

# Understanding and Evaluating the Category of Spiritual Abuse

The misuse of authority in leadership is a real problem that exists in the church and in the culture. But recently, the term ‘spiritual abuse’ has been used by some as a category that only applies to Christians and other religious groups. This workshop will examine attempts to define ‘Spiritual Abuse’ in this wider context - attempts that, while sincerely meant, have certain drawbacks in terms of diagnostic precision, legal mission creep, and religious liberty. Alternative definitions will be examined, albeit within a framework that holds the needs of victims and survivors in this context as central.

**David Hilborn** is Principal of Moorlands College, UK. Moorlands is an interdenominational evangelical college based near Christchurch in Dorset, with regional training centres in Birmingham, Torquay and Gloucester. He was previously Principal of St John’s College, Nottingham and Assistant Dean of St Mellitus College. Before that he was Head of Theology at the Evangelical Alliance UK for nine years, also serving on the Executive of the World Evangelical Alliance Theological Commission. David is an ordained Anglican minister and was a member of the Church of England’s Faith and Order Commission from 2006-2016. He currently chairs the Evangelical Alliance’s Theological Advisory Group. He is a graduate of the Universities of Nottingham (BA, PhD) and Oxford (MA), and has led or served on the ministry teams of five local churches. He has authored or edited several books, including *Picking Up the Pieces* (Hodder), *The Nature of Hell*, *‘Toronto’ in Perspective*, *One Body in Christ*, *Movement for Change* (Paternoster) and *The Atonement Debate* (Zondervan). David is a Londoner by birth and is married to Mia, a senior hospital chaplain. They have two grown-up children. He loves cricket and enjoys a wide range of music.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Recent Proliferation of ‘Spiritual Abuse’ (‘SA’) discourse

- 1.1.1. Linked to church-based sexual abuse scandals (RC cases, Peter Ball, John Smyth, IICSA)
- 1.1.2. Spurred by raised statutory profiles of bullying, harm, hate speech, coercion and control
- 1.1.3. Promotion within firmer frameworks of Safeguarding (e.g. CCPAS/thirty-one:eight)
- 1.1.4. Academicization of previously intra-evangelical pastoral concerns (Oakley & Kinmond 2013)
- 1.1.5. Politicization by opponents of Classic Evangelicalism, Christianity and religion as such (Jayne Ozanne; UK National Secular Society)

### 1.2 Key Challenges and Problems in ‘SA’ discourse

- 1.2.1 Incoherent reassertion of Erastianism (Hilborn 2019)
- 1.2.2 Unworkable call for secular statutory bodies to arbitrate specifically theological concerns
- 1.2.3 Mission-creep from intra-ecclesial healing for ‘heavy shepherding’ to legal sanction
- 1.2.4 Evangelical Alliance report and critique (2018)

## 2. ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF ‘SA’ DISCOURSE

- 2.1.1 Initial Evangelical context: Johnson & Van Vonderen (1991); Enroth (1992); Blue (1993)
- 2.1.2 Domination/bullying; misused ecclesial power, leading to shame, anxiety, depression
- 2.1.3 Legal corollaries of ‘SA’ in ‘Emotional and Psychological Abuse’ (case study from UK)

- 2.1.4 Emotional Abuse a form of child abuse alongside sexual, physical and neglect-based abuse
- 2.1.5 Psychological Abuse as sub-set of Common Assault
- 2.1.6 Psychological abuse and ‘Coercion and Control’
- 2.1.7 Varied contexts for Psychological Abuse: martial; medical; sporting; theatrical; party-political; Hollywood; #MeToo; TimesUp; John Berkow accusations; British Cycling. Yet context typically supervened by commonality of Psychological Abuse.

### **3. ATTEMPTS TO DEFINE ‘SA’ AS A DISTINCT CATEGORY OF ABUSE, OR A DISTINCT SUB-CATEGORY OF EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE**

#### **3.1. Formative ‘Popular’ Pastoral Definitions: Johnson & van Vonderen; Enroth; Blue:**

- 3.1.1. ‘Justified’ by appeal to the divine, or to sacred texts/ defined as having divine authority
- 3.1.2. Enacted by people associated in their role or function as religious
- 3.1.3. Perpetrated in settings identified in one way or another as religious

#### **3.2 Academicization of ‘SA’: Oakley & Kinmond (2013)**

Spiritual abuse is coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. The target experiences spiritual abuse as a deeply emotional personal attack. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or the pulpit to control behaviour, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a ‘divine’ position, and isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context. (*Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, p.21.)

#### **3.3 Recent cases presented ‘SA’ – Timothy Davis, John Smyth, Jonathan Fletcher, Steve Timmis**

### **4. BIBLICAL BASES FOR DISTINCTIVELY CHRISTIAN CONSTRUALS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE**

- 4.1. Matthew 23:4; 13; 23 – burdensome, exclusivist, legalistic religious leaders
- 4.2. Mark 10:42-3 – ‘lording over’ v. serving
- 4.3. Titus 1:10-11 – ‘empty talkers and deceivers’
- 4.4. Relevant areas prompting church discipline: a) Internal dispute Matthew 18:15-20 b) Divisiveness: 1 Cor. 5:1-13; Rom. 16:17-18; 2 Tim. 4:14; Titus 3:9-11; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; 3 John 9-10 c) False teaching: Gal. 1:8-9; 8; 1 Tim. 1:18-20; 1 Tim 6:3-5; 2 John 9-11; Rev 2:14-16

### **5. CRITIQUE: PROBLEMS WITH ‘SA’ DISCOURSE**

#### **5.1. Intended and unintended echoes of Erastianism**

- 5.1.1. Erastianism as the ‘doctrine that the civil state has final earthly authority over expression and practice of religious beliefs’ (Little, 1992: 122).
- 5.1.2. Example A: Jayne Ozanne, ‘‘Spiritual Abuse – the Next Great Scandal for the Church’ (Royal College of Psychiatrists Lecture, April 2017 and follow-up)
- 5.1.3. Example B: CCPAS/thirty-one:eight campaign to elevate ‘SA’ into statutory nomenclature

## **5.2.Intended & unintended consequences for religious liberty**

- 5.2.1. John Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689): ‘the Magistrate’s Power extends not to the establishing of any Articles of Faith, or Forms of Worship by the force of...Laws. For Laws are of no force at all without Penalties, and Penalties in this case are absolutely impertinent because they are not proper to convince the mind’. (Oxford: OUP, 2016 [1689], p.129.)
- 5.2.2. Timothy Garton Ash: too many ‘bad, anachronistic, inconsistent, vacuous and counterproductive’ applications of laws to distinctively theological concerns in modern secular pluralist states (*Free Speech: Ten Principles for a Connected World*, London: Atlantic, 2016, pp.270-71). E.g. ‘Incitement to Religious Hatred’ (2006) qualified to include ‘all belief systems’.

## **5.3.Intended and unintended consequences for social cohesion**

- 5.3.1. ‘Spiritual’ Abuse overwhelmingly formulated by and applied to Christians and Christianity, *but...*
- 5.3.2. ‘Spiritual’ inherently requires application to *all* faiths, including non-theistic religions
- 5.3.3. Danger of culture war if different traditions within and across religions use ‘SA’ as weapon

## **5.4.Intended and unintended consequences for legislative overreach/mission creep**

- 5.4.1. Judges, lawmakers & police not equipped to arbitrate specifically theological dimensions of ‘SA’
- 5.4.2. Court *sentencing* for abusive paedophile priest may be heavier due to priestly duty of care, but same would apply to atheist youth worker or agnostic paediatric surgeon who abuse.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

- 6.1 Churches may discipline emotional and psychological abusers in their midst *over and above* law, in relation to distinctive biblical/theological precepts not reflected in law, but as a *supplement* to law, not a *substitute* for it
- 6.2 ‘SA’ akin to amorphous psychological terms of 100 years ago – ‘The Vapours’, ‘Shellshock’, ‘Hysteria’. More precise and coherent diagnosis needed (cf. clinical depression, bipolar disorder, functional neurologic disorders, PTSD).
- 6.3 Better diagnosis aids better treatment!
- 6.4 ‘SA’ discourse needs re-thinking, and resisting – for reasons expounded here.

***Suggested Readings:***

Evangelical Alliance, *Reviewing the Discourse of 'Spiritual Abuse'*. London: EA, 2018. <https://www.eauk.org/assets/files/downloads/Reviewing-the-discourse-of-Spiritual-Abuse.pdf>

David Johnson & Jeff Van Vonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing and Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority Within the Church*. Bethany House, 1991.

Lisa Oakley & Kathryn Kinmond, *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2013.

Lisa Oakley & Justin Humphreys, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse*. SPCK, 2019.

David Hilborn, 'Reviving Erastianism? 'Spiritual Abuse', Religious Liberty and the Paradoxes of Post-Christendom', *Affinity Bulletin* (40), Feb

2019 <http://www.affinity.org.uk/downloads/The%20Bulletin/issue-40/bulletin-40---final.pdf>