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## **Spiritual Abuse within Christianity: Implications for Pastoral Care & Counselling Practice**

### **Key words:**

Spiritual Abuse: Pastoral Care: Counselling Practice

### **Summary**

This study investigates human experience of a phenomenon that is little researched or understood. Stories of those who have identified themselves as having been spiritually abused within the Christian tradition are explored, together with existing theories, whilst the implications for counselling practice are also briefly discussed. This study acknowledges and builds upon previous research in spiritual abuse; however, much of the research completed to date has its origins in the United States and within the Christian Fundamentalist Movement; it is also ten or more years old. From a cultural perspective, research into spiritual abuse is generally inadequate within the United Kingdom. Furthermore, study exploring the implications for counselling practice is lacking in this context, resulting in noticeable gaps in academic work. Research into spiritual abuse and counselling spiritually abused victims who are Christians is also very limited within the United Kingdom and there is therefore a fundamental lack of awareness of spiritual abuse within the Church and the social sciences. Spiritual abuse is often thought to be limited to a phenomenon of sects or cults and not generally viewed as a problem within the Christian community. Therefore, to raise awareness of the problem and further the research, this paper examines what it is that constitutes spiritual abuse within Christianity, its core features and causalities and the counselling implications that are likely to be encountered. The literature reviewed is of a qualitative design and a phenomenological analysis.

## **Introduction**

### *Aims and purposes of this study*

This study is a review of research literature into spiritual abuse and answers the questions that the literature provokes. Material is gathered from a range of literature, crossing the full spectrum of the Christian tradition and secular organisations. I have employed a phenomenological analysis and have identified from the data, links between individual pieces of work, and a cluster of meanings from significant statements, sentences or quotes that provide an understanding of lived experiences.

This study will identify what is meant by spiritual abuse and its key themes. A phenomenological approach is implemented in attempting to gain an understanding of human experiences and the meanings they attach (Hart 1998).

This study therefore sets out to answer the following research questions;

1. What constitutes spiritual abuse within the Christian faith culture?
2. What are its core features and causalities?
3. What are the implications for pastoral care & counselling?

## **Rationale and contribution to knowledge**

The rationale for this paper is drawn from relevant literature, personal experience and from the testimonies of victims of spiritual abuse. Little has been written that focuses upon spiritual abuse in the cultural context of the Christian tradition and which considers the implications for pastoral care or counselling practice. It is therefore important to investigate issues relating to spiritual abuse and relevant existing theories and to create a dialogue between the research in spiritual abuse, the Church and the social sciences, whilst also investigating gaps in the literature (Creswell 2007). It is acknowledged that this study cannot be generalised as it is focused upon experience.

This review explores individual experiences of spiritual abuse, their descriptions, definitions and meanings, providing a rationale for further research and knowledge for pastoral care and counselling practice. It provides a significant contribution to the Church and the social sciences and provides counsellors and clergy in particular, with a greater understanding when working with those who have been spiritually abused. The aim is to urge professionals to look at the fullest range of abuses and to

include spiritual abuse; by examining the very structures and processes that aid the perpetration of this form of abuse (Beed 1998). Spiritual abuse can occur within virtually any organisational structure, (Henke 1996) whether it is a family, Church or any other authoritarian relationship that involves faith issues. As Oakley and Kinmond (2007 p9) confirm, spiritual abuse is often thought to be limited to a phenomenon of sects or cults and not generally viewed as being a problem within the Christian community.

### **What is Spiritual abuse?**

Ward (2007) argues that a problem arises in the definition of the term spiritual abuse because it is somewhat new in general literature and, to date is sparingly used. 'Abuse' is a broad term that is generally understood, 'spirituality' is equally broad and however, it is less implicit. The phrase *spiritual abuse* rarely appeared in literature until around ten to fifteen years ago, and remained mainly within the context of Christianity (Ward 2007 p13). There was some earlier material that explored the dynamics of unhealthy spirituality, but it failed to specifically name this as spiritual abuse (Ward 2007 p13). According to Henzel (1997) spiritual abuse has been described as the abuse of power in the context of Christian fellowship with the core features of legalism, authoritarianism, spiritual intimidation, manipulation and excessive discipline. Blue (1993) suggests that all abuse occurs when someone exerts power over another and uses that power to hurt. Ward (2007 p iii) clearly, describes spiritual abuse as, spiritual bullying, this being the maltreatment of a person in a spiritual context. Churches with sound and solid Biblical doctrine can be considered *cultic* when they practice techniques of manipulation and thought reform (brainwashing). In general, spiritual abuse is acknowledged to be the misuse of a position of power, leadership, or influence to further the selfish interests of someone other than the individual who needs help. It occurs out of a doctrinal position, or of legitimate personal needs of a leader that are being met by illegitimate means.

### **A spiritually abusive system**

Spiritual abuse is an issue of power (Beed 1998 p18) and, according to Benyei (1998); power is the ability to influence an outcome. Beed (1998 p7) also confirms that power is a necessity of life and humans need to exercise power to organise society. The behaviour of persons in a community is determined by where they are placed in relation to others and Benyei (1998) points out that this has to do with issues of power. Religious institutions see themselves as communities because their members

share commonalities of religious history or tradition. This type of community has similarities to a family system where members move within it according to their perception of explicit and implicit rules. Members of the Christian Church generally see themselves as a family of faith where Clergy and congregation ideally function within an egalitarian partnership (Benyei 1998).

However, many Churches develop into an uneven hierarchical structure, similar to a parent child relationship (Benyei 1998). In these settings, Clergy may become very powerful and lead from the top of the hierarchal structure, accountable to no one, and congregations tend to idolise them (Benyei 1998). Unless there is accountability of Clergy to a higher body or peers, and/or explicit codes of conduct and ethics, there remains a potentiality to abuse within these structures.

In a spiritually abusive system, an authoritarian stance often develops where the leader or person in the system claims the right to command their followers (Henke 1996). This system tends to be scrupulous in attempting to maintain an image of consciousness of righteousness at all costs, which gives rise to secrecy. The suppression of criticism occurs where questions cannot be allowed and, as a result, there is no place for criticism; this is seen as a direct challenge to authority. A perfectionist philosophy in an abusive system means the person's accomplishments come through the performance of spiritual requirements and failure is strongly condemned.

In some Christian denominations leadership is seen as a powerful symbolic authority in representing God (Ward 2007 p51). Biblically, the responsibility of leaders within the Christian Church is to serve others in a way that represents the incarnation of Christ to humankind; serving as Christ served, laying down their lives for the sake of others (Hunter 1990 p599). The leader is therefore an ambassador of this relationship, leading others into association with God through Jesus Christ, and not to themselves (Hunter 1990 p636). Ideally the Christian leader should not govern others under a hierarchal leadership. Conversely, the leader is an over-seer, an advocate, leading in order to serve and, in doing so, following the example of Christ (Hunter 1990 p636). The philosophy of serving guards against the possibility of Clergy abusing those under their care and is ideally implemented through the structures of the Church in all its activities and teaching (Hunter 1990 p636). However, within hierarchal structures, the leadership is incredibly powerful.

Henke (1996) argues that organised hierarchical structures are especially well suited to the perpetration of systemic spiritual abuse. Shupe (1998) echoes the declarations of Henzel (1997), Johnson and Van Vonderen (1991), adding that a leadership that hides its true management plans, and promises empowerment to its followers, is making its authority absolute. Shupe (1998) refers to the phenomenon of the abuse of religious followers by its leaders as Clergy malfeasance.

## **Clergy malfeasance**

Irrespective of whether or not the abuse is perpetrated intentionally or unintentionally, the issue remains that spiritual abuse is inflicted by persons who are accorded respect and honour in society, by virtue of their role as religious leaders and models of spiritual authority (Enroth 1992). Clergy malfeasance is a core feature of a spiritually abusive system. It is the misconduct of a religious leader abusing his/her position and in doing so, perpetrating harm to others (Encarta 2003). Clergy malfeasance occurs within a unique type of altruistic institution where power is equitably distributed (Shupe 1998).

A Christian organisation is a trusted hierarchy where followers believe in, or are encouraged or instructed to believe in, the good intentions, sincerity, and wisdom of the leadership (Shupe 1998). Historically, Clergy have been the professionals who sought to help guide communities through the difficulties of life. They offered spiritual guidance and direction with emotional and family issues and with everyday life (Rhoads-Meek et al 2003 p1). Although spiritually orientated, these leaders are comparable to the contemporary psychotherapist, although they lacked the title and specialised training available today (Rhoads-Meek et al 2003 p1).

In western culture, Christian Clergy/leadership is considered to be in a prominent position to provide human services on a spiritual level (Rhoads-Meek et al 2003 p1). However, this vocation has rarely been the focus of psychological research, assessing work-related stressors they experience, or their health and coping responses. Using qualitative methodology, Rhoads-Meek et al (2003 p1) investigated clergy malfeasance by a studying 874 Clergy in 45 states of the United States of America by way of survey and 398 provided responses. This represented a response rate of 45% and findings indicated that, because of the nature of their work, an advocate was needed who would listen and understand, and who would be beside them in assessing and solving the problems they faced. It is not the remit of this paper to discuss the difficulties with which Clergy cope; however, it is useful to consider that, without support, regular reviews or assessments of any nature, there is a possibility that the pressures of leadership may lead to intentional or unintentional Clergy malfeasance of any type. This important issue could possibly provide a subject for future research.

The process of this kind of abuse is subtle, thus explaining why many respectable, well thinking people are ensnared in abusive systems. Christians are asked to give their loyalty to an organisation, Church or leader and in doing so they believe they are obeying God. This enables the abuse to be accepted by reasonable Christians and permits it to continue long term.

Because leaders within abusive systems actually believe they are representing God, they consider themselves to be beyond support or assessment of any kind. As a consequence, these systems become abusive and therefore create an environment for the perpetration of spiritual abuse. Ward (2007 p85) confirms, particular structures and modalities of leadership are used as a means (intentionally or unintentionally) to initiate abuse. Any form of review or assessment of the leader or system may prove to be difficult because it challenges loyalty and faith issues. Similarly, Shupe (1998) argues that a long standing hierarchical Church structure and its polity provide opportunities to abuse. Anson (1998) examines paedophilia within the Catholic Church and concludes that the avoidance of Church structures to review its polity establishes abuse in the long term.

### **The process of spiritual abuse.**

Abusive leaders dominate those under their leadership they then, influence people through negative discourse, which inflicts wounds upon the person's psyche, causing the shaming of the person who can then be easily manipulated (Skedgell 2008).

The powers of discourse to induce shame, and the power of shame, are the methods used to oppress the victim, who then remains submissive to the abuser's demands, enabling the abuse to continue over a long period of time (Skedgell 2008). These methods also create an illusion of normality and consequently the victim comes to accept the behaviour as God's will for them (Skedgell 2008). Henzel (1997) argues that spiritual abusers make great efforts to ensure that their followers are always focused upon what they have to say.

Peppiatt (2007 p9) argues that shame is one of the main results of spiritual abuse. She describes shame from a Christian point of view and states that it is a result of hurt that is received when growing up; making one feel that they are unable to measure up to the world's or Church standards while other people have got it right. Shame adds emphasis to the feeling of falling short of one's own, and God's, expectations; one's worth therefore tends to be judged by failures. Shame is a powerful tool for abusers, because it is self focused and punishment based which in turn influences and constructs social values and behaviours (Peppiatt 2007 p12). Moreover, the fear of shame and ridicule can be so strong that people will risk serious physical injury or even death to avoid it, because it shows damage to social acceptance and a breakdown of social relationships. A study by Ward (2007 p71) revealed that all participants suffered a sense of shame as they struggled and failed to measure up to the dictates of the leadership. When participants complied with the leadership they gained a sense of acceptance (Ward 2007 p71).

The evolutionary root of shame is in a self-focused, social threat system related to competitive behaviour and the need to prove one is acceptability and desirability to others. There is now evidence that shame can act as an inner warning signal of threats and challenges to the self, with a triggering of automatic defence especially desires to escape (flight) and submissive behaviour” (Gilbert 2003 p 401).

### **Actual abuse**

Historically, spiritual abuse within Christianity has not been seriously considered as being a problem. As Henzel 1997 points out, this is despite the existence of many carefully evaluated and documented cases. Henzel (1997) argues there are a number of Clergy who dismiss the issue because it appears, to a large extent, like a politically-correct, postmodernist-inspired, abuse fad. Christian counsellors in particular are known to disregard true sufferers of spiritual abuse as being victims of their own thin skin (Henzel 1997).

Horrific accounts of abuse are dismissed, because they are believed to be too subjective to be reliable, and categorised as a ‘perception’ of spiritual abuse, rather than acknowledging the actuality of the abuse (Henzel 1997). Moreover, Oakley and Kinmond (2007 p9) suggest that, within the counselling profession, there is a lack of awareness of spiritual maltreatment as a form of abuse.

In their research, Oakley and Kinmond (2007 p10) propose that the resistance of counsellors to accept spiritual abuse as a form of actual abuse, compounds the dilemma for both counsellor and client. As stated above, spiritual abuse shares commonalities with other forms of maltreatment, and academic or practical support is limited, both for those experiencing spiritual abuse and for the counsellors working with them (Oakley and Kinmond 2007 p9). The implications of this resistance are that the client may remain silent and not access suitable support systems (Oakley and Kinmond 2007 p11). Moreover, counsellors may be unable to empathise with the core construct of the clients self. Alternatively, they may not understand the situation (Oakley and Kinmond 2007 p11), and therefore the best choice of counselling approach may be difficult to ascertain.

For many people in secular society (Oakley and Kinmond 2007 p9), and the Church there may be some level of resistance to even accept this issue. Blue (1993) argues that spiritual abuse is actual abuse, and abuse of any type occurs when someone has power over another and uses that power to hurt. He states that spiritual abuse is comparable to other forms of abuse; although the effects differ he argues that physical abuse means that someone exercises physical power over another, causing

physical wounds. Sexual abuse means that someone exercises sexual power over another, resulting in sexual wounds. And spiritual abuse happens when a leader with spiritual authority uses that authority to coerce, control or exploits a follower, thus causing spiritual wounds. However in the act of spiritual abuse, other forms of abuses may be perpetrated as well.

### **The dilemma**

From personal my experience and professional role and in my research I have discovered that spiritual abuse is a widespread issue that few would wish to address. The church is generally regarded as a safe place of love and acceptance; however that is not the experience of many. Well meaning, professional, stable people regularly fall victim to this kind of abuse, due to its sinister nature and not being easily identified. Certainly, one would least expect it within a Christian Church, especially one that has the respect of the community in which it is set. Many of the victims who I have had personal involvement with, have emerged deeply scarred, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually from their experience of spiritual abuse. There is nowhere for these people to seek help; this results I believe, from a fundamental lack of Christian or secular support and ignorance of the issues involved.

Victims are in a dilemma, they are unable to seek help from the Church because, in general, they tend to be looked upon as perpetrators themselves by rocking the boat, causing trouble for the Church. They therefore resort to secular counsellors, which in turn becomes problematic. Many Christians value their beliefs and wish to seek counselling that is sympathetic and affirming towards matters of spirituality (McMahan 2002 p336). As Watts (2001 p207) argues, research shows that victims may be hesitant, or even afraid, to visit secular counsellors because of their concerns that their religious perspectives may not be taken seriously, that they will be ignored, or that they may even be viewed as extreme.

This form of abuse shares commonalities with other forms of maltreatment and yet, academic or experiential support is limited, both for those experiencing spiritual abuse and for the professionals working with them.

### **Deficiencies in the research**

Ward (2007 p2) argues that most of the existing research has investigated religious cults and there is a significant gap with regard to exploring the subjective experience of spiritual abuse. Moreover, I have discovered that the issues of spiritual abuse are not commonly researched within the Church or secular counselling profession in the United Kingdom. This may be due to a misunderstanding of the nature of spiritual abuse (author 2009 p6), and the need for pastoral care or/and therapeutic

intervention to aid recovery. This form of abuse needs to be researched on all levels in order to investigate its causalities, its outcomes and ways to recovery, particularly in the cultural context of the United Kingdom. Awareness needs to be raised for the purposes of prevention and victim support.

## **Conclusion**

I have discovered that spiritual abuse is generally expected to happen more in cults than in Christianity and therefore, most of the existing research investigated religious cults; this has created a gap in regard to exploring the subjective experience of spiritual abuse. There is also a new opportunity for the phenomenon to be quantified; to date I have not found any quantitative data to ascertain its prevalence in the United Kingdom. Therefore, aspects of spiritual abuse are largely unexplored and the amount of people that are affected is unknown (Martin 2005).

I have found that spiritual abuse is a significant problem and is more common than imagined. Secular counsellors are largely unprepared to deal with religious/spiritual issues therefore there is a challenge here - where do victims find support?

I argue that spiritual abuse it is not only a spiritual issue, but because of the actuality of abuse, it is also a mental health issue, thus spiritual abuse should be approached with care and knowledge by Clergy and professionals of the social sciences.

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