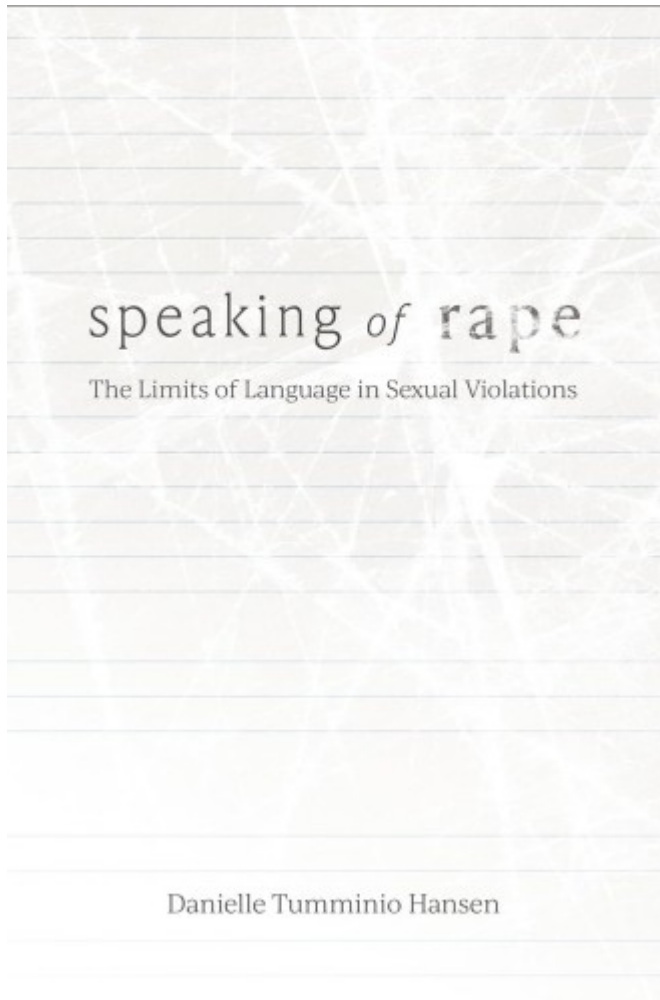


Trending topics: Sexual assault and the church

selected by [Jessica Mesman](#) in the [May 2025](#) issue

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In Review



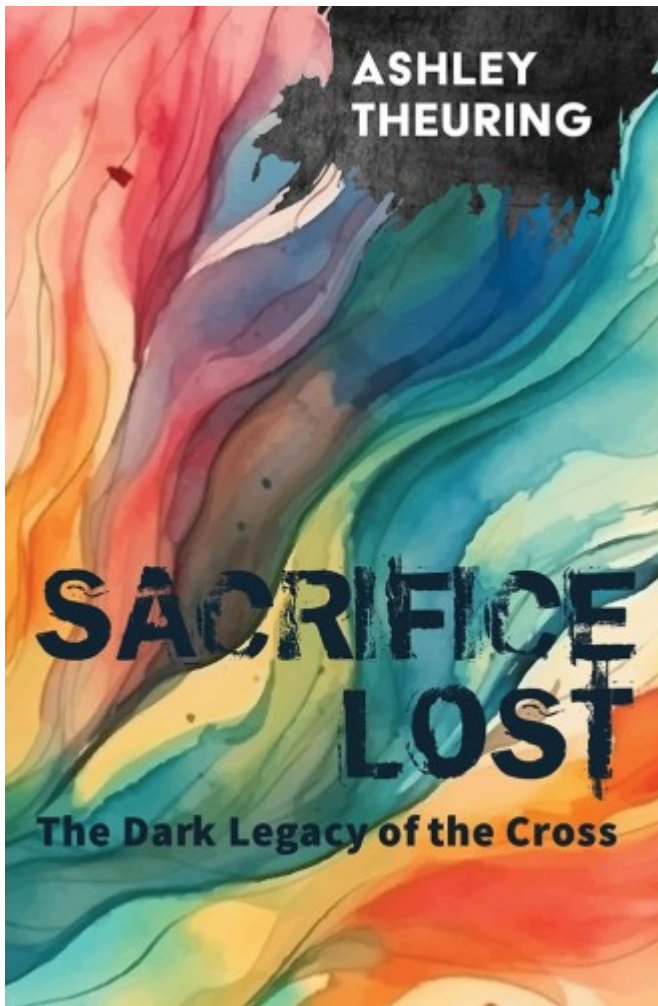
Speaking of Rape

The Limits of Language in Sexual Violations

By Danielle Tumminio Hansen

Fortress

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Sacrifice Lost

The Dark Legacy of the Cross

By Ashley Theuring

Orbis

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"A monumental gift to the church and to survivors alike."

—LISA SHARON HARPER,
author of *The Very Good Gospel* and *Fortune*

A NEW VISION OF GOD
THROUGH THE EYES OF
SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVORS

SURVIVING



GRACE JI-SUN KIM AND
SUSAN M. SHAW

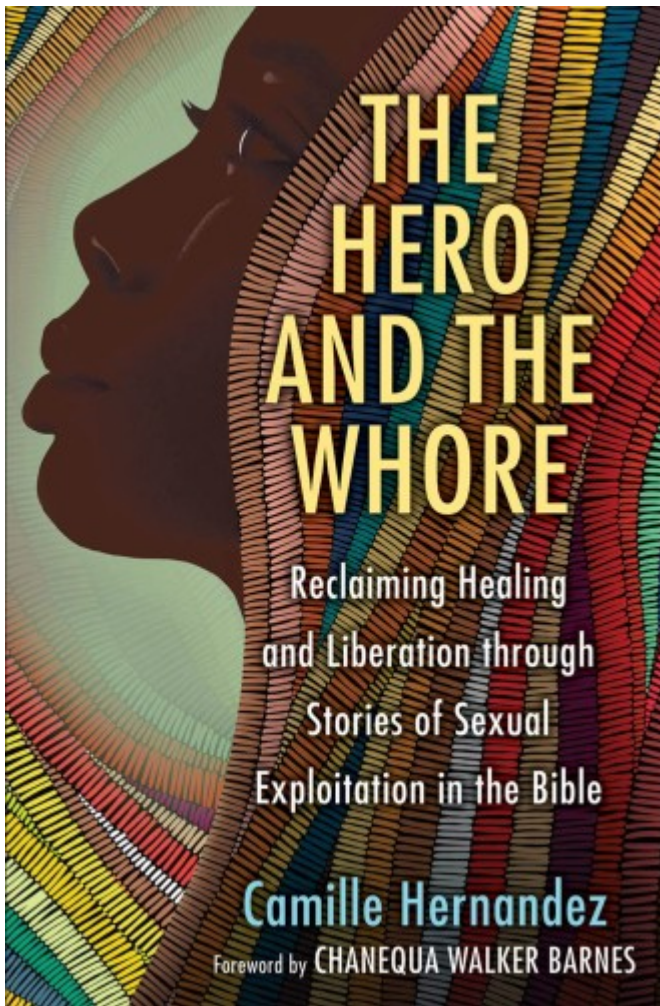
Surviving God

A New Vision of God Through the Eyes of Sexual Abuse Survivors

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Broadleaf Books

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The Hero and the Whore

Reclaiming Healing and Liberation Through Stories of Sexual Exploitation in the Bible

By Camille Hernandez

Westminster John Knox

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Speaking of Rape: The Limits of Language in Sexual violations

By Danielle Tumminio Hansen

Fortress

Danielle Tumminio Hansen draws on feminist theory, psychology, practical theology, and her own personal experience to explore how the words we use for sexual

violations, privately and legally, influence our perceptions of victims, survivors, and perpetrators. She problematizes so many of those words that I am tempted to append multiple parenthetical caveats here. For example, “When we reduce an individual to a perpetrator,” she writes, “we become cognitively tempted to conflate character and action . . . when these two things are not the same.” The language of “victim” and “perpetrator,” Hansen argues, encourages us to believe only perfect victims and to suspect only people who fit prevailing stereotypes of abusers. She prefers the terms “assailant” and “offender” or even “person who inflicted harm,” which create distance between the person and the problem.

Hansen takes great care in her analysis to show the “linguistic and epistemic harm” that results when our language fails to express the full spectrum of sexual violation and instead reinforces cultural rape scripts that perpetuate misogyny, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and classism. She proposes that restorative justice might be a way to counter linguistic injustice and offer those who have suffered sexual violations a voice.

RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Sacrifice Lost: The Dark Legacy of the Cross

By Ashley Theuring
Orbis

Practical theologian Ashley Theuring examines how atonement theories have both perpetuated the abuse crisis in the church and helped survivors to make sense of their suffering. She begins with a survey of three classical atonement theories—*Christus Victor*, substitutionary atonement, and moral influence—and then describes their contemporary critiques from feminist, liberation, and nonviolent theologians, always looking to how these narratives can act as agents of healing rather than harm. She then offers a brief history of the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, contrasting the disastrous institutional response with best practices for managing abuse. Like Hansen, she acknowledges the promise of restorative justice practices for addressing and alleviating communal and individual suffering. Finally, Theuring revisits the gospels’ Passion narratives to uncover a modern understanding of

crucifixion and resurrection, weaving these themes into narratives shared by survivors in order to place them at the theological heart of the church.

Theuring looks to a future that is truly survivor-centered, one where the presence of survivors in a church community can be a source of hope and healing instead of moral injury. It does not have to be the case, she says, that narratives of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection "reinforce coerced self-sacrifice of the powerless." They can be "powerful and radical examples of the reality of evil, critiques of self-sacrifice, God's suffering solidarity, and the communal role in suffering and healing."

RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Surviving God: A New Vision of God Through the Eyes of Sexual Abuse Survivors

By Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw

Broadleaf Books

Surviving God also centers the voices of abuse survivors while rethinking potentially harmful Christian beliefs. While Theuring focuses on atonement theology and sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan Shaw demonstrate more broadly how traditional ways of thinking about God can perpetuate abuse in a variety of Christian contexts and prevent survivors and their communities from healing. Both authors are survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and they also consider themselves survivors of God—or at least of the God of their childhood churches, the "God of bad ideas that marginalize and oppress."

But the book's title also refers to the God who survives when we discard the harmful beliefs, tropes, and language that justify and excuse abuse. The "surviving God" is the God who suffers with us. Kim and Shaw tell their own stories and incorporate the voices of other survivors, and they also revisit the stories of those who survive (and don't survive) sexual violence in the Bible, where they find "God as the one who sides with people victimized by sexual violence and who demands justice for them."

The Hero and the Whore: Reclaiming Healing and Liberation Through Stories of Sexual Exploitation in the Bible

By Camille Hernandez

Westminster John Knox

Where Kim and Shaw employ a gentle approach to problematic scriptures, Camille Hernandez throws a stick of dynamite. Ever heard Sarai described as a pimp's "bottom bitch"? Me neither. But Hernandez argues convincingly that Sarai's proximity to power encourages her to regurgitate the same system that oppresses her in order to oppress Hagar. The connections Hernandez makes between modern-day sex trafficking and the story of Abram, Sarai, and Hagar bring these characters to life in a way I've never previously experienced. Hernandez works this obliterative magic again and again, blasting the most troubling scriptural stories about women and sex to smithereens, preparing me to throw the whole dang story in the trash—before she starts picking up the pieces and showing where God lives in the shards.

How do we make sense of God's command, once God finally acknowledges Hagar, to return to her abuser (Gen. 16:9-10)? "Too often we hear this verse telling us to return to the place of harm, violence, and enslavement," Hernandez says, and as a former evangelical, she once accepted that reading herself. Womanist theology gave her the space to question and walk away from it altogether. Only she doesn't. She comes to terms with it through her own experience of abuse and recovery, acknowledging the hard truth that for many survivors, "there are certain situations in which returning is inevitable." Sometimes a foster child is sent back to an unhealthy family system. Sometimes we have to co-parent with an unhealthy ex-partner. "Returning does not mean you succumb to the environment and become the victim again," Hernandez writes. "Healing is a part of the returning." She notes that before God sends Hagar back to Abram and Sarai, God affirms Hagar's worth and promises her a future. In Hernandez's reading, God *entrusts* Hagar to return.

Her readings of Leah and Dinah, Potiphar's wife, Gomer, and other stories of sexual exploitation are equally unflinching, devastating, and even enraging. They're also creative, fully imagined, and, ultimately, hopeful. I closed this book full of righteous anger and a deep admiration for how Hernandez runs straight at texts of terror and real-life horror stories. "The good news is that while the women of the Bible can't

change their course of action,” Hernandez writes, “knowing their stories helps us to change ours.”