ROUTLEDGE FOCUS

ABUSE IN WORLD RELIGIONS

Towards Solutions

Edited by
Johanna Stiebert

ROUTLEDGE Focus

Abuse in World Religions

This book draws attention to the texts, mechanisms, strategies, and initiatives that address and combat sexual(ised) spiritual abuse in five world religions. It goes beyond identifying, describing or characterising spiritual abuse in multiple religious traditions and rape culture settings, instead describing what is being done in diverse religious communities and settings to confront, address, resist, and heal from spiritual abuse.

Just as none of the world religions are free from spiritual abuse, all have developed ways to detoxify, prevent, eliminate, and bring healing and justice in the face of its existence.

Solution-focused activities range from analysis of sacred texts, to discussion forums, creation of self-representational visual and creative expressions, digital and other forms of activism and protest, specialist training courses, support groups, and survivor-led initiatives.

The book will appeal to academics of religious studies with interest in rape culture and spiritual abuse, as well as upper-level undergraduates and postgraduates, and also religious leaders, or leaders of faith-based organisations, seeking to understand and to confront spiritual abuse and rape culture in their own communities.

Johanna Stiebert is Professor of Hebrew Bible at the University of Leeds and founding co-director of The Shiloh Project, a research collaboration exploring the intersections of rape culture, religion, and the Bible. She is Co-Investigator of the AHRC-funded research project, "Abuse in Religious Contexts."

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Abuse in World Religions

Towards Solutions

Edited by Johanna Stiebert

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Dedication

Elizabeth Pulane ("Lizzie") Motswapong, Mma Tema (29 March 1973 to 6 May 2024) of Mahalapye in Botswana died suddenly and unexpectedly as this volume was going into production. Lizzie was a person of warmth and spirit and the first scholar of Hinduism and Buddhism in her country to be educated to the level of PhD. She was a bold advocate for the rights of women, girls, and for members of the queer community of Botswana. Lizzie's legacy continues through her daughter Tema, who was her heart, pride, and joy, and through her many students: *le ka moso.* We dedicate this volume, along with its companion volume, to Lizzie – may her memory be for a blessing.

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Introduction

Johanna Stiebert

The first volume, a companion to this one, focusses primarily on establishing that abuse exists across multiple religious traditions. Whereas spiritual abuse is best documented in Christian contexts, spiritual abuse is a presence also in non-Christian religious traditions – including Jewish, Hindu, Sikhi, Muslim, Buddhist, and others. Of course, it is impossible to generalise about any one of the five traditions explored in Volumes 1 and 2: each of Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhi(sm), Islam, and Christianity is far too internally variegated for this. Still, acknowledging the reality of the widespread existence of spiritual abuse across many religious traditions is a first step towards confronting, preventing, eliminating, and healing from it.

This volume confirms the wide and deep reach and the diversity of spiritual abuse but focusses primarily on forms of resistance and activism that have emerged within religious traditions. In other words, spiritual abuse is rampant, tenacious, as well as profound in the harm it causes,[1] yes – but it is far from uncontested and the chapters to follow attest to organisations and resources that actively and often very creatively and effectively resist spiritual abuse.

Moreover, this volume is a text of its time, a time where spiritual abuse is finally becoming confronted much more vocally and visibly – including in religious traditions other than Christianity (e.g. Choudhury and Hammer, 2024) and in settings other than Global North West ones (Mbote et al., 2024).[2] As such, this book joins and also represents a growing and worldwide movement of research-based scholar-activism.

I submit this volume at a time shortly after Justin Welby resigned as the Archbishop of Canterbury (on 12 November 2024). His resignation was prompted by the Makin Report, which criticised the Church of England's handling of and failure to investigate numerous allegations of abuse by John Smyth. The series of events leading up to Welby's resignation shows up yet again the need for ongoing resistance and for upstanding and not bystanding. It is becoming ever clearer that such is not only right but on the right side of history.

Johanna Stiebert (Otley, 20 December 2024)

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Notes

1 In their chapter for Volume 1, Chowdhury and Hannan evocatively refer to the impact of spiritual abuse reaching "the core being of a person." Similarly, Starr refers to acts of spiritual abuse as "scars of the soul." Dehan and Levi, meanwhile, point out that spiritual abuse is not separate from, but adds additional force to, other forms of abuse, including physical, psychological, sexual and economic abuse.

2 Both volumes cited here are available open access and both have a clear activist purpose of confronting abuse in religious contexts head on – be this sexual abuse in minoritised Muslim communities (Choudhury and Hammer, 2024), or homophobia in East Africa – that is, predominantly Christian settings (Mbote et al., 2024).

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1 Judaism

(Re)deploying Male Texts to Combat a Mostly Male Problem? Rabbinic Law and American Jewish Resistance to Sexual Abuse

Barbara Thiede

Introduction

In February 2022, the American Jewish Reform movement issued a report on sexual harassment and abuse in Reform institutions. The report ended with a hopeful assertion: "[t]hat this investigation happened at all reflects positive and profound cultural change" (Hogan and Sherno, 2022: 37). Almost exactly one year later, America's Conservative movement released an analysis and summary of some seven decades of sexual abuse and misconduct in the denomination's umbrella organisation, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and in its youth wing, United Synagogue Youth. Although, according to a press release, the report's author concluded that "there was no widespread or systemic abuse beyond the individual incidents or matters reported" (Blumenthal, 2023), a deluge of accounts of sexual harassment in Conservative seminaries, synagogues, camps, and federations appeared in posts using #MeToo and #GamAni,[1] leading the movement to issue a statement on behalf of all its major institutions.[2] The statement decried the use of power to "take advantage of others," stated that Jewish tradition prohibits physical and sexual abuse, and called for all Conservative institutions to work towards ensuring that children, in particular, are safe and protected (Conservative Jewish Movement, 2023).

Reports of extensive sexual misconduct in Orthodox yeshivot[3] in Israel, Australia, the United States, and elsewhere have emerged in recent years (Stasi, 2019). As of this writing, a New York court case brought by 50 men against Yeshiva University, the well-known Orthodox seminary, for repeated sexual abuse by teachers and staff is ongoing (Jones, 2024). Post-denominational Jewish movements,[4] such as Jewish Renewal,[5] and independent institutions of higher learning without denominational affiliation have also struggled with alleged misconduct in their ranks. According to the *Jewish Telegraph* Agency, Hebrew College announced in an email of January 2023

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to its campus community that Rabbi Art Green, the former president of the Reconstructionist[6] Rabbinical College and founding dean of Hebrew Union College, was barred from the school due to "a report by a community member of an unwanted and distressing sexual advance" (e.g. Hajdenberg, 2024).[7] Jewish Renewal's Kallah, an annual teaching and learning event, and its retreat centre, Elat Chayyim, regularly invited Rabbi Mordechai Gafni to teach, despite decades of allegations of sexual misconduct, and cut ties only after three women brought charges against Gafni in Israeli courts in 2006.[8] The movement has recently faced calls to address toleration of sexual harassment and abuse in its institutions.[9]

The prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual violence in Jewish communities, right across different denominations, movements, and institutions, has become painfully apparent. And yet, as late as 2018, experts in the field of sexual abuse noted that "[t]here has been a paucity of research on the prevalence of sexual abuse among Jews" (Rosmarin et al., 2018: 22).[10] Indeed, despite at least four decades of headlines filled with reports of shocking tolerance for sexual misconduct on the part of Jewish leaders, communal and institutional discussion of this phenomenon has lagged behind those taking place in Christian circles (Zucker, 2005: 66).[11] In 2023 and 2024 alone, charges of sexual harassment and assault in every realm of Jewish life have proven that Jewish communal structures of all kinds continue to struggle with ensuring the safety of children and adults. Accountability remains elusive even when seemingly powerful codes of conduct are in place.[12]

Addressing sexual assault and sexual harassment in Jewish settings has been confounded by a plethora of misogynistic and patriarchal readings of *halakha* (rabbinic law).[13] Increasingly, Jewish leaders have worked towards reframing such law to focus on the acknowledgement and protection of victims and on holding perpetrators accountable. Nevertheless, such efforts are still in their infancy. In addition, basing institutional change on rabbinic law assumes that such law underpins all Jewish communal life and will work as a foundation for establishing Jewish norms in the first place. Jewish communities worldwide are highly diverse, however, and not all manifestations of Judaism are grounded in rabbinic textual traditions (see Thiede, 2019).[14] For most American Jews, however, and for many other Jewish communities worldwide, framing communal problems or challenges according to rabbinic law provides a way to ground policy in what are widely assumed to be ethical traditions. Even American Jews who do not live according to halakhic practice and observance generally accept the premise that rabbinic law provides guidelines for discussion and implementation of righteous behaviour, reflecting what are loosely termed "Jewish values."[15]

For this reason, the discussion that follows will first explore historic deficits both in the halakhic system itself, as well as in past uses of rabbinic law to respond to and address sexual harassment and abuse. It will describe the reframing of *halakha* that is now part of current American Jewish efforts to

resist and combat sexual abuse. Finally, it will demonstrate how a few representative Jewish organisations are relying on rabbinic law to safeguard members of American Jewish communities, regardless of denomination or movement.

There are important caveats for the discussion of sexual harassment and abuse in Jewish settings. First, there is no such definable, discrete thing as "Judaism," though there are manifold expressions of Jewish tradition, culture, and religious life. These are so diverse that making any claims about "what Jews do" is an exercise in futility. Jews have built diverse communities in far-flung parts of the globe.[16] The subject of this chapter, American Judaism, is itself hardly monolithic. At the same time, American Judaism remains dominated by white Jews, though the number of Jews of colour is rising.[17] As the largest Jewish community outside Israel, American Jews are among the best-known and best-researched Jewish communities in the world. They have often served as a source for claims about the nature of Judaism as a whole. Although antisemitism remains a part of life in North America, American Jews live in a safer world than many other Jews. Most American Jews are enthusiastic participants in American culture and benefit accordingly. American Judaism is privileged.

Second, while religious traditions of all kinds include prohibitions against sexual misconduct, indications are that rates of sexual abuse are similar in religious communities as in the wider population. While gathering data on this is particularly difficult, there is evidence that sexual abuse and sexual harassment pervade religious (and secular) systems in every part of the world. Rates of sexual harassment and sexual abuse in American Jewish religious life appear to be roughly equivalent to US national norms (Rosmarin et al., 2018: 26). It is also certain that instances are underreported; victims routinely face pressure (internal and external) to keep silent about their abuse.

Finally, it is critical to acknowledge and dispel supersessionist stereotypes that have operated for centuries, particularly regarding Jewish sacred texts. The Hebrew Bible, Talmud, and other Jewish texts do not support the conclusion that Judaism is particularly prone to valourising sexual violence. Numerous religious traditions include texts that depict or suggest sexual violence, and when such violence takes place in religious spaces (be these homes, places of religious instruction and worship, or religiously overseen institutions), it is widely excused, suppressed, ignored, mitigated, and explained away by leaders, adherents, and scholars alike. Systemic conditions may reveal particular challenges for each religious tradition, but one challenge is shared across the board: sexual molestation, sexual harassment, and sexual assault are far from being eradicated.[18] We are only beginning to confront how systemic sexual violence affects every major religious tradition (Stiebert, 2022).

For all these caveats, there are particular features that govern Jewish institutional and communal life and affect attempts to resist and combat sexual abuse. Unlike, for example, the Catholic Church, Jewish institutions, and

communities are not governed by any central authority.[19] In fact, Jewish religious communities often lack hierarchical structures responsible for ensuring ethical standards, for providing oversight of religious and secular leaders, and for ensuring accountability for misuse of power.[20] Rabbis are employed by, and are accountable to, individual congregations and boards. As presumed experts in Jewish law, rabbis are charged with maintaining ethical standards and norms; yet if they themselves are abusers, many safeguarding mechanisms are rendered completely ineffective. Consequently, complaints of sexual misconduct are often silenced or read as individual cases of bad behaviour, rather than as symptoms of systemic dysfunctions or catalysts for creating meaningful codes of conduct and protection. Such remain largely localised enterprises.

Halakha as hindrance: When (male) Jewish law mitigates and enables sexual violence

By no means all, but certainly the predominance of sexual violence is perpetrated by men against women and girls. Men and boys are also victims of sexual violence, and this is attested in Jewish contexts, too. Overwhelmingly, perpetrators of sexual violence are men, and this is in large part because men, including in Jewish contexts, are by far most often the ones who have the power and the agency that enable abuse and violence.[21] The impact of male dominance and control over the formation of *halakha* has, therefore, profoundly impacted Jewish life.

Since the early Middle Ages, rabbis have been considered the primary leaders of Jewish communities in Europe, and subsequently, also in the Americas, and in Southwest Asia. The rabbinate was a male-only affair until the twentieth century.[22] For many centuries, the education of rabbis rested primarily on the mastery of Jewish law. Even today, most seminaries assume that their rabbinic students should devote much (or even most) of their time becoming acquainted with, understanding, and demonstrating proficiency in *halakha*. Rabbinic law, even when it no longer provides a template for daily practice for most American Jews, is nevertheless revered and respected as a source for establishing moral and ethical norms.

The very foundations of *halakha* are, however, based on male perspectives. The misogynistic and patriarchal assumptions behind much Jewish law have been well documented.[23] Rabbinic literature understands the world in binary terms. The Talmud acknowledges that it is difficult to assign some individuals a male or female identity;[24] it nevertheless attempts to do so (Lavee, 2018). Rabbinic literature is male-centric, discussing the doings of biblical male characters at length while rarely mentioning biblical women.[25] Women are described as a "separate people" (BT Shabbat 62a) and appear, as Charlotte Fonrobert writes, "only on the receiving end of rabbinic discourse, rather than as participants in creating the discourse" (2000: 7). Talmudic rabbis

use women's bodies "to think with" when they address halakhic questions, and their contests for power are "carried out across the discursive bodies of women" (Boyarin, 2000: 45). Eve, the mother of all women, is tainted by evil from birth and brings death into the world; she and all of her daughters provoke lust and must be controlled. A critical purpose for *halakha* is to impose such controls (Thiede, 2023). Describing women as the cause for whatever sexual aggression males may display has caused untold suffering for centuries.

Rabbinic discussions of same-sex relations are also fraught with troubling commentary. According to Genesis Raba 26:5, men engaging in sexual relations with men or with beasts explains both God's wholesale destruction of humanity in the flood and ongoing indiscriminate destruction in the world. And finally, rabbinic texts shockingly mitigate, excuse, and even tolerate the sexual assault of minors, both male and female (see BT Ketubbot 11b; Niddah 45a).[26] Rabbinic texts are the outcome of the hegemonic masculine system in which cisgender heteronormative men write for men with male concerns. The normative Jew is a male one, and women are valued most for the capacity to produce more male Jews but, apparently, for little else.

American Jewish seminaries have done little to confront and rectify the dominance of cisgender male voices as authorities for what counts as Jewish. Moreover, modern rabbis are rarely offered significant training in pastoral care, much less in the subtle and dangerous use of power that lies behind sexual abuse, power that is historically – certainly in Jewish history – wielded by men. Though clergy are mandated to report abuse in many states, rabbis and cantors are not always aware of their responsibilities in this regard (Blau, 2017: 51). Yet, as authorities who are supposed to be experts in Jewish law, which itself is understood by most American Jews as the ethical foundation for Jewish life, rabbis are frequently in charge (though not always well trained or prepared) when an allegation of sexual harm is made. But sometimes, they are the perpetrators, too.

A good part of the problem is inherent in the rabbinic system. Past interpretation of Jewish law has frequently served to protect perpetrators of sexual abuse. For example, victims of sexual and other forms of abuse who report crimes to the police have been reminded within their community of the long-standing ban against one Jew reporting unethical conduct of another Jew to a non-rabbinic authority. *Mesira* (מסירה), which literally means "to hand over," is discussed in the Babylonian Talmud (Bava Kama 115b–117b) as well as in later texts of Jewish law.[27] According to the ban on *mesira*, one who reports a Jew to outside authorities is implicated as a traitor to the Jewish people. Although most rabbinic authorities will state that Judaism has no place for the protection of sexual predators, and even though this prohibition is understood in Jewish law to be inapplicable in the face of a clear public menace (Broyde, n.d.), Jewish leaders have used *mesira* as a weapon against sexual abuse *victims*. Such victims have been treated as threats to the community, while

abusers have been protected (Blau, 53; Brown, 87, Persky, 2013: 47). *Mesira* has served as an ideological weapon to intimidate witnesses, shun victims, and force out entire families whose members speak out about abuse they have endured.[28]

Another halakhic framework, one based on the concept of *lashon hara* (לשון הרע) "evil speech/tongue," has also been deployed to silence victims. *Lashon hara* is considered a serious transgression in Jewish tradition, one that violates a biblical mandate found in Leviticus 19:16, which prohibits ancient Israelites from acting as "talebearers" among their own people. Rabbis have also referred to Psalm 34:14 in their discussions of *lashon hara*. The Psalm reads: "guard your tongue from evil, your lips from deceitful speech." Rashi, the well-known Torah commentator, argues that Deuteronomy 27:24, which includes a curse on any Israelite who "strikes down his fellow countryman in secret," is a clear reference to *lashon hara*, since evil speech harms an individual without their knowledge.

Leaders of Jewish institutions have been known to refuse to hear complaints or allegations of sexual misconduct or abuse because they fear the effect of doing so on the person accused.[29] Those who call out Jewish leadership for their inaction are also accused of speaking *lashon hara* and even of creating a *ḥilul Hashem* (חילול השם), desecration of the name of God (Blau, 2017: 56). Invoking the dangers of *lashon hara* is hardly limited to any particular Jewish denominational setting as it often functions as a go-to technique for mitigating or excusing sexual harassment and sexual abuse.[30] But like the invocation of *mesira*, invoking *lashon hara* when victims have come forward has worked to silence them while protecting perpetrators.

A host of halakhic concerns and communal norms also contribute to conditions that make reporting sexual abuse particularly problematic for many Jewish children. National statistics suggest that one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused before the age of 18. Studies suggest that rates of abuse in Jewish communities are commensurate with such statistics (Rosmarin et al., 2018). These statistics are no secret; they are publicly available and part of an ongoing national discourse. In addition, the #MeToo movement has made clear the pervasive nature of sexual harassment and sexual abuse in American settings across the board – from schools, colleges, and universities, to businesses of every possible kind, whether blue or white collar, to the entertainment industry and to legal, political, and governmental settings. Nevertheless, Jewish institutions are reluctant to broach this topic, much less address it (Berkovits, 2017: 40).

In part, this reluctance is due to the cultural value prized in many Jewish communities, that of *tsniut* (צניעות), "modesty." *Tsniut* refers to a set of laws that address the issue of modesty in both appearance and behaviour. Talmudic laws that enjoin discretion have given rise to a host of detailed legal prescriptions – particularly valued in Orthodox Judaism – regarding how much skin may be exposed and how to dress. But other Jewish denominational settings

also include expectations of modest dress, particularly in synagogue settings and most especially for those called to read Torah or to pronounce the blessing over readings.[31]

Laws regarding modesty and privacy have contributed to an atmosphere in some Jewish communities in which education on the body and bodily functions is discouraged.[32] As Shira Berkovits has noted, "In combating sexual abuse, Jewish institutions must find a way to uphold the important value of *tsniut* while speaking about these issues directly" (2017: 41). Children who are repeatedly reminded of the value of "modesty" and "privacy" may receive the signal that certain topics are permitted, and others are not, making it harder (if not impossible) to identify and name violations against their bodies.

Finally, Jewish communities and institutions often rely on the use of *teshuva* (תשובה), "atonement/return" as a vehicle for dealing with sexual transgression.[33] Trusting in *teshuva* has, however, frequently worked to avoid imposing consequences and accountability for sexual harassment or sexual abuse. As David Zucker notes, "[t]he cruelest and most disastrous choice is to forgive and forget. It excuses evil and offers no resolution to the victims" (2005: 74). Nevertheless, Jewish institutions are, like most, notably inclined to seek resolution through the restoration of communal peace,[34] assumed to be achievable through acknowledgement of sin (not necessarily public![35]) and promises of change.

Rabbinic leaders are hardly experts when it comes to establishing whether a sex offender has been "cured," but they are, ironically, the very authorities that communities rely on for establishing boundaries in the communities they serve. It is often the rabbi who declares whether a penitent is sincere. Similarly, those involved in ethics cases establish what treatment an offender must undergo without any actual expertise in the field.[36] Most importantly, even heartfelt and true repentance should not *ever* serve as an automatic guarantee that an offender has earned the right to participate in Jewish communal life. Nevertheless, Jewish institutions and their leaders often find it difficult to imagine that exclusion from community can or should be a necessary consequence of sexually abusive behaviours. Misguided confidence in *teshuva* can lead to repeated abuse, sometimes in the same community. The fear of publicity and lawsuits, of course, must be factored into the reliance on *teshuva* as a medium for dealing with sexual harassment and abuse (Blau, 2017: 57; Berkovits, 2017: 32–35). Reliance on *teshuva*, however, assumes that the act of repentance constitutes accountability.

A majority of American Jews identify as descendants from Jews of Europe (Pew report). For about ten centuries, such Jews have mostly assumed that rabbinic law, *halakha,* provides guidelines for both personal and communal behaviour. Indeed, it continues to provide the context for the framing of conversations regarding ethics. But, given the historical dominance of cisgender heterosexual men in, and the inherently misogynistic foundations

of rabbinic law, as well as the long-standing interpretations of halakhic questions that silence victims and protect perpetrators, the need to revisit halakhic concepts and strictures in the light of what we now know about widespread and pernicious sexual harassment and sexual abuse in Jewish contexts has become obvious and urgent to many American Jews, including to me.

Revisiting *halakha*: American Jews seeking a new foundation

Rabbinic tradition relies on the assumption that *halakha* is a *process.* Talmud famously eschews the pronouncement of a "last word," preferring to present conversation, discussion, and argument among rabbinic authorities. Multiple outcomes of any given conversation are frequently described without any conclusive or definitive decision. Moreover, rabbinic literature, like biblical literature, is multivalent. Its cryptic nature and oblique references permit divergent outcomes and interpretations. Given the value American Jews continue to place on *halakha,* the dexterity of *halakha,* and the tradition of revisiting and reinterpreting *halakhic* concepts, it is not surprising that American Jewish leaders have seen rabbinic law as a go-to in their attempts to ground institutional responses to sexual harassment and abuse. Rereading Jewish law in ways that serve a changing world and further expand the "tent" are hardly new.[37] Feminist Jewish leaders as well as Queer ones have been engaged in such attempts for many decades (Plaskow, 1990: 60–64; Greenberg, 2004).[38] American Jewish leaders are now relying on the same technique to come to grips with the dangers of sexual harassment and sexual abuse in their midst.

Thus, recasting a long-standing tendency to express more concern for those accused of abuse and for known abusers than for victims as the "true *ḥilul Hashem*" reestablishes a *halakhic* mandate as the foundation for *protecting* the community (Brofsky, 2017: 60).[39] Similarly, extensive exploration of the rabbinic literature on *lashon hara* leads to the conclusion that there is no prohibition of *lashon hara* on reporting sexual abuse and *mesira* (Brofsky, 2017: 60–77).[40] The Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), one of the world's largest organisations of Orthodox rabbis and the primary rabbinical association for modern Orthodox American communities, has concluded that "any individual with firsthand knowledge or reasonable basis to suspect child abuse has a religious obligation to promptly notify the secular law enforcement of that information" (quoted in Brofsky, 2018).

A number of Jewish institutions and Jewish leaders have participated in this effort to reframe the very *halakhic* ideas that have been used to silence victims or to mitigate sexual abuse. At times, the victims themselves

are demanding change. Julie Guilfoyle, a therapist specialising in abuse and trauma and a well-known victim advocate and activist, writes:

> Must we, the victims, educate rabbis on the meaning of T'Shuvah[41]? It is hard to educate when the lines of communication are so firmly closed. What happened to their promises of listening to victims, transparency, and T'Shuvah? T'Shuvah requires more than elaborate grandiose statements of remorse while under public scrutiny. T'Shuvah requires listening to victims, introspection, changing harmful policies, and restitution (2024).

Jewish Community Watch (JCW) was formed in order to combat *halakhic* constraints against reporting sexual abuse. JCW names and exposes perpetrators by publicly identifying offenders with pictures and information on its "Wall of Shame." The JCW's homepage also directs readers to its page on *halakha.* The page attempts to reframe rabbinic law that has traditionally worked on behalf of perpetrators so that it can be actively deployed by victims as a foundation for their resistance and activism (see JCW).

Za'akah, another organisation specifically designed to address sexual abuse in Orthodox communities, was founded in 2012. Its director, Asher Lovy, himself a survivor of sexual abuse, has noted that victims and their families are often pressured into silence and threatened with unemployment, eviction, expulsion of their children from yeshiva, and with declaring them ineligible for marriage (Lovy, 2022). Za'akah dedicates its energy, therefore, to combating and raising awareness of child sexual abuse, helping parents spot signs of sexual abuse, and helping pass legislative reforms that help victims in their efforts to secure justice. Za'akah publicly protests communal coverups of child sexual abuse, organises educational events for parents and teachers, and helps find resources for victims. The organisation does not entirely limit its outreach and education to Orthodox communities; however, its website includes links to news stories of sexual abuse across the Jewish denominational spectrum (see Za'akah).

Notably, one of the most expansive organisations dedicated to prevention and response to sexual abuse across denominational settings, Sacred Spaces, also relies on revisiting and reinterpreting *halakha* as part of its work.[42] This approach was generated by a question asked at the very founding of the organisation: "What does our Jewish tradition have to say about the problem of and the solution to institutional abuse?"[43] To answer this question, the institution also makes available a collection of short essays from across Jewish denominations which use *halakhic* texts to examine how sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and other institutional abuses of power can be prevented or, once they occur, how Jewish leaders should respond. "Respect and Responsibility: A Jewish Ethics Study Guide" features essays, sermons, and even prayers grounded in Jewish texts. These include questions for consideration and discussion as well as *halakhic* analysis; their authors include survivors,

ethicists, psychologists, trauma specialists, and academics. Many authors are also rabbinic leaders. Topics are wide ranging. They include, for example, exploring *yichud*,[44] including in cases when two adults meet alone in the workplace, as well as Talmudic texts which can be read as relevant to the issue of consent, and the commandment of *tokhecha*, or rebuke, and its role in combatting indifference or inactive bystanding. The collection relies on Jewish textual tradition to elicit discussion on ethical leadership and responding to abuse. Sacred Spaces operates, then, on the premise that each of its many initiatives can be grounded in Jewish textual tradition as a source of "Jewish values."

Conclusion

For American Jews, *halakha* remains foundational to efforts to resist and combat sexual harassment and abuse. Despite the fact that rabbinic law is a male product, often premised on toxic hegemonic assumptions, Jews in North America (and elsewhere) remain convinced that it can also be revisited, reframed, and reused to establish safe communities where no one – child or adult – will be subject to sexual violence or abuses of any kind. Indeed, it is fair to say that rabbinic law both admits and even calls for adjustment to contemporary needs in every generation, from issues of fertility to gender expression. After all, rabbis are expected to be able to address the implications of *halakha* for all manner of modern concerns.

Still, it is significant that efforts to address, resist, and combat sexual harassment and abuse through *halakhic* and textual study often fail to acknowledge either the history or the limitations of rabbinic literature. Written by and for men, such texts traditionally assume binary views of the world and imagine the normative Jew as a cisgender, heterosexual male. While critical approaches and rereadings of rabbinic law can certainly help establish "Jewish values" that undergird Jewish efforts to combat sexual harassment and abuse, *halakha* does not comprise the whole of Jewish wisdom and teaching. Jewish leaders of all denominations and gender identities have yet to emphasise the rich textual traditions that belong, for example, to Jewish women's history or Queer history (e.g. Umansky and Ashton, 2009; Sienna, 2019). That literature – encompassing everything from ethical wills to personal correspondence, from poetry to first-person accounts – could also provide sources for naming the pervasive and toxic influences of a hegemonic male system and the sexual abuse it has tolerated and enabled for many centuries. The veneration and privileging of *halakha* as a source for combatting sexual abuse should be tempered by the awareness not only of its limitations, but also of the minority voices Jewish leadership has not yet considered or fully integrated into its work of resistance. These voices are authorities, too.

Notes

1 Transliterated Hebrew for "me, too," #GamAni is a closed forum Facebook group dedicated to creating a safe space for disclosing and sharing personal experiences, particularly harassment or abuse within Jewish communal organisations.
2 These included the Conservative Jewish movement, as represented by the Rabbinical Assembly, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Women's League for Conservative Judaism, Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs, North American Association of Synagogue Executives, Cantors Assembly, Masorti Foundation, Schechter Institutes, Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, the Ramah Camping Movement, and the Jewish Theological Seminary.
3 A yeshiva (plural: yeshivot) is an Orthodox Jewish college or seminary, or a traditional Jewish educational institution. The primary focus of yeshiva study is rabbinic literature (the Talmud), with Torah and Jewish philosophy studied in parallel.
4 Post-denominational (or trans-denominational) and non-denominational Jewish movements are organised Jewish groups that evolved throughout the mid-20th and early 21st centuries to meet the needs and demands of Jews seeking community outside of the main denominational movements (i.e. Orthodox, Conservative and Reform denominations).
5 Jewish Renewal refers to a movement originating in the 20th century, which strives to reinvigorate modern Judaism with ancient traditions, such as those of mysticism (Kabbalah, Hasidic practices) and including musical traditions and ecstatic prayer.
6 Reconstructionist Judaism is recognised as a distinct Jewish movement. Its foundation lies in concepts developed by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, which view Judaism as not only a religion but as also a progressively evolving civilisation. Reconstructionist Judaism emerged first as a semi-organised strand within Conservative Judaism but now stands separately.
7 Several news outlets also quoted a subsequent email to Art Green informing him of the ban. The email, according to news outlets, mentioned "conduct by you in a recent interaction with an individual in Israel" and described that interaction as "concerningly similar" to the previous report of sexual misconduct.
8 In 2004, Gary Rosenblatt, editor and publisher of *The Jewish Week*, interviewed three women, who were aged 13, 16, and 22 when, they alleged, Gafni assaulted them. Rosenblatt consulted the leader of Jewish Renewal, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. Rosenblatt wrote: "Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the acknowledged leader of the Renewal movement, said he is aware of the allegations against Rabbi Gafni but supports him. 'If you want to find fly specks in the pepper, you can always find them,' Reb Schachter-Shalomi said. 'But I've watched him teach. He is learned, exciting and charismatic. A good teacher is one who gets people excited'" (Rosenblatt, 2004). Arthur Waskow, a leading light in Jewish Renewal circles, and head of the Shalom Center, noted how Jewish Renewal had made a home for Gafni in an extensive note to the Center's email list in May 2006 (Waskow, 2006). Merson Law announced that it was representing a client in a 2020 lawsuit against Gafni, under New York's Child Victims Act (Merson Law, 2006). Gafni was also named in a suit brought against Yeshiva University under the 2019 Child Victims Act (Feldman, 2019).
9 In response to a public "Call for Action" from former students and members of the Jewish Renewal movement to address sexual harassment and abuse in Jewish Renewal institutions, Ohalah, the umbrella organisation for Jewish Renewal clergy, has begun engaging in a rewrite of its ethics code, with help from Sacred Spaces. I was among those who composed and distributed this call on Jewish Renewal listserves on 31 August 2023.

10 Rachel Lev's 2003 *Shine the Light: Sexual Abuse and Healing in the Jewish Community* provided an early effort to address sexual abuse: the book combines personal and anecdotal accounts of abuse with scholarly articles that treat Jewish law.
11 Zucker argues that the Reform movement was the first to begin addressing sexual harassment through holding symposia, issuing relevant publications, and posting documents on sexual ethics posted on the North American Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) website (2005: 77, n. 4 and 5).
12 Rabbi Jeremy Scher states that his own experience in filing an ethics case under Reconstructionist guidelines taught him that despite possessing a powerful code of ethics, the actual conduct of those who oversaw his case was highly problematic. (Interview with the author, 29 August 2024).
13 *Halakha* (literally, "the way to walk") is often translated "Jewish law," but is better understood as the correct way to behave. It is derived from rabbinic texts, notably the Talmud.
14 It is also notable that the Reform movement's report on sexual abuse in the movement does not mention *halakha* while making continual reference to American law (Hogan and Sherno, 2022).
15 E.g. Zucker notes that "there is a strong predilection to seek guidance from traditional Jewish texts, notably the Talmud and other rabbinic sources" (2005: 73).
16 To give just one sampling of Jewish diversity, China's Kaifeng Jewish community survived and prospered for nearly eight centuries, making it one of the longest-established Jewish communities in the historical record. Kaifeng Jews did not rely on rabbinic texts for their governance, though they appear to have integrated Confucian ideas in their practice (Leslie, 2000).
17 A recent Pew Report (11 May 2021) put the number of Jews of Colour as high as 15% while noting that the survey did not use this nomenclature in its study. The Jews of Color Initiative has argued that the community has been chronically undercounted because of badly constructed studies on the subject (Shalev, 2021).
18 One early and very poignant chapter on sexual abuse within Jewish spaces is by Ursula Katan. Katan acknowledges a tendency for American Jews readily to see themselves as victims but not perpetrators of violence, as well as a fear that disclosure of abuse will feed antisemitism (2001: 155–58).
19 Survivor Asher Lovy, who also directs Za'akah, an organisation dedicated to combating child sexual abuse in the Orthodox world, writes: "Orthodoxy is much more decentralized than Southern Baptism, or even Reform or Conservative Judaism" (2022).
20 Israel is something of an exception due to the existence of its Chief Rabbinate, but even here there is no real comparison with the hierarchical structure, influence, and power wielded by the Catholic Church.
21 The Judaism chapter in the companion volume cites an instance of sexual abuse perpetrated by a woman with power and authority (Percival, 2023). While examples of female perpetrators of sexual violence are acutely rare when compared with examples of male perpetrators, they are just as abhorrent and capable of inflicting profound trauma and other forms of harm.
22 The first female rabbi ever to be ordained was Regina Jonas of Berlin, in 1935. The United States Reform movement ordained its first female rabbi in 1972, the Reconstructionist movement in 1974, and the Conservative movement in 1985. The Orthodox movement does not officially accept women in its rabbinate.
23 The scholarly literature is too vast to summarise here, but for a classic treatment, see Boyarin (1993) and Baskin (2002).
24 The Talmud includes discussion of the *androgynus* (אנדרוגינוס) who appears to have both male and female genitalia, as well as of the *tumtum* (טומטום), an individual in whom neither male nor female genitalia can be discerned (BT Bikkurim 4:1–5; Yevamot 82a–84).

25 As Cecilia Haendler notes, the Mishnah, which discusses 69 biblical men, mentions only five significant biblical women (2022: 167). She writes that "the Mishnah almost never thinks of biblical women as relevant and pertinent examples for its rulings and discourse" (2022: 174).
26 This text, which permits an adult male to penetrate a three-year-old, is notorious, and no effort should be made to excuse it. Likewise, rabbinic texts that, for example, punish an adult male for penetrating a male over nine years of age but remain silent about the penetration of boys under the age of nine (Tosefta Sanhedrin 10:1) cannot be excused or explained away.
27 See Maimonides Hilkhot Hovel u-Mazzik 8:9–11 and the Shulchan Aruch, Hoshen Mishpat 388:9.
28 A particularly brutal use of *mesira* to silence victims was a feature of the efforts to cover up child sexual abuse in the exclusive Melbourne boys' school, Yeshiva College. Secret tape recordings and emails demonstrate that members of Australia's Orthodox Jewish community who had assisted police investigations were pressured to remain silent. One victim's father, Zephania Waks, stated that he was told that if he went to the police about the sexual abuse of his son he would be in breach of the Jewish principle of *mesira* (Baker and McKenzie, 2015; Cowie, 2016). Waks' son, Manny Waks, wrote in his memoir that he and his family had been ostracised by the community and subjected to a campaign of abuse, intimidation, and threats (Waks, 2016: 130–33). See also the account of Jewish incest survivor Katan who writes, "I lost many of my Jewish friends when I first began speaking of my abuse. I still have not confronted my father or my grandfather, because I know this will mean losing my connection to the rest of my family. The Jewish community never talks about the violence that our own people are capable of ... especially if the violence is toward one of our own" (2001: 158).
29 For a brief discussion which demonstrates how some rabbis must keep clarifying the limitations of applying either *mesira* or *lashon hara* in cases of abuse, see Brofsky (2018).
30 In 2019, Rabbi Robert Tabak, a chaplain who has served on ethics committees both for the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association and for Neshama: Association of Jewish Chaplains, pointed out that male Jewish leaders have relied on invoking *lashon hara* "to silence reports of harassment, misconduct, and abuse." He also noted that the famous American Jewish author Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, who had recently revised his book *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal: How the Words that You Choose Shape Your Destiny,* nevertheless continued to focus on the potential "harm or humiliation" to an alleged perpetrator rather than on foregrounding victims (2019).
31 As a cisgender female rabbinical student in the self-proclaimed "progressive" Jewish Renewal ALEPH Ordination Program, I was cautioned to wear high-necked clothing when called to Torah and modest dress in every other circumstance. Women who did not dress according to the administrative authorities were not only cautioned, but criticised for immodesty.
32 This is particularly, though not exclusively, a concern in Orthodox communities (Gemara et al., 2024).
33 In part, as Zucker notes, this is part and parcel of the effort to seek guidance from traditional Jewish texts. Relying on *teshuva* is a way "to frame the 'rehabilitation' of the offender/perpetrator in terms of traditional forms of Jewish repentance" (2005: 73). He goes on to note, however, that the reality is likely that most perpetrators cannot be permanently rehabilitated (2005: 74).
34 As Blau notes in regard to Orthodox Judaism, "preserving the institution and people's jobs are perceived to be the primary concern" (2017: 53). Those are primary concerns in other denominational settings as well.

35 The Talmud includes texts that argue that rabbinic infractions should be dealt with privately in order to protect the dignity of the rabbinate: the rabbi in question should repent, and whatever consequences or punishments are invoked should remain private (BT Menahot 99b; Hagiga 15b). Other Talmudic texts argue that if a rabbi engages in heresy, licentiousness, or *ḥilul hashem* (desecration of God's name), he must be held accountable in public (BT Mo'ed Katan 17a).
36 It is notable, for example, that those who sat on ethics committees for Ohalah, the Jewish Renewal clergy association, had not been required to have *any* training in responding to disclosures of sexual harassment or sexual abuse – up until a protest was organised and made public (see notes 5 and 8).
37 The expression to expand the tent is grounded in Isaiah 54:2 and pertains here to increasing the reach of Jewish life or *halakha.*
38 An early attempt to provide a reading of *halakha* that insists that Jewish law and tradition do not condone sexual abuse is Elliot Dorff's "Jewish Law and Tradition Regarding Sexual Abuse and Incest," (2005: 46–60).
39 Brofsky adds that "communal silence regarding physical and sexual abuse is itself a grave desecration of God's name, and brings shame upon the entire community… a healthy and morally upright community takes pride in revealing sexual abuse and protecting its members from further injury" (2017: 74).
40 Brofsky nevertheless acknowledges that despite explicit rulings by rabbinic authorities, rabbinic proclamations, and scholarly halakhic articles, "it appears that it is still necessary to offer a lengthy halachic justification for that which should be obvious: the Torah's command not to 'stand idly by the blood of your neighbor'dictates that the prohibitions of leshon ha-ra, and even informing, which are so deeply entrenched in the Jewish consciousness formed over thousands of years of exile, must be set aside in order to stop and prevent further abuse" (2017: 77). Note: "halachic" is a variant spelling of "halakhic."
41 *T'shuvah* is a variant spelling of *teshuva*.
42 Sacred Spaces is a national organisation providing assessment of organisational climate, practices, and governance in relation to prevention and response of abuses of power; guidance on developing and/or reviewing existing policies and protocols; training based on current research and best practices; and consultation to help understand and respond responsibly to incidents of misconduct, harassment, or abuse. Among its initiatives are *Aleinu: Safeguarding Our Children*, which aims to standardise policies and practices to ensure the safety of children in Jewish organisations, and *Keilim*, a policy toolkit to help organisations and communities draft values statements and policies.
43 Additional questions included asking what a systemic solution would look like, how to make such a solution unifying for communities, how to move from fear-based to proactive approaches, how to empower Jewish institutions to lead from within, and how to implement safeguards in Sacred Spaces to ensure its own ability to "remain above the fray" when taking on difficult work (personal communication, 11 September 2024).
44 *Yichud* pertains to laws of "prohibition of seclusion." In its traditional form, *Yichud* prohibits the seclusion in a private area of a man and a woman who are not married to each other. This hints both at heteronormative assumptions and at the known possibility of sexual abuse or exploitation. *Yichud* has expanded to include also other situations and preventative and safeguarding measures.

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2 Hinduism

Dynamic Resistance to Violence and Abuse: Examples from Hinduism

Elizabeth P. Motswapong and Siamisang Saudu

Referring to Hinduism as "a religion" – or even "an Indian religion" or set of Indian religious traditions – does not capture or do justice to the dizzying diversity and range of ancient and ever-developing practices and beliefs signified by this exonym. The Sanskrit word *dharma* and its various qualifications, such as *sanātana dharma* or *vaidika dharma* (see Olivelle, 2009), better capture some of the deep roots and layers of sanctity the designation signifies, including resonance with cosmic order and complex customs. While other religious traditions labelled "world religions" are also diverse, Hinduism perhaps especially so – because of its extraordinary antiquity and also because (unlike Islam or Judaism, for instance) Hinduism has no specific or unifying sacred texts, core beliefs, or practices. Given this situation, generalising about Hinduism is exceptionally difficult and problematic – even impossible. In the earlier chapter, our focus is on a form of spiritual abuse in Hinduism – namely, the sexual exploitation of Devadasis, who are girls and young women, who most often come from socio-economically vulnerable sectors, which raises for us questions concerning social and gender-based injustice. This, however, is just one element in the much bigger and variegated picture that is Hinduism or *dharma.* Yes, there is spiritual abuse in India and Indian religious contexts where Hinduism is dominant – but there is also resistance to spiritual abuse, as will be raised (albeit necessarily cursorily) here.

First, even while we stand by our case that the treatment of Devadasis constitutes an example of distinctively Hindu spiritual abuse, we have tried to nuance our earlier discussion. Hence, we raise such matters as the possibility that earlier forms of the Devadasi institution in particular may have offered rare opportunities for enhancing some women's status and education, as well as the argument that colonialism, rather than Hinduism (alone), contributed to much of the violence targeting Devadasis. We also point out the disjuncture between some practices and customs originating in Hinduism (such as the caste system and the institution of Devadasis) and civil law in India. Hence, it is important to stress that while human rights organisations, for instance,

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alert to the prevalence of gender-based and sexual violence against women and girls in India, India's constitution enshrines women's equality with men, and India's criminal law firmly penalises rape, harassment and other sexual violations (e.g. see Marathe, 2020).

Let us add to this a second set of tensions, namely, that India is *both* since its independence in 1947, a secular republic *and* also a setting where religion tends to be enmeshed in almost every aspect of life and living. Staying with the focus of our earlier chapter – namely, sexual violence against women and girls[1] – let us demonstrate this with the Nirbhaya case, which galvanised activism to protect women and girls against violence, in India and beyond. At the centre of the case is the gang-rape and consequent death of Jyoti Singh in late 2012. On account of India's laws, which prescribe the anonymity of victims of sexual crimes, Singh's name, prior to its public release, was the soubriquet Nirbhaya ("fearless"), which sought to proclaim and celebrate her courage and persistence in seeking justice right up until succumbing to her injuries. This case gained international attention and outrage and led to massive protests across India. Moreover, of the six perpetrators, four were executed[2] and a number of laws pertaining to sexual assault were hardened and fast-tracked. Notably, religion, including Hinduism, was part of the fabric of the response. Hence, one prominent protester to clash with police in the large demonstrations to follow the Nirbhaya case was yoga guru Baba Ramdev. Indeed, remarks of several politicians and religious leaders invoking religious and religio-nationalist ideals that served a number of aims – including, to mitigate the rapists' responsibility, to exonerate "traditional Hindu" ways of life, or to blame the victim – were quick to appear (see Brown and Agrawal, 2014). But the large protests also signify a considerable upsurge of resistance and outrage. Some of these protests – while perhaps isolated and fringe – show signs of originality and subversion: notably, the men's protest, which received widespread attention in national and international media, whereby men, in solidarity with women victim-blamed for what they wear, donned skirts in a protest labelled "don't skirt the issue" (e.g. Nelson, 2013).

As within other religious communities and contexts, therefore, in Hindu settings, too, there are examples not only of abuse and violence but of active, effective, and creative resistance to abuse and violence (see Barua, 2023).[3] We will focus next on one celebrated example, namely the *Abused Goddesses* campaign (see DasGupta, 2013; Vemuri, 2019) – another response to the Nirbhaya case. The pro-bono campaign was created by Mumbai-based advertisement firm Taproot India, with the aim of generating social impact. Ayesha Vemuri has called this "shockvertising" (2019) and, drawing on personal communication with Santosh Padhi, co-founder and Chief Creative Officer at Taproot, she explains how the 2013 campaign aimed to address violence against women, because this social problem was surfacing frequently and intensely in the media. The team behind the campaign settled on using Hindu goddesses Saraswati (goddess of knowledge), Lakshmi (goddess of wealth),

and Durga (goddess of power and strength), because of the disconnect they saw between, on the one hand, respect and reverence for female deities and, on the other, the widespread abusive treatment of women (see Vemuri, 2019). Padhi recounted seeing men peeing by the roadside and how "the minute you put a tile with a god's picture on it, they stop" because, when "you bring in the god angle, they get scared. So, we thought, why can't we do the same here?'" (cited in Vemuri, 2019).

The upshot were images of the goddesses familiar from calendar art and recreating "ancient Hindu paintings accurate to their last bejeweled crown and luscious lotus leaf" (DasGupta, 2013) – with the exception that each of the depictions shows the hallmarks of physical abuse: a black eye, a split lip, tears. The statement accompanying the images states, "Pray that we never see this day. Today, more than 68% of women in India are victims of domestic violence. Tomorrow, it seems like no woman shall be spared. Not even the ones we pray to." Prototypes of the images were rejected as too controversial by a number of women's rights groups first approached by Taproot, but when they did eventually come into circulation, their impact was prompt and considerable, with the campaign quickly going viral. Vemuri explains this through the campaign's "slick, beautiful execution…, combined with its use of a familiar and culturally relatable iconography" (2019). Many individuals and organisations, including some feminist ones (see DasGupta, 2013), hailed the campaign as powerful. Sayantani DasGupta (2013), who has gone on to criticise the campaign for glamourising violence,[4] as well as for facilitating and valorising female victimhood, and for smothering empathy by visualising gender-based violence without giving a clear course of action for its prevention, admits to feeling entranced when she first saw the images. She also praises Indian goddess images for their celebration of a beauty that isn't "blonde, blue-eyed Christie Brinkley look-alike" (2013).

Not only was the campaign slick and beautifully executed, its religious focus, even taboo or blasphemous impact, certainly added to its shock value, even titillation, and hence to the attention it received.[5] As Vemuri captures it well, the goddess images are "simultaneously familiar as well as unfamiliar or shocking" (2019). Nkoyo Edoho-Eket, similarly, refers to the images as each showing "a Goddess with mundane qualities rather than a woman with superhuman ones" (2019: 342), which again draws on the unfamiliar-familiar. Edoho-Eket also mentions the "lurid synthesis of religious imagery and violence" (2019: 342), once more evoking a sense of disjuncture and surprisingness.

We acknowledge the valid criticisms levelled at the *Abused Goddesses* campaign, which has proven to be both controversial and problematic. At its heart lies what Edoho-Eket calls "a novel and politically subversive use of devotional imagery" and we agree that this "remains one of the campaign's most lasting triumphs" (Edoho-Eket, 2019: 358). Hence, the images have not only rocked the wider public of India and communities well beyond (as is attested by its widespread resonance), it has cast, along with the buzz of shock it has generated,

a spotlight on violence against women. Shock is not – as Vemuri emphasises – enough as an end in and of itself: from shock, action to address and eliminate violence against women ought to ensue. But this striking and memorable campaign might be one catalyst to action and certainly a transparently Hindu example of resistance to violence and abuse, inclusive of spiritual abuse.

Notes

1 According to one report (which refers to the Nirbhaya case as a widely publicised case that may skew perceptions) rates of sexual violence against women and girls are relatively low in India when compared with the rest of the world (Raj and McDougal, 2014). Another poll, however, by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, concludes that India is the most dangerous place to be a woman. A report on this poll also makes reference to the impact of the Nirbhaya case (Goldsmith and Beresford, 2018).

2 One of the rapists died in police custody (possibly at his own hand, with some rumours suggesting murder) and one was a juvenile offender and received the maximum possible sentence but not the death penalty.

3 While Hindu religious traditions are dominant in India, Hinduism in India exists alongside many other religious traditions. A recent publication (Singh and Saxena, 2023) aims first, to construct a focus and lens centring religions in and of India, and second, to show the positive ways Indian religious and spiritual practices can impact psychological wellbeing. Emphasising the healing potential of religion and spirituality, and providing plenty of positive recommendations for wellbeing, the book nevertheless acknowledges that India has shown a decline in its place in the world happiness index.

4 Vemuri considers the violence not only glamourising, by eroticised (2019).

5 At the 2024 Olympic Games opening ceremony, a tableau starring drag artists, which invoked Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting "The Last Supper," gave rise to outcries that deemed the tableau disrespectful, tasteless, and even blasphemous. Some protestors even called for a boycott of the Olympic Games. The *Abused Goddesses* images, meanwhile, which show deities in ways that invoke brutalised women, also gave rise to shock, as well as to some outrage.

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3a Christianity

Accompanying Survivors of Sexual Harm: Responses, Activism, and Resistance to Sexual Harm within Christian Contexts

Emily Colgan and David Tombs

Going beyond tokenism

Awareness of the prevalence of sexual harm in churches has increased significantly in recent decades. Revelations of sexual abuses by clergy, and movements like #MeToo and #ChurchToo, have raised challenging questions over how churches and faith groups have confronted issues of sexual harm in the past and how they might address them better in the future. Historically, many church responses to sexual harm have been superficial and over-reliant on a simplistic moral approach. Too often, churches have been more concerned with protecting their reputation than in attending to sexual harm. Abuses have been covered up or minimised. Often responses have condemned sexual abuses in tokenistic terms, but not gone beyond this; and so, very little changes. Survivors are frequently blamed or silenced, and even when sympathy for survivors is expressed, the deeper problems and underlying attitudes are left unexamined.

Churches need to go beyond a simplistic moral response to sexual harm. It is not enough to say that sexual harm goes against church teaching and should not happen. It is not even enough to name sexual harm as often a criminal act as well as a sin. Attention needs to be given to both the agency of individuals and to more systemic dynamics that shape and constrain social behaviour, including how religion can contribute to unhelpful attitudes to power, gender inequality, and sexual entitlement.

The importance of power differences and gender inequality for any meaningful understanding of gender-based violence has now been a primary concern of feminist thought for over 50 years. Classic works of the 1970s and 1980s, such as Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* (1975) and Liz Kelly's *Surviving Sexual Violence* (1988), show why any discussion of sexual harm without attention to power and gender inequality is inadequate and inappropriate. This message is very relevant, too, where religion is concerned, as

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religious teachings and authority often support patriarchal attitudes to gender inequality and sexual entitlement that encourage and excuse sexual harm.[1]

Elisabet Le Roux and Sandra Pertek (2023) examine the significance of religion as a factor in violence against women and girls in two faith traditions, Christianity and Islam. They show how religious teachings and practices often contribute to the problem of sexual harm, yet on the other hand, religious communities are well placed to contribute to constructive responses. Their work reinforces insights offered by scholars like Scott Appleby (2000) on the ambivalence of religion in relation to violence. Appleby argues that it cannot be assumed that religion will *always* be benign, but at the same time, religion is too important to ignore or dismiss as *always* negative. Le Roux and Pertek explain how attention to power and social inequalities must be included if religion is to help address gender-based violence and be part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

Various Christian churches have taken up the challenge of being part of the solution in different ways. One example is the Thursdays in Black campaign supported by the World Council of Churches. This initiative encourages people to dress in black on Thursdays as a visual testimony of concern for sexual and gender-based violence. It also provides educational resources to help churches respond to sexual and gender-based violence.[2] Another impressive activist initiative is the SASA! Project. The project originated in Uganda through the organisation Raising Voices. *Sasa* is a Kiswahili word that means "now." Its attention to gender-based violence developed through HIV/AIDS work. The project explains:

> Violence against women is both a cause and consequence of HIV infection. For many women, the violence they experience leads to HIV infection. For others, their HIV positive status brings violence. The root cause of this problem is the imbalance of power in relationships between women and men, girls and boys.
>
> (SASA!)

By emphasising systemic issues and power, including with attention to dynamics in religious communities and structures, SASA! offers a much deeper analysis of both HIV-AIDS and gender-based violence, and the connections between the two. With support from Irish Aid, and the Catholic aid organisation Trocaire, SASA! has been further developed and adopted in other countries as well.[3]

In a similar way, the faith-based relief organisation Tearfund found that its work on HIV/AIDS required closer attention to gender violence, and therefore more attention to power and inequality. This prompted Tearfund to commit to new projects that address sexual and gender-based violence as part of its work in aid and development. And this, in turn, led to a sequence of groundbreaking reports on sexual harm (Tearfund, 2011, 2013, 2015).

Attention to power dynamics in biblical texts has also been central to the work of the Ujamaa Centre in South Africa.[4] Ujamaa is well known for contextual Bible study (CBS) which offers intersectional analysis that connects political, economic, and gender issues.[5] CBS helps community groups explore transformative readings of the Bible, and how different forms of power might shape the interpretation of biblical texts in different ways. The Ujamaa approach has been influential in many contexts outside South Africa, including in Aotearoa New Zealand, as discussed in the case study below.

Case Study – *Accompanying Survivors of Sexual Harm: A Toolkit for Churches*[6]

Accompanying Survivors of Sexual Harm: A Toolkit for Churches is the collaborative effort of seven academics,[7] all of whom work broadly at the intersection of sexual harm and Christian faith traditions in Aotearoa New Zealand. Through their work in this area, they became aware of an urgent need for a trauma-informed resource that is attentive to power dynamics and offers education and support for Christian clergy and lay leaders as they respond to sexual harm in their communities.

The resource functions as a handbook to help facilitators lead educative workshops on appropriate responses to the issue of sexual harm. It aims to educate clergy and lay leaders about:

- Understanding the nature of sexual harm and its prevalence in New Zealand society.
- Being alert to and responding in a pastorally sensitive manner to people within their community who have experienced/are experiencing sexual harm.
- Identifying and articulating some of the scriptural and theological foundations that work to justify, legitimise, and enable sexual harm while silencing the voices of victims/survivors.
- Identifying and articulating some of the scriptural and theological foundations that work to challenge and resist sexual harm.
- Exploring how their church might work to create a safe space for victims/survivors of sexual harm.

The toolkit takes a workshop format, with each chapter including information and questions that the facilitator can present to a group, as well as additional notes and suggestions that the facilitator may want to draw on when leading a discussion and responding to participants. Facilitators are also encouraged to include additional questions and discussion points that they feel will be meaningful in the light of group members' contexts, cultures, traditions, and language. What follows is a brief outline of the toolkit's content.

The first two chapters "set the scene" by offering facilitators basic, practical advice about running the sessions and giving a broad overview of how to understand and support survivors of sexual harm. Chapter 1 includes information on the use of language relating to sexual harm, current statistics around sexual harm, rape myths and the ways in which society perpetuates sexual harm, including the role of churches in sustaining sexual harm. Chapter 2 offers insights into trauma, outlines common responses to sexual harm, discusses appropriate ways to respond to disclosures of sexual harm (and what to avoid), and provides information about supporting survivors.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore the issue of sexual harm by drawing on resources from within the Christian tradition: the Bible and theology. Within the Bible, there is an abundance of traditions that bear witness to the pervasiveness of sexual harm in the biblical world; these have the potential to validate or sanction damaging ideas and attitudes towards sexual harm in contemporary communities. But the fact that the Bible *does* depict sexual harm can also empower people to talk openly about this issue. As sacred scripture, the Bible can break the silence around sexual harm, offering a point of entry for discussions around contemporary instances of sexual harm. Thus, Chapter 3 offers four Bible studies:

- 2 Samuel 13:1–22 (the story of Amnon's rape of Tamar), which encourages participants to explore how sexual harm impacts victims, some of the common myths and misperceptions about sexual harm, and the role of bystanders and enablers of sexual harm.
- 2 Samuel 15–20 (the story of Absalom's rape of David's wives), which considers "secondary victimisation," referring to the trauma experienced by victims of sexual harm resulting from others' subsequent responses to them.
- Matthew 27:26–31 (recounting the humiliations of Jesus), which raises sensitive and challenging questions about Jesus as a victim of sexual harm.
- 1 Peter 3:1–7 (instructions on women's submission), which focuses on coercive control (patterns of controlling behaviours that create an unequal power dynamic in a relationship) and purity culture (gender expectations underpinned by a strict, stereotype-based binary) specifically within the context of marriage.

Chapter 4 considers how the church's theological teachings can impact efforts to accompany and support survivors of sexual harm. The three theological issues discussed in this chapter are atonement, forgiveness, and sacrifice. These were chosen because they can have a significant impact on how sexual harm survivors are treated in faith communities. These theologies have and continue to be used by faith communities in ways that cause additional trauma to survivors of sexual harm. All three of these theologies have served

to silence survivors' voices and to minimise or excuse perpetrators' abusive behaviour.

- Theologies of atonement and sacrifice have been used to encourage victims and survivors to understand their victimisation as a sacred or atoning event (a holy act of self-sacrifice) that they should suffer in silence.
- Theologies of forgiveness have operated to pressure victims of sexual harm into "forgiving" their abusers. This only serves to deny victims full agency over their emotional lives, their ability to process their trauma, and their access to justice.

The way Christians speak or preach about these theological issues has real-life consequences for people who experience sexual harm. The flip side of this, of course, is that theologies of atonement, forgiveness, and sacrifice can also provide opportunities to discuss sexual harm, which remains a taboo topic within many Christian communities. When considered through a trauma-led and victim-centred lens, these theologies can empower faith communities to start conversations and develop new practices that promote the support and care offered to sexual harm survivors.

Chapter 5 encourages participants to think about the language used in church communities and spaces. It asks: does language facilitate environments that are respectful and safe for all those who inhabit them? Or is it dismissive and potentially abusive towards some, while giving greater privilege and power to others? This session covers issues of inclusive and non-inclusive language, and the ways that language can impact survivors of sexual harm.

Finally, Chapter 6 draws together the various strands of the preceding chapters and invites group members to consider how they can use their role as Christian leaders to better accompany victims and survivors of sexual harm in their communities. This section asks how participants will do things differently in their communities. It asks about the tangible, concrete ways in which they might change their practice. It encourages them to identify the practical things they can do in church spaces to make it safer for victims and survivors to come forward, share their experiences, and be supported in their journey. It invites church leaders to start planning how they can make their churches safer spaces for victims and survivors.

The toolkit was developed in Aotearoa New Zealand and is written for churches in that context, but with recognition that sexual harm is a global issue and that the toolkit might be adapted for use elsewhere. Parts of the toolkit have already been used in Kenya and Ghana as part of in the *Kuibuka Africa* project for religious sisters.[8] This involves workshops to encourage religious sisters (nuns) to be agents of change in response to sexual harm and to promote the safeguarding of sisters against abuse.[9] Religious sisters who might otherwise feel reluctant to speak openly on these issues have been encouraged

to talk. The toolkit gives opportunities to discuss how power differences between religious sisters and priests can make sisters vulnerable to sexual harm.

Church responses to gender-based violence are also an urgent concern in the Pacific.[10] The toolkit's Bible studies have been translated into Samoan by Mercy Ah Siu-Maliko (2019) to supplement another CBS that addresses gender-based violence.

Challenges and future work

Despite the existence of important examples of constructive faith-based responses, a lot of work still needs to be done around religion and sexual harm. Our chapter was written during the final weeks of the 2024 US election campaign, which was won by Donald Trump. Trump's success drew on support from conservative religious voters, both Evangelical Protestant and Catholic.[11] This constituency did not see his conviction for sexual abuse and defamation in the E. Jean Carroll case (May 2023)[12] – and the many other allegations of sexual harassment and assault against him – as deal-breakers for their votes. Likewise, they did not see his promise to protect women "whether the women like it or not" as an obvious problem, or if they did, they were willing to overlook it.[13] The need for Christians to understand power, inequality, and entitlement in relation to sexual harm is as urgent as ever.

Notes

1 Sexual violence can and does impact people of every race, ethnicity, age, religion, and class. Anyone can be affected by sexual violence regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. Statistically, however, a considerable majority of victims of sexual violence are female and perpetrators are overwhelmingly male. Many people experience additional vulnerability through social disadvantage or disability.
2 For more on this in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, see Winn (2018).
3 Irish Aid is the government of Ireland's development cooperation programme, whereas Trocaire is an Irish faith-based organisation. Faith-based organisations, like Trocaire and Tearfund, strive to be and are part of the solution in addressing forms of spiritual abuse and other widespread violence. They are not the only organisations addressing such abuse and violence, but they can and do play a significant part.
4 See the following chapter in this volume by Gerald O. West and Sithembiso Zwane.
5 For examples see, Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research (2014), West (1993), and Nadar (2012).
6 See Colgan and Blyth (2022). A PDF of this toolkit can be found at: https://shilohproject.blog/accompanying-survivors-of-sexual-harm/ or https://doi.org/10.48785/100/127.
7 Caroline Blyth, Miryam Clough, Emily Colgan, Rocío Figueroa, Lisa Spriggens, David Tombs, and George Zachariah.
8 Two of the project team, Rocío Figueroa and Lisa Spriggens, along with the project lead Mumbi Kigutha, are involved in the Kuibuka Project for Religious Sisters in Africa.
9 See Figueroa and Tombs (2022).
10 See Ah Siu-Maliko et al. (2019).

11 On support from Evangelicals, see especially Du Mez (2020). See also her short documentary, "For Our Daughters" (2024).
12 E.g., see "Trump Rape Lawsuit: Jury Finds Trump Liable for Sexual Abuse and Defamation" (9 May 2023).
13 See Nehamas and Green (31 October 2024).

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3b Christianity

Forging Biblical Interpretive Resilience in the Face of Bible-based Spiritual Abuse

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Introduction

Martyn Percy, in his recent book *The Crisis of Colonial Anglicanism: Empire, Slavery and Revolt in the Church of England*, documents how various forms of "control" (2025: 206) characterise the equally various forms of abuse perpetrated by the colonial Church of England. While Percy does not interrogate to what extent the Bible – or Scripture, more generally – is an explicit tool of abuse, this will be our starting point. Contextual Bible Study (CBS), the community-based interpretive methodology of the Ujamaa Centre, could be said to be an explicitly resisting engagement with an abusive Bible.

Our essay will draw on 35 years of community-based biblical engagement through the Ujamaa Centre's CBS process. Central to CBS is a re-reading of a particular text, both familiar and unfamiliar, discerning biblical detail that may offer resources for participatory community-based transformation (West, Zwane, and Carlos, forthcoming). CBS focusses on how systems of oppression intersect or interlock to control the lives of poor and marginalised communities. Indeed, CBS recognises that the Bible is used by dominant sectors of society, whether colonial or local, to render people poor: that is, to marginalise and disempower. Though the Bible is often (intrinsically) complicit when put to purposes of oppression, the Bible is also used (extrinsically) to perpetrate forms of spiritual abuse.

Extrinsic and intrinsic biblical abuse

South African Black Theology, during the formative period in which the Ujamaa Centre was established (West, 2022a, 2024b), was insistent that both biblical interpretation (extrinsic to the Bible) and the Bible itself (intrinsic to the Bible) was problematic in the struggle against apartheid (Mofokeng, 1988). The Bible was used – interpreted – by White colonialism and apartheid to perpetrate and legitimate racial capitalism (Sebidi, 1986). More worryingly, according to Takatso Mofokeng and Itumeleng Mosala, the final canonical form of the Bible itself was part of the problem, for it is dominated

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by dominating ideological and theological perspectives or voices (Mofokeng, 1988: 37; Mosala, 1989: 134).

CBS praxis of the Ujamaa Centre acknowledges and works with both an intrinsically and extrinsically contested Bible. Our experience is that the organised poor and marginalised sectors we usually work with have already discerned that the Bible is both a problem and a solution (Mofokeng, 1988: 37). However, their pastors, ministers, priests, and politicians tend to insist on a single, unitary Bible and biblical theology. And they are the gatekeepers, often with impunity, of both the intrinsic integrity of the Bible and of their own extrinsic, often abusive, biblical interpretation.

Theologies and epistemologies of retribution

Among the biblical theologies advocated by both missionary-settler initiated (mainline) churches and African Initiated Churches is a theology of retribution: "Yahweh gives, and Yahweh takes, blessed be the name of Yahweh" (Job 1:21); "Whatsoever a person sows, this they will also reap" (Galatians 6:7). This is, of course, a biblical theology, a trajectory that is entrenched across Old Testament/Hebrew Bible and New Testament texts; retribution is a clear theological voice across the Bible. Walter Brueggemann refers to this kind of intrinsic theological trajectory as a theology of "structure legitimation" (Brueggemann 1985), so it is not surprising that this theological trajectory has been appropriated by the gatekeepers of our African churches.

Our African landscapes are shaped epistemologically and theologically by interlocking (Collective, 1977: 271) or intersecting (Crenshaw, 1989: 139–140; Carastathis, 2014: 304) systems of oppression. Theologies and epistemologies of retribution are established within the interlocking systems of colonial and African patriarchies (Mbonu, van den Borne and de Vries, 2009; Kamau, 2011), African religio-cultural epistemologies with respect to God, the ancestors, and witchcraft (Mbonu, van den Borne and de Vries, 2009; Chitando, 2011), and Christian and Islamic theologies with respect to theologies of retribution (Mbonu, van den Borne and de Vries, 2009; Badri, 2009: 38–40; West, 2011a: 135–38).

These intersecting systems and the epistemologies and theologies of retribution that they have generated and sustained are the focal systems (among others) of oppression in this chapter.

Race

The Bible has played a pivotal role in perpetrating racism, and indeed "racial capitalism" (Sebidi, 1986: 31), both by designating Black South Africans as created by God to be under the "guardianship" of White South Africans (Vosloo, 2015: 201–204) and by the use of retribution theology,

whereby, in the words of the Catholic priest Frei Betto in conversation with Fidel Castro, "some old [Latin American Bible] translations use the term *black* as a synonym for *slave,*" since "the slaves in Latin America were blacks" (cited in Wittenberg, 2007: 25; first published as Wittenberg 1991).

White Afrikaner apartheid theology was a precursor to White Afrikaner apartheid political theory and policy. As early as 1944, the well-known Afrikaans poet and Bible translator J. D. du Toit made the formal argument that "the whole Bible," "from Genesis to Revelation," substantiates the notion of God as the "separator" of people on the basis of race (and ethnicity and language) (cited and translated in Vosloo, 2015: 196). Here creation theology is used, as Brueggemann has argued, to legitimate the ruling elite: "Creation theology readily becomes imperial propaganda and ideology. Then, when the order of life is celebrated, it is the order with which we agree. Indeed, it becomes the legitimated order from which we benefit and which we maintain in our own interest, if at all possible" (Brueggemann, 1992: 42). In South African apartheid theology, God is "the Separator or Divider ('Skeidingmaker'). As the 'great Divider', God separates light and darkness, the dry land from the waters, the living creatures according to their kind. God created things not as a mixed mass, but as separated and segregated" (Vosloo, 2015: 196), foundationally in Genesis 1 and confirmed again in the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11 (Vosloo, 2015: 196–197).

More invidious than this use of creation theology, Black race and/as Black class were framed by retribution theology. In his conversation with Frei Betto (Betto, 1986: 108), Fidel Castro is justifiably worried, referring to Genesis 9:25–26 and asking, "if it's really proper for religion to teach that being Black is a punishment from God" (cited in Wittenberg, 2007: 26). Gunther Wittenberg reflects on this conversation and this biblical text, prefacing his analysis of the biblical text by saying, "Genesis 9:18-27 may not have been taught in quite the same way in South African schools, but it was used, particularly in connection with the other text Josh[ua] 9:27 which tells how Joshua made the Gibeonites 'hewers of wood and drawers of water', to justify job reservation and the fact that Blacks have traditionally been subjected to menial labour" (2007: 26). In South Africa under apartheid, "Blackness" was a punishment for the sins of their alleged biblical ancestral fathers, whether Canaan/Ham or the Gibeonites.

As we will see below in the section on "Unemployment," even in contemporary South Africa, and even among Black South Africans themselves, unemployment is often considered within the framework of retribution epistemology and theology. The Ujamaa Centre has done and continues to do CBS work which counters this understanding. One of our earliest CBS sessions, in the late 1980s, just as what is now the Ujamaa Centre was been formed (West, 2022a), was based on Mark 10:17–22, the story of the rich man who asks Jesus how he may inherit eternal life. In this CBS, we countered individualistic

retribution-based notions of sin with an interrogation of system-based systemic sin (Draper and West, 1989).

In Mark 10:17–22, by selecting only certain commandments, and then by amending by adding a commandment, Jesus guides the man and the reader. Jesus selects the "horizontal" commandments, which govern social-economic-political relations in society through which God is served in concrete social relations. By introducing the commandment, "You shall not defraud" (10:19), Jesus seems to be substituting his version for the commandment he omits: "You shall not covet." The socio-economic analysis of Jesus seems to be that coveting leads to defrauding, and that the reason the wealthy man is unable to obey the command of Jesus to sell his possessions and to give the proceeds to the poor is that he still covets what he has gained through defrauding the vulnerable (see also Horsley, 2001: 191).

For the CBS participants, the slow re-reading of this text, probing the connections between these two sets of commandments (both the biblical commandments and the explicit commandments of Jesus to the wealthy man), enabled them to discern textual detail which resonated with the South African apartheid system. While individual White South Africans may not have murdered or committed adultery or stolen or borne false witness, or defrauded, or dishonoured father and mother, they benefited economically from a settler-colonial-apartheid economic and political system which sanctioned the state-based murder of Blacks, which forced Black men to leave their homes and migrate to single-sexed mine-based hostels, which stole the land of Blacks, which operated a racially biased juridical system that protected the economic and political interests of Whites, which defrauded Blacks through multiple forms of systemic economic exploitation, which dishonoured the ancestors of Blacks and forcefully separated Black workers through migrant labour systems from their fathers and mothers. While the man with extensive property in Mark 10 and White South Africans may not be guilty of the sins Jesus enumerates at an individual level, they are guilty of systemic sin. They have participated in and been beneficiaries of structural sin (West, 2005).

The wealthy man in Mark 10:17–22 is wealthy because others have been impoverished, making them poor. The wealthy man and the poor are systemically related through an unjust set of interlocking systems of oppression that Jesus attempts to address and change. Similarly, Black South Africans are poor because White South Africans are wealthy. Through no personal sin of their own, Black South Africans have been impoverished by systemic sin, by systems of White systemic economic extraction (Terreblanche, 2002).

What had been an enigmatic biblical text took on a remarkable clarity in our CBS when placed alongside the apartheid system. Jesus was exposing the economic systems of both Roman colonialism and local Judahite city-temple elites (see in particular Mark 11:27–13:2 and West, 2006: 140–145). Biblical text and South African context mutually interpreted each other, enabling

context-based appropriation of the system-based resistance to the life, ministry, and mission of Jesus.

HIV and AIDS

Perhaps the clearest example of Bible-based spiritual abuse has been directed at people living with HIV and AIDS. As Nelson Mandela so aptly stated, "many people suffering from AIDS are not killed by the disease but by the stigma surrounding everybody who has the virus" (SALGA, 2019). Central to the fermenting of HIV-related stigma and discrimination were our diverse African religions, in general, and our Christian churches, specifically (Mbonu, van den Borne and de Vries, 2009). Our sacred texts, in general, and the Bible, in particular, were the primary sources of HIV-related stigma and discrimination (West, 2011a).

This was the reality that the first generation of those living with HIV and AIDS were confronted with on a daily basis, within their families, their communities, and their churches (Mbonu, van den Borne and de Vries, 2009). Through the gender-based work of the Ujamaa Centre in the local Pietermaritzburg community in the early 1990s, we were asked by hospital staff doing HIV testing to offer a safe space for those stigmatised by these interlocking systems of violence. Watching our CBS work from within our safe-space offices, these women – for it was primarily women who took responsibility for their HIV status through antenatal HIV testing – organised themselves into a group and invited the Ujamaa Centre to work with them. We continue to work, more than two decades later, with the *Siyaphila* ("we are alive," "we are well") network of people living with HIV (Denis, 2016; Zengele, 2023). Our initial work was with gospel texts in which Jesus stands with the stigmatised over against stigmatising religious leaders (e.g., Mark 3:1–6), but as gradually – too slowly (Nattrass and Kalichman, 2009) – more of the *Siyaphila* group had access to antiretroviral treatment and were *living with* HIV rather than *dying from* AIDS-related illness, so we shifted our CBS towards the contending theological trajectories of the book of Job, moving from complicit acceptance of the theology of retribution (Job 1:21) to resisting lament against the theology of retribution (Job 3 and 19), and then to the repentance of the stigmatising community as they relented of their community-denying theology of retribution (Job 42:11) (West, 2017: 262, 262–264, 264–265, 265–267).

Both particular gospel texts and the book of Job were useful because they interrogated retributive epistemologies and theologies; our CBS work demonstrated that there was clearly more than one biblical perspective or voice on disease and suffering within this one biblical book (West, 2017; see also the CBS work in Makoka and West, 2022). Our various CBS sessions over more than two decades enabled participants to become resilient re-readers of the

Bible, living positively with the God of life in the midst of the idols of death of interlocking retributive epistemologies and theologies.

Alongside these CBS sessions, over the decades that we have worked together with the *Siyaphila* support group, there has been informal and then formal reflection on how *Siyaphila* support group members understand and relate to their Bibles. The formal component of our reflection was consolidated through a focus group discussion led by Bongi Zengele in 2005 with *Siyaphila* members (West and Zengele, 2006). The dominant metaphor pertaining to the Bible used to describe the experience of most members prior to their joining the *Siyaphila* support group involved distance. The Bible was afar off, at a distance from them (West and Zengele, 2006: 57). Related to this image of distance was the image of place. The Bible was located in particular places: for example, in the homes of their parents and grandparents, but predominantly in their churches. As one person expressed it, the Bible "was opened and closed in church" (West and Zengele, 2006: 57). Yet another related image used by participants was of belonging; the Bible *belonged to* others. For most, the Bible belonged to the minister/pastor/priest. The Bible belonged predominantly in the hands of religious professionals and leaders, in the hands of those with authority and some power (West and Zengele, 2006: 57).

Another related image used of the Bible prior to their participation in the *Siyaphila* support groups was that of its relative silence. As one member put it, the Bible required a preacher to make it speak. The Bible was a holy book and could therefore only be made to speak by those whose task it was to do so (West and Zengele, 2006: 57). As another person said, it was a book "handled" by others. In fact, this person reported that she had been expressly forbidden to touch the Bible because she was HIV-positive and, therefore, unclean. Only holy people should handle the Bible. And when the Bible was handled by such people, it was used to address the unclean directly: as the Word of God to chastise, correct, and condemn them for their sin, or the sins of their families (West and Zengele, 2006: 57).

There was also general agreement that the Bible was not about ordinary life, and certainly not an HIV-positive life. As one participant said, the Bible "is … talking about things that do not touch me." She was not permitted, she was made to believe, to bring her questions or her reality to the Bible. It was "about" other things, holy things unrelated to her and her context (West and Zengele, 2006: 57–58). Taken together, it is clear how retribution theology weaves its web of condemnation, stigma, and discrimination.

All of these predominantly negative associations with the Bible had been altered by their membership of the *Siyaphila* support group and their work together, including work in CBS. What was far from them, had come close to them; what had no place with them, now had a place with them; what belonged to others, now belonged to them; what had nothing relevant to say to them, now spoke directly to their condition; what could not be touched or made to speak by them or for them, was now in their hands; they could ask

their questions of it, and they heard it speaking to them directly; what had brought judgment, stigma, and discrimination, now brought healing, hope, and life (West and Zengele, 2006: 58). The Bible was no longer far off. It engaged them personally and as a group and dealt with the daily concerns that constituted their lives. As one person said, it affirmed that she was made in the image of God and offered her support in her inner struggles (West and Zengele, 2006: 58). The Bible belonged to them. As one participant put it, now that she actually "owned" a Bible, she was aware of how much the Bible was used selectively in church by the church leadership (West and Zengele, 2006: 58).

One of the most startling changes was that the members had come to see that the Bible dealt with real-life issues. They had been amazed to discover that the things that were happening in their contexts were "in the Bible" (West and Zengele, 2006: 58). The many connections between their lives and the Bible astounded them. Closely related to this new understanding was their sense of control. Through the participatory CBS processes, they had realised that they did not need anyone else to interpret the Bible for them; they could interpret the Bible for themselves. Another aspect of this control was the sense that they could interrogate the Bible. As one participant expressed it, drawing on her experience of the Job CBS (West and Zengele, 2004; West, 2016a), the Bible itself gave you permission to ask hard questions of the Bible and even of God. This was especially empowering, she continued, for it enabled her to talk back at those who used the Bible to say that HIV is a punishment for sin. She could now contend that God loved and affirmed her, and she could now talk about the process of interpretation. Confirming these comments, another member told the group that she had actually felt secure enough in her newfound sense of ownership of the Bible that she had confronted her own pastor about the way he was using the Bible against people like her (West and Zengele, 2006: 59).

CBS had clearly, the focus group demonstrated, equipped *Siyaphila* members to resist their churches' use of the Bible. This outcome is how we as the Ujamaa Centre would understand our work. CBS work is *resisting* "church theologies" (Kairos, 1985) of stigmatisation, discrimination, and retribution, and constructing "prophetic theologies" of acceptance, inclusion, and redemption. However, what became clear to us the closer we listened was that their empowered ownership and control of the Bible included elements of both resistance and *resilience*. While they were resisting dominant interpretations of the Bible within their safe, brave, and invented *Siyaphila* spaces (Zwane, 2020; West, Zwane, and Carlos, 2023: 594), they were also reentering church space, space from which they had been driven out by retributive theology. CBS had given them, we discerned, resources for an *interpretive resilience* through which they were able to reoccupy their place in church (West, 2021).

Gender

This understanding of our work as constituting biblical interpretive resilience over against patriarchal theologies of retribution has been supported through external evaluations of the Ujamaa Centre, in 2010 and in 2015 (West, 2021: 152–155). In the 2015 external evaluation of the Ujamaa Centre, some participants made a direct link between the dignity they experienced within CBS work and their yearning for a similar acknowledgement of their dignity within their churches. In the words of the external evaluation team:

> Many [women] participants spontaneously commented on the experience of being respected, when they are used to being judged, blamed and ridiculed for their different conditions. They spoke of feeling rejected by the church and finding it valuable to find acceptance from a church-based position [such as the Ujamaa Centre]. This led to a restored sense of dignity and self-worth as reported by participants.
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> (Msunduzi, 2015: 25–26)

"For centuries the patriarchy of the church," argues Beverley Haddad, "has provided its almost exclusively male leadership with a measure of power that enables abuse, or at least collusion in abuse of women, to continue unabated" (2002: 97–98). What Haddad refers to as patriarchal ecclesial "theological justifications" reside at the core of this reality, in which patriarchy dominates and "women's voices are silenced as they cry out their pain" (2002: 98). In a follow-up paper (2018), Haddad turns to David Tombs' notion of "second abandonment" (Tombs, 2018). "Having ignored the destructive effects of patriarchal, culturally oppressive relationships experienced by many women, church leadership chooses to ignore the potential deadly consequences of these relationships and abandons them to HIV vulnerability and gender violence" (Haddad, 2018). Invoking Tombs' incisive concept, Haddad continues: "Once women are diagnosed HIV positive, the church then chooses to shame, stigmatise, and abandon them a second time" (2018).

CBS has remained a safe and sacred site for women in their interactions with the Bible, particularly in the context of violence against women, given that, in their words to the external review team, "these things [referring to 2 Samuel 13:1-22, recounting the rape of Tamar by her brother Amnon] are not read in churches, they are being hidden" (Msunduzi, 2015: 26). While these women still felt disrespected in their churches and subjected to spiritual abuse, some used the resources of CBS to build their capacities to re-turn to their churches, enabling them to use their Bibles to talk back to spiritual abuse. The Tamar CBS has played a pivotal role in the forging of interpretive resilience (West and Zondi-Mabizela, 2004). First, the very fact that this biblical text is read aloud (and performed by a CBS group as part of the CBS process) affirms its presence within ecclesial contexts in

which this text is seldom if ever read aloud publicly, and certainly never on a Sunday. Its very (albeit lectionary-denied) presence in the Bible disrupts patriarchy and retributive theology. Second, our use of the following questions within the CBS enables the recognition and identification of the system of patriarchy:

Who are the main characters in this story, and what do we know about them?
What is the role of each of the male characters in the rape of Tamar?

Engaging these questions slowly allows the patriarchal system of control, violence, and abuse to become evident. Third, the Tamar CBS foregrounds Tamar's resistance to physical and spiritual abuse with another question:

What does Tamar say and what does Tamar do? Focus carefully on each element of what Tamar says and does.

Fourth, participants reflect in the safe and brave space of small groups on the resonances between Tamar's experience and their own experiences:

Are there women like Tamar in your church and/or community? Tell their story.

Fifth, the Tamar CBS moves towards action with the following questions, creating brave space within the CBS for the participants to formulate action plans against physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and spiritual abuse:

What resources are there in your area for survivors of rape?
What will you now do in response to this Bible study?

Significantly, in a version of the Tamar CBS especially formulated by the female spouses of the bishops at the 2008 Lambeth Conference (West, forthcoming), the delegation from the Spouses Implementation Group insisted that we adapt one question to, "In what ways does the Church abuse its power?", and another to, "In what way can we as leaders in the Church respond to abuses of power?" This was a remarkable innovation, foregrounding "the Church" as an institutional system as a perpetrator of violence against women. One woman of the spouses group, Maria Akrofi, a medical doctor married to the primate of the Church of the Province of West Africa and Bishop of Accra, Archbishop Justice Akrofi, expressed the lived reality of women when she said that the Church is not exempt from inflicting violence against women, noting that women who experience abuse at the hands of their spouses who are priests or bishops often have nowhere to go (Sison, 2008). The Tamar CBS offered these women an invigorated place to go (West, Zwane, and Carlos, forthcoming), entering into Tamar's brave resisting space (West, 2024c).

Sexuality

What the 2015 external review enabled us to recognise is how some of the most marginalised and vulnerable re-turn to their families and churches bearing gifts of interpretive resilience that enable them to find a place within sites that have stigmatised and marginalised them. What follows is a remarkable story of interpretive resilience within both the family and the church.

The advent of HIV has created significant space for working with local faith-based communities and organisations in the related areas of masculinity and sexuality (West, 2016b). In its work on sexuality, the Ujamaa Centre has established a collaborative relationship with the Pietermaritzburg Uthingo Network (uthingonetwork.org.za), a human rights organisation advocating for the rights of LGBTI+ persons, with particular focus on rural communities of KwaZulu-Natal. Among the workshops we have done together has been a series which included church leaders from the KwaZulu-Natal province (West, 2021: 155–157). The focus text of our CBS, at the request of our queer colleagues, was Genesis 19, as they yearned to hear another voice over and against the voice of retribution and condemnation. The Ujamaa Centre constructed a CBS reading Genesis 18–19 as a single narrative unit (West, 2016b: 193–96; see also West, Zwane, and van der Walt, 2021). As part of the See-Judge-Act CBS process, the CBS concluded with participants committing themselves to act: that is, with action that they had agreed upon in their small-group work in response to their engagement with the CBS.

This first workshop was followed some months later with a second report-back workshop, where each participant explained what action they had undertaken in response to the CBS on Genesis 18–19. Each participant reported on what they had done. When the process of reporting was complete, there was an interruption, as the Uthingo Network's video operator asked if he too could present a report (West, 2021: 155–157). As facilitators, we in the Ujamaa Centre were intrigued. The young (self-identified) gay man had not wanted to participate in the CBS itself during the first phase of the workshop activities. We had offered him the opportunity, but he had declined, indicating that he was not that interested in "religion," for religion had stigmatised, abused, and condemned him. His only role, he had insisted, was to film aspects of the workshop for the Uthingo Network. He was a persistent but self-effacing presence throughout the workshop, documenting the process. His request to offer an action report was, therefore, unexpected. But we readily invited him to share with the group.

He told us that as he filmed, he had paid careful attention to the CBS, filming the plenary sessions and some of the small-group sessions. His apprehensions about religion in general and the Bible in particular, he said, had slowly begun to dissipate as he watched and listened. His experience with religion and the Bible, ever since he had been open about his sexuality, was of

stigmatisation and condemnation. But his observation of the CBS on Genesis 18–19 had given him pause to reconsider.

He then told us how he had returned home after the first CBS and had worked through the same CBS with his mother. His mother was a devout Christian who loved him dearly, but who was worried that God would condemn him for being gay. Her love for her son was tempered by her church-generated theological apprehension. She had been infected by the homophobic spiritual abuse of her church. The effect of their CBS together was profound, he told us, with tears in his eyes, for she now understood Genesis 19 (within its literary-narrative context) in a new way, recognising that this text (and so God) did *not* condemn him. Through observing the CBS closely, he had found interpretive resources with which to engage directly with the theological world of his mother, negotiating an inclusive theology for their home. Our corporate, collaborative re-reading had offered an antidote to the toxic interpretations of this text that characterise the spiritually abusive reception history of this text in African faith communities and families.

Disability

Interlocking retributive epistemologies and theologies affect not only those living with HIV, women who are subjected to gendered violence, and people who embody different sexualities, they also confront those living with disability (Kabue et al., 2011; Claassens, Swartz and Hansen, 2013). Here too the custodians of spiritual abuse are the clergy, the pastors, the priests; and their basic resource is the Bible.

The Ujamaa Centre has worked with a range of local organised groups of people living with disability, wrestling with texts like Exodus 4:1–17, 2 Corinthians 12:1–10, and Acts 3:1–11 (Kasongo, 2013), and recognising that the Bible itself is a perpetrator of similar interlocking systems in its various theologies of disability, health, and healing (Bruce, 2010; Moss and Schipper, 2011). These theologies are exacerbated by pandemics like HIV and COVID-19 (Havea, 2021), and summon ongoing CBS work (Makoka and West, 2022). "I am often blamed for not being healed. Is it because of my sin? Some people say if I confess my sins, I will be healed" (ConneXion, 2011). This was one of the voices within a resource sent to the Ujamaa Centre in a disABILITY ConneXion document, "A Bible Study to Develop a Biblical View of Disability" (ConneXion, 2011), inviting us to collaborate with them.

We began our work with disABILITY ConneXion in 2012, using, as we usually do, the See-Judge-Act process to shape our CBS work (West, 2024a). The "See" part of the process with disABILITY ConneXion participants – who had packed the room on hearing that we would do Bible study *with* them rather than *against* them – was a very moving experience. Everyone shared about their lived realities. Their experiences of spiritual abuse were divided

by them into four categories: discrimination at school, discrimination in marriage, discrimination in church, and discrimination in the community. For example, at school other children cruelly mimicked the way they walked; in marriage, family members did not think them worthy of being married; with respect to church, they were kept at the back, out of sight, or left at home; and in the community, their special needs were seldom recognised and so they struggled to find work (ConneXion, 2012; West, 2024a: 378–379).

Clearly, these people living with disability experienced the ambivalence of their theological, social, and cultural traditions. When they first arrived at a church, they shared, they almost all had a similar experience. They would be warmly welcomed and called to the front, because they presented an "opportunity" for the pastor to show his healing power. But if they were not healed, then they were sent to the back of the church, and the reason for the failure to be healed was considered to be their lack of faith. Their families would from then on often make excuses for not taking them to church with them. Here is a classic version of structure legitimation theology (ConneXion, 2012; West, 2024a: 279). The normative church theological system is not at fault; the fault lies with those whose disability disrupts and questions the normative theological system (Haddad, 2006).

The See-Judge-Act process of CBS was itself a powerful resource, participants agreed. The See-Judge-Act process began with their experience of disability and discrimination (See), and only then turned to re-read the Bible from this perspective (Judge). They had never before had opportunity to determine *how* the Bible was read. Now they became subjects, owning their voices and beginning with their lived realities. Turning to the potentially useful biblical texts we had together identified in the Judge phase of the workshop, participants recognised that each of the biblical texts offered potential resources. In the Mark 3:1–5 CBS, the participants noted that Jesus became angry because of the way the synagogue leaders treated the disabled man. They agreed with Jesus, "it is time for the church to change, putting people before their rules," said one participant. In the Exodus 4:1–17 CBS, the participants were delighted to see that God used Moses, even though God had not healed Moses of his speech disability. God can and does use people with disabilities, they affirmed. In the 2 Corinthians 12:1–10 CBS, there was a great deal of discussion about verse 7, in which Paul refers to disability as a messenger of Satan. The participants did not like this verse, but they found the rest of the text helpful. This discordant voice was an important recognition for them that not all the Bible is empowering and redemptive for those living with disability. They realised that they had to contend for the meaning of the Bible from their own experience, discerning among the different voices within a biblical text. In this case, it was important to read the whole text and not to focus on only one verse. In the Acts 3:1–11 CBS, what was most helpful was the recognition that the disabled man was healed in a number of different ways. This was very important for people living with disability, for all of them had been healed in

various ways, even if what was considered their disability remained. In the John 9:1–41 CBS, the group focussed on the way in which Jesus identified with and stood in solidarity with the man who was blind. They wished, they said, that their church leaders would stand in solidarity with them (Ujamaa, 2012: 62–63; ConneXion, 2012; West, 2024a: 280–281).

Unemployment

Significantly, given the economic orientation of the Ujamaa Centre since its formation (West, 2022a: 12), even the unemployed are stigmatised by this set of interlocking epistemologies and theologies. One biblical verse that is used to serve such a purpose is, "if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10). In his incisive analysis of the impact, including the theological impact, of unemployment on the youth of Pietermaritzburg, our Ujamaa Centre colleague Sibusiso Gwala identifies the retributive trajectory within the family: "My parents fight with me all the time especially over food. Every time I open the fridge, I am told never to eat the children's food for lunchboxes the next day. I have stopped opening the fridge at home, even when I want cold water" (see Gwala, 2007: 55, 74). "You are so lazy!" (Gwala, 2007: 75) is a refrain with respect to the unemployed within the family, the community, and the church.

Working with unemployed youth, the Ujamaa Centre has developed a CBS on Matthew 20:1–16, among others (West and Zwane, 2020). We have used various versions of this CBS, attempting to offer resources which engage both the ancient and contemporary intersecting systems that generate unemployment (West, 2022b: 33–34). We recognise that Matthew has coopted, for ethno-religious purposes, an economic parable told by Jesus (Herzog, 1994: 79–97). CBS participants from among the unemployed youth have no problem with re-reading this parable as a parable about economic matters, ignoring Matthew's narrative framing emphasis on the inclusion of the gentiles.

The debate among unemployed youth is about whether this parable is about a socialist-type economic vision of radical inclusion or a capitalist-type economic reality of exploitation. In one of our CBS variants, we offer participants each of these options, enabling a discussion about different economic systems (West and Zwane, 2013). However, what proves decisive in participants' final analysis of the parable as an example of exploitative systems is the landowner's typically capitalistic question, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own?" (Matthew 20:15a). The means of production remain within the control of the landowner. This attitude of the employer is familiar to those looking for work in contemporary South Africa. As William Herzog rightly asserts, here the landowner blames the victim: "Having dispossessed peasants from their land, the householder now dispenses a less-than-subsistence wage to the expendables" (1994: 94). Offering his own translation

of verse 15b, Herzog comments that the final question is "bitterly ironic": "Or is your eye evil [covetous] because I am good [generous]?" Here, Herzog notes, we have an "inversion of values" intended by ancient economies of extraction "to mystify oppression" (1994: 94; see also Boer, 2007; West, 2011b). The oppressor stigmatises the oppressed by activating notions of retributive epistemology and theology.

The unemployed youth of South Africa constitute 45.5% of the youth between the ages of 15 and 34 years of age (SA 2024) and experience biblically affirmed abuse on almost a daily basis, whether from their families, their communities, or their churches, "every time I open the fridge."

Impunity

The theology of retribution has haunted the CBS workshops of the Ujamaa Centre over the 35 years of our community-based work, including workshops on race, on HIV, on gender-based violence (and alternative masculinities), on sexuality, on disability, and on unemployment. Notwithstanding our work of resistance, patriarchal and ecclesial epistemologies and theologies of retribution remain tenacious and pervasive interlocking systems of oppression and abusiveness. Citing the work of Irene Monroe, our colleague Cheryl Anderson, who has worked extensively with us in contexts of HIV, offers an analysis from within the African American context that resonates with our own. "Black women and LGBTQ persons have been kept in gender and sexual captivity," argues Monroe (2000: 89). Anderson, citing Monroe, continues, "Policing women, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people gives Black heterosexual [African American] men what they could not have during slavery and what they only have nominally today: power" (Monroe, 2000: 90; cited in Anderson, 2024: 102). The hetero-patriarchal reality in Sub-Saharan Africa is no different. "Much of the social control over women's movements, voice and opportunities is based on the belief that they will become promiscuous if granted too much freedom and this could lead to contamination of the patriarchal lineage" (Mbonu, van den Borne and de Vries, 2009). Patriarchy, specifically hetero-patriarchy, controls our churches and our Bibles.

Within our Tamar CBS, what 2 Samuel 13:21 makes clear is that the patriarchal system operates with impunity. We invoke here a concept from the political realm, particularly as it has been used by intercultural Bible reading scholarship in Latin America. Introducing their interpretive project, Hans de Wit and Edgar López write: "Violence has had a twofold impact on these [Latin American] people and their communities. First their human rights were violated, and then they suffered again because of the state's negligence, its institutional role of explaining away – of justifying – the actions of the victimizers" (2020a: 1). Here is another form of "second abandonment," a political form. The state operates with impunity, which López describes as follows,

citing the UN Commission on Human Rights' "Updated Set of Principles for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights through Action to Combat Impunity":

> "Impunity" means the impossibility, de jure or de facto, of bringing the perpetrators of violations to account – whether in criminal, civil, administrative or disciplinary proceedings – since they are not subject to any inquiry that might lead to their being accused, arrested, tried and, if found guilty, sentenced to appropriate penalties, and to making reparations to their victims.
>
> (López, 2020: 4, note 4)

This intercultural Bible reading project turns to Luke 18:1–8 as its biblical site for engaging biblically and theologically with the concept of impunity: "The cry of the widow before the judge is a real outcry in Latin American societies, as real as their hope that justice will be done …. In the Lucan text, the participating communities see reflected their pain but also their struggle for justice" (de Wit and López, 2020a: 1). The published research on intercultural Bible study work on impunity offers detailed and particular contextual analysis of impunity, with each community-based Bible study group conversing with Luke 18:1–8 from their own specific reality of impunity (de Wit and López, 2020b; Hoyos and Vicente, 2015; Schipani, 2015).

The emphasis in each of these intercultural Bible studies is political state impunity. Our contribution in this essay is to use the notion of "impunity" in relation to patriarchal – or more accurately, hetero-patriarchal – ecclesial leadership. We invoke the notion of "impunity" because church leadership regularly fails, in the words of the UN Commission on Human Rights, in "bringing the perpetrators of violations to account – whether in criminal, civil, administrative or disciplinary proceedings – since they are not subject to any inquiry" (López, 2020: 4).

Religio-cultural epistemologies and theologies of retribution are sustained precisely because they legitimate the impunity of hetero-patriarchal ecclesial power and control.

Conclusion

Brueggemann and Mosala are correct when they acknowledge that the theology of retribution is a biblical theology; it is in the Bible, it is not simply a problem of misinterpreting the Bible. Furthermore, the retribution theological trajectory intersects and forms an interlocking theological system across a range of marginalised realities. Black South Africans have been created to serve White South Africans, and their economic marginalisation is the result of the sins of their biblical ancestors Ham/Canaan and the Gibeonites. Those

who are HIV-positive are reaping what they or their parents have sowed; those who are unemployed do not have enough faith or are lazy; those women who are the victims and survivors of male violence should remain within the abusive household for their faith is being tested; those who live within alternative masculinities need discipline to become proper men; those who are queer and/or practise a queer sexual identity should be punished or corrected for their evil lifestyles; and those living with disability are being punished for sins committed by generations before them, "to the third and fourth generation" (Deuteronomy 5:9). The disciples' question to Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" (John 9:2), and its idolatrous retributive theology of condemnation and death, live on. The Ujamaa Centre, like Jesus, rejects the disciples' question, choosing instead to act with the man born blind against the systems of retribution that have shaped his life (John 9:3–4).

However, both Brueggemann and Mosala are insistent, as is the Ujamaa Centre, that there is a minority trajectory or voice within the Bible that can and must be recovered, heard, and mobilised in the struggle for survival, liberation, and the fulness of life. It is a struggle, to use the terms invoked by Pablo Richard, between the God of life and the idols of death (Richard, 1983). Crucially, as Mosala makes clear, appropriating this minority trajectory requires the reception presence of the marginalised themselves in order to discern these kindred minority voices in and behind the biblical text (Mosala, 1986: 196). Equally important is, however, and this too is a point Mosala makes, that we must acknowledge that the biblical text is a site of struggle and so we must recognise the ideological perspective of any and every text. For, he says, it is only "through struggle with the dominant forces inscribed in the text itself" that "the oppressed and exploited people today can seek to discover kin struggles in biblical communities" (Mosala, 1989: 188). There can be no redemptive re-reading of the Bible without the actual presence and participation of the survivors of spiritual abuse.

We must not hand over the Bible to those in our families, communities, and churches who perpetrate and perpetuate its retributive theological trajectory. The God of life summons us to reclaim the Bible and to re-read with those voices in the biblical text and in our contexts that affirm and include the diverse multitude of those who suffer spiritual abuse. Together, we must contend with the God of life against the idols of death – both in the Bible and in our African contexts.

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4 Islam

Dynamic Resistance to Spiritual Abuse: Strategies and Innovations in Muslim Contexts

Rabiha Hannan and Rahmanara Chowdhury

Introduction

In our previous chapter (Volume 1), we highlighted that spiritual abuse in Muslim contexts can occur across various settings including domestic environments, religious institutions, and secular spaces. Perpetrators of abuse are identified as both those in positions of religious authority as well as everyday community members, particularly those who may hold influence within community or familial networks. We further noted that spiritual abuse can present in diverse forms: including sexual, psychological or physical abuse, financial exploitation, bullying, harassment, and the use of shame or fear to control, harm, or manipulate individuals. Building on this foundation, this chapter examines three domains of response to spiritual abuse: grassroots initiatives, online activism, and academic enquiry. These illustrate dynamic and versatile efforts by Muslims in both the UK and US to address, resist, and heal from spiritual abuse.

By "**acknowledging**," we mean that our purpose is to develop confidence within Muslim communities so that the occurrence of spiritual abuse and the harms it brings with it are acknowledged and, in time, confronted. Achieving this requires education and awareness-raising: only then can the nature of the problem be better understood, and the urgency needed to deal with it be generated. Such initiatives empower individuals to speak out, reducing the secrecy that allows the problem to persist and grow. They also foster resilience and encourage the reporting of abuse.

By "**resisting**" spiritual abuse, we mean to equip communities with the tools and motivation proactively to build systems that prevent harm: by putting in place checks and balances in governance, alongside robust safeguarding, and protection measures, to help minimise opportunities in which abuse can occur. Finally, to heal from abuse we consider the necessity of two levels of action; (1) to provide support (psychological, emotional, financial, legal and spiritual) where requested; and (2) to hold those perpetrating abuse to

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account, and thus enable a sense of justice and closure, whilst also preventing future offences.

Spiritual abuse is a form of exploitation which can be difficult to substantiate, partly due to the uncertainty surrounding the term itself (Oakley, Kinmond and Humphreys, 2018). Efforts to call it out are further hindered in Muslim communities, by the reluctance of some to acknowledge its existence, for fear it could cast Islam in a negative light. This allows perpetrators to escape scrutiny and accountability, creating environments where abuse can continue unchecked (Chowdhury et al, 2021). This hesitancy is not unique to Muslim communities; the desire to protect the image of a religion and to preserve its sanctity is prevalent across multiple faith groups. For example, in her examination of spiritual abuse in new spiritual communities, Hildegund Keul (2022) identifies similar posturing in the Catholic Church, while Naomi Graetz discusses it in her book *Silence is Deadly: Judaism Confronting Wife-Beating* (1998). Both scholars describe a narrative in which religious communities ignore, deny, or cover up abuse as a means of protecting their religion and ostensibly its followers from damage.[1]

For Muslim communities, acknowledging the existence of spiritual abuse carries additional burdens. It risks bringing Islam, its followers and places of worship, which they already experience as widely and unfairly demonised by the media (Sözeri et al, 2019), under yet further scrutiny and into more disrepute, whilst also exacerbating a potential increase in Islamophobia and anti-Muslim prejudice (Idriss, 2020). Such community apprehensions can contribute to the continuation of abuse (Chowdhury et al., 2021). Keul (2022) describes this inclination where "one wounds the other to protect oneself from being wounded," as an assault on human dignity, where lack of acknowledgement of abuse results in prolongation of debasement and trauma for the victim, inhibiting them from processing their experiences or moving forward. Chowdhury's (2023) findings correlate with this, observing that enforced silence for long periods of time compounds trauma, creating further suffering, strained relations with family members, and increased isolation from one's community.

The three domains of response discussed next focus primarily on reducing institutional factors that (sometimes unintentionally) facilitate spiritual abuse. Additionally, some strategies have implications for domestic settings and influence community perceptions of spiritual abuse. These approaches are crucial for building community resilience against such misconduct and for empowering communities to effectively address and challenge spiritual abuse (Chowdhury, 2023). The examples presented here are not exhaustive, but they illustrate key activism methods currently being employed by individuals and organisations in the UK and the US to tackle spiritual abuse in Muslim communities.

Grassroots initiatives

> **"Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."**
>
> *– James Baldwin*

Lack of recognition and concerted commitment or effort to address spiritual abuse from religious institutions and government bodies has resulted in the emergence of grassroots organisation. Simultaneously, existing organisations have placed spiritual abuse firmly on their agenda among key issues requiring urgent attention. One such organisation is the Muslim Women's Network UK (MWNUK), a small national charity that seeks to "improve social justice and equality for Muslim women" (MWNUK, 2024). In 2018, MWNUK submitted a response to the Ministry of Justice, following its public consultation on "Transforming the Response to Domestic Abuse" (MOJ, 2018). MWNUK formulated an online questionnaire to gather thoughts from its grassroots service users. Based on these findings, two of their key recommendations to the board were: (1) to include spiritual abuse as part of the "domestic abuse/coercive control" definition, and (2) to recognise spiritual abuse as an "aggravating factor" in relevant cases, thereby increasing sentences for abusers. This is in light of the recognition that some perpetrators use spiritual abuse as a means of control, to prevent victims from leaving or reporting them. Organisations like MWNUK hold potential to serve as effective advocates for minority communities and to develop links with wider networks to gain further support and amplification.

A second British-based charity, Nour (from the Arabic word meaning "light"), is one of few trauma-informed organisations in the UK, which is sensitive to Muslim needs. Founded by women, Nour works with minoritised communities – particularly, but not exclusively Muslim ones. Nour provides a range of services for men and women, including free counselling, legal advice, emotional and practical support, and financial assistance, all aimed at helping survivors heal from the trauma of abuse (Nour, 2024). In addition to these services, Nour actively encourages communities to speak up and report abuse, offering free posters to the public with statements such as: "your silence is their greatest weapon" and other awareness-raising materials. Although Nour focuses primarily on dealing with domestic violence, they recognise both the exploitation of religion to justify abusive behaviours, and the potential of religious teachings to address these issues. Consequently, they have collaborated with Islamic scholars to develop a ready-made *Khutbah* (Islamic sermon) available for free download. This encourages Imams and leaders to speak about the crime of abuse from the pulpit during Friday prayers and in other settings, acting as both awareness-raising and a deterrent through faith-orientated community education.

In the US context, the Association of Muslim Chaplains (AMC), which supports chaplains in providing quality pastoral, religious, and spiritual care

to service users, has also taken proactive steps to educate, raise awareness, and encourage the reporting of spiritual abuse. As part of their commitment of care to the community, AMC has developed a pledge and code of professional conduct, holding themselves to "the highest ethical standards as derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah"[2] (AMC, no date), reminding members to make a conscious commitment to "never violate the personhood of another human being, religiously, emotionally or physically" (AMC, no date). This initiative is particularly important as Muslim chaplains may not be integrated into institutions in the same way as other religious employees; thus, this provides a layer of accountability that might otherwise be lacking. Chaplains are further trained on how to offer religious guidance and support to those who have become disillusioned with religion due to spiritual abuse, if they seek it.

There is no equivalent structure in the UK, and governance issues like these are yet to receive adequate attention. However, institutions such as the Markfield Institute of Higher Education provide courses and educational programmes, such as their Certificate in Chaplaincy Training, and undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Islam and Pastoral Care, which widen expertise in this area. Through the critical exploration of theological and practical issues related to pastoral care and counselling within Muslim contexts, the training aims to enhance the effectiveness and proficiency of pastoral care for victims of all forms of abuse, including spiritual abuse.

Our final example is the Scotland-based community interest company SACRED (Body:Mind:Space) (BMS CIC, 2024), founded in 2022 by Maariyah Adam, a community activist and doctoral researcher. Starting out as a primarily female team, they have since grown to include male members, too. Their work seeks to benefit all Scottish Muslims, to widen acknowledgement and better understanding of abuse, and to develop safe and nurturing communities that protect and support those affected by abuse. They aim to do this by (1) creating safe spaces for those who have experienced abuse in Muslim communities to come together and help one another through the process of healing, and (2) to undertake community-centred research to explore issues and identify ways of preventing abuse. To date, the safe spaces facilitated by SACRED have catered to various sections of Scottish Muslim communities and have incorporated a range of formats including workshops, retreats, coffee mornings, and a men's club. Whilst SACRED is proudly a grassroots initiative, its research element holds affinities with academic enquiry, to be discussed shortly.

This array of grassroots efforts shares preventative, educational, and supportive features. There is an active recognition of spiritual abuse and its harms, of its entanglements with other forms of abuse, as well as acknowledgement that communities need to drive a bottom-up approach towards addressing this issue. Whilst these efforts contribute collectively and significantly towards developments in addressing spiritual abuse, further work remains to be done. The projects remain constrained in their capacity, with limitations as to their scope and impact. This is not for want of effort, but due particularly to limited access to funding.

Online activism

> **"Safeguarding the rights of others is the most noble and beautiful end of a human being."**
>
> *Khalil Gibran*

Online activism against spiritual abuse is a response domain associated most prominently with American Muslims. In the UK, online platforms are primarily used to signpost support groups or provide basic information on related issues. In contrast, US Muslim communities have taken much bolder steps to provide tools and resources to aid in the prevention of abuse. Some have even taken the courageous step of publicly naming, shaming, and calling out individuals for evidence-based abusive behaviours, particularly in cases of spiritual abuse.

Danish Qasim is founding director of the organisation *In Shaykh's Clothing*. A community activist trained in the Islamic sciences, he has worked with victims of spiritual abuse for over a decade. Qasim expresses that when trying to protect vulnerable people from abuse there are limitations in using scripture and religious teachings on their own (In Shaykhs Clothing, 2024).[3] He and co-founder Danya Shakfeh, a practising attorney, work instead to educate Muslims on the tactics of those who perpetrate such abuse, teaching them how to identify religious manipulation strategies and such traits as narcissism. They also provide training to institutions and leaders on how to formulate organisational systems with better safeguarding procedures and accountability strategies. Furthermore, they have used their legal expertise and community experience to curate an 11-page "Code of Conduct in Islamic Leadership" document, which is available for free download online (In Shaykhs Clothing, 2024). This document provides clear definitions to eliminate ambiguity on key issues and includes eight concise sections covering topics such as hiring procedures, dealing with and managing amorous relationships, harassment, bullying, and exploitation. Each section outlines best practices, rules and regulations, and guidelines for addressing grievances and implementing remedy processes.

They describe the code as setting a minimum standard of ethical conduct for Muslim organisations and as establishing a legal mechanism for enforcement through contract law. They point out that the US legal system has shortcomings but also offers opportunities. Hence, when a standard of ethical behaviour is agreed upon and signed at the outset of employment, this creates a legally binding contract that all signatory parties are committed to, making legal recourse more accessible in the event of abuse. This, they teach, is a concise yet powerful document that could have a significant impact on how Muslim organisations protect themselves and their constituents, as well as a tool to curtail abuse.

It is unclear from their website how effective this legally informed strategy has been to date – that is, how many Muslim institutions have adopted this

voluntary protocol, or indeed how many have the desire, need, or compulsion to do so. It appears that the system is only as strong as the bodies that choose to adopt it, and without due pressure and challenge from community members, external bodies, or other incentives, its use may remain limited. UK Muslim communities are yet to develop a standardised safeguarding system like this; there may be individual institutions which have formulated their own governance proceedings, but such did not come to light at the time of writing this paper.

In Shaykh's Clothing also features first-hand accounts from individuals who have experienced spiritual abuse, not merely to recount their ordeals, but to extract possible lessons from these experiences. Individual insights are accompanied with religious texts that emphasise the importance that Islam places on respect and preservation of human dignity, alongside the examination of exploitative tactics and patterns employed by those perpetrating abuse, to help others avoid similar situations and to build resilience and solidarity within communities.

A second online medium of activism is the online magazine Muslimmatters.org. Started in 2007 as a collaborative project between Muslim bloggers and Islamic scholars, it aims to address contemporary issues faced by Muslims living in the West. Although the website is not specifically focussed on spiritual abuse, it provides a platform for education and allows victims of abuse to share their stories, simultaneously exposing predators (providing disclosure passes internal scrutiny panels) and raising awareness. As such they have published a range of articles, addressing issues around spiritual abuse in Muslim communities: from exposing overt spiritual abuse in organisations, to guidance on caution with "celebrity shaykhs," and understanding coercion and manipulation, as well as promotion of good safeguarding, and highlighting Muslim initiatives tackling abuse. By providing a credible base, with indirect theological endorsement, the platform promotes better understanding, more open discussion, and proactive confrontation of spiritual abuse within Muslim communities. Some articles provide testimonials by those who have direct experience of abuse, which serves as both a public warning, and a means of amplifying the voices of victims, helping to shift the balance of power from leadership to those who have courageously shared their trauma. Speaking out on spiritual abuse is not without risks, particularly given the strong likelihood of power imbalances between victims and abusive individuals with significant standing and religious authority. Public disclosures in these cases are fraught with challenges and carry the risk of those speaking out being ostracised from their communities (Chowdhury, 2021).

Our final example of online activism relates to the US-based organisation FACE: Facing Abuse in Community Environments (Facetogether, no date). FACE is another female-led initiative and was founded by Alia Salem in 2017, out of her frustration that, for too long, some leaders, teachers, and religious scholars in Muslim communities have abused their power

and authority without being held accountable. The organisation proposes a framework of investigation to address this gap in accountability, to protect communities, and to ensure that those in power are held responsible for their actions. A significant aspect of FACE involves supporting individuals who make credible accusations of abuse, ethical violations, or who experience an infringement of their rights by those in positions of religious power or trust. FACE asserts that they follow a survivor-centred community safety approach, which allows the public to be informed about individuals holding positions of religious authority who have perpetrated abuse. They draw upon outcomes of official investigations and conduct their own enquiries through legal means. A key element of their work is making their findings publicly available on their website, inclusive of detailed reports with evidence, while at the same time ensuring the protection of victims' identities. They also provide resources such as a "code of conduct for leadership," a community response toolkit (to aid organisations dealing with accusations of abuse), and a defamation toolkit (for defence against defamation, a mechanism frequently adopted to silence victims). Since its inception, FACE has received 162 reports of abuse,[4] with 53% of these cases categorised as sexual abuse, alongside instances of physical, financial, and spiritual abuse.

There are critics of the "outing" methods FACE applies, particularly as sections of their work (while not illegal) operate differently to mainstream US legal frameworks. In 2021, an article titled "The Problem of American Imams and the Failings of FACE" publicly criticised the organisation, accusing it of flaws in its investigative procedures and of prejudice. Although FACE disputes these allegations and maintains that they are continually improving their processes, this situation underscores the risks of embarking on such work. It further highlights the need to explore the impact and viability of such activism in addressing spiritual abuse and how individuals navigate these challenging spaces.

Since 2021, due to limited resources and funding, FACE has been forced to initiate an "investigative moratorium" to focus their efforts on existing cases. The last investigation report on their website is dated November 2022.[5] They continue to centralise records about those who perpetrate abuse, with the aim of providing resources for the public to carry out background checks before appointment to positions of leadership.

All three examples above originated in the US, although *In Shaykh's Clothing* operates globally. Whilst some resources might be helpful and applicable to the UK context, there remains a vast gap in provisions specific to UK-based Muslims' needs. The online domain of activism serves to offer a different form of accountability, one that makes it more difficult for those perpetrating abuse to navigate unhindered from one institution to another. It further serves as an accessible source of resources which communities can draw upon. Whilst such public platforms facilitate public discussions on the topic of spiritual abuse, they do not come without their risks, as we have shown.

Academic enquiry

> **"At any given moment you have the power to say this is not how the story is going to end."**
>
> *Christine Mason Miller*

In more recent years, there has emerged a steady stream of academic enquiries into spiritual abuse, including across a range of faith and spiritual groups (Demasure, 2022). This is proving to be a powerful and persuasive mechanism for drawing scholarly attention to the issue, but it is also having impact on individuals and communities more widely. Much of the work amongst Muslims in the UK has involved ethnographic research, listening to the voices and experiences of survivors of abuse, through one-to-one interviews and questionnaires (Chowdhury, 2021; Chowdhury, 2023; Adam et al., 2024). Although anecdotal evidence has been used for some time by both individuals and Muslim organisations, as already demonstrated above, having academic research to substantiate this work provides rigorous empirical evidence and findings which are more difficult to ignore – not only by communities but by governing institutions and policy makers.

Studies completed to date, draw attention to: (1) what spiritual abuse looks like, including the extent of the problem, and the damage it causes to people's lives; (2) weaknesses within organisational set-ups and community structures, which may inadvertently enable spiritual abuse; and (3) components such as religious language, religio-cultural community and family practices, distorted scriptural evidence, and patriarchal interpretations of Islam, which are used by those perpetrating abuse to exploit, control, and manipulate (Chowdhury, 2021; Chowdhury, 2023; Adam et al., 2024).

It is through fieldwork that we have come to understand that for many survivors of spiritual abuse the research interview setting is the first occasion where they could tell their whole story (Chowdhury, 2021; Adam et al., 2024; Chowdhury and Winder, 2022). Findings highlight the healing which occurs in being heard in a safe space, particularly in light of the inadequacy in current provision of safe spaces and support for victims. This body of work also identifies how religion, scripture, and connection with a higher power can be a source of strength and healing for abuse survivors, instilling hope, a sense of justice, and a way forward through the challenges and trauma (Chowdhury, 2023). The need for service providers to consider tailored and culturally informed support to Muslim clients, inclusive of faith, has been argued across key areas of wellbeing research (Chowdhury, 2023; Terrill and Chowdhury, 2024; The Lantern Initiative et al., 2021).

In Mohammad Mazher Idriss's academic analysis of 38 interviews with key agents and survivors of domestic abuse and honour-based violence in the UK, he emphasises various inequalities and discrimination practices faced by Muslim women who have been abused (2020). He refers to Burman and Gills'

terminology of "triple victimization," to depict how Muslim women experience abuse at three levels: (1) in the home (where the abuse first occurs); (2) when reporting abuse to statutory agencies (where they are belittled, misunderstood or undermined); and (3) in the religious domain (where religious institutions when approached for intervention, provide little, if any, support or understanding of their predicament). Instead, mosques are sometimes viewed as colluding in the oppression of women (Idriss, 2020: 2481) by encouraging women to stay in abusive marriages and "not seek outside intervention" (Idriss, 2020). In contrast to this, Chowdhury (2023) demonstrates how victims and survivors of domestic abuse actively utilise faith and scripture to navigate a way out of abuse and abusive situations. Furthermore, they drew upon the support of scholars and religious leaders who possessed a more holistic and nuanced understanding of domestic abuse. What is evident here is the parallel use of faith and scripture to either uphold or challenge abusive practices, in line with the findings of the Web Model of Domestic Violence and Abuse (Chowdhury and Winder, 2022).

In Part 1, we noted that Islamic scholars have evidenced how the dangers of spiritual abuse have been considered in early Islamic tradition. Indeed, historical documentation[6] utilises language such as *darar deeni* (religious harm) (see Nsour, 2022: 133). Spiritual abuse can thus be defined through the lens of Islamic terminology such as, the taking of someone's right *(haqq)*, through (1) *al-Ghaish* (deliberate religious deception) (see Nsour, 2022: 133) (2) *al aklu bil deen* or *khiyanatul Amanah* (misusing one's power/religious position) (Nsour, 2022: 135), or (3) *talbis* (manipulating Islamic scripture) (Nsour, 2022: 136). Given this, scholars posit that there are tools which exist within the Islamic tradition which can be used to help (1) raise awareness of the dangers of spiritual abuse; (2) emphasise the Muslim community's responsibility to address the issues and design systems to minimise it; (3) provide guidelines for punishment of spiritual abuse and hold people to account; and (4) help people to heal from the damage it causes (Malik, 2019).

It is recognised that those who perpetrate abuse distort religious teachings to justify their actions and maintain power; it is less often stated that misunderstood religious texts increase vulnerability for those enduring abuse. Victims may believe their suffering is a trial that they will be rewarded for, or that "this life doesn't matter" (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003: 688), leading to "passivity and compliance," and weakening their resistance to abuse (2003: 692). Thus, understanding how Islamic texts can be used instead as a means to empower individuals to resist abuse, to report it, and as aids in healing from it is important (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003). This has resulted in the reclaiming of those interpretations of scripture which might be misunderstood by communities, or mis-used to facilitate exploitation, restoring them to be used as tools of "empowerment and liberation" (Desai and Haffajee, 2011: 128–129).

By using academic enquiry to educate communities on their rights in Islam and the collective responsibility to stand up to oppression, such enquiry

provides a mechanism to strengthen communities in tackling abuse committed in the name of religion. Islamic epistemologies are thus being actively utilised both to warn against the vices of spiritual abuse and to identify historical practices in Islam that can be safely and legally replicated for the purposes of accountability. Indeed, there is evidence of both in existing service provision. Hence, Nour, the domestic abuse charity cited among grassroots initiatives, quotes from a number of prominent scholars of Islam on their website,[7] and uses scriptural references to challenge derogatory notions of gender and patriarchy, which might otherwise be mis-used to legitimise abuse, particularly violence against women.

Within the US context, the Hurma Project was set up by American activist-scholar of Islam Professor Ingrid Mattson in 2018. The Arabic word *hurma* translates as "inviolability"; the term is derived from Prophetic teachings and aspires to capture the high regard Islam holds for the sanctity of human life and preservation of essential standards of human dignity and respect.[8] The Project's body of staff is currently all female, although it is not clear if this is deliberate. The Hurma Project is funded by various Muslim philanthropic organisations and community grant-distributing bodies and aims to educate the community on what they define as "their God-given dignity and rights." Their primary focus is on the responsibility of those in positions of power and authority and on equipping them with principles and processes both to respond to and prevent abuse in Muslim spaces. This is achieved through the production of research papers relating to spiritual abuse, its psychological impact, and how those in positions of leadership and religious authority can support in removing obstacles for survivors of abuse. One of their key methods for conducting and disseminating this work is through their podcasts, where Mattson interviews experts who have worked on spiritual abuse or related issues, or abuse survivors, exploring themes from trauma and healing, to investigating allegations of misconduct, to safeguarding children in educational institutions. By providing a platform to openly discuss, educate, explore, and find solutions to age-old problems around exploitation, abuse, and keeping the vulnerable safe, Hurma raises the bar on expectations for Muslim leaders and organisations, pushing them to do better. In combining an academic and research approach with an online element, the reach and impact potential of their message is considerable.

Scotland-based SACRED (body:mind:space), meanwhile, is a grassroots organisation that partners with academics and religious leaders to explore how abuse is understood, experienced, and addressed in Scottish Muslim communities. Drawing on collaborations with other grassroots organisations, their open research methods have resulted in a series of community engagement events. These have brought together various sections of Scottish Muslim communities (from academic and practitioner sectors, as well as the general public), which has yielded impetus for subsequent research explorations. Engagement activities include workshops, coffee mornings, male wellbeing events and coffee clubs, an immersive retreat, wellbeing on campus, Islamophobia

awareness events, and more. The research element has run in parallel with community engagement. This brings the rigour of research methodology to an unwavering commitment to and focus on the communities at the heart of the research. The research team advocates for research that is both critical and sensitive, which is particularly necessary when working in groups who are stigmatised and minoritised in a post-colonial context (Adam et al., 2024).

Academic enquiry into spiritual abuse can provide an added layer of authority and validation to the experiences of victims and survivors, who often otherwise have their voices suppressed (Chowdhury, 2021). It allows for addressing spiritual abuse from an insider approach, as well as for sensitively informing the provision of services and policies, within affected communities themselves, and beyond. Through combining with other response domains, such as those covered in sections one and two, such methods also hold potential for developing effective bottom-up and survivor-informed approaches for maximising effectiveness. This innovative two-way approach can be seen in the examples of both the Hurma Project and SACRED.

In conclusion

> **"It is not only what we do, but also what we do not do, for which we are accountable."**
>
> *Moliere*

The three areas of engagement explored in this chapter demonstrate the multifaceted nature of activism addressing spiritual abuse within Muslim communities. There is a palpable sense of ownership, with community activists and others working in the field embarking on diverse initiatives through which spiritual abuse can be addressed. This has led to a range of activisms across different media, with each making a valuable contribution.

Table 4.1 sets out key risk factors which permit spiritual abuse to prevail unchecked, as per the work of activists and academics outlined here. Understanding this allows us to determine how and why practical measures have been adopted by organisations to intervene and attempt to break the chain of abuse at multiple points.

Our analysis highlights how activism within Muslim communities is creating vital opportunities for developing mechanisms to address spiritual abuse. While the strategies identified are not exhaustive, they mark the beginning of a significant effort to confront this issue. Table 4.1 not only illustrates these mechanisms, but also offers a potential model of good practice for other faith groups, which can be adapted to their specific contexts.

Across this broad expanse of work, which is still in its infancy, a number of clear contours are apparent. There is a drive to understand spiritual abuse (what it is, how it presents) and to raise awareness about it within

Table 4.1 Preventing and addressing spiritual abuse: risk factors and protective measures

Risk factors	*Safety measures*
1. Misuse of: • Religion/spirituality • Religious position/ authority/power • Scripture/religious texts	**1. Greater clarity and education of religious teachings on:** • Issues in religion which might be subject to misunderstanding, manipulation or abuse • Ethics and responsibility of religious authority and processes of accountability • Distorted/misused scripture
2. Inadequate safeguarding practices: • lack of comprehensive safeguarding policies and procedures	**2. Strengthened safeguarding mechanisms:** • Robust governance and safeguarding policies • Regular safeguarding training • Clear and accessible reporting mechanisms
3. Weak community support systems: • Lack of strong, supportive community networks	**3. Building resilient and supportive communities:** • Increased awareness of spiritual abuse and encouragement of reporting • Foster open communication and mutual support within communities • Encouragement of collaboration with external support networks
4. Insufficient support for survivors of abuse: • Lack of accessible, empathetic, religiously sensitive, and effective support for victims.	**4. Enhanced support for abuse survivors:** • Provide tailored support services, including counselling and legal assistance • Establish survivor-led support groups • Clear and accessible reporting systems • Opportunities to access religious/spiritual support when requested
5. Deficient investigative and accountability mechanism: • Lack of rigorous systems for investigating abuse and holding perpetrators accountable • No fear of repercussions; leading to a greater sense of power, infallibility and confidence in repeating offences	**5. Development of investigative and accountability systems** • Develop transparent and independent systems for investigation and accountability, e.g. Muslim Arbitration Tribunals (MAT) • Encourage external oversight and regular audits

communities. This is reflective of a widespread lack of understanding and awareness at a community level. Underpinning this drive is an effort to identify religious concepts and theological frameworks that highlight the harmful nature of spiritual abuse and the religious obligation to challenge and speak out against it. Integral to this is the development of robust safeguarding and prevention mechanisms, inclusive of clear accountability structures, within religious institutions. Also at the heart is a strong emphasis on encouraging the reporting of spiritual abuse and support for victims/survivors towards recovery and healing.

Some of the activism also seeks to build resilience within communities, whether through the use of scripture to affirm human rights and dignity, or through better identification of risky behaviours and environments. Efforts are being made to encourage Muslim institutions to adopt systems, processes, and procedures which promote good practice and clear accountability. Within the US context, the issue of spiritual abuse appears to have more visibility than in the UK, although here too things are still at an early stage. There are publicly disseminated mechanisms of support for those who have faced abuse, as well as pathways towards healing and gaining some form of legal recourse. There also exists a much stronger mechanism for exposure and accountability, even when this can come with personal repercussions for the people working in this area. Given how Muslim communities are particularly stigmatised at a macro level (Chowdhury and Winder, 2022; Younis 2024), this is a precarious position to be in. Due to such risks, the work of publicly calling out abusers has to be meticulously traversed; otherwise, those attempting to seek justice risk being labelled as perpetrators themselves.

The public drive towards addressing all forms of abuse appears to be gaining traction in Muslim communities (Awan, 2020), and the return to scripture to aid in this endeavour is also apparent. Muslim activists utilise sources from within their own tradition to demonstrate that abusive practices have been, can, and should be called out, as well as prevented. Thereby, narratives relating to stigma and shame, or to further marginalisation when disclosing (Hammer, 2019; Chowdhury, 2021) can be contested using culturally appropriate resources, methods and epistemologies (Adam et al., 2024; Terrill and Chowdhury, 2024).

While these efforts are commendable, they underscore the need for broader recognition of spiritual abuse, including in terms of policy and funding. Effective deterrence of abuse requires support from macro-level systems, including statutory recognition and intervention (Chowdhury, 2021; Adam et al., 2024; Chowdhury and Winder, 2022). Current work to address spiritual abuse is largely driven by communities themselves, usually with minimal statutory and financial support, and represents an important start in building protection and resilience against abuse. We hope that these pioneering endeavours will receive more support, so that they may evolve and continue to foster a healthier culture of respect, dignity, and enhanced protection for vulnerable individuals and communities.

Notes

1 See also a church experience survey, which found that nearly 50% of respondents reported being made to feel shame or blame when dealing with spiritual abuse (Oakley and Kinmond, 2014: 89).
2 Sunnah refers to prophetic practice and example.
3 Qasim explains that in the past when he has tried to provide theological reasoning for why behaviours are against Islam, people told him that there were multiple opinions and interpretations, and that, consequently, religious justification for abuse might remain legitimate in their eyes.
4 This is as of 11 November 2023, when we accessed the FACE website.
5 This is as of 11 November 2023, when we accessed the FACE website.
6 Sk Rami Nsour of the Taybah Foundation, in analysing the work of Mauritanian scholar Shaykh Muḥammad Mawlūd's (d.1905) *Mat-hartul Qulub* (*The Purifier of the Hearts*), explains how the concept of *darar deeni* (religious harm), was postulated by the Prophet Muhammad himself (Nsour, 2022: 133).
7 See https://www.nour-dv.org.uk/features/tafseer-surah-434-does-islam-really-allow-wife-beating/ (accessed 4 September 2024).
8 This "foundational teaching" is derived from a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, which draws attention to celebrating the age-old Arab custom of "Upholding the sacred inviolability of all who enter Muslim spaces from exploitation & abuse by those holding religious power & authority" (see, https://hurmaproject.com, accessed 4 September 2024).

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5 Sikhi(sm)

From Sikhi Spiritual Abuse to Sikhi Spiritual Healing

Harjinder Kaur-Aujla and Christopher Wagstaff

Here, we will reflect on Domestic Violence and Abuse (DVA) in UK Sikh settings, focusing once more on the survivor case study in Volume 1. First, we want to examine some general matters pertaining to abuse and recovery from abuse in Sikh contexts, giving some emphasis to the overwhelmingly positive depiction of Sikh faith in the case study. We will close with advocacy for first, consulting experts by experience, and second, collaborations supporting Sikh DVA survivors that incorporate faith actors and factors. We consider both to hold significant potential for facilitating healing from spiritual and other forms of abuse.

Sikh tradition in many ways advocates prominently for equality between and among genders. The five Ks that make Sikhi distinctive apply to both men and women.[1] Men and women are to be treated equally inside a Gurdwara, where they sit together, and follow the same etiquette, such as covering one's head and wearing modest attire. While Sikh scriptures are conventionally read publicly by men, there are no restrictions on who can become a granthi – that is, a ceremonial reader of the Guru Granth Sahib, the holiest Sikh sacred text. Sikh women usually take the surname Kaur (like the lead author), and Sikh men the surname Singh, with both signifying religious surnames that express rejection of inequality, notably of the caste system. Sikhi also condemns practices that harm or restrict females, such as female infanticide, widow burning, and dowry payment, and also the treatment of menstruating women as impure, and women's seclusion and face veiling. But, as in other religious traditions, Sikhi exists within wider social contexts and, therefore, sometimes absorbs and reflects practices of gender-based harm. Consequently, there is sometimes a disconnect between religious ideals and practices.

Abuse that takes place in settings of worship, or that is perpetrated by persons, such as faith leaders, family members or anyone else claiming religiously founded authority, or by using sacred scriptures as legitimation, constitutes spiritual abuse. The main space for Sikh worship and assembly is called the Gurdwara. The Gurdwara is the home of the Guru Granth Sahib and acts as the doorway to the Guru.[2] Many activities take place in the Gurdwara, and these involve men, women, and children. There is awareness in the

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UK Sikh community that faith settings can also be spaces where abusers are present and, sometimes, where abusers seek and seize opportunities for abuse. Sometimes, too, abuse is rumoured or asserted rather than actual.[3]

Rumour, suspicion, and accusation can come from inside the Sikh community but also and, increasingly, from outside of it. Discrimination, abuse, and hate crimes towards Sikhs have been on the rise, particularly following events such as 9/11 and 7/7[4] and since Brexit (see Sherwood, 2016; Sikh Network, 2018). Media representations and wrongful stereotyping of Sikh men as "big, bearded and dangerous" operate in ways similar to those depicting Black men as frightening, criminal, or a threat.[5] Moreover, Sikhs have been wrongfully associated with Islamist radicalisation and disproportionately or in inflammatory ways with elements of Sikh political activism (such as the pro-Khalistan movement), which has fuelled ignorance, and discrimination from outsiders (Bloom, 2023: 121–134). It is imperative to acknowledge these disturbing manifestations of racism in the UK context, which transpire in abuse of Sikhs by non-Sikhs.

Abuse of minoritised Sikhs in the UK should not, however, detract from the existence of abuse also within Sikh communities.[6] Hence, the existence of Sikh Guarding, a UK-based organisation aspiring to ensure safeguarding in Sikh spaces, such as through the provision of training and resources, is testimony to both the existence and possibility of such insider abuse. Sikh Guarding, according to its website is a "specialist advisory organisation for driving and supporting improvements in safeguarding practice, throughout faith institutions, including all Gurdwaras…". Its primary role is to safeguard "all children, young people, and adults at risk in Faith institutions," and its spiritual foundation is made explicit, such as in its clear recourse to being "governed by principles of Gurbani" (that is, Sikh Scripture) (Sikh Guarding, no date).[7] Encouraging about Sikh Guarding is the recognition of a problem, or potential problem, and the utilisation of Sikh spaces and scriptures to resist abuse and facilitate safeguarding and healing.

What we have learned from the case study is that spiritual abuse is possible also in the home and family environment, and that a person's religiosity, or claim to religiosity, does not prevent abuse. We note, too, that the survivor of abuse is not let down by services up until the point of reaching the family court. Hence, she is initially taken seriously by police, as well as by Women's Aid, and by the various facilitators of the multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC). Her own conclusion is that she is victim-blamed. That victim-blaming takes place in family courts and is not entirely a cultural or religious issue is substantiated by some research studies (e.g. Brandt, 2023). The survivor mostly acknowledges religious practices and spaces (e.g., *sewa*, prayers, the support in the Gurdwara) as helpful and supportive.[8] Where religion is blended with harmfulness (e.g., in the actions of her abuser and his family), she is reluctant to designate these as true Sikhi, speaking instead of a "guise" or of *maya.* This shows a high degree of trust in what is deemed

true Sikhi faith and structures. Where such are infiltrated by abusers, they can cause harm, but the suggestion is that in their intended, and uncontaminated state, such faith and structures bring and contribute to good outcomes. Again, this trust can offer scope for healing – as in the case of the survivor's account.

The survivor of the case study is typical of the UK Sikh diaspora in that she is educated, with a career in the professional sector.[9] It is striking how she distinguishes herself from "Western" structures. Hence, although she is a British Sikh, socially successful, as well as fully fluent in English and articulate – in other words, in many ways she is presumably very integrated – she sees herself as somehow separate from what she designates "Western culture" and "Western women's organisations." Growing up within a minoritised community, and no doubt experiencing racism and hearing about historical injustices perpetrated against Sikhs (such as the Amritsar Massacre of 1919), are likely to have contributed to distancing from and to questioning of attitudes and things considered "Western."[10] This flags up a strong possibility of suspicion of and hesitancy to use support services identified as "not-Sikh" or "Western" and promotes the need for access to support in explicitly Sikh spaces (Kaur-Aujla, Wagstaff and Lillie, 2022). Gobinderjit Kaur and Manpreet Kaur Basra (2022) have demonstrated that gatherings in the Gurdwara are helpful for the wellbeing of Sikh women. We argue that such gatherings are also valuable opportunities (which can be supplemented with available technology – including email and telephone) for signposting and referral to professional support services.[11]

Mental health strain in minoritised communities, including minoritised faith communities like Sikh ones, as well as among women, being at higher risk of DVA and other gender-based discriminations, is considerable and complex. As such, it needs multi-directional strategies to address it – and the first step is reaching the vulnerable persons who require help and support. Religious spaces and leaders can be well-placed and effective settings and mediators for identifying and reaching out with support for multiple matters, including help and support for mental health and in cases of DVA.

The survivor of the case study acknowledges both patriarchy as part of Sikhi (she notes the male dominance of the running of the Gurdwara) and gender discrimination on the part of the UK legal system with which she contends (hence, she wonders whether a mother would be given the leeway that the abuser-father is given). Emma Tomalin (2022) points out that spiritual abuse is often aligned with gender-based violence, and indeed, there are some parallels in terms of women and girls being disproportionately affected by both (as is the case also with DVA and sexual violence). We maintain that it is important to preserve a firm distinction while also acknowledging points of overlap. Not all spiritual abuse is gender-based but both kinds of abuse correlate with wider social patterns of where power is concentrated (i.e., as the word "patriarchy" suggests, with older males). We do advocate for Gurdwaras, where Sikh men, women, and children gather and interface, to be

maximised as venues where *all* can receive support, advice, and sanctuary. In this way, spiritual but also other kinds of healing can take a first important step towards being achieved.

In the case study, the survivor reports no obstacle or concern in accessing Sikh spaces during her ten-year battle with DVA. Abusers are typically controlling in terms of who the person they are abusing can engage with. This is part of a strategy of isolating their victim and increasing the victim's dependency on their abuser. In the case study, the woman's access to spaces of worship, however, is unrestricted,[12] which again suggests their significant potential for being first points of access to help.

Following up on racism and the othering of Sikhs in the UK context, it is likely that Sikh places of worship, too, may be regarded with suspicion or hostility in the wider non-Sikh community. This, in turn, could hamper the tremendous potential of Gurdwaras for offering community, support, and valuable information, including for victims and survivors of various forms of abuse. To draw attention to such racism and othering, as a first step towards dismantling them, we welcome the courageous accounts of justice seekers like Mankamal Singh (2020), Gurnam Singh (2023), and Manjit Kaur (2023). Their moving accounts of discrimination and violence, however, appear on the site Asia Samachar, which is an independent news portal for Sikhs and Punjabis. The audiences whom these stories need to reach, however, are the wider UK public, non-Sikhs. This – namely, writing not only for other Sikhs but about Sikhi for non-Sikhs – is a significant area for Sikh academic researchers.

Also to be celebrated and to be given more recognition is that in the UK Gurdwaras such as Khalsa Jatha (London) and Sri Guru Singh Sabha (Southall) demonstrate good practice in female involvement and equality practices. Groups such as Sikhs in Law and Sikhs in Academia ensure for more than equal gender representation on their committees, all of which is good news for equity and embracing Sikhi principles. Organisations such as Sikh Sanjog (Scotland) and Sikh Women's Alliance have demonstrated service provision and nurtured women's groups for over 30 years of UK Sikh history. These experts have fought for recognition of women, especially migrant women, and challenged patriarchal views at a local and national level. Their work receives too little recognition and is widely overlooked, possibly due to limited state funding and lack of media coverage.

In settings of worship, countering male dominance appears more difficult than in the academy or legal profession. Hence, faith spaces and Gurdwara committee memberships remain largely patriarchal, with cultural and historical tendencies proving hard to shift (see Ruprai, 2013). Conservative tendencies in religious spaces are not confined to Sikhi, and reforming Gurdwaras requires ongoing effort. With better female representation on committees and in other leadership roles, focus on gender-based aspects of spiritual care will, we believe, receive greater priority.

We are advocating, then, for dissemination of Sikh experience in the UK into the wider community, as well as for more education on Sikh history and practice and more reporting of positive Sikh contributions to UK society. Alongside this, we advocate, too, for ongoing and intensifying efforts towards gender-based and other forms of equity, including in religious settings. When these are in place, the positive potential of Sikh religious principles and Sikh places of worship can be more fully and freely utilised. The existence of such potential, particularly for assisting Sikh women in cases of DVA, is confirmed by research such as that of Pindy Badyal (albeit conducted in Indo-Canadian communities), which advocates for a wrap-around approach of support provision that includes, "multiple sources including … religious faith, support from friends and family as well as psychotherapy" (2003: 130). Our own research has found the need for a similarly multi-directional approach that incorporates sensitivity to faith and involvement of faith actors and resources (Kaur-Aujla, Shain and Lilley, 2019 and Kaur-Aujla, Wagstaff and Lillie, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic and its resultant complexities and upsurge in DVA (see Chandan et al., 2020) has deepened the necessity for a public health approach where faith organisations work with and alongside health and social care providers (Kaur-Aujla, Lillie and Wagstaff, 2022).[13] Collaboration, we maintain, is necessary for constructing the level of "abuse literacy" required for confronting and addressing DVA and other abuses in Sikh contexts. After all, as the case study also makes clear, the tentacles of abuse are far-reaching: in the survivor's case embracing, among other forms, physical, emotional, structural, and spiritual abuses.[14] This requires a collaboration of multi-directional and disciplinary approaches to confront, heal, and eliminate abuse.

Recommendations

We advocate for listening to and validating the stories of survivors, not least to develop experts by experience, who can give insight into how multi-faceted abuse is. Moreover, survivor accounts can develop researchers' critical empathy and, as we have tried to demonstrate, both illuminate and supplement academic research and media coverage. While we have focused on just one survivor account, this case study demonstrates evocatively how enmeshed religion is with other aspects of Sikh life in the UK. The account vividly shows how the woman is both part of and party to UK structures (she is in employment and seeks help from all of police, courts, and Women's Aid) but also marginalised, recognising herself as separate from mainstream UK culture and as misunderstood and discriminated against on account of her gender, ethnicity, and religion.

We advocate, alongside listening to experts by experience, for outward-facing education about Sikhi, as well as nurturing positive developments within Sikhi, such as moves towards gender equity, and safeguarding training

and resources in Gurdwaras. With these more firmly established, the significant potential of faith settings being also places of sanctuary, provision of reliable and confidential support, and of facilitating expert advice of multiple kinds, can be more fully plumbed. We see confirmation for the effectiveness for this in the solace found and trust placed in Gurdwaras, including by the woman of our case study.

Notes

1 The five Kakaars, or K's, are first, Kesh (not cutting one's hair) and four religious symbols: Kangha (the comb), Kara (the iron bracelet), Kachera (the cotton undergarment), and Kirpan (the iron dagger). All are outward symbols prescribed by Guru Gobind Singh as expressions of Sikh faith.
2 The founder of Sikhi was Guru Nanak. After him followed nine further human Gurus. Following this, the final and perpetual role of Guru was passed on to holy Sikh scriptures, Guru Granth Sahib.
3 In the case study of Part 1 (see Volume 1) the source of spiritual abuse is the abuser (together with his family). While the abuser was not a particularly devout Sikh, his family used their standing in the Sikh community to claim respectability and leverage control. It is important to remember that spiritual abuse can emanate from a variety of sources. While these can include places and people vested with spiritual authority (as in the widely publicised scandals based in Catholic churches and involving Catholic priests, for instance), the woman in our case study did not experience such as abusive. It is important not to "cross-fertilise" prejudices from one religious setting to another.
4 9/11 refers to terrorist attacks in the USA, carried out on 11 September 2001. 7/7 refers to the London bombings of 7 July 2005. Both attacks were carried out by Islamist terrorists. There was no involvement of Sikh persons in either attack. On the misrepresentation of what is sometimes called "Sikh radicalisation," see the research of Jasjit Singh (2016–2017).
5 *The Breaking the Circles of Fear* report (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, 2002) shows clearly how fear, prejudice and discrimination targeting African-descended Black men have exacerbated not only mental health problems but ineffective mental health treatment and provision. Many of the report findings (which are focused on the UK) have relevance also for Sikh men. As the report details, the problems highlighted have repercussions also for the families and wider communities to which the focus demographic belongs.
6 In the context of North America, Deslippe (2012) has researched and written about the widely publicised accusations of sexual abuse made posthumously against Harbhajan, better known as Yogi Bhajan. Yogi Bhajan was a Sikh spiritual teacher and the spiritual director of the organisation 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy). Some of Deslippe's observations have relevance also for contexts beyond North America and, indeed, for religious communities other than Sikh ones.
7 Sikh Guarding is facilitated by the UK-based Sikh Jyoti Saroop Foundation.
8 Interestingly, in the most recent UK Census (2021), by far most respondents who identified as Sikh did so through the category of "religion," rather than "ethnic group only" or "both ethnic and religious group" (Office for National Statistics 2022).
9 According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), Sikh women exceed the general population of England and Wales in the categories of professional occupations and as managers, directors, and senior officials. Other indicators do show up vulnerabilities and disadvantages.

10 Some contemporary events, such as the suicides of Mandeep Kaur in the USA (2022) and of Lakhveer Kaur in the UK (2023), both of which were widely reported, might also have bearing on survivors' sense of social dislocation and isolation. Both women died by suicide and visited their Gurdwara immediately before; consequently, we have proposed installing suicide help and mental health assistance in Sikh places of worship (see Kaur-Aujla, Wagstaff and Lillie 2022).
11 Jakobsh (2022) points to the growing need for technologically up-to-date methods and resources to reach and serve young Sikh women.
12 See note 10 above. The two cases of women dying by suicide, following abuse and/or mental health concerns, with both attending a Gurdwara imminently before, gives yet more support to this suggestion.
13 The research of Thandi (2011) speaks to the effectiveness of incorporating faith and spirituality into health care and support in Sikh settings. Thandi's primary focus is not DVA but substance abuse. Not only is substance abuse sometimes a co-factor in DVA (including in Sikh communities: see Sandhu 2009) but some of Thandi's observations apply also to strategies for addressing DVA.
14 The case study also demonstrates that legal structures can exacerbate suffering and that the consequences of abuse persist for a long time.

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