

When priests are sexual tourists

Kevin O'Neill uses the case study of a predatory Catholic priest shuffled to Guatemala to discuss provocative ideas about abuse and justice.

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In Review



Unforgivable

An Abusive Priest and the Church That Sent Him Abroad

By Kevin Lewis O'Neill
University of California Press

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What is it like to be a survivor? Have we truly reckoned with the scale and scope of clergy sexual abuse? What can church leaders do differently to support victims and their families? As a researcher who has worked with Catholic survivors for the past 15 years, these are some of the questions that I sit with each day. And so it was with deep appreciation that I found them centered in Kevin O'Neill's latest book, *Unforgivable: An Abusive Priest and the Church That Sent Him Abroad*.

The book is a case study of Father David Roney, a Catholic priest who escaped accountability by fleeing from Minnesota to a rural mission in the Indigenous highlands of Guatemala. *Unforgivable* highlights the Catholic Church's callous practice of shuffling priests not just within dioceses but also across international borders. The story revolves around Roney, several of his victims, and a small cast of bishops, nuns, and priests who were feckless in their limited attempts to halt his predation. Roney was one of at least 25 toxic priests in the United States who bishops dumped into the Global South.

Unforgivable is organized chronologically. After describing Roney's formation and early pastoral assignments in Minnesota, O'Neill takes readers to New Mexico, where the Catholic Church ran an infamous treatment center for pedophile priests. Next, the author outlines Roney's retirement in Guatemala, where he adopted a young Indigenous orphan named "Justina" (a pseudonym) and lived until his death in 2003. O'Neill then explains how the 2002 scandal in Boston transformed the legal landscape for White American survivors. The book's final section, which is written as a first-person narrative, recounts O'Neill's extensive efforts to find Justina and then—over the course of several years—to guide her to recognize her father as an abuser, imagine herself as one of his victims, and hire a law firm on her behalf.

At the heart of the book is O'Neill's central insight "that the category of abuse and its corresponding identities exist only at certain times, in certain places, and in certain social settings." There would not have been a clergy sexual abuse crisis in the United States, he says, without the institutional apparatuses of psychology, journalism, and the criminal justice system. Psychologists brought the language of "abuser" and "victim" into our vocabulary. Lawyers generated piles of depositions and affidavits that exposed the church's secret abuse archives. And journalists connected the dots across disparate geographies and jurisdictions.

In Guatemala, O'Neill argues, "clergy sexual abuse" does not exist. Undoubtedly, the actions and dynamics that Americans conceptualize and name as "clergy sexual abuse" occur there, perhaps at even higher rates than in the United States. But, according to O'Neill's reasoning, less industrialized cultures lack the psychological, legal, and judicial frameworks to interpret and understand those dynamics as abusive. In short, "experts made clerical sexual abuse recognizable in the United States, while an absence of expertise made the phenomenon unspeakable in Guatemala."

Surely, "Unspeakable" must have been among O'Neill's draft titles for the book. Every chapter repeats the claim that abuse remains an unarticulated and unintelligible category in many cultures. By contrast, I only found the book's actual title, *Unforgivable*, once, buried in the acknowledgments. If my hunch is correct, O'Neill and his editors likely pivoted away from "Unspeakable" out of respect for another recent book. In the award-winning *Unspeakable: A Life Beyond Sexual Morality* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), historian Rachel Hope Cleves provides a breathtaking account of the child abuse and sexual tourism perpetrated by Norman Douglas. A famous British writer, Douglas is known best for his 1917 novel *South Wind*, a tale of religious hedonism on a mythical version of the Italian island of Capri, the same site where most of Douglas's victims lived in real life. Peculiarly, I could not find a citation to Cleves in O'Neill's footnotes or bibliography.

At any rate, this overlap in titles hints at other similarities. Although I hold Cleves's book in the highest esteem, O'Neill explains their shared theoretical argument—namely, that certain acts we consider fundamentally abhorrent are also, in other times and places, neither understood nor named as criminal—with equal clarity. The

two authors also share a fascination with the problem of sexual tourism. O'Neill argues that Roney was a sexual tourist (just as Douglas was) and that he and his superiors selected Guatemala for his exile precisely because it was a country where "sex abuse" did not exist juridically. In Guatemala, O'Neill claims, Roney surrounded himself with children all day without so much as evoking suspicion from the local townspeople, let alone drawing the attention of civil authorities.

Although this "sex abuse does not exist there" line of reasoning might at first sound like an abstract theory of language games, O'Neill compellingly explains its practical consequences. Alice and Carol, two of Roney's Minnesota victims, chose to identify themselves as survivors after seeing Boston victims in the news. That process made Alice and Carol legible *as victims* in American society and, in turn, this new identity made them eligible to receive monetary financial settlements from the Catholic Church. By contrast, Roney's Guatemalan orphan, Justina, lived outside of the margins of victimhood.

In fact, it took O'Neill several years to convince Justina that she was a victim of clergy sexual abuse. He set up a whole team to lead her to that understanding and to support her in its aftermath—including American psychologists, other anthropologists, and fancy lawyers. Through their collective efforts, Justina eventually came to understand and articulate herself as a victim. But the US judicial system still failed her: in the end, Justina was able to recoup less than \$2,000 as civil compensation for the decade she spent under Roney's eerie gaze.

The narrative chapters of *Unforgivable* stand out for their lack of engagement with other scholarship. O'Neill's lengthy footnotes enumerate whole subdisciplines of secondary literature, but those citations rarely provide more specifics about his primary sources and only gesture sparsely toward the kinds of intellectual conversations typically found in titles published by a university press. The one glaring exception is Michel Foucault (1926–1984), the towering French philosopher O'Neill mentions in every section of the book.

O'Neill leverages Foucault in two directions. In the first move, O'Neill invokes Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, a famous analysis of the ways that discourses about "deviant" sex have changed over time and place. O'Neill draws extensively on this Foucauldian insight to justify his thesis that clergy sexual abuse and its corresponding social identities are historically contingent and culturally dependent. Roney as an abuser and Justina as a survivor can only exist when and where language and culture identify them as such.

Unfortunately, O'Neill does not alert readers to the fact that he and Foucault would surely have disagreed about the solutions that *Unforgivable* advocates for. Foucault's corpus unapologetically critiqued the very institutions of the nation-state that O'Neill places all of his faith in: judicial processes, medical diagnosticians, psychologists, sexologists, attorneys, politicians, and penal codes. So there is a very substantive tension here between Foucault as he is normally read versus Foucault as O'Neill uses him.

Unforgivable's second use of Foucault will be even less recognizable to most readers. Citing a widely debunked French television interview, O'Neill alleges that Foucault was, just like Roney, a sexual tourist. O'Neill accentuates speculative accounts of Foucault visiting Tunisia to have sex with prepubescent boys, even going so far as to emphasize the salacious rumor that Foucault "abused children atop gravestones under a full moon." To put it generously, this is a dubious interpretation of Foucault's homosexuality and the philosopher's time in Tunisia. I suggest that readers who are not already familiar with Foucault seek out additional context from reputable public sources, such as the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

In addition to being somewhat perplexed by O'Neill's uses of Foucault, my own research with Catholic survivors is sorely out of step with several of O'Neill's main arguments, including his faith in the potential of the American criminal justice system to help survivors attain justice and repair, his statement that survivor camaraderie relies on "imagined" communities (rather than real, local relationships), and his claim that international abuse cases are intrinsically different from (and more valuable than) more regional case studies.

These objections, however, constitute genuine areas of scholarly disagreement. O'Neill presents provocative interpretations that are ripe for lively intellectual debates.

On the whole, *Unforgivable* is an engaging and fast-paced story that orients us toward the often overlooked international dimensions of clergy sexual abuse. It is well written, incisive in its descriptions of people, and eloquent in its painting of distant landscapes. Thoroughly in command of his narrative, O'Neill unspools Roney's violent acts with the tone and foreshadowing of a true crime podcast.