

As a lawyer, my career has been dedicated to representing sex trafficking survivors in civil lawsuits. I often speak about my somewhat unique work as an anti-sex trafficking attorney. [As part of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta's Commission on Human Trafficking, I visit churches throughout Georgia to educate them on the issue of sex trafficking.](#) I always say there are more victims of sex trafficking in Georgia than most people think. And there are nowhere near enough resources to support survivors once they exit "the life." Though most of my days are occupied with supporting survivors, that extremely sympathetic group is not who I want to discuss here.

The Outpouring of God: Challenged by an 8-Year-Old

Several years ago I participated in a book study at St. Luke's Episcopal Church (Atlanta) on Richard Rohr's *The Universal Christ*. At the beginning, Rohr talks about the Christian mystic [Caryll Houselander](#). She came off a train in England and was overcome when she suddenly saw a vision of Christ in everyone, in every face. Rohr goes on to say, "Everything visible, without exception, is the outpouring of God." I found this idea very comforting at the time, because I had not applied it to hard cases.

When I first started this work, my 8-year-old son asked me what my job involved. Unsure, and wholly unprepared to talk with him about sex trafficking, I vaguely said that I represented clients who had essentially been kidnapped by bad people and were hurt. He immediately corrected me. He said, "they're not bad people, they just did bad things." This floored me because that was something we had taught him, that there are no inherently "bad" people. That all people carry something divine. He apparently remembered that better than I had.

Are Sex Traffickers and Buyers Truly the Christ Suffering?

That was the first time I had to connect the idea of everything and everyone being an outpouring of God to such a hard case. Are sex traffickers really an outpouring of God? Are the men—thousands and thousands of them in metro Atlanta alone—who buy sex with children and coerced women an outpouring of God? This is a question I have thought about for years.

Of her awakening, Houselander wrote:

I saw too the reverence that everyone must have for the sinner; instead of condoning his sin, which is in reality his utmost sorrow, one must comfort the Christ who is suffering in him. And this reverence must be paid *even to those sinners whose souls seem to be dead*, because it is Christ, who is the life of the soul, who is dead in them; they are His tombs, and Christ in the tomb is potentially the risen Christ

The Ground for Resurrection: Embracing Radical Forgiveness

Ultimately, resurrection doesn't happen around anything but death. Even in the born-again aspect of the death of your former self. The ground for resurrection is a barren place of intolerable suffering. Remember that Saul, later Paul, actively participated in and oversaw the execution of early Christians right up until the scales fell from his own eyes.

I wonder whether the church today could embrace such radical forgiveness? If a sex trafficker, or a man who had purchased sex from children or abused women stood up in your church and asked for forgiveness, would it be given? Could such a person become a leader like Paul? Is everyone *really* welcome at church? Paul's example says they should be. Even, maybe especially, the hard cases.



Jonathan Tonge is a partner in [Andersen, Tate, & Carr's anti-human trafficking division](#). He represents survivors of sex trafficking in civil lawsuits against businesses that profited from their victimization. Alongside Pat McDonough, Jonathan made history by filing the first civil sex trafficking cases in Georgia. As an adjunct professor, he also teaches human trafficking litigation at the University of Georgia's School of Law. He serves on the [Diocese of Atlanta Commission on Human Trafficking](#), developing and presenting awareness and prevention trainings to community groups and churches in Georgia.

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