

**Review of Gina Messina-Dysert's**  
***Rape Culture and Spiritual Violence:***  
***Religion, Testimony, and Visions of Healing***

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*Rape Culture and Spiritual Violence: Religion, Testimony, and Visions of Healing* by Gina Messina-Dysert. Pages: 127. New York: Routledge, 2015.

**Abstract:** In *Rape Culture and Spiritual Violence*, Gina Messina-Dysert asserts that rape impairs both individual spiritual health and the well-being of the Christian community. She also claims that it challenges theologians to confront what she considers the faults of the patriarchal anthropology of the Christian tradition. Using testimonies from non-fiction literary reports of rape, Messina-Dysert provides a forum from which these women's voices can be heard. This forum eradicates the silence rape culture perpetuates and establishes the act of testifying as a discursive practice. According to Messina-Dysert, community must be rebuilt for salvation to occur, and this rebuilding entails a shift from patriarchy. To initiate this shift, she defines and defies rape culture while exploring the vacillations between honor and shame that are related to rape. Most importantly, she gives voice, validation, and support to victims of rape.

**Keywords:** rape, violence, spiritual, healing, women

Growing concern about the intimate relationship between religion and violence prompts theologians to reconsider how theology supports violence, and how theology can provide resources for healing from violence. Gina Messina-Dysert's *Rape Culture and Spiritual Violence: Religion, Testimony, and Visions of Healing* focuses on a specific manifestation of violence, rape, which is supported and denied by rape culture, defined as a

“cyclical system where rape is viewed as inevitable and is accepted as a fact of life and impossible to change.”<sup>1</sup>

As a theologian contributing to the study of religion and violence, Messina-Dysert denounces rape and fills the silences of rape culture with real women’s voices. In this text, she examines the sources, dynamics, and victims of rape culture and introduces ways of resistance and opportunities for change. In a poignant memorial to her mother, Messina-Dysert states that this book gives voice to many women. By articulating “the anguish” that her mother endured as a victim of rape culture, Messina-Dysert honors her mother’s experience in defiance of rape culture and in an effort to liberate her suffering.<sup>2</sup>

In the first chapter, Messina-Dysert explains her use of terms, including her use of the word “victim” as validating the realities of those who have been raped, an important qualification in light of the expanding field of trauma studies that often promotes alternative expressions of a victim’s experience.<sup>3</sup> In addition, she indicates how she will traverse the landscape of rape culture using the testimonies of rape victims to expose global constructions of rape culture.

Chapter two examines the elements that support rape culture within religion, with an emphasis on Christianity. The investigation combines biblical passages, purity legends, and narratives surrounding the virgin martyrs and includes the case of the most recent

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<sup>1</sup> Gina Messina-Dysert, *Rape Culture and Spiritual Violence: Religion, Testimony, and Visions of Healing* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 67.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Lenore Terr, *Too Scared to Cry: How Trauma Affects Children and Ultimately Us All* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); and in theology see Jennifer Beste, *God and the Victim: Theological Reflections on Evil, Victimization, and Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009); Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

virgin martyr Saint Maria Goretti, which Messina-Dysert asserts epitomizes the nature of rape culture encompassed by “the notion that women want to be raped and men bear no responsibility.”<sup>4</sup> Referring to the biblical examples of Dinah, the unnamed pilegish in Judges 19, the rape of Tamar, and the gang rape of David’s pilegish, Messina-Dysert builds her case against rape culture reinforced by religion. For instance, the lack of biblical exegesis of the Judges text, the unnamed state of the pilegish, the missing element of the women’s own experiences of the events, and finally, the failure to name rape serve as evidence of a thriving rape culture. Furthermore, Messina-Dysert argues that the central message conveyed by “andocentric texts,” purity legends, and the support of women’s martyrdom is that “women’s purity is more precious than her life.”<sup>5</sup>

In chapter three, Messina-Dysert calls readers to hear testimonies of rape victims. She employs twenty-five cases of non-fiction literary reports of rape as testimonies in order to give voice to the women, eradicating the silence rape culture perpetuates and establishing the act of testifying as a discursive practice. The reports detail stranger rape, acquaintance rape, marital rape, gang rape, honor rape, rape within war, rape within the military, and sex trafficking, showing how the body is the scene of the crime, yet the event itself is often not treated as a crime. One woman’s voice, Muktar’s, echoes throughout Messina-Dysert’s text: she laments that “Rape is the ultimate weapon.”<sup>6</sup> Through the use of women’s testimonies, Messina-Dysert captures the devastation of a self destroyed by rape. In addition, she notes a critical aspect of rape trauma indicated by the experience of betrayal trauma, which occurs when the people and institutions that should support rape

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 45.

victims—parents, law enforcement, and the armed forces, for instance—fail to do so and rape remains denied, ignored, and shattering to women’s spirit.

Using forthright language in chapter four, Messina-Dysert explores rape and rape culture in a contemporary context. Opening with an assertion about the Steubenville rape case, she critiques cross-cultural interpretations of rape and what is not rape, stating that “the failure to define the act of rape properly is widespread,” which illustrates rape culture.<sup>7</sup> In addition, she details the function of rape by arguing that rather than being a sexual act, rape is meant to “dominate, control, and humiliate.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, she writes, “Rape is an act of torture.”<sup>9</sup>

Rape culture supports torture, a social evil that leads to isolation and alienation, which manifests in the idea that “we teach our daughters not to get raped rather than teaching our sons not to rape.”<sup>10</sup> Messina-Dysert effectively argues that language downplays the seriousness of rape and assists in the categorization of gender. She faults the media and rape myths in demeaning women and defining rape in terms of struggle. She adds dimension to the rape experience asserting that a second rape occurs when victim report rape by the medical treatment involved and by the invasive juridical procedures women undergo. These leave women “feeling ashamed and at fault for their own victimization.”<sup>11</sup>

In chapter 5, Messina-Dysert turns toward *han*, drawing from Chung Hyun Kyung’s relation of *han* to the suffering of victims of sexual violence and her integration of *han* with

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 76.

Christian theology. Messina-Dysert approaches *han* similarly to describe the suffering victims endure as a result of rape, articulating that *han* represents the “Korean concept and term that describes the compression of multiple sufferings that damage the spirit.”<sup>12</sup> Messina-Dysert argues that rape culture participates in the construction of *han* by communicating that rape is the worse possible thing that could happen in a woman’s life. The result: perceptions of impurity or feeling “dirty” which lead to the inexpressibility of pain, invisibility, shame, and self-blame.

Affirming multiple possibilities inherent in resurrection, chapter 6 explores the shamanistic ritual *Han-Pu-Ri* that releases and liberates *han* through “speaking and hearing, naming, and changing.”<sup>13</sup> *Han-Pu-Ri* discharges through speech the horrors of rape and fosters forms of resistance, which rely on community. Messina-Dysert cites *Take Back the Night* marches and *SlutWalks* as examples, but she also importantly recognizes that just two people can compose a community where healing can occur. KWAT (the Korean Association of Women Theologians) represents a theological example of community whose method includes recognition of women’s experience as a crucial source for doing theology. Messina-Dysert claims that similar theological methodologies can foster a release of *han*. Such release constitutes a kind of salvation that Messina-Dysert asserts does not eradicate suffering but allows it to be heard, felt, and shared. In the final chapter, Messina-Dysert repeats her demand that society work to eradicate and disempower rape culture, offering practical recommendations. For example, she stresses training as a mode of changing

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

attitudes in law enforcement and media outlets. Lastly, she emphasizes that transforming rape culture is a global need, not merely a national or individual one.

Throughout this book, Messina-Dysert serves as a theological guide, especially but not exclusively to women. Through her mother's memory, she offers courage to women of rape to speak their truth in safety and trust. Such trust builds through the denouncement and subsequent eradication of rape culture. Messina-Dysert's text provides a forum where the horrors of rape can both be heard and shared. In addition, Messina-Dysert initiates a theological move to deconstruct terms within the Christian tradition, while drawing from other traditions for sources of understanding and inspiration, both to heal rape victims and to promote the destruction of a culture that supports rape.

What I wonder after reading is where can we uncover points of resistance to rape culture within the Christian tradition itself? Furthermore, in light of recent research in epistemologies of the body, how can rape culture be explored in conjunction with theological understandings of the somatic to promote a release of Messina-Dysert's understanding of *han*?<sup>14</sup> And perhaps most importantly, how can religious communities and victims continue to do what Messina-Dysert does so well: interrupt the culture of silence around rape and confront the rape culture that demeans and commodifies women's bodies so that healing and resurrection can happen?

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<sup>14</sup> For instance see Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

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