

# Spiritual abuse: an exploration

By Kathy Spooner

Spiritual abuse can take place in any religious context. This article is written from a Christian perspective and Kathy unpacks the definition of spiritual abuse within the Church – what it is and, just as helpfully, what it isn't. The 'Church' is used here as a highly generalised representative of all Christian denominations, communities of worship and other related contexts that involve Christians coming together.

## Difficult to address

Spiritual abuse is a complex and uncomfortable subject to address. As with 'domestic' abuse there is a misnomer in the title, as there is nothing intrinsically *spiritual* about the abuse; rather it is the context that gives definition to the nature of harm against the person or persons. As with domestic abuse, spiritual abuse sits within a wider context and can be re-enforced by systems of oppression such as patriarchy, is often disguised as love and care for its victim(s) and manifests within a spectrum of hurtful, shaming, controlling and coercive behaviours.

A helpful and widely referenced definition was formulated by Lisa Oakley (2019, p. 31):

Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterised by a systemic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it. This abuse may include manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts or teaching, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a divine position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism.

Despite the clarity of this definition, the question "Is what is happening abuse?" has been a difficult one for victims and others to discern, especially where hurt and harm are experienced within religious settings. Is there a line to be drawn that demarcates between harm and hurt on one side, and abuse on the other – and, if so, where should this be drawn? Is the Church especially vulnerable to producing conditions that foster a type of aggregated form of harm and abuse?

It seems important to explore the conditions that give rise to situations of harm and spiritual abuse, as ultimately this will help us understand their impacts and inform and guide therapeutic and pastoral responses.

## Levels of complexity

Spiritual abuse is complex to understand, and therefore to help heal and recover from, because it is situated within a Christian context, which



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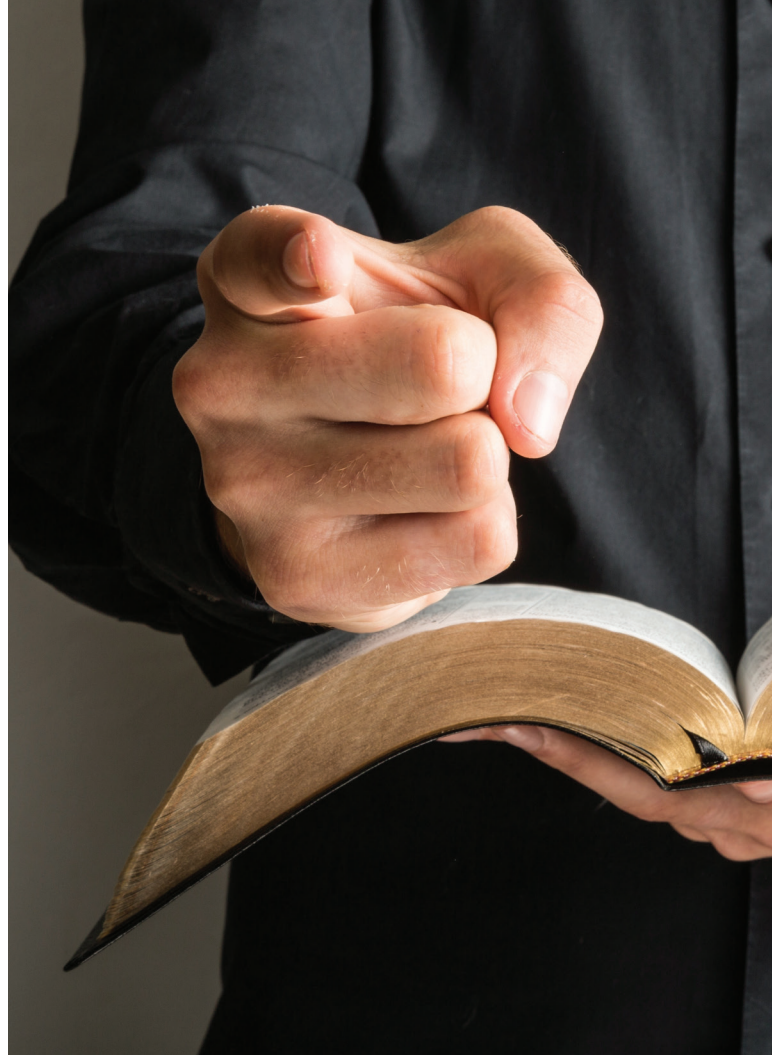
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at some level requires the disciple to entrust themselves (and often their loved ones) to the care, direction and leadership structure of a community of fellow believers. This divesting of power in trust to the goodness and rightness of a process (discipleship), and the corollate desire to surrender in obedience to God's will (the source of all life and ultimate salvation), makes the person especially vulnerable to 'God's proxies' and their role in mediating an understanding of God and the system of religious beliefs through teaching and behaviours of the church community they are part of. Therefore, the issue of spiritual abuse cannot be easily dissected from the teachings of the church, nor from the power that is divested by some and entrusted to others whether leaders, spiritual companions, family members etc – that is inherent in the life of community.

Another level of complexity in understanding the dynamics of spiritual abuse is the consideration of psychological, social and systemic forces that shape an individual's experience of self and identity, and their susceptibility to staying within or being pulled into a high-control church or community (or cult) where they are at higher risk of experiencing spiritual abuse.

Psychological understandings of group processes (such as the dynamic of 'group think' in which shared beliefs and values can lead to more extreme views) can help us understand how spiritually abusive beliefs and practices form within a congregation (often with unexamined and benign intention). There are other complex relational psychological processes that will be familiar to counsellors and psychotherapists, for example the unconscious processes of introjection and projection, the influence of developmental



processes such as social learning theory and attachment, and the internal formation of 'conditions of worth', which together serve to entangle leaders and the led and make both vulnerable to the vagaries of human relationships. When relationships that are heavily invested in (as might be common between a church leader and congregation members) and plugged into the psychological and emotional wiring that connects to the ultimate source of security, self-worth and salvation, then any breakdown in relationship and trust can be deeply de-stabilising and result in a crisis of personhood and belief.

The final aspect of complexity to consider is the issue of power. The Church has power to speak over people. The strictures that emerge from the history of the Church, and the resultant scriptural emphasis, interpretation and meanings etc., do not sit in isolation from the world and all the various cultural and other forces that help to shape contemporary Christianity. A leader or leadership group in a Christian setting cannot escape the requirement to preach the gospel drawing on a specific Christian anthropology and narrative of creation, fall and salvation, which carries expectations about how Christians should honour and worship God, view themselves and others, make wise and good life choices etc. At any point in space and time these teachings are variously shaped by the power of belief systems, mediated



through both sacred sources, such as Church history and theology, and less sacred sources such as patriarchy, individualism, supremacy etc.

For any person in receipt of Church teachings, it is possible to imagine that depending on where they pitch up and the characteristics of their identity: gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality etc., they could experience the Church as yet another place of imposed limitation, oppression and exclusion (despite the promise of the Gospels).

Power manifests also in claims to *religious* authority which rest on various sources, including discerned spiritual anointing, scholarship, differing denominational instruction in ministry and priesthood, and can also be associated with church growth (a sign of God's blessing and endorsement?), and influential pan church movements that capture a zeitgeist and sit alongside or replace more conventional church structures. Power can be positional (as in an appointed leadership position) which is buttressed by institutions and/or by personal appeal and leadership qualities that attract a following, and/or shared with a select group in an appointed leadership team. It can be hard to question or challenge those who hold such power, and it is also the case that they are human. So perceived failings in those holding power and authority, and witnessing interpersonal conflict and disagreements, risk not just hurt and fractured relationships, but also can result in a sense of deep betrayal of trust that can be profoundly shocking (even for those not directly involved).

## Abuse within churches

In overly simplistic terms those who hold power in Christian settings can exert spiritually abusive power by:

- selecting and favouring 'Christian' narratives that seek to control, coerce, demean, diminish, condemn and shame individuals or groups
- using the security of their wider value and worth e.g. as a 'charismatic' leader, or respected spiritual director, to mask harmful and abusive interpersonal behaviour
- relying on their 'anointing' in an unexamined way to bolster their ego and enforce their will (i.e. without humility, self-reflection or understanding of the interpersonal impact of their action)
- playing down and overlooking direct and indirect evidence of harm and abuse, sidestepping structures of accountability, and laying blame on the powerless
- isolating and effectively banishing detractors from their congregations or movements
- using religious teachings in their interpersonal relationships (especially in marriage and parenthood) to control, coerce, demean, diminish, condemn and shame people who are close to them
- seeing themselves and encouraging others to see themselves as not needing to be accountable (being different, having a special anointing etc.).





## Critiquing the Church

Thinking about spiritual abuse is uncomfortable because it demands that we (as in Christians who are therapists and pastoral carers concerned for the wellbeing of all) must critique the Church, examining its structures, teachings and communal processes and be courageous in exposing what is harmful. Maybe here more than any other area of the intersection of Christian and psychological understandings of human flourishing do we face conflicts between loyalty and love for the Church and our recognition that not all its fruits are good.

The Christian Church has a long and at times brutal history of oppressing and condemning those whose beliefs do not chime with those holding power (including imprisonment and execution). In the present-day disagreements based on different interpretations of scripture, there are impacts on different groups of people that can restrict their ability to participate in and be in receipt of full blessings that can be bestowed by the Church. These issues are subject to fierce debate and, at some point, history evidences that they will be resolved, just as new issues and challenges will emerge. These disagreements are not in themselves necessarily abusive, but their impact on people and groups can be harmful. Please see section on taxonomy of harm below.

At any given point in time, there are specific narratives that will have potentially negative and enduring impacts on people. An example is ideas relating to a Christian's (disciple's) relationship with their bodies and the giving and receiving in intimate relationships, such as those associated with 'purity culture'. Often these are shaped by historic and cultural understandings of sexual responsibility and accountability, but they can label desire outside of marriage as a problem which is firmly situated in the embodiment of women as incitement to the lustful nature of men (see, for example, modesty strictures). And there is also the devastating impact of narratives that ascribe naturally occurring adverse events, such as having a child with a disability, with specific 'sin' in the lives of the child's parents. Finally, we know from recent history that the Church's collective failure to

listen to and act appropriately to victims of abuse by those in positions of authority in the Church has compounded the adverse impact of the abuse itself.

In all that is set out above, I have tried to situate the Church both as an outworking of the complexities of human relationships and variously subject to the influence of the 'powers and principalities' of the world it exists within. In doing so, I am attempting to describe an environment where people and groups will inevitably experience hurt within a religious setting because we as humans face the same relational struggles within the Church as without and are subject to a system of power within wider systems of power. Experiences of hurt can feel all the more painful

because one of the draws of Christianity is the promise of a place of belonging and the security and safety that goes with that. Also, these natural fractures in relationships and systems of power provide opportunities for spiritual abuse to set seed, establish itself and flourish.

Within the complexity and discomfort, it may be helpful to set out a taxonomy of harm which places at one end normative experiences of human interaction within religious communities and congregations, and at the other spiritual abuse. *All can cause hurt*, sometimes profound hurt and religious trauma. However, it not helpful to victims and perpetrators alike to label all

adverse experiences in a Christian religious setting as spiritual abuse. The following are suggestions and points for discussion based on extensive reading in this area.

### **Spiritual abuse is not hurt resulting from 'ordinary' events**

These may include:

- occasional slights, unkindness and judgement received from others who happen to be part of a person's Christian community (whatever the intention)
- disagreements within church communities that are respectfully conducted and where space is given to explore other points of view

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- being subject to challenge about a chosen path, decisions made or opinions and values espoused, by someone in leadership of a church, where these are communicated clearly, with respect and care and the person is given time and space to react, reflect and respond.

### **Spiritual abuse does not automatically arise from the failing of someone in a leadership or other trusted position**

A leader who can no longer live up to the commitments and obligations of their office, and embarks, for example, on relational or financial wrongdoing, is not being spiritually abusive. However, spiritual abuse may be taking place if another person was coerced to cover up or enter into the leader's wrongdoing through fear related to the invocation of God (as in, "God told me to enter into a relationship with you", or "rules don't apply to us"), or evoking fear of the abandonment or supernatural power to harm (as in, "no one will believe you, I can make things difficult for you").

A 'fall from grace' and any associated breach of trust can nonetheless be devastating for those in the congregation and impact their ability to forgive and be reconciled.

### **Spiritual abuse may result from systemic failures of the Church and some Christian teachings**

The experience of survivors of physical, sexual and emotional abuse by people within the Church may perceive that the systemic failure of the Church to take concerns seriously, and the cover ups that allowed abusers to move on and continue to harm people, may be a form of spiritual abuse relating at best in neglect and failure to safeguard, and at worst to the shunning and abandonment of victims.

This is a controversial claim, but the harm resulting from authoritative teachings on areas relating to gender, for example excluding women from leadership and placing them in a subordinate role in marriage, encouraging reconciliation and forgiveness in situations of domestic abuse, could be perceived by those subject to these teachings as a form of spiritual abuse – because the harm has in effect been 'sanctioned' by religious teachings.

Similarly, where power is wielded by the Church and conditionality imposed on access to membership, the sacraments and the blessings of the Church because of the intrinsic nature of a person (as in LGBT+ Christians), in effect imposing barriers to a person being fully being recognised and accepted on an equal footing as a child of God

– then it is at least possible that for those that have been disenfranchised or exiled to feel that they have been subject to an abuse of power.

Where teachings on spiritual warfare and possession results in harsh (physical and psychological) forms of deliverance ministry or the scapegoating of those who are different or challenging, then the person concerned is likely also to be subject to an abuse of power.

### **Spiritual abuse is demonstratively at work when:**

- a 'charismatic' leader uses their power and influence to control or coerce another in an intentional way, normally in a way that is hidden from others, or as a cloak for physical, sexual or emotional abuse
- anyone who uses their power and interpersonal influence to control and coerce others by acting as God's intermediary in a situation or a relationship.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Lisa Oakley refers to spiritual abuse as a 'maze' and exploring some of the themes above has had the quality of trying to trace a path through some complex structures. I hope that it has communicated that spiritual abuse sits within a wider context of spiritual harm, and neither can be neatly dissected away from the wider body of the Church and the form and function of religious beliefs. Nor can anyone who is a Christian remain immune from the deep regret that Church is not always a sanctuary.

The slightly messy perspectives on spiritual abuse set out in this article may have benefit in helping counsellors and psychotherapists select approaches such as grief work (including disenfranchised and cumulative grief), moral injury and complex trauma



### **Upcoming training event**

The London School of Theology is holding a Research Conference on the 8-9 April 2025 on 'Spiritual and Pastoral Abuse: issues in theology and practice'. Details can be found [on the ACC website](#) and [the LST website](#).



## Church is not always a sanctuary

with clients who have experienced spiritual abuse and harm. These can sit within an exploration of psychological processes which contributed to the client's vulnerability to spiritual harm and abuse. We can also look at the dynamics of faith conservation as route to healing spiritual wounding after crisis – as well as the more obvious dynamic of faith deconstruction and reconstruction. These approaches will be explored in a companion article planned for the spring 2025 issue.



### Definitions of terms

**Attachment** A psychological theory that explains how early relationships with caregivers shape a person's emotional and social development.

**Conditions of worth** Conditions we believe we have to meet to gain acceptance, love or positive regard from others. As children, we quickly learn what behaviours please parents, caregivers, teachers, friendship groups and society in general.

**Introjection** The unconscious adoption of the ideas or attitudes of others.

**Projection** A type of defence mechanism when someone unconsciously attributes their thoughts, feelings or behaviours to another person.

**Social learning theory** A theory of human behaviour that explains how people learn new behaviours by observing and imitating others.



### Further reading

Anderson, L.E. (2023) *When Religion Hurts You: Healing from religious trauma and the impact of high-control religion*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press.

Fife, J. and Gilo (2019) *Letters to a Broken Church*. London: Ekklesia.

Harper, R. and Wilson, A. (2019) *To Heal and Not to Hurt*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.

Johnson D. and VanVonderen J. (1991) *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers.

Landberg, D. (2020) *Redeeming Power: Understanding authority and abuse in the Church*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press.

Landberg, D. (2003) *Counselling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*. Florida: Xulon Press.

Nash, S. (2020) *Shame and the Church: Exploring and transforming practice*. London: SCM Press.

Oakley, L. and Humphreys, J. (2019) *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse*. London: SPCK.

Stortz, M.E. (1993) *PastorPower*. Nashville: Abingdon Press



### About the author

Kathy Spooner is a qualified counsellor and supervisor as well as the CEO of ACC. She has a special interest in the intersection between Christianity and psychotherapy and has enjoyed teaching on BA and MA courses on both counselling and spiritual direction.