

Reviewing the Discourse of ‘Spiritual Abuse’

Logical Problems & Unintended Consequences

A report by the Evangelical Alliance Theology Advisory Group

February 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Executive Summary is intended as a 'way in' to the main report. The definitive position of the Alliance is expressed in that main report, which is far more detailed, and which is thoroughly referenced. Once they have absorbed this Executive Summary, we would strongly encourage readers of it to consult the main report.

A. Abuse in Society and the Church

In recent years, awareness of and concern about abuse has grown. High profile campaigns like #MeToo and #TimesUp have hit the headlines of late, along with scandals in the entertainment industry, in the media, and in political, sporting and other contexts. Indeed, abuse is a serious problem for society as a whole - and not least for the church. In recent years churches of various denominations have had to address severe distortion of their moral and pastoral values by leaders and lay people in their midst who have been found guilty of child abuse in particular, but of other forms of abuse as well.

The Evangelical Alliance is a body representing a wide range of Christian churches, organisations, networks and individuals. We regard abuse both within and beyond the Christian community with the utmost seriousness. Over recent years we have worked to educate and equip our members to detect and resist abusive practices, and have profiled the work of organisations leading in this area.

B. The Proliferating Language of 'Spiritual Abuse'

As concern about abuse has grown in society at large, and in faith groups particularly, some have developed a terminology of 'Spiritual Abuse' ('SA') to define forms of abuse that might in certain ways be regarded as specific to religious people and communities. Prominent among such proponents have been the academic

psychologist Lisa Oakley and the Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS), who have worked together on various reports, papers and events that have sought to raise the profile 'SA'. At face value, this development seems commendable: after all abuse, defined in part as manipulation, exploitation, domination and bullying, is incompatible with the gospel of love, compassion and grace proclaimed by Jesus and the apostles (Matthew 23:4, 13, 23; Luke 17:1-2; Mark 10:42-43; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Titus 1:7-11). Yet on closer inspection, 'SA' terminology is revealed not only to be unhelpfully ambiguous in and of itself; its practical application is also shown to be fraught with problems, not least in relation to existing legal definitions of abuse, and to long-standing and hard-won principles of religious liberty.

Insofar as increasing use of 'SA' represents a sincere attempt to highlight and safeguard against emotionally or psychologically abusive behaviours that might take place in religious contexts, the motives for its use might be understandable. We want to make clear that in questioning the spread of 'SA' terminology we are not criticising the sincerity of those who have contributed to it. However, sincerity of intent cannot be the only test for the ministry we exercise or the language we use as we do so. We must be mindful of the coherence and precision of the language we use, and also of the consequences of what we say and do, even if those consequences might initially have been unintended. This emphasis on outcomes as well as motivations (Romans 7:4) requires us to be mindful of how our words and actions might be appropriated – not least in a culture which is increasingly at odds with classic Christian belief, and which has in certain cases more recently sought to link it with the discourse of extremism. Hence, our concern is focused on where the promotion of 'SA' might lead.

The term 'Spiritual Abuse' is not new. It was initially deployed as a way of recognising the emotional and psychological damage done to certain believers by practices such as 'heavy shepherding', authoritarian ministry or brainwashing. The early application of 'SA' in various books issued by American evangelical publishers in the 1990s was undoubtedly motivated by genuine concern to support victims of practices such as psychological domination, manipulation or bullying, principally by people holding positions of power within churches. Legally, though, 'SA' is not a recognised term, and

in the UK such phenomena would most typically be identified as forms of Emotional or Psychological Abuse resulting in Emotional or Psychological Harm. Most clearly, Emotional Abuse is defined as one form of Child Abuse, alongside Physical and Sexual Abuse, and Neglect. Psychological Abuse is associated with adults, and since 2013 a form of psychological abuse called 'Coercive and Controlling Behaviour' has been recognised in law. In statutory terms, however the language of Coercion and Control is focused upon domestic abuse, and has not been read across to abuse that takes place distinctively in religious settings. Indeed, any prosecution relating to abuse of an adult in these and other settings would most likely be pursued as Common Assault, and depending on the circumstances could also include offences such as criminal damage, harassment, sexual assault or others.

C. Analysing and Critiquing the Terminology of 'Spiritual Abuse'

As mentioned above, Emotional or Psychological Abuse and the harm they cause can exist in all sorts of settings. Despite this, proponents of 'SA' are insistent that there is something so distinctive about the 'spiritual' context in which Emotional and Psychological Abuse might occur that it requires a separate headline definition. For some this should be distinctively criminalised; for others it should at least be prominent in safeguarding policy and procedure. Thus, following the earlier work of Johnson, Van Vonderen, Enroth and Blue in this area, CCPAS, Lisa Oakley, and others propose that for abuse to be deemed specifically 'spiritual' it must principally:

- a. be 'justified' by appeal to the divine, or to one or more sacred texts defined as having divine authority;
- b. be enacted by people associated in their role or function as religious, and
- c. take place in settings identified in one way or another as religious.

Theoretically 'SA' could be taken to extend to all religious traditions, but at present virtually every popular and academic publication in English that uses the term is focused on Christianity.

It is our conviction that all abusive behaviour should be detected and rejected, and that the actions and effects of what some call 'SA' may well warrant discipline or sanction. However, the term itself has grown more problematic and unhelpful. In a culture characterised by increasing hostility to classic Christianity, and the growing association of such Christianity with the language of 'extremism', the use of 'SA' terminology has proliferated in such a way that its further use risks damage to fundamental freedoms of religious thought, expression and assembly.

In April 2017 Jayne Ozanne presented a paper to the Royal College of Psychiatrists entitled 'Spiritual Abuse: The Next Great Scandal for the Church'. While acknowledging that 'SA' is not a legally-recognised category, Ozanne cited the work of Oakley and CCPAS, and went on to imply that 'SA' should be subject to the same statutory prosecution and punishment as homophobic hate crimes. The range of practices thus deemed potentially actionable by Ozanne included preaching and teaching most mainline churches' positions on same-sex relationships and gay marriage; using 'charismatic gifts', encouraging baptism in the spirit, and belonging to a 'Charismatic Tribe' – examples of which included several well-known and mainstream Christian churches, organisations and events, including the Evangelical Alliance, Spring Harvest, Holy Trinity, Brompton, Alpha and New Wine.

Given such expansionist attempts to criminalise 'SA', it becomes ever more crucial to subject the term to proper analytical scrutiny. Hence, the results of a survey of 1,591 people on 'SA' published by CCPAS in January 2018 might have been very helpful. No doubt, any actual harm suffered by the 63% of respondents who self-identified as having experienced 'SA' should be accorded the fullest attention and care. Yet such pastoral concern must be distinguished from the research methods applied by CCPAS. In any field of pastoral psychology, good quality research can aid understanding and enhance support. CCPAS themselves concede, however, that even to enter the questionnaire, participants already 'needed to have heard of the

term 'spiritual abuse', and that 'this was a self-identified sample and therefore cannot be verified'. This in turn renders problematic the claim made in the introduction to the report, that despite lack of agreement about it, 'SA' is 'the most commonly used term and therefore the one that is used here'. If true, this claim to commonality has been significantly fuelled by the fact that CCPAS and Lisa Oakley have themselves made the promotion of 'SA' terminology such a key part of their own work. There is thus an element of self-fulfilling prophecy in the methods they have deployed. Instead, like many other terms which seek diagnostic acceptance, 'SA' terminology should be open to close critical evaluation, and should be superseded if more accurate, coherent and suitable terminology can be found.

Thus, before momentum builds further in the oxygenation and potential criminalisation of 'SA', the Evangelical Alliance would urge all concerned to pause and reflect on the potential consequences of this, not only for the public mission of the church, but also for social cohesion in what is, after all, a multi-faith society. Little or no work has been done on the application of 'SA' to other faith communities beyond Christianity, but since these contain significant classic and orthodox streams that are at least as traditional on sexual morality and social ethics as classic Christianity, targeting those communities for censure under the inadequately-defined rubric of 'SA' could lead to unhealthy tension and fragmentation in our social fabric.

D. Legal and Safeguarding Implications

Our position is that the existing legal framework and language of Emotional and Psychological Abuse is sufficient, and this is based on the fact that actions and effects must remain the principal consideration where these or any other forms of abuse are concerned. As above, previous attempts to define 'SA' have sought to distinguish it as 'spiritual' by reference to divine guidance or scriptural warrant (motivation), institutional religious authority (position) and location in a place or event deemed in some way to be religious (setting). Yet assessment of these last three categories would require specifically theological understanding which secular statutory bodies

cannot be expected to possess or apply. In any case, first and foremost, abuse is abuse plain and simple (action) and, as abuse, manifestly harms the victim (effect).

Hence, in response to Jayne Ozanne's more recent and more explicit suggestion that 'the government needs to recognise Spiritual Abuse as a formal category of harm' in law, we would want to ask the following questions:

- a. What, specifically, is now legal in spiritual/religious contexts that should be deemed illegal over and above the existing statutory framework of abuse?
- b. If additional actions particular to those spiritual/religious contexts are to be distinctively criminalised, how in practice could secular law makers and legal authorities unused to arbitrating specifically theological matters be expected to legislate for, prosecute and try such actions?
- c. How would the singling out of specifically spiritual/religious people and communities in this way for exclusive additional prosecution over and above the existing secular framework not constitute religious discrimination?

These questions have become even more salient recently, in the light of the Diocese of Oxford's Bishop's Tribunal's action against Rev Timothy Davis, Vicar of Christ Church, Abingdon. Davis was found guilty in December 2017 of 'abuse of spiritual power and authority' over a 15/16 year old school boy in his congregation. The Tribunal agreed with the boy's and his mother's joint complaint that Mr Davis had subjected the boy to mentoring of 'such intensity ... that he was in breach of safeguarding procedures both of the national Church but also of the parish and that this amounted to spiritual abuse'.

Clearly, the Tribunal deemed that Davis' actions amounted to emotionally abusive behaviour, and that his actions toward his victim and the victim's girlfriend and parents were manipulative. This behaviour was also judged to merit disciplinary action. Even so, the status of the Church of England as an established national church, and the construal of Mr. Davis' actions as 'SA' in relation to statutory safeguarding protocols, could be interpreted as lending particular proto-legal weight to the concept of 'SA'. Specifically, it could be seen as providing ecclesiastical 'case law' which secular

lawmakers and courts might then quite readily cite, pursuant to placing a distinctive offence of 'Spiritual Abuse' on the statute book or within associated secondary guidance, and prosecuting it as such.

E. The Potential Threat of Religious Discrimination

The specific actions of churches and other religious bodies to condemn and punish any attempts to justify abuse theologically should not be confused with their baseline responsibility to refer emotional and psychological abusers in their midst to the statutory authorities, where they will be dealt with according to the secular, non-theologically specific precepts of the law. Those same churches and religious bodies might wish to apply further disciplinary measures over and above those applied by the law: for example, suspension or decommissioning from ministerial office. Clearly, however, they should not exhibit standards that fall short of the existing law in these matters.

Granted, it might at times be helpful to identify the context in which abuse has occurred as 'religious' or 'spiritual', but there should be no suggestion that by using such terms the abuse perpetrated should be treated differently, distinctively or more severely under the law. Not only would this amount to religious discrimination; as we have stressed, it would require police officers, the Crown Prosecution Service, barristers and judges to make specifically theological determinations that they cannot possibly be expected to make in a modern, secular democracy.

F. Church, State and Law: Interrelationships and Distinctions

Due to the fact that the danger of distinctive legal sanction for religious groups would be even greater if the construct of 'SA' gained further traction, we believe its ongoing use should be actively discouraged. Such ongoing use risks exacerbating the 'self-fulfilling prophecy' critiqued above. Whether intentionally or not, it will lend weight to

the arguments of those who take such cumulative general usage as evidence of the need distinctively to criminalise it, and thus potentially to criminalise whole religious communities with whose theology they happen to disagree.