

## **When religion leads to injury rather than healing**

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Since the seventies, a lot of literature has been published on the theme of religious abuse, using various terms such as 'spiritual abuse', 'spiritual assault', 'spiritual rape', 'spiritual molestation', and 'spiritual bullying'. Early and influential contributions include Wayne Oates' book *When religion gets sick* (1970), which emphasizes the dual meaning of the term 'religion'. On the one hand it refers to a positive system that can enhance spiritual growth; on the other hand, it can be a disorder affecting the person's functioning as a whole. Scott Peck's book, *The road less travelled* (1978), highlights the widespread nature of spiritual abuse across different religious denominations. In his book, *When God becomes a drug* (1991), Father Leo Booth describes from personal experience how religion became an escape mechanism for him and eventually lead to addiction. From his own experience he got a lot of insight to write about this theme.

### **Defining spiritual abuse**

The following are some important definitions:

- Dupont (2004) describes it as spiritual structures that use unethical, manipulative techniques and coercive measures to promote leaders' objectives, which harm group members, their families, or the community.
- Gibson (2009) states that spiritual abuse has a negative effect on a person's spirit, usually as a result of a spiritual leader or system attempting to dominate, control, and manipulate the person, often through fear.
- Johnson and VanVonderen (1991) imply that it involves the detrimental handling of a person in need of help or support – eventually it weakens or debilitates their spiritual status. Spirituality can also be used to influence others to conform to a certain 'spiritual standard,' promoting 'external 'spiritual performance' without considering the individual's well-being.
- Blue (1993) defines it as leaders using their spiritual authority to force, control, or exploit followers, leading to spiritual wounds.
- Pretorius (2007) describes spiritual abuse as leaders using their office or

authority to control or dominate others who are often unaware of the leader's hidden agenda.

### **Factors forming the basis for a spiritually abusive system**

Factors like the following usually play a crucial role:

- Absolute and unconditional acceptance of doctrines, which enables abuse in the name of God.
- A literal, absolute, and dogmatic interpretation of Scripture, leading to dysfunctional religious messages and behaviour.
- People's lack of ability to discern and judge truths from the Word, and their tendency to rigidly follow rules as spiritual leaders lay them down, viewing these leaders as the final authority regarding the Word.
- An insecure relationship with parents in the family of origin appears to be an important contributing factor, as early childhood experiences colour people's view of the world and themselves.

Oates (1970) points out the following factors that contribute to vulnerability to a 'sick' religion:

- Unprocessed grief processes.
- Unwillingness to give or accept forgiveness.
- Hope and hopelessness, and the absence of love.

Vulnerable persons are also predominantly those who have never learned to articulate or control their feelings, leading to denial or avoidance of emotions. They often become over-achievers and perfectionists who also try to please everyone.

Pretorius (2007) lists the following eight reasons why people fall into the trap of spiritual abuse:

- A lack of acceptance at home and in the church, leading to behaviour seeking recognition.
- Shame-based motivation, related to sin or weakness for which the person tries to compensate at all costs.
- The need for a deeper spirituality, making people vulnerable to sacrifice anything.
- Disillusionment with the existing world order, such as corruption and spiritual decay.
- A need for security.

- Inner doubts about their abilities and self-worth.
- The conviction that spiritual success depends entirely on their own efforts.
- The need to control the reality of inner pain, where an inflexible religious belief system can give an impression of control.

### **Typical characteristics, strategies, and techniques of a spiritually debilitating system**

- *Emotional and spiritual incest*

In dysfunctional systems (family or church), roles are reversed, and those in authority positions abuse subordinates/followers to meet their selfish needs, rather than to serve or equip them.

- *The misuse of exclusivity*

The viewpoint that your belief system is the only correct and valid one, and that others' doctrines are dangerous and must be destroyed.

- *Control and domination rather than grace*

Leadership strongly focused on control and domination is a main characteristic. Fear, guilt, and intimidation are used to keep members in line. Individual lives are placed under a magnifying glass, excommunication occurs, and the path back to normality is difficult for those who leave. Members often remain out of fear of rejection, even if they are unhappy. Misuse of spiritual authority is common.

- *An inflexible black/white approach*

For persons with an inner lack of security, religious systems offering simplistic black/white answers provide a refuge of security. It is reassuring when others can decide for you how to live and what to believe.

- *Burdens are placed on people*

Leaders place their own burdens (from guilt or unprocessed pain) on members, using them to meet personal and professional needs. Tired people receive 'formulas' about God instead of His unconditional love.

- *People are used rather than served*

Like Jesus and Ezekiel condemned the Pharisees and certain shepherds, contemporary systems sometimes focus on religious rules that are spiritual poison, depriving followers of true life.

- *Denial*  
Pain is avoided, but it has negative effects. In toxic religious systems, people are taught to deny the reality of their emotional pain and anger, and instead show love and kindness.
- *Through rules, real pain is bypassed*  
Persons with an inner emotional void and low self-esteem follow strict rules to gain recognition, but this does not address their real pain of shame and loneliness. Excessive spiritual rules and demands destroy such seeking people.
- *The role of isolation*  
Victims are usually in isolation, afraid to ask questions for fear of being seen as critical. This deprives them of the opportunity to put their situation into a wider perspective.
- *Out of touch with people's inner emotions*  
Religious shaming occurs when theology has lost touch with people's feelings. Emotions are seen as evil, and legalism and condemnation as virtues. The value and meaning of members depend on performance, and conformity to the leader's style is demanded.
- *Accountable to no one*  
Spiritual abuse can occur in any church or group if the leaders are accountable to no one.

### **The consequences of spiritual wounding**

Spiritual wounding is an extremely destructive form of abuse that leads to diverse emotions and typical consequences include the following:

- *Distorted conceptions of God*  
God is experienced as a despotic and unstable perfectionist. Trust in people or organizations becomes difficult, and God is indirectly blamed for the injustice if representatives of God abuse. False feelings of guilt can also arise by involving God in doctrines to make people feel guilty.
- *Distorted conceptions of Christianity*  
A twisted self-identity (negative or shame-based) can develop as well as an obsession with spiritual achievements, leading to self-righteousness or serious striving for performance. Overwhelming fear of losing salvation can cause

people, who left, to return to the group again - there is often little understanding of grace.

- *Emotional and psychological disability*

Victims can develop exaggerated perfectionism and a desire to exert control.

Dissociation can also occur due to the message to deny your true self. Total disillusionment can also arise from unfulfilled promises and accusations of sin and this can lead to serious despondency, hopelessness, and even suicidal thoughts. Anger towards leaders is common while alternating phases of opposing emotions (anger, joy, depression) can last a long time.

- *Personal incompetence*

Problems with personal boundaries can arise due to denial of their humanity and right to their own opinion. This can also result in a crisis regarding personal responsibility, leading to giving up too easily, or taking on too much responsibility.

- *Nightmares*

Repeated nightmares can occur.

- *Torn families*

Families can be torn apart with unprocessed pain

## **Guidelines toward healing**

### **A. The start of the process**

- *The value of counselling*

Professional counselling from someone with experience in spiritual abuse is valuable.

- *Denial*

Abandoning denial is the first big step towards freedom and healing, which involves a willingness to be vulnerable.

- *Healing is a process*

Healing does not happen overnight and implies a long process with professional help, and without relapsing into old, inflexible ways of thinking.

### **B. Focus on support groups**

- *The therapeutic value of a support group*

Healing cannot take place in isolation. A caring group can offer support, accountability, and a space to share feelings of religious shaming.

- *Seek someone who can serve as a sounding board*

Someone who can regularly serve as a sounding board without judging can expedite the process.

### **C. Spiritual recovery**

- *Distorted conceptions of Christianity and God*

Misconceptions must be pointed out and replaced with balanced views.

- *General attitudes and beliefs*

Negative beliefs (lies) and hindering attitudes (such as control and domination rather than grace, as well as a rigid black/white approach) must be replaced with Scriptural truths.

- *Learn not to overreact to spiritual wounding in the future*

The experience should not become an excuse to withdraw from the church and God. Abuse was often inflicted by persons who had not learned to act differently.

- *Initially connect anonymously with a church*

Trust takes a long time and initial attending of church services without personal involvement can help.

- *The importance of forgiveness*

Forgiveness is a process that takes time and can only begin after the grieving process has been completed. Grieving over opportunities for healthy growth that were denied is necessary.

- *Learn to trust Christians again*

Time can be spent with previous Christian friends, focusing on friendship without a 'ministry agenda'.

- *Healthy spiritual growth*

The articulation of unprocessed emotional pain and the expression of suppressed anger can pave the way for healthy spiritual growth.

### **D. Recovery in thought patterns**

- *Guard against a victim mentality*

Healing is possible, but requires grieving, prayer, forgiveness, and confession over several seasons.

- *Guard against overwhelming dark memories*

Bad memories should not nullify the good in the past. Most systems are not just

good or bad, and abusers were probably victims themselves.

- *Reprogram toxic thinking*

Counsellors must point out negative thought patterns (such as black/white thinking) and indicate the opposite.

- *Rectify invalid conclusions*

Intellectual lies must be pointed out and replaced with the truth; this involves cognitive restructuring based on sound and healthy Biblical views.

- *Get a realistic view of reality*

When one focuses on the irrelevant and negative, one only sees one part of reality, while the whole picture is distorted. In this regard, victims must be helped to return to reality. Replacing the lies and distorted beliefs that stem from emotional and spiritual wounding will go a long way towards regaining a realistic view of reality.

- *Empower the positive*

The positive is not so much disempowered when information is ignored, but when the facts are slightly distorted, usually in the direction of the negative. As part of the coaching process, such distorted facts will also have to be dealt with.

- *Determine reasons for disregarding the negative*

The counsellor must help determine reasons for ignoring negative behaviour that maintains a toxic self-image.

- *Guard against predominantly emotional thinking*

The person must be helped to distinguish between emotions and facts, and maintain a healthy balance.

- *Guard against an obsession with 'I should have' thoughts*

Realize that often too high standards were set for themselves.

- *Guard against maintaining a hyper-sense of responsibility*

This toxic thought process must be pointed out, and the person must be helped to set healthy and balanced personal boundaries.

- *Concentrate on new information*

The victim must be taught basic spiritual and Biblical truths, and in this regard a support group can help assess information.

## **E. Social recovery**

- *Concentrate on the family*

Healing must also be facilitated with regard to the wounded family, including handling of anger and facilitating reconciliation through family therapy.

- *Concentrate on new friends*

A large inner void usually arises when dysfunctional relationships are abandoned – these must be filled with new sources of social support.

- *Learn to find joy in ordinary things again*

Guidance is needed to experience gratitude and joy in daily situations.

## **F. Physical recovery**

Concentrate on the body and identify possible poor eating habits, weight problems, lack of exercise and sleep. The recovery program must include guidance regarding these physical aspects to prevent future relapse into unhealthy behaviour.

## **Conclusion**

Spiritual abuse can emotionally and spiritually destroy individuals. No religious group or structure is automatically immune to this phenomenon. However, the consistent application of the proposed pastoral guidelines can make a dramatic difference in the recovery process of the spiritually wounded person.

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