

From Spiritual Coercion to Systemic Harm: The Role of Power Abuse in the Escalation of Violence Against Vulnerable Populations in Religious Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the phenomenon of power abuse within religious institutions as a key structural factor in the escalation of violence against vulnerable populations, with profound societal implications. Drawing on an interdisciplinary approach that integrates law, sociology of religion, and trauma psychology, this research seeks to demonstrate that spiritual coercion constitutes a distinct form of abuse underlying multiple manifestations of institutional violence. The central hypothesis posits that spiritual authority, when exercised without oversight, may devolve into coercive dynamics that obscure, justify, and perpetuate sexual, psychological, economic, and symbolic violence. Such violence primarily impacts the quality of life, psychological well-being, and social development of victims, their families, and communities at large.

The study employs qualitative analysis of paradigmatic cases documented between 1995 and 2024 in Latin America, Europe, and North America, supported by documentary sources (official reports, judicial rulings, legal doctrine) and interviews with expert professionals, alongside the authors' direct experience in addressing abuse within religious contexts. The analysis reveals recurring structural patterns: closed hierarchical structures, absence of external oversight, theological narratives weaponized to justify subjugation, and institutional silencing mechanisms.

Results confirm that spiritual abuse is neither anecdotal nor isolated but rather a systematic form of symbolic and institutionalized violence. In response, this article proposes the legal recognition of spiritual abuse as an autonomous category, the creation of independent oversight bodies, and institutional reforms grounded in transparency, horizontal governance, and human rights principles.

Key words: Spiritual abuse, Abuse prevention in religious settings, Abuse of power, Safeguarding minors in the church, Ecclesiastical misconduct

INTRODUCTION

Scandals involving sexual abuse within religious institutions have exposed systemic violence often cloaked in moral and spiritual authority. Such violence transcends individual criminal acts, finding sustenance in institutional dynamics that normalize subjugation, silence victims, and promote impunity. Despite growing scholarly attention, legal analysis of power abuse in religious contexts—particularly through the lens of spiritual coercion—remains inadequately systematized.

This article advances a conceptual and legal expansion of the phenomenon, framing spiritual abuse as a necessary category to comprehend how sacred power may transform into an instrument of structural violence. Through an interdisciplinary lens, it examines the escalation of harm from spiritual manipulation to severe institutional violence and criminal acts.

Theoretical-Conceptual Framework

Spiritual Abuse and Religious Coercion

Spiritual abuse may be defined as the manipulative use of religious elements to control, dominate, or exploit individuals or groups [1]. This includes leveraging fear of divine punishment, emotional manipulation through concepts of “sin,” and social isolation under the guise of “spiritual purity.” Such practices engender submission and dependency, creating fertile ground for sexual and psychological abuse [2].

Structural and Symbolic Violence

Building on Galtung (1990), structural violence refers to systemic harm arising from social structures rather than individual acts of aggression. In religious contexts, this violence is perpetuated through sacred symbolism, the unquestioned authority of spiritual leaders, and doctrines framing suffering as “divine will” [3].

Bourdieu (1999) observes that symbolic power operates through the unconscious complicity of its subjects, reproduced via habitus. This explains why victims of religious abuse often refrain from reporting, rationalize mistreatment, or deny it outright [4].

Legal Framework: Normative Gaps

Legally, spiritual abuse lacks autonomous classification in most jurisdictions, severely limiting its judicialization. Such practices are typically subsumed under crimes like sexual abuse, psychological harm, or coercion, thereby obscuring the specificity of spiritual harm [5].

METHODOLOGY

An exploratory qualitative methodology was employed, integrating three primary techniques to examine spiritual abuse dynamics. The study prioritized methodological transparency, data triangulation, and ethical rigor, as detailed below.

Documentary Review

A systematic analysis of 108 national and international reports was conducted, including:

- **Government inquiries:** Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013–2017), Sauvé Commission Report on sexual abuse in the French Catholic Church (2021).
- **UN documents:** Committee on the Rights of the Child reports (2014), OHCHR guidelines on religious freedom (2019).
- **Legal rulings:** Cases adjudicated in Argentina (1998–2023), Spain (2001–2024), and the U.S. (1995–2024).

Selection criteria:

- Relevance to spiritual coercion, institutional cover-ups, or victim silencing.
- Publication between 1995–2024 to capture contemporary patterns.
- Geographic diversity (Latin America: 45%, Europe: 30%, North America: 25%).

Thematic coding using NVivo identified recurring patterns (e.g., “theological manipulation,” “hierarchical secrecy”), cross-referenced with legal and psychological literature (Salter, 2003; Oakley & Kinmond, 2013).

Case Studies

Twenty adjudicated cases were analyzed, selected through purposive sampling:

Inclusion criteria:

- Judicial rulings confirming abuse within religious institutions.
- Evidence of spiritual coercion (e.g., doctrinal threats, isolation).
- Institutional diversity (Catholic: 10 cases; Evangelical: 6; non-denominational: 4).

Examples:

- *Case 12 (Mexico, 2018)*: A Pentecostal pastor used "divine revelations" to coerce sexual acts from female congregants.
- *Case 5 (Italy, 2020)*: A Catholic priest exploited confessional secrecy to silence victims.

Data extraction focused on victim impact statements, perpetrator modus operandi, and institutional responses.

Semi-Structured Interviews

a) Participants:

- **Victims/survivors**: 14 individuals (8 women, 4 men, 2 non-binary; aged 18–65).
- **Practitioners**: 8 legal experts, 6 clinical psychologists, 4 clergy members (all anonymized).

b) Protocol:

- Interviews (60–90 minutes) were conducted virtually or in-person (2022–2023), guided by open-ended questions:
 - *"How did spiritual authority influence your experience?"*
 - *"What institutional barriers hindered justice?"*
- Recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed via inductive coding, identifying themes like "spiritual gaslighting" and "institutional betrayal."

c) Triangulation:

- Interview findings were cross-verified with case study evidence and documentary themes (e.g., victim narratives aligned with judicial records in 85% of cases).
- Discrepancies (e.g., underreported economic abuse) were flagged for further analysis.

d) Ethics:

- Informed consent obtained; trauma-informed protocols minimized re-victimization.
- Participant quotes anonymized (e.g., *"They said my doubts were Satan's work"* — Survivor 3, Colombia).

3.4. Data Triangulation and Validity

To ensure robustness:

1. **Methodological triangulation**: Combined document analysis, case law, and interviews.

2. **Investigator triangulation:** Two researchers independently coded 30% of data, achieving 92% inter-coder reliability.
3. **Theoretical triangulation:** Findings contextualized through Galtung's structural violence and Foucault's biopower frameworks.

RESULTS

Empirical analysis identified recurring patterns in power abuse within religious contexts, organized across three levels: abuse escalation, structural institutional factors, and vulnerability profiles. Interpretation was guided by the premise that spiritual abuse thrives within institutional systems that enable, tolerate, and reproduce violence through authority structures and symbolic apparatuses.

Abuse Escalation: From Spirituality to Systemic Subjugation

Cases reveal a tiered progression of religious institutional violence, beginning with ostensibly benign spiritual guidance and escalating to severe sexual, economic, and psychological aggression. This progression comprises four interconnected phases:

a) Initiation Phase: Spiritual Seduction and Charismatic Recruitment

Victims—often vulnerable due to age, gender, economic status, or prior trauma—are approached through discourses emphasizing “unconditional love,” “forgiveness,” “spiritual healing,” and membership in a “chosen community.” Religious leaders exploit charisma, theological training, and moral standing to cultivate emotional and spiritual dependence [1].

“He told me God had chosen me, that I was special, and that my pain was part of His divine plan. I felt seen for the first time.” — Victim testimony, Case 4.

b) Spiritual Coercion Phase: Constructing Subjugation

Once trust is established, leaders introduce doctrines of absolute obedience, spiritual guilt, fear of damnation, and isolation from external networks. Phrases such as “God speaks through me,” “doubt is sin,” or “leaving the community is abandoning God” erode personal autonomy via spiritual manipulation [2].

c) Abuse Phase: Boundary Violations

Spiritual subjugation enables acts otherwise deemed unacceptable, including:

- Sexual abuse framed as “sacred acts” or “purification rites.”
- Economic exploitation through coerced tithes, donations, or asset transfers.
- Psychological violence via guilt-inducing narratives and control over intimate behavior (attire, relationships, diet, sexuality).

d) Silencing and Re-Victimization Phase

When victims challenge or report abuse, institutional mechanisms activate to suppress disclosure, including:

- Threats of spiritual exclusion.
- Theological reinterpretation of suffering.
- Transfer or concealment of perpetrators.
- Accusations of “attacking the Church” or “serving demonic forces.”

Structural and Institutional Facilitators

Five structural factors emerged across cases:

1. **Charismatic Authority and Institutional Verticalism:** Centralized spiritual authority in male leaders claiming exclusive divine interpretation.
2. **Absence of External Oversight:** Autonomy under religious freedom principles fosters ineffective self-regulation.
3. **Theology of Suffering and Sacrifice:** Doctrines glorifying pain as sanctification inhibit harm recognition.
4. **Culture of Secrecy and Fear of Scandal:** Institutional prioritization of reputation over victim welfare.
5. **Deficient Human Rights and Gender Training:** Normalized control under the guise of spiritual guidance.

Vulnerability Profiles

Populations at heightened risk include:

- **Women:** Controlled in sexual expression and autonomy, often under pretexts of “purification.”
- **Children/Adolescents:** Susceptible to spiritual authority; frequent targets of child sexual abuse.
- **LGBTQ+ Persons:** Subjected to conversion therapies, exorcisms, and public condemnation.
- **Individuals in Grief/Crisis:** Exploited during emotional vulnerability to foster dependence.
- **Persons with Disabilities:** Isolated or labeled “spiritually possessed.”

DISCUSSION

The study confirms spiritual coercion as an institutionalized control mechanism with profound mental health and human rights implications. Foucault’s biopower concept elucidates how religious institutions regulate bodies and subjectivities, conditioning agency and obstructing protected reporting.

Legally, the absence of spiritual coercion as an autonomous offense perpetuates impunity. Incorporating it as an aggravating factor would enhance visibility and enable context-sensitive investigative protocols.

Policy recommendations include intersectoral prevention strategies, specialized training for justice and health professionals, and culturally attuned psychosocial support networks.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study underscores spiritual abuse as a systemic mechanism of violence entrenched in religious institutions, enabled by hierarchical secrecy, theological manipulation, and institutional impunity. The qualitative triangulation of documentary evidence, case law, and victim-practitioner testimonies reveals that spiritual coercion operates as both a precursor and perpetuator of harm, necessitating urgent legal, policy, and cultural interventions. While the proposed recommendations provide actionable steps, their efficacy hinges on sustained interdisciplinary collaboration and empirical validation. Below, we outline a roadmap for future research and implementation.

Legal and Policy Recommendations

- **Legal Recognition:** Codify spiritual abuse as an autonomous offense (e.g., France’s 2021 anti-sectarian law) and an aggravating factor in related crimes.

- **Adapted Reporting Protocols:** Develop gender-sensitive, rights-based procedures ensuring confidentiality and victim support.
- **Multidisciplinary Training:** Equip justice, health, and community stakeholders to identify and address spiritual abuse.
- **Intersectoral Policies:** Foster collaboration among governments, civil society, and religious entities to protect vulnerable groups.
- **Specialized Prosecutorial Units:** Establish offices dedicated to institutional religious violence.
- **Community Education:** Promote awareness campaigns to empower congregants and ensure accountability.
- **Comparative Research:** Encourage transnational studies to refine intervention models.

Implementation of these measures will dismantle systemic violence in religious institutions, safeguarding dignity, freedom of conscience, and the well-being of vulnerable populations.

The fight against spiritual abuse demands a paradigm shift—from viewing it as isolated misconduct to recognizing it as structural violence. By integrating legal innovation, community empowerment, and rigorous research, societies can dismantle systems that weaponize faith against the vulnerable. As the Sauvé Commission (2021) starkly concluded, “Silence is complicity.” Only through sustained, collective action can institutions be transformed into spaces of safety and spiritual integrity.

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