

Betrayed by the Divine and Overlooked by Scholarship: An Inquiry into Spiritual Abuse and
Religious Trauma

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October 31st, 2022

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ABSTRACT

Terminology to describe the experience and effects of abuse in religious and spiritual settings has only begun to surface in the last three decades. Though terms like “spiritual abuse,” “spiritual violence,” “religious abuse,” “spiritual harm,” “religious trauma,” and “religious harm” may reference similar types of injury, the terms were born out of different fields, and for different purposes. This thesis argues that the terms “spiritual abuse” and “religious trauma” are being narrowly used and defined by individuals in the psychology and counseling fields to equip practitioners with concrete definitions and tools to support clients who have suffered abuses in religious and spiritual settings. The definitions of spiritual abuse and religious trauma are grounded in Protestant communities and traditions even though the definitions have a general scope. This finding is contrasted by the field of religious studies which uses the term “religious abuse” to describe abuse specific to a particular religious community rather than attempting to assimilate abuse in all religious and spiritual communities. This thesis also argues that there is a lack of attention to and inclusion of the experience of Indigenous and Native American communities in discussions of spiritual abuse and religious trauma even though the concepts of historical trauma and historical unresolved grief were created to describe the intergenerational injury of colonialism and cultural genocide in the United States, which often came in the form of spiritual oppression and genocide at the hands of various Christian denominations supported by the United States government. Given this historical context, it is argued that some of the current suggestions for healing from spiritual abuse and religious trauma (i.e.,entheogenic practices and the appropriation of traditionally Indigenous practices) could create a double injury for Native communities whose spiritual abuse and religious trauma have not been recognized. Additionally,

many of the suggestions for healing are based in individualistic and Western-oriented value systems of productivity rather than communal or structural healing.

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INTRODUCTION

In May 2022 an investigative report into the Southern Baptist Convention's (SBC) mishandling of sexual abuse allegations was released, uncovering the suppression and protection of information by the Executive Committee involving over 380 SBC-affiliated abusers who had either been convicted or pled guilty to sex crimes against over 700 victims since 1998.¹ The report highlighted the insidious culture of sexual abuse across all levels of engagement - from youth pastor leaders to those in the highest positions of power - within the largest Protestant denomination in the country. This report comes twenty years after the scathing 2002 *Boston Globe* exposé that found that over seventy clerics within the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston had been accused of child molestation, and the Church had been actively involved in keeping the settlements secret.² Solving the problem often meant handling the legal proceedings internally, paying victims off, and geographically relocating abusive clerics.³ This exposé inspired a broader investigation into the U.S. Roman Catholic Church, which found that between 1950 and 2022, over 10,600 victims had accused more than 4,300 priests of child abuse.⁴ Not

¹ Thomas Fuller, "Southern Baptist Convention Says It Faces Federal Investigation for Sexual Abuse," *The New York Times*, August 12, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/12/us/southern-baptist-convention-sexual-abuse.html>.

² The original article, "Church allowed abuse by priest for years" was published January 6, 2002 and focused on the knowledge of Father John Geoghan's sexual abuses by Cardinal Bernard Law who knowingly shuffled Geoghan through different parishes. The original article was followed-up by subsequent reports addressing different aspects of the scandal in Boston. The Boston Globe journalists who broke this story were the subject of the 2015 film *Spotlight*. See, Michael Rezendes, "Clergy allowed abuse by priest for years," *The Boston Globe*, January 6, 2002, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/special-reports/2002/01/06/church-allowed-abuse-priest-for-years/cSHfGkTlrAT25qKGvBuDNM/story.html>.

³ Derek Farrell, "An Historical Viewpoint of Sexual Abuse Perpetrated by Clergy and Religious," *Journal of Religion & Abuse* 6, no. 2 (September 21, 2004): 41–80, https://doi.org/10.1300/J154v06n02_04.

⁴ Emily St James, "The Sexual Abuse Scandal Rocking the Southern Baptist Convention, Explained," *Vox*, June 7, 2022,

only was the Church not protecting the victims for child sexual abuse, but they were also protecting the perpetrators.

One of the largest Buddhist organizations in the West, Shambhala International, is also undergoing its own reckoning after the release of three reports exposing sexual impropriety by its leader, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, against many of his followers.⁵ This is not the first set of harmful allegations of abuse within the Shambhala community; former leader Osel Tendzin is well-known for having had unprotected sex with many members of the community while knowingly infected with AIDS.⁶ Andrea Winn, a survivor of child sexual abuse in her sangha, created “Buddhist Project Sunshine,” a three-part report detailing the intergenerational abuse that has occurred within the Shambhala community.⁷ These and many other recent examples, from small religious movements to spaces of neoliberal spirituality, show that abuse does not discriminate among religious and spiritual communities.

The revelation of these events has been met with shame, horror, and shock. Public responses range from a broad condemnation of “organized religion” in general to the criticism of specific religious traditions. But the fact that abuse occurs across religious traditions demonstrates that abuse occurs and must be studied as a larger issue of religion in general. Terms like religious abuse, spiritual abuse, and religious trauma have been created in order to provide a categorization and diagnosis of abusive treatment that could be experienced in any spiritual or religious setting, empowering survivors to recognize certain behaviors and treatments as abuse.

<https://www.vox.com/culture/23131530/southern-baptist-convention-sexual-abuse-scandal-guide-post>.

⁵ Andy Newman, “The ‘King’ of Shambhala Buddhism Is Undone by Abuse Report,” July, 11, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/11/nyregion/shambhala-sexual-misconduct.html>.

⁶ Katy Butler, “Encountering the Shadow in Buddhist America,” May/June 1990, https://info-buddhism.com/Encountering_the_Shadow_in_Buddhist_America_Katy-Butler.html.

⁷ Andrea Winn, “BPS Welcome Page - <https://Andreamwinn.com/Offerings>,” Boulder Project Sunshine, accessed October 23, 2022, <https://andreamwinn.com/offerings/bps-welcome-page/>.

These terms provide fertile ground to study the abuse that occurs in religious settings. Some scholars, practitioners and activists have turned to comparative forms of analysis to help explain the seemingly ubiquitous presence of abuse in spiritual and religious spaces. But while it may be possible to compare similarities in the ways in which abuse was hidden by top authorities within the SBC and the Catholic Church, it would be much more difficult to compare how these different groups responded to such abuse due to the very different organizational structures of these religions.⁸ Furthermore, one may be tempted to compare how clerical vows of celibacy within both the Catholic and Buddhist traditions may be factors in the sexual transgressions of its leaders, but the ways in which sexual abuse may be interpreted by followers of these traditions vary due to their cultural positioning (for example, secular values or “Western” orientation). Abuse in a religious setting is unique to the tradition and cultural context in which it happens and exists along a spectrum from emotional and psychological abuse to physical and sexual abuse.

In the past three decades, discussions of spiritual and religious abuse have been taken up by survivors, former religious leaders, the press, psychologists and counselors, and religious studies scholars. But if anything, more questions and complications have been raised. The study of abuse in spiritual and religious settings is incredibly complex and requires the consideration of other intersecting issues and topics such as domestic violence, child abuse, theological reasoning and justification, colonial legacies, issues of power, the role of scholars, and methods for healing and responding to these forms of abuse. Many survivors, counselors, and scholars have started public organizations, groups, and forums in search of more information and grounded research on these issues. Some of these include Buddhist Project Sunshine, Bishop-Accountability.org, the Religious Trauma Institute, Religious Trauma: North American Research Collective, Reclamation Collective, and the Global Center for Religious Research (GCRR). In addition to

⁸ St James, “The Sexual Abuse Scandal Rocking the Southern Baptist Convention.”

the organizations focused on research and awareness, there has been a proliferation of committees and organizations specifically focused on survivor-centered advocacy work and support for survivors of clergy sexual abuse. Some of these include: Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (commonly known as SNAP), Faith Trust, Inform, and An Olive Branch.⁹ These organizations aim to provide survivors with resources and information about why clergy sexual misconduct takes place, and mediation tools to strengthen organizational health for leaders and their religious communities.

This thesis will use two conferences on religious trauma hosted by GCRR as case studies which have served as starting points for a larger examination of spiritual and religious abuse, and religious trauma. The inspiration for this thesis and the questions which drove my research centered on four things: (1) definitions (Who is creating the definitions for spiritual and religious abuse? Who is included and who is left out of these definitions?); (2) manifestations of spiritual and religious abuse (Why does this happen? What do spiritual and religious abuse, and religious trauma look like? Who does spiritual abuse and religious trauma affect?); (3) suggestions for healing (Are people being advised to turn towards or away from religion for healing?); and (4) the holes in the current scholarship and literature (What is missing from these conversations? Whose voices are being privileged?).

In this thesis I will argue, through a descriptive overview of the field, that the present literature on spiritual abuse and religious trauma is largely limited to and based in Protestant experiences even though the definitions of spiritual abuse and religious trauma are generalized to

⁹ “Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests,” Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, accessed November 7, 2022, <https://www.snapnetwork.org/>; “Our Mission and Guiding Principles,” FaithTrust Institute, accessed November 7, 2022, <https://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/about-us/guiding-principles>; “Inform,” inform, October 25, 2022, <https://inform.ac/>; “An Olive Branch Strengthens Organizations by Helping Leaders Understand the Role of Conflict in Organizational Health,” An Olive Branch, accessed November 7, 2022, <https://www.an-olive-branch.org/>.

all religious traditions. This is evidenced by the contrasting approach of religious studies scholars who have focused their research on the particularities of abuse in specific religious traditions. Additionally, I will argue that the Native American concepts and legacies of historical trauma and historical unresolved grief should be included in an analysis of spiritual abuse and religious trauma because while unique to a Native American experience, these experiences fit many of the criteria of spiritual abuse but have been completely excluded from the literature. Finally, I will problematize the suggestions for healing from spiritual abuse and religious trauma, which in some cases are forms of culturally appropriative behavior and have the potential to create further spiritual harm to Native populations.

Chapter one includes an overview and summary of the presentations from two conferences on religious trauma put on by GCRR. Chapter two includes an overview of the secondary literature in the fields of spiritual abuse and religious trauma through a chronological exploration of definitions and understandings of terminology around spiritual abuse and religious trauma. This section attempts to address what abuse in a spiritual and/or religious context looks like, who is affected by it, why it is a unique form of injury for those who experience it, and what the suggestions are for healing. Finally, chapter three critiques the current research in the area. It provides a brief literature review for religion and abuse in the field of religious studies; a discussion of indigenous forms of trauma and abuse like historical trauma and historical unresolved grief; and problematizes current spiritual abuse and religious trauma definitions and Western-oriented healing modalities and suggestions.

CHAPTER 1 GLOBAL CENTER FOR RELIGIOUS RESEARCH: A CASE STUDY

The Global Center for Religious Research (GCRR), located in Denver, Colorado, describes itself as a non-religiously affiliated, interdisciplinary, academic institute, society, and publishing house, and a leader in research efforts on religious trauma. GCRR was founded in 2019 by Darren Slade.¹⁰ The “About” page on the website states: “GCRR is adamantly *not* profit-driven or agenda-driven. We are education-driven. Both our motivation and passion is focused on knowledge.”¹¹ GCRR’s values are centered on the promotion of academic research and accessible and affordable knowledge.¹²

In 2020, GCRR established the North American Committee on Religious Trauma Research (NACRTR), which was tasked with formulating a definition of religious trauma that could be shared with the psychiatric community as a way to facilitate the legitimization and acceptance of “religious trauma as a real condition” in our culture.¹³ The definition of religious trauma developed by NACRTR and cited by GCRR as the official definition of religious trauma is: “Religious trauma results from an event, series of events, relationships or circumstances, within or connected to religious beliefs, practices, or structures, that is experienced by an individual as overwhelming or disruptive and has lasting adverse effects on a person’s physical,

¹⁰ Slade received his Masters of Divinity and PhD in Theology and Church Studies from the Rawlings School of Divinity, part of one of the world’s largest Christian universities, Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. In addition to being the President and Certification Instructor at GCRR, he is also an adjunct professor at the Rocky Mountain School of Art and Design where he teaches ancient history and comparative religion. See, “Darren M. Slade,” Academia.edu, accessed October 24, 2022, <https://darrenmslade.academia.edu/>.

¹¹ Part of GCRR’s stated mission is to change the academic industry, which GCRR believes to be corrupt. See: “About | Global Center for Religious Research,” GCRR, accessed October 15, 2022, <https://www.gcrr.org/about>.

¹² “About | Global Center for Religious Research.”

¹³ “Religious Trauma Research,” GCRR, accessed October 15, 2022, <https://www.gcrr.org/religioustrauma>.

mental, social, emotional, or spiritual well being.”¹⁴ GCRR’s goal is to conduct the first-ever sociological study of religious trauma, which would aim to correct the gap in knowledge and support practitioners, patients, and researchers “by offering an interdisciplinary and scientific examination of the origins, impact, and treatment options of religious trauma.”¹⁵ GCRR is currently in the process of crowd-sourcing money to support this endeavor.¹⁶

GCRR features a variety of papers published by GCRR’s in-house academic journal, news, blog entries, and conference recordings on their website. In fact, the website is a challenge to navigate given the amount of images, digital fliers, bold script, floating and moving icons and other interesting features embedded in it. Using the search feature on GCRR’s website, I typed in each of the world’s major religions as keywords to see how many results from GCRR’s extensive archive of books, conference recordings, blog posts, advertisements, and calls for submission proposals would come up for each. Christianity had over 150 results, Judaism had forty, Islam had twenty-seven, Hinduism had one and it was a call for a proposal submission rather than something with content, and Buddhism had five (two of which were referencing applications and submissions). I also searched for the keywords “Native American,” “Indigenous,” “historical trauma” and “historical unresolved grief.” A search for “Native American” yielded four results, only one of which was content-oriented (a blog post on the paradox of tolerance) while the others were passing references to Native Americans or a call for applicants for the “Head of Global

¹⁴ “Religious Trauma Research.”

¹⁵ GCRR claims that there is currently no empirical data to support the concept of religious trauma. See, “Religious Trauma Research.”

¹⁶ Darren Slade. “Religious Trauma Sociological Study.” gofundme.com, June 20, 2022. <https://www.gofundme.com/f/religious-trauma-sociological-study>.

Native American Studies” position at GCRR.¹⁷ “Indigenous” resulted in one blog post on shamanic practices, and there were no results for historical trauma or historical unresolved grief.

GCRR has hosted two International e-Conferences on Religious Trauma: the first annual conference was held in May 2021 and the second in March 2022. The conference registration cost \$59.99, and the website stated that 100% of the proceeds would go towards funding GCRR's social-scientific research on religious trauma.¹⁸ GCRR's website explained that the conferences would bring together the “World’s Leading Voices on Religious Trauma Research” to discuss the causes of religious trauma, as well as its “manifestations and treatment options for those afflicted with the often adverse and disruptive effects associated with religion.”¹⁹

The conferences taken together consisted of a total of twenty-nine Zoom presentations featuring a range of presenters from those with backgrounds in counseling and psychiatry, to former fundamentalists and pastors who have turned toward the study of religious trauma after personal experiences of abuse, to spiritual counselors (including a hospice chaplain and an interfaith minister), to professors from the fields of psychology and philosophy, to graduate students who have done research on some aspect of religious trauma. The conference poster listed three questions: “What causes religious trauma? How does it manifest in our lives? How do we treat it?”²⁰ These questions informed the presentations, each of which could be separated into categories of causes, manifestations, and healing or treatment suggestions. The following

¹⁷ David Kyle Johnson, “‘Hate Has No Home Here’ and the Paradox of Tolerance,” GCRR (GCRR, July 3, 2020), <https://www.gcerr.org/post/hate-has-no-home-here-and-the-paradox-of-tolerance>; Darren M. Slade, “Apply to Be on the Board of Directors for GCRR!,” GCRR (GCRR, January 7, 2021), <https://www.gcerr.org/post/apply-to-be-on-the-board-of-directors-for-gcerr>.

¹⁸ “2nd Annual Religious Trauma e-Conference,” GCRR, accessed October 15, 2022, <https://www.gcerr.org/religioustraumaconference2022>.

¹⁹ “2nd Annual Religious Trauma e-Conference.”

²⁰ Ibid.

includes a summary of some of the most notable presentations from the conference, by the question that the presenter broadly addressed.

What causes religious trauma?

Many of the presenters began by sharing GCRR and NACRTR's definition of religious trauma to set the stage for their presentations. One of the recurring terms used throughout the conferences was the concept of Adverse Religious Experiences (AREs), derived from the clinically and culturally accepted Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) test which gauges someone's susceptibility to negative behaviors based on the environments they were exposed to as a young child.²¹ In a session titled "How Religious Trauma Hits Home," Rebekah Drumsta, who described herself as a "Writer, Spiritual Abuse Advocate, Consultant, and Life Coach" and whose work has the "mission of supporting survivors of spiritual abuse and religious trauma by providing resources to educate and equip not only survivors, but the public as well" introduced the idea of AREs by using the Religious Trauma Institute's definition.²² ARE's are "any experience of a religious belief, practice, or structure that undermines an individual's sense of safety or autonomy and/or negatively impacts their physical, social, emotional, relational, or psychological well-being."²³ The Religious Trauma Institute's ARE survey is designed to inventory individuals' experiences with religious trauma and spiritual abuse so that more data can be gathered about the phenomenon. She also defined spiritual abuse in her own words: "spiritual abuse is using one's power or authority to control, manipulate, guilt, or coerce another

²¹ "Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 2, 2021), <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>.

²² Rebekah Drumsta, "About," Rebekah Drumsta, accessed October 24, 2022, <https://rebekahdrumsta.com/about>.

²³ Rebekah Drumsta, "How Religious Trauma Hits Home" (presentation, 2nd Annual International e-Conference on Religious Trauma, March 26-27, 2022)

with claims of Biblical or spiritual truth,” she said, and it can manifest in any spiritually-based organization or system (such as yoga).²⁴

Some people investigated more specific forms of religious trauma, like “Developmental Religious Trauma” that is said to deform the growth of a child’s personality and is often the result of families within religious fundamentalist groups whose religious worldview guides the way they raise their children. Gill Harvey’s presentation argued that factors that can lead to developmental religious trauma include what he calls “religious tribalism”: the sheltering of children from outside society in an us vs. them culture; imposed moralistic, all or nothing rules; and the use of power, control, and authoritarian fear mongering to instill the Biblical hierarchy of God, father, mother, and children within a family.²⁵

Jenna Riemersma, a best-selling author and the founder/clinical director of the Atlanta Center for Relational Healing, presented “Understanding Religious Trauma through the Internal Family Systems Model,” in which she defined overt and covert religious trauma. In her presentation she provided examples of overt religious trauma, such as clergy sexual abuse, and covert religious trauma, such as having negative thoughts about yourself based on religious teachings.²⁶ There were also definitions of trauma more broadly that surfaced during the conferences. Riemersma defined trauma as “something negative,” and certified trauma and grief

²⁴ Drumsta, “How Religious Trauma Hits Home.”

²⁵ Gill Harvey, “The Power and Control Dynamics of Growing up in an Abrahamic Faith Environment” (presentation, 2nd Annual International e-Conference on Religious Trauma, March 26-27, 2022).

²⁶ Jenna Riemersma, “Understanding Religious Trauma through the Internal Family Systems Model” (presentation, 2nd Annual International e-Conference on Religious Trauma, March 26-27, 2022).

therapist Kara Bowman explained that “trauma isn’t what happens to you, it’s what happens afterwards.”²⁷

How does it manifest?

During the GCRR conference, some of the sessions focused on what religious trauma looked like or how it affected specific demographics. There were three main groups that were repeatedly referenced as being more susceptible to spiritual abuse and religious trauma in faith communities due to an unequal hierarchical structure or harmful theology: children, women, and the LGBTQIA community. Children are some of the most vulnerable to spiritual and religious abuse because they are often raised with little to no exposure of a worldview outside their parents. This leads to a child internalizing their parents’ theological worldview at very young ages (two, three, four) in a process which Terri Daniel, a hospice chaplain calls, “embedded theology.”²⁸ This can lead to abusive disciplinary tactics pulled from religious beliefs, and a deep fear of hell and the end times. Drumsta discussed the elements of control in almost every aspect of the child’s life: behavioral (“instilling obedience and praise of conformity”), informational (separation and exclusion from the world outside of parental worldview and faith community), thought (“believing the “right” things, with questioning about a child’s upbringing or spiritual beliefs seen as a threat, rebellion, or sin”), and emotional control.²⁹ Children’s feelings cannot be trusted and so children are seen as inherently evil in many faith communities and thus there is a

²⁷ Beth Schwartz, “The Effect of Adverse Religious Experiences on Women’s Health: A Proposed Grounded Theory Study Within the Theoretical Framework of the Roy Adaptation Model” (presentation, 2nd Annual International e-Conference on Religious Trauma, March 26-27, 2022).

²⁸ Terri Daniel, “Bereavement and Bad Theology: A Toxic Cocktail” (presentation, International e-Conference on Religious Trauma, May 29-30, 2021).

²⁹ Drumsta, “How Religious Trauma Hits Home.”

rationale for abusive attempts at control.³⁰ The acceptance - often later in life - that an individual has undergone spiritual abuse and is now experiencing the effects of religious trauma may disrupt an entire family system because not only may the person who has experienced the trauma be fearful of leaving the only community they have ever known, but they may also fear losing their family which may lead to stages of deep grief should that individual choose to leave.³¹ Janyne McConnaughey, a victim of sexual abuse, trauma-informed author, and advocate for childhood trauma, added to the conversation of developmental trauma by explaining how its physical manifestations lead to a dysregulated nervous system, impaired cognitive functioning, under-developed sense of self, difficulty trusting and setting boundaries, and an inability to experience joy.³² Another woman presented her findings on how religion can lead to the development of obsessive compulsive disorder, in large part due to the all-or-nothing thinking of toxic faith.

In the presentation “The Effect of Adverse Religious Experiences on Women’s Health: A Proposed Grounded Theory Study Within the Theoretical Framework of the Roy Adaptation Model,” Beth Schwartz, a public health nurse, pastor, and Christian feminist theologian, discussed the mental, physical, sexual, and spiritual health manifestations of AREs on women. Schwartz’s presentation was aimed at equipping nurses and public health practitioners with knowledge about how religion affects the physical health of individuals so that they can provide trauma-informed spiritual care. For her, spiritual abuse is a type of ARE. The mental health manifestations of AREs include poor coping strategies from a suppression of negative emotions; depression, anxiety, paranoia, obsession, and compulsion as results of negative beliefs about God

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Kara Bowman, “Departing a Religion - Supporting those in Grief,” (presentation, 2nd Annual International e-Conference on Religious Trauma, March 26-27, 2022).

³² Janyne McConnaughey, “Five Spiritual Practices Which Re-traumatize the Traumatized,” (presentation, 2nd Annual International e-Conference on Religious Trauma, March 26-27, 2022).

that can also lead to guilt; and failure to adhere to religious standards leading to shame, guilt, and low self-esteem.³³ The examples she provided for physical health manifestations are more so examples of the *choices* individuals made as part of their religious beliefs to turn away from Western-oriented or mainstream health protocols. She noted that Christian Scientists may avoid using antidepressant medication because of their beliefs, religious sects such as the Amish may refuse to use vaccines, and other groups may believe that their attendance at a healing service healed and cured them of their disease and justified them stopping their medication. Finally, she said that adverse religious experiences may impact the sexual health of individuals through vaginismus, injured spiritual health after a clergy sexual assault, and lack of knowledge around contraceptive use for individuals who pledged their virginity. It is important to note that Schwartz is a nurse practitioner and her own biases may be showing through in these conclusions. Katelynn Steinhauser, a graduate student, presented “Chewed Up Gum and Broken Rose Petals: Problematizing Purity Culture in Evangelical Christianity” in which she discussed the doctrinal and cultural view of women’s nature as sinful in the evangelical church. In the evangelical church, traditional gender roles are upheld and reinforced through the rhetoric of purity culture and fear of sex.³⁴ This echoed additional comments throughout the conference about the religious trauma that can come from being a woman in a conservative religion.

Anne-Marie Zanzal, a coming out later in life coach, presented “Religious Trauma and the Later in Life LGBTQIA Community” which contributed a unique perspective on religious trauma and LGBTQIA individuals. In her presentation she spoke candidly about her own experience leaving her heterosexual marriage and church community in search of a more

³³ Schwartz, “The Effect of Adverse Religious Experiences on Women’s Health: A Proposed Grounded Theory Study Within the Theoretical Framework of the Roy Adaptation Model.”

³⁴ Katelynn Steinhauser, “Chewed Up Gum and Broken Rose Petals: Problematizing Purity Culture in Evangelical Christianity,” (presentation, 2nd Annual International e-Conference on Religious Trauma, March 26-27, 2022).

meaningful and accepting spirituality. She listed the following as examples of what religious trauma looks like:

- growing up with chronic fear or anxiety around salvation, rapture, Hell, Satan, or demons
- deep or chronic shame about not living up to expectations or being a sinner
- fear of rejection by God or the faith community
- feelings of unworthiness, being unlovable, or bad in some way
- lack of self-compassion
- feeling that they can't trust themselves, their body or their emotions
- superstitious beliefs about what will lead to positive and negative outcomes in life
- perfectionism, hypervigilance
- extreme dualistic thinking
- spiritual bypassing
- difficulty with experiencing pleasure
- feeling bad or wrong for having sexual thoughts or feelings or having physical reactions to sex or sexual thoughts such as crying or feeling a disconnection from the body
- denying sexuality³⁵

There is a considerable amount of literature on religious trauma and the LGBTQIA+ community given the tangible disconnect between many churches, sexuality and gender identity, and the vulnerability of LGBTQIA+ individuals in toxic, dogmatic, and fundamentalist religious environments. Erika Allison, a minister and spiritual counselor, spoke to the long-term impacts of religious trauma and so-called “conversion therapy” for LGBTQIA individuals. She listed vulnerability, inner-critic/judgment, and the feeling that you constantly have to prove yourself (overservice) as some manifestations of religious trauma.³⁶ A discussion of religious trauma, spiritual abuse, and the LGBTQIA+ community is both necessary and important, however, this thesis will not address the nuances of the spiritual, or more specifically, religious abuse pertaining to this specific community.

³⁵ Anne-Marie Zanzal, “Religious Trauma and the Later in Life LGBTQIA Community,” (presentation, 2nd Annual International e-Conference on Religious Trauma, March 26-27, 2022).

³⁶ Erika Allison, “Gay the Pray Away: Uncovering the Long-Term Impacts of Religious Trauma and Conversion Therapy,” (presentation, International e-Conference on Religious Trauma, May 29-30, 2021).

How do we treat it?

Healing from religious trauma is often more complex because the response and care must be even more trauma-informed than responses to other forms of traumatic experiences.

McConnaughey's 2022 presentation on "Religious Abuse and the Trauma of Perceived Spiritual Failure" discussed how spiritual disciplines have been used to help people with their trauma.³⁷

However, for religiously abused and traumatized individuals, spiritually rooted interventions like meditation, prayer, time spent in silence, study and memorization, fasting, or journaling may be retraumatizing rather than healing. In the 2021 conference, McConnaughey explored how if an individual enters a church/faith community with no acknowledgement of their pre-existing trauma (McConnaughey termed this perceived unworthiness), they may experience a sense of perceived spiritual failure.³⁸ This compounding experience can lead to maladaptive coping strategies (in fact, many who experience trauma return to harmful coping mechanisms) in the form of ACE behaviors (i.e. substance abuse, domestic violence, risky behavior, poor mental health), which are often seen and described as sin in religious contexts.³⁹ This can lead individuals to feel like they are on a pipeline to spiritual failure and hell, because of their inability to perform at the spiritual disciplines (i.e., living without sin). Maladaptive coping mechanisms to trauma can also look like spiritual bypassing and shame and blame associations. Additionally, individuals who have experienced harmful or traumatic experiences previously, religious or not, are more vulnerable to religious trauma because they may inadvertently seek out harmful spiritual practices or a harmful religious tradition. Zanzal, also referenced spiritual bypassing and explained how in the specific context of a Christian faith setting, it is the denial of

³⁷ Janyne McConnaughey, "Five Spiritual Practice Which Re-traumatize the Traumatized."

³⁸ Janyne McConnaughey, "Religious Abuse and the Trauma of Perceived Spiritual Failure," (presentation, International e-Conference on Religious Trauma, May 29-30, 2021).

³⁹ Janyne McConnaughey, "Religious Abuse and the Trauma of Perceived Spiritual Failure."

the presence and validity of mental health issues due to a belief that those feelings come from Satan or a lack of faith, and the belief that if an individual prays enough or is favored by God, He will take away the suffering.⁴⁰ Spiritual bypassing is also applicable to New Age practices as well, such as meditation. Zanzal suggested that in order to heal from religious trauma (specifically for people who have left their Church after spiritual abuse), one should find a community that can replace the community the individual has left. That community may very well be another religious group.⁴¹

In addition to sessions about psychotherapeutic responses to religious trauma, and trauma more generally, the GCRR conferences included three presentations on the use of entheogenic and psychedelic treatments in order to heal from religious trauma. Andrew Jasko, a presenter at both the GCRR conferences and a survivor of religious and spiritual abuse, described these interventions as mind-body-spirit medicine which facilitate a genuine experience of mysticism that access the core of the wounds of religious trauma.⁴² For Jasko, religion and spirituality are almost entirely separated; he viewed religion as a dogma and ideology, and spirituality as a “felt sense of transcendence,” “quality of being,” and “expansion of oneself” that is accessed through mystical experiences.⁴³ Jasko defined mysticism as the “science of consciousness.”⁴⁴ Spiritual abuse negatively impacts one’s spirituality and he suggests that in order to heal one’s damaged spirituality, one must seek out mystical experiences; the examples he gave are Samadhi, ego death, life review, out of body experiences, getting in touch with ancestors, entities, and guides.⁴⁵ He then listed a variety of psychospiritual practices that would support someone in accessing the

⁴⁰ Zanzal, “Religious Trauma and the Later in Life LGBTQIA Community.”

⁴¹ Zanzal, “Religious Trauma and the Later in Life LGBTQIA Community.”

⁴² Andrew Jasko, “Reclaiming Spirituality After Religious Trauma,” (presentation, 2nd Annual International e-Conference on Religious Trauma, March 26-27, 2022).

⁴³ Andrew Jasko, “Reclaiming Spirituality After Religious Trauma.”

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

spiritual realm, framed by “find what works for you”: meditation, psychedelics, breathwork, yogic practices, sacred sexuality, indigenous ceremonies, shamanic drumming, nature-based rituals, and dance or embodied practices. Kelby Bibler, a PhD student in philosophy, suggested that entheogenic experiences meet the criteria for William James’ definition of mystical experiences, which include elements of ineffability, transience, noetic qualities, and passivity.⁴⁶ Bibler spoke about how entheogens break the cyclical and theologically based thinking that is indicative of religious trauma and helps to facilitate a re-enchantment with the world by producing a religious experience.⁴⁷ Bibler called for the recognition of entheogens in religious trauma responses because they induce an experience (which sometimes result in a dialogue with God) rather than simply targeting symptoms, and thus it is a more effective form of healing.⁴⁸

In the GCRR conferences, I observed four clear themes about religious trauma: 1) religious trauma is a product of white, Christian churches and spaces (often evangelical or fundamentalist groups) and is based on doctrines of guilt, shame, control, and hierarchy; 2) the research cited is mostly drawn from counseling and psychology with frequent reference to trauma research such as Bessel van der Kolk’s findings; 3) there was a focus on healing from religious trauma, whether that is through psychotherapy, seeking out a new community, finding a new form of spirituality, or a combination of these responses; 4) the reclamation of one’s “spirituality” (but not necessarily a reclamation of “religion”) is central to a discussion of healing from religious trauma (alternative and new forms of spiritual exploration or mystical experiences are common suggestions).

⁴⁶ Kelby Bibler, “Entheogenic Therapies for Religious Trauma and Disaffiliation: A Phenomenological Argument,” (presentation, International e-Conference on Religious Trauma, May 29-30, 2021).

⁴⁷ Kelby Bibler, “Entheogenic Therapies for Religious Trauma and Disaffiliation: A Phenomenological Argument.”

⁴⁸ Ibid.

However, there was a notable lack of inclusion and discussion about historical (and present-day) forms of spiritual abuse and resulting generational and religious trauma in Native American communities; only one presenter gave a land acknowledgement and very few mentioned generational trauma. There was also a notable lack of marginalized voices: there was not a single presenter of color at either of the conferences, nor any reference to the lack thereof. There was no problematization or questioning of proposed healing methods such as the use of traditionally Indigenous forms of healing, such as the use of mushrooms or peyote to activate mystical healing experiences or Indigenous ceremonies, which could be considered forms of cultural appropriation and further abuse. Finally, there was little to no reference to the abuse and trauma present in religious traditions outside of Christianity. The GCRR Religious Trauma e-Conferences serve as a case study and jumping off point for a broader exploration of the discourse happening around the topics of religious abuse, spiritual abuse and religious trauma. The GCRR conferences mirror a broader focus in the public discourse and scholarly literature around spiritual abuse and religious trauma on Protestant denominations, and highlight the shortcomings and privileged nature of these conversations, which are centered on white, Western, Protestant communities, experiences, examples, and terminology.

CHAPTER 2 ANSWERING THE QUESTIONS: SPIRITUAL ABUSE AND RELIGIOUS TRAUMA

While researching religious abuse, spiritual abuse, and religious trauma, I found that “spiritual abuse” is the most pervasive term used when describing the harm and violence that is experienced in both religious and spiritual contexts. The questions that the secondary literature has taken up broadly map onto the three questions that the GCRR conferences focused on (What causes religious trauma? How does it manifest in our lives? How do we treat it) and include the following sub-questions: what is spiritual abuse and religious trauma?; what are the features of spiritual abuse and religious trauma?; who does spiritual abuse and religious trauma affect?; and how does one recover or heal from spiritual abuse and religious trauma? The secondary literature addressing these specific questions is located in the fields of psychology, counseling, theology, and philosophy and focuses mostly on Protestant communities, though their definitions are often generalized to fit all religious and spiritual settings. This generalization is sometimes done through the use of very general terms like “spiritual and religious abuse” (rather than “spiritual abuse” *or* “religious abuse”), which lacks specificity and explanation. This has informed the application and definition of this term, because although definitions are crafted for a general religious application, the term has mostly been used by survivors and academics of a Protestant background, with some important exceptions. In this chapter I will survey the secondary literature to examine how it answers these questions.

What is Spiritual Abuse and Religious Trauma?

Spiritual Abuse

While the articulated concepts of spiritual abuse, religious abuse, and religious trauma are contemporary, the experiences that mark these terms have a much older history, even articulated as early as 1656 in *The Reformed Pastor*.⁴⁹ The specific characteristics associated with spiritual abuse can be traced back to the shepherding or discipling movement of the 1960s within some charismatic Christian communities.⁵⁰ In the mid to late 20th century, small faith groups led by “shepherds” (chosen leaders of these smaller practicing groups) rose up to oppose what they viewed as threats to their faith and the nuclear family posed by liberal society. The shepherding movement emphasized a submission to spiritual authorities (in the form of the group leaders) and generated a hierarchical structure wherein the leader of the group held the majority of power and demanded a relationship of unquestioning obedience from parishioners, creating an environment allowing for abuse to take place.⁵¹ Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kinmond write that while much of the shepherding movement was disbanded, the emphasis on obedience and submission of faith communities to their pastoral leaders remained present in many charismatic and evangelical Protestant groups.⁵² According to Oakley and Kinmond, there was a shift in the 1990s from describing these issues of coercive power dynamics as symptoms of shepherding, charismatic, or

⁴⁹ Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kinmond, *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013).

⁵⁰ Oakley and Kinmond, *Breaking the Silence*, 9.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

“cult” movements to symptoms of spiritual abuse.⁵³ This history is evidence of the development of a distinctly Protestant understanding of spiritual abuse.

The concept of spiritual abuse was not popularly articulated until 1991, when Jeff VanVonderen and David Johnson published *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* (currently listed #35 on Amazon’s Psychology and Religion bestsellers).⁵⁴ Shortly after, books by Ron Enroth (*Churches That Abuse*) and Ken Blue (*Healing Spiritual Abuse*), evangelical pastors, were published in 1992 and 1993 respectively. The academic literature on the subject of spiritual abuse did not fully expand until the mid 2010s; most of the literature I reference comes from the years 2005- 2014, with another surge taking place a few years later. Jeff VanVonderen, a former pastor turned famous interventionist and counselor on spiritual abuse, believes that spiritual abuse is the worst kind of abuse a person can endure.⁵⁵ In *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* he never uses the term “religious abuse,” although he does reference spiritual abuse as a “religious dynamic.”⁵⁶ The most common characteristic of spiritual abuse across almost all literature surveyed is the presence of toxic power and authority. VanVonderen centers this point in his oft-cited definition of spiritual abuse: “Spiritual abuse is the mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening,

⁵³ See: Oakley and Kinmond, *Breaking the Silence*, 9. The term ‘cult’ is referenced throughout the literature on religious trauma and spiritual abuse. The implications and meaning of this term is highly contested due to the popular conception of the term as pejorative and stigmatizing. New terms such as ‘new religious movements’ or ‘minority religions’ have been introduced to describe innovative religious groups but also received backlash. See Megan Goodwin’s *Abusing Religion* and Catherine Wessinger’s article “Culting: From Waco to Fundamentalist Mormons” in *Religion Dispatches* for more discussion on the terms.

⁵⁴ David Johnson and VanVonderen Jeff, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1991).

⁵⁵ “Spiritual Abuse: An Interview with Jeff VanVonderen,” The National Association for Christian Recovery, February 16, 2013, <https://www.nacr.org/center-for-spirituality-and-recovery/spiritual-abuse-an-interview-with-jeff-vanvonderen>.

⁵⁶ Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, 20.

undermining or decreasing that person's empowerment."⁵⁷ He goes on to state that it is often the use of someone's higher spiritual position to control or dominate another individual that leads to spiritual abuse.⁵⁸ While VanVonderen and Johnson may have been the first to put the term "spiritual abuse" into print, in an interview with The National Association for Christian Recovery, VanVonderen stated that spiritual abuse has been around since biblical times, a claim for which he provided biblical evidence.⁵⁹

Ken Blue, the author of *Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experiences*, situates spiritual abuse in comparison to sexual and physical abuse:

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 exploit a follower, thus causing spiritual wounds.⁶⁰

Blue uses Enroth's definition to further explain that "spiritual abuse leaves scars on the psyche and soul" and is inflicted by individuals with high spiritual authority who are deemed "shepherds with a sacred trust."⁶¹ However, Blue specifically focuses his analysis of spiritual abuse on the aspect of its *intent to hurt*. Spiritual abusers often do not realize the exploitation or harm they are inflicting on their communities. He understands spiritual abuse on a vertical continuum with minor, sporadic abuse at the bottom and deliberate and systematic abuse at the top.⁶² While abuse that is perpetrated without intent is no less important to observe, Blue argues that it is more common than purposeful spiritual abuse and that this is an important dimension of

⁵⁷ Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, 20.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 20.

⁵⁹ "Spiritual Abuse: An Interview with Jeff VanVonderen."

⁶⁰ Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experiences* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 12.

⁶¹ Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, 12.

⁶² Ibid, 13.

spiritual abuse that cannot be ignored.⁶³ Blue describes how victims of spiritual abuse often lose themselves and become “loners” who have been cut off from God’s healing because, and here Blue quotes Juanita and Dale Ryan, authors of *Rooted in God’s Love*, “it damages the central core of who we are. It leaves us spiritually disorganized and emotionally cut off from the healing love of God.”⁶⁴ The most committed believers are the most vulnerable to abuse, and it is often the hierarchical and shepherding nature of Christian churches that attract these people to the faith in the first place but which also lead to their “spiritual death.”⁶⁵ Blue’s analysis of shepherding in Christian environments supports Oakley and Kinmond’s similar argument. Most of his book is focused on a scriptural analysis of the ways in which Jesus confronted the poorly wielded spiritual power of the Pharisees and stood up to their faulty, abusive, authoritarian, ego-driven leadership, qualities that are still present in the modern preachers who make “God’s acceptance contingent upon religious performance” today.⁶⁶ The fundamental shift is that of turning towards a service-oriented leadership rather than one focused solely on power and authority.

In 2002, Demaris Wehr, a Jungian psychotherapist and spiritual counselor, included a chapter in his book *The Psychology of Mature Spirituality* entitled “Spiritual Abuse: When Good People Do Bad Things.” Wehr consciously uses the word “spiritual” rather than “religious” to describe abuse because “it is broader and more experience-based.”⁶⁷ Wehr understands “religion” to refer to institutionalized forms of worship, and “spirituality” to reference any experience of the sacred. She then gives examples:

⁶³ Ibid, 13.

⁶⁴ Juanita and Dale Ryan, *Rooted in God's Love*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Publishing; 1992.) quoted in Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experiences* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 15.

⁶⁵ Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, 17.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 19.

⁶⁷ Demaris S. Wehr, “Spiritual Abuse: When Good People Do Bad Things,” in *The Psychology of Mature Spirituality*, ed. Polly Young-Eisendrath and Melvin Millar, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2000), 38.

In a God-centered environment like a church, spiritual abuse consists of irresponsible behavior such as using the seeker for the healer's own purposes, making unwise pronouncements, abusing the seeker sexually, giving self-serving advice in the name of God. In a non-God-centered spiritual context, such as Buddhism or psychotherapy, spiritual abuse consists of the same irresponsible uses of power in the name of a sacred practice.⁶⁸

While Wehr is one of the few from the psychology and counseling field to mention Buddhism with relation to spiritual abuse, it is interesting that she does so while separating Buddhism from having any religious or institutional basis. Additionally, she likens Buddhism to psychotherapy in being “non-God-centered spiritual contexts” but she does not discuss how Buddhism is a religion and psychotherapy is a Western secular form of treatment. However, the possibility of spiritual abuse occurring in secular as well as religious spaces is important to her conception of spiritual abuse: one of her case studies involves a woman who was “spiritually abused” by her therapist. She argues that “wounding healers” create unintentional harm to those they are charged with the care of, thus resulting in a wide range of spiritual abuses.⁶⁹ For Wehr, the loss of integrity is central to the experience of spiritual abuse, making individuals more vulnerable to others' influence, dogmas, and projections. She expands her definition of spiritual abuse to be something that can occur at any place or time that has a spiritual context or element.

Dr. Lisa Oakley (psychology professor and Chartered Psychologist with the British Psychological Society) and Dr. Kathryn Kinmond (counselor and psychologist) published *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse* in 2013. After having suffered from spiritual abuse themselves, Oakley and Kinmond were inspired to write this book in order to remedy the challenges they faced in naming their experiences due to the lack of available literature that addressed their experiences. They critiqued the fact that most of the literature until the

⁶⁸ Wehr, “Spiritual Abuse: When Good People Do Bad Things,” 38.

⁶⁹ Wehr, “Spiritual Abuse: When Good People Do Bad Things,” 37.

mid-2000s came from male, white, American pastors or individuals holding positions of power. The impetus for *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse* was to fill the void in spiritual abuse literature by writing a book that centered survivors' stories and provided a UK perspective on spiritual abuse within Christian faith communities. The authors argue that spiritual abuse should be considered with as much seriousness as other forms of abuse. The book covers the historical and present day context of spiritual abuse: what it looks like, the emotional experiences and related coercive tactics of spiritual abuse, the process of spiritual abuse from joining the church to [sometimes] the exit from the faith community, the long term effects of the abuse, and suggestions for clinical and practical guidance and healing.

Oakley and Kinmond give an overview of existing definitions of spiritual abuse and provide critiques to lay the groundwork for their own definition. Their definition decenters the focus on both the leaders as abusers or the helplessness of survivors, which previous definitions had done. Oakley and Kinmond base their definition of spiritual abuse in the experience of survivors:

SA [spiritual abuse] is coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. The target experiences SA as a deeply emotional personal attack. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or the pulpit to control behaviour, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a "divine" position, and isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context.⁷⁰

In 2018, after conducting a survey to gauge common understandings and experiences of spiritual abuse, Oakley, Kinmond and Justin Humphreys published "Spiritual Abuse in Christian Faith Settings: Definitions, Policy, and Practice Guidance," which listed a new definition of spiritual abuse:

⁷⁰ Oakley and Kinmond, *Breaking the Silence*, 21-22.

Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterised by a systematic 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.⁷¹

The updated definition is more explicit in its explanation of spiritual abuse by adding words like “systematic,” “coercion” rather than pattern, and “control,” which is specified as a tactic of spiritual abuse.

In *Breaking the Silence*, Oakley and Kinmond explore power in relation to spiritual abuse. They name a variety of harmful manifestations of this power in religious contexts, but the two main themes are coercion/control and divine position, often conveyed by discursive means. Coercion and control are wielded to create patterns of spiritual abuse in the use of censorship, conformity, manipulation and exploitation, ownership, and the use of scripture and pulpit to exercise this power. The authors repeatedly come back to the idea that it is the employment of scripture or religious and spiritual beliefs to give a divine rationale for abuse that is a widespread component of spiritual abuse. One of the most unique aspects of Oakley and Kinmond’s understanding of spiritual abuse is its distinction from other forms of abuse because unlike other forms of abuse (they cite animal abuse, child sexual abuse, and domestic abuse), it is possible that “in SA it may appear that a person chooses to enter the potentially abusive situation - certainly as an adult. They then, seemingly, have a similar choice whether or not to leave.”⁷²

Thus they conclude that there is an increased amount of shame and stigma associated with

⁷¹ Lisa Oakley, Kathryn Kinmond, and Justin Humphreys, “Spiritual Abuse in Christian Faith Settings: Definition, Policy and Practice Guidance,” *The Journal of Adult Protection* 20, no. 3/4 (August 13, 2018): 144–54, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JAP-03-2018-0005>.

⁷² Oakley and Kinmond, *Breaking the Silence*, 92

coming out about one's experience of spiritual abuse, because people may believe that the individual deserves what comes to them.

David J. Ward is a therapist and social worker from Brisbane, Australia who specializes in working with survivors of ritual and spiritual abuse. In his 2010 article, "The Lived Experience of Spiritual Abuse," published in the academic journal *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, he summarizes the findings of a study done on six individuals who left five "Bible-based" groups, whose doctrine and practice he describes as "loosely Christian in orientation."⁷³ For him, spiritual abuse is a "misuse of power in a spiritual context whereby spiritual authority is distorted to the detriment of those under its leadership."⁷⁴ Here we see a return to the centering of leadership in the definition. He isolates spiritual abuse from "cult abuse" in order to define spiritual abuse as a more general term rather than solely as something which exists in "unorthodox groups."⁷⁵ Through this study he identified six core themes of spiritual abuse: leadership representing God, spiritual bullying, acceptance via performance, spiritual neglect, the expanding external/internal tension, and the manifestation of internal states. Similar to Oakley and Kinmond, each of these characteristics are further explained and exemplified through sub-characteristics and practices. The experience of spiritual abuse is not linear, it is multifaceted, and many of these characteristics exist simultaneously and support each other; however, Ward found that the initial acceptance of "leadership representing God" fostered the grounds for more nuanced experiences of spiritual abuse. While Ward recognizes the limitations of his study given the small sample size, he also cites the similarity in narratives and themes from other literature as support for his findings. Like many of the other authors in this

⁷³ David J. Ward, "The Lived Experience of Spiritual Abuse," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 14, no. 9 (November 2011): 899–915, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2010.536206>.

⁷⁴ Ward, "The Lived Experience of Spiritual Abuse," 901.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 900.

area of research, Ward urges that spiritual abuse, while falling under the auspices of emotional, physical, or psychological abuse, should be categorized as its own form of abuse because the effects of spiritual abuse are due mainly to a spiritual environment.

Thus far, the literature on spiritual abuse has been limited to Christianity and secular spaces. While the dominant narrative of the concept is still largely centered in Christian contexts, other religious traditions are also discussing spiritual abuse, on a smaller scale and in ways that are unique to the religious and cultural context of their traditions. Nicole Dehan and Zipi Levi's "Spiritual Abuse: An Additional Dimension of Abuse Experienced by Abused Haredi (Ultraorthodox) Jewish Wives" is an example of this expanded discussion.⁷⁶ Spiritual abuse is seen as a possible and central dimension of other forms of wife abuse (including psychological, sexual, and economic) in this context. Dehan and Levi explicitly discuss their choice to use "spiritual abuse" rather than "religious-spiritual abuse" in a way not distinguished elsewhere in the literature. They settled on the term "spiritual abuse" for three reasons, the first being that it better reflected the "experience of abuse, as the religious acts themselves are not at the basis of the suffering but rather the transcendental meanings attributed to them" second, they argue that "spiritual abuse" takes a whole-person approach that allows for the existence of a spiritual self beyond the physical being; and lastly, spiritual abuse allows for non-religious spirituality.⁷⁷ With this in mind they define spiritual abuse as "any attempt to impair the woman's spiritual life, spiritual self, or spiritual well-being, with three levels of intensity: (a) belittling her spiritual worth, beliefs, or deeds; (b) preventing her from performing spiritual acts; and (c) causing her to transgress spiritual obligations or prohibitions."⁷⁸ The authors highlight the severity of a

⁷⁶ Nicole Dehan and Zipi Levi, "Spiritual Abuse: An Additional Dimension of Abuse Experienced by Abused Haredi (Ultraorthodox) Jewish Wives," *Violence Against Women* 15, no. 11 (November 2009): 1294–1310, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801209347619>.

⁷⁷ Dehan and Levi, "Spiritual Abuse: An Additional Dimension of Abuse," 1304.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 1294.

damaged spirituality for [abused] women because “spirituality may be an important, if not the only means, of giving meaning to a life otherwise perceived as chaotic and without significance, [so that] damaging their spiritual life or spiritual self means damaging their very identity and well-being.”⁷⁹ While this is a culturally and religiously specific study, the authors see this definition of spiritual abuse as being applicable to other cultures and faiths.

Religious Trauma

Religious trauma is a much less-researched and studied term than spiritual abuse. However, the scholarship that does exist on religious trauma is similarly grounded in Protestant-based examples and experiences. While most authors articulate that spiritual abuse can result in lasting harm, that harm was not categorized as a specific type of injury or trauma until 2011, when Dr. Marlene Winell coined the term “Religious Trauma Syndrome” (RTS). However, her interest in supporting individuals struggling with toxic religion began in 1993 when she wrote the guidebook *Leaving the Fold: A Guide for Former Fundamentalists and Others Leaving Their Religion*, which is currently listed as number 26 in Christian Counseling books and number 36 in Religious Counseling books on Amazon.⁸⁰ *Leaving the Fold* is presented as a self-help book for those who are seeking to “understand and recover from harmful religious indoctrination” as well as for therapists and those in helping professions who want to be more knowledgeable in this area, especially with regards to harm done from Christian fundamentalism.⁸¹ Her book is divided into three parts: Sorting it Out, Healing, and Growth, in which she discusses everything from how to recognize the manipulations of the church to telling

⁷⁹ Ibid, 3000.

⁸⁰ Marlene Winell, *Leaving the Fold: A Guide for Former Fundamentalists and Others Leaving Their Religion*, 1st ed. (Berkeley, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1993).

⁸¹ Winell, *Leaving the Fold*, 13.

her own story to the process of emotional recovery and regaining control of your thoughts. In 2011, Winell debuted the term Religious Trauma Syndrome in a three part explanatory series for *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Today*.⁸² While her work is not without critique, she is a leader in religious trauma counseling and therapeutic responses. She currently runs the website and organization “Journey Free: Recover from Harmful Religion,” which includes therapeutic interventions like her “Religious Recovery Consultation” program involving retreats and programs for individuals suffering/recovering from religious trauma.⁸³

Winell’s book is one of many self-help books on religious trauma and its related concepts that have surfaced in the last decade. *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse* by Chuck DeGroat, *You Are Your Own: A Reckoning with the Religious Trauma of Evangelical Christianity* by Jamie Lee Finch, *Traumatized by Religious Abuse: Courage, Hope and Freedom for Survivors* by Connie Baker, and *Sacred Wounds: A Path to Healing from Spiritual Trauma* by Teresa Pasquale and Richard Rohr are just a few of the most popular on Amazon.⁸⁴ The top results of a google search for religious trauma or spiritual abuse bring up a variety of websites including Winell’s “Journey Free,” “Dare to Doubt,” and “Choosing Therapy,” all of which provide self-diagnostic checklists and “answers” for individuals questioning their personal experiences as spiritual abuse or

⁸² Marlene Winell, “Religious Trauma Syndrome: It’s Time to Recognise It,” *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Today*, Religious Trauma Syndrome, 39, no. 2 (May 2011): 16-18. Reprinted at the Journey Free website:

<https://www.journeyfree.org/religious-trauma-syndrome-articles/>.

⁸³ “Journey Free,” Journey Free - Recover from Harmful Religion, accessed October 24, 2022, <https://www.journeyfree.org/>.

⁸⁴ Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes To Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse* (Intervarsity Press, 2020).; Jamie Lee Finch, *You Are Your Own: A Reckoning with the Religious Trauma of Evangelical Christianity*, 2019.; Connie A. Baker, *The Trauma of Religious Abuse: Helping Survivors Find Courage, Hope and Freedom* (Eugene, OR: Luminare Press, LLC, 2019).; Teresa B. Pasquale, *Sacred Wounds: A Path to Healing from Spiritual Trauma*, First Edition (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2015).

religious trauma.⁸⁵ This is evidence of the burgeoning field of self-help resources for religious trauma and spiritual abuse, which the scope of this paper will not address.

Marlene Winell defines religious trauma syndrome as:

the condition experienced by people who are struggling with leaving an authoritarian, dogmatic religion and coping with the damage of indoctrination. They may be going through the shattering of a personally meaningful faith and/or breaking away from a controlling community and lifestyle. The symptoms compare most easily with PTSD, which results from experiencing or being confronted with death or serious injury and causing feelings of terror, helplessness, or horror.⁸⁶

For Winell, RTS is twofold: first, the trauma comes from the actual teachings and practices of a religion (what can be understood as spiritual abuse), and secondly (this is something that has been less addressed by other authors), trauma results from the actual *departure* from a religious fold, which puts pressure and strain on the individual as they leave one world (often restrictive and isolated) for another.⁸⁷ Winell expresses the urgency and importance of the clinical acceptance of RTS because “people are leaving the ranks of traditional religious groups in record numbers and they are reporting real suffering” and therapists need an appropriate diagnosis and plan to engage with the effects of authoritarian and dogmatic religions.⁸⁸ Winell identifies the groups most susceptible to religious trauma as “those who were raised in their religion; sheltered from the rest of the world; very sincerely and personally involved, and/or from a very controlling form of religion” and as well as individuals who are struggling with their lives and are perceived to be more “receptive to proselytizing” and vulnerable due to their own personal stress thus

⁸⁵ “Journey Free,” Journey Free - Recover from Harmful Religion.”; “Dare to Doubt: Questioning and Leaving Harmful Belief Systems,” [daretodoubt.org](https://www.daretodoubt.org/), accessed October 23, 2022, <https://www.daretodoubt.org/>; Alisha Powell and Benjamin Troy, “Religious Trauma Syndrome: Examples, Symptoms, & 7 Ways to Cope,” Choosing Therapy, August 12, 2021, <https://www.choosingtherapy.com/religious-trauma-syndrome/>;

⁸⁶ Winell, “Religious Trauma Syndrome: It’s Time to Recognise It,” 17.

⁸⁷ Winell, “Religious Trauma Syndrome: It’s Time to Recognise It,” 17.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

finding themselves in a spiritually abusive space as they search for community.⁸⁹ Interestingly, Winell explicitly states that she is not talking about damage done from sexual abuse: “while it may be easier to understand the damage done by sexual abuse or natural disaster, religious practices can be just as harmful.”⁹⁰ Her understanding of religious trauma is very narrow, focusing specifically on the psychologically and emotionally damaging aspects of involvement with fundamentalist Christianity. Winell does not explicitly state that religious trauma is only a descriptor of trauma from fundamentalist Christian groups, she does not refer to other religious groups and she often references fundamentalist theology.⁹¹

Michelle Panchuk is an English and philosophy professor at Murray State University who has contributed a large amount of research to the study of religious trauma from the perspective of it being a category of hermeneutical and epistemic injustice. In Panchuk’s article “The Shattered Spiritual Self: A Philosophical Exploration of Religious Trauma,” she defines trauma as a multiply ambiguous term that can refer to both the experience and the effects of the experience that trauma encompasses.⁹² She uses “traumatic experience” to describe the events and “post-traumatic distress” to refer to the effects that the traumatic experience has had on an individual. In another article she defines religious trauma as “a broad category of traumatic experiences that includes (but is not limited to) putative experiences of the divine being, religious practice, religious dogma, or religious community that transform an individual in a way

⁸⁹ Winell, “Religious Trauma Syndrome: It’s Time to Recognise It,” 17.; Winell, *Leaving the Fold*, 83.

⁹⁰ Winell, “Religious Trauma Syndrome: It’s Time to Recognise It,” 17.

⁹¹ Marlene Winell, “Understanding Religious Trauma,” *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Today*, Religious Trauma Syndrome, 39, no. 3 (September 2011): 23-25. Reprinted at the Journey Free website: <https://www.journeyfree.org/religious-trauma-syndrome-articles/>.

⁹² Michelle Panchuk, “The Shattered Spiritual Self: A Philosophical Exploration of Religious Trauma,” *Res Philosophica* 95, no. 3 (2018): 515, <https://doi.org/10.11612/resphil.1684>.

that diminishes their capacity for participation in religious life.”⁹³ Ultimately, Panchuk argues that hermeneutic injustice plays a causal role in the experience of spiritual violence and religious trauma, and creates a toxic epistemic environment conducive to spiritual violence. Panchuk defines hermeneutic injustice as the nature of someone’s experience that is “obscured from collective understanding as a result of unjust social structures.”⁹⁴ In the “Shattered Spiritual Self” Panchuk quotes Teresa Pasquale’s (author of *Sacred Wounds: A Path to Healing from Spiritual Trauma*) definition of a religiously traumatic experience as a “painful experience perpetrated by family, family, friends, community members, or institutions inside of religion.”⁹⁵ Panchuk believes Pasquale’s definition to be too broad while she critiques Winell’s definition of religious trauma as too narrow due to the fact that it does not include reference to the post-traumatic distress that is experienced by those who continue to identify themselves with the religion in which they have experienced abuse. Panchuk’s definition of religious trauma is born out of what she sees as a need to fill the gaps in the existing definitions. She delineates three distinct characteristics of religious trauma:

First, the trauma is, in paradigmatic cases, caused by something that the individual closely associates with the religion—when harm is inflicted by someone whom the subject perceives as representative of the divine (e.g., clergy, religious parents, guru, spiritual mentor), justified on religious grounds (e.g., citing religious texts, traditions, or doctrines), inflicted for religious reasons (e.g., as part of religious rituals), or arises from a negatively valenced (putative) experience of the divine being itself or other spiritual reality (as in canonical religious or mystical experiences). Second, the survivor usually perceives the religion to have played a positive or negative causal role in the experience’s coming about, either by motivating the perpetrator, justifying the behavior, or by failing to forbid or protect against it. And third, some of the post-traumatic effects (the epistemic

⁹³ Michelle Panchuk, “Distorting Concepts, Obscured Experiences: Hermeneutical Injustice in Religious Trauma and Spiritual Violence,” *Hypatia* 35, no. 4 (2020): 608, <https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2020.32>.

⁹⁴ Panchuk, “Distorting Concepts, Obscured Experiences: Hermeneutical Injustice in Religious Trauma and Spiritual Violence,” 607.

⁹⁵ Teresa Pasquale, *Sacred Wounds: A Path to Healing from Spiritual Trauma*. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press; 2015. 22.) quoted in Michelle Panchuk, “The Shattered Spiritual Self: A Philosophical Exploration of Religious Trauma,” 515.

or the not-merely-cognitive) have a religious trigger or object. The survivor may come to believe that God is untrustworthy or that religious communities are unsafe. They might experience intrusive memories triggered by religious practices, feel extreme fear, distrust, or revulsion toward the divine being, or internalize a deep sense of self-hatred as the result of religious doctrines.⁹⁶

The core aspect of religious trauma is that the trauma can be perceived to have been perpetrated by the divine or a divine representative.

Alyson Stone, Craig Cashwell and Paula Swindle address religious trauma and religious abuse, respectively, from the perspective of providing therapists with best practices when working with those affected by religious abuse or religious trauma.⁹⁷ Stone, a licensed psychologist and member of the GCRR-affiliated NACRTR, published “Thou Shalt Not: Treating Religious Trauma and Spiritual Harm with Combined Therapy,” which addresses therapeutic interventions for religious trauma.⁹⁸ In it, she argues that while religion has undeniable benefits for its adherents, most literature fails to acknowledge the negative impact that religion can have on an individual's mental health. Stone defines religious trauma as “pervasive psychological damage resulting from religious messages, beliefs, and experiences.”⁹⁹ Her examples are drawn from Christianity and New Age spirituality, although, she says, religious trauma is possible in various faith traditions.¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, Stone never uses the terms spiritual

⁹⁶ Panchuk, “The Shattered Spiritual Self,” 516.

⁹⁷ It is interesting to note that Stone, Cashwell and Swindle have been involved with GCRR. Cashwell and Swindle presented at the 2022 e-Conference on Religious Trauma and Stone serves as a member of GCRR's NACRTR.

⁹⁸ Alyson M. Stone, “Thou Shalt Not: Treating Religious Trauma and Spiritual Harm With Combined Therapy,” *Group* 37, no. 4 (2013): 324, <https://doi.org/10.13186/group.37.4.0323>.

⁹⁹ Stone, “Thou Shalt Not,” 324.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

abuse and/or religious abuse to describe the harm done by religion or the cause of religious trauma, instead she uses “spiritual harm.”¹⁰¹

Cashwell and Swindle, both licensed counselors and clinical supervisors, provide the main body of work on therapy for religious abuse. In their article “When Religion Hurts: Supervising Cases of Religious Abuse,” they look at the relationship between therapist and client and the need for therapists to have religious literacy and unbiased approaches to fully support the traumatized client.¹⁰² Their inclusion in this part of the literature review on religious trauma is due to their categorization of religious abuse as a betrayal trauma, and their use of the term religious abuse. Cashwell and Swindle are one of the only sources that I found within psychology and counseling to specifically use the term “religious abuse” in their study, rather than the more commonly used terms of “spiritual abuse” or “spiritual and religious abuse.” They acknowledge that while religious abuse can happen in any religious context, they are focused on religious abuse within Christian communities. Betrayal trauma is a form of trauma characterized by the violation of a person’s trust or well-being by an individual or institution on which that person depends for survival, a role which religious leaders and communities often fulfill.¹⁰³ Cashwell and Swindle categorize religious abuse into three types that roughly map onto Panchuk’s categorization: abuse perpetrated by religious leaders, abuse perpetrated by a religious group or a person representing a religious group, and abuse with a religious or spiritual component.¹⁰⁴ They also posit that the elements of the sacred and the power of the clergy based

¹⁰¹ Stone explains her use of the term spiritual harm: “I use the term spiritual harm to refer to the negative impact that restrictive spiritual belief systems and spiritual bypassing can have on mental health.” See, Stone, “Thou Shalt Not,” 326.

¹⁰² Craig S. Cashwell and Paula J. Swindle, “When Religion Hurts: Supervising Cases of Religious Abuse,” *The Clinical Supervisor* 37, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 182–203, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07325223.2018.1443305>.

¹⁰³ Cashwell and Swindle, “When Religion Hurts,” 183.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

on their perceived spiritual authority granted by God are what makes religious abuse so unique from other types of abuse and associated trauma:

For people who believe in God, harm done to them in the name of God or by a representative of God carries enormous weight and power (Farrell, 2004). Victims who have previously found meaning in their religious beliefs may now face an existential crisis due to the use of the sacred in the abuse, such as when a clergy member grooms a potential sexual partner by referring to her or him as chosen.¹⁰⁵

Given the sensitivity of the topic, they suggest that there is a strong need for trauma-informed care and adequate supervision of therapists working with religiously abused clients in order to honor and respect the sensitivity and precarity of religion as a topic.

What Are the Features of Religious Trauma?

Spiritual abuse and religious trauma manifest in different ways and thus will be addressed separately. The literature proposes that spiritual abuse is the process of harm, while religious trauma is the diagnosis and long-term effects of that harm, however, some individuals use the terms more loosely and reference spiritual abuse when they discuss religious trauma and vice versa. The question “How does religious trauma manifest and/or what does it look like” is addressed in a very limited set of research within trauma studies, psychology, and therapeutic best practices literature, which advises practitioners what to look for and the range of its effects on an individual. The manifestation of religious trauma is often hard to distinguish from other psychological or emotional challenges. However, religious trauma is not discussed in the same ways or with the same frequency of traumas incurred from grief, disaster, childhood, medical, abuse, war, and those of a sexual nature. Ward uses the term spiritual abuse to describe both the process *and* event in which one’s inner and outer worlds are influenced, creating “the potential to

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 184.

affect the biological, psychological, social and spiritual domains of the individual.”¹⁰⁶ This is a unique aspect of spiritual abuse in comparison to other events surrounding trauma, because the trauma may be developed over a long period of time rather than attributable to one event.

According to the North American Research Collective - Religious Trauma (NARC-RT), trauma is a product of one’s inability to process emotions, feelings, and “overwhelmed energy” in a safe place. This feeling is compounded in religious institutions which “do not give individuals safe space to process their emotions, especially when their triggers are related to church doctrine.”¹⁰⁷

Religious trauma is commonly referenced as being a subset of trauma, complex trauma, PTSD, and complex-PTSD. Bessel van der Kolk’s work on the effect of trauma on brain chemistry is often mentioned in discussions of religious trauma because it highlights the lasting and often intergenerational effects of trauma due to the change in brain chemistry to adapt and also maladapt to situations. Van der Kolk writes:

Traumatized people chronically feel unsafe inside their bodies: the past is alive in the form of gnawing interior discomfort. Their bodies are constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs, and, in an attempt to control these processes, they often become expert at ignoring their gut feelings and in numbing awareness of what is playing out inside. They learn to hide from themselves.¹⁰⁸

An example of a commonly cited manifestation of religious trauma is that individuals may have a visceral physical experience to being in a church service or on the grounds of the religious institution responsible for their abusive/traumatizing experience. VanVonderen tells a story that exemplifies an experience of religious trauma, although he does not explicitly describe it as such. VanVonderen was serving as a church counselor when a woman was referred to him

¹⁰⁶ Ward, “The Lived Experience of Spiritual Abuse,” 913.

¹⁰⁷“North American Research Collective: Religious Trauma,” NARC-RT, accessed October 23, 2022, <https://www.narc-rt.org/>.

¹⁰⁸ Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes To Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse* (Intervarsity Press, 2020), 124.

because she was struggling with “church and authority stuff.”¹⁰⁹ VanVonderen was told that if he could support and help this woman reach a place where she could experience that it was possible to sit in a church building without being abused by a man, then that would be a success. When the woman arrived at the church it took her over twenty minutes to enter the auditorium, which she needed to cross in order to get to VanVonderen’s office. The physical and religious space of a church caused this woman so much distress and pain due to the abuse she had suffered in the name of God that it was physically difficult for her to *enter* the space, even though this had not been the site of her abuse.¹¹⁰

While the manifestation of religious trauma is individual, Winell lists the key dysfunctions resulting from religious trauma syndrome that involve one’s cognitive, affective, functional, and social/cultural aspects of being: cognitive challenges including “confusion, difficulty with decision-making and critical thinking, dissociation, identity confusion”; affective challenges like “anxiety, panic attacks, depression, suicidal ideation, anger, grief, guilt, loneliness, lack of meaning”; functional challenges with “sleep and eating disorders, nightmares, sexual dysfunction, substance abuse, somatization”; and social/cultural challenges in the form of “rupture of family and social network, employment issues, financial stress, problems acculturating into society, interpersonal dysfunction.”¹¹¹

As Stone writes, religious trauma is rarely something that people originally seek out therapy to heal. Rather, it is something that is uncovered once that individual has been attending therapy for symptoms often associated with PTSD or another reason altogether.¹¹² Stone says that those who suffer from religious trauma often avoid anything having to do with religion:

¹⁰⁹ “Spiritual Abuse: An Interview with Jeff VanVonderen.”

¹¹⁰ “Spiritual Abuse: An Interview with Jeff VanVonderen.”

¹¹¹ Winell, “Religious Trauma Syndrome: It’s Time to Recognise It,” 17.

¹¹² Stone, “Thou Shalt Not,” 327.

People who have experienced religious trauma often cannot tolerate the distress of participating in any kind of organized religion and may studiously avoid religious environments, people, and reading material. In psychotherapy, these individuals may not mention their religious history for years. Although people who have been traumatized by religion often steer clear of religion, they are frequently drawn to spirituality and spiritual bypassing.¹¹³

“Spiritual bypassing” is a topic often referenced in conjunction with spiritual abuse and religious trauma, as it is a coping mechanism for many survivors of spiritual abuse. Stone defines spiritual bypassing as “the use of spirituality to bypass developmental needs, painful feelings, and unresolved wounds.”¹¹⁴

Why Do Spiritual Abuse and Religious Trauma Happen?

The definitions of religious trauma and its catalyst, spiritual abuse, have shown that these are nuanced concepts, understandings of which shift based on scholar, survivor, or situation. There are, however, repeating characteristics and patterns that mark and distinguish spiritual and religious abuse in the literature, which mostly focuses on Christian contexts. What spiritual and religious abuse look like in action can be anything from the power that church leadership as a divine representative holds and can easily misuse; the use of Scripture, theology, or popular doctrine to justify abusive actions; and the use of shame as a tool of coercion, manipulation, and obedience. Research on organizational relations between leaders and followers explains what may partially be going on in abusive spiritual and religious settings: the “abuse of power occurs when a leader acts in a manner that manipulates an area of control for personal gain at the

¹¹³ Stone, “Thou Shalt Not,” 327.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 326.

followers' expense – all the while avoiding basic managerial responsibility. Intention may or may not be present.”¹¹⁵

One of the ideas that resurfaces throughout the literature is that faith communities and religious leaders serve as family and parental figures. The projection and feeling of familial unity and relationship with religious leaders and a religious community further complicates the effects of the spiritual abuse. When this powerful role is misused, the dynamic becomes harmful and leads to varying levels of spiritual abuse.¹¹⁶ The psychological phenomenon of “symbolic status,” according to Sankowsky, “is the tendency for followers to tacitly regard leaders as parent figures”; this facilitates a relationship in which followers not only seek out approval from their parent-leaders but also buy into the vision they are spreading, which in the case of religious communities, is the vision and will of God.¹¹⁷ Chuck DeGroat’s work is supported by Sankowsky’s claim that when “a leader is both charismatic and narcissistic, he or she is likely to *successfully* abuse the power of symbolic status – that is, to induce followers to buy into abusive behaviors.”¹¹⁸

Henri Nouwen, priest, psychologist and author of several books addressing pastoral ministry, spirituality, social justice, and community, speaks to the temptation for power that is felt in the position of church leadership:

The long painful history of the Church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led. Those who resisted this temptation to the end and thereby give us hope are true saints. One thing is clear to me: the temptation of power is greatest when intimacy is a threat. Much Christian

¹¹⁵ Daniel Sankowsky, “The Charismatic Leader as Narcissist: Understanding the Abuse of Power,” *Organizational Dynamics* 23, no. 4 (March 1995): 61, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0090-2616\(95\)90017-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0090-2616(95)90017-9).

¹¹⁶ See Ward’s definition of spiritual abuse in “The Lived Experience of Spiritual Abuse”: “A misuse of power in a spiritual context whereby spiritual authority is distorted to the detriment of those under its leadership,” (901).

¹¹⁷ Sankowsky, “The Charismatic Leader as Narcissist,” 57.

¹¹⁸ Sankowsky, “The Charismatic Leader as Narcissist,” 57.

leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships and have opted for power and control instead. Many Christian empire builders have been people unable to give and receive love.¹¹⁹

In his book *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community From Emotional and Spiritual Abuse*, Chuck DeGroat broaches the subject of narcissism and church leadership, questioning and problematizing the prevalence of narcissists within positions of authority in Christian religious institutions. DeGroat describes the narcissistic system as one that relies and thrives on structure, shame, and control.¹²⁰ Interestingly, these same themes are seen as the tenets of spiritually and religiously abusive systems. In either case, the system goes unchallenged because its mission is imbued with a spiritual meaning and thus there is believed to be no need for questioning. Furthermore, there is both an implicit trust in pastoral authority, a general lack of accountability of pastors, and/or a culture of blindness towards one's "brothers and sisters in faith" who may have been perpetrators of spiritual abuse.¹²¹

Winell, Oakley and Kinmond discuss how the church is often seen as a "divine family," which is attractive because it provides individuals with the experience and safety of an extended family structure in a time when the cultural significance and support that comes from large families in close proximity to one another are declining.¹²² Many religious groups satisfy this deficiency.¹²³ Because of this, religious leaders have the potential to embody parental-like roles, especially with regard to disciplining and punitive actions of the community. Winell explains that the spiritual and divine authority representing God is seen as a divine replacement parent who is

¹¹⁹ Henri Nouwen, *In The Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad, 1989, 60.), quoted in Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes To Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse* (Intervarsity Press, 2020), 18.

¹²⁰ DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes To Church*, 125.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Oakley and Kinmond, *Breaking the Silence*, 10.

¹²³ Winell, *Leaving the Fold*, 61.

all-knowing, all-powerful, and always available, something which mortal parents cannot fulfill:

“Thus remaining a perpetual child in a cosmic family helps the individual avoid the developmental task all young adults have to do: to let go of parents and face their limits and mortality.”¹²⁴

The hierarchical family structure within many evangelical and fundamentalist Christian communities is central to the church function: God is at the top, then the church leader, then the father, then the mother, and finally the children.¹²⁵ The effect is that church leadership is equated with being the mouthpiece of the divine, God’s spokesperson. The spiritual authority that this person has, whether initially toxic or not, controls the behavior of their followers, ultimately driven by a desire to please God. Ward writes that “to question them [the leadership] is by implication questioning God.”¹²⁶ In one of the interviews that Ward conducted in his study on the lived experience of spiritual abuse, a respondent discussed this punitive, parent-like treatment from leadership: “our minds were spinning with this indoctrination all the time it was all they were allowed to think and if we thought anything else we would be sharply rebuked or punished or ostracized and of course they make you so codependent. They literally just made us children, we regressed and the way they would treat us was as children.”¹²⁷ Cashwell and Swindle also discuss how betrayal by a religious/spiritual leader in the form of abuse leads to feelings of powerlessness because the abuse is believed to be coming directly from God. Religious abuse amplifies the power differential often present in abusive situations because of the “ultimate supernatural power” that is granted to those with spiritual authority in a religious community.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Winell, *Leaving the Fold*, 61.

¹²⁵ See, Harvey, “The Power and Control Dynamics of Growing up in an Abrahamic Faith Environment.”

¹²⁶ Ward, “The Lived Experience of Spiritual Abuse,” 903.

¹²⁷ Ward, “The Lived Experience of Spiritual Abuse,” 903.

¹²⁸ Cashwell and Swindle, “When Religion Hurts,” 183.

While the experience of betrayal and abuse by church leadership is one of the most widely researched aspects of spiritual and religious abuse, there is another aspect of betrayal, which includes the betrayal by the community. In her two-part definition of religious trauma, Winell acknowledges that leaving a religious fold, or an individual's divine family, is akin to leaving one world for another or even choosing to leave one's own family. To be "born again" into a "fellowship of believers" or the "body of Christ" gives people an experience of membership and support they may have never had before.¹²⁹ This can take the form of ostracism of a certain member (i.e. if someone comes out as gay but had been previously accepted), or the protection (or simple ignorance of the claim) of a church leader accused of abuse. The leader of these groups often uses a dominating form of control in order to create in and out groups that use shame and guilt tactics to police adherence. The pressure from leadership becomes the pressure of the group to adhere and conform to the group. One woman who was spiritually abused explained: "My church emphasized being part of God's army — not God's love — and that the church was only as strong as the weakest member. I felt shame because I knew I was the weakest and was always told what was wrong with me."¹³⁰ The individual self must be suppressed in order to maintain membership and spiritual acceptance.¹³¹ Winell writes that, "In the fundamentalist system, the self must be rejected because it is essentially bad and cannot be trusted."¹³² One of the common factors in these types of toxic theology is the underlying use of shame and guilt to control, preserve, and maintain a church community.

In closed religious environments (i.e., groups with little to no contact with the world outside of their religious community and family), family and church authority are one's only

¹²⁹ Winell, *Leaving the Fold*, 61.

¹³⁰ Winell, *Leaving the Fold*, 88.

¹³¹ Ward, "The Lived Experience of Spiritual Abuse," 907.

¹³² Winell, *Leaving the Fold*, 83.

connection to outside information and knowledge. In his research, David Ward developed a conceptual map to show the path of spiritual abuse:

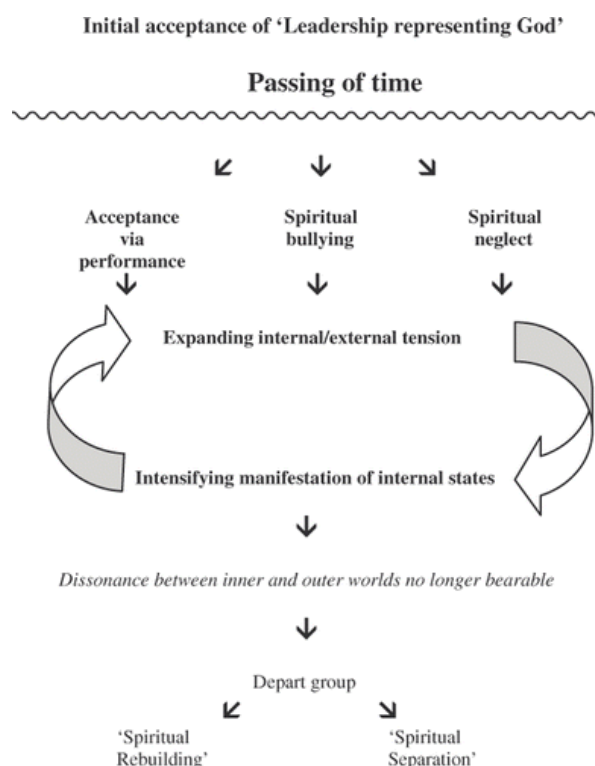


Figure 1. “A conceptual map of spiritual abuse” (image by David Ward from “The lived experience of spiritual abuse.”)¹³³

According to figure 1, the first step in spiritual abuse is an individual’s initial acceptance that the “Leadership Represents God.” The trust that is instilled in the leadership as a member of one’s family and the belief that this spiritual authority is one’s only direct connection to the divine both lead to a toxic hierarchical relationship, which lays the foundation upon which other forms of spiritual abuse grow. This is one of the most detrimental and unique aspects of spiritual abuse because it is where people equate their abuse with God. This leads to severe injury of one’s own spirituality and sense of self. “The victim feels just as perplexed and confused as one who

¹³³ David Ward, *A conceptual map of spiritual abuse*. (The lived experience of spiritual abuse: *Mental Health, Religion, & Culture*. 2011), 911, fig. 3.

has experienced emotional abuse but experiences it from a seemingly more authoritative source — a holy source.”¹³⁴

Spiritual abuse is laden with a discourse of power. A research symposium on “Gender, Sex, and Power” held at Notre Dame University, included a panel titled, “We All Carry This Story” on the sexual abuse of young women by the Catholic Church, presented by R. Marie Griffith. The panel included stories from young women who spoke to the fact that even while they knew the sexual abuse was wrong, but because they had been taught that the priest was the highest position of power and spiritual authority, second only to God, it was hard to separate that fact from the act.¹³⁵ Additionally, stories were shared about sexual abuse by and intimacy with a priest being likened to communion. In another example, priests used a guise of spiritual direction to initiate sexual acts, saying things like, “having sex with me will be like making love with Jesus Christ himself.”¹³⁶ This theological reasoning deeply complicates one's understanding of the abuse and the divine.

This is also an example of toxic doctrine. Spiritual abuse can also come from the use of harmful doctrine and scripture as justification for certain actions by clergy or the church community. Demaris Wehr uses the term “pious coercion” to describe the twisting of scripture in order to manipulate the “seeker.”¹³⁷ Scripture is believed to be the literal word of God, which while available to all of God’s followers, is best interpreted by those closest to God: the clergy or people in positions of spiritual authority. The use of spiritual truths and biblical texts to enact harm is a form of spiritual abuse; this use of biblical texts has generated books and analyses on the interpretations of the texts used to justify abuse. In a spiritually abusive context, leaders use a

¹³⁴ DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes To Church*, 126.

¹³⁵ R. Marie Griffith, “Panel 1 at Symposium ‘Gender, Sex, and Power,’” YouTube video, 1:32:40, “Notre Dame,” April 20, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stbRS3y9ZEc>.

¹³⁶ R. Marie Griffith, “Panel 1 at Symposium ‘Gender, Sex, and Power.’”

¹³⁷ Wehr, “Spiritual Abuse: When Good People Do Bad Things,” 42.

reductive process called proof-texting in which they isolate scripture to justify and support their end goal (often something to do with maintaining power and control), even if the passage is taken completely out of context, effectively distorting those passages. This can surface in the form of scripture being used to convince people to give more money or tithes to the church, to maintain a sense of unity and peace within a church community (which usually results in a toxic culture of secrecy), to convince women to stay in an abusive marriage and submit to abusive husbands, or even to justify child abuse.¹³⁸

Terri Daniel argues that scriptural misuse, or abuse, is an example of toxic religion or toxic theology, which coexist. “Toxic religion is any system in which legitimate human experiences and responses are shamed by religious institutions and systems. Psychological disruption can emerge when a person’s perception of the beliefs and behaviors required by their religion are in conflict with the person’s actual lived experience.”¹³⁹ In the article “Toxic Theology as a Contributing Factor in Complicated Mourning,” Daniel identifies the features of a toxic theological system as:

- Followers are held to a rigid, static system of beliefs
- Questioning and exploration is discourage
- Outsiders are viewed with suspicion or disdain
- Religious pluralism is unacceptable
- Biblical texts are interpreted literally
- God is seen as an authoritarian parental figure
- A belief that God rewards piety and faithfulness
- behaviors/beliefs not in line with strict doctrines are punished by God
- Natural disasters, epidemics, and community tragedies are curses from God¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, 74 and 98.

¹³⁹ Terri Daniel, “Toxic Theology as a Contributing Factor in Complicated Mourning,” *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Advancing Theory and Professional Practice through Scholarly and Reflective Publications* 73, no. 4 (December 2019): 196–204, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1542305019858289>.

¹⁴⁰ Daniel, “Toxic Theology as a Contributing Factor in Complicated Mourning,” 200.

One common example of toxic theology is the use of end times, apocalyptic, eternal damnation, and hell rhetoric as tools of fear-mongering and manipulation, which, especially for a child growing up in a church system, can have serious developmental impacts and cause religious trauma.¹⁴¹ Another commonly cited form of toxic theology is the use of perfectionist-retributionist doctrines (Winell terms this a “guilt manipulation”).¹⁴² Christian perfectionism is often equated with spiritual maturity, however, the attainment of perfection is unachievable and in its pursuit, many develop harmful personal narratives and self-denigration for failing to live up to Christ or to live in the absence of sin.¹⁴³

Another aspect of toxicity is the theological and institutional protection of leaders who have committed sinful acts. In many traditions, there are scripturally sanctioned power relations which lend themselves to, in practice, hiding the sins of priests and gurus. According to Amanda Lucia, Hindu scripture instructs devotees of the guru that “the disciple must not critique the guru, nor be in the presence of critique of the guru...wherever his teacher is slandered or reviled, he should go somewhere else.”¹⁴⁴ The devotee must not dissent or abandon their guru, and strive for obeisance, even in instances where the guru may be displaying inappropriate behavior (often excused with “well, he is only human”).¹⁴⁵ “The guru remains as the authority to his pupil, regardless of how ignorant and immoral he might be.”¹⁴⁶ Ann Gleig points out that Mahayana

¹⁴¹ Harvey, “The Power and Control Dynamics of Growing up in an Abrahamic Faith Environment.”

¹⁴² Winell, *Leaving the Fold*, 79.

¹⁴³ “Spiritual Abuse: An Interview with Jeff VanVonderen.”

¹⁴⁴ Amanda Lucia, “Manufacturing Consent: Creating Hierarchies in the Guru-Disciple Relationship,” *Sacred Matters Magazine*, April 4, 2021, <https://sacredmattersmagazine.com/manufacturing-consent-creating-hierarchies-in-the-guru-disciple-relationship/>.

¹⁴⁵ This is also a Hindu example of the equation of a religious leader with God, devoting themselves to and seeing him as an extension of the divine: “Devotees honor the guru alongside as equal to god or as a gateway to god” writes Lucia in “Manufacturing Consent: Creating Hierarchies in the Guru-Disciple Relationship.”

¹⁴⁶ Lucia, “Manufacturing Consent: Creating Hierarchies in the Guru-Disciple Relationship.”

Buddhist doctrine of *upaya* “states that seemingly unethical actions can bring about awakening if performed by enlightened teachers with the right intention.”¹⁴⁷ Catholic scandal theology purports that “a priest’s bad acts become more sinful – additionally sinful – if faithful Catholics learn about them. In such cases, the bad acts of one man might double as ‘stumbling blocks’ or sin-causing obstacles to proper faith for an entire community.”¹⁴⁸ These institutional and scriptural forces add a systemic level to the abuse by habitually protecting abusive leaders.

Not only do spiritually abusive leaders and spaces have an identifiable set of characteristics that lend themselves to the perpetration of harm but, as mentioned earlier in an overview of the GCRR conferences, children and women are among the populations most vulnerable to this abuse. In the following sections I will address children and women and their unique experiences of spiritual abuse.

Spiritual Abuse and Children

Child abuse in the church, especially as it relates to child sexual abuse (specifically in the Catholic church) is one of the more widely discussed forms of abuse in a religious context. Child abuse linked to faith or belief (CALFB) is another aspect of child abuse that encompasses a broad range of abuses from medical neglect to spirit possession. In the article “Safeguarding Children Who Are Exposed to Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief,” Oakley, Kinmond, Humphreys, and Dioum write that CALFB has historically been associated with witchcraft, spirit possession,

¹⁴⁷ Ann Gleig, “Sexual Violations in American Buddhism: Interpretive Frameworks and Generative Responses,” *Ten Thousand Things* (blog), March 5, 2020, <http://blog.shin-ibs.edu/sexual-violations-in-american-buddhism-interpretive-frameworks-and-generative-responses/>.

¹⁴⁸ Kathleen Holscher, “Priests That Moved: Catholicism, Colonized Peoples, and Sex Abuse in the U.S. Southwest,” *The Revealer*, March 2, 2020, <https://therevealer.org/priests-that-moved-catholicism-colonized-peoples-and-sex-abuse-in-the-u-s-southwest/?fbclid=IwAR1uEt6YgF3LBh9pYurHLH4slum8ZmPW9v6gsFiyewA0vWXUBddoGkQDg3A>.

and ritualistic and satanic abuse, but there is a need for the definition to include a broader set of abusive practices.¹⁴⁹ While the majority of Americans are familiar with clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, similar abuse is prevalent in other faith communities as well, but it is less discussed given, in part, the effort of churches to resolve these issues internally rather than seeking outside help.¹⁵⁰ The abuse of power by church leaders plays a role in the protection of these institutions from outside intervention, because they see the outside world as one that is corrupt and intent on destroying the church.¹⁵¹ Furthermore, there is a sentiment that the people in power have been placed there by God, and thus know how to handle situations of child abuse through biblical counseling or other religiously grounded alternatives. Studies show that this has been the case in evangelical, Ultra-Orthodox Jewish, and Catholic faith communities.¹⁵² To acknowledge the abuse head-on would be to admit to the shortcomings of a faith, a psychologist muses: “In moments of crisis, Christians are forced to reconcile a cognitive dissonance: How can the church — often called ‘the hope of the world’ in evangelical circles — also be an incubator for such evil?”¹⁵³ A reckoning with the abuse, in what some argue to be a systemic issue, would be a disruption to the worldview of so many.

Michelle Panchuk argues that “children are among the most frequently abused and systematically marginalized members of our society” and that childhood trauma is especially

¹⁴⁹ Lisa Oakley, Kathryn Kinmond, and Justin Humphreys, “Spiritual Abuse in Christian Faith Settings: Definition, Policy and Practice Guidance,” 28.

¹⁵⁰ For statistics on American’s knowledge on the Catholic Sex Abuse crisis see: “Americans See Catholic Clergy Sex Abuse as an Ongoing Problem,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project (Pew Research Center, May 30, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/06/11/americans-see-catholic-clergy-sex-abuse-as-an-ongoing-problem/>; Joshua Pease, “The Sin of Silence,” *The Washington Post*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/05/31/feature/the-epidemic-of-denial-about-sexual-abuse-in-the-evangelical-church/>.

¹⁵¹ Pease, “The Sin of Silence.”

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

harmful and resistant to therapeutic interventions when “it is inflicted by trusted authority figures such as parents or clergy.”¹⁵⁴ The abuse of children is also laden with problems of knowledge of children as to what is happening and dependence upon their parents for basic needs. Panchuk writes that invisible prejudice against children is theologically supported in Christian communities: “Evangelical preacher and writer Voddie Baucham describes infants as ‘vipers in diapers’ whose wills must be broken, and goes so far as to urge parents who are concerned about beating their children to death not to worry, because the Bible teaches that children will not die from being beaten with a rod.”¹⁵⁵ She goes on to argue that, if this was the worldview in which a child is raised, with the idea that the abuse a child endures is actually a sign of loving discipline or godly parenting that will support them later on, the child would not know they were being abused or be able to communicate that to others.¹⁵⁶ The child

is spiritually and religiously harmed in virtue of believing that God endorses the abuse. She is spiritually harmed by the way her concepts of child and love and discipline obscured her understanding of her own inherent value and her right to respect and care. She cannot understand her relationship with God as anything other than punitive, at least as long as she embraces her mother’s religious vision. Furthermore, it will likely not be sufficient for someone to convince Mary that God is a God of love, or even that God loves her in particular, in order for these spiritual harms to be ameliorated.¹⁵⁷

This exemplifies Panchuk’s point that children are victims of hermeneutic injustice within religious communities: the hermeneutic injustice both creates the unique spiritual and religious harms and the environments which allow these harms to exist.¹⁵⁸ One of the core aspects of the spiritual abuse of children is the harm that it does to their spiritual development and worldview,

¹⁵⁴ Panchuk, “Distorting Concepts, Obscured Experiences,” 614.

¹⁵⁵ Panchuk, “Distorting Concepts, Obscured Experiences,” 615.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 618.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 613.

which can impact their sense of “meaning, purpose, connection/belonging, faith, moral or ethical guidelines.”¹⁵⁹

Garbarino explains that the experience of violent trauma for a child is the opposite of a religious experience; instead of being awoken to the light and possibility of the world, they are shown the darkness.¹⁶⁰ Kvarfordt expounds upon this notion:

Specifically, experiencing violent trauma produces not only psychological wounds, otherwise known as post-traumatic stress disorder, but also produces a broader philosophical or spiritual type of wounding. This wounding threatens, or permanently alters, the youth's sense of meaning and purpose in life as well as his or her sense of belonging and connection with others, including trust in a caring and protective higher power.¹⁶¹

There is another level to this: the fact that parents often do not question the authority or abuse their child has suffered, in an effort to remain in the community and not be ostracized, which may result in their own experience of religious trauma through the loss of the family and community provided by their faith, or even worse, being shunned by God for questioning his authority. In her presentation at the Gender, Sex, and Power symposium, Griffith's presentation highlight a story in which she discussed that parents would remain complicit in their daughter's abuse because they valued the special treatment of the clergy, feeling as if their own child had been “chosen” for the role.¹⁶² One study on the “Cognitive Distortions of Religious Professionals Who Sexually Abuse Children,” cited by the Zero Abuse Project found that “clergy in treatment for sexually abusing children believed that God would particularly look after the children they

¹⁵⁹ Connie L. Kvarfordt, “Spiritual Abuse and Neglect of Youth: Reconceptualizing What Is Known Through an Investigation of Practitioners' Experiences,” *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 29, no. 2 (May 5, 2010): 144, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426431003708287>.

¹⁶⁰ James Garbarino and Claire Bedard, “Spiritual Challenges to Children Facing Violent Trauma,” *Childhood* 3, no. 4 (November 1996): 467–78, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568296003004004>; Kvarfordt, “Spiritual Abuse and Neglect of Youth,” 147.

¹⁶¹ Kvarfordt, “Spiritual Abuse and Neglect of Youth,” 147.

¹⁶² R. Marie Griffith, “Panel 1 at Symposium ‘Gender, Sex, and Power.’”

had victimized and otherwise keep them from harm.”¹⁶³ This was also an example of “compensatory behavior,” in which clergy believed that the good they had done for the church would excuse the immoral and illegal actions taken with children.¹⁶⁴ Studies cited by Kvarfordt found that the sexual abuse of children by an individual in a position of spiritual authority has a greater impact on an individual’s mistrust, psychological trauma, spiritual distress and relationship with God than those who were sexually abused by a nonpriest adult.¹⁶⁵ In conclusion, a child is susceptible to many forms and nuances of spiritual and religious abuse; it is possible for a child to experience both religious abuse within the church (such as clergy child sexual abuse) and spiritual abuse outside of the church (for example, pressure to uphold the toxic doctrine taught by their parents and enforced by the family system).

Spiritual Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Women

When one thinks of domestic and intimate partner violence, spiritual abuse is not often included or acknowledged as a factor of the abuse. However, spirituality and faith communities can have a significant impact on the abuse of women and play a role in women’s religious trauma. In the face of adversity, such as a domestic violence experience, an individual’s religious and spiritual beliefs and communities are used as coping mechanisms and support systems.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Adam Saradjian and Dany Nobus, “Cognitive Distortions of Religious Professionals Who Sexually Abuse Children,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 18, no. 8 (August 2003): 905–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260503253881>; Victor Vieth, “When Faith Hurts: The Spiritual Impact of Child Abuse,” Zero Abuse Project, March 10, 2022, <https://www.zeroabuseproject.org/when-faith-hurts-the-spiritual-impact-of-child-abuse/>.

¹⁶⁴ Vieth, “When Faith Hurts: The Spiritual Impact of Child Abuse.”

¹⁶⁵ Kvarfordt, “Spiritual Abuse and Neglect of Youth,” 151.

¹⁶⁶ Lettie L. Lockhart and Fran S. Danis, eds., *Domestic Violence: Intersectionality and Culturally Competent Practice*, Foundations of Social Work Knowledge (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 319.

It is important to recognize that domestic and intimate partner violence does not discriminate against gender, sex, community, religion, socioeconomic status, race, or ethnicity, but the literature on spiritual abuse tends to focus specifically on women in conservative and traditional Christian contexts, where the woman's primary role is as wife, homemaker, and the protector of purity for both themselves and men.¹⁶⁷ Religious ideology reinforces traditional, patriarchal gender roles of the nuclear family. Kristin Kobes Du Mez, author of *Jesus and John Wayne*, focuses her research on evangelical churches in the U.S. that teach a "gender essentialism."¹⁶⁸ An article from Vox summarizes Du Mez's point in an article on the SBC report: "The woman's job is to protect purity; the man is often not at fault for giving in to his urges. Couple that outlook with a culture that generally practices deference to leaders, and you have an environment rife with the opportunity for abuse."¹⁶⁹ The cultural milieu of male hegemony extends to the notion that "happy families build strong nations" and a strong stance against women's reproductive autonomy and choice.¹⁷⁰ These roles are not only expected of women but central to a woman's sense of self-worth. The condemnation of divorce, scriptural justification, and women's subservience to men as a part of the hierarchy of the church have all been referenced to come together to abuse and retraumatize women through spiritual abuse and domestic violence.

Tricia Bent-Goodley and Dawnovise N. Fowler focus their research on spiritual abuse in relation to domestic violence. They argue that a study and definition of spiritual abuse should be

¹⁶⁷ Katelynn Steinhauser, "Chewed Up Gum and Broken Rose Petals: Problematizing Purity Culture in Evangelical Christianity."

¹⁶⁸ St James, "The Sexual Abuse Scandal Rocking the Southern Baptist Convention."

¹⁶⁹ St James, "The Sexual Abuse Scandal Rocking the Southern Baptist Convention."

¹⁷⁰ Nancy Nason-Clark, "When Terror Strikes at Home: The Interface between Religion and Domestic Violence," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 3 (2004): 304.

a concept separated from other forms of abuse.¹⁷¹ Situated in a Christian context, Bent-Goodley and Fowler speak to the specific experiences of spiritual and religious abuse in African-American communities, which adds dimension to the concept of spiritual and religious abuse in terms of how various demographic groups relate to their faith communities.

Bent-Goodley and Fowler argue that the faith communities of women of color provide an especially robust form of support for these women in times of personal struggle or health concerns.¹⁷² In contrast to other research done on spiritual abuse, they were interested in how these communities viewed and defined spirituality and religion (both within and outside of a faith context) and the ways these understandings interacted with the experience of domestic violence. Throughout their study they use the term “spiritual and religious abuse” to reference the problem: they discuss women’s spirituality as something which is exploited in and outside of their faith community. Religion, on the other hand, seems to refer to the relationship with communities of faith that women have, in other words the organized space for their spiritual community. They define domestic violence as “one person’s abusive use of power to control another,” an experience that cannot be extracted from the faith present in these women’s lives.¹⁷³ This study focuses on spiritual and religious abuse as a phenomenon that can exist outside of a religious space but is reinforced by cultural, spiritual, and religious ties of individuals to their faith community. In this way the aspects of spiritual abuse (manipulation, power, etc.) are still present even though the physical or psychological abuse is not necessarily happening within the church, and thus faith communities have a responsibility to address such issues.

¹⁷¹ Tricia B. Bent-Goodley and Dawnovise N. Fowler, “Spiritual and Religious Abuse,” *Journal of Women and Social Work* 21, no. 3 (2006): 282–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109906288901>.

¹⁷² Bent-Goodley and Fowler, “Spiritual and Religious Abuse,” 282.

¹⁷³ Bent-Goodley and Fowler, “Spiritual and Religious Abuse,” 282.

In addition to the fact that faith communities can be seen as places of support and thus involved in spiritual and domestic violence of women, another aspect of spirituality and abuse in relation to women is the diminution and targeting of women's spirituality by their abuser, in the home. Domesticshelters.org defines "spiritual abuse" as a category of domestic violence in which an abuser prevents an individual from practicing religion, ridicules beliefs, uses religion to berate or manipulate, and the forcing of one's children to be raised in a faith that is not agreed upon.¹⁷⁴ Among the religious reasons that women often stay in abusive relationships are religious beliefs that the man is not only to be obeyed, but also that the marriage vow of *til death do us part* (understood as "stay in the marriage regardless of what happens") must be honored, even if that means enduring abuse.¹⁷⁵ While religious women are not more likely to experience domestic violence than non-religious women, they are more likely to stay in the relationship for longer periods of time.¹⁷⁶ These are examples that spiritual abuse is possible in contexts outside of a religious institution.

In order for abuse to be considered "spiritual abuse," the abuse one suffers does not necessarily have to qualify as being religious or spiritual in nature, but the response to it can be. Another aspect of spiritually abusive domestic violence is the perpetuation of the violence outside of the church, by the church itself. When women seek support from clergy for their abusive situation, scripture is often used as a tool to convince women to stay in their abusive marriage or to justify the abuse by the husband. Several studies, and individual experiences highlight that clergy engage in victim blaming by centering their advice on a woman's need to

¹⁷⁴ Shelley Flannery, "What Is Spiritual Abuse?," DomesticShelters.org (domesticshelters.org, October 24, 2022), <https://www.domesticshelters.org/articles/identifying-abuse/what-is-spiritual-abuse>.

¹⁷⁵ Nancy Nason-Clark, "When Terror Strikes at Home," 304.

¹⁷⁶ Nancy Nason-Clark, "When Terror Strikes at Home," 305.

improve her Christian characteristics by being more loving, forgiving, or prayerful.¹⁷⁷ For example, a woman who seeks out counsel for the physical abuse she has endured from her husband may be told that she needs to demonstrate a “godly response to her suffering” for her children by staying, which adds a dimension of spiritual abuse that was not previously present.¹⁷⁸ In another example of the misuse of scripture, VanVonderen notes that the overwhelming response of religious leaders to abused women is “Wives, submit to your husbands.”¹⁷⁹

It is further reasoned that the domestic abuse or violence is a punishment from God for one’s own sinfulness by using the theological assumption that “if you suffer, it is a sign that you must not be a good Muslim, a good Christian, or a good Jew, and that God is displeased with you.”¹⁸⁰ Based on this theological assumption, DeGroat writes that, “Many [abused women] will not ask pastors for help for fear of a negative response. In my many years of treating clients abused by narcissistic spouses, I can count on two hands the number of times churches stepped up with courage to offer empathy, care, safety, and resources.”¹⁸¹ These aspects are not mutually exclusive; for example, Bent-Goodley and Fowler found that “many participants acknowledged that the methods that an abuser uses to keep a woman in an abusive relationship are often similar to those used by the church to maintain the relationship. These participants brought awareness to a situation that makes it confusing for the woman if she hears the same messages from both the perpetrator and her religious community.”¹⁸² When spirituality is wielded as a tool of oppression

¹⁷⁷ Linda Ammons, “What’s God Got to Do With It? Church and State Collaboration in the Subordination of Women and Domestic Violence,” *Rutgers Law Review* 51, 1999 (January 1, 1999): 1209.

¹⁷⁸ Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, 99.

¹⁷⁹ Johnson and VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, 98.

¹⁸⁰ Lockhart and Danis, eds., *Domestic Violence: Intersectionality and Culturally Competent Practice*, 321.

¹⁸¹ DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes To Church*, 123.

¹⁸² Bent-Goodley and Fowler, “Spiritual and Religious Abuse,” 291.

it has the potential to harm the ‘essence’ of women in ways essential to their identities, compared to psychological abuse which is more cognitive.¹⁸³

R. Marie Griffith spoke to the fact that there is something distinct about the abuse of girls (and women) in the Catholic church and its teachings because of the divinely ordered teachings of gender differences by God.¹⁸⁴ In Christian teachings, women embody temptation and sin, and thus need to be controlled (similar to how children must be controlled). Furthermore, the centrality of masculine speech about and for God further entrenches women in their subordination by creating both an imaginative and structural world that excludes women.¹⁸⁵

The literature about spiritual abuse and domestic violence further complicates what is included in the definitions of spiritual abuse and religious trauma: not only is spiritual and religious abuse a transgression that happens *within* the context of a faith community, often at the hands of those who hold power, but it can also be the product of religious and spiritual beliefs, teachings, and scripture that justify abuse outside of a religious context, such as domestic violence.

The final question asked by the secondary literature, how does one recover or heal from spiritual abuse and religious trauma?, will be addressed briefly at this point and returned to in the final chapter for critique and problematization.

How Does One Recover or Heal from Spiritual Abuse and Religious Trauma?

Any type of abuse has the potential to create trauma in the body of an individual. As more and more research is done on trauma and its effects on the body, mind, and behavior of an individual, the more one can identify the extent to which trauma plagues our society. For

¹⁸³ Bent-Goodley and Fowler, “Spiritual and Religious Abuse,” 289.

¹⁸⁴ R. Marie Griffith, “Panel 1 at Symposium ‘Gender, Sex, and Power.’”

¹⁸⁵ Panchuk, “Distorting Concepts, Obscured Experiences,” 616.

example, many studies show that those who abuse have often been survivors of abuse themselves. If left unaddressed, individuals have the ability to pass their trauma down to their children and even grandchildren, creating intergenerational burdens and effects. In order to end the cycle of trauma, individuals and communities must find ways to treat and heal from their traumatic injury. The suggestions for healing from spiritual abuse and religious trauma are based on the idea that if left unaddressed, trauma will be destructive not only to the individual who has experienced the traumatic events, but also to others. The following passage from DeGroat's book highlights this point: "Our bodies hold these memories, and when the trauma is triggered a flood of memories can rush into our conscious minds."¹⁸⁶ He quotes trauma expert Peter Levine, who writes, "Although humans rarely die from trauma, if we do not resolve it, our lives can be severely diminished by its effects. Some people have even described this situation as 'living death.'"¹⁸⁷

In most literature and discussions of spiritual abuse and religious trauma, the topic of *healing from* these injuries is broached. The last decade has seen an exponential increase in research on trauma and the way it lives within us, those around us, and even in the generations that came before and will come after each person. Regardless of what the science says or the popular responses to trauma at the current moment, it is important to understand that it is the choice of the individual who has survived an injury resulting in trauma to decide what course of action is best for them. The research that I discuss in this section is merely an overview of the current suggested or documented responses to religious trauma.

¹⁸⁶ Peter Levine, *Healing Trauma: A Pioneering Program for Restoring the Wisdom of Your Body* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2008, 30), quoted in Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse* (InterVarsity Press, 2020), 122.

¹⁸⁷ DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes To Church*, 122.

Healing from religious trauma will sometimes include an individual's departure and removal of themselves from the religion and community that has caused the harm. As Winell's definition of RTS explains, this may in itself be a challenging and traumatic experience. Religion often serves as a form of community.

One of the questions I continually asked of the literature on clinical responses to religious trauma was "is there a suggestion to move towards or away from the church?" Ward terms this differentiation as spiritual separation (a choice "not to engage in any further formal or informal religious connection") and spiritual rebuilding (in which individuals reconnect with a new form of spirituality or religious denomination).¹⁸⁸ Cashwell and Swindle emphasize that the healing process and the need for a person to either return to, reform, or break away from their religion is an individual and case-by-case decision.

Religiously traumatic experiences have the ability to deeply harm an individual's capacity for religious involvement, or faith in general. This idea is explored in Panchuk's "The Shattered Spiritual Self," in which she discusses what paths survivors *ought* to take in the aftermath of spiritual violence on a spectrum from non-conventional spirituality to complete deconversion.¹⁸⁹ Panchuk references Theresa Tobin's use of the categories seeker and dweller in her discussion of the paths that religious trauma survivors take post-traumatic event(s). For some, being anywhere near a religious setting may be immediately rejected, but for others, there is a need for a corrective experience that can challenge an individual's negative expectations, associations, or prior experiences (i.e. organized religion) to form a different outcome. Panchuk writes:

The dweller/seekers are those who, after experiencing spiritual violence, "still encounter God in the sacred places and holy rituals designated by the official Church" (2016, 160), but with a new appreciation for the fallibility of religious traditions and authorities and often with new negative emotional responses. This is what I am calling normal

¹⁸⁸ Ward, "The Lived Experience of Spiritual Abuse," 911.

¹⁸⁹ Panchuk, "The Shattered Spiritual Self," 525-526.

spirituality. The seeker/dwellers, on the other hand, if they are able to maintain their faith at all, are more likely to seek radical institutional change or find completely new structures for spirituality—what I am calling non-conventional spirituality.¹⁹⁰

Regardless of one's association with seeker or dweller tendencies, once religious trauma is recognized individuals will often seek out psychotherapeutic support and, as Winell often warns, therapists must be ready to handle such clients.

Special consideration by therapists to be spiritually and religiously well-versed, trauma-informed (moving from a question of “what’s wrong with you” to “what happened to you”), and adequately supervised in their care of religiously traumatized individuals is of the utmost importance.¹⁹¹ Survivors of religious and spiritual abuse will have varying needs as far as the role spirituality and religion will play after naming and identifying their traumatic event; some will have a desire to continue a connection to the spiritual or religious or the community in which they experienced the abuse, while others will choose to exit the religion altogether.¹⁹² The therapeutic setting must be open to both of these extremes and everything in between so as not to create further guilt, shame, and harm. In the case of religious trauma, Cashwell and Swindle identify four areas in which therapists must help their clients: “(a) own the experience as abuse and traumatizing, (b) work through the impact on belief systems, (c) grieve losses, and (d) address issues of support for the client, particularly in situations where the support of the religious community is lost.”¹⁹³ Additionally, because religion is a highly charged topic for many individuals, adequate supervision of therapeutic processes involving religious trauma is necessary so as to ensure the needs of the client are put first and a therapist’s own biases and

¹⁹⁰ Panchuk, “The Shattered Spiritual Self,” 525.

¹⁹¹ Craig Cashwell and Paula Swindle, “A Twisting of the Sacred: The Lived Experience of Religious Abuse,” (presentation, International e-Conference on Religious Trauma, May 29-30, 2021).

¹⁹² Cashwell and Swindle, “When Religion Hurts,” 188.

¹⁹³ Cashwell and Swindle, “When Religion Hurts,” 186.

opinions of religion are not clouding the counseling (this is also to ensure that the therapists themselves are not triggered). In the GCRR conference, Cashwell spoke to the fact that in his thirty years of clinical practice he has observed a lot of unethical and bad practice by therapists in responding to religious abuse, especially when they attempt to impose their own worldviews. Stone advises that the therapist should follow the client's lead as far as broaching religious subjects. Stone writes about the presence of countertransference in religious trauma therapy:

Both clients and therapists who have experienced religious trauma may demonstrate symptoms of PTSD by consciously or unconsciously avoiding the topic of religion and becoming emotionally reactive when it is mentioned. For example, the therapist may become overly active and attempt to direct the session, change the topic, or change the client. Conversely, he or she may become less engaged and fail to ask questions that would advance the client's exploration of the topic. Therapists who are not religious may also experience difficult countertransference reactions to religion and spirituality.¹⁹⁴

Stone's article was the only one I found that mentioned the possible benefits and concerns of group therapy for religious trauma survivors, but there is a broad consensus that individual psychotherapy is a beneficial response to religious trauma. On the one hand group therapy may be an opportunity for individuals to model and observe others discussing events of religious and spiritual abuse - thoughts and emotions which have otherwise been demonized and forbidden for many of these individuals - as well as provide a supportive communal base, especially at a time when individuals may be undergoing the loss of another support system.¹⁹⁵ That said, group therapy may also serve as a site of transference in which the client perceives the group leader as God or Satan and associates the members of the group as either part of their own family of origin or as members of a new faith community.¹⁹⁶ With this transference in mind it is not surprising that Demaris Wehr delineates the psychotherapy space as another potential site of spiritual abuse

¹⁹⁴ Stone, "Thou Shalt Not," 331.

¹⁹⁵ Stone, "Thou Shalt Not," 336.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 328.

when the promise of healing and renewal is taken advantage of to benefit the needs of the healer rather than those of the individual seeking the healing.

For individuals who have a religious background, these norms of social interaction and hierarchy may be so deeply embedded that detaching from them is a long and arduous process likened to that of an individual separating from a parent. Self-help/guide books like Winell's *Leaving the Fold* provide step by step healing processes on an individual rather than formal therapeutic level; some of the suggestions include accepting experiences as traumatic and grief-filled, visualizations, and journaling.

This chapter has attempted to provide context for the concepts of spiritual abuse and religious trauma. I have presented an analysis of the definitions, a brief introduction to both the causes of spiritual abuse and religious trauma and the groups most affected by the abuse, as well as a description of suggestions for healing from spiritual abuse and the diagnosis of religious trauma. The final chapter will offer a critique of what is currently included in the discourse surrounding spiritual abuse and religious trauma, both with regards to the secondary literature and the content of the GCRR conferences.

CHAPTER 3 OVERCOMING EVIL WITH GOOD: A CRITIQUE OF THE CURRENT FIELD

Religious Studies: “Religious Abuse”

Before returning to further discussion and critique of the literature on spiritual abuse and religious trauma, I am going to briefly address the field of religious studies and the ways in which it is discussing religion, spirituality, and abuse. The field of religious studies is not asking the same questions that have informed the fields of psychology, counseling, and theology in research on spiritual abuse and religious trauma. Religious studies scholars are more interested in analyzing religious abuse as it pertains to specific religious traditions. There is little focus on spiritual abuse or religious trauma because they are addressing the particularities and unique characteristics of abuse in a distinct religious setting rather than a focus on abuse that includes any aspect of spirituality. While their understanding of what constitutes religious abuse is more narrow, religious studies scholarship includes a more robust set of voices with diverse backgrounds extending outside of Protestant Christianity. Furthermore, religious studies scholars are less-concerned with providing definitions for religious abuse, perhaps because they are not attempting to develop a framework to explain religious abuse in *all* religious traditions, but rather they are concerned with the whats, whys, and hows of specific case studies. The following will give an overview of current research being done in the field of religious studies.

Perhaps the best known scholar of religion and abuse from a religious studies perspective is Robert Orsi. Orsi’s research is broadly oriented toward the question, what is Catholic about the clergy sexual abuse crisis? His essay “What is Catholic about the Sex Abuse Crisis?” was an attempt to shed light on the Catholic aspect of the sexual abuse endured by so many, rather than

the sexual abuse itself.¹⁹⁷ The clergy sexual abuse crisis refers to the sexual abuse of Catholics by their priests and the protection of these priests by their religious authorities. In his essay for the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, “The Study of Religion on the Other Side of Disgust,” Orsi discusses this crisis that in many ways characterizes modern Catholicism.¹⁹⁸ The aim of this essay is to show and explain Orsi’s intimate and visceral disgust with the clergy sexual abuse crisis, not only for what was done and for who did it, but for what was done and excused in the name of God. Orsi writes that scholars of religion have a duty to address the horrors of religion: the abuse, the domination, the sadism, and the masochism.¹⁹⁹ This essay is also largely informed by Orsi’s work on lived religion, of which he says disgust is the final explication.

Megan Goodwin’s timely and persuasive 2020 book *Abusing Religion: Literary Persecution, Sex Scandals, and American Minority Religions* provides a much needed contribution to the conversation on abuse within religious studies, focused on American minority religions and their relationship with sexual abuse.²⁰⁰ She argues that even while American minority religions are so often othered and blamed for sexual abuse (specifically relating to satanic ritual abuse, celestial polygyny, and the racialization and perceived threat of Islam to the white woman’s body), the problem of abuse is not an inherently religious one, it is an American issue, and the blaming of minority religions for sexual transgressions is a way to preserve the American body politic.²⁰¹ However, she explains that religious spaces do make an escape from an

¹⁹⁷ Robert Orsi, “What Is Catholic about the Clergy Sex Abuse Crisis?,” in *Anthropology of Catholicism* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 282–92, <https://doi-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/10.1525/california/9780520288423.003.0022>.

¹⁹⁸ Robert Orsi, “The Study of Religion on the Other Side of Disgust | Harvard Divinity Bulletin,” accessed October 2, 2022, <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/the-study-of-religion-on-the-other-side-of-disgust/>.

¹⁹⁹ Orsi, “The Study of Religion on the Other Side of Disgust | Harvard Divinity Bulletin.”

²⁰⁰ Megan Goodwin, *Abusing Religion: Literary Persecution, Sex Scandals, and American Minority Religions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

²⁰¹ Megan Goodwin, *Abusing Religion: Literary Persecution, Sex Scandals, and American Minority Religions*, 136.

abusive situation more challenging. Goodwin's book is an additional call for religious studies scholars to address the issue of abuse head on. She also artfully weaves in a critique of who is often included and privileged in discussions of religion and sexual abuse (specifically in the context of the Catholic church) and the issues of identifying and bringing to light this issue in the context of religious institutions that prioritize secrecy and denial.

Both Goodwin and Orsi similarly shed light on how the use of distinctions such as "good vs. bad" or "right vs. wrong" religion further enables and excuses the abuse that is happening as something that is a deviance from the normative religious spaces where the abuse is taking place, rather than an endemic issue.

Other prominent religious studies scholars addressing aspects of religion and abuse include Anthony Petro and Kathryn Lofton, authors of *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion* and *Consuming Religion* and *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*, respectively. Petro's 2020 essay titled "Crisis and U.S. Religion" examines rhetorical use of the word "crisis" and how that word has narrated our study of U.S. religious history and influenced the urgency with which we have addressed topics like religious abuse.²⁰² Lofton, a scholar focused on religion, sexuality, and capitalism, worked with Robert Orsi and Terence McKiernan to put together the 2011 Yale conference on "Sex Abuse and the Study of Religion" and has since published a few articles on the clergy sexual abuse crisis within the Catholic church.²⁰³ Orsi,

²⁰² Anthony Petro, "Crisis and U.S. Religion," in *Proceedings: Sixth Biennial Conference on Religion and American Culture* (Indianapolis, IN, 2019).

²⁰³ Terence McKiernan is the founder of BishopAccountability.org, an public online library of documents, reports, and press regarding nearly every aspect of the Catholic clergy sexual abuse crisis. See: Kathryn Lofton, "Revisited: Sex Abuse and the Study of Religion," *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, religion, and the public sphere*, August 24, 2018, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2018/08/24/sex-abuse-and-the-study-of-religion/>; Kathryn Lofton, "It Isn't Just Them," *American Catholic Studies* 130, no. 2 (2019): 26–29, <https://doi.org/10.1353/acs.2019.0035>.

Petro, and Lofton all engage deeply with the rhetoric of these events being a crisis, to which those engaged with religion should pay attention.

The American Buddhist tradition has also undergone a recent unveiling of a rampant culture of sexual violations within the tradition.²⁰⁴ There are a handful of religious studies scholars who have taken up the topic of sexual abuse in Buddhist and Hindu communities, including Amy Langenberg, Ann Gleig, Holly Gayley, Amanda Lucia, and Katy Butler.²⁰⁵ The scholarship focusing on abuse in a Buddhist and Hindu context is not so much concerned with definitions of spiritual abuse or religious trauma, perhaps because the abuse they are discussing is sexual in nature and thus does not need as much clarification. Langenberg and Gleig, professors of religion at Eckerd College and the University of Central Florida respectively, are currently in the process of co-authoring the new book *Abuse, Sex, and the Sangha*, which will expand upon the work they have already done in centering survivors, applying feminist lenses, and generating frameworks to understand the systemic sexual abuse in Buddhism.

Ann Gleig and Amy Langenberg, add a Buddhist perspective to the conversation on religious abuse. In a podcast the two scholars explore the nuance and sensitivity that is necessary when responding to sexual violations and the importance of centering survivors' experiences even if they choose to remain silent in the aftermath of an abusive event. During this podcast, they use the term spiritual abuse to reference a distinct form of injury and devastation, the impact

²⁰⁴ Sexual violations is a term used repeatedly by scholars of this tradition to describe the abuse.

²⁰⁵ Dr. Holly Gayley is currently involved with the Religion and Sexual Abuse Project at University of California Riverside, a collaboration of projects that focuses on collecting geographically and religiously diverse scholarship on sexual abuse in religious communities. See "Religion & Sexual Abuse Project," Religion & Sexual Abuse Project, accessed November 8, 2022, <https://www.religionandsexualabuseproject.org/>; see also Holly Gayley and Somtso Bhum, "Parody and Pathos: Sexual Transgression by 'Fake' Lamas in Tibetan Short Stories," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 23 (April 2022): 62–98, which is about the use of fictional stories as a method for women to discuss the reality and experience of sexual transgressions by lamas and leaders in Buddhism.

of which is compared to incest because of the double injury that is incurred when abuse comes at the hands of someone who one knows, loves, trusts, and even idealizes.²⁰⁶ Similarly to the authors of spiritual abuse literature I presented earlier, Gleig and Langenberg understand spiritual abuse as a “comparative religious” term, however, although they recognize the concept as important to the topic of abuse and Buddhism, they give the term “spiritual abuse” less attention than the other authors mentioned.²⁰⁷

Langenberg and Gleig address female sexuality, sexual ethics, and gender relations within Buddhism. Gleig discusses the interpretive frameworks with which devoted individuals attempt to understand sexual violations within American Buddhism, building upon Katy Butler’s 1990 article “Encountering the Shadow in Buddhist America.”²⁰⁸ These interpretive frameworks include a psychological interpretation of why adult devotees do not hold their abusive teachers accountable; a Buddhist doctrinal interpretation that relates sexual violations to a lack of adherence to Buddhist practices; cultural clashes between traditional Asian Buddhism and modern American culture that have led to increased power and sexually progressive morals, as well as issues of misinterpretations and appropriations of “traditional Asian Buddhism,” all of which are argued to have contributed to violations in Buddhist communities; other frameworks include feminist analysis and organizational limitations.²⁰⁹ The article then turns to a discussion of “generative responses” to sexual violations in Buddhism.

²⁰⁶ Patricia Ullman, “Survivor-Centred Solutions: #MeToo and Spiritual Abuse,” interview with Ann Gleig and Amy Langenberg, Basic Goodness, March 30, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/tapestry/basic-goodness-episode-2-1.5960847>.

²⁰⁷ Patricia Ullman, “Survivor-Centred Solutions: #MeToo and Spiritual Abuse.”

²⁰⁸ Gleig, “Sexual Violations in American Buddhism: Interpretive Frameworks and Generative Responses”; Katy Butler, “Encountering the Shadow in Buddhist America,” *Common Boundary Magazine*, June 1990, https://info-buddhism.com/Encountering_the_Shadow_in_Buddhist_America_Katy-Butler.html.

²⁰⁹ Gleig, “Sexual Violations in American Buddhism: Interpretive Frameworks and Generative Responses.”

Amanda Lucia contributes an analysis of the guru-disciple relationship to the conversation on religion and abuse. Her article “The Guru-Disciple Relationship and the Complications of Consent” argues that this complex and power-filled dynamic lends itself to sexual violations.²¹⁰ She explores whether or not a devotee who has promised her guru, or spiritual master, complete submission of her ego to his will and authority is able to fully express either defiance or consent in a situation of sexual intimacy. Through the narration of a story about a disciple who was sexually abused by their guru, Neem Karoli Baba, Lucia questions the ability and accuracy of secular scholars and others removed from the realm of Buddhism to make fair judgments of the situation without imposing our own secular humanist worldviews and engaging in theological imperialism, further victimizing the devotee. For contemporary audiences, the actions of the guru were undoubtedly sexual abuse, but for some devotees it is considered “divine play” because of the belief that physical proximity to the guru is sacred, and thus physical contact with the guru is a “sacred opportunity” that leads to deeper spiritual transformation.²¹¹ Discussion of abuse in religious contexts must maintain a hyper awareness of the context, values, and moral standards of these events.

Antoinette DeNapoli, author of “I am the one who will change the direction of the world”: A Female Guru’s Response to Gender-Motivated Sexual Abuse and Inequality in Hinduism” centers her discussion broadly on the “sex abuse crisis [in religion],” which for her includes the interlinked problems of sexual inequality, discrimination, exploitation, and violence against women.²¹² Using the case study of a female guru, DeNapoli highlights that female

²¹⁰ Amanda Lucia, “Guru Sex: Charisma, Proxemic Desire, and the Haptic Logics of the Guru-Disciple Relationship,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86, no. 4 (November 29, 2018): 953–88, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfy025>.

²¹¹ Lucia, “Guru Sex: Charisma, Proxemic Desire, and the Haptic Logics of the Guru-Disciple Relationship,” 955.

²¹² Antoinette DeNapoli, “Chapter 12: ‘I Am the One Who Will Change the Direction of the World’: A Female Guru’s Response to Sexual Inequality and Violence in Hinduism,” in *The*

leadership in religious spaces (in this case Hindu) can challenge the norms of gender inequality and oppression within Hindu society that have resulted in sexual abuse.

A final piece of religious studies scholarship on abuse is a chapter from Andrea Jain's *Peace Love Yoga: The Politics of Global Spirituality*.²¹³ Jain uses Bikram Yoga as an example of sexual violence in neoliberal spirituality. Bikram Choudhury's abuses brought to light the sexual violence happening in the yoga industry at large. Jain critiques the morphed and biased Western media interpretation of the guru model as the cause of such abuses due to the supposedly "despotic and abusive" nature of non-Protestant forms of spirituality, which creates more fodder for damaging Orientalist stereotypes.²¹⁴ These abuses, she argues, occur for similar reasons that abuse happens in other religious (and spiritual) contexts. However, Jain warns that a focus on religious authoritarianism (i.e., the guru model) distracts us from the social structures and norms that have led to a dominant global culture of sexual violence.²¹⁵ This chapter situates sexual violence in the yoga industry in the larger context of neoliberal spirituality and capitalist culture, which has effectively commodified women's wellness and healing and simultaneously protected the industry leaders who commit acts of sexual violence in the name of spirituality and healing.

As the preceding chronology of the development of the field and the definitions for spiritual abuse and religious trauma has shown, the term spiritual abuse encompasses a wide-ranging and experience-based set of ideas, and the term religious trauma represents a newer concept. Spiritual abuse includes a vast set of abuses, from inside the walls of a religious

Rowman & Littlefield Handbook of Women's Studies in Religion (London, United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 169–81.

²¹³ Andrea R. Jain, "Self Love Club: Neoliberal Feminism and the Call to Heal the Self, Not the System," in *Peace Love Yoga: The Politics of Global Spirituality*, ed. Andrea R. Jain (Oxford University Press, 2020), 101–30, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190888626.003.0005>.

²¹⁴ Jain, "Self Love Club: Neoliberal Feminism and the Call to Heal the Self, Not the System," 121.

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, 124.

institution to the interpersonal relationship of husband and wife to the secular spaces of psychotherapy. Religious abuse is a more specific, nuanced term, and when used independently, it is often with that intention in mind. It could be argued that spiritual abuse exists whenever religious abuse is present, while aspects of religious abuse are not a given in instances of spiritual abuse. However, spiritual abuse does not always involve religious abuse, which complicates a diagnosis of religious trauma or religious trauma syndrome. In looking at the spiritual abuse and religious trauma literature together, it is worth noting that authors who discuss religious trauma rarely engage with the term spiritual abuse, instead using terms like spiritual harm or spiritual violence. However, their explanations of what causes or events have led to religious trauma are direct examples of the criteria and definitions for spiritual abuse. It is the literature from psychology and counseling on spiritual abuse and religious trauma, rather than the literature on religious abuse, which has informed my critique of the discourse surrounding this topic.

In this chapter I will argue that historical trauma is a category of spiritual abuse and religious trauma but has been left out of the literature on spiritual abuse and religious trauma thus far; definitions of spiritual abuse must be expanded to include types of abuse that specifically impact Native American communities; and that the current suggestions for healing from spiritual abuse and religious trauma are individualistic, culturally appropriative, and may not serve the needs of survivors of these harms.

The lack of recognition of the impact of spiritual abuse and religious trauma on Native American and Indigenous communities, Black communities, and minority religious spaces was nowhere more apparent to me than in the two GCRR conferences I attended. In both conferences there was not a single presenter nor attendee who was a person of color. Furthermore, during the

single conversational mention of Native American communities, the host and director of GCCR, Darren Slade, responded with complete ignorance and disrespect. The conversations within these two conferences were narrow in scope (there was a lot of repeat-information, similar sources were used), focused on highly *individualized* rather than communal experiences and responses, and were crafted for a white audience, mostly in response to abuse within Christian denominations.²¹⁶ Furthermore, while much of the research around counseling and therapeutic interventions for religious trauma urges the need for trauma-informed care, this conference, while academic in nature, provided no sense of safety or sensitivity to the challenging topics of abuse being discussed. Often, inappropriate and loaded questions were asked but defended as being part of the academic discussion and process. For example, after opening up about her spiritual abuse and religious trauma from years of hiding her sexual orientation and the challenges of coming out later in life (she has a family and had been previously involved in a heterosexual marriage), one woman was asked by Darren Slade if she didn't have a moral obligation to stay in the marriage with her husband since they had exchanged vows and had a family together. Her response, while professional, was laden with emotion and frustration. How is that a trauma-informed space? A google review left by an attendee of the conference commented on the noticeable absence of Black faith voices and the need for contributions from a

²¹⁶ An exception to the common theme of individual experience was the mention of intergenerational or generational trauma. These concepts were mentioned about five times during the conferences and often referenced a parent's religious indoctrination of certain beliefs and their imposition of those beliefs onto their children without realizing the trauma involved. Generational trauma was also mentioned in reference to the maladaptive coping mechanisms or symptoms that are a result of trauma. For example, in a session on religious trauma and the family system, Rebekah Drumsta explained that religious trauma affects every person in the family unit (because the experiences of one individual may lead to a crisis of faith and identity which can complicate a family's relationship with the faith) and other close relationships and thus it is important to heal so as not to perpetuate the intergenerational patterning. See: Rebekah Drumsta, "How Religious Trauma Hits Home."

community that lives in a culture of institutionalized trauma. This individual also mentioned that there was a noticeable bias to a specific narrative about religion and trauma that did not account for the intersection of cultural and religious trauma.²¹⁷ The response was “Unfortunately, we can’t force diverse people to apply to be presenters at our events. And since there are patterns to religious trauma, particularly in fundamentalist sects, it’s inevitable that these patterns will be the subject of discussion the most at a conference on religious trauma.”²¹⁸

The instances of insensitive responses and content oversight began to overshadow the GCRR conferences. While my analysis is limited to two conferences put on by one organization, the literature and popular discourse around spiritual abuse and religious trauma tend to support the disconnect that I witnessed at the GCRR religious trauma conferences. The definitions suggest that spiritual abuse and religious trauma are all-inclusive, general concepts, able to be applied in various instances of trauma from organized religion to broader spiritual spaces, but the supporting case studies and examples are all drawn from Protestant communities. While the abuse is unique to the community in which it happens, the focus on individual experience takes away from the cultural milieu that allows this to happen. In other words, the diversity of victims is concealed in the literature adding to the pre-existing invisibility of non-white and other marginalized communities affected by spiritual abuse. The lack of reference to this seemingly obvious conclusion is very surprising.

²¹⁷Anita Brown, Google Review for the Global Center for Religious Research, <https://www.google.com/search?q=gerr&oq=gerr&aqs=chrome.0.0i355i512j46i175i199i512l2j69i60l2j69i61l2j69i60.1430j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#lrd=0x876c7979405342d9:0xb880347c69b423ac,1,,,,>

²¹⁸ This is a direct quote pulled from the google reviews for the Global Center for Religious Research; Anita Brown, Google Review for the Global Center for Religious Research.

There was no reference in the spiritual abuse and religious trauma literature to Native American experiences of colonization and violence at the hands of religious actors. The concepts of historical trauma and historical unresolved grief include forms of abuse that extend beyond spiritual abuse, however, the concepts are intertwined and inclusion of Native perspectives and stories should be incorporated into discussions on spiritual abuse and religious trauma.

Historical Trauma

Historical trauma is a concept developed to highlight and describe the legacy of traumatic injuries that the Indigenous peoples of North America have been subjected to in the name of Christian imperialism during U.S. history and into the present day. Historical trauma encompasses both the generational harm of historical oppression and the psychological trauma incurred from Indigenous experiences of violent colonization through tools such as reservation boarding schools and state-sanctioned cultural suppression and genocide. In the article “Rethinking Historical Trauma,” the authors explain the “Four C’s of Historical Trauma”: colonial injury; collective experience, cumulative effects; and cross-generational impacts.²¹⁹

(i) *Colonial injury* to Indigenous peoples by European settlers who “perpetrated” conquest, subjugation, and dispossession; (ii) *Collective experience* of these injuries by entire Indigenous communities whose identities, ideals, and interactions were radically altered as a consequence; (iii) *Cumulative effects* from these injuries as the consequences of subjugation, oppression, and marginalization have “snowballed” throughout ever-shifting historical sequences of adverse policies and practices by dominant settler societies; and (iv) *Cross-generational* impacts of these injuries as legacies of risk and vulnerability were passed from ancestors to descendants in unrelenting fashion until “healing” interrupts these deleterious processes.²²⁰

²¹⁹ Laurence J. Kirmayer, Joseph P. Gone, and Joshua Moses, “Rethinking Historical Trauma,” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 51, no. 3 (June 2014): 299–319, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461514536358>.

²²⁰ Kirmayer, Gone, and Moses, “Rethinking Historical Trauma,” 301.

Furthermore, historical trauma “offers an explanation for continuing inequities in health and wellbeing and a focus for social, cultural, and psychological interventions.”²²¹

One of the many devastating instances of cultural suppression and erasure at the hands of the United States government was the banning of traditional and religious ceremonies, in what Steve Talbot labels a process of spiritual or religious genocide.²²² Talbot argues that any instance where access to the sacred (i.e., grave sites, natural world) is prevented is religious abuse; moreover, “until 1935, the traditional (non-Christian) religions of the American Indians were banned outright on the reservations... The Sweat Lodge purification ritual and the beautiful Sun Dance religion were outlawed, and many other spiritual practices driven underground.”²²³ The consequences of settler colonial domination and displacement of American Indians included the “coerced abandonment of religious and cultural underpinnings of the subject society, preemption or destruction of resources necessary to native survival... disruption of kinship and familial relations basic to native social structural... [and] outright extermination.”²²⁴ These political actions and the use of residential/boarding schools by over fourteen denominations led to the loss of culturally specific traditions (like ceremonial grieving processes) and kinship relations with

²²¹ Ibid, 300.

²²² Steve Talbot, “Spiritual Genocide: The Denial of American Indian Religious Freedom, from Conquest to 1934,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 21, no. 2 (2006): 7–39.

²²³ Talbot, “Spiritual Genocide,” 7.

²²⁴ Lyman H. Legters, “The American Genocide,” *Policy Studies Journal* 16, no. 4 (June 1988): 771–772, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0072.1988.tb00685.x>, quoted in: Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra DeBruyn, “The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief,” *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research* 8, no. 2 (1998): 60–82, <https://doi.org/10.5820/aian.0802.1998.60>.

other beings central to Native American spirituality and culture.²²⁵ Andrea Smith examines the legacy of sexual abuse in religious boarding schools and suggests that:

Colonialists saw the cultural assimilation and missionization processes as part of the same project. From their point of view, Indians not only lacked the Scripture, they lacked the language that would allow them to comprehend God...missionaries also complained that Indigenous languages were unable to communicate the concepts of “Lord, Saviour, salvation, sinner, justice, condemnation, faith, repentance, justification, adoption, sanctification, grace, glory, and heaven.”²²⁶

Most Native American communities see and understand themselves as interconnected with the self, others, and the spirit and natural world. The Western conception of religion cannot be as easily separated from the daily life of Indigenous communities as simply as it can be for Christian denominations who delineate between the religious and the secular.²²⁷ In her article, “Indigenous Visions of Self-Determination: Healing and Historical Trauma in Native America” Natalie Avalos discusses how boarding schools systematically facilitated a loss of connection to the land, religions, and communities from which these Native American children came and thus led to a loss of traditional knowledge and fragmented identities.²²⁸

²²⁵ The National Native American Boarding School Healing Project lists the following denominations as having been responsible for 367 schools in 29 states: Catholic (80); Presbyterian (21); Quaker (15); Episcopal (9); Methodist (12); Baptist (4); Jesuit (4); Dutch Reformed (2); Evangelical (2); Mennonite (2); Protestant (2); Anglican (1); 7th Day Adventist (1); and Unitarian (1). See: The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. (2020). *American Indian Boarding Schools by State. Healing Voices Volume 1: A Primer on American Indian and Alaska Native Boarding Schools in the U.S. (2nd Ed.)*, 8-9. Minneapolis, MN: The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. <http://boardingschoolhealing.org/list>.

²²⁶ Andrea Smith. *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005, 52.

²²⁷ In “Spiritual Genocide: The Denial of American Indian Religious Freedom, from Conquest to 1934,” 7., Talbot explains that the concept of “the Sacred” is used to explain Native beliefs, traditions, and spiritual practices more accurately than “religion.” “The Sacred, or spirituality, lies at the heart of Indian culture and is not separate from the indigenous institutions of government, the family, or even the economy. The Sacred is not only something made or declared holy, it is also something shared, a collective experience necessary in order to keep the oral traditions and sacred ways vital” (8).

²²⁸ Natalie Avalos Cisneros, “Indigenous Visions of Self-Determination: Healing and Historical Trauma in Native America,” no. Journal Article (2014), <https://go.exlibris.link/LbpXQ8W6>.

Boarding schools and reservations became the dumping grounds for priests known to be abusers. In the case of the Diocese of Gallup (the first so-called “Indian” diocese), the numbers of Catholic clergy accused of sexual abuse is several times higher than the Archdiocese of either Boston or Pittsburgh. The dioceses with the highest rates of sexual predators are those that “contain and oversee the Catholic spiritual care of colonized peoples.”²²⁹ The uneven geographic distribution of the abuse, due to the intentional relocation of predator priests to areas with high concentrations of Native Americans, is evidence that clerical sexual abuse is part of a larger history of colonial and racialized violence against Latino and Native American populations.²³⁰ Within a missions context, not only did known-abusive priests take advantage of the abuses that settler colonialism had already rendered on Native American communities (through the breaking up of families, imposition and knowledge of intergenerational trauma, and resulting increased vulnerability in a colonized space) and enforce intimacy (of which abuse was an extension) with Native American students through the assertion of control over children during bathing and sleeping, but priests and Catholic sisters who had no prior history of bad behavior began to abuse in Indian missions. Catholic theology, doctrine, and institutional structures, including the relocation of predator priests to Native American communities, “aggravated the problem of sex abuse in colonized places.”²³¹ This adds another layer of pathological behavior to the Catholic clergy sexual abuse crisis.

The repeated and systemic abuse and cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples and the traumatic intergenerational effects on many communities in North America have been likened to the Holocaust and its resulting health impacts on the Jewish people. However, Kirmayer et al.

²²⁹ Holscher, “Priests That Moved: Catholicism, Colonized Peoples, and Sex Abuse in the U.S. Southwest.”

²³⁰ Holscher, “Priests That Moved: Catholicism, Colonized Peoples, and Sex Abuse in the U.S. Southwest.”

²³¹ Ibid.

challenges this analogy by suggesting that “the social, cultural, and psychological contexts of the Holocaust and of post-colonial Indigenous ‘survivance’ differ in many striking ways.”²³² To begin with, the authors of “Rethinking Historical Trauma” explain that the deaths of Indigenous peoples were a direct result of settler colonialism, which brought disease and containment strategies focused on forced assimilation and marginalization rather than murder (though this did occur).²³³ Additionally they further explain the differences between what led to the trauma of the Holocaust and the Indigenous peoples in the Americas:

While the Holocaust was a time-limited series of events covering about a decade, the events that constitute historical trauma for Indigenous peoples in the Americas lasted hundreds of years. Survivors of the Holocaust were able to move far away and start new lives, often with the support of diasporic communities that were already well-established and thriving. Indigenous peoples have been divested of their own lands and frequently relocated to marginal spaces marked by deprivation and neglect, far from the centers of power and economic activity. Jews who survived the Holocaust were able to return to an unbroken religious and cultural tradition grounded in the biblical text of the Torah and commentary of the Talmud and in patterns of communal life that are similar among groups living in many countries. Indigenous peoples had the reproduction of cultural knowledge and traditions across the generations disrupted by religious suppression and the residential/boarding schools.²³⁴

Many Native American tribes were stripped of their spiritual and religious beliefs and traditions, and sometimes lost those traditions forever due to the separation and breaking up of communities.²³⁵ The effects of these losses created legacies of historical trauma and historical unresolved grief among generations of Native Americans, which have resulted in high rates of alcoholism, child abuse, domestic violence, suicide, homicide, and depression.²³⁶

²³² Gerald Robert Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*, (Lincoln, Neb.: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2010) quoted in Kirmayer, Gone, and Moses, “Rethinking Historical Trauma,” 301.

²³³ Kirmayer, Gone, and Moses, “Rethinking Historical Trauma,” 305.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ See Talbot, “Spiritual Genocide” for more information about how legislative acts failed to safeguard Native American religious cultures and practices.

²³⁶ Brave Heart and DeBruyn, “The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief,” 75.

A discussion of historical trauma and historical unresolved grief is necessary as part of a larger exploration of spiritual abuse and religious trauma in order to expand our notion of the ways in which spiritual and religious abuse can and have manifested themselves. The forced assimilation and erasure of Native religious and cultural traditions cannot be separated from the concepts of spiritual and religious abuse. The presence of loss, grief, sexual abuse in the religious context of boarding schools, and the biblically ordained “Manifest Destiny” of European colonists are all examples of effects and deliberate acts of spiritual and religious abuse. While there is a need for a more inclusive discussion of spiritual abuse, religious abuse and religious trauma, the methods of healing or recovery must be culturally appropriate, sensitive, and often separate from the responses of dominant Western culture. Historical trauma, and more generally the experience of cultural genocide, also includes elements of all of the terminology I have addressed thus far: spiritual abuse references the destruction of Native American spirituality; religious abuse references the unique role religious institutions had in Native American colonization, such as boarding schools; and religious trauma points to the intergenerational and lasting harm that is caused by such harms. While I see the value in a more nuanced and inclusive discussion of what constitutes spiritual abuse and religiously traumatic experiences, I also recognize that historical trauma and associated concepts are specific to Native American communities and it is important that such terminology does not lose its meaning by being subsumed into more general concepts of spiritual or religious abuse. There is also a corresponding need for discussions of spiritual and religious abuse and religious trauma to embrace a larger and more inclusive perspective.

Expanding the Current Notion of Spiritual Abuse

Anna Lutkajtis also argues that the current spiritual abuse literature is not cross-culturally applicable because it does not include common forms of spiritual abuse for Indigenous communities, like the desacralization and contamination of sacred objects. Furthermore, there is a lack of research and discussion of spiritual abuse at the hands of a group of individuals who are not religious leaders. In her article “Lost Saints: Desacralization, Spiritual Abuse and Magic Mushrooms” Lutkajtis writes:

Definitions of spiritual abuse generally derive from studies that examine the phenomenon in contemporary Western contexts: institutionalized religions, new religious movements, spiritual communities and quasi-spiritual contexts such as psychotherapy (see, for example, Blue 1993; Ward 2011; Wehr 2000). However, such settings provide only a partial representation of spiritual abuse. Specifically, they fail to consider a form of spiritual abuse that occurs most commonly in Indigenous contexts, but can, as this article will argue, also occur in the modern West; that is, the desacralization or contamination of sacred objects and practices.²³⁷

Desacralization is possible when a sacred object is used outside of its traditional religious setting, purpose, or used without permission. Lutkajtis discusses the use of psilocybin mushrooms being appropriated and taken up by white Westerners as an example. The desacralization and contamination of an object can actually harm the object’s spiritual and religious value for the people who originally used the object for religious purposes (for example, the use of psilocybin mushrooms as a recreational drug). Lutkajtis clearly delineates how the Western encounter with mushrooms and the influx of mushroom tourists to Huautla in the 1950s met the criteria for spiritual abuse against individuals and the community that Wehr, and Oakley and Kinmond

²³⁷ Anna Lutkajtis, “Lost Saints: Desacralization, Spiritual Abuse and Magic Mushrooms,” *Fieldwork in Religion* 14, no. 2 (March 31, 2020): 124, <https://doi.org/10.1558/firn.40554>.

present in their research.²³⁸ The impacts included a loss of relevance, meaning, and disconnection from the sacred and spiritual source, the loss of the efficacy and force of the mushrooms, and the destructive communal impact of coercion, control, and consumption in the relationship with Westerners seeking the medicine for their own gain.

Jacqueline Gray, Kathryn LaBore, and Paula Carter suggest a different definition of spiritual abuse, one which leaves room for the inclusion of common experiences of Indigenous communities at the hands of Westerners, in their article “Protecting the Sacred Tree: Conceptualizing Spiritual Abuse against Native American Elders.”²³⁹ Spiritual abuse is defined as “actions that damage one’s subjective experience and personal practice of the sacred, creating a severe disconnection with a higher power or other spiritual sources of meaning and resulting in harm to one’s spiritual integrity, lack of access to spiritual resources to cope, and/or an inability to pursue spiritual growth.”²⁴⁰ The authors further conceptualize the experiences of spiritual abuse as including: “(a) abuse from trusted spiritual leaders or mentors, (b) limitations of access to sacred objects or ceremonial practice, and (c) contamination of sacred objects or practice.”²⁴¹

The impact of spiritual abuse, as we have discussed, can deeply impact one’s faith and worldview, sometimes eliminating people’s ability to have faith in God (for example) altogether. Spiritual abuse must also be recognized as a unique category of abuse, and Gray, LaBore, and Carter argue that the attempt to assimilate spiritual abuse into other forms of abuse is a perpetuation of colonization because it ignores the centrality of spirituality in Indigenous life.²⁴²

²³⁸ Lutkajtis, “Lost Saints: Desacralization, Spiritual Abuse and Magic Mushrooms,” 124.

²³⁹ Jacqueline S. Gray, Kathryn B. LaBore, and Paula Carter, “Protecting the Sacred Tree: Conceptualizing Spiritual Abuse against Native American Elders.,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 13, no. 2 (May 2021): 204–11, <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000195>.

²⁴⁰ Gray, Labore, and Carter, “Protecting the Sacred Tree: Conceptualizing Spiritual Abuse against Native American Elders,” 207.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Gray, Labore, and Carter, “Protecting the Sacred Tree: Conceptualizing Spiritual Abuse against Native American Elders,” 209.

Gray, LaBore, and Carter argue that limitations of access to sacred objects and their desacralization are forms of spiritual abuse. Because of the popularity of psilocybin mushrooms among hippies in the West, mushrooms were classified as an illegal drug, thus limiting access and desacralizing the objects. Western influence has stripped the meaning of mushrooms as a sacred medicine and resulted in negative consequences: “Indigenous communities in Mexico must now choose to either continue their sacred mushroom practices in a context of global prohibition and become ‘criminals,’ or forego these practices entirely and rely upon Western biomedicine for healing and other sources for spiritual fulfillment.”²⁴³

Part of the damage that was done was due to the different cultural contexts of the Westerners and the Indigenous people of Huautla. For hippies, the mushrooms represented a psychedelic experience that would increase one’s authenticity, freedom, and individuality, a striking contrast to the interpretation of these substances for Indigenous communities.²⁴⁴ This coincides with Oakley and Kinmond’s observation that the outcomes of spiritual abuse are conceptualized as intensely individual and personal experiences.²⁴⁵ In Western culture the self is of the utmost importance to the human experience of navigating life, and thus the experiences that come with life, like spiritual abuse. This predisposition to the individual however, may artificially separate individuals from understanding abuse within the cultural and spiritual context in which it occurs, which is a vitally important factor. Oakley and Kinmond suggest that it is this fact that has created the gap in literature between a focus on the abuse and abuser rather than the spiritual context in which the abuse occurs.²⁴⁶

²⁴³ Lutkajtis, “Lost Saints: Desacralization, Spiritual Abuse and Magic Mushrooms,” 134.

²⁴⁴ Lutkajtis, “Lost Saints: Desacralization, Spiritual Abuse and Magic Mushrooms,” 136.

²⁴⁵ Oakley and Kindmond, *Breaking the Silence*, 14.

²⁴⁶ Oakley and Kindmond, *Breaking the Silence*, 14.

One of the most striking disconnects for me during the GCRR conferences were the suggestions for healing. During their presentations, Jasko and Bibler, listed many psycho spiritual practices as treatments for religious trauma, including suggestions of Indigenous ceremonies and the use of peyote to treat religious trauma. In a similar way to the account of mushrooms and Huautla, the suggestion of peyote is more than an innocent mistake.

Tisa Wenger, author of *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal*, sheds light on the struggle for recognition as a religion that the Peyote movement sought in the early twentieth century. The Peyote movement negotiated traditional religious aspects with white American understandings of what counted as “religion”; often the elements that were counted were reminiscent of Protestant themes and models of religion that had been reworked to fit into the Indigenous tradition known as the Native American Church. According to Wenger,

The Peyote movement linked Protestant themes of individual salvation and morality with a more indigenous emphasis on healing and communal well-being. Adherents viewed peyote as a medicine, as a teacher that provided them with an ethical way of life, and as a ‘gift of God’ or even as God’s flesh ingested as a holy sacrament.²⁴⁷

However, even though the Native American Church mirrored Christianity in many ways, the U.S. government saw Peyote religion as a “return to heathenism” and thus its use was outlawed.²⁴⁸ The fight to outlaw the use of Peyote lasted most of the twentieth century and in 1965, the ceremonial use of peyote was protected by Federal regulation.²⁴⁹ However, while there are 28 states that have protected the use of ceremonial peyote, 22 states have not taken the steps to do so. In 1996 Congressional findings declared that “this lack of uniformity has created

²⁴⁷ Tisa Joy Wenger, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 121.

²⁴⁸ Talbot, “Spiritual Genocide,” 22.

²⁴⁹ “42 U.S. Code § 1996a - Traditional Indian religious use of peyote,” Legal Information Institute (Cornell Law School), accessed October 24, 2022, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/42/1996a>.

hardship for Indian people who participate in such religious ceremonies,” and they further found that “the lack of adequate and clear legal protection for the religious use of peyote by Indians may serve to stigmatize and marginalize Indian tribes and cultures, and increase the risk that they will be exposed to discriminatory treatment.”²⁵⁰ The religious use of substances such as peyote or mushrooms are imbued with fights for legitimacy, recognition, and traditional Indigenous ways of being and healing. Cultural genocide is tightly intertwined with the prohibition of religious freedom.²⁵¹ Thus, the suggestion for these medicines’ use as a way for white people to heal from the religious trauma they have experienced might serve as a double injury of sorts for Indigenous communities who use these practices to heal from the traumatic effects of settler colonialism.

In their article, “The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief,” Brave Heart and DeBruyn speak to the experience of spiritual persecution:

We believe that the current proliferation of “New Age” imitations of traditional American Indian spiritual practices is genocidal. Insensitive and opportunistic non-Indian “healers” corrupt and attempt to profit from stereotypic distortions of traditional ceremonies. Such attitudes towards the “possession” of sacred pipes and ceremonies, for example, are reminiscent of the entitlement and subsequent aggressive actions inherent in the doctrine of manifest destiny. It is our opinion that these behaviors are an assault on Native people who do not separate spiritual traditions from the self.²⁵²

One of the most explicit common threads I have observed in the research between religious trauma and historical trauma is their similar description as a soul wound. Indigenous knowledge has been identifying historical trauma and its related injuries as soul wounds for centuries.

Different articulations seem to point to similar injury: a soul murder is often used with reference to the affects of child abuse but is also referenced with respect to the unique harm of religious

²⁵⁰ “42 U.S. Code § 1996a - Traditional Indian religious use of peyote.”

²⁵¹ Eduardo Duran et al., “Healing the American Indian Soul Wound,” in *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, Book, Section vols. (Boston, MA: Springer US, n.d.), 341–54, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4757-5567-1_22.

²⁵² Brave Heart and DeBruyn, “The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief,” 69.

and spiritual abuse.²⁵³ Religious and spiritual abuse have the ability to shatter one's ability to have faith in God or seek out religious and spiritual help later on.²⁵⁴ Demaris Wehr explains that "many survivors feel that something very sacred – something like their soul – has been stolen," which actions like shamanic "soul retrieval" may resolve in the instance of a soul theft or soul stealing.²⁵⁵

Critique of Healing Responses

An injury to the soul creates a cognitive dissonance within an individual that can be hard to repair. The chapter "Events of Abundant Evil" in Robert Orsi's *History and Presence* utilizes stories from survivors of clergy sexual abuse to highlight the Catholic nature of this abuse.²⁵⁶ A survivor who worked closely with Orsi speaks to the challenges of reconciling conflicting feelings and thoughts in the aftermath of clergy sexual abuse: "I don't know what I feel in God's company... The emotional tie with that priest went sour... Why wouldn't that spread to God and everyone else?... "You just don't trust the people around you, you don't trust yourself, and you don't trust God."²⁵⁷ Most survivors, writes Orsi, do not know what to think about God, or how to trust him again if they believe that his purpose was to harm these individuals, often children at the time of their abuse.²⁵⁸ This may also be why individuals see their abuse as both a gift and a

²⁵³ Panchuk, "The Shattered Spiritual Self," 515.

²⁵⁴ Panchuk, "The Shattered Spiritual Self," 515.

²⁵⁵ Wehr, "Spiritual Abuse: When Good People Do Bad Things," 47.; Wehr references Sandra Ingerman's book *Soul Retrieval: Mending the Fragmented Self* which explores this process. The implications of shamanic soul retrieval practices will not be discussed in this paper; An article written on pastoral sexual abuse names the affects of these actions as soul stealing. See also: Cooper-White, P. (1991) Soul stealing: Power relations in pastoral sexual abuse. *The Christian Century*, 108 (Feb): 196-199.

²⁵⁶ Robert A. Orsi, "Events of Abundant Evil," in *History and Presence* (Harvard University Press, 2016), 215–52, <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674969056>.

²⁵⁷ Orsi, "7. Events of Abundant Evil," 222.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

curse from God, Orsi explains: “Because the abuse is perceived as having come from God, a being who is not questioned in the same way one may question humans, the shame and guilt that someone can harbor due to the belief that they caused God to treat them in a truly horrible way is devastating and often unresolved.”²⁵⁹ Even while the survivors of clergy sexual abuse are not inspired or hopeful that the Catholic system which perpetrates and perpetuates this sexual abuse will end at any point soon, Orsi writes that all of the survivors he has known continued to attend Mass after they were abused, into their adult lives. Many of these survivors see themselves as having a unique ability (the aspect of the abuse that is a gift) to see Catholicism for what it really is, a tradition that has the capacity for both evil and holiness, while other Catholics who have not been abused believe, *love*, and hide behind a Catholic illusion of pure sanctity.²⁶⁰

Through the stories of survivors, Orsi complicates the concept of healing with regards to Catholic clergy sexual abuse in a way that is not reflected elsewhere in the literature on religious trauma. He argues that healing can be weaponized by the Catholic church as a form of passive action in response to such heinous crimes.²⁶¹ In this way, many of the victims he has worked with reject the word healing, as it has served as a form of their silencing (“How can there be healing...if you don’t know what the hurt is, what the damage is?” muses one survivor that Orsi worked with).²⁶² “They [survivors] do not want to be asked by people who have not been sexually abused by priests if they have been healed, which sounds diagnostic; or told that they need to be healed, which is condescending; or to be assured that they will be healed, which has

²⁵⁹ Orsi, “What Is Catholic about the Clergy Sex Abuse Crisis?,” 291.

²⁶⁰ Orsi, “What Is Catholic about the Clergy Sex Abuse Crisis?,” 290.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Orsi, “Events of Abundant Evil,” 245.

an ominous ring to it.”²⁶³ Healing both obscures and manufactures an end point to the pain that often fuels survivors’ anger.²⁶⁴

In Western culture, healing seems to be equated with a sort of definitive resolution. Healing as a process or end-goal was never specifically defined in the literature regarding healing from religious trauma and spiritual abuse. An exploration of grief may help us to better understand the culturally expected outcome of “healing.” Brave Heart explains that in dominant U.S. culture, “grief is recognized and considered legitimate only when the relationship to the deceased is an immediate kinship tie.”²⁶⁵ In general, Western culture has a very narrow understanding of grief and thus, there has been very little application of grief in the case of leaving a religion, or experiencing the loss of one’s spiritual worldview through spiritual and religious abuse.²⁶⁶ This has harmed the ways in which Native American communities have been able to process the grief of past generations. This grieving includes grief for current deaths, but also for historical traumas such as “loss of land, the loss of the right in the past to raise our children in culturally normative ways at home, and mourning for the human remains of ancestors and sacred objects being repatriated” in culturally specific grief ceremonies.²⁶⁷ Orsi, Brave Heart and DeBruyn all suggest, in different ways, that perhaps *healing* should not only reference an immediate therapeutic response or intervention. Brave Heart and DeBruyn, include a quote from which brings together historical unresolved grief and communal healing: “tradition is to suffer with the remembering of our lost one, and to give away much of what we own, and to cut our

²⁶³ Orsi, “What Is Catholic about the Clergy Sex Abuse Crisis?,” 283.

²⁶⁴ Orsi, “Events of Abundant Evil,” 245.

²⁶⁵ Brave Heart and DeBruyn, “The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief,” 66.

²⁶⁶ Bowman, “Departing a Religion - Supporting those in Grief.”

²⁶⁷ Brave Heart and DeBruyn, “The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief,” 74.

hair short.”²⁶⁸ For many Native communities, the process of healing is not short and concise, and it involves learning to exist within the pain, trauma, and grief: between pain and resolution. The survivors that Orsi worked with are also hesitant to embrace healing so as to not become complicit in the abuses which harmed them. Perhaps the concept of healing, then, can be expanded to include a more intricate, personal, and culturally appropriate understanding of healing.

Additionally, there is little mention of healing within the community in which one has experienced the abuse in a Western religious context and only marginally more references to processing with other individuals who have undergone similar abuses.²⁶⁹ This is most likely due to the individualistic nature of Western culture, as argued by Oakley and Kinmond. I was surprised to find that in my research, there was minimal mention of restorative justice for communities and traditions affected by situations of spiritual and religious abuses, with a few exceptions.²⁷⁰ One of the GCRR presenters, Elizabeth Power, spoke to the power that congregations have to traumatize and retraumatize individuals, and she suggested restorative justice as a helpful medium rooted in empathy and compassion, for congregations to become more supportive and empowered.²⁷¹ Power argued that by focusing on the strengthening of community and individuals, there will be less opportunity for acts of abuse because both

²⁶⁸ Brave Heart and DeBruyn, “The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief,” 75.

²⁶⁹ See: Stone, “Thou Shalt Not” and Orsi, “Events of Abundant Evil” for examples of group therapy and support groups for religious trauma and religious abuse.

²⁷⁰ See: Theo Gavrielides, “Clergy Child Sexual Abuse and the Restorative Justice Dialogue,” *Journal of Church and State* 55, no. 4 (December 1, 2013): 617–39, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/css041>;

Douglas E. Noll and Linda Harvey, “Restorative Mediation: The Application of Restorative Justice Practice and Philosophy to Clergy Sexual Abuse Cases,” *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 17, no. 3–4 (October 2, 2008): 377–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538710802330021>.

²⁷¹ Elizabeth Power, “The Sacredness of Trauma: Equipping Congregations to Bear Witness,” (presentation, International e-Conference on Religious Trauma, May 29-30, 2021).

individuals and the larger community will not be so worn down and deteriorated, leading to acts of abuse.²⁷² Restorative justice is based on the principle that crime is a “wound in human relationships” and thus restorative justice aims to repair this wound.²⁷³ Following a similar thought process, Theo Gavrielides argues that religious abuse in the form of child sexual abuse is also a breakdown in the relationships within a church. Gavrielides argues that clergy sexual abuse is marked by a violation of the sacramental culture of the Catholic Church, and is what separates child sexual abuse from other types of crime. This sacramental injury cannot be resolved by retributive justice processes, argues Gavrielides, making restorative mediation a valuable consideration in a victim’s healing process.²⁷⁴

There are a variety of avenues for further exploration and critique of healing in Western culture. Many of the issues I have raised here, especially with regards to cultural appropriation, point to the issue of one person healing at the expense of another’s spirituality, religion, or culture. These conversations should also include discussions of neoliberal spirituality and the spiritual marketplace as well as an application of decolonial frameworks.

²⁷² Power, “The Sacredness of Trauma: Equipping Congregations to Bear Witness.”

²⁷³ Gavrielides, “Clergy Child Sexual Abuse and the Restorative Justice Dialogue,” 620.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

In her book *Abusing Religion: Literary Persecution, Sex Scandals, and American Minority Religions*, Megan Goodwin writes:

Religion does not cause abuse. But as I have noted throughout this book, religious belonging can make abusive situations and relationships harder to escape. Perhaps most significantly, religion can make it harder to recognize abuse as such: How could someone meant to channel the divine perpetrate what Robert Orsi calls “events of abundant evil”? Religion does not cause abuse, but religious communities frequently protect abusers while denying and enabling abuse, creating conditions of possibility.²⁷⁵

Goodwin’s phrase, “conditions of possibility” is an appropriate way to describe much of what I have presented in this thesis. This thesis has explained the ability and power that spirituality and religion have to harm individuals and communities through the presence of the conditions of power, vulnerability, and divine justification that they foster. It is important, then, that the conversations which discuss topics such as spiritual abuse, religious abuse, and religious trauma do not further perpetrate the harm that is being and has been done.

In this thesis I have argued that the content presented in the GCRR conferences mirrored the narrow orientation of the mainly white and Protestant-based secondary literature on spiritual abuse and religious trauma. I have also argued for an expansion of the current interpretation of spiritual abuse and religious trauma by including a discussion on historical trauma and historical unresolved grief as concepts related to spiritual abuse and religious trauma. Furthermore, I have sought to highlight the problems associated with many of the suggestions for healing from injuries of spiritual abuse and religious trauma.

²⁷⁵ Goodwin, *Abusing Religion: Literary Persecution, Sex Scandals, and American Minority Religions*, 147.

The potential for further study in this field is vast, as this thesis has exhibited. Additional study is needed on spiritual abuse and religious trauma outside of the Christian context presented here, as well as an exploration of how the application of an expanded definition of spiritual abuse would stretch our perceptions of what constitutes spiritual abuse. Furthermore, inquiry into how spiritual abuse leads to religious trauma, rather than the rarely-referenced, spiritual trauma is another untouched topic. Additional research into the particularities of spiritual abuse and its effects on specific demographics is also important.

Inspired by my thesis topic, I have recently had several conversations with people close to me about spiritual abuse, religious abuse, and religious trauma. More than one of these conversations has led to the revelation of a friend or family member to me, of either a personal experience of abuse or trauma in a religious setting or, the disclosure of a religiously abusive or traumatic event that someone they know has undergone. Perhaps it is a coincidence that I would hear personal stories which support and highlight the pervasiveness of spiritual and religious abuse, or perhaps this is evidence of the prevalence of the toxic “conditions of possibility” which allow this abuse to transpire. Regardless, language is both empowering and powerful, and I hope the conversation around spirituality, religion, and abuse grows to meet the needs of the communities affected.

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