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Church abuse

In the 20th century, many practices that had been around for millennia were labeled as “abuse” (mistreatment, misuse, exploitation) in secular Western culture.

Beating your wife and children, a practice that is still perfectly acceptable in many parts of the world, became spouse and child abuse. Talking to people with curses, threats and profound disrespect became verbal abuse. Not listening when a person says “no” to having sex became sexual abuse.

These “new” abuses were the butt of hundreds of jokes, as people uncomfortably laughed at the idea that so many accepted types of human interaction could be called abnormal. After all, that’s the way the world works, right? People with power use it to tyrannize and control others. All of this abuse involves the criminal misuse of power and authority. But when even the Church was exposed as an abuser, the laughter stopped.

Here are a few common types of church abuse:

Manipulating people into submission to God’s will: Sometimes the idea that being on God’s holy mission induces blindness to right and wrong—as with the Christian crusades, or Muslim jihad. When it’s all for God, it’s okay to lie and misrepresent your actions. The old “Bibles in the car trunk” story” plays on this theme. If your cause is just and God-ordained, you can treat people however you want, as they are in the way of God’s will if they resist or challenge you. This is particularly abusive behavior, as it trades on the trust of other people.

Casting doubts on someone’s commitment to Jesus/salvation: Salvation is a spiritual relationship between a person and God; no one else can know what’s happening between them. When someone in authority decides that a person is backsliding, and publicly shuns or ignores that person, that’s church abuse.

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St Vitus Cathedral, Hradcany

Thoughts, ideas and questions about religion



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Excessive control over political, social and educational issues: the Church has no “accepted stance” on these worldly questions, and Church leaders who pronounce that Christians should think this or that about an issue, and that any other ideas are unbiblical is practicing church abuse.

Pressure for improper social, emotional or sexual relations: In the press and on TV, reports of pedophile priests are joined by accounts of Evangelical pastors who secretly meet with gay masseurs or straight strippers in the mad dash to have the kind of sex their religion preaches against. It’s easy to recognize that this is abuse. However, just as abusive are relationships in which the authority figure enmeshes a person in an emotional or social situation that gives one person all the power. If the pastor, priest or minister puts himself above everyone else, and uses that platform to control behavior, that’s abuse.

Extreme pressure for acceptable behavior: It’s okay for Christians to encourage each other in love and, if necessary, admonish each other, to act in a way that honors Christ. But when one person in authority in a church holds another to standards that should be personal choices, and punishes that person for not meeting the standards, that’s church abuse.

A personal note

I worked for more than a decade at a school that was tied to a conservative Protestant Evangelical church, the kind of church where everyone was expected to hold pretty much the same opinions about politics, the social order and the likelihood that the world would end quite soon. I knew that the church had some strange, extreme ideas but thought that as long as the leadership let me do my job (teach high-school English), I could just ignore the more crazy parts.

Each year when I signed my contract, I had to sign an addendum that would surely cause the American Civil Liberties Union to scream! The addendum forbid me to drink alcohol or to smoke; it commanded me to be chaste outside of marriage. I was not to tell anyone my salary, nor ask theirs; I was not to say anything negative about the school. Getting caught breaking any one of these rules was grounds for immediate dismissal. Most of these items were okay with me, so I signed, but the idea that I was so little trusted and respected that I had to sign a paper that I would be good made me angry. Legally, the school was doing nothing wrong—in the state where I worked, a religious school can make any demand it wants to make, and fire people with no reason. But morally and ethically, the school was abusing its teachers by insisting on behavior that had nothing to do with being an effective teacher. The school cared more about its façade of holiness than about the God-given rights of its employees. That’s abuse.