

Abuse of Power, Spiritual Abuse, and Abuse of Conscience: Similarities and Differences

Johannes Häuselmann - Francisco Insa¹

Translation from the article HÄUSELMANN, J. – INSA, F., *Abuso di potere, abuso spirituale e abuso di coscienza: Somiglianze e differenze*, «Tredimensioni» 20 (2023), pp. 42–53.

Introduction

In recent decades, the scandal of sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable people by some clergy representatives has shocked the Church. A closer and more in-depth analysis, however, shows that these crimes were often preceded by another type of abuse, which is psychological and has also been found in various situations without necessarily having a sexual purpose or resulting in physical contact. Many terms describe these dynamics, but the most widely used are “abuse of power,” “psychological abuse,” “spiritual abuse,” and “abuse of conscience.” In this article, these expressions will be compared in order to be able to grasp their similarities and differences.

1. Spiritual abuse and psychological abuse

The expression *spiritual abuse* is relatively recent and comes from a reflection regarding a movement called *heavy shepherding* or *discipling*, which arose in Protestant circles in the U.S. in the late 1960s.² Disciples who joined it were required to submit totally to the pastor and consult him on all personal decisions, such as, for example, in choosing a partner to marry or a job. The aim was to foster faster spiritual growth of members and greater missionary success of the movement. After an initial phase of popularity, they realized that the rigid authoritarian structures, based on a supposed biblical foundation, were, instead, bound to cause various psychological damages to the members. It was precisely to describe these negative aspects in the religious sphere that, soon, the term *spiritual abuse* began to be used in the US. In studying this phenomenon, it became clear that there were similar dynamics and symptoms in the victims as in other forms of psychological abuse. Domestic abuse, for example, is characterized by control, restriction of freedom, intimidation and emotional manipulation. Another example

¹ Johannes Häuselmann, priest, licentiate in Moral Theology at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross (Rome). Francisco Insa, priest, professor of Moral Theology and secretary of the Center for Priestly Formation at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, psychiatrist.

² Cf. L. OAKLEY - K. KINMOND, *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2013, pp. 7-10.

would be workplace *bullying (mobbing)*, in which individuals feel ignored, yelled at, threatened, over-monitored, or blamed.

Despite these similarities between different forms of psychological abuse, it is possible to say that spiritual abuse is a phenomenon in its own right. What distinguishes it is both the context and the religious motivation: this abuse, in fact, is always exercised in the name of God.

How can spiritual abuse be defined? Several authors have attempted to delimit the concept. We can summarize their proposals into three categories that are not mutually exclusive³:

(a) Pastors who cause spiritual wounds.⁴ This category describes a *personal situation of asymmetry* of the “teacher-disciple” type, in which the person in authority takes advantage of the vulnerability of another person, who has turned to him/her for help to grow spiritually.

(b) Coercive systems. This refers to *systematic coercive and controlling behaviour in the context of a religious institution or aggregation*.⁵ This model reveals that the environment is an important feature for abuse to occur. Several authors have shown that the more closed a system is, the greater the risk of spiritual abuse occurring. In fact, while in the Protestant environment whole communities with a sectarian structure have been most affected, in the Catholic environment spiritual abuse has occurred not so much in parishes as in congregations and new communities.

(c) The violation of spiritual self-determination.⁶ All people have a deep need for spirituality and are in some way seeking meaning for their lives. At the same time, however, every person has the fundamental right to freely choose the way in which to accomplish it and the way of life that best suits him or her. This *spiritual right to self-determination* is violated in various ways and intensities in cases of spiritual abuse.

Without pretending to be exhaustive, we can distinguish some actions that, to a greater or lesser degree, signify spiritual abuse:

³ Cf. W. SCHAUPP, *Spiritueller Missbrauch: Eine theologisch-ethische Analyse*, in G. HÖRTING (ed.), *Grauzonen in Kirche und Gesellschaft: geistiger Missbrauch*, LIT Verlag, Wien 2021, pp. 81-86.

⁴ Cf. K. BLUE, *Healing Spiritual Abuse: How to Break Free from Bad Church Experience*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove (IL) 1993, p. 12; D. JOHNSON - J. VAN VONDEREN, *The Destructive Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing and Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority Within the Church*, Passaggio, Bigarello - Mantua 2015, p. 21; D. S. WEHR, *Spiritual Abuse: When Good People do Bad Things*, in P. YOUNG-EISENDRATH - M. MILLER (eds.), *The Psychology of Mature Spirituality*, Routledge, London 2000, p. 49; I. TEMPELMANN, *Geistlicher Missbrauch: Auswege aus frommer Gewalt. Ein Handbuch für Betroffene und Berater*, SCM R. Brockhaus, Holzgerlingen 2018, p. 22.

⁵ Cf. L. OAKLEY - J. HUMPHREYS, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures*, SPCK Publishing, London 2019, p. 31.

⁶ Cf. D. WAGNER, *Spiritueller Missbrauch in der katholischen Kirche*, Herder, Freiburg 2019, p. 79.

- The abuser stands between God and the person concerned, presenting himself or herself or accepting that the other person regards him or her as an “oracle” who conveys the immediate divine Word and to which nothing can be objected.
- The abuser requires (or allows) that you consult him or her on any personal decisions.
- The abuser makes decisions in the person’s place even on basic life choices (e.g., “you must—or you must not—marry this person”), making him believe that this is God’s only will and omitting that his directions should be considered mere advice.
- The abuser more or less blatantly insinuates (or even imposes) on the person concerned his or her way of understanding and will.
- The abuser claims exclusivity over the soul of the abused, who is implicitly or explicitly forbidden to go to other people for spiritual help.
- The abuser places himself at the center of the person’s life, making him or her emotionally dependent on himself, through privileges and/or gifts, limiting contact with other people or groups (including his family) that do not conform to his views.
- The abuser demands (or allows) blind and unquestioning obedience.
- The abuser manipulates the person by forcing the relationship to gain benefits: he, for example, exploits the virtues or faults of the other person to his own advantage by putting the other person in a extreme situation, pressuring him or her to awaken feelings such as compassion, guilt, sense of inferiority, etc.⁷
- The abuser has an ambiguous approach to the truth, which changes according to his own needs by applying *gaslighting* techniques⁸: for example, reverses his own advice 180 degrees in a short time;⁹ denies facts and events, even if there is evidence; does not accept criticism and does not want to discuss problems objectively; puts all the blame on the victim; tells lies; does not keep promises made; offers positive reinforcement with the purpose of manipulation; generates confusion in the victim in order to make him/her doubt himself/herself; turns other people against the victim, claiming, for example, that the victim is losing his/her mind; etc.¹⁰

⁷ Cf. F. Insa, *The Formation of Affectivity: A Christian Approach*, St. Augustine's Press, South Bend (IN) 2023, p. 298.

⁸ The term *gaslighting* comes from the play by British playwright Patrick Hamilton *Gas Light* (1938). It has been used in English and German to refer to certain types of psychological manipulation, consisting of trying to drive a person crazy by making him/her believe that what he/she sees or feels is not real.

⁹ For example, the abuser, in order to exert control, claims at first that the victim has a vocation to the priesthood and then denies it later by stating that he/she is called to form a family instead.

¹⁰ Cf. *10 tecniche tipiche del Gaslighting: impara a riconoscerlo per difenderti*, in <https://www.guidapsicologi.it/articoli/gaslighting-imparare-a-riconoscerlo-per-proteggerti> (accessed 08/14/2023).

- The abuser threatens or blackmails, implicitly or explicitly, the victim through diminishing affection, exclusion and/or isolation from the group, defaming and slandering the victim: in doing so, he destroys the community environment and the victim’s relationship with it.
- The abuser, by prophesying over the victim’s life, endows the victim with a false spiritual identity that is unattainable in practice, but to which he/she must conform (by, for example, requiring him/her to copy another person who achieves very high levels—often a saint or leader—to the smallest detail).
- The abuser disregards the law of gradualness and forces spiritual growth against and at the expense of human nature, misrepresenting and distorting the true relationship between grace and nature.
- The abuser “mystifies” and “spiritualizes” physical and psychological suffering, either by making the victim feel that he or she does not need to seek help from a professional (a doctor, psychotherapist, etc.), or by belittling or despising psychological support.
- In the case of institutions, in order to gain new members for their community, they conceal one or more consequences of being part of it. For example, the use that the members can make of the material goods, the exigency of living in community or solitude, the availability to move frequently, the limitation in relationships (especially with their own family), etc.¹¹

2. Spiritual abuse and abuse of power

Both abuse perpetrated by an individual and by a system present a *situation of asymmetry*, which may be of the “teacher-disciple” or “individual-institution” type. In both cases, the individual freely establishes a relationship, taking it for granted that the guidance offered to him or her will always be for his or her own good, and therefore, it is highly likely that he or she will tend to follow it while also lowering his or her own critical level. A key concept appears here: trust inevitably makes us vulnerable.¹² Therefore, we must reject the assumption that only minors or people with physical or psychological deficiencies can be abused. In fact, personality analysis of victims shows that the most zealous people, who want to grow in the spiritual life, are precisely among the most

¹¹ The casuistry would be endless, but our intention is to emphasize that at least the main aspects of the way of life must be explicitly explained before the candidate takes his or her first steps toward vocation. A very sensitive issue is to what extent “a total gift of self to God” is sufficient without further specification.

¹² Cf. D. DE LASSUS, *Abuses in the Religious Life and the Path to Healing*, Sophia Institute Press, Manchester (NH) 2023, Chapter 10.

vulnerable to spiritual abuse.¹³ The problem comes when the person in authority takes advantage of the vulnerability of the one who seeks help from him/her to grow spiritually.

We can conclude that any abuse is always an abuse of power. But what power are we talking about? In the ecclesiastical sphere, there are two types of authority:

(a) *The power of governance*. This is the *ecclesiastical power or office*, which includes a hierarchical superior (bishop, religious superior, head of an institution, etc.) whose competencies are defined by Canon Law, rules, statutes, etc. In the case of consecrated persons, the vow of obedience applies to what is established by the rule.¹⁴ Abuse would occur when the superior imposes a subordinate to do something that is not within the latter's obligations.

(b) *Moral authority*. It happens when the situation of asymmetry has not a juridical basis but is founded on trust, authoritativeness, age difference, prestige, etc. An example would be the different modes of spiritual accompaniment. In our view, moral authority, because it is based on trust, is precisely the most conducive context for spiritual abuse and abuse of conscience.

There are, in addition, cases where a person has both juridical and moral authority. For this reason, in the case of power of governance, we can distinguish between an abuse of ecclesiastical power or office *simpliciter*, when the command concerns only the external forum (e.g., when the superior orders not to watch television for a week even though he or she does not have this competence), and an abuse of power to which is added a spiritual or conscience abuse, which happens when we face an authority that is also moral.

We can point out some differences between abuse of power *simpliciter* and abuse of moral authority, which justify why we have related spiritual abuse and abuse of conscience to the latter and not the former.

In abuse of power *simpliciter*, the victim may be aware that he or she is being exploited; this is usually not the case in spiritual and conscience abuse, because the relationship of trust weakens critical thinking. To illustrate this fact, we can use the image of the captain and the ship: abuse of power *simpliciter* consists of forcing the captain to sail where he or she does not want to go (which limits freedom of action), while abuse

¹³ Cf. A. LANNEGRACE, *Emprises sectaires et abus de pouvoir. Une approche psychologique*, in CONFÉRENCE DES EVÊQUES DE FRANCE (ed.), *Dérives sectaires dans des communautés catholiques (Documents Episcopati 11)*, Secrétariat général de la Conférence des évêques de France, Paris 2018, pp. 36-37.

¹⁴ Cf. D. DE LASSUS, *Abuses in the Religious Life and the Path to Healing*, cit., Chapter 6.

of conscience consists of manipulating the instruments of navigation (which limits, instead, freedom of judgment).¹⁵

Abuse of power usually concerns the external forum (“do this”), while spiritual abuse and abuse of conscience enter into the person’s interiority (“you have to think/feel this way”). Especially problematic are situations where the two areas are mixed, which the Church has insistently called for to be kept separate.¹⁶

Moreover, there is also a difference in reference to God: in abuse of power *simpliciter*, the victim thinks, “if I disobey, I will be punished by the boss”; instead, in spiritual abuse and abuse of conscience, he/she thinks, “if I disobey, I will be unfaithful to God.”

Finally, in the abuse of power *simpliciter* the abuser can choose his victims more freely because he has authority over them and thus can easily seek contact on his own initiative; in spiritual abuse and abuse of conscience, instead, it is generally the victim who turns to the abuser for help.

3. Spiritual abuse and abuse of conscience

Currently only a few authors consider spiritual abuse and abuse of conscience as two separate concepts, while most, instead, use them practically as synonyms.

The *Sussidio per formatori* of the National Service for the Protection of Minors of the Italian Bishops’ Conference,¹⁷ for example, makes a distinction between spiritual abuse and abuse of conscience through the concept of sensitivity, while asserting that both are a form of abuse of power¹⁸: when spiritual sensitivity (relationship with God) is touched, we speak of spiritual abuse, while in the case of moral sensitivity (what we should or should not do), we speak of abuse of conscience.

Other authors believe that abuse of conscience is a form of spiritual abuse,¹⁹ although they fail to explain in detail what the differences consist of. One criterion of distinction could be the process of *grooming*, which—up to a certain point—is common to both. The beginning of this process is marked by a *seduction* phase in which an attempt

¹⁵ Cf. S. FERNÁNDEZ, *Towards a Definition of Abuse of Conscience in the Catholic Setting*, “Gregorianum,” 102/3 (2021), p. 564.

¹⁶ Among many, cf. FRANCIS, *Address to Participants at the Course Organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary*, March 29, 2019.

¹⁷ Cf. A. CENCINI - S. LASSI (eds.), *Sussidio per formatori al presbiterato e alla vita consacrata e per giovani in formazione 3: La formazione iniziale in tempo di abusi*, Servizio Nazionale per la Tutela dei Minori della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, Rome 2021, pp. 52-58.

¹⁸ Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 54.

¹⁹ Cf. S. FERNÁNDEZ, *Towards a Definition of Abuse of Conscience in the Catholic Setting*, cit.; C. BORGONO - C. HODGE, *El abuso de conciencia. Hacia una definición que permita su tipificación penal canónica*, “Veritas,” 50 (12/2021), pp. 173-195.

is made to beguile the victim with praise, recognition, gifts, privileges, etc. All this is aimed at establishing a *relationship of dependence* that leads to *submission*. The abuser on the one hand comforts and reinforces the victim, and on the other hand he tries to intimidate the victim, with the threat (implicit or explicit) of losing affection, betraying his/her purpose in life, not being up to it, not fitting in with the group, etc. This relationship of dependence can be protracted to such an extent that the victim *identifies* his/herself with the abuser, thinking, in this way, that he/she is doing God's will. The victim thus loses his/her identity and self-esteem because he/she has handed over control of his/her life to another person, who feels and makes decisions for him/her. If the victim is in this psychological state, he or she cannot think and choose freely: the voice of the abuser resonates in his/her mind so intensely that it prevents him or her from making a personal judgment, since to think otherwise would mean being unfaithful to the abuser and thus also to God, thus triggering deep feelings of guilt in the victim.

Therefore, how can we determine the difference between spiritual abuse and abuse of conscience in the above *grooming* process? The elements of seduction, dependence and submission can be present in both spiritual abuse and abuse of conscience. However, the last element, that is, the *delusion of identification* (a such intense relationship of dependence that the victim identify him/herself completely with the abuser) can be seen as a distinguishing feature peculiar to abuse of conscience. It is possible, therefore, to say that abuse of conscience is not only a form of spiritual abuse, but also its most extreme form.

4. Definition and specific acts of abuse of conscience

As is well known, there are various interpretations of the concept of “conscience” among theologians. Vatican Council II and the subsequent ecclesiastical magisterium, however, develop three dimensions of conscience²⁰: conscience as an instrument of recognition of God's law (*conscientia habitualis*),²¹ conscience as an act of judgment (*conscientia actualis*)²² and conscience as a place of encounter with God.²³ Based on this ecclesial view, we propose the following definition of abuse of conscience:

Abuse of conscience are acts occurring in the context of a relationship of spiritual direction or help in which the person giving guidance ascribes to himself divine authority—that is, identifies his advice with God's will—imposing

²⁰ Cf. A. FUMAGALLI, *L'eco dello spirito: teologia della coscienza morale*, Queriniana, Brescia 2012, pp. 274-284.

²¹ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Gaudium et Spes* 16; see also *Dignitatis Humane* 3; ST. JOHN PAUL II, *Veritatis Splendor* 54.

²² Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1778; see also *Veritatis Splendor* 59.

²³ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 16.

himself on the identity, freedom and responsibility of the person being guided in an area concerning moral judgment.

As we saw in the previous section, the CEI National Service for the Protection of Minors' *Sussidio per formatori* considers spiritual abuse and abuse of conscience as two parallel categories. This distinction has the limitation that spiritual and moral sensitivities are always linked. Take for example the vocational choice of a boy who does not know whether to enter the seminary or not: this has to do with spiritual sensitivity (the relationship with God), but also with moral sensitivity because the subject may feel entering the seminary as a moral obligation. This is why we are more inclined to think of abuse of conscience as a form of spiritual abuse, in which the abuser replaces the abused in his judgment of conscience, i.e., the judgment which concerns what is right or wrong, what should or should not be done, what is permissible or sinful, what endangers eternal salvation, etc.

Abuse of conscience includes all the actions we listed in paragraph 1, but adds a moral charge. We can list some specific actions that constitute abuse of conscience:

- The abuser induces the abused to think that he/she sins against God if he/she does not follow the abuser's directions (the abuser, therefore, bases moral judgment on his own words and not on God's commandments).
- The abuser threatens or blackmails the abused implicitly or explicitly with negative spiritual consequences (eternal damnation, misfortune in life, moral degradation—such as becoming superb—, etc.) if he/she does not bend to the advice he offers.
- The abuser imposes a certain moral decision in areas that the Church has left to the discernment of the individual (e.g., prohibits a married person from using natural methods of birth control).
- The abuser insistently demands the full manifestation of consciousness and forces the confidence of his subordinate.
- The abuser induces the victim to think that a bad action is good or vice versa.

Both in spiritual abuse and—much more intensely—in abuse of conscience, the victim, without realizing it, gradually loses his/her identity: he/she forgets who he/she is and what he/she wants to do, and slowly loses his/her self-esteem. His/her personal discernment disappears, because it has been left in the hands of the abuser, and the living space of his inner freedom, willed by God, is progressively obliterated. The abused person, therefore, will not be able to choose the truth in freedom, that is, to become

responsible for himself/herself and for his/her own decisions. In extreme cases, he/she may even doubt reality, since what he/she is told by the spiritual guide contrasts with what he/she sees with his/her own eyes. The consequence is an increasing annihilation of the person.

The difference between spiritual abuse and abuse of conscience could thus be summarized as follows. In spiritual abuse, in matters that should be left to the free discernment of the individual, the abuser uses his moral authority to say, “If you do everything that I—and only I—tell you, you will get closer to God.” While this is wrong, it is also true that it leaves the victim a small margin of freedom (such as, for example, whether to progress more or less quickly or through other paths that have not been explicitly excluded by the abuser). In contrast, in the abuse of conscience, the abuser explicitly or implicitly adds, “...but if you do not do this, you will turn away from God, and you will jeopardize even your eternal salvation.” This addition supplants the moral judgment of the accompanied person and eventually annihilates him or her.

A clarification needs to be made at this point. There is a risk of “abuse of abuse,” that is, of calling abuse what is not abuse. For example, presenting and explaining the demands of Christian morality does not necessarily mean forcing someone’s conscience: no one can say that it is an abuse of conscience to try to convince a thief to stop stealing. In fact, classically it has been accepted that negative precepts (“do not steal”) oblige *semper et pro semper*, while positive precepts (“you must pray”) oblige *semper sed non pro semper*. Abuse of conscience, therefore, would occur especially when positive precepts are wrongly presented as absolute (*semper et pro semper*)²⁴: “you must go to Mass every day, or you will be condemned.”

Conclusion

As in matryoshkas, in this article we have moved from a broader concept to a narrower one contained in the previous one, but which has specific characteristics. The broader element that encompasses all the others is the abuse of power (either power of governance or moral authority), one form of which is psychological abuse. When this is done in the name of God we are dealing with spiritual abuse, and within this, as a more serious form of it, there is the abuse of conscience, which we have defined as follows: *acts occurring in the context of a relationship of spiritual direction or help in which the person giving guidance ascribes to himself divine authority—that is, identifies his advice*

²⁴ We hope to deepen the “abuse of abuse” in a further article, in which we also hope to answer some questions left open in this text.

with God's will—imposing himself on the identity, freedom and responsibility of the person being guided in an area concerning moral judgment.

How to prevent these situations that do so much harm? We have mentioned that one of the factors that facilitate vulnerability is trust, but it would be a mistake to try to prevent abuse by promoting distrust, because that would go against the very nature of the Church, which is the “great family of God’s children.”²⁵

Since the best form of prevention is always education, it would be desirable that this sensitive topic be part of seminary formation, including as a mandatory subject a course on spiritual direction and how to exercise the power of governance in the Church. Respect for people and their vulnerability will be facilitated if any kind of spiritual accompaniment keep always in mind that the model is Christ (John 14:6), the principal formator is the Holy Spirit²⁶ and the person accompanied is “a necessary and irreplaceable agent of his own formation: All formation [...] is ultimately a self formation.”²⁷

²⁵ FRANCIS, *General Audience*, May 29, 2013.

²⁶ Cf. ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS, *The Living Flame of Love*, B, strophe 3, n. 46

²⁷ ST. JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis* 69.