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Abusive Theology and *LLF*

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses abusive theology and its manifestation in scripture. It focuses on two examples from the Bible alongside two common forms of abuse: Numbers 5, with reference to domestic abuse and coercive control, and Numbers 31, with reference to inaction in response to gender-based and sexual abuse. The paper recommends challenging and explicitly rejecting such texts as one step towards validating survivor experience and showing solidarity with victims and survivors of abusive theology. The paper points to deficiencies in *LLF*, particularly concerning its deference to the Bible.

KEYWORDS

ABUSIVE THEOLOGY, COERCIVE CONTROL, GENDER-BASED
VIOLENCE, *LLF*, SEXUAL ABUSE, SPIRITUAL ABUSE

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In this piece I discuss depictions of abuse in *Living in Love and Faith (LLF)* and examine two instances of gender-based abusive theology from the biblical book of Numbers. I go on to advocate centring survivors and rejecting uncritical deference to the Bible.

The terminology of abuse in relation to religious life is varied: ‘abusive theology’, ‘spiritual abuse’, ‘religious abuse’, ‘abuse in religious contexts’.¹ There is some tendency to use these terms fluidly or interchangeably, as well as to emphasise their range, complexity, and slipperiness. One widely recognised characteristic is the *gendered* nature of much of such abuse;² and in biblical studies the earliest interpretations focusing on what we now call abusive theology emerged within feminist hermeneutics.³

As with other kinds of abuse, power relations play a key role in abusive theology. Consequently, groups disenfranchised in terms of representation and agency – women, children, LGBTQ+ persons, persons with disabilities – are disproportionately targeted in spiritual abuse. Such abuse is predominantly perpetrated by hegemonic men in

¹ All are relatively new. An early text to use ‘spiritual abuse’ is Johnson and VanVonderen (1991). In non-Christian religious traditions and non-Westernized settings, the terms are used less frequently, although this does not indicate that practices they point to are either absent or rarer. For a preliminary overview, see Stiebert (2022).

² See Tomalin (forthcoming).

³ See the annotated bibliography (<https://www.shilohproject.blog/resources/>), on abuse, the Bible, and Bible-based religions.

positions of authority: be that in faith communities, the family, or the public sphere.

Targets of spiritual abuse are disproportionately female.⁴

Adrian Thatcher (2020) aptly speaks of ‘authoritarian masculinism’ and points out that ‘IICSA [the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse] found not a single case where [clerical] abuse, actual or alleged, was committed by a woman. It was the abuse of male, clerical power that lay behind the abuse crises’. Revelations from scandals in Boston and Pennsylvania as well as IICSA, and the Australian Royal Commission have shown beyond any doubt that the scale of abuse of *children* in churches and other religious settings has been staggering (Clough 2022: 6–8).

LLF contains a text box on the Church of England and IICSA (2020: 87). There is mention here of the importance of working together with victims and of ‘great pastoral sensitivity’. Yet it mentions IICSA only briefly, and swiftly moves on, acknowledging that the Church has committed ‘failures’ and has a record that is ‘at times ... shockingly poor’, before stating that the purpose of *LLF* is distinct from that of IICSA, and recommending theological reflection on IICSA should be carried out ‘separately’ from *LLF*, ‘after the full published findings of IICSA have been carefully assessed’ (2020: 87).

This does not really cut it, given how woefully inadequate Church response to disclosures of abuse has been.⁵ A better course of action would be for the Church to act

⁴ Spiritual abuse follows well-trodden gendered patterns, comparable with those in secular workplaces (Gillett 2017) and domestic spheres (ONS 2020).

⁵ *LLF The Course* states ‘If someone has shared something that raises safeguarding concerns, please contact the diocesan safeguarding team’ (2020: 62). But this strategy is utterly ineffectual. Particularly damning is the journalism of Graystone (2021) who has demonstrated that John Smyth QC was not only able to use his role in

decisively and to hold itself to account. An easy-to-locate and dedicated section on the online *LLF* hub could be used to provide updates about what the Church is doing and planning to do, to address the findings of IICSA. An online hub is ideally suited to this. Currently, the *LLF* site has a section on safeguarding, which includes contact details of organisations such as NSPCC. *LLF*, when searching for ‘IICSA’ also provides access to numerous reports and statements but not, insofar as I could locate, anything like a clear table listing failures and problems alongside how they are being proactively addressed and resolved.

Shockingly, as large-scale as the clerical abuse of children is, in all likelihood the number of women abused by clergy is much larger still (Clough 2022: 8; and see Batchelor 2013: xv-xix). Spiritual abuse is very frequently linked to gender-based abuse; and cases of religiously-based gender discrimination, like cases of religiously-based homophobia, and other kinds of discrimination on the basis of sexuality, sexual identity, or sexual orientation, amount to abusive theology, whether or not that label is used. The link between spiritual abuse and gender-based violence, moreover, can be profound, since many religious traditions (including those associated with the Bible) have strongly patriarchal elements widely justified by recourse to scripture and to teachings that maintain male hegemony and women’s subordinate status. This can make women more vulnerable to spiritual abuse and less likely to challenge it. Moreover,

the Church to abuse 100+ men and boys over multiple years, he was also able to evade justice and was aided in abuse and evasion by scores of church leaders. Failures continue up to the present, in spite of Archbishop Justin Welby’s assurance to pursue all allegations of abuse and safeguarding failures. One survivor, using the pseudonym ‘Graham’, reports that one year on from Welby’s assurances *no one* has been held to account (2022). Graystone reports in a tweet of 23 March 2022 that there are at least six current bishops who knew of Smyth’s abuse, of whom none acted to stop him and none of whom has been sanctioned.

dominant traditions based in the Bible are also heteronormative, which has established a basis for marginalising and oppressing LGBTQ+ people (Greenough 2018).

Abuse and *LLF*

When we go looking in *LLF* we see that ‘abuse’ covers a wide range – from violence and misuse of power depicted in scripture, to conduct in congregations and families, sexual abuse of children and adults, domestic and gender-based abuse. Near the beginning is mention of ‘[t]he sobering truth’ that experience of church life has for some included hostility, homophobia, transphobia and sexual abuse (2020: 4). Such abuses are not exclusive to the Church but societal (2020: 62, 86). Later comes the statement, ‘[q]uestions about sexual abuse have risen to the top of the agenda’ (2020: 61). It is identified as ‘the deepest problem’ for ‘some’ (2020: 136) and there is mention, too, of ‘deep roots in the church’s institutional structures and culture’ and of ‘deep betrayal of trust’ (2020: 136). But the topic is never top of the agenda in *LLF*.

Abuse is identified ‘[i]n the pages of Scripture’, where it is part of ‘[e]very aspect of life’, because scripture ‘shows us the rich variety and complexity of human life, and ... a world marred by the consequences of our rebellion and sin’ (2020: 176, and see 184). Abuse is cast as humanly made and ‘an offence against human dignity before God’ (2020: 194; and see 391).

A focus passage on 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 suggests that what is condemned here is not sex between same-sex loving persons per se, but abusive sexual practice – such as inhumane treatment of a male sex worker, or of a boy. *LLF* asks, ‘would Paul’s opposition be relevant to committed, loving relationships?’ (2020: 292) and then goes on to say, ‘Paul straightforwardly lists same-sex intercourse along with other behaviours of those who are not obedient to God’ (2020: 293). At this point *LLF* urges consultation

of other scriptural texts. The upshot of this is indecisive; there is no affirmation or protection of same-sex loving people here.

Abuse in scripture is acknowledged of Samson and David, who are identified as both heroes *and* abusers (2020: 184). There is mention, too, of '[t]he sons of Eli [who] abuse their position as priests and sleep with women serving in the tent of meeting (1 Samuel 2.22), in a chilling echo of abuse scandals in the church today' (2020: 184). Narratives of raped women and of threats of rape to men receive mention (2020: 185) with the comment that '[t]hese stories matter deeply: they speak the truth about a violent world' (2020: 185).

LLF also discusses some horrendous stories (e.g. Judges 19) with sensitivity, emphasising questions of power and violence (2020: 285–86). *LLF* – to be fair – does not shy away from some other passages that have caused division and makes explicit that 'every word of the Bible has a human history' shaped by 'the contexts in which it was first produced and received' (2020: 278). There is acknowledgement, moreover, that 'followers of Christ come to different conclusions... about the texts [of the Bible]' (2020: 268).

For all this, *LLF* is firmly grounded in the Bible, which is identified as the ultimate source of the Church's inspiration and authority (2020: 24). Deference to the Bible is plain. Hence, the Bible's 'revelatory purpose and transforming power' is affirmed (2020: 268). We are told the Church 'is soaked in the Bible' and that it assists us 'to discern God's will' (2020: 273). The Bible's purpose is to convey the good news of God's saving love and to call all into holiness (2020: 275). Consequently, the Bible is revered.

LLF tends to depict difficulties about the Bible in one of two ways. *Either*, texts that depict violent and abusive events (Judges 19, the narrative of David’s transgression) signify that the times during which the Bible was written, like our present, was fraught and marked by turbulence; *or*, texts (like Genesis 19 or 1 Timothy 1:8-11) are carefully examined to show that they ‘have met different interpretations’ depending ‘on what else we take into account in our interpretation’—in other words, ‘it’s complicated’. Texts either *reflect violence* (with the implication that this is ‘just how it is and always was’), or texts *evidence ambiguity or complexity*. Both convey inevitability and resignation.

What would be refreshing and what is indeed urgent, is first, acknowledgment that abusive theology causes damage and pain to victims and survivors, and second, rejection of abusive texts and of the abusive theologies to which they give rise. Two prominent forms of abuse are 1) coercive control and violence in marriage, and 2) child sexual abuse. Let me focus on one biblical text and theology for each.⁶

Gendered Abuse, Numbers 5 and 31

The Bible is widely drawn on to comment on marriage – including in *LLF*. And yet, the Bible has curiously little to say on the topic and what is there is murky.⁷ Numbers 5:11-31⁸ is one of the most sustained biblical texts about a married couple. Over twenty verses, this passage sets out what to do in a particular situation: namely, when ‘a spirit

⁶ Examples are drawn from the Hebrew Bible, not because the New Testament is free from texts that convey toxic theologies (which is not the case) but because I have more knowledge about the Hebrew Bible.

⁷ See Stone (2017) on the complicated and flawed picture of marriage in the Hebrew Bible.

⁸ For more detail, see Stiebert (2019).

of jealousy' (5:14) overcomes a man concerning his wife, who may, or may not, have 'gone astray' (5:12). This is expanded on as sex in secret with another man, without any presence of witnesses (5:13). In such a situation, the husband is to take his wife to the priest. The priest is then to perform an elaborate ritual to which the woman can only submit (5:22).

The woman is 'under' her husband's authority (5:29). She is brought before God and bound by an oath before drinking a potion of bitter water with curses dissolved in it. This will either punish her with physical agonies, possibly a miscarriage, or with infertility, if she has been – in the terms of this passage – 'defiled', or it will declare her 'clean' and able to conceive. The account closes with the statement that the husband in either case is clear of iniquity, whereas the wife must bear her iniquity. In other words, his 'spirit of jealousy' along with the ritual – which sounds to be elaborate and likely to cause emotional distress – is excused whether the woman has done anything or not. She, on the other hand must bear her iniquity whether she has actually done anything to legitimate her husband's jealousy or not.

Numbers 5 suggests a high degree of anxiety around especially women's sexual continence. Notably, there is no more than a fleeting reference to the other man: there is *no* preoccupation with who he might be, or with finding him, and no insistence on either his guilt or punishment.

The prescription is explicitly attributed to the LORD, who relates the instruction to Moses (5:11). Further sanctification of the law is conferred by the active role of the priest (5:15, 16-27) and by location in the sanctuary, before the LORD (5:18, 21, 25, 30).

The impetus for the man's violence is a 'spirit of jealousy' (or zeal) (*ruach-qen'ah*). Both words, 'spirit' and 'jealousy' are associated with God. God's *ruach* hovers over the deep in the creation story (Gen. 1:2) and afflicts Saul (1 Sam. 16:16). God's jealousy, meanwhile, motivates God to protect Israel, especially in battle (e.g. Isa. 42:13). Not only is the husband absolved of any iniquity, he is associated with the deity. By implication, this makes his authority and control rightful, and beyond challenge.

The potential for Numbers 5 to legitimate and justify jealousy, the policing of women, and what we nowadays call coercive control, is glaring. What is missing is outrage at how toxic the text is – especially in the midst of skyrocketing rates of domestic and intimate partner violence.

Numbers 31 is another abusive text, sanctifying violence, this time mass murder and rape.⁹ Once more the LORD instructs Moses (31:1). This time the LORD's vengeance (31:3) is enacted on a whole people, the Midianites. As the LORD instructs, all grown males are killed (31:7). Moses is angered – not about the bloodshed but because the women and boys are *not* killed. Next, *all* males are killed, as well as all women who have 'known a man by lying with him' (31:17). As with Numbers 5, an obsession with female purity and with male control of female sexuality is evident. Only one group is spared slaughter: Moses says, 'But all the young girls who have not known a man by sleeping with him, keep alive for yourselves' (31:18). There is no specification of minimum age and the rape of the girls is implied: the virgin girls are '*for yourselves*'. The 32,000 girls (31:35) are listed along with the booty and divided up.

⁹ For more detail, see Stiebert (forthcoming 2023).

After this, Moses orders purification for all who have killed or touched a corpse. The captives too are to be purified. The purification has the effect of making this bloodbath and preparation for rape a sanctified business.

Neither of these Numbers texts is mentioned much in sermons or Bible studies. They are not mentioned in *LLF* either. The reason *I* mention them is because they are unambiguous examples of abusive texts. If they were utilised as proof-texts, they could justify wives' submission to their husbands and husbands' jealousy and coercive control, as well as a theology of rape.

Conclusions

The silence on such texts in *LLF* points to an echoing chasm at its heart. What is needed, instead, is vocal *rejection* of toxic texts and of the abusive theologies to which they give rise. Deference to 'the Bible' as a whole when parts of it validate abuses in our midst (such as domestic abuse, coercive control, and sexual abuse) is dangerous.

Also missing in *LLF* is empathy for and solidarity with survivors of abusive theologies. How must Numbers 5 sound to a survivor of domestic abuse and coercive control, given that the abused woman is publicly exposed, and accused, rendered passive, and given no interiority, while the abuser is exonerated and protected by the religious authorities and by God? And how must Numbers 31 come across to survivors of clerical abuse? In the text the deity and prophet collude in violence. In the text girls are handed over to men and this is sanctioned, even sanctified. The girls are not named, they have no voice, no one speaks up for them.

At the outset of *LLF* is an invitation to address ignorance, cast out fear, speak into silence and pay attention to power (2020: 4-5). Addressing ignorance demands calling

attention to many more passages in the Bible than those most cited, or cherished, or theologically convenient. *LLF* calls for being ‘faithful to both Scripture and the Church’s tradition’ (2020: 4), but sometimes such faithfulness needs to be challenged and parts of scripture called out as harmful. Casting out fear and speaking into silence must be preceded by conscious effort to include and listen to those who do *not* feel safe and who find scripture and tradition to condemn, or hurt, or silence them. And paying attention to power demands awareness of and sensitivity to the damage done by leaders, as well as to careful interrogation of biblical texts, probing who is named, active, or vocal and who is not.

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