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To cite this article: David J. Ward (2011) The lived experience of spiritual abuse, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 14:9, 899-915, DOI: [10.1080/13674676.2010.536206](https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2010.536206)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2010.536206>



Published online: 22 Mar 2011.



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## The lived experience of spiritual abuse

David J. Ward\*

*Social Worker, Private Practice, Brisbane, Australia*

*(Received 27 January 2010; final version received 27 October 2010)*

Over the years there has been considerable research investigating the controversial issues of cult recruitment, “mind control” and post-group difficulties of ex-members from a variety of religious groups. However, the less-well-defined phenomenon of “spiritual abuse” is still under-researched as a specific phenomenon. This is particularly evident in the lack of studies exploring the subjective, internal experience. This study reports on the lived experiences of six individuals who left five different religious groups that were essentially Judeo-Christian in their orientation. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) revealed six core themes throughout the participant narratives. They consist of “Leadership representing God,” “Spiritual bullying,” “Acceptance via performance,” “Spiritual neglect,” “Manifestation of internal states,” and “Expanding external/internal tension.” These are offered as a foundation to answer the question *What can be described as the lived experience of spiritual abuse?* The findings suggest that spiritual abuse is a multi-faceted and multi-layered experience that is both process and event, affecting the bio/psycho/social and spiritual domains of an individual.

**Keywords:** spiritual abuse; experience; cults; phenomenology

### Introduction

Spirituality is an extremely diverse and complex phenomenon, both within and across various traditions (Rose, 2007). The psychology of religion as a field of study has experienced significant growth over the last quarter century (Emmons & Paloutzin, 2003). However, there remains little written about the phenomenon of spirituality that has turned toxic; that is, via a range of psycho-social processes, it ceases to be beneficial to the adherent, but instead becomes a tool to inflict psycho-spiritual damage. While there is a vast body of literature that has examined the cult phenomena, extremely little has been written on spiritual abuse in its own right. Thus far, much extant material has revolved around various (psychological) models of cultic influence (e.g., Hassan, 1988; Lifton, 1961; Singer, 1995). These models remain conceptually and therapeutically useful in understanding complex group dynamics. However, they essentially focus on what causes group behaviour and what are the effects of the causes. While the focus on observable behaviour is useful, the models offer little insight into the subjective states of those affected. Apart from references to emotion manipulation, these empirical frameworks offer little by way of exploring internal processes and the meaning ascribed.

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\*Email: david@buildingblocks.net.au

Conversely, the field of phenomenology asserts that should one want to objectively know something, it must journey via our subjectivity. Moran (2000) writes "... the whole point of phenomenology is that we cannot split off the subjective domain from the domain of the natural world as scientific naturalism has done. Subjectivity must be understood as inextricably involved in the process of constituting objectivity" (p. 15). Objectivity and subjectivity then, are intertwined and the desire behind this research is that the exploration of subjectivity shall add a more holistic insight into the phenomenon.

The qualitative study that follows was initiated after two clinical observations by the author over many years in supporting ex-members from a range of groups. Firstly, while acknowledging that not all "unorthodox" groups or New Religious Movements harm their membership (Namini & Murken, 2009), there are groups that clearly do so. Some are indeed toxic, with clearly physically and emotionally abusive practices (Asser & Swan, 2004; Lalich, 1997; Stein, 1997).

The second observation is that harm that can be linked to group membership generally occurs on a continuum for a multitude of reasons and a clear-cut "normality versus pathology" is unhelpful (Buxant, Saroglou, Casalfiore, & Christians, 2007). However, while the "true religious cults" (in the pejorative sense) are arguably spiritually abusive, the thesis of this paper is that not all spiritual abuse is found in a "cult." Clinical experience suggests that some groups, while displaying concerning behaviours toward its membership, would be hard pressed to warrant the term. Nonetheless, there are ex-members who were subjected to boundary violations by the leadership and who experienced an array of emotional and existential difficulties as a consequence. To what extent the group process was responsible for any residual issues is open to debate.

This research was also initiated after noting three observations in the literature. Firstly, many studies that explore the experiences of ex-members in controversial groups tend to be firmly empirical in orientation (i.e., Amendros, Carrobles, & Rodriguez-Carballeira, 2007; Buxant et al., 2007; Martin, Langone, Dole, & Wiltout, 1992). Popular psychological models that are used to explain toxic groups also tend to focus on the behavioural dynamics (Hassan, 1988; Lifton, 1961; Singer, 1995). A considerable portion of the literature has investigated how groups control and influence members, recruit new members or has focused on the brainwashing controversy (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001).

Secondly, it appears that the internal, subjective experience of ex-members has not been researched as vigorously. While the more positivist research is useful in exploring a plethora of psycho/social/spiritual variables, I argue that it is equally important to explore the subjective experience. The elucidation of internal experience has been historically foundational to many helping professions and has been argued to be a prerequisite for any therapeutic relationship (Hansen, 2005). Research that explores the subjective meaning of an event also appears to be increasing. For instance, in their study of the subjective experience of Parkinson's disease, Bramely and Eatough (2005) have noted that the *meaning given* to the physical illness rather than solely the observable symptoms can often determine emotional well-being. In light of the propensity for quantitative methodologies in investigating the personal experience of ex-members and the inclination in the literature to focus on the brainwashing/recruitment controversy, it is understandable that the subjective experience has been relegated to secondary importance. Interestingly, a review of the literature suggests there is an expanding awareness of spirituality within the therapeutic domain by a range of professions (Powers, 2005).

Finally, research that explores this topic tends to equate "cult abuse" with "spiritual abuse" (i.e., Langone, 1993) or investigates the spiritual effects of childhood trauma (e.g., Bland, 2001). Admittantly there is overlap between the two concepts, such as various

boundary violations, coercive or unethical behaviour and resultant emotional distress. However, as this paper suggests, the spiritual aspect of the abuse is usually the core experiential feature for the exiting member. In other words, there is no consensual definition of “spiritual abuse” and like the term “cult,” could be defined in various ways depending on the methodology of the researcher. The heterogeneity of contemporary groups also makes it challenging (Bohm & Alison, 2001). Such definitional ambiguity is not uncommon however, and this parallels other social and behavioural phenomena where despite much examination, there remains considerable debate as to its character (e.g., Follinstad & Dehart, 2000; Haugaard, 2000).

This research then, aimed to explore an elusive, difficult-to-define phenomenon; one that is intensely personal and subjective. Given that spirituality is a deeply personal and variable phenomenon, deciding at what point it becomes toxic is problematical. Despite this, there have been some moves to address the issue. For example, Johnson and VanVonderen (1991) argued that:

Spiritual abuse is the mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining or decreasing that person’s spiritual empowerment. (p. 20)

More recently, Wehr (2000) suggested that, “Spiritual abuse is a misuse of power in a spiritual context” (p. 20). From what literature is available, the primary component appears to centre on a misappropriation of power by the leadership culminating in a range of grievances. Again, the parallels with certain sections of the cult literature become apparent. Consequently, for the purpose of this study, spiritual abuse was defined as:

A misuse of power in a spiritual context whereby spiritual authority is distorted to the detriment of those under its leadership.

This was a necessary starting point from which to initiate the study and the above definition was used in the recruiting of participants. Obviously, only those individuals who could identify with the above definition volunteered for the research.

## **Methodology**

Given purpose of the research was to explore the internal, meaning-making experience of spiritual abuse, the theoretical guide for this study was important. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) constructed by Smith (1996, 2003, 2004) acted as this guide. IPA sustains a phenomenological core by seeking to understand human experience. It also involves a detailed examination of the lifeworld of the individual and aims to gather a description of the person’s perceptions of an object or account (Smith, 2003, p. 51). Having its origins in the hermeneutic tradition, a wide use of available literature is encouraged so as to develop a richer picture of the experience. Such an approach was adopted for this study with a small sample size of six, but with an attempt to seek out a variety of individual backgrounds so as to develop a more complex picture of the phenomena.

## **Participants**

At the outset of the study, it was determined to involve participants from a variety of groups with an even gender mix. This would offer a richer account of the experience studied. Sample size within IPA is dependent on the topic under discussion; however,

it tends to favour small numbers (Smith, 2004). Via a snowball sampling, four female and two males between 39 and 77 years of age (age = 56.1 years) were willing to be involved. The average time spent in their respective group was 19.3 years with an average of 12.5 years out of the group. One male and female were married and came from the same group. The five groups from which the participants exited could be described as “Bible-based” groups; that is, doctrine and practice were loosely Christian in orientation.

### **Method**

Given the potential for individuals to be emotionally vulnerable, a number of ethical domains were considered to minimise undue distress in the interviews. Firstly, there was a telephone interview to ascertain general suitability. This was followed by a face-to-face interview to further assess emotional stability. Finally, counselling agencies were also notified should any of the participants leave the study and require psychological assistance. Over the years, the author has noted the distress of some ex-members and subsequently, steps were taken to enhance the emotional safety for the participants as they recounted their story.

Data collection was via open-ended interviews with the purpose of collecting participant interpretations of their experience (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The in-depth approach was used for two primary reasons. Firstly, it allowed the participants to choose what material to disclose and to what extent. Secondly, to impose a more rigid structure may have created an unhelpful linear time frame for the participants’ experiences. By using an open structure, the participants were encouraged to pause or expand on their experiences as they arose in consciousness. This also allowed participants and researcher to explore personal meaning in a collaborative way. Tape recording was used as opposed to video so as to reduce intrusiveness.

To ensure the interview schedule gathered useful information, a pilot interview was held with an independent individual who identified as being a victim of spiritual abuse. Productive information was collected and so the schedule remained unchanged. The data from that interview however, were not used in the analysis. Given that the aim of the research was the exploration of subjective experience, the interview schedule was designed so as to allow the participants to share their experience as unencumbered as possible. While the questions were broad in scope, emerging themes in the interviews were probed and developed as fully as possible. All participants were articulate in the retelling of their experiences and were keen to share. A “good” interview has few fixed criteria; as much a craft as it is science (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

### **Findings**

The analytic process within IPA involves the individual transcript being read numerous times so as to be fully acquainted with the material. Patterns of meaning are then distilled within the transcript and a preliminary list of sub-themes is then produced. In this phase, there were a range of sub-themes that described the lived experience of the participants such as “collective consciousness,” “family impact,” “use of fear and guilt,” “image of God,” “social isolation” and “submission to authority.” These patterns of meaning are then investigated across all the transcripts along with the use of existing literature to further elaborate the themes. These broad themes were later organised into categories that

<i>Leadership representing God</i>	(Powerful symbolic authority)
<i>Spiritual bullying</i>	(Manipulative behaviour of the leadership)
<i>Acceptance via performance</i>	(Approval of the leadership/group through obedience)
<i>Spiritual neglect</i>	(Detrimental acts of omission by the leadership)
<i>The expanding external/internal tension</i>	(Dissonance between one's inner and outer worlds)
<i>Manifestation of internal states</i>	(The bio/psycho/spiritual repercussions of the abuse)

Figure 1. Six core themes as generated from participant transcripts.

distilled the experience into six core themes that each of the six participants encountered while in their respective group. These themes are outlined in Figure 1.

The above six themes are illustrated below with verbatim narrative from the transcripts along with some brief comments. This is followed by a more detailed conceptualisation. Material in italics represents strong emphasis by the participant as he or she recounted their story.

### ***Leadership representing God***

During the interviews, all the participants explained the idea that the leadership of the group represents the highest spiritual authority. It was believed that the leadership were placed in their position by God and therefore spoke authoritatively on all areas of faith and life. It followed that if the leadership represented the highest authority (God), then essentially to obey them is to obey God; to disagree is to be in opposition to God:

You *can't* admit that you don't believe something that comes out in a publication, you can't have a different view on something that is being said from the platform. If you do, you are in opposition to *God*. (Sue)

The importance of leadership as God's mouthpiece was recounted by Mark and Liz:

I challenged him after he made a statement and I said "Are you saying to us here, that when you speak, you speak the infallible word from God?" He looked at me and said "Yes I do. I am speaking an infallible word from God". (Mark)

He [the leader] would come up with spontaneous prophecies and prophecy that God was saying 'Listen to voice of your father David, for he is righteous', so he would prophesise his own affirmation of himself you know. (Liz)

Given the deep symbolic power of leadership representing the Divine, to question them is by implication questioning God. Consequently, there is the assumption that the leadership is more spiritually advanced than the rest of the group. For example, Megan expressed the notion that they were "forced into immaturity":

Ok... here is a big one, spiritual abuse by being forced into immaturity. In other words, we were never given permission to grow; we were always hampered, or hindered. For example, if I wanted to grow in hearing more from God I was always told "Goodness me! Where did you come from? What on *earth* gives you even the grey mist of idea that you even could possible pursue that! God doesn't talk to you! You know... he only talks to us, the leadership".

Liz expressed a similar thought as she recounted the punitive parent-like treatment of the leadership:

You know, our minds were spinning with this indoctrination all the time it was all they were allowed to think and if we thought anything else we would be *sharply* rebuked or punished or

ostracised and of course they make you so co-dependant. They literally just made us children, we regressed and the way they would treat us was as children.

Each of the participants experienced this unequal power dynamic. Most felt as Mark did that it was reflective of the leader's personality:

It's something that man invented because the man at the top, [Leader] I believe is a megalomaniac. He's quite unbalanced. He is almost like Hitler, and these characters throughout history who demand *complete* obedience and they become obsessive about it so they don't know how to trust anyone. (Mark)

Mark's comment regarding the leadership's obsessionality and distrust of outsiders reveals a religious fundamentalism that sees the world only in polarities, or an "us versus them" mentality.

Corollary to such compliance is the expectation that self-directed decision making is frowned upon as Megan explains:

Permission needed to travel interstate. I needed permission to visit other Churches which had to be within our network of course. I needed permission to visit other small groups *within* our Church. It was just extraordinary. I had to get permission to go to a family function instead of a Church function. I had to get permission to go down to the Coast to visit my parents in law and explain every little thing, where I was, why I was there and why I didn't go to Church activities. (Megan)

As Megan remembers how little she could do without the leader's permission, one starts to get a sense of the dominating control found in spiritual abuse. This control extended to relationships both within and without the group.

The narratives above suggest that the combination of discouragement of self-directed action, the pressure to obey and the belief that the leadership's directives originate from God, have painful and far-reaching consequences. This was particularly so for the individual's sense of worth:

They somehow or other ruled you by making you feel that you are a failure and the only way to not be a failure was to depend on them more, trust them more, give yourself completely to them more because they had a divine revelation, they had a divine line between them and God which was greater than any connection you might have had with God. You had to hear from God through them. (Ann)

Ann's narrative indicates a spiralling double bind. The sense of failure that the leadership itself induced can only be ameliorated by more dependency. This parallels another layer of experience that the participants reported; that of a regressing to an earlier developmental stage. For example, this was Megan and Liz's awareness of "forced immaturity" and "regression." This potentially creates an even stronger tie with the leadership. This reveals some of the more subtle aspects of spiritual abuse whereby an individual discovers he or she is in a psychological trap that is difficult to make sense of and even more difficult to extract oneself from.

For others such as Sue, it has equally serious consequences such as the turning of a blind eye to domestic violence:

There are a lot of women that get abused because you are supposedly in subjection to your husband. Even if you are doing the wrong thing, because he's the head of the household you have to *take* it . . . you can't even get a restraining order because you are not allowed to take your brother to court. You have nowhere to go, if you take it to the elders . . . he can be more angry with you then he was in the first place because he has got into trouble. (Sue)

Threatening children is also not uncommon in domestically abusive situations. For Sue this too was a tremendous fear, particularly in terms of whether her children would survive the end of the world as taught in her apocalyptic group:

Also the thing of if I *didn't* live God's way then my children would pay the price and they would die an early death so there was a mixture of emotions going in there . . . It engulfed me and I thought I can't take on anymore and because they kept on saying that, the end is so close that your children's lives are at risk, I chose that I had to give my energy to that, rather than to finish my studies and follow my career in architecture. (Sue)

Once again the language used by the participants has helped to appreciate the potent forces behind this theme. The control and domination of the leadership become "God's way." Consequently, Sue experienced a "mixture of emotions" that threatened to "engulf" her to the point where she relents and forgoes personal welfare such as vocational interests. Powerful imagery such as being "engulfed" is an informative window into the internal experience of spiritual abuse.

The notion of leaders representing the Divine also had repercussions for how the participants subsequently viewed spirituality after they departed the group. For one respondent, a marked sensitivity was generated:

I don't have anything to do with the Bible. I don't have any . . . hate for God or anything against the Bible, I just . . . don't have anything against anybody else having anything that they believe but I am *extremely* sensitive to anybody trying who force their beliefs on me (Sue).

For another, there were deep feelings directed towards God:

As far as spirituality goes, for the next few years I was deeply depressed and very angry with God and I would cry myself to sleep every night just telling him how angry I was with him (Liz).

The difficulty for Ann was at a more relational and personal level:

Finding *trust* again and being able to love and accept, and allow *yourself* to be loved and accepted again is a hard thing.

Interestingly for Mark, while he felt the experience did not cloud his perceptions regarding God, a sense of apprehension remained:

As I think about it now, I am pretty sure I didn't buy it, it didn't make God some kind of a terrifying person but it certainly did do something to put a fear in me of those men.

The above highlights that individuals who have encountered spiritual abuse often share common experiences. However, they also make sense of the experience as unique individuals, interacting with their own personality and history.

In summary, a primary theme as told by all the participants is that their respective leaderships represented the Divine. The leadership had to be obeyed in order to receive validation and avoid recrimination. Since the leadership is above reproach, any mistreatment is justified due to Divine representation. As the rest of the themes below suggest, the notion that the leadership represented the Divine was the catalyst for other ill-treatment.

### ***Spiritual bullying***

Due to the fact that the leadership represented the highest spiritual authority, they were in a position to dictate to the group whatever standards of behaviour they deemed

appropriate:

And incredible bullying and recrimination around this leaving, people who left and [the leader] himself of course wrote many letters on backsliders and their fate and if you ever heard of anything bad happening to any backsliders he would make a big deal out of it and ‘this is what God does to those who leave’ and all that kind of stuff. (Liz)

In reflection, you are robbed of your right to be yourself. I haven’t used that word before it is just something that has come into my vocabulary now about it all. But we *were* seduced. In a matter of fact, a word that I have used and I don’t know if I have used it here before, two words that I have used and I noticed it here in my notes here. That on reflection, I felt that we were *violated* because emotionally, spiritually, psychologically we were *robbed* of the right to be ourselves, and we were violated. I hope this is not too strong a word, but I felt in that sense we were raped. We really were. (Mark)

Due to the fact that the leadership were subject to no accountability themselves, opportunities for bullying behaviour emerged. Language such as being ‘violated’ and ‘raped’ give some sense of the deeply personal nature of the mistreatment. Noteworthy also were the threats of doom should the member consider leaving or to any who did leave, they were considered “backsliders.”

### *Acceptance via performance*

Each of the participants in the study experienced what one participant termed “love based on performance.” That is, a spiritually abusive milieu is a performance-based system where ones’ worth is measured only in terms of productivity:

I *genuinely* feared that my children were going to pay the price and die if I couldn’t live up to God’s expectations. (Sue)

I just *pushed* myself and *pushed* myself to do the best I could. (Liz)

They somehow or other think that if you don’t twitch the way they twitch, and move the way they move you are not loyal to them. Being in it was continually like a soul searching, of flagellating of oneself because you just weren’t coming up to their standards *and it just ground you, ground you, ground you into the dust.* (Ann)

Note that the acceptance via performance is fear-based. Consequently, there is a relentless pursuit to perform. As a result, there was also a ‘soul searching’; a flagellating of oneself” to ensure no recriminations by the leadership.

### *Spiritual neglect*

Thus far, the concerns of the ex-member have been associated with emotional manipulation and hurtful acts by the leadership. However, the extensive quote below summarises the experiences of the other participants that speaks of acts of *omission*:

If you asked anybody that was not within the group [for help] it was tantamount to a slap in the face to God, because even medical help was complicated because . . . we didn’t have anyone in the medical profession within our group. My Dad was a doctor so that was fortunate because it meant I could go to him and he came under the auspice of family help, but it is a really terrible thing. We had in our group people who had psychotic episodes we had an inordinate incidents of bipolar, we had incidents of psychotic depression, we had *terrible* incidents of bulimia and anorexia and *terrible* incidents of substance abuse and sex and relationship abuse in our young people. We had a *terrible* incident of suicide, we had marital break ups, of such a *terrible* percentage, but of course you see if you had marriage problems you were kicked out of the Church because you were not walking with God because God was

punishing you and that is why you had marriage problems, so of course they would separate outside of the Church so within the Church it always looked like we had a really good record, but the truth is you would always kick out, kick people out, so if anyone started to go off rails or they started to become emotionally unstable or they had these sort of aberrant problems and they would all be told “Now separate yourselves from us because you are not pure or you’re not perfect”. (Megan)

The above was a common experience among the participants. There were many situations where a group member experienced a range of emotional or physical conditions that were not adequately addressed by those in a position to help. In fact, rather than refer to a physician or a mental health professional, the individual concerned was seen to be slipping spiritually should he or she acknowledge any difficulty or went outside the group for help. As the participant explained above, some of these difficulties were extremely serious; only for the person to be neglected at best, or blamed at worst.

### *The expanding external/internal tension*

Another theme that the participants expounded was the tension between their inner and outer worlds. At the outset of group membership, each person was able to suppress their individuality and emotional pain. However, each shared how the suppression of their individuality could not be maintained indefinitely. The demands of the group milieu, coupled with the developmentally normal drive to express individuality, eventually collided:

I remember this one day where there was this group of us together and we had all been keeping up the ‘Kingdom smile’, and one of them let it slip that they weren’t coping. *Every one* of us had been feeling the same way and were too afraid to admit it. It was just *such a revelation*, we were all able to go “So it’s not just me!” and we were all able to finally see that we weren’t alone in finding it as difficult as what we were finding it. (Sue)

I am sure I often did what was so out of kilter with my *own* character because it was so important to be accepted and to be approved. You were living under this *double bind* all the time. (Mark)

The phrase “double bind” is a valuable window into the experience of spiritual abuse. On the one hand, the member wants to please God and the leadership who represent God. However, to accomplish this requires the individual to stifle normal human nuances such as asking questions, expression of individual personality and the desire for comfort when in pain. This came at a cost as the following theme explains:

### *Manifestation of internal states*

Each of the participants recounted the physical and psychological repercussions of the previous five themes. For all of them there was a mix of physiological difficulties that they experienced as a result of the constant “double bind” they found themselves in:

I was sick. I was sick *all* the time! My health . . . I was in and out of hospital. I had major surgery and I have a lot of major surgery. I have not been healthy, I was *never* healthy as a member. (Sue)

*Interviewer:* Megan, can you tell me a little bit about what might be the tension between, as you said before, your ‘independent thinking’ and you explaining you obeyed some of these directives. How did you hold those two in tension?

*Megan:* (Laughing) Okay. That is a really interesting question isn’t it? I suppose it came out in my in stress and it came out in anger . . . it also came out for me physically. I developed gall

stones... I developed biliary colic of the liver and I developed an inflamed oesophagus and oesophageal erosion where the gastric fluids would erode my oesophageal lining and so when that all came to a head in that particular fashion where I had chronic indigestion, and it manifested because I was not allowed to [express individuality] and they could not mix.

As a consequence of the physical conditions, most of the participants sought out an external medical practitioner initially to get help. While seeking help outside the group was discouraged, the physical and emotional exhaustion was sufficient to chance any reprimand from the leadership.

## Discussion

The following section explores the six themes in more depth followed by a conceptual map of the experience. Firstly, it appears from the participants' narratives, the theme *Leadership representing God* acted as the cornerstone for the other themes. This theme was the driving force behind the others due to the fact that it was this aspect that provided the impetus for the others. In other words, much of their experiences noted in later themes would not have been tolerated were it not for the fact that during group membership, the individual perceives the authority of the leadership as binding. The leadership are seen as more pure, more spiritual and subsequently more authoritative. This creates tremendous symbolic power (Sankowsky, 1995). Each of the participants recalled how the treatment they received from the leadership was not unlike that of a chastening parent. He or she consequently tried harder to appease the leadership, only to become more dependent on them. Two participants described this process as "forced immaturity" and "regression." This negation of the self-worth of the member resembled that of a punitive parent-child relationship; the spirituality that initially was perceived by the individual as benign and deserving of obedience, is now eventually seen as "counterfeit" (Welwood, 1983).

This raises the oft-asked question about what constitutes sound spiritual authority and how to discern spiritual authority that could lend itself to the aforementioned abuses. As explained above, the theme of the leadership representing God was the foundation for the other interlocking themes, and the representation of the Divine plus little or no accountability offers a fertile field for unchecked indulgences. Of course, not all spiritual leadership is toxic. Lewandowski and Canda (1995) point out that a range of religious groups may well have controlling elements, but are balanced with other facets of group life such as open communication, clear and explicit expectations and freedom to express personal concerns.

I suggest that it is the narcissistic elements in leadership that provide the primary impetus for any coercive manipulation coupled with little accountability. Healthy spiritual leadership respects individual autonomy, tolerates and encourages critical thinking, and is appreciative of any power inequality. This is in contrast to leadership that is essentially self-serving. Kets de Vries and Miller (1985) argue that narcissism occurs on a continuum. When it's pathological, it echoes closely with the participants' experiences of leadership:

... narcissists become preoccupied with establishing their adequacy, power, beauty, status, prestige and superiority. At the same time, narcissists expect others to accept the high esteem in which they hold themselves, and to cater to their needs. What is striking in the behaviour of these people is their interpersonal exploitativeness. Narcissists live under the illusion that they are entitled to be served, that their own wishes take precedence over those of others. They think that they deserve special consideration in life (p. 588).

Healthy spiritual leadership	Toxic spiritual leadership
Leadership recognises, and is sensitive to, power issues.	Awareness of power issues, but dismissed due to narcissistic rewards through symbolic authority.
Leadership accepts the individual due to intrinsic human worth.	Acceptance by leadership dependent upon performance.
Seeks to incorporate a healthy bio/psycho/spiritual integration.	A spiritual lens takes priority to the detriment of the other facets of our humanity.
Seeks to cooperatively address spiritual needs.	Spiritual needs exploited to satisfy the narcissistic needs of the leadership.
Encourages a spirituality that can be expressed uniquely by each member within the same group.	Spirituality is narrowly built around the self-centred perspective of the leadership.
Leadership recognises and acknowledges their own personal flaws and limitations.	Leadership with poor self-awareness and self-evaluation; the group becomes an extension of the leadership's narcissistic ego.

Figure 2. Healthy spiritual leadership versus toxic spiritual leadership.

Typically for many phenomena in the social and behavioural sciences, toxic spirituality lies on a continuum and at what point it “crosses the line” can be difficult to establish. Nonetheless, tentative comparisons between healthy and unhealthy leadership can be suggested as in Figure 2.

The issue of unhealthy individual personality characteristics meshing with personality characteristics of the leadership is still unclear. Burke (2006) suggests that dependent personality structures in the membership may have been pre-existing before group membership and the narcissistic or anti-social features of the leadership facilitate their emergence. Conversely, the membership may have few pre-existing personality factors and it is the group milieu that creates any anxious dependency. It is beyond the data in this small study to speculate either way.

Two of the participants used the term *spiritual bullying* to describe a range of attitudes and behaviours by the leadership that had adverse effects. While not using the term specifically, each of the other participants described events that closely resembled “bullying” behaviour such as intimidation, rejection and emotional manipulation. A common fear in this regard was to threaten with separation from family; a behaviour common in toxic groups (Whitsett & Kent, 2003). Paralleling work-place bullying, each of the participant recounted episodes of being ignored, ridiculed and exposed to excessive fault-finding (Einarson, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003).

Each of the participants also explained that to be considered worthy or spiritual in their respective group, one must perform in accordance with group norms as set by

the leadership. An *acceptance via performance* mindset permeated the group milieu. That is, value in the group was measured by productivity; meet the expectations of the leadership and one is considered spiritually satisfactory. For a variety of reasons (e.g. health issues) should the individual not meet the ever-changing yardstick of the leadership, one was paraded to the group as spiritually weak. In this environment, perfection equates with spirituality with the resultant drive to perform. The dynamics of Divine authority (leadership representing God) coupled with a strong group consciousness, converge to create strong persuasion in the group member. For whatever reason (perceived weakness, personality factors etc), should these two processes not create the desired response in the individual, more coercive behaviours from the leadership emerge (bullying behaviours).

As the previous excerpts show, “acts of omission” were also deeply painful; what I have termed *spiritual neglect*. They represent situations in the participants’ life while in the group where they themselves or other members experienced significant relational, medical or emotional distress. However, the difficulties experienced were not addressed by the leaders. Indeed, the person concerned was usually castigated for displaying any signs of frailty and it was commonly viewed as spiritual weakness. The participants had initially viewed the leadership as having answers to any crisis at hand. Being God’s representatives, they were seen to be the final authority on life matters – regardless of whether or not the leadership had any expertise in the particular area of concern. As the participants shared, there were episodes of serious issues that included domestic violence, medical conditions and marriage breakdown. The members were incredulous at the lack of care demonstrated by the leaders. As one recalled, “I just *couldn’t believe* that they did *nothing*.” This theme revealed a profound lack of compassion at its core. Corollary with this deficiency in empathy was the tendency to blame the individual for his or her pain. The multiple layers of spiritual abuse can start to be appreciated under such “self-serving” leadership (Harwood, 2003). The participants’ accounts indicate that the leaders by virtue of their higher spiritual standing cannot be seen to be imperfect beings. It appears that the group itself was an *extension* of the leadership via the efforts to enforce compliance. When any member of the group revealed any “flaws” they were distanced from the leadership and perceived as spiritually weak. Punishment then ensued.

Another theme emerged in the study that revealed an *expanding external/internal tension*. During the early stages of group membership there was little incongruence between the individual’s inner world (personality, values) and outer world (demands of the milieu). Consequently, there is little or no tension between member and leadership; the group member wants to please those whom he or she believes are placed there by Divine choice. However, this changes over time. As the participants shared, a conflict develops between the demands of the collective and one’s individuality eventually creating friction between the individual and the leadership. The internal dissonance is fed via the previous mechanisms of spiritual bullying, a strong performance orientation and spiritual neglect. These in turn have their genesis and maintenance via the Divine authority represented in the leadership. As the participants in this study explained, these powerful forces created much internal anxiety. This internal pressure eventually builds to the extent that it manifests in a range of physical ailments. The expanding external/internal tension also creates more psychological distance between the member and leadership. The coercive tactics by the leadership initially used to produce conformity eventually backfire. As one participant declared “... *I just said to myself ‘this isn’t of God’; if this is God, I don’t want anything to do with God.*”

Another important finding in this research has been that “spiritual” abuse creates far more than existential crises; there were also significant *manifestations of internal states*.

The participants' recalled how when their physical and psychological systems reached exhaustion levels, various physiological and emotional consequences resulted. That is, the psycho-spiritual pressure had accumulated over a period of time and the result was manifested in a variety of bodily and psychological complaints. Interestingly, despite most of the respondents not experiencing physical abuse, the psychological pain from their time in the group remained long after they left and gives credit to the view that emotional abuse can sometimes be more distressing than physical abuse (O'Leary, 1999). Two of the participants used the phrase "breakdown" to describe this experience. Other participants used similar language where they reported as having panic attacks, depression, and "... the life draining out." The imagery parallels burnout, which can include elements such as emotional exhaustion, loss of idealism, somatic complaints and disillusionment (Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003).

Figure 3 is a representation of the above six themes. As it suggests, during the initial stages of group membership, there is little dissonance between the person's inner world and the demands of the outer world (i.e. group demands). The notions that the leadership represent the Divine, that they are trustworthy and are seen to be benign pastoral figures, are all accepted at the beginning. However as time progresses, performance orientation, along with bullying and neglectful behaviours create an internal tension that manifests externally. This process continues until the experience is no longer tolerable and the member departs the group. In this study, one member chose not to engage in any further formal or informal religious connection ("spiritual separation"), while the other five eventually reconnected with various Christian denominations ("spiritual rebuilding").

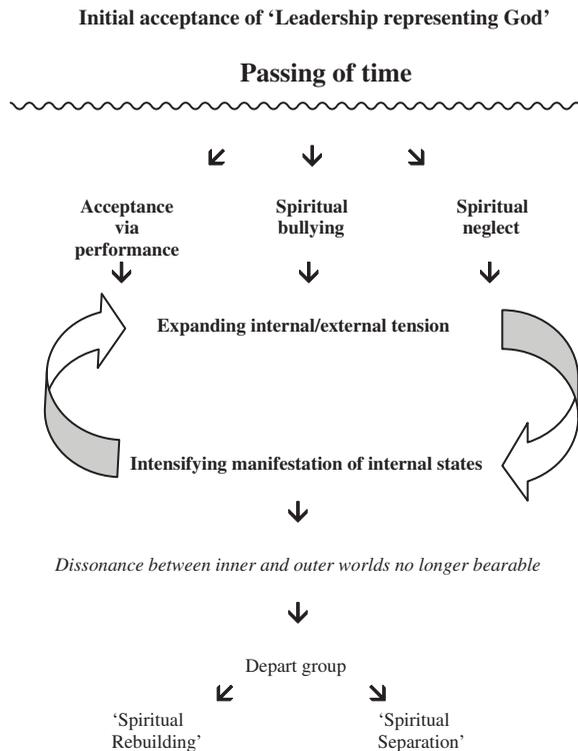


Figure 3. A conceptual map of spiritual abuse.

Several other facets also emerge from the above that help illuminate the phenomenon of spiritual abuse. Firstly, spiritual abuse is multifaceted with significant breadth in the experience. Each participant recounted a range of emotional, physical and existential responses while in their respective group. It was often difficult to make sense of an experience that concurrently involved physiological and cognitive difficulties along with emotional and spiritual confusion. Their relationships with other group members, family and ones' relationship with God were also impacted. Few areas of an individual's life remained untouched by the experience. Secondly, spiritual abuse is multilayered. The events mentioned above were often experienced *simultaneously* by the participants. Corollary to this is that the aforementioned six themes are closely linked, and where one starts and another finishes is sometimes difficult to distinguish.

This study also suggests that spiritual abuse is both process and event. The dynamics previously described are also interdependent that created circular processes that tended to reinforce each theme. For instance, when the leadership displayed any coercive or "bullying" behaviours, the internal tension for the individual increased accordingly. Should the group member display any weakness, more punitive discipline was the result. This created further frailty within the individual which in turn elevated any physiological difficulties. Throughout this process, the individual concerned experienced specific castigatory acts by the leadership that could be easily recalled many years after the event. However, it is important to note that for the participants in this study, acts of omission were often just as emotionally painful as were the more explicit coercive acts. The lack of compassion or care for group members was often the catalyst for much internal questioning; omissions by the leadership that best be described as spiritual neglect.

It is apparent from the respondent narratives that spiritual abuse is a phenomenon that contains a range of facets found in other forms of abuse where there are significant boundary violations – particularly the common experiences of domestic abuse and workplace bullying. Abuse in the home usually involves restricting various freedoms, intimidation and emotional manipulation. Similarly, workplace bullying parallels some of the experiences of the participants such as being ignored, shouted at, being threatened, excessive monitoring or fault-finding (Einarson et al., 2003, pp. 195, 196). A narcissistic leadership as described by the participants can also be found in other group-based situations such as psychotherapy (Horwitz, 2000). In each scenario, there is a strong double bind created by the dual processes of mistreatment by those in a more powerful position, and trying to keep one's internal world intact. This was the experience of the respondents in this study. For example, Sue at one point lamented:

... if I *didn't* live God's way then my children would pay the price and they would die an early death, so there was a mixture of emotions going in there... it engulfed me.

The experience of this female participant encapsulates the painful internal process that is at the very heart of spiritual abuse: *How can I live "God's way" (which I must) when "God's way" is itself a source of so much pain?*

Finally, I suggest that spiritual abuse is a phenomenon in its own right. One could argue that given many of the negative aspects of the experience were psychological or physiological, it might be better framed as "psycho-spiritual" abuse or simply "cult" abuse. However, I would argue that by doing so would dilute the core spiritual dimension that these participants found themselves in. This is in keeping with Dehan and Levi's study

(2009) of abused ultraorthodox Jewish women:

When the abuser uses the realm of the woman's spiritual experiences and connectedness beyond the self to hurt her and when the main damage does not occur at the interpersonal level, but rather at the transcendental one, the focal dimension of the abuse is spiritual (p. 1302).

Similarly, the negative interpersonal aspects that the participants in this study experienced were a direct result of the spiritual environment. Again, it was primarily due to the resolute belief that the leadership were spiritual representatives and who therefore had to be obeyed, that the resultant difficulties were tolerated for so long.

## **Conclusion**

The question that initially framed this study was "What is the lived experience of spiritual abuse?" Given the narratives of the six respondents in this study, coupled with what the literature informs us about injurious groups and their processes, I suggest that:

Spiritual abuse is a misuse of power in a spiritual context whereby spiritual authority is distorted to the detriment of those under its leadership. It is a multifaceted and multilayered experience that includes acts of commission and omission, aimed at producing conformity. It is both process and event, influencing one's inner and outer worlds and has the potential to affect the biological, psychological, social and spiritual domains of the individual.

The above was a deeply felt experience for the respondents and their recollections in this study portrayed a confused distress as they tried to make sense of what was happening to them. I argue that the mistreatment the respondents in this study experienced has the potential to be observed in any religiously based group if there are insufficient processes for the accountability of leadership. It also offers another perspective on inappropriate conduct from the leadership in groups that do not meet the sometimes rigid criteria for a religious cult. This could also be extended to one-on-one "cultic relationships" (Ward, 2000).

The study has its limitations. The sample is obviously small and one cannot generalise. Nonetheless while the study is small, it is congruent with current knowledge regarding dissonance and restrictive groups in general (Langone, 1993; Singer, 1995). While a larger sample might reveal other themes that this study could not discern, the experiences of each ex-member were remarkably similar to each other, despite exiting different groups. It therefore offers a starting point from which to understand the personal experience of spiritual abuse.

Second, while five out of the six participants exited different groups, they all departed groups that had a Christian-based core. This is acknowledged as a potential limitation as it could have been fruitful to interview those who had left non-Christian-based spirituality. The limitation of self reports must also be acknowledged. There was the reliance on the participant's ability to recall their experiences, sometimes many years after the event. The very act of sharing one's story has the potential to change the story in terms of detail or emphasis. I therefore acknowledge Kvale and Brinkmann's point (2009, p. 183) that the transcripts are co-authored by subject and interviewer. Nonetheless, each participant was able to recall in particular detail the events of their experience and the six core themes outlined above were strikingly common throughout all the narratives.

In conclusion, the above study has obtained a picture of the phenomenon of spiritual abuse. It has articulated a complex experience and has provided insight into some of the difficulties of remaining in, and exiting out of, controversial religious groups. It has

documented the importance of viewing persons as composite beings and that no one aspect of their life can be disconnected from the whole. The study also demonstrated that spirituality is not always experienced positively. Like many facets of life, one's spiritual life can be manipulated by others. Upon reflection, perhaps the experiences of the participants in this study support the notion that "where love is absent, power occupies the vacancy."

### Acknowledgements

This study formed the basis for the author's MPhil thesis in the School of Social Work, University of Queensland (Ward, 2007). Deepest appreciation to Dr Rose Melville and Associate Professor Judith Murray, and the anonymous reviewer.

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