

Seemingly harmless *new Christian religious movements* in South Africa pose serious threats of spiritual abuse

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Abstract

This article argues that Citizen rights in South Africa are as well protected as the structures that ensure their protection. Strict measures are in place to clamp down on the abuse of women and children. Domestic violence is treated in a very serious light. But what about spiritual abuse that occurs in seemingly safe environments – in the church or within religious groups? What about the victims of this type of abuse? In this article the dynamics of spiritual abuse within seemingly harmless new Christian religious groups in South Africa and the effects of spiritual abuse on their victims are exposed. The article maintains that serious threats of spiritual abuse occur within some of the new Christian religious movements in South Africa despite their seemingly harmless outward appearance. It is furthermore contended that measures to curb these abuses are lacking.

1. INTRODUCTION

Spiritual abuse is a phenomenon that is found in all walks of life even in the church or in religious groups. The church and religious groups are generally believed to be safe places where spiritual development and support are offered. The truth is that spiritual abuse is unfortunately also present in these so-called safe and sacred places.

Victims who have left some of these religious groups experience serious emotional, physiological and psychological problems. Many find it hard to understand how people could have been injured spiritually in a religious group. This failure to understand is possibly based on the general assumption that the *bona fides* of most Christian religious groups, apart from differences in doctrinal issues and some practices, are above suspicion. Unfortunately this judgement is based on the outward appearance of groups. However, a closer investigation into the dynamics of these groups reveals a totally different picture.

Spiritual abuse takes place in Christian religious groups. The burning questions are, how does this abuse occur and why do people fall prey to spiritual abuse? Can something be done to stop these abusive practices?

2. DEMANDING NEW CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

In everyday life religions or religious groups regarded by the majority culture as spurious or unorthodox are referred to as “new religious movements” or “minority religions”. It is agreed that these terms are more objective appellations for religions or religious groups (Dillon & Richardson 1994; Pfeifer 1992). The term *new religious movement* that will henceforth be used in this article covers the spectrum from cults to harmless minority religious groups that apply strategies of psychotherapy, positive thinking or some other means of developing human potential (Hunt 2003:17). On this continuum some of these religious groups are described as religious groups with an authoritarian leader or leadership, which suppress the rational thought of their followers, utilise deceptive and unethical recruitment techniques and coercive mind control, and isolate members from conventional society and former relationships (Possamaï & Lee 2004:337).

For the purpose of this article the focus will be on seemingly harmless *new Christian religious movements* in South Africa where spiritual abuse is evident. And, in addition, the groups under discussion have adopted a pseudo-Christian doctrine and lifestyle and claim to be Christian in nature. These groups will henceforth be referred to as *demanding new Christian religious movements*.

What does a *demanding new Christian religious movement* mean? A *demanding new Christian religious movement* is: A relatively small group of people zealously following a leader who has a special gift. The group exhibits radically new so-called *Christian* religious beliefs and practices that are contrary to traditional Christian beliefs. The leader and his or her followers believe that they are the final arbiters of what is or is not the truth. The group isolates itself from the outside world, exhibiting inward innovative behaviour that both differentiates and makes for conformity among group members, thus establishing a group identity. Sophisticated techniques are utilised in order to bring about thought reform (mind control), group identity and dependence on the group (Pretorius 2004:609). The group is described as “demanding” as a result of the requirement of total commitment to its doctrines and practices at whatever cost. In the process, family, friends and other support structures are abandoned; possessions, personal ambition, human rights and self-worth are all relinquished for the sake of the group’s goals. Followers are subtly

persuaded to commit to the high demands of the group under the guise that this is the will and purpose of God.

The unethical influencing process is successful as a result of the claims of the leader and the group. Firstly, the leader claims to have divine sanction that ensures direct communication with God (Singer & Lalich 1995:7). Secondly, followers of the group are referred to as “the chosen” or “special elected of God”. The primary presumption of this special calling of the followers is that God has handpicked them. This coincides with a high demand placed on the followers to be responsible stewards of God’s special calling on their lives – which they unconsciously accept. The purpose of God must at all times – and at whatever cost – be the highest priority.

In South Africa such *demanding Christian religious movements* do exist. The leader of one of the more prominent groups is Eugene Houy the leader of the *Houy group* in Mpumalanga, who claims to be a “prophet” of God and that he receives his messages directly from God (Erasmus 2004:14, 80). Another is Hennie van Niekerk of Emmanuel Fellowship in Limpopo Province, who also believes that he is a “prophet of God” with a special gift of wisdom to convey messages from God to his followers (SABC 2004).

The premises for spiritual abuse in these specially called groups are found in their make-up. Firstly, the belief is conveyed that the leader is a representative of God endowed with a special gift. Secondly, the followers are persuaded that they are the only chosen and elected people of God. Lastly, there is the belief that truth and salvation are only found inside the group. All the above-mentioned assumptions accumulate an almost unbearable responsibility for the followers. Not only do they want to ensure that they do not disappoint God, but they also wish to maintain God’s special election and calling. This responsibility is an important dynamic in motivating followers to aspire to almost limitless ends in an endeavour to please God and do “his will”. *The desire to please God at whatever cost leaves followers wide open to spiritual abuse.*

3. SPIRITUAL ABUSE IN NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

Abuse of any type occurs when someone has power over another and uses that power to hurt. Physical abuse occurs when someone exercises physical power over another, causing physical injury. Sexual abuse entails the exercise of sexual power over another, resulting in sexual lesions.

What is spiritual abuse? Spiritual abuse occurs when a leader with spiritual authority utilises that authority to coerce, control or exploit a follower, causing spiritual wounds (Blue 1993:12). “Spiritual abuse is the mistreatment

Seemingly harmless new Christian religious movements in South Africa

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" (Johnson & Van Vonderen 1991:20). Spiritual abuse can also occur when spirituality is used to make others live up to a "spiritual standard". Spiritual abuse can take the form of shaming someone in an attempt to obtain his or her support for a belief or to fend off legitimate questions (Johnson & Van Vonderen 1991:21-22).

Spiritual abuse is the misuse of a position of power or leadership, in order to control or dominate another person, or to influence the person to promote the selfish interests of someone other than the individual who needs help. Sometimes abuse arises out of a doctrinal position. At other times it stems from the legitimate personal needs of a leader whose needs are being met by illegitimate means (Henke 2006:1). Leaders are engaging in spiritual abuse when their words and actions tear down another, and attack or weaken a person's standing as a Christian in order to gratify themselves, their position or beliefs, while at the same time weakening or harming the other (Johnson & Van Vonderen 1991:23).

Three main factors namely, *mindset*, *motive* and *method*, operate to lay the foundation for spiritual abuse. Firstly, mindset: people have little or no capacity to discern the word of God for themselves. Their view of the scripture is that it is a book of rules designed to lead to behaviour that is pleasing to God. They fall prey to obeying diligently the rules of spiritual leaders who are viewed as having the last word on the meaning and purpose of God's word. Secondly, the motive is to bring about religious performance on the part of the people in order to meet the needs of the leaders to prove that their theology is right. Lastly, the method of "proof texting" scripture is used to bolster or substantiate the leader's agenda or teaching (Johnson & Van Vonderen 1991:82-83).

The above definitions of spiritual abuse can be refined to the following function definition:

- Spiritual abuse occurs when a leader uses his or her position or authority to control or dominate others who, unaware of the hidden agenda of the leader, committed themselves to what they believe to be the will and purpose of God. The belief that followers are committing their lives to God makes them vulnerable to spiritual abuse. Most spiritual abusers utilise emotions of shame, guilt and fear to emphasise the substandard of their followers' behaviour and wellbeing in order to move them to do what the leader requires. Moreover, the feelings and opinions of the person in need are overridden in order to achieve these

selfish goals of the leader. Spiritual abuse leaves the victim spiritually wounded.

3.1 WHY PEOPLE FALL PREY TO DEMANDING NEW CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

Innocent people get involved in spiritually abusive systems mostly because of the attractive bait they present. The bait presented offers an idealistic world. This world not only provides answers to all of life's questions but also addresses the emotional and spiritual needs of people. Although people may belong to a church, they may still lack spiritual/emotional nourishment. Some *new Christian religious movements* are aware of the demand and offer almost tailor-made solutions. The following needs make people vulnerable to the trap of spiritual abuse:

- *A lack of acceptance in the home and church.* This drives people to religious performance that precisely meets spiritual abusers' demand.
- *Shame-based motivation.* Shame-based motivation stemming from a particular sin or a weakness produces religious performance. People who were brought up believing that God is a perfectionist tyrant will fall prey to an abusive leader who demands religious performance in order to please God (Blue 1993:106).
- *A need for a deeper level of spirituality.* Some people are unfulfilled in their churches. They experience a desire for a deeper level of spirituality. It is the eagerness to "give up everything for Jesus" that attracts them to these groups.
- *Disillusionment with the world order.* There are those who may be discouraged by the decay of this world. They see the corruption, violence and disrespect for human life as signs of spiritual decay and of a turning away from God's commandments.
- *Need for security.* In these uncertain times some people fear for their lives. Some of the *new Christian religious movements* present a safe haven.
- *Self-doubt about their ability and self-worth.*

Seemingly harmless new Christian religious movements in South Africa

- *The belief that spiritual success is a do-it-yourself project. All individuals must take care of their own sin and work out their own holiness (Blue 1993:55).*
- *A need to control painful inner reality. A need to control painful inner reality is established through the rigid religious belief system of new Christian religious movements (Linn, Linn, & Linn 1994:11)*

The most committed believers are often the most vulnerable to abusive systems.

3.2 Attractive bait offered by demanding New Christian Religious movements

The success of a trap is determined by how well it is concealed. Spiritually abusive systems are well concealed in the outward attractiveness of these groups. The bait in the trap includes the following supposed characteristics of the group:

- The group can provide a “right standing with God”. Serious and committed believers desire to have a right standing with God. In these groups reference will be made to their past religious experiences as being unsuccessful. In return, the group offers restoration of the person’s relationship with God (Johnson & Van Vonderen 1991:184).
- The group undertakes to ensure unconditional acceptance. With the acceptance comes the assurance of an improvement in the standard of life.
- There is the supposed special and specific calling of God, in addition to the fact that God has set out a specific task for the person to fulfil.
- The outward perception of the group is that of a safe and attractive haven ideal for total commitment to God’s purpose (Blue 1991:97).
- Ultimately it is a place that provides answers to all life’s questions.
- Supposed it carries the divine authority of the leader (Johnson & Van Vonderen 1991:112).

The promise that most demanding *new Christian religious movements* offer is enough to convince some people to join such groups. The prospect that some groups offer of full-time commitment to the work of God compared to the everyday rat race seems very attractive and worthwhile.

3.3 The spiritual abuse that entraps and addicts followers

The spiritual abuse in *new religious movements* manifests generic characteristics. The following characteristics form a list that is far from exhaustive. The important characteristic of spiritual abuse is that it entraps followers. A number of important and prominent characteristics evident in spiritual abuse are discussed below:

- *Power posturing.* By this is meant that the leader of the group spends a lot of time on his or her own authority by reminding followers of his or her calling. This is necessary because it is not real, not based on genuine divine godly character; it is postured. True leaders will demonstrate spiritual power and credibility through their lives and their message (Johnson & Van Volderen 1991:63-64). This power is manifested through a control-orientated style of leadership (Henke 2006:1). Eugen Houy of the Houy group emphasised his authority by comparing it to the incident where Uzziah reached out and touched the ark of God and, as a result, died (2 Sm 6:7). In the same manner his followers need to understand that he is also untouchable because of the godly authority he claims (Anon 2003).
- *Emotional manipulation.* Spiritually abusive groups routinely utilise guilt, fear, shame, love, hate, elite mentality and intimidation as a means of controlling their followers. An unhealthy form of dependency and spirituality is created through teachings that continuously focus on submission, loyalty and obedience to the leader and his or her revelations. Dependency is an important aspect for subjugation (Enroth 1992:103). A system of reward and punishment is utilised to sever victims not only from their support systems but also from their own autonomous decision-making, rational thinking an evaluation, ambition, self-worth, and their freedom to interact freely with others (MacDonald 1988). A new support system within the group replaces old support systems.

Fear is inordinately effective in controlling followers. Followers fear that they will disappoint God when they leave the group. Followers also fear

Seemingly harmless new Christian religious movements in South Africa

the consequences when orders of the group or leader are disobeyed. They also have a fear of demons of deception from outside the group. An environment of fear is created and obedience to the leader and inclusion in the group are portrayed as the only way to be safe. Female members of Alon Christian Fellowship were subtly convinced not to wear make-up and long hair because it could jeopardise their relationship with God. Different rules seem to apply for the leader's wife who is allowed to wear both (Miller 2003). In the process the fear was instilled that their behaviour could cost them their right standing with God. As a result, they changed their behaviour.

Guilt is an effective emotion for punishing bad behaviour. A continuous reminder of the worthlessness of the followers and their behaviour makes them hate who they are but also to commit even more seriously and wholeheartedly to improving. A follower of the group The Way described the guilt feeling he experienced when the leader of the group had to sleep on the cold cement floor as a result of his disobedience. He could not sleep the whole night, wrestling with the thought that his disobedience caused the "servant of God" to suffer (Pienaar 2004).

Shame is also utilised. Shame differs from guilt in that it indicts the person for who he or she is. It is attached to the human being. Shame prompts a person to hate himself/herself (Blue 1993:120). In so doing, the victim becomes like clay in the hands of the leader to shape him or her in the way that is pleasing to the leader. A follower of Hennie van Niekerk of the Emmanuel Fellowship was told that he was lazy and a disgrace to God when he asked to be excused from one service because he was exhausted. He was chased away from the church. The follower felt that he had failed God and struggled for a few weeks to gain the acceptance of the leader again (Van Niekerk 2004).

- *Rigid and legalistic lifestyle.* Many *new religious movements* demand unwavering devotion to the group. Allegiance to the church has priority over allegiance to God, family, personal ambition, personal welfare or anything else (Zukeran 2006:2). Followers are subjected to a very busy work programme. The work programme includes compulsory attendance at Bible study or teaching sessions, prayer meetings, and undertaking of daily responsibilities. Because of this work programme, many followers quit school or their full-time occupation, and neglect family responsibility in order to keep up with the programme. In the

case where followers stay together on a farm a work programme entails total commitment of their time to the goals and practices of the group. Clear guidelines exist for dress, dating, finances, and everyday handling of personal issues. *Busy work programme*. Basson (2003) an ex-member of the Alon Christian Fellowship situated on a farm in the Limpopo Province reports on the busy work programme of followers in this group. The female followers are responsible for cleaning toilets, preparing food, making clothes to sell, while some of the others are involved in artwork. The young followers are involved in vegetable gardens. The male followers are engaged in building projects, and the manufacturing of furniture. Apart from the working programme during the day, a very busy “spiritual” programme follows at night. Meetings are held every night and attendance is compulsory. Friday evenings when the Jewish Shabbat starts, prayer meetings for Israel are conducted and these continue till early on Saturday morning. Every morning of the week a prayer meeting is held. Those who do not want to attend are viewed as lazy and not worthy to be part of the group. The reluctance of followers to attend is described as laziness and this subconsciously instils guilt that is aimed at correcting their behaviour. Van Niekerk (2004), an ex-member of the Emmanuel Fellowship, also situated in Limpopo, confirms the busy and rigid programme of the group he belonged to. His responsibility was to feed the ostriches on the farm where Emmanuel fellowship is situated. The cows also had to be tended and milked between 05h00 and 07h00 every morning. From 07h00 until 13h00 he taught at the private school of the group. From 13h00 until 17h00 he carried out other duties on the farm and then had spiritual duties lasting until daylight every night. He hardly had time to spend with his family or to eat properly. His particular wellbeing was not considered. Instead, he was called lazy in order to obtain the desired result imposed through shame.

- *Unspoken rules*. Reference is made rules that exist in churches or religious groups but these are not openly and audibly stated. Followers do not know about them until they break them. One important unspoken rule in these groups is that a follower may never disagree with the leader or leadership. Breaking this unspoken rule will be punished either by neglect – being ignored, shunned or overlooked – or by aggressive legalism – being questioned, openly censured or asked to leave the group. The power of the unspoken rule must not be underestimated. It is more powerful than the scripture. In abusive

Seemingly harmless new Christian religious movements in South Africa

systems where both types of rules apply (unspoken and spoken) the unspoken rule is more powerful. For example the Bible is clear on speaking the truth (Gl 4:25) yet in these groups honesty is suppressed, repressed or oppressed (Johnson & Van Vonderen 1991:67-68). Van Niekerk (2004) paid dearly for opposing or disagreeing with the leader of Emmanuel Fellowship. When he realised what was going on and decided to speak out about the corruption and false teaching in the group, five other followers physically assaulted him. In the Houy group the same applies. If a follower is found to be disloyal to the leader he or she is brought before the leadership and punished (Anon 2003).

- *Unbalanced approach.* Johnson & Van Vonderen (1991:69) identify two extremes that are both responsible for an unbalanced approach to Christian living. The first one is an empirical approach to life. Through this approach the objective truth is elevated above and to the exclusion of valid subjective experience. Through this approach spirituality is based on the level of education and intellectual capacity alone and not on intimacy with God, obedience or sensitivity to his spirit. The other extreme is manifested in an extremely subjective approach to Christian life. This approach gives more weight to feelings and experience than to what the Bible declares. The danger of this approach is that followers are indoctrinated to act on some or other spiritual directive received by the leader because he or she is "in authority". Followers are made to believe that they do not need to test each directive against the Scripture. This approach also seems evident in the Houy group. According to an ex-member, when followers need to take decisions, they will approach Houy who will pray about a matter and tell them what to do. This leaves followers no room for personal intimacy with God (Anon 1999).

Another tactic that creates an imbalance is found in their majoring on minor issues such as prophecy, carrying biblical law to the extreme, or their strange and unique methods of Bible interpretation (Henke 2006:2). In the Houy group the leader rejects the sacraments of baptism and communion claiming that communion is only for those who live free of sin. Therefore he and his followers are not included (Van Wyk 1995:5). Members of The Way group became almost totally dependant on the prophecy of the prophetess that was first conveyed by audiocassette and later through letters. This prophecy was the main source to direct their lives (Pienaar 2004).

Paranoia. Within abusive systems there is a sense that, because of the special calling and enlightenment of the group, (a) followers are on a higher plane, (b) therefore outsiders will not understand unless they become part of the group and (c) this is why others will respond negatively and even persecute them (Johnson & Van Vonderen 1991:73). The above-mentioned viewpoints in turn create sensitivity to persecution in the group. To avoid persecution, everything is kept within the system. Subtly and without any written rule, followers are indoctrinated by certain suggestions from the group to act in a certain way. Nothing can be traced to the leader and there are no rules ordering such behaviour – it just follows from information that has been fed to them. A strong wall of psychological isolation is built around the group – firstly because of the “otherness” of the group, as a result of the camaraderie that is created because they are in this battle together and, finally, as a result of paranoia about the “evils” outside the group.

If a group is criticised or persecuted in the media, this is viewed as proof that they are indeed the true church of God being persecuted by Satan (Zukeran 2006:3). People in the outside world are also viewed as enemies used by Satan to pull the followers away from the truth within the group.

- *Misplaced loyalty.* People seek God but end up following leaders. In these abusive groups loyalty is focused on and subtly demanded by the leader and the group. The way in which this misplaced loyalty is ensured is by comparing disrespect or disobedience to the leader or group to disobedience or disrespect to God. Other methods utilised to ensure the loyalty of followers include the suggestion that the group alone has the truth and the group alone is right. Followers are thus left with no other alternative but to stay loyal to and remain in the group for the fear of being lost. Houy, the leader of the Houy group, openly declares that there is no hope or salvation outside his group (Houy 1995:82). Another method is the use of scare tactics by the leader when a follower seems to lose interest or commitment. For example, he says, “God is disappointed with you and is going to withdraw his Spirit from you” or “God is going to destroy you” or “God will destroy your family”. Lastly the fear of being exposed publicly in the group, as being rebellious, not spiritual, prompts followers to reconsider their commitment. Followers who have left the group are repeatedly used as examples of traitors that are lost and without hope because they have

Seemingly harmless new Christian religious movements in South Africa

turned their back on God (Johnson & Van Vonderen 1991:76-77). Some leaders even believe that they have the authority to curse disobedient followers. Van Niekerk of Emmanuel Fellowship has also claimed that he has the authority to curse. He cursed a disobedient follower. He went on to say that he has already cursed three other people; one has died in the interim and two are very ill and waiting to die (Van Niekerk 2004).

- *Antagonism towards all other churches.* As a result of the elite mentality present in most of these *new religious movements*, they are antagonistic towards all other churches. The elite mentality stems from the fact that they believe that they are God's "only true elect" and therefore the only ones who have access via their leader to the truth. No one outside the group has the truth. Instead, they are poisoning the world with their false doctrine. Followers are warned against the deception present in other, opposing churches and doctrines (Zukeran 2006:3). The leader of the Houy group teaches that traditional churches are worthless. Moreover, the structure of authority in these churches is negative and no hope exists outside his group (Houy 1995:81).

Followers are taught to suppress criticism against the group or leader. Because the religious system is not based on the truth it cannot allow questions, dissent or open discussion (Henke 2006:2). All criticism is viewed as an attack from the enemy and is thus invalid. This approach is substantiated by placing emphasis on the divine sanctioning of the leader who is in direct contact with God. In the Houy group this attitude is instilled by the expression, "*If you think you sink*" thus discouraging any independent rationalisation (Anon 2003).

- *No freedom to leave group.* The most disturbing aspect of an abusive system is the difficulty followers encounter when wishing to leave the group. The difficult and painful exit process can be directly linked to the continuous intimidation, pressure and threats of divine judgement awaiting the one who leaves the group. Members of the group are also instructed not to associate with any former member, seeing that they are lost and will contaminate them (Zukeran 2006:4).

Denial of freedom to leave can also be attributed to the following factors: (a) there is too much at stake – too many years invested in the group; (b) followers are afraid of the unknown world outside the group;

(c) they are too emotionally dependent on the group to survive psychologically or financially outside the group; (d) they believe they are to blame for the abuse and got what they deserved; (e) they keep changing their minds in response to the promise that things will improve and (f) they cherish the untrue belief about themselves and their relationship with God (Johnson & Van Vonderen 1991:50-51). Apart from the fact that followers become dependent on the group, they are also experiencing a religious addiction. The lack of assurance of salvation makes them do more and more. One can never do enough. The follower offers more and more to a system that promises but cannot produce.

This restriction on leaving of one's own free will must be seen as an emotional/spiritual limitation. Groups that abuse will indicate that followers are free to leave at any time. Spiritually and emotionally however the gates are closed to those members because of the effect the spiritual abuse has had on their self-image and their ability.

The component that is common to an abusive systems is the fact that people are subtly indoctrinated in such a way that they cannot easily escape. Abusive systems function in such a way that followers believe that they voluntarily belong to the group. Instead, they have been lured into the group by what is known as the "bait and switch" tactic. The "bait and switch" tactic means that what is presented as a reward for belonging to the group at the outset is switched once the follower reaches out to take it. Instead, followers are burdened with a heavy load of rules and regulations in order to live up to the spiritual standard expected by the group. Songs of the grace and love of God still sung in these groups seem to have lost their true meaning (Johnson & Van Vonderen 1991:157).

3.4 Spiritual abusers

Ironically and sadly certain persons, who are accorded respect and honour in society by virtue of their role as religious leaders and models of spiritual authority, inflict spiritual wounds. These leaders base their authority on the Bible, the word of God, and see themselves as shepherds with a sacred trust (Blue 1993:12). These leaders claim to have divine sanction for their seemingly controversial proclamations and actions.

Why then do people of such stature abuse the innocent? Different viewpoints exist on why they do it and also on the characteristics or motives of

Seemingly harmless new Christian religious movements in South Africa

spiritual abusers. Some scholars believe that spiritual abusers are curiously naïve about the effects of their exploitation. They rarely intend to hurt their victims (Blue 1993:12). These leaders are so focused on the task they are doing for God that they do not notice the wounds that they are inflicting on their followers (Blue 1993:13). On the other hand Upal (2005:215-216) discusses two models namely: the psychopathology model and the entrepreneur model to illustrate the role and characteristics of the founders of *new religious movements*.

According to the psychopathology model which entails the study of mental disorders, *new religious movements* founders suffer from certain mental illnesses such as epilepsy (Saliba 2004), hysteria (Zweig 1932), paranoia (Gardner 1957), and schizophrenia (Storr 1996) which cause them to have psychotic episodes resulting in hallucinations of having received divine wisdom. Religion is also considered to be a projection of neurotic wish fulfilment that should be dealt with in therapy. Freuerstein (1991) argues that *new religious movement* leaders are authoritarian personalities that want to control their followers. These leaders have problems similar to those suffered by serial killers, namely that they are driven by power and sex urges beyond the normal limits Wilson (2000). D' Aquili & Newberg 1999) believe that some of the leaders of religion are mystics who have learnt to experience a different state of consciousness through "spiritual exercise" and, in this extraordinary state, the cognition offered them a unique view of reality – a view that is "more than reality self".

The entrepreneurship model proposes that founders of *new religious movements* must be viewed as entrepreneurs who produce, market and sell compensations in exchange for other rewards. The leader offers the compensation such as a future reward that is low in supply or unavailable at present. An example of such compensation is the promise of life after death. Like an entrepreneur, the religious leader must also fashion a new product, market it and sell it (Stark & Bainbridge 1987).

Yet another viewpoint on spiritual abusers is that they are dogmatic, self-confident, arrogant and demand to be the spiritual focal point in the lives of their followers. This arrogance is clearly demonstrated in their belief to be more spiritually in tune with God than any one else. These leaders claim special insight into scripture that no one else has. Special revelations are endowed upon these leaders and their word is final. Questioning these leaders amounts to questioning God. In most cases these leaders even make personal decisions for their followers. Individual thinking on the part of the followers is discouraged. The hierarchy of many of these *new religious movements* are such that the leader is accountable to no one. The leadership

of these groups consists of people who are loyal to the leader (Zukeran 2006:2).

Blue (1993:107-114) identifies abusers either as insecure abusers or narcissistic abusers. The insecure abuser is the more common type who feels insignificant and seeks significance by gaining dominion over others. This type of abuser is normally plagued by inner doubts and fears. Although these individuals may not intend to hurt others, in their quest to become somebody, they may inadvertently damage others. They themselves may be the victims of spiritual abuse and grasp power as a form of self-defence. Abusers, who are very insecure, fear failure and have poor impulse control, may be very dangerous. The prodding of a spouse, friends and denominational leaders may awaken repressed lack of independence.

The narcissistic abuser is the heroic, grandiose or messianic narcissist, obsessed by a desire to be someone great or to do something unprecedented for God. In order to carry out their fantasy, they need the cooperation of others and access to their belongings and money. They, too, may not intend to hurt others yet they do because they use others for their personal and God's higher purpose. Narcissistic abusers tend to devalue others in order to maintain their exaggerated sense of self-importance. These abusers are potentially dangerous because they need their followers to applaud their vision and justify their actions. Their messianic claims to greatness can be both straightforward and subtle. Once their claims to be special and important have been established, they become very difficult to challenge. These claims to importance are ostensibly corroborated by special gifts, revelations or encounters with God. Public support is mostly obtained by extraordinary claims made by the leaders themselves or on their behalf. Spiritual abusers live double lives with one set of values for themselves and another for everyone else (Johnson & Van Vonderen 1991:122).

The truth of the matter is that spiritual abusers are a reality – and so are innocent people they abuse. These victims are left with spiritual wounds and many questions about what happened to them in what they had believed to be a safe and godly environment. But even more devastating is that what they believed to be a special calling of God, turned out to be spurious.

The most concerning aspect of this matter is that these leaders are running free – with or without intent to hurt. They enjoy religious freedom ensured by the constitution of the country. No real measures are in place to address the many complaints of spiritual abuse. Apart from internal church structures to address complaints within the church, there is no other body to investigate any possible spiritual abuse claims outside the organised church. So, the burning question is whether it is right for Christians – or anybody else

for that matter – to look on while so-called spiritual leaders abuse innocent people. Should the Christian church as a whole not take a firm stand against this serious infringement of human rights? Or should a body similar to the South African Medical and Dental Council, that could form part of the Human Rights Commission, not be established to investigate complaints of so-called spiritual abuse? These abuses are no less serious than any other abuse and should be curbed at all cost.

3.5 Effects of spiritual abuse

The effect of spiritual abuse is underestimated, mainly because of its abstractness/invisibility. Differing from other types of abuse such as physical abuse and sexual abuse, spiritual abuse is not that visible to the untrained eye. Nonetheless spiritual abuse inflicts serious wounds on the psyche of a person that impact on his or her total life. Spiritual abuse has a devastating effect on people. In many cases the wound is so deep that the wounded person cannot trust even a legitimate spiritual authority again (Henke 2006:3).

According to Damiani (2002:45-46), Henke (2006:3-4), Johnson & Van Vonderen (1991:41-50) and Langone (1993:238-239), the following effects of spiritual abuse on victims who left abusive systems have been recorded:

- All victims experience a deep, at time suicidal, depression as a result of the collapse of the entire belief system they have wholeheartedly committed to. Nothing is left for them to pin their hope and faith to.
- Another symptom is rage at the responsible leaders. For many there is no language too strong to express their anger. Depression and anger may last for many months.
- After a period of time conflicting emotions occur. Days or weeks of happiness will be followed by periods of deep depression and rage. The rage can subside but will reappear again and again. It may gradually disappear during the healing process that may last a year or longer.
- A sense of purposelessness and disconnection from life coupled with an unbearable loneliness, isolation and alienation ensues.
- Victims may experience a fear of losing their salvation because they have left the group. Some relapse completely and return to the group as the only safe place they know.

- Most victims become distrustful of any kind of authority especially religious leadership. Some victims even refuse to participate in any religious set-up for months, even years.
- Victims experience the feeling that nobody understands their specific situation and they fear that they will go crazy. This feeling causes the battered follower to pull back even into isolation.
- Embarrassment at being so stupid as to be abused and even to have participated in recruiting other followers is common.
- Many victims who gave up careers and possessions, face frustration and a dismal career track and financial future. The leader traps some victims in a marriage as a result of matchmaking.
- Parents tended to neglect their children as a result of their total commitment to the group.
- Some victims have been sexually abused.
- Other victims have repeated nightmares and other experience dissociation.
- Families of the victims are heartbroken and in many cases the relationships are destroyed.
- Victims develop a distorted image of God.
- Victims have a distorted self-image of themselves as Christians
- Some may have difficulty with the concept of grace.
- Most victims have difficulty with admitting that they have been abused.

Recovering from spiritual abuse is a long and difficult process. In almost all cases these victims need professional help to learn to cope with their situation. The old saying “prevention is better than cure” is eminently applicable.

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

It is clear from the above discussion that spiritual abuse in *new religious movements* in general but no less in South Africa, poses a threat. These religious groups very cleverly misuse the Christian faith based on biblical authority to give impetus to their teachings and practices. The outward perception of authenticity and supposed divine calling of these groups makes them attractive to join. Moreover, they appeal to the constitution of South Africa that ensures religious freedom. The lack of some kind of umbrella authority to oversee the application of religious freedom and the acceptability of the religious practices within the context of human rights in these groups lays bare the opportunity for abuse. To all intents and purposes, they are functioning as free agents. They teach whatever doctrine or revelation they desire and utilise whatever techniques they wish to recruit members. They establish their own rules and regulations without considering the negative impact these might have on the emotions, psyche and rights of their followers. These groups are mostly registered as article 21 non-profit organisations. Ironically, they misuse an idealistic picture of freedom to entrap and abuse spiritually needy and serious people.

There is an obvious lack of protection for spiritually abused victims. Churches have their own internal structures to address these abuses. Nonetheless, the religious movements discussed in this article function independently and, as mentioned above, have no umbrella body to oversee their practices. Some kind of legislation or governmental body should be in place to enforce measures to prevent such practices. Furthermore, mainstream Christians may not accept such practices in the name of Christianity. The same gospel that frees people from sin and bondage is misused – in these instances – to entrap others. The scripture is clear about it too. God does not tolerate these practices. In the Old and New Testaments such abusers are exposed as “wicked” (Jr 5:26), as a “brood of vipers” (Mt 12), and as “ravenous wolves” (Mt 7:15). The Apostle Paul refers to them as “Judaizers”, “the dogs”, “the evil workers” (Phlp 3:2) and “false brethren” (Gl 2:4).

The biggest hurdle in curbing spiritual abuse is to expose the subtlety with which it is practised. In contrast to physical abuse or sexual abuse that leaves outward scars, spiritual abuse leaves inner scars invisible and therefore ignored. Any successful attempt to combat spiritual abuse would require a combination of forces to involve government. Some scholars like Possemaï and Lee (2004:338) believe that any proposed legislative intervention is undesirable. They view the French anti-cult legislation passed through parliament on 30 May 2001 as an undermining of the fundamental

principles of religious freedom and diversity as well as of the basic principles of human rights.

Intervention from governmental level may be viewed as the undermining of basic human rights and could indeed be – depending on the content of the legislation. However, human rights also need to be protected in such a manner that religious (or other) movements do not create areas for the abuse of people. In the area where action and practices are motivated by an abstract belief or philosophy, as in religion and spirituality, it is possible for subtle intimidation that is not really in service of the religion, to occur. This intimidation can move people to extremes that are detrimental to their own wellbeing. Surely the freedom that is fought for by the constitution of the country also needs to be fiercely protected against those who would misuse that freedom to entrap abuse and harm others. Freedom also means being free from the abuse of those who present themselves as friends in a so-called friendly and safe environment such as a religious movement. Government intervention would not be intended to limit religious freedom, or to prescribe doctrine or the spirituality of any religious group, but to ensure that gross abuse of innocent people through cunning methods of intimidation and emotional blackmail is avoided.

In order to address this problem the following is proposed:

- All religious movements in South Africa must be registered with the department of home affairs.
- The human rights commission should focus on spiritual abuse in religious movements and investigate related complaints.
- Spiritual abuse should be declared a punishable offence.
- The article on the freedom of religion in the constitution should include a section that excludes any form of spiritual abuse.

People are granted the right to the religion of their choice but must also be protected against the unscrupulous that utilise loopholes in the system to abuse others for their own enrichment and to cover up their own weaknesses.

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