

# Introduction

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The chapters in this volume explore spiritual abuse in multiple religious contexts and traditions. Both key themes – “spiritual abuse” and “religious contexts and traditions” – are highly complex and difficult to pin down. Both are central to the large research project that has given rise to this set of explorations: namely, “Abuse in Religious Contexts,” funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this volume is not to provide comprehensive definitions or explanations for either theme, let alone both, but to give snapshots and some sense of their complexity, reach, and range.

## Spiritual abuse<sup>2</sup>

A useful working definition for spiritual abuse can be found in the open access position paper of the Christian safeguarding charity Thirtyone:eight. This definition draws particularly on the pioneering research of Lisa [Oakley \(2009\)](#) and her collaboration with Kathryn Kinmond (2013):

Spiritual abuse is characterised by an ongoing, systematic pattern of coercive control within a religious context. Key elements of this experience are manipulation, exploitation, control through the misuse and abuse of scripture and divine position, censorship of decision-making, pressure to conform, enforced accountability, requirement of obedience, and isolation. ... As in all other types of abuse, spiritual abuse will sometimes co-exist with and be used to legitimise other forms of abuse and harmful cultures. ... [T]here will always be an emotional or psychological element. ... [T]here may also be physical and even sexual abuse occurring allied to the spiritually abusive elements.

(“Spiritual Abuse” 2018: 2, adapted)<sup>3</sup>

The chapters to follow demonstrate the deeply harmful impact of spiritual abuse, and its entanglements with other kinds of violence. These include sexual abuse, gender-based abuse, and domestic violence and abuse, none of

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which are disproportionately prominent in, let alone exclusive to, religious settings.<sup>4</sup> Hence, indications are that domestic abuse is as common in religious as in non-religious households, but that religious authority and scripture can be weaponised by perpetrators to justify it (see Paynter).<sup>5</sup> Respectability associated with religious practice can mask and deflect from spiritual abusers (see the case study discussed by Kaur-Aujla and Wagstaff). Meanwhile, for the victim-survivor<sup>6</sup> of spiritual abuse, the harm can be especially profound, “impacting at the core of identity, and essentially acting as a blockade to, or shattering, the Divine connection” (see Chowdhury and Hannan).

The authors of the chapters to follow identify associations between spiritual and other forms of abuse, as well as tendencies these different forms of abuse share in common (e.g. hierarchies and patriarchal structures, as well as prescriptive interpretations of scripture, are prominent in abusive, including spiritually abusive, cultures). All contributors demonstrate that abusive dimensions brought to the fore, or intensified, by religion are ignored at our peril.<sup>7</sup>

### World religions

Each chapter focuses on one example or more of spiritual abuse within a major religious tradition. Collectively sometimes called “world religions,” these are: Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhi(sm),<sup>8</sup> Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This volume includes chapters on all, barring Buddhism.<sup>9</sup> Admittedly, all these labels are reductive. Moreover, it is legitimate to criticise the world religions paradigm for multiple reasons, including for its misleading suggestions of internal cohesion, and for imposing or prescribing what constitutes a “proper” religious tradition (e.g. in terms of religious texts, doctrines, or places of worship). One damaging consequence of this paradigm has been to side-line, even to dismiss, religious traditions that are not part of the “big six” – notably, many small-scale and minoritised religious traditions, especially Indigenous ones (see Owen, 2011).<sup>10</sup>

The reason for chapters focused on five world religions is not to reimpose the world religions paradigm. None of the chapters attempts to provide or even suggest anything more than a briefly drawn characterisation of their respective religious tradition. All demonstrate awareness of a lack of unanimity within their religious tradition of focus. Sacred texts, places of worship, or doctrines are alluded to but not described in depth.

Up until now, the bulk of research focus on spiritual abuse has centred on Christian contexts.<sup>11</sup> This book seeks to emphasise that spiritual abuse is *not* confined to, or exceptionally concentrated in, Christian contexts but exists in other religious traditions also; demonstrating this is the primary aim of this volume. The companion volume (Volume 2, *Abuse in World Religions: Towards Solutions*) will direct focus onwards, to show that not only does

spiritual abuse exist across traditions, so does active and sometimes highly creative activism against and resistance to spiritual abuse.<sup>12</sup>

## Aim and purpose

One compact volume cannot provide a thorough, let alone comprehensive, depiction of spiritual abuse in any one tradition, let alone across five internally variegated traditions, each diverse and with millions of followers. Instead, this volume is aimed at offering snapshots and at opening important conversations that extend beyond established ones in primarily Christian, or inter-Christian contexts.<sup>13</sup> Together with the companion volume, it aspires also to cross-fertilisation and pooling of effective activist and healing strategies and ideas from multiple religious settings.

Taken together, the five chapters show up some common threads. These include that claims to authority and insistence on obedience and submission can tip over into abuse. There is also some correlation between gendered hierarchies and patriarchal structures, on the one hand, and gender-based and sexual abuse, on the other – in some religious settings as in some non-religious settings. Patriarchal and hierarchical authority structures need not bring about abuse – but they can and have.

Multiple contributors are at pains to stress that while women and girls are often disproportionately targeted and affected, men and boys, too, can be and are victims of spiritual abuse. Moreover, like sexual and domestic abuse of men and boys, spiritual abuse of men and boys, too, is very probably under-reported. There is agreement across the chapters that perpetrators of spiritual abuse, however, are overwhelmingly men.<sup>14</sup> Poignantly, it was during the final stages of the production of this volume that Justin Welby resigned as Archbishop of Canterbury following the publication of the Makin Report, which exposes the Church's failures in responding to allegations of vicious abuse perpetrated over many years by John Smyth against boys and young men.<sup>15</sup>

Most contributors to this volume, though not all, are working from within their own tradition,<sup>16</sup> navigating the difficult terrain of acknowledging that painful harm has occurred within their cherished faith or religious tradition. Almost all contributors take pains to provide and to amplify the perspectives and voices of victim-survivors.<sup>17</sup> Some have direct experience of spiritual abuse, others have worked with victim-survivors, yet others centre on victim-survivors' own words. We are all in agreement that survivor-centred, trauma-informed approaches are essential for understanding spiritual abuse, its power and impact, and, from there, essential for gaining critical empathy and insight and for providing advocacy and support for victim-survivors.

As the editor, I have tried to give contributors to this volume relatively free rein and did not impose on anyone a particular thematic focus or methodological practice.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, there is much diversity in terms of focus

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and method even in such a small volume. Robyn Ashworth-Steen and Yehudis Fletcher focus on scriptural passages and gender-based violence; Helen Paynter examines domestic abuse and violence; Elizabeth Motswapong and Tshenolo Madigele discuss the sexual enslavement of Devadasis; Rahmanara Chowdhury and Rabiha Hannan review institutional, domestic, and scriptural abuse; and Harjinder Kaur-Aujla and Christopher Wagstaff present the case study of a Sikh survivor of domestic and systemic abuse.

All chapters are the product of collaborations; the majority are co-authored. This gives insight into the emotional labour of conducting research on a topic as serious and as distressing as spiritual abuse. Research like this not only negotiates sensitivities and traumas, it also benefits from, and needs, inter-personal support. In all this, collaboration is key and gives also some sense of the networks that already exist and that are extending so that spiritual abuse can be better identified and then firmly resisted and eliminated. Our collective hope is that this book will strengthen these networks further.

#### Notes

- 1 The Principal Investigator is Gordon Lynch (formerly of the University of Kent, now at the University of Edinburgh) and the project reference is AH/W003112/1. The project has been active from March 2022 to June 2024. It was previously named “Abuse in Religious Settings” (see “Acknowledgements” for the full title).
- 2 There are other designations, such as “religious abuse,” “religious trauma,” or “spiritual trauma.” After discussion, our project changed its title from “Abuse in Religious Settings” to “Abuse in Religious Contexts.” The various denotations and particularly the subtle connotations of words are, again, complex. Several contributors to this volume evidence wrestlings with language. In the realm of our topic, two designations that regularly come into focus and under scrutiny are “victim” and “survivor.” The former acknowledges that something dreadful has been done to someone and allows for the possibility that this can be fatal (i.e. not all survive). Arguably, “victim” also implies object status and passivity (i.e. having something done to them). “Survivor,” on the other hand, could be said to confer more agency and to focus on overcoming and on recovery. “Victim” might evoke more protectiveness and “survivor” more admiration. For a fuller discussion, see RAINN (no [date](#)).
- 3 Both Justin Humphreys, of Thirtyone:eight and Lisa Oakley are part of the project (see note 1).
- 4 All of these forms of abuse exist not only across settings of multiple religious traditions but have been reported also in numerous other human organisations and communities and/or in the homes of persons affiliated with these (e.g. the military, boarding schools, the police force, and sports clubs). On the contours of spiritual abuse and its nuanced relationship with gender-based violence, see [Tomalin \(2023\)](#).
- 5 Where there is no further detail, as here, references pertain to chapters within this volume.
- 6 See note 2.
- 7 For a brief analysis of how sexual violence plays some part across religious traditions, and the various ways in which religious actors and factors enable such violence, see [Stiebert \(2022\)](#).
- 8 Singh Mandair designates the term “Sikhism” a colonial construct ([2013](#): 15). An “ism” implies something that can be labelled, captured and defined. The designation

“Sikhi” seeks to capture something much more dynamic that is closer to the Punjabi verb *Sikhana* (“to learn”) that gives Sikhi(sm) its name. Both terms – “Sikhi” and “Sikhism” – continue to be widely used.

- 9 We regret the absence of a chapter on Buddhism. A post by Ann Gleig and Amy Langenberg (2020) reports on their important and extensive survivor-centred research on abuse in Buddhist communities. Their co-authored monograph is forthcoming with Yale University Press. The first Buddhist studies conference focused on sexual violence was held on 25 October 2024 (Gleig, Langenberg and Jacoby, 2024).
- 10 As some contributors to this volume mention (e.g. Chowdhury and Hannan, with reference to abuse in UK Islamic contexts), in-depth studies on spiritual abuse in traditions other than Christian ones (which are the focus of Oakley’s research also) are considerably sparser. I have not been able to locate academic investigations of any significant depth or scope focused on spiritual abuse in Indigenous religions. This is not to say such abuse does not occur – only that research in this area is particularly rare. The literature on spiritual abuse in New Religious Movements (with relationships to both Abrahamic, or Eastern religious traditions) is more prolific (e.g., Jacobs, 2007 and multiple contributions in the edited volume by Lewis 2011).
- 11 For an annotated and regularly updated bibliography of sources, see The Shiloh Project: <https://www.shilohproject.blog/resources/> (accessed 5 February 2024).
- 12 Power and Paynter (2023) aim for something similar in their edited volume on violence and peace across six world religions.
- 13 The organisation Thirtyone:eight (named after the biblical reference Proverbs 31:8, which inculcates speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves) is there to “equip organisations, churches, other faith groups, individuals and government with the safeguarding tools they need to protect vulnerable people” (see Thirtyone:eight, “About us”). Its origins and focus lie firmly in Christian contexts but do not specify any particular Christian denomination (see also “Spiritual abuse” 2018). One inter-faith independent charity operating across religious traditions is “Replenished Life,” which, according to its website, supports “those who have experienced abuse and trauma within faith.”
- 14 Patterns evident in other forms of abuse are widely reflected in research on spiritual abuse. Hence, those who tend to have more power and representation (disproportionally, hegemonic, heteronormative, cis adult males) tend also, more often, to be among abusers of power, while those with less power and less representation (disproportionally, women, children, queer, and non-binary persons) are considerably more vulnerable to abuse.
- 15 The Makin Report is available on the website of the Church of England (see Church of England). Allegations of Smyth’s violent abuse were documented in detail well before the publication of this report, most fully in the book-length investigation by Andrew Graystone (2021).
- 16 One contributor is an ordained rabbi, another is an ordained minister, both writing of abuse in their own religious tradition within which they have held positions of some authority and leadership.
- 17 Arguably, in the case of Devadasis (see Motswapong and Madigele), being subaltern, they cannot speak (see Spivak, 1994).
- 18 I have standardised some matters of style and have minimally edited textual portions that might have jeopardised anonymity.

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