Holy Havoc: Chaplains as First Responders in Healing Spiritual Abuse

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Spiritual abuse occurs when an authority figure causes harm to a person in the name of God or a faith community, thereby diminishing that person’s sense of self. Spiritual abuse crosses religious boundaries and may be subtle or overt, mild or traumatic. As chaplains function outside the local faith community and provide support without an agenda toward a singular theological persuasion, they are well suited to serve as “first responders.” Following established theories of abuse recovery, chaplains’ interventions may help individuals to move beyond unhealthy religious encounters toward a deeper, healthier spirituality.

Who is there in all the world who listens to us? Here I am—this is me in my nakedness, with my wounds, my secret grief, my despair, my betrayal, my pain, which I can’t express, my terror, my abandonment. Oh listen to me for a day, an hour, a moment lest I expire in my terrible wilderness, my lonely silence.

—Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 BC–65 AD)

Roman Stoic philosopher

Spiritual abuse, a term coined in the early 1990s, is used widely in religious and counseling circles to refer to religion that has become unhealthy due to misuse of power. Spiritual abuse occurs when a person with real or perceived authority causes intended or unintended harm to another person through the practice of a specific spiritual belief or ritual. Experiences of spiritual abuse have been cited in many of the world’s religions. The common effect of all types of spiritual abuse is that they result in diminishment of another person’s sense of self.

Spiritual abuse may seriously undermine individuals’ spiritual health and wholeness. Many of those who experience spiritual abuse choose to forgo attention to their spiritual health rather than risk further abuse by returning to the church or faith community. The professional institutional chaplain, functioning outside the walls of traditional religious communities and meeting people in the marketplace, may be in the best position to identify spiritual abuse and to offer initial assistance to those who are open to transforming the abuse into a healthy, deeper and more meaningful experience of spirituality.

Comparison to other forms of trauma

Spiritual abuse has been studied alongside other forms of abuse and trauma. Experiences of spiritual abuse appear to resemble most closely those of violent domestic relationships. Both of these abuse situations involve ongoing relationships of trust and intimacy that, at least in some ways, have been voluntarily chosen. Expressions of abuse in both contexts tend to include verbal abuse, emotional abuse, isolation, control and thought reform.
A wide spectrum of experiences may be assumed under the umbrella of spiritual abuse. To some, the threat of spending eternity in hell’s torment is considered abusive. Others would more cautiously reserve the term for practices of thought reform and isolation, overtly illegitimate behaviors, e.g., clergy sexual or financial misconduct or holy war. Chaplains are most likely to encounter individuals who have been exposed to subtler forms of abuse such as forced obedience or submission, humiliation, intimidation, shunning and other forms of persecution, such as the following:

- A child dies after her mother listened to a pastor who insisted the mother only pray for healing, rather than also seeking medical interventions for her daughter.
- A senior adult dips into his meager savings account to make substantial contributions to his church because his minister tells him that this is the way he and his children will receive God’s blessing.
- A 40-year-old is told repeatedly that he is worthless and will not be loved or forgiven by God because he identifies as a gay man.
- A grandmother is tormented by the suicide of her grandson because the pastor told the family he had committed an unpardonable sin and would be punished in hell.

Researc[1]hing spiritual abuse
How does one determine that a religion is abusive, or a spirituality is unhealthy? Charles Kimball, Ron Enroth, David Johnson, Jeff Van Vonderen and others have enumerated factors that contribute to harmful religion. Much of the research on this topic may be reduced to three characteristics that create a climate for religious abuse:

**Power-hungry, unchecked leadership** – Individuals lack accountability, operate in secrecy, squelch dissent, set themselves up as ultimate authorities, and consider themselves immune to laws, rules and regulations.

- **Intense intolerance** – Religiously abusive systems do not allow for varying opinions, interpretations or expressions of faith and view those who do not conform in an increasingly negative (or even evil) light. Such systems thrive on separateness and isolation.

- **Individual diminishment** – Practices inadvertently or purposefully diminish self-worth, wholeness and freedom of individuals to make their own decisions and to develop their own beliefs.

In addition to authorities within the religious tradition, professionals from other disciplines also have studied the concept of unhealthy religion.

Henri Prens and Salman Akhtar, psychiatrists and editors of the book *Does God Help?*, came to the determination that “both the belief in God and the disbelief in God have normal and pathological variants,” depending on how God is understood and what behaviors such beliefs produce.

Kenneth Pargament, professor of psychology at Bowling Green State University and recognized authority in the psychology of religion, states, “A religion that is internalized, intrinsically motivated, and built on a belief in a greater meaning in life, a secure relationship with God, and a sense of spiritual connectedness with others has positive implications for well-being. Conversely, a religion that is imposed, unexamined, and reflective of a tenuous relationship with God and the world bodes poorly for well-being, at least in the short-term.”
In collaboration with Pargament, Harold Koenig, psychiatrist and director of the Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health at Duke University, conducted a study of hospitalized patients that showed those who viewed God as kind and caring tended to have better mental health than those who viewed God as punishing.9

**Spiritual distress as a diagnosis**

Spiritual distress is a diagnosis recognized by the North American Nursing Diagnosis Association as the “impaired ability to experience and integrate meaning and purpose in life through connectedness with self, others, art, music, literature, nature, and/or a power greater than oneself.”10 Spiritual distress is identified by multiple disciplines as pain or suffering that develops when a person’s meaning in life or previously held worldview is dis-integrating. While this diagnosis does not speak to abuse, per se, it recognizes that spirituality is not always benign.

**Recovering from spiritual abuse**

Theories addressing recovery from spiritual abuse range from the anecdotal and personal to the academic and researched. Some clergy recommend that the person who was abused be immersed in the positive alternative of the same belief system as soon as possible.11 Research shows, however, that while many people maintain a personal sense of faith after a spiritually abusive experience, they are understandably reluctant to re-engage with a formal faith community.12 Since the severity of spiritual abuse varies widely, two diverse theories of recovery will be reviewed briefly. The experience of individuals more acutely impacted by spiritual abuse may most closely follow the theory of Judith Herman, a psychiatrist at Harvard and author of the book *Trauma and Recovery*. From clinical interviews, Herman determined that prisoners of war and survivors of hostage situations, domestic violence and religious cults all had certain common experiences of trauma and phases of healing. Her studies led her to theorize a three-stage recovery model that focused on empowerment and creation of new connections.13

- **Safety** – naming and identifying the problem; restoring control; establishing trusted connections; developing a plan.
- **Remembrance and mourning** – reconstructing the story; transforming difficult memories; grieving the losses.
- **Reconnection** – learning to fight; reconciling with self and with the past; reconnecting with others; finding a survivor mission; finding resolution to the trauma.

Individuals who endured milder forms of unhealthy religion most likely faced less trauma; their experiences may have parallels to the process of “role exit.” While substantial research had been conducted on the process of accepting a new social identity, little had been studied about the impact of leaving one’s former identity until sociologist Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh interviewed 185 people who had left one of twelve defining roles, e.g., ex-nuns, ex-doctors, ex-convicts, transgendered individuals, and found multiple commonalities.14 From these, she theorized a four-staged process of role exit:

- **Doubts** – initial discovery of disappointment in one’s current role.
- **Seeking alternatives** – first considerations of leaving; weighing pros and cons.
- **Turning point** – public announcement of change; addressing grief factors.
- **Creating the ex-role** – formalizing the change; physical and emotional adjustments.
Not everyone recovers from spiritual abuse, and those who do sometimes take circuitous paths to get there. While each individual’s path to wholeness is unique, some commonalities in these experiences are that the individual

- Must choose recovery for her or himself,
- Needs to grieve past losses,
- Needs to share his or her story with others and have the abuse recognized and acknowledged by them, and
- Is able to forge a new identity as the old identity is integrated into her or his life and worldview.

According to author and speaker Fr. Richard Rohr, pain and suffering are inevitable parts of the human condition that may either be transmitted or transformed. Rohr believes that suffering is one of the few things in life that are strong enough to lead a person to transformation. This assertion correlates well with James Fowler’s six-stage theory of faith development. Fowler believes that of those who reach stage five, Conjunctive Faith, few do so without first having some form of life-altering struggle or suffering experience. These concepts of suffering give hope that even after serious suffering—even in the form of spiritual abuse—an individual still may be able to transform the experience into a healthy, deeper and more meaningful spirituality. As the Sufi poet Rumi noted centuries ago, “Where there is ruin, there is hope for treasure.”

**The chaplain’s role as first responder**

In the medical field, the term “first responders” refers to those who are first on the scene to provide emergency care in times of crisis. Their work is focused on triaging the most critical needs and referring individuals for further care from other professionals. Several factors make chaplains uniquely suited to becoming first responders to survivors of spiritual abuse.

Chaplains are clergy, but they work outside the walls of a local faith community. By design, chaplains meet people in everyday life. They are trained to focus on the individual’s need, not the chaplains’ own theological persuasions. Due to their code of ethics and their exposure to a wide variety of belief systems, chaplains are more likely to be able to stay present with individuals on difficult paths of doubt and transition—even when they don’t match the chaplains’ beliefs. Finally, chaplains usually have non-clergy supervision in an institution with more checks and balances than a faith community. While this doesn’t eliminate the threat that chaplains may also misuse power, it may be comforting to someone who has been abused by a clergyperson with “ultimate” religious authority.

Professional chaplains are required to meet certain competencies in order to become board certified. Among these is the skill of assessment, which assumes a certain amount of evaluation of a person’s spirituality. The task of assessing and addressing what may be considered unhealthy spirituality—while maintaining a nonjudgmental presence—may seem contradictory and certainly represents one of the chaplain’s most challenging tasks. Nevertheless, to neglect this duty is possibly to abandon the individual in matters where chaplains are the best equipped to provide assistance.

As first responders, chaplains may assist individuals to recognize and acknowledge an experience of spiritual abuse, after which the focus turns toward support and recovery. Spiritual abuse recovery occurs on a continuum. For some, it may be as straightforward as deciding that “I don’t believe this way anymore.” Others may experience many “dark nights of the soul” and need extensive psychotherapy to heal the damage to their psyches and to reconstruct a worldview that once again provides meaning.
Listening is perhaps the most important skill chaplains need in order to support individuals who are grappling with the effects of spiritual abuse. As with any experience of trauma or suffering, a person needs to have his or her experience heard, validated and named by another individual in order to begin the process of recovery. Telling and retelling the story of suffering enables the individual to feel less powerless and more able to separate him or herself from the experience.

Chaplains may be in ideal positions to hear these stories, to take them seriously and to bear witness that religion has a healthier, more vibrant and life giving component than the abusive situation the individual has experienced. Much of recovery from spiritual abuse involves grief—a phenomenon with which chaplains are uniquely acquainted. Individuals who have experienced unhealthy religion likely have multiple layers of loss, which may manifest as loss of physical and emotional health, loss of innocence, loss of trust, loss of world view, loss of relationships—including a perceived loss of relationship with God—and loss of self. By modeling healthy boundaries and an open-minded spirituality, continually triaging the individual’s needs and remaining present to the individual, chaplains provide a safe place in which to reduce the person’s sense of isolation and validate his or her experience and emotions.

Beyond remaining present to the difficult story and providing active listening, chaplains also may assist in establishing a safety plan and identifying immediate resources for support. As noted by Fowler, theological shifts and new faith understandings may follow some experiences of unhealthy religion, and support may be needed as the individual makes these transitions. Some individuals may need education about the similarities and distinctions between religion and spirituality as well as the assurance that spirituality is not dependent on a particular religious expression in order to survive and thrive. Whether the individual returns to an established community of faith, s/he will need some spiritual connectedness and support structures in order to continue to move toward wholeness. In some situations of intense trauma or complicated grief, referral for ongoing counseling may be needed.

As always, the chaplain’s role is to meet the individual where s/he is, providing spiritual assessment, clarification and support while also bearing witness, not only to great sorrow, but also to great hope.

There is a river that runs through us. It is Mystery, it is Life, some say God. It descends through my granite soul with the force of gravity and love, plunges through empty canyons, chisels out corridors with its wet hands and slowly, ever so, widens the cracks and crevices of my failures into pools where grace collects. The injury of the river is also its gift. Where I have been cut deeply, so there Life most deeply, most surely, flows.

Author note

This article was adapted from their 2012 APC conference workshop, “Holy Havoc: Chaplains’ Unique Role in Helping Heal Spiritual Abuses.” A recording of this session may be obtained via the APC website (www.professionalchaplains.org). Select Annual Conference/Past Conference Recordings/APC1205.


Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*.


Richard Rohr, “The authority of those who have suffered,” mp3 audio recording, 2005 Association of Professional Chaplains Annual Conference, Albuquerque, NM.

