainstream religious institutions there are typically lines of accountability and oversight that lead outside the walls. No such lines exist in a place where father, church, and school are effectively one and the same.

These stories pose serious questions for the more highbrow versions of separatist Christianity that are growing in prominence as cultural Christianity withers. One nuanced vision of Christian separatism goes by the name of the “Benedict Option.” Coined by Orthodox writer Rod Dreher, it’s a reference to the form of Christian life pioneered by St. Benedict, filtered by the cryptic conclusion to Alasdair McIntyre’s *After Virtue* and revived for the church in a secularizing world. The Benedict Option, topic of an October 10 symposium at Georgetown, promotes thick Christian communities that pursue their vision of a good communal, liturgical, and family life, with a distinct and self-consciously separate ethic to preserve them from the acids of postmodernity.

A still softer, more rarified version of Christian separatism is something Rob Saler calls “polis ecclesiology.” (I [reviewed Saler’s book](#) in the *Century* earlier this year.) Polis ecclesiology is a commitment to the church as a concrete, visible, enduring community with its own norms of thought and discourse. Where the “Benedict Option” often appeals to burned-out veterans of the culture wars, “polis ecclesiology” is more typically the work of former mainline Protestants who have become Roman Catholic for the sake of a thicker, more rigorous conception of what it means to be in Christian community.

The impulses driving these separatist tendencies are reasonably clear and sympathetic. Secular culture, discourse, and institutions really are in some ways at odds with Christian attempts to claim and maintain a profound and distinct religious

identity.

Unfortunately, neither the problem nor the solution is all that new. Both are visible, in garish exaggeration, in the IBLP and its affiliated institutions and cultural products. And as the newer, more urbane versions of Christian separatism mature into movements with their own institutions and gated communities of discourse, it seems inevitable that they will experience the same crises. Separation from secular schools can very easily lead to separation from secular child welfare systems. The belief that “the church” uniquely guards Christian truth against a hostile “world” can very quickly create the insularity that is a background feature of every story of sexual abuse or financial fraud in a purist organization. The conviction that secular norms on the status of women and children, or on the handling of sexual assault, are at heart an attack on Christian sexual ethics or the family itself will create endless opportunities for predators, narcissists, and other bad actors to exploit people who have little authority in their communities.

The ever-intensifying race to salvage or redefine some notion of Christian identity in a secularizing world will lead to some beautiful and challenging experiments. That is as it should be. But those experiments will come with dangers we have already seen. Those who wish to minimize those dangers should think soon and hard about how to do so.