Overview of contemporary Practical Theology in Africa: Conceptualisations of spiritual abuse

Mashudu E Muthivhi
University of Venda, South Africa
mashudu.muthivhi@univen.ac.za
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2418-4436

Abstract

Misdeeds in spiritual or religious environments, arguably, differ in stratums of abuse, and all manner of internal and external factors may be ascribed to such settings. Given the upsurge and attention to the concept of spiritual abuse, an undertaking to understand the lived experience of victims or survivors and the conceptualisation of spiritual abuse is critical. The dearth of spiritual abuse literature is noteworthy, particularly from an African perspective. Spiritual abuse, when confronted as a distinct construct, prompts a practical theological examination of the underlying processes and significance attributed to it. It involves consideration of its character. Subsequently, depositing some insight other than a Western context is relevant and offers an opportunity to engage in spiritual abuse that occurs in an indigenous setting. From a qualitative angle, this article highlights psycho-spiritual challenges and the need for appropriate pastoral care and counselling.

Keywords

counselling; Practical Theology; spiritual abuse; trauma

Introduction

In tackling the complexity of religion, scholars either define it according to its social and psychological functions or say what religion does, i.e., according to its belief content (Niekerk, 2018). Religion poses underlying forces that need to be examined to comprehend how religious practitioners apply certain practices and how they assist believers in their mental and emotional growth, or lack thereof. In religion, one is bound by spiritual obligation or the observance of specific principles based on devoutness

or virtue, and with an expectation of rewards or punishments in the future (Park & Hale, 2014). Religions and spiritual traditions are complex and diverse, and affect people significantly. Nevertheless, it is critical to recognise that a religious belief system that appears to be solid and authentic could be insidiously mishandled by a practitioner, even to further their purposes. The concept of religious or, more intently, spiritual abuse has significantly plagued the religious space over the years. Whitehouse (2018) opines that wide-ranging teachings and practices exist on the spiritual path; however, not everyone may be regarded as authentic or helpful. Furthermore, extreme religious approaches have not only surfaced but have done so to the point of depriving adherents of dignity and, at times, the value of human life.

Although various faiths and groupings within religions have distinct beliefs, one can recognise broad patterns of spiritual abuse, which assists in identifying spiritual abuse as a phenomenon before more subtle traits that may be acknowledged within particular faiths (Keller, 2016). This article offers a critical review of theology that critiques spiritual abuse in terms of its nature, dimensions, and ramifications, particularly through the eyes of practical theology attuned to the African context. The study considers the growing scholarly desire for theology to be accountable to the lived experiences of faith (Ganzevoort & Roeland, 2014). Such accountability means theology interprets experience, but it also requires that theology push back against oppressive forms of abuse that might claim to be a form of piety.

Early theological engagement(s) related to abuse were more likely to investigate psychological or sexual abuse and often placed the discussion of the spiritual aspect of abuse in a secondary category (Tobin, 2019). Nevertheless, African theologians such as Kobo and members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians have argued that spiritual abuse must be recognised as a theological and a social reality that intersects with experiences of power that are defined and shaped by gender and race (Dlamini, 2023).

This article intends to contribute to the dialogue within three notable areas. First, it acknowledges the work that has already been done addressing spiritual abuse both within Africa and global contexts, and critiques what

has already been written. Second, it maps an embodied and intersectional approach to understanding spiritual abuse that attends to the intricacies of race, gender, class, and spirituality in shaping people's experiences. Lastly, it employs practical theological lenses to provide complex answers to different ways of understanding and analysing responses to spiritual abuse, specifically, engagement in, and redemptive and transformative aspects. The argument is predicated upon the understanding that theology, one that is true to the pastoral practice, cannot be a site of harm by its very nature; rather, it must be a hermeneutics of liberation, not subjugation.

Aspects of spiritual abuse

The convergence of various lines of scholarship highlights spiritual abuse as a distinct construct, and it has become the topic of scholarly attention (Ward, 2011; Ellis, et al., 2022). Spiritual abuse is neither an unfamiliar nor an unacknowledged issue. However, it is still an area that has been under-theorised in African practical theology, where it is important to discuss the intersection of power, gender, and spirituality in religious life. This gap suggests the importance of a conceptually grounded framework that is sensitive to context. Spiritual abuse scholarship seems to have developed from the body of work covering broader abuse studies, just as psychological abuse material derived from research focusing on physical or sexual abuse (Keller, 2016). Surprisingly, the scholarship on religious groups, domestic assault, and clerical sexual abuse predated the research on spiritual abuse. There are many ways to understand the idea of spirituality, some of which list key traits of spirituality without fully defining what they imply.

Spiritual abuse may be construed as abuse that operates under the guise of strengthening individuals spiritually. However, at the same time, it systematically weakens the individual psychologically in the name of devotion to deficient religious ideologies, which are viewed as established and whose interpretation by ordinary people is considered sinful (Qureshi et al., 2020). Religious abuse occurs when authorities or power structures do not allow variations in opinion or behaviour (Vernon, 2019) – a rigid preference for compliance over discretion, logic, and debate results in strict conformity.

Qureshi, Ullah, and Butt further explore this concept and stipulate that:

> For the sake of religious commitment or under the danger of discipline from God, spiritual misuse evacuates the right of people to make judicious decisions concerning their physical, emotional, and mental prosperity and security. Being conscious of the fact that they suffer, they do not protest. Under the false impression of the sacredness of religious authorities, their mental capacities are paralysed. They do not think, or if they think at all, it is again guided by the will of the abusers, who constantly tell them about the curse and damnation by God had they criticised them (2020, pp. 30-31).

To be considered spiritually abused, a person must have engaged in any activity or transaction that induces doubts about their ability to trust their intuitions or any behaviour that takes advantage of the genuine, sincere longing to commune with the divine (Ellis et al., 2022).

In arguing that not all spiritual abuse is found only in cults, Ward (2011) argued that six key themes may be derived from spiritual abuse. These included (1) leadership representing God, (2) spiritual bullying, (3) acceptance via performance, (4) Spiritual neglect, (5) disconnect between a person's inward and exterior feelings and observations, and (6) the manifestation of internal states, including physiological difficulties. This seems to resonate with the definition given by Oakley and Kinmond (2014), as they identify spiritual abuse as:

> Coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. The target experiences spiritual abuse as a profoundly 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, a requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a "divine" position, isolation from others, primarily those external to the abusive context (Oakley & Kinmond, 2013a, p. 25).

Society, as well as the church, is grappling with abuse. In response to a growing concern about abuse in society at large and in faith-based communities in particular, some scholars have zoomed in to evaluate

forms of abuse that can be viewed as specific to religious communities in some way or another (Fernández, 2022). Spiritual abuse is not a legally recognised category of abuse, as it is a term commonly used in supporting victims (Saunders, 2020). It seeks to reflect a valid concern for victims of the adverse effects ascribed to the phenomenon, such as psychological dominance, manipulation, or bullying of another by another who holds a position of power or authority over them, with the result that the victim manifests unhealthy or debilitating responses such as shame, low self-worth, and anxiety (Evangelical Alliance Theology Advisory Group, 2018). Typically, some have identified these phenomena as emotional or psychological abuse that results in psychological harm, and Oakley discloses that spiritual abuse entails:

- the concept of a godlike posture,
- the application of sacred writings and the pulpit to promote ideologies,
- the spiritual context,
- the risk of spiritual implications and
- repercussions on fundamental faith convictions are all factors that contribute to spiritual abuse.

From a theological standpoint, Scripture has always critiqued the abuse of power. For instance, Mark 10:42-45 and 1 Peter 5:2-3 promote a servant leadership style that warns against domination of others for self-interest. Galatians 3:28 treats all persons as equals, while Micah 6:8 exhorts people to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with all humanity. Therefore, the abuse of spiritual authority is a pastoral and theological proposition, and among those response strategies must be biblical and ethical (Orogun & Pillay, 2022).

Understanding the dynamics of religious abuse and how it affects people's attachment patterns and relationships can be facilitated by using attachment theory as a framework (Counted, 2017). According to attachment theory, the early events of a person's life significantly impact their attachment style and capacity to build positive relationships with others. Religious organisations or leaders may misinterpret or manipulate a person's attachment needs in the context of religious abuse, resulting in unhealthy attachment patterns and relationships (Cherniak et al., 2021). For instance,

a victim of religious abuse may adopt an anxious or avoidant attachment style that is marked by suspicion and anxiety. They could struggle with closeness in relationships, have trouble putting their faith in others, and feel cut off from their spirituality or religious views. To fully grasp spiritual abuse, one needs to think about more than just the definition itself. It is worthwhile to see spiritual abuse as a social phenomenon and a concept that arises and unfolds in larger power systems (Oakley, 2013). If one is only considering the definitions, this diminishes the complexity of the social phenomena involved and limits an understanding of the relational nature by which power and authority perpetuate spiritual abuse and its structural continuity.

The implications of spiritual abuse in Africa

It is imperative to recognise that spiritual abuse may take place in all religious/spiritual contexts, irrespective of the religious beliefs or practices. The acts of spiritual abuse occur in how those who wield authority utilise it, rather than in the doctrine or theology. This could be a religious doctrine used to condone immoral behaviour towards others, for example, the sexualisation of women and patriarchal domination associated with the above (Wood, 2019). Spiritual abuse can have both a lasting impact and be emotionally harmful, regardless of the historical or faith background. Individuals and communities must at least acknowledge that spiritual abuse exists and work to prevent its harm. This may include creating spaces that are safe and supportive and that help individuals be braver in speaking out when they perceive abusive behaviours. Community resources and support must also be available to everyone who has experienced spiritual abuse.

Spiritual abuse is a unique form of maltreatment that must be distinguished from other abuse types (Oakley, et al., 2018). Even when overlap could occur, the spiritual component is typically at the core of the person's experiences, deserving special consideration and understanding. Furthermore, in the context of the therapeutic community becoming more aware of spirituality, it is important to consider individual experiences of members of faith communities who experienced spiritual abuse, to shed light on meaningful interventions and support, and allow for a broader knowledge of the consequences of spiritual abuse to individuals.

The legacy of racial hierarchies stemming from colonial-era Christianity creates a long, damning existence today in both church authority and faith practices. Often this encourages subjugation, infusing and augmenting the pain that authoritarian persons wield from their roles, hence the term "coloniality of faith" in some cases (Mashau, 2018). In gender aspects, this is further complicated by patriarchal theologies, which in effect create "systematic dissonance" with women's viewpoints by framing their suffering as a divine test, hence creating additional epistemic injustice (Hübel, 2020). Essential to feminist interpretations is the recognition and celebration of women's spirituality and eminent spiritual agency. Economic distress contributes to the problem through neo-prophetic ideas of wealth and healing, being weaponised against poverty, mimicking the ideology of economic spiritual abuse.

Spirituality can be deeply empowering; it can both liberate and bind believers to the disease of harmful spiritual abuse. When believers divest any critical emotional dependency on a charismatic leader, instead of having a critical reflective approach toward their spirituality, they become detached in both spirit and body (Jentile, 2016). On the other hand, there can be a larger benefit if believers develop a more critical, reflective approach to spirituality, as it may be related to forging a resilient coping device against repeated forms of oppression, moving away from spiritual and theological abuse. Opposing forms of spirituality can become a means to become reflective theological thinking while revealing the systemic structures of oppression to create a sense-making process(es) which in turn can offer some moral stability while becoming and changing the lives of those lives being lived as meaningful and useful after experiencing oppression (Panchuk, 2020). To oppose forms of spiritual abuse and the spiritual harm from communities of faith, there must be a more profound commitment to critical reflections of a theological nature, and therefore, reveal experiences and possible reinterpretation of lived religious experiences.

In African contexts, spiritual abuse appears in various forms, including scripture manipulation, an authoritarian pastoral style, gender-based oppression, and socioeconomic exploitation, which require both diagnostic and prescriptive theological responses (Msibi, 2023). Diagnostically, abuse can be seen in the pastor's attempt to exert divine authority to gain compliance; in the pastor's use of Scripture to coerce submission, or a

widow to offer financial support; by the silencing of women; by targeting financially vulnerable congregants; or by using psychological or spiritual harm such as guilt, fear, and alienation. To combat abuse and harm, it is necessary to create models of servant-leadership, to engage indigenous spiritual knowledge systems, construct trauma-informed pastoral care, establish oversight and accountability structures, and empower survivors to reclaim their spiritual authority (Mahon, 2022). Meaningful intervention requires an intersectional awareness of race, gender, and class to ensure the response is sensitive to the relevant cultural context, to express an ethical pivot in action, and to consider the vulnerabilities and hierarchical structures that inform African spiritual experiences.

While not all religious movements are adverse, it is vital to recognise that some may be poisonous and abusive to their adherents emotionally and physically. It is crucial to recognise the complexity of the problem rather than seeing the harm caused by group participation as a simple case of normality versus pathology (Strain, 2018). It is significant to grasp the subjective effects of former members on individuals to create appropriate treatment strategies for affected individuals. Exploring the ex-member's subjective experiences would provide the needed information specific to the conditions that led to the individual's involvement in the group, internal experiences with the group, and the post-leaving experience, causing difficulty in recovery. Moreover, it would help to treat and facilitate the recovery and healing of ex-member experiences in which injured individuals have suffered. In general, understanding group membership effects on individuals and supporting the healing and recovery of individuals requires a holistic approach to consider objective and subjective experiences.

Psychological vs. spiritual abuse

The two forms of abuse, psychological abuse and spiritual abuse, can overlap in certain areas but differ in their purposes and outcomes (Kinmond & Oakley, 2015). Psychological and spiritual abuse have similar elements but ultimately serve different intentions and produce different results. Both can influence an individual's mental/emotional status, but we can distinguish between them based on their intent and consequences. In comparison,

psychological abuse is the use of accommodated behaviours to manipulate, belittle, or gain control over an individual, through isolation, humiliation, or strategies such as gaslighting (College, 2017). Spiritual abuse includes taking a person's religious or spiritual ideology and using it against them to control them through fear or guilt. Although both can sometimes be aligned, these opposing intents and outcomes help separate the two types of abuse.

Psychological abuse is a behavioural pattern that entails using intimidation, control, and emotional and/or sexual manipulation to diminish an individual's sense of self-worth and threaten their mental health (Rodríguez Carballeira, et al., 2015). Psychological abuse can manifest in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to, emotional, psychological, coercive, and verbal abuse. It can occur in various relationships, including friendships, families, or places of employment. Spiritual abuse, on the other hand, is a type of abuse that is designed to centre on a person's spiritual and/or religion-based engagement and beliefs (Pargament et al., 2014).

Spiritual abuse entails harming, manipulating, or controlling an individual by way of religious or spiritual beliefs, rituals, or activities. Examples of spiritual abuse include restricting an individual's access to religious resources or using religious or spiritual beliefs to humiliate, guilt, or coerce an individual (DeGroat, 2020). Other examples include using religious or spiritual rituals or activities as a punishment. Spiritual abuse can have additional implications or impact on an individual based on their spiritual/religious identity. In contrast, psychological abuse can have a wide range of effects on a person's mental and emotional well-being. A loss of faith in religious or spiritual organisations is one of these impacts, as well as perplexity, remorse, and humiliation about one's spiritual activities or beliefs (Fromm, 2013). Although they have certain similarities, psychological and spiritual abuse are distinct in their purposes and outcomes. It is critical to identify and address both types of abuse to support healing and rehabilitation for those who have experienced abuse. The understanding of spiritual abuse may be restricted in that it may only include some components of the experience while leaving out others. Spiritual abuse can entail the manipulation and deception of fundamental religious or spiritual beliefs, such as obedience and authority, and it can

have severe detrimental effects on a person's mental health and well-being (Mason-Callaway, 2023).

Religious leaders or adherents may occasionally use ambiguous allusions to biblical passages supporting power and submission to justify spiritual abuse (Thinane, 2021). This might maintain power relations inside the ministry hierarchy, harming people's identities. Identifying abuse and seeking help can be challenging when religious or spiritual rhetoric is used to defend abusive conduct. Furthermore, Individuals who have experienced extended periods of spiritual abuse may develop a range of post-traumatic stress symptoms. These symptoms often manifest as an ongoing sense of anxiety, repeated flashbacks, and an impression of emotional detachment. This reaction can cause significant impairment in both functioning and well-being (Vernon, 2019). Individuals who have experienced spiritual abuse should seek professional help from qualified professionals experienced in enabling the individual to work through their experiences and cope with their trauma. Also important are religious institutions and their leaders recognising that spiritual abuse is a possibility within their organisations and working with initiative to prevent spiritual abuse from occurring in their community.

Unfortunately, there have been occurrences of leaders of the Christian church engaged in narcissism (Ruffing, et al., 2018). This style of leadership can be highly damaging, as people are used and abused for narcissistic gain. For narcissistic leaders, this appears to occur when their desires and needs take precedence over their followers' desires and needs, leading to a toxic and abusive environment. Additionally, church leaders can intentionally leverage narcissistic traits to influence their followers' thinking to remain in power, using religious context and doctrinal language to justify these actions. When religious thought is manipulated, the cognitive/relational distortion can have negative mental health and well-being consequences (Lucchetti, et al., 2021). Overall, a church and/or other religious organisations need to be aware of narcissistic behaviour in leadership and intervene. Intervention may include an accountability framework, leadership moral/ethical training, development resources, and support resources for individuals misused or abused by narcissistic leadership.

The lived experience of the spiritual target in the African context

While spiritual abuse is a worldwide problem, it is important to examine the impact that it has on African victims. Religion is an integral part of the social culture in Africa, and religious leaders hold great social power and legitimacy (Agbiji & Swart, 2015). In the African context, the lived experiences of victims of spiritual abuse are nuanced and complex. Victims face a plethora of struggles in relation to the unique social and socioeconomic factors in each African context, which require a sensitivity to the discussion around spiritual abuse (Stratton, 2022). Faith and Indigenous behaviours, beliefs, and practices often share characteristics that also confound the ability to draw distinctions between accurate spiritual guidance and abuse.

Within Africa, Indigenous beliefs and practices often become co-mingled with cultural practices, which makes it difficult to identify actual spiritual guidance versus false action (Matholeni, et al., 2020). Complications within the relationship between Indigenous and Christianity or Islam often create doubts about action and set a delay or prevent identification and addressing spiritual abuse, because when one has been conditioned to protect careless actions that take place under the cloak of something that is deemed sacred and worthy. Exploiting spiritual authority, often worsened by the lack of intervening measures, builds alienation and dissatisfaction in religious communities (DeGroat, 2020).

As a result, the rising prevalence of exploitation and corruption is a significant problem for the organisations' fundamental principles and ethical goals. These organisations are in danger of losing their integrity and the original purpose for which they were created. This study does not collect firsthand empirical data on this subject but combines existing academic works to create a broad overview of the lives of survivors. By referring to a wide range of existing literature, the study wishes to have a representative image of the issue addressed. One can find numerous instances of spiritual abuse, mainly in African communities, which in turn signify the spread of such actions. The literature shows that spiritual abuse happens among all human beings, and the reported experiences of exploitation and corruption are not only the interlocutors' but also a part of

a larger pattern. Ali and Cerkez (2020) state that those who are spiritually and emotionally attacked may develop fear, guilt, anxiety, and depression. Such emotions, according to Oakley et al. (2018), may have a profound impact on the victim's spiritual life; thus, those who have suffered spiritual abuse may find it challenging to recognise their spirituality and the wider faith community they belong to.

It is arguable to say that spiritual abuse is a significant issue, and the implications are evidently stark in Africa, as we are witnessing. Diminished trust in faith-based communities impacts people's long-term spiritual care and wellbeing. Spiritual people of authority abuse trust because there are inadequate structures for accountability and because they perceive themselves to be special and therefore closer to God than their membership (Kaunda, 2020). When one justifies their behaviour, this can lead to becoming more isolated from the collective will and interests of the greater community. This will have ramifications for those communities as abuses of power and corruption continue to emerge. Thus, the initial purpose and value of faith-based initiatives can disintegrate to the point of disenfranchising membership and necessitating mistrust of the institution itself (Winter, 2017). In spiritual abuse, the adherent gets false projections of reality to confuse them. The adherents who have been the victims of spiritual abuse experience extreme psychological and emotional duress, which can lead to anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation (Ali & Cerkez, 2020). All those who have become entrenched in this reality accept the delusion as the truth, which eventually becomes the norm. Therefore, transparent avenues of accountability are established and maintained so that those in authority can be held accountable and to allow for full and open lines of communication in the community. One can see the truth by letting go of all chains of regret, shame, or fear and standing up and away from the lie.

Practical theology serves an even greater purpose in an African context. It is a theological enterprise and an interrogative response to the colonial inheritance (Magezi, 2019). It considers the lived experience of faith in the face of coloniality and spirituality and the cultural complications associated with communal life. As such, African practical theology must not simply adapt a Eurocentric theology and practices (Pali, 2024). The perspective must be intercultural, narrative-oriented, and oriented towards liberation,

grounded in the African worldview and community ethics. This study uses two African practical theological models, Lartey's (2020) intercultural pastoral theology and Magezi's (2019) transformational practical theology, to engender a conceptual and analytical framework to help understand spiritual abuse in contemporary African Christianity. The two theological models considered together offer a relational, decolonial, and restorative hermeneutic for understanding spiritual abuse against the backdrop of the church in Africa. Henceforth, theology becomes a praxis of healing and justice.

Emmanuel Lartey's (2020) concept of practical theology is conceptualised as relational, dialogical, and intercultural. His approach implies empathetic engagement, communal accountability, and mutuality. For spiritual abuse, this approach first foregrounds relational damage, accentuating faithful listening and engagement with victims' experience, while communal ethics rooted in ubuntu, facilitates vulnerable collective restoration that can re-establish relationships between the victims of abuse, the faith community, and God. Lartey's intercultural sensitivity identifies the need for the pastor to respond relationally while respecting African cosmologies, collective moral frameworks, and the gospel in the pastoral process of engagement, communal structures, and prevention in churches.

In conjunction, Maluleke's (2021) postcolonial African theological hermeneutics situates spiritual abuse within the structures colonised from traditional Indigenous ecclesial roots. His model underlines Beven's structural critique, where the church's authoritarian and hierarchical principles permit the manipulation of individuals (Whyte, 2023). His model recasts and highlights the voice of the margins, where the abuse survivor's narratives are theological texts pronounced to inform and construct continued ethical and pastoral responses. Maluleke urges liberative praxis toward individual liberation and political emancipation, where theology is studied by the oppressed and the oppressor, and work includes justice and transparency, collective social accountability in the African church leadership. Lartey and Maluleke provide relational, cultural, and structural critiques to develop practical theological responses to spiritual abuse.

Findings

There is still considerable ambiguity surrounding the notion of spiritual abuse, with different meanings and perspectives. Although the idea of spiritual abuse is becoming more widely accepted in scholarly works and therapeutic contexts, conceptualisation, scientific investigation, and practical therapies are greatly hampered by the concept's intrinsic opacity. To address these challenges, it will be important to develop multiple strategies, considering the diversity of spiritual experiences and the complex relationships between ideologies, social relations, and institutional structures in different cultural and religious communities.

The intricacy of spiritual abuse

The absence of specific, widely acknowledged criteria and frameworks hinders recognition, prevention, and intervention practices for spiritual abuse. Spiritual abuse can take many forms: improper or distorted application of doctrines, limiting autonomy, coercive accountability, manipulation, and victimisation. It shares the similarities of psychological abuse, but its distinction lies in the utilisation of spiritual or religious methods of control, including the manipulation of the mind and emotional states, while posing as spiritual or religious direction. This abuse may occur in places of worship, including churches, mosques, and temples. The abuse is pervasive in many religious communities and can stem from clergy, lay leaders, or even regular members of the community.

Variance in context and culture

The explicit relationship of spiritual abuse to customs and belief systems makes it harder to conceptualise in the African context. Spiritual abuse in Africa has unique characteristics, in part due to the sociocultural context in which church leaders have significant power, and in which spiritual abuse can be seen as either normative or acceptable. Building strong guidelines will lead to the identification and response of spiritual abuse in a context that transcends cultural and religious settings. Strong guidelines need to have comprehensive abuse typologies for both spiritual and psychological forms of abuse.

The need for proficient pastoral care

Pastoral care and therapy that appropriately attends to the unique needs of survivors of spiritual abuse are greatly needed. Substantial cognitive and emotional trauma, such as worry, despair, diminished self-worth, and disenchantment with religious institutions, is brought on by spiritual abuse. Survivors often feel conflicted about their faith beliefs, feelings of guilt, and shame. Recovery and restoring a sense of self-actualisation includes developing boundaries, learning about abusive factors, exploring relational spirituality, building a support network, and accessing professional support. Recovery includes employing trauma-informed care approaches that address psychological healing and spiritual healing.

Problems in religious institutions

Sexual abuse often proliferates in environments lacking integrity and transparency. Significant scrutiny and disclosure processes can deter potential abusers but provide an easy avenue for individuals to obtain help after abuse because they usually lack strong systems of accountability, and the abusive behaviour of leaders goes unchecked. The absence of formal recognition of spiritual abuse makes it more complex to identify and address the problem. This lends to the cycle of abuse and perpetuates a culture of silence.

Recommendations

Spiritual abuse creates serious issues in faith and spiritual communities throughout the world, necessitating a holistic approach to understand, manage, and prevent it. To respond to the concerns, while seeking also to improve the efficacy of suggested remedies, we now offer the following recommendations:

Advancing cultural sensitivity through contextual understanding

It is important to acknowledge the cultural specificity of spiritual abuse, particularly in African contexts where traditional belief systems operate alongside modern religious systems. Engaging empirical explorations of these converging positions will enhance understanding and create solutions aligned with cultural specificity. To develop successful platforms

to support diverse groups impacted by spiritual abuse, caregivers and counsellors need to be educated and trained to be culturally competent.

Specialist treatment

Establishing programmes designed to provide specialist pastoral care and counselling is vital to provide effective counselling for spiritual abuse. The program should be purposeful for this population, adhering to the needs of survivors psychologically and spiritually, while using a trauma-informed framework and a safe healing space.

Oversight frameworks

To strategically prevent and respond to spiritual abuse, faith communities need to develop an open and accountable governance structure. Comprehensive policies for recording any report of abuse or misconduct in a faith-based context will help ensure that any investigation is rigorous, fair, and informed by an understanding of victimisation; ultimately, we aim to get at the facts and arrive at a just conclusion. This entails developing independent oversight mechanisms to ensure compliance and oversight of standards of conduct for faith leaders. Again, as it relates to abuse accountability, the focus must be on restoring trust regarding abuse to the community.

Conclusion

Discourse surrounding spiritual abuse highlights the necessity for more research, especially in relation to the cultural and geographic contexts that would further recognise the scope of such awareness and ultimately facilitate a more focused response. Through identifying spiritual abuse and working to develop healthy climates of accountability and empathy with faith communities around the world, we can promote healing, psychological resilience, and empowerment. By reflecting on and attending to incidents in religious and spiritual relationships that have formed identities and communities, individuals can seek healing and strengthen their capacity to recover from spiritual abuses, which often involves reinterpretation of religious beliefs, and mainly what could be considered authoritative understandings of the Bible.

Fostering a culture of respect, openness, and a focus on responsibility is the first step in reducing the effects of spiritual trauma and beginning the process of healing and growth for those who have been impacted. Spiritual abuse has many constituent components that influence abuse through faith-related teaching or coerced compliance into the church as a religious institution. The issue of spiritual abuse can create different kinds of dysfunction, from feeling worthless, being concerned about one's spiritual nature, and isolation from faith-based settings. More importantly, the topic of spiritual abuse within an African context is more complex due to the mixing of traditional beliefs/practices and more orthodox religions. Healing from spiritual abuse alludes to a holistic solution that incorporates notions of pastoral care, counselling, and an accountability plan in any follow-up circumstances related to faith-based institutions.

Bibliography

Agbiji, O.M. & Swart, I. (2015). Religion and social transformation in Africa: A critical and appreciative perspective. *Scriptura*, 114(1):1–20.

Ali, N. & Cerkez, Y. (2020). The Effects of Group Counseling with Gestalt Therapy in Reducing Depression, Anxiety and Stress among Traumatized People. *Revista de cercetare si interventie sociala,* 71(1):343–359.

Awaad, R. & Riaz, T. (2020). *Insights into the Psychological Sequelae of Spiritual Abuse.* Chicago, Hurma Project 2020 Research Conference.

Cherniak, A., Mikulincer, M., Shaver, P. & Granqvist, P. (2021). Attachment theory and religion. *Current Opinion in Psychology,* 40(1):126–130.

College, W.J. (2017). *An exploratory study of personality factors related to psychological abuse and gaslighting.* Pensacola: University of West Florida.

Counted, V. (2017). Attachment theory and religious violence: theorising adult religious psychopathology. *Journal for the Study of Religion,* 30(1):78–109.

DeGroat, C. (2020). *When narcissism comes to church: Healing your community from emotional and spiritual abuse.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Dlamini, Z. (2023). Buried alive in the dungeon – Examining the patriarchal language of religion and how acts of faith inform GBV in sacred spaces. *Stellenbosch Theological Journal,* 9(1):1–23.

Ellis, H. et al. (2022). Religious/spiritual abuse and trauma: A systematic review of the empirical literature. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice,* 9(4):213–232.

Ellis, H. et al. (2022). Religious/spiritual abuse and trauma: A systematic review of the empirical literature. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice,* 9(4):213.

Evangelical Alliance Theology Advisory Group, (2018). *Reviewing the Discourse of 'Spiritual Abuse': Logical Problems & Unintended Consequences,* United Kingdom: Evangelical Alliance.

Fernández, S. (2022). Victims Are Not Guilty! Spiritual Abuse and Ecclesiastical Responsibility. *Religions*, 13(5):427.

Fromm, E. (2013). *Psychoanalysis and religion.* New York: Open Road Media.

Ganzevoort, R. & Roeland, J. (2014). Lived religion: The praxis of practical theology. *International Journal of Practical Theology,* 18(1):91–101.

Hübel, S. (2020). Herstory of epistemic injustice: Women's silencing in the Catholic church. *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research*, 28(1):127–152.

Jentile, T. (2016). *The moral formation, pastoral leadership and contemporary Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches in Soweto.* Bloemfontein: University of the Free State.

Johnson, D. & Van Vonderen, J. (2005). *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognising and Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority Within the Church.* Minnesota, USA.: Bethany House Publishers.

Kaunda, C. (2020). The emptied authority: African Neo-Pentecostalism, modernisation of sacred authority, and gendered and sexualised constructions of violence. *Acta Theologica,* 40(2):216–237.

Keller, K. (2016). *Development of a spiritual abuse questionnaire.* Texas: Texas Woman's University.

Kinmond, K. & Oakley, L. (2015). Working safely with spiritual abuse. Spiritual accompaniment and counselling: Journeying with psyche and soul. In: P. M. Gubi, ed. *Spiritual Accompaniment & Counselling.* London: Jessica Kingsley. pp. 145–162.

Lartey, E. (2020). Back to the future: intercultural, postcolonial and inter-religious streams in practical theology. *Practical Theology,* 13(1-2):150–161.

Lucchetti, G., Koenig, H. & Lucchetti, A. (2021). Spirituality, religiousness, and mental health: A review of the current scientific evidence. *World Journal of Clinical Cases,* 16(9):7620-7631.

Magezi, V. (2019). Practical theology in Africa: Situation, approaches, framework and agenda proposition. *International Journal of Practical Theology,* 23(1):115–135.

Mahon, D. (2022). Servant Leadership: It Really is Trauma-Informed. In D. Mahon, (ed.). *Trauma-Responsive Organisations: The Trauma Ecology Model.* Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited. pp. 25–48.

Maluleke, T. (2021). Why I am not a public theologian. *The Ecumenical Review,* 73(2):297–315.

Mashau, T. (2018). Unshackling the chains of coloniality: Reimagining decoloniality, Africanisation and Reformation for a non-racial South Africa. *HTS: Theological Studies,* 74(3):1–8.

Mason-Callaway, A. (2023). *Social Support, Religious Support, and Psychological and Spiritual Outcomes in Christian Survivors of Spiritual Abuse.* Illinois: Wheaton College.

Matholeni, N., Boateng, G. & Manyonganise, M. (2020). *Mother Earth, Mother Africa & African indigenous religions.* Cape Town: African Sun Media.

Msibi, M.C. (2023). *Facing a masculine God: Towards a pastoral care response in the context of gender-based violence*. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University.

Niekerk, B. v. (2018). Religion and spirituality: What are the fundamental differences? *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies,* 74(3):1–11.

Oakley, L. (2013b). Breaking the silence on spiritual abuse. In *Spiritual abuse is abuse.* New York: Palgrave: Macmillan. p. 56–82.

Oakley, L. (2013). *What is spiritual abuse?. In Breaking the silence on spiritual abuse.* London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Oakley, L. & Kinmond, K. (2013a). *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse*. Basingstoke.: Palgrave Macmillan.

Oakley, L., Kinmond, K. & Humphreys, J. (2018). Spiritual abuse in Christian faith settings: definition, policy and practice guidance. *The Journal of Adult Protection,* 20(3/4):144–154.

Oakley, L.R. & Kinmond, K.S. 2014. Developing safeguarding policy and practice for Spiritual Abuse. *The Journal of Adult Protection,* 16(2):87–95.

Orogun, D. & Pillay, J. (2022). The abuse of spiritual authority among some African Neo-Pentecostals and its impact on human rights. *Stellenbosch Theological Journal,* 8(1):1–28.

Pali, K. (2024). Markers and tools to facilitate decolonisation of theological education in Africa. *Religions*, 15(7):783.

Panchuk, M. (2020). Distorting concepts, obscured experiences: Hermeneutical injustice in religious trauma and spiritual violence. *Hypatia*, 35(4):607–625.

Pargament, K., Murray-Swank, N. & Mahoney, A. (2014). Problem and solution: The spiritual dimension of clergy sexual abuse and its impact on survivors. In K. Pargament, N. Murray-Swank & A. Mahoney, (eds.). *Understanding the Impact of Clergy Sexual Abuse.* New York: Routledge. pp. 200–223.

Park, C. & Hale, A. (2014). Religious/spiritual meaning systems: Multiple pathways to wellbeing. In C. Kim-Prieto, (ed.). *Religion and spirituality across cultures*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 177–201.

Qureshi, A.W., Ullah, U. & Butt, A. (2020). Spiritual Abuse: A Critical Analysis of Ali and Brenton's Iranian Nights. *Global Language Review,* 5(1):29–37.

Rodríguez Carballeira, Á. et al. (2015). Group psychological abuse: Taxonomy and severity of its components. *European Journal of Psychology Applied to Legal Context,* 7(1):31-39.

Ruffing, E., Paine, D., Devor, N. & Sandage, S. (2018). Humility and narcissism in clergy: A relational spirituality framework. *Pastoral Psychology,* 67(1):525–545.

Saunders, M. (2020). *A soul wound: Exploring the therapeutic practices of Christian psychological therapists addressing religious or spiritual abuse that occurs within a Christian religious setting.* London: Middlesex University/Metanoia.

Strain, J. (2018). The psychobiology of stress, depression, adjustment disorders and resilience. *The World Journal of Biological Psychiatry,* 19(1):1–8.

Stratton, C. (2022). *Healing from Spiritual Abuse as a Process of Transformation.* California: Sofia University.

Thinane, J. (2021). *Human rights abuse by some self-styled spiritual leaders within the "Nyaope religion" in South Africa,* Pretoria: University of South Africa.

Tobin, T. (2019). Religious faith in the unjust meantime: The spiritual violence of clergy sexual abuse. *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly,* 5(2):1–29.

Vernon, J. (2019). *Theology and Power: The Reality of Religious Abuse in Christianity.* Seattle: Seattle School of Theology & Psychology.

Ward, D.J. (2011). The lived experience of spiritual abuse. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture,* 14(9):899–915.

Whitehouse, A. (2018). *Spiritual Abuse: A Sufi's Perspective.* Brewer, Maine: The Interrogative Imperative Institute.

Whyte, G. (2023). Bevans Revisited: Reflections on Stephen Bevans's Models of Contextual Theology. *International bulletin of mission research,* 47(3):430–440.

Winter, M. (2017). *An analysis of the abuse of power by leaders in Christian organisations: Cultural comparisons from Canada, Germany and South Africa.* Pretoria: University of South Africa.

Wood, H.J. (2019). Gender inequality: The problem of harmful, patriarchal, traditional and cultural gender practices in the church. *HTS Theological Studies,* 75(1):1-8.