

# Sexual Violence and Communities of Trauma on American College Campuses: Challenges and Possibilities for Christian Ethics

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The silence surrounding sexual violence on college campuses is a theological and public health issue that impacts the entire community. Drawing upon interdisciplinary sources from theological ethics, forensic nursing and psychology, this paper will take a closer look at the “knotted” relationship between mental health and sexual violence as it appears at religiously-affiliated colleges in the United States. Implications for Christian ethics will be explored.

In 2011, the Obama-Biden administration highlighted the issue of sexual assault on college campuses with an expanded version of Title IX (1972). While this bi-partisan effort brought necessary attention to a social problem and public health issue that is often disregarded and shrouded in silence and shame, its implementation presents practical and theoretical challenges for many religiously-affiliated institutions of higher education. Donna Freitas explains:

Questions arise about how to handle victims and alleged perpetrators, how to involve (or not) the police, and how and when to educate students around sexual assault. At religiously-affiliated colleges these questions can be even more complicated, especially if the institution is heavily invested in proving to itself and the public that sex doesn’t happen on its campus. (2015, 256-7). Religiously-affiliated schools for reasons ranging from concerns over enrollment to discomfort discussing sexuality and gender among faculty and administration.

Yet, college students are not talking either. Despite its presence, sexual assault is seriously underreported. This is often due to pressure from peers, embarrassment, self-blame, fear of others finding out, lack of support from the university and health services, and other factors. Irrespective of reporting, sexual assault can have lasting health consequences, many of which manifest in mental health issues. This cycle of violence-silence-violence (and lack of care) has consequences not only for victim-survivors, but also for the entire community. As I will argue, this cycle creates communities marked by fear, mistrust, and betrayal. Drawing upon interdisciplinary sources, this paper will begin to identify both the challenges this issue presents and the possibilities for healing.

## References

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