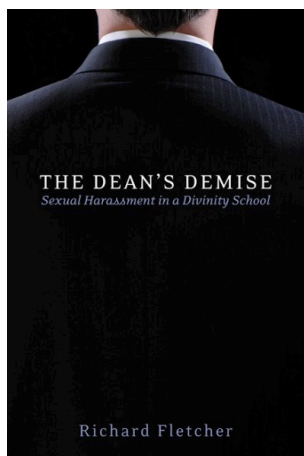




The Dean's Demise: Sexual Harassment in a Divinity School

Fletcher, Richard
Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016

Book Review

Tags: boundaries and ethics | classroom power and privilege | harassment | sexual harassment

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The Dean's Demise offers a disturbing reminder that seminaries and the church are not exempt from the abuse of pastoral powers to coerce sexual demands from colleagues, students, and even children entrusted to their spiritual care. With over fifty years of experience in theological education in the roles of minister, professor, and dean, Richard Fletcher crafts a compelling fictional case study of Dean Karl Wolf and presents comprehensive viewpoints from the perpetrator, the victims and their families, and the school administrators.

Fletcher starts the book by describing young Karl Wolf as a promising scholar while foreshadowing his potential liability by alluding to his insatiable need for admiration and power. Fletcher then takes the reader through Wolf's academic rise to become the dean of a prominent divinity school, all the while sketching his sexual hunts. Wolf is indeed a predator. The reading experience feels almost voyeuristic at times. Fletcher evokes a complex range of emotions in the reader with the secret intimate details of affairs and their aftermaths. Wolf's blatant disregard for the wellbeing of his victims and his self-serving lies fuel an emotional response and at the same time demand that one thinks through one's feelings with regard to the physical, emotional, and spiritual damages inflicted on the victims and their families.

In addition to providing a profile of the mind and actions of a sexual predator, in The Dean's Demise we confront the response of seminary officials, including their theological and moral deliberations, and the process of how the school ends up resolving, or rather settling the sexual harassment case against the dean. In light of the multiple stakeholders presented in the unfolding narrative, this book is a rich resource for generating discussions on many fronts, including theological reflections on power and the brokenness of humanity, justice issues and

accountability, personality and mental health issues in seminaries, and practical legality around sexual harassment cases.

A limitation to the helpfulness of this book is that the content is outdated. Although the book was published in 2016, the accounts of the events are recorded from 1979 to the early summer months of 1993. The content of the book, the nature of Wolf's sexual predatory behavior, and the ways the school administration respond, are consistent with the time period in which the book is set. Since the early 1990's, sexual harassment awareness and training initiatives in workplaces and schools have increased. As opposed to the blatant predatory behavior of Wolf detailed in the book, now there are specific definitions and criterion of more nuanced behaviors which constitute sexual harassment. With concrete definitions, guidelines, and policies in place, today's academic administration's deliberation and handling of such cases is very different than the deliberation portrayed in the book that relied on collective wisdom.

The school administrative demographics are another aspect which date the book - being all men, presumably white. With increasing female and minority faculty members, deans, and presidents in academic institutions, different understandings and experiences shape how power, abuse, and sexual harassment are defined and handled. Whereas all the victims in Fletcher's book are female, in today's reality there are more women in power positions that blur and render more complex binary and stereotypically gendered depictions of perpetrator and victim. As sexual predatory behaviors occur within the context of relationships of power and privilege, gender and cultural influences must be considered when deliberating sexual harassment cases.

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