

Report on a Harvard Divinity School Conference Entitled “Uses and Abuses of Power in Alternative Spiritualities”

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Highlights

- A growing number of abuses within spiritual organizations, previously shrouded in secrecy, have begun to be uncovered in recent years.
- Lessons arising from the Guru scandals of the 1960s and 70s do not appear to have been learned, the misconduct of spiritual teachers does not appear to have lessened.
- Ethical standards are found to be lower in spiritual organizations than in the corporate world, and there are multiple – sometimes unique – factors contributing to this problem.
- Institutional spiritual bypassing – or applying spiritual teachings to avoid dealing with issues that are reported – is prevalent within spiritual organizations.
- Remedies for mitigating abuse include providing education, strengthening systems of support and normalizing the subject of ethics within a community.
- Engaging the entire community in maintaining ethical standards is vital, as is creating an environment of psychological safety that encourages open communication without fear.
- Clear codes of conduct are particularly important to get right because they set the tone for healthy dynamics across a whole community.

Abstract

The author, a long-time member of the Dances of Universal Peace community, attended a three-day conference on the "Uses and Abuses of Power in Alternative Spiritualities," hosted by Harvard Divinity School in April, 2023. The author was keen to learn more about the psychology of abuse, the mechanisms by which such behavior can escape unchallenged, and what distinctions and best practices can help an organization elevate and protect its ethical integrity.

The conference explored the paradox of spiritual communities, which on the one hand can bring people together and provide a deep sense of purpose, but which also carry the potential to cause immense and lasting suffering through unethical behavior. This report presents findings which highlight the importance of improving accountability, increasing ethical awareness, and developing practical strategies for mitigating harm.

The report discusses the prevalence of abusive behavior in spiritual communities, including sexual, physical, emotional, spiritual, and financial abuse. It highlights the severity of psychological or emotional abuse, which can be just as devastating as physical or sexual abuse, and notes that cover-ups and institutional failures have often enabled abuse to continue. The text references several alternative spiritual communities that have been embroiled in abuse scandals, including the Shivananda Yoga community, the Buddhist Shambala community, the Kundalini Yoga community,

and others, and suggests that these cases share common patterns and psychological weaknesses that contribute to abuse.

The report explores the neurobiology of power, examining how it can lead to abusive behaviors and create feedback loops that reinforce them. It also discusses the negative outcomes for those subjected to abuse and the need for intentional efforts to create accountability and promote healthier power dynamics.

The text explores the psychology of denial in the context of abuse in spiritual organizations. It discusses the concept of "neutralization," where perpetrators justify harmful behavior by creating cognitive excuses, and lists five common defenses of neutralization. The report also examines institutional denial, where the perpetrator is often defended within the community and the survivor is not, and highlights the range of reactions to revelations of misbehavior, from denouncing the people making the revelations to rationalizing and minimizing the abuse.

Ethical standards are found to be lower in the spiritual sector than in the corporate world. A number of factors are identified as contributing to this problem, including spiritual bypassing, institutional betrayal, and wilful ignorance. History has shown that spiritual leaders often abuse their power and that internal reporting systems can be designed to silence survivors rather than hold abusers accountable. Moreover, it is observed that spiritual organizations are often unable to acknowledge and apologize for their wrongdoing, even when faced with overwhelming evidence.

The text addresses the "epidemic of silence" in organizations, where fear of retaliation prevents open communication and undermines psychological safety. It also notes that destructive leadership traits can be obscured by situational factors, suggesting that a holistic approach is needed to combat self-serving leaders and foster healthier environments.

The report presents practical remedies for minimizing abuse of power within spiritual organizations. It highlights nine key strategies, including educating community members to recognize warning signs of abuse, creating trainings and improving support systems, nurturing psychological safety and giving people a voice, understanding nuances of power, using caution when choosing leaders, retaining people who can bring inner change, building more robust systems of accountability, raising self-awareness in leaders and normalizing the subject of ethics. By adopting these measures, spiritual organizations can establish a culture of integrity, transparency, and compassion, where everyone thrives.

Methodology

During the conference many of the presentations ran simultaneously, although some recordings were also made available for a limited time after the conference had finished. Since it was impractical to attend all the presentations, the author selected for those that seemed to hold the most potential for being helpful to our Dances of Universal Peace community. The author attended many presentations but later discarded ones that did not appear to be so relevant.

This report then is based primarily on those presentations that made the grade, which the writer hopes will help contribute to the ongoing conversation on ethics in our community. The discussion is occasionally augmented by supplementary research, which expands on the key points made by conference speakers.

Introduction

In April 2023 the author attended a three day conference given by Harvard Divinity School (HDS), one of the constituent schools of Harvard University, on the theme of “Uses and Abuses of Power in Alternative Spiritualities.” The conference presented over 80 papers and workshops from over a hundred speakers from around the world including spiritual teachers, sociologists, scholars, abuse survivors, lawyers, clinical psychologists, trauma healers, psychotherapists, interreligious ministers, anthropologists and more.

The conference organizers introduced the gathering in this way:

“Within spiritual communities, we may find our life's worth, a path through the valley of the shadow of death, or the face of the divine. Spiritual practices can make us feel strongly alive, connected to a community, but spirituality also has great power to cause harm.

Some of us gathered here have experienced physical assault, sexual abuse or financial exploitation at the hands of cherished spiritual teachers. We may have sought beloved community and instead had our sense of self shattered and our trust betrayed. The goal of this conference is to create a single conversation that holds all of those realities together.”

What is abuse and what is unethical behavior? The dictionary tells us that abuse is that which “*hurts or injures by maltreatment*” – often to unfairly gain benefit – while unethical behavior is that which is not “*in accordance with the accepted principles of right and wrong.*” With this in mind, the author attended the conference seeking answers to some pressing concerns:

- In spiritual organizations whose primary reason for existing is to enable liberation from suffering, why is there so much unethical behavior?
- Why is the universal value of *ahimsa* or non-injury to others – found in cultures all around the world – so often ignored?
- What are the mechanisms that allow senior teachers within a spiritual community to systematically and repeatedly behave unethically without being meaningfully challenged?
- What are some of the best practices for reducing the incidence of such infractions and mitigating the attendant harms?

As one conference speaker observed, it is the people or organizations who think they are beyond the rules of moral accountability or the need to attend to their own psychology that likely need the most reminding of the significance of ethics. In the Dances of Universal Peace community what are our blind spots? What are the responsibilities of mentors and guides in investigating and responding to allegations of abusive conduct about their students or mentees? What processes for healing and restoring harmony have we not considered? What can we do to raise ethical standards and awareness in all members of our community, the author included?

Background

The scope for abusive behavior in human beings sadly seems to be almost unlimited. Many abuses within spiritual communities have come to public attention in recent years, abuses that have led to deep and sometimes irreparable psychological damage. These have spanned the whole gamut of human misconduct including sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, spiritual abuse, financial abuse and more.

In addition there have been cover-ups and institutional failures. This includes leaders failing to take appropriate action when allegations of abuse were brought to their attention, leading to a culture of silence and protection of abusers rather than victims. This in turn has led to further harm and suffering for the victims.

While physical or sexual abuse are often seen as more severe due to the violation of physical boundaries and the potential for bodily harm, the scientific literature strongly supports the notion that psychological or emotional abuse – which can include manipulation, deceit, emotional coercion, intimidation, bullying, gaslighting, neglect and more - can be just as damaging and can lead to similarly severe levels of long-term psychological distress and impairment (Almendros et al., 2011; Basile et al., 2004; Coker et al., 2000; Herman, 1992; Tolman, 1999). In fact, some studies have found that the effects of psychological abuse can in some cases be more long-lasting and debilitating than those of physical or sexual abuse (Arias & Pape, 1999; Dutton & Goodman, 2005; Gortner et al., 1997; Sackett & Saunders, 1999).

The damage from psychological abuse can also be more difficult to recognize and acknowledge than from physical or sexual abuse, as it often involves subtle and manipulative behaviors that can be harder to detect. As a result, psychological abuse may be more likely to be minimized or denied by perpetrators and even by the victims themselves.

Sequelae, or the enduring physical, emotional, and psychological effects that can result from experiencing abuse, can be strikingly similar across different types of abuse, highlighting the profound and lasting impact that traumatic experiences can have on an individual's overall well-being (Briere & Scott, 2015; Courtois & Ford, 2009; Kolk, 2014). For some individuals, symptoms can be a persistent presence in their daily lives, whereas for others they may arise unexpectedly in response to experiences or sensations that evoke the traumatic event. These can include:

- Chronic low self-esteem
- Assorted avoidance behaviours
- A sense of isolation and loneliness
- Feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness
- Hypervigilance and heightened levels of fear
- Shame or guilt for feeling unable to prevent the abuse
- Mental health issues such as anxiety and depression or even suicidal ideation
- Unhealthy coping mechanisms and addictions, such as self-injury or substance abuse
- Difficulty trusting others, thus impacting wider relationships and social interactions
- Complex emotions, including feelings of anger, sadness, confusion, or disgust

Victims of abuse may also feel like they are stuck in a situation or relationship that they cannot escape. They may experience physical symptoms that can include headaches, stomach problems, sleep disturbances, fatigue and compromised immune responses. Almost all victims of abuse have a need for support, which can come from therapy, support groups, or trusted friends and family.

With the Catholic Church, while there were likely instances of abuse throughout the centuries, the modern era of public awareness and scrutiny began to take shape primarily in the 1980s. The following is a list of some of the alternative spiritual communities examined at the conference, whose narratives of abuse have often followed a similar arc to that of the Catholic Church, albeit on a shorter timescale. The dates in parentheses indicate when abuses, or further abuses, came to public attention. In many cases, allegations were made years or even decades earlier – and swept under the carpet.

Mount Baldy Zen Center (1997) / ISKCON (1998) / NXIVM (2017) / Buddhist Shambala International (2018) / Pagan community (2019) / Shivananda Yoga community (2019) / Taize community (2019) / 3HO Kundalini Yoga community (2019) / Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition - FPMT (2020)

In the paper, “Investigating Alternative Spiritual Movements: What Experience and the Law Tell Us About Sexual Abuse in Alternative Spiritual Communities” Angela Gollat observes *“notable similarities across traditions regarding abuse,”* which presumably reflect the psychological weaknesses that are common to the human condition (Merchasin et al., 2023).

Neurobiology of Power

In the presentation, “Association for Spiritual Integrity: Lessons from a Young Organization Making a Difference” spiritual teacher Jac O’Keeffe touches on the topic of the neurobiology of power, which seeks to understand how power dynamics affect the brain and nervous system (O’Keeffe et al., 2023).

Studies have consistently shown that power can have a corrupting influence on individuals, leading to increased feelings of entitlement, narcissism, and a sense of being above the rules that govern others. This mindset can contribute to abusive behaviors, as those in power may feel justified in exploiting their position and disregarding the welfare of others.

The experience of power can create feedback loops that serve to reinforce certain behaviors. When individuals in positions of power successfully exert their influence or control over others, this can elevate that person’s status within a group or organization, which may generate feelings such as pleasure, euphoria, confidence, enhanced self-esteem or satisfaction. These are mediated by what O’Keeffe loosely refers to as *“chemicals of power”* – neurotransmitters such as endorphins, dopamine and serotonin, and hormones such as testosterone, oxytocin or cortisol.

As individuals experience positive reinforcement for their actions, they may become more emboldened to engage in increasingly aggressive or abusive behaviors. This can create a cycle where abusive behaviors become normalized and the individual in power becomes desensitized to the impact of their actions on others, further perpetuating abusive behavior without recognizing the harm they cause.

Conversely those who are subjected to abuse may experience a range of negative outcomes, including anxiety, depression, or trauma, which can affect their mental health and overall well-being. Continuous exposure to abuse can diminish a person's sense of agency and self-worth, making it more difficult for them to assert themselves or challenge the abuser.

Over time, the feedback loop can contribute to the entrenchment of power imbalances within a group or organization. As abusive behaviors go unchecked, the power dynamics become more rigid, making it harder for those in lower positions to speak out or seek help. This can lead to victims feeling powerless to report abuse due to fear of retaliation or disbelief, further perpetuating the cycle of abuse. Over time, a culture of silence and acceptance of abusive behavior can develop, making it difficult to challenge or change the status quo. Addressing these feedback loops requires intentional efforts to create accountability and promote healthier power dynamics.

Psychology of Denial

In his presentation, “The Dance of Betrayal, The Psychodynamics and Abuses of Authority in Spiritual Organizations” clinical psychologist Duncan Hollomon presents “Five Defenses of Neutralization” (Hollomon, 2023). The term “neutralization” refers to an inner psychological process wherein a perpetrator reduces the guilt or shame associated with unethical behavior by creating cognitive justifications or excuses (Sykes & Matza, 1957). By downplaying or denying the harm they have caused, they are able to maintain a positive self-image, which in turn allows them to continue engaging in harmful conduct:

1. Denial of facts (It didn't happen)
2. Distorting the facts (That's not how it happened)
3. Denial of injury (What I did isn't so awful)
4. Denial of responsibility (I couldn't control myself)
5. Blaming the circumstances (External locus of control)

As psychologist Albert Bandura points out, *“there are many psychosocial maneuvers by which moral self-sanctions are selectively disengaged”* (Bandura, 1999). Other neutralization techniques include shifting the blame onto the victim for the harm the victim suffered, attacking those who draw attention to the behavior in question, or pointing to supposed good deeds done in the past and claiming these outweigh any harm the perpetrator has caused. This latter strategy conveniently ignores the fact that harm caused by abuse or trauma cannot be erased or offset by good deeds.

Neutralization is a significant concept in understanding the dynamics of abuse, as it highlights the cognitive processes that allow perpetrators to justify harmful behaviors. However, it is not just perpetrators who typically seek to minimize the effects of their behavior. Hollomon (2023) highlights similar psychological processes happening in both abuse survivors and institutions, a kind of wilful ignorance that he characterizes as *“not knowing what I know.”* For survivors it is a way to cope with their trauma and for institutions it is a way to avoid having to confront allegations of abuse.

Institutional Denial

In this connection Hollomon (2023) draws attention to a dynamic wherein the perpetrator is often very defended within the community and the survivor much less so. So *“the power imbalance is not*

only a function of the position of authority it is also a function of the different levels of defendedness.” In other words, there is often strong denial at the institutional level.

Author Philip Goldberg touches upon this topic in his paper, “The Guru Scandals: Lessons from the Recent History of Power Abuse.” He highlights a range of reactions to revelations of misbehavior, a range that he has seen within every community he has looked at (Goldberg, 2023).

At the highest level of defendedness, Goldberg describes how people in this category will *“circle the wagons and often demonize the people making the revelations and the accusations.”* He further observes that this reaction in many instances comes from people *“fairly high up in the hierarchy of that organization”* – in other words those likely to be the most invested in the organization and maintaining the status quo. Then there are those who *“don't entirely deny what happened in the light of evidence, but where there's substantial evidence they'll rationalize it, minimize it, explain it away.”*

Researcher Jens Augspurger agrees, noting that *“the closer you come to the inside of an organization, the more control is going to happen”* (Merchasin et al., 2023).

In her seminal and widely cited work on trauma, Harvard psychiatrist Judith Herman explains some of the psychology at play here: *“It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering”* (Herman, 1992).

In her presentation, “Healthy Happy Holy? Harm and Healing in Sikh Dharma's Kundalini Yoga Community” scholar Nirinjan Khalsa asks, *“What does it mean for a community of practitioners who have spent the past 50 years dedicated to spreading the light when there is so much darkness in the shadow?”* She further asks, *“(When) heads of the community... under the guise of neutrality... are denying the abuse as slander and betrayal, ...when some are not even able to acknowledge the harm done, ...how are we to move forward as a community?”* (Khalsa, 2023).

Speaker Izzy Swanson highlights the irony that the disempowerment being perpetuated in modern spiritual communities *“mimics the behavior patterns of dominant religious institutions, the very same institutions that many of us seek to break free from”* (Swanson, 2023).

Are Spiritual Organizations More Ethical Than Secular Ones?

Scholar Jens Augspurger, whose research focuses on spiritual organizations finds a *“very high prevalence of abuse in spiritual communities”* (Merchasin et al., 2023).

Colleague Angela Gollat agrees, noting for example that *“whistleblowers have come forward from nearly every modern transnational yoga tradition with reports of sexual and other abuses, and with remarkably similar defensive responses from leadership.”*

Referring to the prevalent systems of privilege and power in the secular world, Gollat points out that spiritual teachings are often given by individuals who are *“equally mired”* in those same *“complexities of dominant systems of power.”* Unfortunately, spiritual communities often have particular blind spots that allow ethical abuses to play out through *“unique mechanisms.”* She finds

that *“the epidemic of abuse (and) lack of accountability... illustrate that the yoga community is as unexceptional as sports schools, the military, churches, etcetera, as a site of violence and oppression, which is very disappointing”* (Merchasin et al., 2023).

Carol Merchasin, a colleague and attorney, spent many years investigating workplace abuses in large corporations, before applying her expertise to examining similar issues in various Buddhist and yoga communities. Shockingly, she finds emphatically that ethical standards in the spiritual sector are meaningfully *lower* than in the corporate sector, even while emphasizing that *“corporate America is hardly a bastion of high ethical standards in the United States.”* Despite the corporate world's own shortcomings, she finds it to be much more effective at rooting out abuse than the spiritual sector (Merchasin et al., 2023).

There appear to be several factors that pave the way for this outcome. First, within spiritual settings those in power may exploit their positions while appearing humble and selfless, rendering such abuses particularly insidious and challenging to uncover.

Second, the phenomenon of priestly castes considering themselves special and above the people they serve is a well-documented phenomenon across diverse cultures and traditions the world over. Merchasin finds accord with this, describing a mindset wherein leaders in alternative spiritual organizations often consider themselves to be special, and feel they are above the law and answerable only to a higher power.

Merchasin (2023) contrasts this attitude with that of corporate America which has *“spent billions of dollars trying to not be liable for lawsuits. They have a policy. The policy explains what behavior is not permitted, tells you how to report behavior that is not permitted. Then they investigate it.”* She adds that *“they understand what the law is”* and take *“action at the end of the investigations.”*

Conversely, Angela Gollat describes how in some alternative communities *“internal reporting systems were instituted offering the appearance of adherence to legal and ethical standards while functionally discouraging survivors.”* Research has shown that *“not acknowledging abuse may be psychologically damaging in itself”* (Coker et al., 2000). Gollat concurs, finding that for victims who reported abuse but were *“denied, ignored, isolated or vilified in response,”* the resulting experience was *“as traumatic as the abuse itself”* and caused *“ongoing deleterious health, emotional, interpersonal and economic effects”* (Merchasin et al., 2023).

In a similar vein, Merchasin offers a devastating reflection on the subject of remorse: *“I have found for an unfathomable reason that these organizations are almost pathologically unable to apologize... even when their own investigation found these things out... (and) corroborated”* the allegations made.

Merchasin identifies five further key dynamics commonly at play within spiritual organizations:

- Spiritual bypassing
- Institutional betrayal
- Networks of complicity
- Epistemic injustice
- Wilful hermeneutical ignorance

Institutional betrayal refers to the harm or mistreatment that individuals experience when institutions fail to protect or support them, or actively cause harm. This can include situations where institutions prioritize their own interests over the well-being of individuals, or where they fail to take responsibility for their actions.

Epistemic injustice is a concept in social epistemology that highlights how certain social groups or individuals may be unfairly discredited in their ability to contribute to knowledge, share their experiences, or have their voices heard, including when testimony is not taken seriously.

Wilful hermeneutical ignorance refers to the deliberate choice to misinterpret information, to refuse to understand data or evidence in an honest and unbiased manner. This term combines "hermeneutical," which relates to the process of interpretation, and "ignorance," which refers to a lack of knowledge or awareness. It is a concept used to describe the ways in which individuals or groups may deliberately distort or manipulate information often due to a desire to protect their own power, privilege or agenda.

Closely related is the notion of wilful ignorance, which refers to a conscious decision to remain uninformed or to ignore information that one has the ability to understand, thereby avoiding knowledge that might lead to uncomfortable truths or responsibilities.

These two dynamics can show up in multiple ways, such as dismissing or trivializing someone's experiences, refusing to listen to their perspective, or actively silencing their voice. Whichever strategy is used, the intention remains the same: by remaining uninformed about the experiences of others, they can evade the uncomfortable moral and ethical responsibilities that come with understanding the issues being raised.

Networks of complicity describes the web of relationships and behaviors within an organization or community that allow harm or wrongdoing to continue unchecked, often due to a culture of silence, fear, or allegiance. Members may prioritize their own interests, such as personal gain, status, or belonging, over the well-being of others, leading to a collective failure to address or acknowledge wrongdoing.

Furthermore, Angela Gollat observes that spiritual communities often suffer from "*lineages of abuse*" where generations of disciples become teachers, themselves with their own disciples, who then cover up and silence victims' reports of misconduct against teachers higher up in the chain, thus "*silencing survivors and enabling ongoing harm.*" In other words, both students and teachers can become complicit in enabling or perpetuating the abuse.

Spiritual bypassing is a term that refers to the use of spiritual beliefs, practices, experiences or language to avoid dealing with emotional, psychological, or relational issues. It can apply to both individuals and organizations.

In individuals it involves using spirituality as a defence mechanism to escape from uncomfortable feelings, unresolved trauma, or difficult life situations, rather than confronting and processing them.

In the context of organizations, spiritual bypassing can occur when a group or institution uses spiritual rhetoric to avoid addressing systemic issues, power imbalances, or harmful practices within

their own structure. This can include using spiritual language or weaponizing spiritual teachings to justify oppressive or exploitative behaviors, or to silence marginalized voices within the organization.

Examples of spiritual language used in this context include:

- “Everything happens for a reason.” (Justifying or dismissing suffering or difficulties)
- “Don't dwell on the negative.” (Minimizing or dismissing emotions or concerns)
- “Holding onto anger only hurts you.” (Shaming or invalidating anger or negative emotions)
- “Just surrender to the universe.” (Avoiding responsibility or action)
- “You create your own reality.” (Blaming the person for their problems or circumstances)
- “It's all an illusion.” (Minimizing or dismissing real-world issues or experiences)
- “Just trust that everything will work out.” (Implying no action is needed to address issues)
- “There's no such thing as good and evil.” (Dismissing moral boundaries or accountability)
- “Just focus on the present.” (Avoiding discussion of past traumas or future concerns).

Aside from being top of Merchasin's list, spiritual bypassing was mentioned by other speakers in the conference. Angela Gollat finds “*spiritual bypassing or applying spiritual teachings to prematurely transcend or avoid grappling with harm*” to be “*common*” in alternative spiritual organizations (Merchasin et al., 2023). Jac O'Keeffe agrees, and remarks that bypassing is often used as a tool to protect entrenched “*power differentials*” (O'Keeffe et al., 2023). Jens Augspurger sees spiritual bypassing as a “*mechanism of control*” and a form of “*toxic positivity*” (Merchasin et al., 2023).

In addition to these patterns Gollat finds that spiritual organizations “*tend to protect abusers and come after victims*” by employing DARVO as a tactic. DARVO is a model developed by Dr. Jennifer Freyd that describes a common pattern of behavior exhibited by individuals when accused of wrongdoing. The acronym refers to a four-stage response where the accused denies any wrongdoing, attacks the credibility or character of the accuser, reverses the roles of victim and offender, and shifts the focus from their own actions to the victim's behavior. This response is often used to deflect accountability, discredit the accuser, and maintain a positive public image, and can be particularly damaging in cases of institutional betrayal (Freyd, 1997).

Unlike corporations, where retirement age provides a natural mechanism for leadership turnover, spiritual organizations often lack such a mechanism, allowing leaders to remain in power for life and potentially entrenching unhealthy power dynamics even more deeply.

Augspurger also identifies additional factors that can be quite particular to spiritual organizations, including the “*ongoing production of hagiography*” and “*continued glorification of abusers and their empires*.” Furthermore he notes that “*members often become dependent on the group or organization and the cost of leaving... just becomes too high,*” which “*secures their adherence to the group*” (Merchasin et al., 2023).

An Epidemic of Silence in Organizations

Noted Harvard Professor Amy Edmondson finds many organizations suffer from an “*epidemic of silence*” where “*the gravitational pull of silence can be overwhelming.*” In such environments people fear to speak up for fear of retaliation, for fear of being viewed or labeled negatively, or for fear of damaging existing relationships. To this list she adds the “*fear of insulting someone higher up in the*

organization by implying that the current systems or processes are problematic.” In such organizations staying silent is the only way of being “completely confident that we’ll be safe” (Edmondson, 2018).

This notion of an epidemic of silence is closely related to the concept of psychological safety. In a psychologically safe environment people *“feel comfortable sharing concerns... without fear of embarrassment or retribution. They are confident that they can speak up and won’t be humiliated, ignored, or blamed”* (Edmondson, 2018). In the decades since the paradigm of psychological safety was first researched, the scientific literature has consistently highlighted its importance in creating a culture of integrity within communities and organizations.

A More Holistic Perspective on Destructive Leadership Traits

According to social cognitive theory, the way individuals express their traits is largely influenced by *“situational affordances”* – or the situations people find themselves in (Laurijssen et al., 2024). Consequently, colleagues or subordinates or indeed superiors who do not encounter circumstances that trigger a leader's destructive behaviors may remain unaware of those negative aspects. This suggests that a leader's harmful traits can be hidden in certain contexts, leading to a skewed perception of their character among team members.

At the core of social cognitive theory is the idea that others' actions reveal what is permissible. *“In other words,”* Laurijssen et al. write, *“people scan and interpret their environment to understand which behavior is tolerated or appreciated in the pursuit of personal goals.”*

The authors add that *“negative leadership processes are rarely the result of individual leaders alone”* because leader characteristics *“only translate into negative outcomes if followers assist or are unable to resist destructive leader behaviors, and if the organizational environment... enables or supports these behaviors.”*

This suggests a holistic approach may be an effective way for communities to more effectively inoculate against self-serving leaders who have a pattern of harming others (Laurijssen et al., 2024).

Remedies

What are some of the practical remedies for this state of affairs? How can a spiritual organization protect itself from some of the unique structural vulnerabilities and psychological pitfalls examined at the conference? What parts of the organizational makeup unwittingly accommodate the shadow? What best practices are supported by research in fields such as organizational behavior, ethics, and psychology?

1. Educating community members

Philip Goldberg of the Association for Spiritual Integrity, an organization that describes itself as being on *“a mission to bring high levels of integrity to the culture of spiritual leadership,”* believes that *“one of the critical issues before all of us is to educate spiritual seekers and students about what to look out for, what the warning signs are, how to protect yourself from being vulnerable to abuse of power (and) how to recognize it when it comes up”* (O’Keeffe et al., 2023).

Not all abusive behavior is overt or easily recognizable. By equipping community members with the knowledge, awareness and language to identify abusive behaviors and understand the procedures for reporting them, organizations can create a safer and more supportive common environment. This includes educating community members on recognizing when tactics such as neutralization, spiritual bypassing, wilful ignorance, or epistemic injustice are being used to downplay or dismiss legitimate concerns.

Regular training and education on ethical behavior, power dynamics, and the impact of abuse can empower community members with the resources, skills and confidence to address inappropriate behavior while at the same time deepening their understanding and absorption of the community's ethical guidelines. Such a program of education can of course only happen when an organization has enough honesty and self-awareness to acknowledge there may be room for improving its ethical standards.

2. Creating stronger support systems

To redress the systematic power imbalances arising from differing levels of defendedness between perpetrators and survivors, those who have experienced abusive behavior need to receive at least as much support as perpetrators, particularly when they come forward to report their experiences.

Support systems can encompass peer support groups, both online and in-person, as well as counseling services and advocacy support. A key component of advocacy support is providing a dedicated advocate to support survivors in navigating the reporting process, accessing resources, and advocating on their behalf.

Jac O'Keeffe (2023) reports one of the primary learnings at the Association for Spiritual Integrity is that *"our intention to do good needs to be supported by training, by information, by support systems."* She adds that, *"without these, within the broader community, breaches of the code happen frequently without any awareness that we're breaching the code."*

3. Creating psychological safety and encouraging a speak-up culture

Vital to any genuine efforts to uphold ethical standards is creating an environment of psychological safety that encourages open communication without fear. When people know that their voices are heard and valued they are more likely to report incidents of abuse or misconduct, thereby helping to reinforce an atmosphere of respect and safety. Regularly soliciting feedback from community members through surveys, online suggestion boxes and other means can help identify areas where misconduct may be occurring and create opportunities for improvement.

Spiritual teacher Jeff Carriera notes that in spiritual communities *"people often don't have a voice, and what happens if (you) don't have a voice, if you're not able to speak about things when they're small (is that) everything builds up (into) an explosion."* He adds: *"So the ability to call things out needs to be built into the system so that it can happen consistently at levels that allow it not to reach that explosive outrage, so that it's all part of maintaining the conversation"* (Carreira, 2023).

When community members feel supported in speaking out against abuse and *"are not silent when people are hurting,"* it sends a powerful message that abuse will not be tolerated (Swanson, 2023).

4. Understanding nuances of power

Jac O’Keeffe (2023) finds it helpful to distinguish between *“misuse of power”* and *“abuse of power.”* While both involve the improper use of authority, misuse of power implies a lack of intention or awareness, whereas abuse implies a deliberate and intentional exploitation of authority or influence for personal gain, selfish motives, or to harm others.

Abuse of power often involves a conscious decision to use power in a way that is harmful, unjust, or unethical. It can involve coercion, manipulation, or exploitation of others, and is often accompanied by a sense of entitlement or a lack of accountability. O’Keeffe (2023) remarks that misuse of power is *“inevitable if we teach too quickly”* and may be remedied by adequate training, but abuse of power is more problematic.

5. Using caution and discernment when choosing people for leadership positions

People in leadership positions *“usually have considerable control over one’s own and others’ resources and have the means to secure and sustain their position”* (Laurijssen et al., 2024). Therefore *“organizations should consider the moral identity of people they promote to powerful positions because those who have weak moral identities can be expected to engage in more self-serving behavior”* (Treviño et al., 2014).

Charisma, popularity and magnetism are not synonyms for integrity. When abuse is seen to be tolerated within an organization, unscrupulous and ambitious leaders notice it and can exploit this vulnerability in order to gain more and more status within the community (Laurijssen et al., 2024).

Jens Augspurger observes that within spiritual organizations *“those who manage to get into leadership positions are often learning themselves to be abusive – maybe emotionally, maybe in other ways – to retain their status within the group.”* Thus when abusive people gain power, this can set the tone for the next generation of leaders, and Augspurger finds that *“the dysfunctional patterns become quite intergenerational”* (Merchasin et al., 2023). The Catholic Church is perhaps a stark and sobering reminder of the long-term consequences of unchecked abusive power.

6. Retaining people who have the potential to bring inner change to the organization

Organizations that promote leaders who *“turn their service into power”* and who use that power to accumulate *“even greater power”* (Francis, 2014) will sooner or later lose people who might otherwise be able to bring great benefit to the community.

As Jens Augspurger explains, *“experience tells us these organizations have a really hard time changing from the inside because they do not retain people that bring ideas... People who are repelled by the abusive dynamics either leave by their own will or are kicked out, but with that the organization also loses people who have the potential to bring inner change or really change something in the entire system”* (Merchasin et al., 2023).

7. Building better systems of accountability

Jac O’Keeffe (2023) observes that *“violations of the code happen in very discreet ways, so we discovered we need to bring in some system of accountability.”* Philip Goldberg finds that *“it’s the people who think they are above all this, who don’t want to be held accountable, that usually cause the most problems”* (O’Keeffe et al., 2023).

Research indicates that to build a robust system of accountability it is crucial to engage the community in the process (Arnstein, 1969; Braithwaite, 2002; Laurijssen et al., 2024). When community members participate in the policy-making process – which can include helping to shape ethical guidelines as well as response protocols to ethical infringements – they can provide valuable insights into dynamics at the grassroots level and identify potential areas of concern. This collaborative approach not only enhances the relevance and effectiveness of the policies but also fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to uphold these standards, as well as encouraging a culture of openness and mutual respect within the wider community.

Effective accountability requires very clear guidelines on what constitutes abuse, well-defined consequences for such behavior, and leadership that visibly holds people accountable for their actions (Laurijssen et al., 2024). Organizations can also demonstrate accountability by openly reporting on abuse incidents, including their occurrence, characteristics, and the measures taken to address them.

8. Educating and raising self-awareness in leaders

Senior teachers and other leaders can receive training on power dynamics, abuse prevention, and response protocols. Education can include developing a deeper awareness of the potential blind spots in spiritual leadership, including epistemic injustice, wilful hermeneutical ignorance, and spiritual bypassing.

A code of conduct for leaders – above and beyond the basic ethical guidelines common to all – can help clarify the responsibilities of senior leaders when presented with allegations of abuse concerning other teachers. The code can help ensure that both the person making the allegation and the leader responding to it are aware of their roles and responsibilities in the process.

Trainings can also focus on raising self-awareness in leaders. In her presentation, *“Building Safer Spaces: Ethics and Transparency in Alternative Spiritualities”* Allegra Lovejoy urges leaders to *“work on learning their own habits of transference and projection,”* to be alert to noticing *“clues that we are seeking to meet our personal needs through the people we serve,”* and to have a strategy at hand for when we notice we are wandering (Lovejoy, 2023).

Personal needs can include the need to *“insatiably accumulate power,”* to show oneself as *“more capable than others”* or to think of oneself *“as above others”* (Francis, 2014). They may also include the need for love, sex, money. The need to feel admired, successful, special, virtuous, liked. The need for approval, validation, recognition, praise. The need for control, dominance, respect, social status. The list goes on.

9. Normalizing the subject of ethics

Lovejoy (2023) emphasizes that *“codes of conduct are particularly important to get right (because they) set the tone for healthy dynamics across a community.”* Ethics need to be a regular and

accepted and well-communicated part of community discussions, rather than a niche or specialized topic. How are we relating to one another? How are we treating one another? What's the health of our community? She observes that the *“more normalized it is to talk about ethics and the conduct expected of community members, teachers or students, new members or old hands, the more these norms can become accepted.”* Conversely, when *“behavioral norms are never discussed, or if they're only discussed after a crisis, then it becomes: ‘Oh, that issue again.’”*

Normalizing the topic of ethics within a spiritual organization requires a thoughtful and inclusive approach. Strategies to bring the subject of ethics more deeply into the awareness of all community members can include: inviting guest speakers with expertise in power dynamics and ethics / holding dharma talks incorporating core ethical principles / setting up small discussion groups / utilizing storytelling, parables, art and poetry / including deep ethical awareness in trainings / sending delegates to conferences about ethics in spiritual communities such as this one to stay abreast of developments and resources in the field.

Scope for Further Research

While the conference provided for a very rich education on the subject of ethics in spiritual communities, there were certain topics that may have been touched upon but which were perhaps underrepresented. Undoubtedly a wealth of topics remain to be investigated and explored but in a future gathering it would be good to see more research on areas such as: the intersection of spirituality and insatiable ambition, both in individuals and organizations / the role of money and right livelihood in spiritual life / the neurobiology of power.

Conclusion

It is a shared understanding across spiritual traditions the world over that we live in a dharmic universe, one that is governed by a natural moral order or law, and one that is a unified, interconnected whole. The author argues that our spiritual life can therefore never be separated from the matter of ethics and moral conduct.

In such a life, ethics are not a secondary consideration, nor a discretionary add-on, nor a personal preference; they are absolutely fundamental because without a bedrock of moral integrity and ethical behavior, it is impossible to build a strong and enduring spiritual foundation.

Leaders in spiritual communities are not immune to the neurobiological feedback loops that can produce and reinforce abusive behaviors, nor the psychological neutralization processes that can precipitate denial of the same. Neither are leaders invulnerable to being complicit in enabling the continuation of harmful behavior in others, even when there is substantial evidence of misconduct.

In addition to being susceptible to the failures of institutional integrity, networks of collusion, and wilful ignorance that may be present in secular institutions, spiritual organizations face additional ethical vulnerabilities. These can include spiritual bypassing and certain forms of spiritual narcissism, leading them to believe that moral or legal standards do not pertain to them.

A spiritual organization that neglects to address power imbalances and abuses can eventually expect to suffer devastating consequences, including a breakdown of trust, irreparable reputational damage, ongoing internal conflict, and a loss of legitimacy, resulting in a legacy of lasting harm and

suffering. Just as trauma can get passed down from one generation to another, the same is true in organizations where there is a culture of abuse – the dysfunctional patterns can become intergenerational if not addressed.

Corrective countermeasures are possible and involve engaging the whole community in the process of upholding ethical standards. Practical measures can include empowering community members through education, launching better support programs, fostering an environment where there is enough psychological safety for voices to be heard, recognizing the intricacies of power dynamics, being prudent and discerning when promoting leaders, holding on to people who value ethics and moral conduct, improving systems of accountability, equipping leaders with knowledge, and making ethics a standard topic of discussion.

Abuse survivor Izzy Swanson devastatingly shares that *“what broke me more than anything”* was the silence of a person in authority who could have spoken up but who *“did nothing.”* Swanson's words are an impassioned plea for people to show up for those who have been hurt, to bear witness to their pain, and to remind them not only that they are not forgotten but that they are not alone: *“The community is the one who has to say these are not healthy behaviors and we cannot accept them... What I'm begging people to do is not be silent: Say something. Do something.”*

May gentle solace envelop all who have been wounded. May those who have endured the shadows that dwell within spiritual communities find refuge in compassionate hearts, their voices finally heard and their pain soothed. May those who have wittingly or unwittingly caused harm be guided by the light of self-awareness, that they may embark on their own path of healing and renewal.

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