

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



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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 only was the Church not protecting the victims of 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

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

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, <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

4 Emily St James, "The Sexual Abuse Scandal Rocking the Southern Baptist Convention, Explained," *Vox*, June 7, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/culture/23131530/southern-baptist-convention-sexual-abuse-scandal-guide> post.

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.

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 schol-

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/>.

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

ars 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 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 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

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/>.

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.

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