

When Terror Strikes at Home: The Interface Between Religion and Domestic Violence

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In this short essay, I raise two particular questions concerning the interface between religion and domestic violence: the first focuses on religious victims, the second on religious perpetrators. For almost 15 years, I have been intrigued by the story of what happens when religious people look to their faith communities for help in the aftermath of violence in the family context. For many religious victims, their faith sustains them through long periods of domestic crisis: it empowers them to ultimately flee their abuser and to seek refuge and safety where they begin a new life free of abuse (Nason-Clark and Kroeger 2004). There are others who are not so fortunate: they are consumed by the “sacred silence” on the issue, never finding spiritual or practical support that would enable them to leave the fear or the reality of violence behind (Nason-Clark 1997). As a result, there are many layers we need to unravel as we seek to understand the complex relationship between faith, violence, and family ties. I begin with a brief look at the prevalence of violence against women in families of faith and conclude my essay with several theoretical questions requiring further analysis.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN FAMILIES OF FAITH

Domestic violence knows no boundaries of class, color, or religious persuasion (Stirling et al. 2004; Timmins 1995). Despite the fact that religious rhetoric is replete with references to happy families (Edgell 2003), many religious women are victimized by husbands who promised before God to love and cherish them for life (Nason-Clark 1997). Although religious families may be considered sacred, they are sometimes unsafe. In 1989, the Christian Reformed Church in North America conducted a survey among a small random sample of adult church members: 28 percent had experienced at least one form of abuse (Annis and Rice 2001), a figure close to those of national U.S. samples not specifically targeting church-going families. Whether particular religious theologies exacerbate violence in the family is something on which there has been some speculation but very little data. Bartkowski and Anderson (1996), using U.S. data from the National Survey of Families and Households, argue that they found no clear evidence that men or women affiliated with conservative churches were especially prone toward violence. Similarly, Brinkerhoff, Grandin, and Lupri (1992) reported that conservative Christian men in Canada were not significantly more violent than those of other persuasions. Although many religious groups have been slow to acknowledge the prevalence of violence in their midst (Horton and Williamson 1988), psychologist Andrew Weaver (1993) claims that “domestic violence is probably the number one pastoral mental health emergency.”

There are specific religious contours both to the abuse that is suffered and to the healing journey. As a result, many in the secular therapeutic community do not like to work with clients who are particularly religious (Whipple 1987). Without spiritual credentials, these workers find it difficult to challenge the religious ideation that is believed by the victim or perpetrator to give license to abuse. Sometimes, secular shelter workers and others believe that it is in fact the religious ideology that gives rise to the violence and undergirds victims’ reluctance to seek refuge

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or assistance in its aftermath. Consequently, they encourage the victim to leave behind both the abuse and their community of faith. In a similar vein, there are religious professionals who are slow to refer their parishioners who have been abused to outside sources of help, believing that a secular shelter is an unsafe place to claim faith. There can be suspicion on both sides and sometimes the voices of the caregivers drown out the voices of the victims (Timmins 1995). For collaborative ventures between the steeple and the shelter to be successful, personnel operating from a secular or sacred paradigm must be willing to see that the condemnation of domestic violence requires both the language of contemporary culture and the language of the spirit (Nason-Clark 2001). A cultural language that is devoid of religious symbols, meanings, and legitimacy is relatively powerless to alter a religious victim's resolve to stay in the marriage no matter what the cost. Correspondingly, the language of the spirit, if devoid of the practical resources of contemporary culture, compromises a victim's need for safety, security, and financial resources to care for herself and her children.

IN WHAT WAYS DO NOTIONS OF RECONCILIATION AND FORGIVENESS—CONCEPTS AT THE HEART OF A JUDAEO-CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW—PLACE WOMEN VICTIMS AT GREATER RISK OF TERROR AT HOME?

In families of strong faith, many of the patterns that are observed within mainstream culture are intensified: the fear, the vulnerability, the isolation, the promise before God to stay together until *death do us part*. Although there is no compelling evidence that violence is more frequent or more severe in families of faith, religious women are more vulnerable *when abused*. They are less likely to leave, are more likely to believe the abuser's promise to change his violent ways, frequently espouse reservations about seeking community-based resources or shelters for battered women, and commonly express guilt—that they have failed their families and God in not being able to make the marriage work. To be sure, most women victims are reluctant to see their marriage end, experience financial vulnerability, and fear for their own lives (and the abuser's reprisal). Some cling to a fantasy of change and others harbor notions of working harder to ensure the marriage lasts. However, for religious women, these beliefs are commonly and strongly reinforced by a religious ideology that sees women's roles as wife and homemaker as pivotal to her sense of self-worth, believes that happy families build strong nations, and condemns divorce. Moreover, there are explicit religious notions that make it especially difficult for religious victims to see the full extent of their suffering or to sound out the call for help. Paramount among these are Christian notions of forgiveness and women's identity with Jesus the sacrificial lamb. Could battering be a religious woman's *cross to bear*? Are religious batterers' abilities to manipulate their victims dependent on specific features of their religious belief system?

Any discussion of the healing journey of victims of abuse eventually comes to the issue of forgiveness. Writing about forgiveness from a religious standpoint, Hudson argues that the cry of Jesus from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing"¹ is often touted as the model by which victims ought to approach their aggressors. Yet, forgiveness does not erase the pain of the past, nor does it deny its implications. Rather, when forgiveness is placed within a broader context of the journey from victim to survivor, it is achieved when the pain of the past no longer controls the future and the victim is no longer entrapped in a complicated web of anger and despair (Nason-Clark and Kroeger 2004). But the line is a fine one. Marie Fortune claims that forgiveness is the last step on the healing journey, the last rung on the ladder of a woman's struggle to overcome the brokenness of her past. As such, it cannot come before justice or the offender's accountability. In this way, premature forgiveness actually damages the possibility of healing and growth for both perpetrator and victim. Religious pressure on the victim to quickly "forgive and forget" prevents the abuser from being fully accountable for his actions and can be life threatening for the victim. Forgiveness might be the most charitable and compassionate gift religious groups can offer victims in their fold (Fortune 1988), but it cannot

be timetabled by someone other than the victim and should never be regarded as a guarantee for safety or protection. Religious language must not pretend that everything is now okay and life for the family should return to normal, as if the abuse never happened.

HOW AND WHY WOULD MANDATED INTERVENTION FOR BATTERERS BECOME MORE EFFECTIVE IF THE COURTS RECOGNIZED THE POTENTIAL AND POWER OF RELIGION?

Justice, accountability, and change are all central ingredients in the intervention services offered to men who have abused their wives. Although some come voluntarily, other men are mandated by the courts or referred by their wives, therapists, or clergy to participate in an intervention program for abusers. Although abused *religious* women want the battery to stop, they may not wish to terminate their relationship with the abuser, either temporarily or forever. Consequently, the resources these women seek in the aftermath of violence in part differentiate them from their more secular counterparts. As a result, religious women in particular place a lot of trust in programs that purport to help men to stop the abuse and to alter their ways of coping with anger and frustration. Simply put, the stakes to keep the marriage together (and perhaps to accept the battery) are much higher for religious women (Horton and Williamson 1988; Kroeger and Nason-Clark 2001).

Woven through the narratives of abusive men who are travelling toward justice and accountability are the roles of religious congregations and their leaders in supporting the men as they seek help. A pastor or priest is a key player in ensuring accountability in the life of a religious man who is, or has been, abusive. Consequently, houses of worship and religious leaders are unique resources in any community-based efforts to create safe and peaceful homes.

However, there is little agreement about the efficacy of batterer intervention groups (Daly and Pelowski 2000; Hanson and Wallace-Capretta 2002; Scott and Wolfe 2000). Although completion and recidivism rates vary amongst programs (Dalton 2001; Gondolf 2002), it is clear that intervention must be integrated into the overall social context of these men's lives (deHart et al. 1999). Researchers have recognized the critical role played by the courts and other parts of the judicial system, but none has acknowledged any role for religious organizations. Yet, for many abusive men, a key component of their social context is their religious belief system (Dobash and Dobash 1979; Ptacek 1988; DeKeseredy and MacLeod 1998).

In one faith-based batterer intervention program, a case file analysis of over 1,000 closed files of abusive men revealed that men in such a program differ on many personal and family characteristics from men who enter secular programs for batterers (Nason-Clark et al. in press). The men in the faith-based program are more likely to be older, married, and white; to have attained postsecondary education or a university or graduate degree; to be employed and in a white-collar occupation; and to have witnessed or experienced violence in their childhood home. On the other hand, men in this program had similar rates of alcohol abuse and criminal history as men in secular programs. Another finding to emerge from this data is the role of clergy and other religious leaders in encouraging or "mandating" men who seek their spiritual help to attend a faith-based intervention program. In fact, men who were clergy referred were more likely to complete (and graduate from) the program than those whose attendance was mandated by a judge. When the clergy and the courts both referred such men, their rates of program completion were very high indeed.

Attempting to understand exactly why this might be so is important. Past research has shown that religious men and women stay longer in a relationship, even an unhealthy one (Horton and Williamson 1988). Clergy, then, may be especially prone to assist abused women and their partners who are still married and to use the language of reconciliation as motivation for the men to seek help in a faith-based agency (Nason-Clark 1999). Since the men themselves have more life stability factors (currently married, employed, higher education, etc.), this may reinforce their willingness to complete the program and to alter their abusive ways. Sharing a religious worldview

with the other men in the program may actually provide a *safe place* for these abusive men to challenge themselves and each other and look toward a day when their abusive past will no longer control their present reality.

Nonetheless, too often forgotten in the growing research literature on batterers is the role of religion in either supporting or challenging men's abusive ways. Achieving accountability is paramount to successful intervention. On this issue, there may be a difference between the sheep and the goats: for religious men having their violence condemned by not only the language of contemporary culture but also by the language of the spirit may be central. It may well be that accountability factors are more easily set in place in the life of a religious man. A key player in ensuring such accountability is the man's pastor, priest, or other religious leader. But powerful, too, is a religious community—that is, the congregation—when perceived by the abuser or the family as supportive of his journey toward change and wholeness. For violence to be overcome, the personal struggle will need to acquire public dimensions. In families of faith, the religious community becomes that important ingredient, with the capacity to either augment or thwart the process of recovery. The question then becomes: How can a person's religious ideology be employed by sacred and secular intervention services in a way that will nurture, monitor, and reinforce a violent-free future?

SUGGESTIONS FOR EXPANDING THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Outlined below are several questions that I consider essential in our efforts to unravel the nuanced relationship between religious faith and violence within families. Each of these queries could be addressed at an individual or community level. Each has political or social action implications that permeate beyond the boundaries of any specific groups. However, from my vantage point, it is inconceivable to separate theoretical gains from the direct impact on the lives of hurting people.

1. What are some of the central features of various religious traditions that negate community-wide efforts to raise awareness about violence against women and to suggest strategies that would empower women to reduce the risk of endangering their physical or emotional health in the aftermath of abuse?

I wish to highlight two "central features" of various religious traditions that work against raising awareness about domestic violence and empowering victims: discourse on the salience of *family* for women's lives and thus the undesirability of family dissolution, and the tendency to "spiritualize" social problems by religious ideologies and leaders. A third feature, gender segregation both within and beyond the religious group, contributes to the way the issue of abuse may be marginalized within the discourse of a specific group, but these same single-sex social contexts also offer the practical and emotional support on which many women victims depend. Notions about family values including, but not limited to, an anti-divorce sentiment reinforce a victimized woman's sense of failure and vulnerability. Moreover, when the abuse is conceptualized as a spiritual issue, this exacerbates her dependence on the religious group for guidance concerning the decisions she needs to make to ensure safety.

For fundamentalists of varied world religions, divorce is regarded as a dangerous trend (Hawley 1994), evidence of narcissism at a personal level, and a conduit to later problems for affected children and adolescents. Some conservative Christian traditions argue that divorce is the result of female economic independence augmented by married women's introduction into the paid labor force (Bartkowski 2001). Clearly, any religious tradition that regards women's primary *raison d'être* to be child bearing and home making resists societal advances to ensure female participation in all sectors of society (Balmer 1994). Sacred texts and their religious elite interpreters play a critical role in how the issue of abuse is framed. When it is highlighted

in the weekly routine of church life—through sermons or informational material available to congregants—victims feel safe to come forward; when it is absent from religious discourse, victims keep silent, seeing the issue as their own personal struggle. Working out one's salvation has never been easy, but it has almost always been gendered. Thus, family failure is interpreted by many religious women as a sign that they have failed God. When women's abuse is at the hands of their religious leaders, their vulnerability is especially high (Jacobs 1989); sometimes, they suffer as secondary victims when priests or other religious leaders of congregations are convicted of sexual misconduct (Nason-Clark 1998).

2. What are the intersections of race and class in any discussion concerning the abuse of women in the family context, especially women of faith?

Social theorists such as Patricia Hill-Collins (1997) remind researcher and activist alike of the "constructs of multiplicity" through which inequalities of race, gender, and class are reproduced. The problems, as well as the solutions, have multiple layers. In the Caribbean, a Pentecostal woman may ask her prayer group to beseech God that the violence would stop, even as she takes his shirt to the shaman.² There is ample evidence that religious women support each other, both when things are going well and at times of great personal trial; often this occurs under the umbrella of women's ministry within congregational life.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (2000) recently asked us to consider what would have happened to African-American religious organizations and communities if it weren't for the women. Emilie Townes (1997) provides rich examples of womanist perspectives on evil and suffering. Milagros Peña has considered this issue from the perspective of Anglos and Latinas working together on both sides of the Mexican/U.S. border and it may be that the same degree of collaboration might be evident when violence erupts at home (Peña and Frehill 1998). Ebaugh and Chafetz (2000) briefly mention congregational support for women in crisis within immigrant congregations; Timmins (1995) notes assistance within Aboriginal communities. The degree to which sisterly support for abuse victims is enhanced by social factors of heightened marginalization—through race, class, or ethnicity—has yet to be examined in full.

3. To what degree do faith-based initiatives have an added advantage in working with clients for whom a religious worldview is a salient feature of their lives?

Recent years have witnessed growing scholarly debates concerning faith-based initiatives to meet a variety of the social and practical needs of the American population, but little attention has been drawn to the role of faith-based services for perpetrators of domestic violence. Yet as mentioned above, there is evidence that clients in a faith-based batterer intervention program may be more likely to complete the requirements of that program than men enrolled in secular equivalents, and that abusive men in the faith-based program who were encouraged by their priests or pastors to attend had higher completion rates than those whose attendance was mandated by the courts. Although faith-based initiatives cross the spectrum from no religious content in their programming to a high visibility of religious language and ritual, it is clear that there is an important interplay between the religious beliefs of workers, religious beliefs of clients, program content, and the nature of the problems for which the program has been established. Teasing apart these interconnections is as interesting as it is timely.

4. As we consider the prevalence and severity of violence in families around the globe, what are some of the features of the interface between faith, fear, and pressures to keep the family intact in various regions of the world?

Violence against women occurs in every corner of the world, taking a variety of different forms and affecting women's lives differently depending on the social context in which it occurs. A man in Bangladesh may throw acid on a woman's face, a Kenyan man hit his wife with her own

market stool, or an American may use his gun, but the result is the same: women learn to fear the men who claim to love them. Whether we consult data compiled by the United Nations Secretariat, the World Health Organization, or the departments of censuses and surveys of individual countries, the prevalence rates are startling: at least one in five women around the globe have been victims (see Kroeger and Nason-Clark 2001).

Recent fieldwork experiences in the Caribbean³ and eastern Europe⁴ offer some interesting clues in the relationship between faith and families in crisis in different parts of the world. In the Jamaican capital of Kingston, a city known for its high rates of violence and prevalence of Christian churches, there is evidence of strong resignation about both the incidence and severity of abuse within the general culture and within families. In this context, individuals and institutions alike develop a strategy that refuses to ignore the problem (rather, it is widely acknowledged) but remain reluctant to conceptualize abuse in such a way as to demand a social-action response from either secular or sacred sources of help. Although there is little resistance to the principle of churches and community agencies collaborating, without framing the problem in ways that might lead to solutions, the result is impotence to act.

In postcommunist Croatia, on the other hand, clergy and other religious leaders are slow to see the pervasive violence in church families and reveal great hesitation in accepting social-scientific explanations for why abuse is prevalent in families of faith. Perceiving the problem to be primarily of spiritual origins, faith leaders are resistant to making referral suggestions to community-based resources. Social service delivery personnel and other victim advocates, on the other hand, are more likely to recognize the influence of posttraumatic stress disorder in this war-torn region of the world and to see religious ideology as silencing women who are suffering. Despite the high levels of violence experienced in both of these cultural contexts, the reaction to abuse in the family and collaborative ventures between the state and the church differ. In Jamaica, the absent father is considered a fact of life; fatherless families in Croatia are perceived in very negative terms. Religious professionals are regarded in Jamaica as instrumental in any effort for social change and clergy themselves reveal no resistance to working with others in community-based agencies; in Croatia, community-based activists and clergy alike appear very cynical about collaboration.

There are many more questions. What is the interface between religion and violence in same-sex relationships? What are the longer-term implications for children in devoutly religious homes who witness violence against their mother or are victims of parental rage themselves? What are the contours of the healing journey when it is an adult man who has been victimized by his religious partner? How is violence toward the elderly conceptualized in faith-based nursing homes?

Violence knows no religious boundaries: it is a global issue and it is gendered. The journey toward healing and wholeness for religious victims is replete with both secular and sacred overtones—as are its causes and the factors that reinforce it. Breaking the cycle of violence in the family requires both the language of secular culture and the language of the spirit. Researchers and activists alike must unravel the many layers involved in the interface of faith, family, and fear for victimized women and their children.

NOTES

1. Biblical reference is Luke 23:34.
2. Fieldnotes, Jamaican focus group, September 2003.
3. With the assistance of Lanette Ruff, a graduate student at the University of New Brunswick, I conducted personal interviews and focus groups in Kingston, Jamaica in the fall of 2003, and offered training and violence sensitivity workshops to a wide range of religious and secular professionals as well as to students.
4. Together with colleagues at the University of Zagreb (Sinisa Zrinscak and Marina Ajdukovic), the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek (Ela Balog), and within the social-science delivery sector (Suzanna and Zoran Vargovic), I have been considering religion and family violence in a postcommunist context. After three fieldwork visits, we have collected both quantitative and qualitative indicators of the resistance and openness to discussion of family violence connected with churches in Croatia; here, too, I have been involved in training workshops.

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