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Sexual Abuse, Moral Transgression and Male Exit Narratives¹

Abstract:

This article focuses on the experiences of men within two religious groups with evidence of sexual violence against women. Drawing on primary source material from enquires to Inform, the two movements are anonymised as those around leader X (a fitness instructor) and leader Z (an alternative healer). Both created patriarchal and misogynistic cultures in which women were inferior to men, including on the spiritual path. Whilst male followers did not directly experience sexual abuse in these groups, some of them experienced other forms of abuse including physical, psychological, spiritual, and financial abuse. We argue that the gendered nature of the religious teachings in the two movements led to gendered experiences of abuse. Men were harmed by the sexual abuse of their female co-religionists but also by control of their sexual relationships. Some also experienced physical abuse, financial indebtedness and spiritual harms/fears. We introduce the idea of moral injury as a transgression of deeply held moral beliefs to explain the different reactions of individuals to experiences of abuse. We argue that men and women had different patterns of religious exit in these groups, but we also focus on differences between the groups. Male leavers of X's group acknowledged the mistreatment of women as a central reason for their leaving and some expressed shame and regret in their role in supporting X. Male leavers of Z's group on the other hand prioritised the harm done to themselves in their exit narratives. It is important to consider not only how abuse and religious exit is gendered but also how men's experiences differ between groups with ostensibly similar, heteronormative teachings.

Key words: abuse, gender, sex, religious exit, moral injury

Introduction

Religious exit following experiences of sexual abuse or restrictions on sexual freedom (such as reproductive control, purity culture, conversion therapy and more) has predominantly focused on women's and, to a lesser extent, LGBTQ+ experiences (e.g. Allison 2021; Gaddini 2022; Harvey forthcoming; Jacobs 1989; Puttick 1997; Rantala 2022; Van den Brandt 2024; Van den Brandt and Rantala 2024). This is unsurprising given that women and LGBTQ+ people are more likely to experience gender-based violence, that is violence because of their actual or perceived gender or sexuality, as well as sexual violence. However, men have also been victims of sexual abuse in religious movements and have been members in movements in which religious teachings have justified restricted gender roles and sexual

¹ A version of this paper was first given at the online day symposium, 'Gender and Religious Exit: Moving Away from Faith', 28th November 2023. We are grateful to the three organisers, Nella van den Brandt, Teija Rantala, and Sarah-Jane Page, for accepting our paper and for encouraging us to think about the intersections of gender and religious exit in these cases.

activity. To date, there has been a lack of empirical study of cisgender, heterosexual men's experiences in such movements (and of masculinities and religion in general, see Krondorfer and Hunt 2012, Van Es 2021).

In this article, we focus on two religious movements in which the two respective male leaders sexually abused some of their female followers, and in which both male and female members experienced physical, financial, psychological and spiritual abuse. These two movements were chosen largely because they have interesting similarities and the educational charity Inform holds large amounts of data on each movement; the nature of Inform and how this data was collected will be explained in more depth in the next section. Whilst men were not sexually abused in these movements, a realisation of the sexual abuse of women was a contributing factor in their religious exit, alongside their own experiences of harm. We emphasise that the religious teachings and the experiences of abuse within the movements, as well as the reasons for religious exit, were gendered.

The early work of feminist scholars with a focus on 'new religious movements' (NRMs) such as Jacobs (1989; 1991; 2007) and Puttick (1997), held that the majority of new religions replicate wider patriarchal structures and resultant subordination of women, despite some examples of gender equality or even superiority of women (Puttick 1997, 152). Research on joining NRMs suggest that while some groups are more attractive to either women or men, resulting in imbalanced gender ratios, the reasons behind this are complex and likely group-specific (Tøllefsen 2016); moreover it is likely that gender does not make anyone more or less likely to be involved in an NRM per se and "there is no strong evidence that women are more susceptible to joining NRMs than men" (Dawson 2003, 123).

More recently Vance (2015) has suggested, following Max Weber, that women often have greater access to religious power and nontraditional roles before the religious movement

enters a period of “routinization” and “maturation” (2015, 127). The two case studies of new religions we explore here present more clearly what Vance terms “contradictory strains of dominant thinking on gender and sexuality” which have elements of gender empowerment for women while also demonstrating gendered patriarchal patterns of socialisation and sexual abuse (Vance 2015, 124-5). In this, the two case studies follow Jacobs’ insight that gendered abuse tends to be found particularly in NRMs with “a charismatic social structure that is patriarchal in nature” (2007, 234).

Both case studies discussed in this article were led by male charismatic leaders who upheld patriarchal and misogynistic worldviews. They drew on ideas and behaviours circulating in wider religious traditions and non-religious society but intensified and justified them with their religious teachings. Leaving aside the question of whether patriarchy is always and inherently abusive, from a practical perspective, these ideas and behaviours move into the realm of abuse when individuals experience harm – to the body, to their sense of self, to their social and financial capital and more. As noted above, feminist scholarship has focused on harm to women with men – aside from the charismatic leader/perpetrator – sidelined. In this article, we seek to add nuance to the feminist scholarship on women as victims of patriarchy by considering how this structure has also harmed men in certain religious movements.

Data and Research Methods

Information about the two movements discussed in this article is not in the public domain. Instead, the data is primarily comprised of confidential enquiries received by Inform (Information Network on Religious Movements)² and materials held in its archive in London. Inform is an educational charity which provides information about new and minority religions which is as accurate, up-to-date and evidence-based as possible. Founded by

² See www.inform.ac. Inform is an organizational partner with the Religion and Sexual Abuse Project (R&SAP), funded in part by the Henry Luce Foundation.

sociologist of religion, Professor Eileen Barker, in 1988 (during the height of the ‘cult wars’ – see Ashcraft 2018), Inform seeks to make academic, empirical information about new religions publicly accessible in order to reduce harms caused by lack of information and/or misinformation. To do this, we maintain an enquiry service whereby anyone can contact us to ask about a new religion or to provide us with information, including testimonies of their own experiences. We maintain one of the world’s most comprehensive databases of new and minority religions, with 5190 entries as of July 2024. We rely on our extensive international network of experts to provide us with information and are committed to sociological research methods and principles of comparison and contextualisation. We obtain data from as many sources as possible whilst noting their biases and seek to maintain contact with the religious movements themselves, as well as with their critics, ex-members and friends and relatives of members, as well as other interested parties. Both authors of this article have been researchers with Inform for over twenty years, and Suzanne Newcombe is currently Honorary Director, Sarah Harvey is Senior Research Officer.

Inform’s database and archives contain a great deal of confidential and sensitive information. This raises significant issues with regard to how we work with the data (van Eck Duymaer van Twist and Harvey, forthcoming). Inform is bound by both its own confidentiality policy protecting enquirers³ and by UK laws around privacy and sexual offences legislation. These laws protect victims of sexual assault but also the accused, if they are not convicted, as well as their family members and other members of the religious community, if relevant. Because the majority of the testimonies Inform holds about the two movements discussed in this article were either not reported to police or did not result in conviction, we anonymise the leaders and their movements. This both protects Inform from defamation and libel claims and upholds the wishes of enquirers who do not want to make their information or experiences

³ https://inform.ac/gpdr_and_ethics/

public. However, this raises other issues around the difficulties of writing about religious movements with sexual assault allegations and upholding the wishes of enquirers who do want to make their information and experiences public. We recognise that anonymisation is a level of protection for religious leaders and movements and contributes to the protection of the movement at the expense of individual victims of abuse.

This article is largely based on testimonies received by former members of two movements - both small, informal networks built around charismatic male leaders.⁴ We refer to the two men as Z (an alternative healer) and X (a fitness instructor). Inform received 160 enquiries about Z between 1997 and 2024. 51 of these were from former members, of which 23 were new and distinct enquiries (the other 28 being repeat enquirers). Inform received 55 enquiries about X between 1999 and 2024, including 34 from ex-members of which 25 were new and distinct enquirers (9 being repeat enquirers). Whilst we have spoken to and recorded the testimonies of the enquirers, they cannot be considered interviews in the usual academic sense. Rather, we use redacted and generalised information from testimonies in order to provide public information and to assist future enquirers. We also only give broad descriptions of the religious teachings to keep the movements anonymous. We sometimes do put select words in quotes from these exchanges, particularly where the same phrase was used by multiple sources.

Inform received two enquiries from male former followers of Z, 16 enquiries from male former followers of X. These gender splits are representative of the wider membership composition of the movements. Z's group of about 30 core followers were mostly women – the majority white although from international backgrounds, middle aged, and many with successful careers; some women who experienced sexual assault during the healing

⁴ We do not have the space in this article to discuss charisma in any depth, for important theorisations see Barker 1993; Lucia 2018; Prophet 2016.

treatments were younger and hence less socially and financially secure. X's group of about 100 core followers were evenly split along gender lines, with many heterosexual couples within the group. They were more ethnically mixed and of younger ages than Z's group, but also had high levels of education and employment. Members of both groups were spiritual 'seekers' (Sutcliffe 2022; Wuthnow 2000) who had the financial and social capital to explore their spiritual interests. They were 'converts' to their new religious movements, reflecting the characteristics Barker (2004) has identified as following on from conversion, including high levels of commitment and enthusiasm, and a recognition of charismatic authority in the leader allowing him to make proclamations across all areas of their lives.

In his leadership role, Z was a Buddhist and an alternative healer. His group was involved in hosting international Buddhist teachers, attending and organising events in the UK, and visiting and financially contributing to ashrams and retreats in India. Z's primary occupation was as a healer, including naturopathy, osteopathy, massage and what could loosely be called life coaching. According to the former members we spoke with, he was strongly influenced by the Indian teacher Osho (originally called Rajneesh, 1931-1990), particularly in his ideas around breaking down ego and sexual activity as part of the spiritual path. X, on the other hand, began his teachings as an alternative fitness instructor but, over time, his focus moved to political and religious discussions with the young men who attended his classes, who then brought in other friends and relatives. With an initial focus on Islamic traditions, X's teachings became both more structured and more idiosyncratic over time, until they were presented as a culmination of the 'Abrahamic traditions'. Simultaneously, X progressed from an individual with mystical experiences, to one who received divine revelations as a messenger or prophet of god, to the personification of god with a unique role to play in humanity's salvation. His proclaimed ability to purify his followers was believed to be central to their salvation.

Gendered Religious Teachings

Whilst Z and X had different religious teachings, drawing on different traditions and promoting different practices, their teachings on gender and sexual relations had some similarities and are essential to understanding the subsequent experiences of abuse and of religious exit. Both men created heteronormative communities, displaying hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) and supporting ‘rape cultures’ – cultural milieus supportive of sexual violence (Stiebert 2020, 54-55). This was an intensification of patriarchal social structures and worldviews operating in wider society and was harmful to both women and men within the movements. The worldviews of both movements were gender essentialist with gender coterminous with binary biological sex and with gender-specific embodied practices and roles and responsibilities. There was no room for LGBTQ+ identities within either of these movements. Catherine Wessinger suggests in her *Theory of Women in Religions*, clearly defined and binary gender roles are a defining feature of patriarchal cultures. She moreover theorises that this binary easily supports other forms of binary thinking which “demonise the ‘other,’” making it socially acceptable to commit acts of violence against them (Wessinger 2020).

Megan Goodwin (2020) has analysed the dangerous consequences of equating religious difference, alternative sexual practices and abuse, resulting in discrimination against minority religious movements. This is not our intention here. However, we discuss these two cases as ex-members have reported to Inform that these teachings and practices were harmful to them, either at the time, or years later upon reflection. The authors agree that it is not the place of the religious studies scholar to make normative judgements about people’s sexual practices and whether they are ‘good’ or ‘bad’; however, it is also incumbent upon a scholar to report

where the participants' themselves have identified practices they believe were abusive, which was the case in both of these groups.

Z's group, as an alternative health movement with Buddhist and Hindu influences, had a preponderance of women followers, in line with women's greater participation in the holistic milieu more generally (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). As a generalisation, women can experience empowerment in such movements because of numerous interlinked factors including validation of women's embodiment, emotions and intimate relationships (Sointu and Woodhead 2008) and conceptions of a female divine. These movements can also offer men alternative modes of masculinity (Hunt 2022). However, in this case, the few men in the movement were offered a worldview in which men were considered as superior to women and women were devalued in numerous ways. Short-term relationships and multiple sexual partners were held as the ideal model of sexual relations as exemplifying non-attachment and 'freedom.' This was an upholding of hegemonic masculinity, and reinforcing misogyny circulating in wider society, rather than offering any alternative model of masculinity.

Allegedly drawing on an interpretation of Osho's teachings, Z taught both that people needed to be free of their 'attachments', working on their own 'egos' (specifically 'breaking them down'), and that sexual activity was an important part of this spiritual work. Sexual activity was a means through which attachments could be broken and ego eradicated. Women in the movement reported that Z recommended women work as dancers in 'gentlemen's clubs', have 'one-night stands', as well as embracing body practices such as dressing in a 'feminine' way, eating 'sensually' and putting on weight,⁵ and behaving diffidently around men, such as

⁵ A number of women reported this; recognising that it is perhaps at odds with western beauty standards, they explained it as a proclivity of Z who himself liked to eat well. Another religious group that has teachings which could be framed as gender polarity and 'sacred eroticism', as well as allegations of sexual abuse by some adult former member, is the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA). This group's imagery also promotes an ideal feminine aesthetic which is more Rubenesque than mainstream female beauty images (see e.g. MISA Intensive Tantra Course 'Natha Yogacenter 2008–2010' in the Inform files and Sublima 2018). For more on this group see Introvigne 2022 and Olsson 2024.

not looking them in the eye, and more. These teachings encouraged women to be simultaneously demure and subservient whilst being sexually available. These teachings were directed particularly at women as, in Z's conception, women had more ego 'issues' than men, and thereby had to work harder to break down their egos to progress along the spiritual path. Teachings were heteronormatively gendered as women's practices concerned their embodiment, deportment, dress, and sexual activity. It seems that there were far less regulations for men within the movement who were also encouraged to have multiple sexual partners but without the accompanying religious justifications or further dictates around dress and deportment. It should also be noted that for both men and women, and in line with Osho's teachings, sexual activity was divorced from reproduction and there were no children within the movement. This was sexual activity as a spiritual technique rather than for creating a second generation to vitalise and continue the religious movement (for Osho see Goldman 1999, 26 and Urban 2015).

As Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) conception of hegemonic masculinities emphasises, gender is a relational construct. The few men in Z's movement thus automatically had a higher standing, e.g. personal access to Z and the movement's financial resources, than the women regardless of their time involved, knowledge of religious teachings, or capacity to be involved with the organisation of events. Men were also encouraged to have multiple sexual partners but not, it seemed, for their own spiritual progression. Rather the group's promotion of short-term, multiple sexual partners was for men framed as a conquest and representative and constitutive of their masculinity. It was a demonstration of hyper-virility. There was no need for the men to 'break down' their egos through sexual practices.

Masculinity within Z's group was not only created through sexual practices. In his younger years, Z had reportedly been involved in a life of petty crime and some of his male network

had similar backgrounds. Z was reportedly often accompanied by a male acquaintance when he approached women to offer healing treatments in public spaces such as health food shops. Z and other men in the movement drove expensive cars and dressed alike in displays of wealth and status. Ex-members reported to inform a sense of in-group superiority and demeaning language used towards those outside, including critical family and friends, as well as, sometimes, towards LGBTQ+ or non-white people – despite Z being non-white himself. Gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class all intersect in Z's movement to create a culture in which Z himself represented the ideal masculine to which male followers aspired, and women became tools in this process. A similar situation was at work in X's group. X also used demeaning language towards those critical of his movement.

X's group began life as an alternative fitness practice geared towards young men from a particular immigrant community. Here, constructions of masculinity played a part in the *raison d'être* of the early group and arguably in young men's reasons for joining and participating. Over time, the fitness aspect was partly sidelined by religious, political and philosophical discussions and the group membership became more diverse, in terms of gender, age, and ethnicities. Fitness classes were largely replaced with discussion meetings at X's home and a social element was emphasised – the young people involved in the movement spent most of their evenings and weekends with X and his family, usually in their home, but also going to restaurants and sometimes on holidays. X and his family became the role models for the movement: X was a strong, charismatic, masculine figure, an expert at his fitness technique; over time he became a revered philosophical teacher and author. His sons were poised to follow in his footsteps whilst his wife was portrayed (at least by X, according to ex-members) as the ideal woman – meek and subservient and sexually loyal to X.

On the surface, X's religious teachings did not discriminate by gender. His main teaching was that he, as a divine being, would usher in a new age in which the human and divine realms were reconciled. In the resultant new realm, select and purified individuals would attain a new level of consciousness – a 'metaphysical immortality'. One means through which X could reconcile the two realms, and ensure an individual's place in the new realm, was by petitioning angels to remove an individual's 'bad deeds' (including sexual encounters) from the 'heavenly record'. This involved a process of purification, for both male and female members, in which they shared their past sexual histories with X who then offered techniques of reparation – from a physical healing ritual to various purification practices such as the consumption of purified substances and proscriptions around couples' sexual activity.

However, these teachings were gendered because X, like Z, presented women as inferior on the spiritual path – it was women who were the bearers of impurities, impurities 'stuck' to women more than to men and hence women had to work harder to attain salvation.

Furthermore, it was sexual activity which caused the greatest risk of impurity. Former members reported to Inform that even from the earliest days of the fitness club, X extolled the virtues of female virginity whilst encouraging men to be sexually promiscuous. Men were automatically of a higher standing because the impurities of sex did not remain in their bodies to the same degree and hence, they could enjoy sexual activity without threatening their salvation. These ideas about purity may relate to a resurgence of telegony in some alternative spiritual milieus (particularly in Slavic new age and pagan networks). Telegony is a discredited nineteenth century pseudoscientific theory of heredity which sees women as continuing to hold the 'seed' of all past sexual partners which are then mixed together in any future offspring.

There are also parallels here to ideas circulating within purity cultures associated with some forms of American Evangelicalism at a height in the 1990s-2000s but continuing into the present. Academics and survivors (such as Allison 2021; Blyth 2021; Moslener 2015; Thwaites 2022) have characterised these cultures as harmful and abusive in their disciplining of women's and girl's bodies, identities and behaviours, in order to protect the (sexual) purity of men. In many of these patriarchal cultures, it is women and girls who must regulate their behaviour and appearance in order not to 'tempt' men and cause them to 'stumble'. Similarly, a higher value is placed on female than male virginity. As Wessinger notes, we are currently in a "transitional period in which patriarchy is slowly being transformed and some persons are responding by embracing and promoting equality for girls and women, while others in patriarchal religions are clinging to the old theologies, religious polities, and views of gender" (2020, 164). Sub-cultures of patriarchal religion highlight the ways in which women's bodily autonomy can be restricted by theology and patriarchal cultures even in countries where there are ostensibly equal legal rights for all people, irrespective of gender or sexuality.

X constructed a particular hegemonic masculinity, closely tied with sexual activity. The male former members who reported their stories to Inform did not, unsurprisingly, admit to being sexually promiscuous and/or to upholding X's view of women, but did report that such ideas were circulating in the group to create a general misogynistic culture. As will be discussed below with regard to both groups, this was particularly damaging for women in the movements, but it was also harmful to male members.

As in Z's group, everyday practices within X's movement were also gendered. As with Z, male followers of X took on stereotypically 'masculine' roles within the movement, such as driving X to appointments, helping with construction and maintenance work on his

properties, and contributing financially to these works. Women, on the other hand, took on more of the embodied, intimate and subservient roles such as preparing and serving food and providing massages to X – although women also had opportunities within the movement for activities such as public outreach and assisting X with his teachings and publications.

Women, like men, were also expected to contribute financially to the movement. However, on the whole, the gendered religious teachings of the two movements contributed to gendered experiences of abuse.

Gendered Abuse Experiences

Within both movements, it was women who experienced sexual abuse. Z sexually assaulted a number of women who came to him for healing treatments. The most convincing testimonies of sexual abuse to the police came from women who had only attended a couple of events with the group or who had seen Z specifically for a healing treatment and who reported rape and/or sexual assault in the healing context. The testimonies of these women were strikingly similar in that they described social situations in which the group of followers socialised at one of their homes, cooking and eating together, listening to Z or others discuss religious teachings. They described waiting long periods of time for their expected treatment from Z – usually in the form of a massage. During the massage, they described, Z penetrated them with either his finger or penis. When the women challenged him, either at the time or shortly after, Z justified his actions in various ways – from a rebalancing of energies, to realigning the chakras, releasing toxins or negative mental states and attachments, to simply his penis was enlightening. Z's sexual assaults were framed as healing and the language and ideas of the holistic milieu, with which the women were familiar, were utilised.

It was the testimony of women who reported sexual assault soon after their initial encounter with Z's group which eventually secured two convictions against Z and led to a prison

sentence. Quite a few women described their experiences in Z's group as abusive; some of these women contributed testimony about their experiences of the group when Z was on trial for rape and sexual assault charges. However, the testimony of women with more extended experiences within Z's group, who narrated longer and more complex interactions, but which also included accusations of rape and/or sexual assault, were not able to lead to a conviction by a jury. Moreover, some of the accusations of intimidation of Z's followers through threats of physical violence and financial pressure to support Z were considered irrelevant to the jury's specific duty to decide on the charges of rape and sexual assault.

In X's group, on the other hand, it was a number of long-term female followers who were coerced into sexual relationships which they, in hindsight, characterised as abusive and harmful and the result of pressures and manipulation on X's part. Unlike in the case of Z, they did not report their experiences to police as they were uncertain about issues of consent. They had consented to sexual relationships at the time only later recognising this as a result of unequal power relationships and unhealthy group dynamics. In addition to the teachings on sexual purity noted above, X also came to teach that some of the women in the group were his divine consorts. He suggested that desiring a sexual relationship with him, a divine being, could prove the women's divine status. Furthermore, a sexual relationship in this context would be purifying rather than conveying impurities to the women. Some of the women in the group hence desired a close, physical and sometimes intimate relationship with X in a process which can be understood through Amanda Lucia's framework of 'haptic logics' (2018): the women – and men - in the movement desired to be within X's presence and to have physical contact with him in order to partake of his sacred presence. For some women this extended to a sexual relationship. Women were encouraged to explore their sexual feelings for X, at first in letters, and then in sexual activity with him. Former followers reported feelings of competition and of jealousy when other women were shown favour –

such was the desire to be the chosen goddess (without the realisation that X, in fact, had sexual relations with more than one woman). As with Z's group, sexual activity was justified as essential to the women's spiritual progress – in this case it was purification rather than healing that was the framing but similar arguments around the unique ability of X (and his penis) were made.

In both of these cases, male members did not experience direct sexual abuse. They were not sexually assaulted or pressurised into sexual relationships with their religious teachers.

However, they did experience harm stemming from the hegemonic masculinities described above and they did experience control of their sexual activity. In both cases, male members reported to inform experiences of emasculation at the hands of their religious teacher. Their own masculinity and sense of self was at times threatened by regulation of their sexual activity, fear of physical or spiritual violence, financial indebtedness and more. Hence whilst the religious teacher was upheld as the ideal masculine role model, in reality this was unattainable for men in the group who had to be cast into a subservient (feminised) role in order to maintain the approval of and access to the teacher's charismatic authority.⁶ This is not unique to these two movements. There are other examples of new religious movements in which the male charismatic leader has claimed sexual rights to female followers (such as David Koresh, leader of the Branch Davidians), has claimed to be able to purify female followers through sexual activity (Sun Myung Moon of the Unification Church), has encouraged female followers to use sexual activity as a recruitment tool (David Berg of the Children of God), and has arranged marriages of (underage) female followers to older, more senior, male members, casting out the excess of young male members (the 'lost boys' of the

⁶ For further discussion of the link between gender and charisma see Harvey forthcoming; Joosse and Willey 2020; Lloyd 2018; Lucia 2018.

Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, led by Warren Jeffs).⁷ These are all techniques which maintain patriarchal, misogynistic worldviews and social structures in which the male charismatic leader stands at the apex of a gender-based hierarchy. Whilst women, children and LGBTQ+ people are at the bottom of this hierarchy, men are also subservient to the leader and experience related harms.

The male members of Z's movement described the harms they experienced from the culture of promiscuity within the group – one alleged that Z had slept with his partner and the other alleged that his partners were Z's 'cast-offs', that he did not have the ability or permission to find his own partner. Both men were socialised into the misogynistic culture, contributing to it and upholding it, a form of sexual violence for all involved.

Similarly, male members of X's group were harmed by the teachings around sexual purity. Like the women in the group, they had to recount their past sexual histories in group meetings and undergo purification rituals – which were experienced as emasculating. Whilst numerous men described this process as demeaning and humiliating, they all recognised that the process was much harsher and more intense for the women in the movement whom X held accountable for impurities. Women were publicly humiliated by X, made to feel dirty and shameful, their bodies devalued. Men also recognised that their female partners underwent purification processes in order to protect them, the men, from impurities. This led to a situation in which X controlled the sexual activity of couples within the movement; they could only have sexual relations if specific purification practices had been followed at certain times. A number of ex-members, both men and women, described the strain of this on their marriages and difficulties with physical intimacy even after leaving the movement.

⁷ For the sexual practices of the Branch Davidians see Tabor and Gallagher 1995; for the Unification Church see Nevalainen 2011; for the Children of God see Vance 2015; and for the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints see Wright and Richardson 2011.

In addition to sexual abuse, men and women within the two movements experienced other, interconnected forms of abuse. Physical violence was a threat in both cases and both leaders allegedly physically assaulted male members of their movements. Unlike in a number of other Buddhist organisations, such as Rigpa International,⁸ this did not take the form of a ‘crazy wisdom’ type teaching in which a member was struck as both punishment and learning experience. Rather, both Z and X directed their anger towards those who had recently left, or were threatening to leave, their movements. They punished ‘apostates’ as a warning to others still within the movement, indicating that terrible things would happen to them if they stepped outside of ‘the truth’ of their movements. They also used threats of future ill health and divine retributions in an attempt to prevent people from leaving.

As with sexual abuse directed towards women, physical abuse was gendered as it was more directed towards male members. Whilst some women within Z’s group described being ‘roughed up’ or ‘bullied’ or ‘harassed’ (including with abusive phone messages) by other women within the movement once they left, women within X’s group did not report physical violence. Instead, X encouraged a number of remaining male members to physically assault two male members who had left the movement. This case was so severe that the members received prison sentences. Whilst it was framed as a financial dispute in the legal case, the victims interpreted it as punishment for leaving X as a divine teacher. It can also be read as X (allegedly the coordinator of the assault) exerting a dominant masculinity, one based on physical violence, over his former followers.

Followers within both movements experienced financial abuse. All were encouraged to make monthly payments to their movements: in Z’s group to contribute towards the organisation of

⁸ See the 2017 open letter by a group of senior members within Rigpa International to founder Sogyal Rinpoche, outlining the abuse they suffered at his hands. Available at <https://www.lionsroar.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Letter-to-Sogyal-Lakar-14-06-2017-.pdf>

events and hosting teachers, in X's group as a payment for the fitness classes and religious teachings which had developed into a structured learning programme. Whilst freely given at the time, the amounts were later interpreted as excessive, being in the region of hundreds of pounds per month for many. In addition, followers of both men reported that they had made loans to their religious teacher in the expectation that these would be repaid – but they were not. Whilst both men and women had made these financial commitments, they figured larger in the exit narratives of men than women. For instance, both men who had followed Z reported that Z had 'stolen' from them – perhaps indicating a sense of emasculation. Ties between finances and forms of hegemonic masculinity were also apparent in X's group where ex-members reported to Inform that there was competition amongst members with regard to donations – higher donations showed greater commitment, but also, perhaps, a stronger masculine identity.

The situation described above, in which members were sexually, physically and financially abused, also contributed to their experiences of psychological and spiritual abuse. Ex-members who contacted Inform described being harmed by their experiences (recognising that a bias is at play here as if they had not experienced harm, they would be unlikely to report their experiences). In addition to the specific forms of abuse described, members reported generally unhealthy atmospheres and social dynamics in the groups, including bullying, favouritism, jealousy, competition, humiliation, shame and more. The abuses described can be usefully considered as spiritual abuse as religious teachings were used to justify them and to coerce members into certain patterns of behaviour (see Oakley 2018; Oakley and Humphreys 2019). Furthermore, the abuses experienced had an ongoing impact on the spiritual life of some members after leaving – some were still concerned by the spiritual threats that their religious leaders had made. Some of Z's followers described fears that he could direct negative energies towards them, while some of X's followers believed

that he could send spiritual entities to harm them.⁹ Both religious leaders had a continuing impact on the lives of ex-members, and both men and women experienced spiritual abuse in these movements.

Gendered Religious Exit

Recent work on religious exit has not focused on the issue of gender (for instance, Enstedt, Larsson and Mantsinen's *Handbook of Leaving Religion* 2020). Carole Cusack's chapter, 'Leaving New Religions', in the above volume, gives an excellent overview of the debate within NRM Studies, complicating different 'types' of leaving and highlighting, through the example of Freezone Scientology, how someone can leave an organised religious movement whilst retaining their beliefs and practices in the broader religious tradition (see also Thomas 2021). This point is also explored by Sara Rahmani (2022) amongst those who leave Goenka's Vipassana Movement. However, these recent expansions on understanding the leaving of religious groups do not touch on issues of gender or experiences of abuse aside from Cusack referencing Janet Jacobs (1989), one of few NRM studies authors to address this specific issue. Jacobs argued that women left NRMs when their emotional bond with the charismatic leader broke down.

Increasing attention is being placed on women's experiences of leaving religious movements which curtail their sexual freedoms in some way, with a focus on purity cultures and reproductive control (see, for instance, Allison 2021; Gaddini 2022; Rantala 2022; Van den Brandt 2024). But more empirical work is needed on the intersections of gender, specific abuse experiences and subsequent religious exit.

⁹ Beliefs from former members that supernatural retribution will be a result of leaving the movement, or breaking vows made within the movement, is not uncommon. For example, some critics and former members of the New Kadampa Tradition not infrequently report experiences of a non-embodied being, Shugden, causing accidents, bad luck and illnesses (Newcombe 2020, 28).

Abuse, either personally experienced or witnessing or learning about another's experience, can be a reason for religious exit. However, leaving a religious movement is seldom a straightforward process. Lisa Oakley's processual map of spiritual abuse (2019), developed in her 2009 PhD thesis, outlines potential cycles of abuse and recommitment until a final catalyst which becomes something of a 'last straw'.

It could be useful to conceptualise these catalysts as 'moral injuries'. With origins in military studies, particularly applied to veterans of war (e.g. Shay 1994), moral injury has been defined as "the damage done to one's conscience or moral compass when that person perpetrates, witnesses, or fails to prevent acts that transgress one's own moral beliefs, values, or ethical codes of conduct".¹⁰ In recent years, it has been applied in the study of religion, for instance to describe experiences of conversion therapy (Jones, Power and Jones 2022). Whilst it has overlap with trauma, moral injury focuses specifically on the individual's interpretation of the event and whether this impacts their own moral compass and worldview. It also takes into account the individual's own agency and role in the event. Applied to religious exit, it suggests that an event or behaviour which transgresses the individual's deeply held moral values may cause them to question their own actions and/or those of the religious leaders, as well as their commitment to the religious movement. Moral injury is an ethical transgression that invalidates a promise or expectation and necessitates a break with the leader and/or movement (sometimes after the transgression has been rationalised or ignored for a long time).

Moral injury can be useful in thinking about the different exit pathways from the two groups discussed here. In general, there were different exits between the two groups, as well as between men and women in the groups. In terms of Z's movement, people left independently

¹⁰ From The Moral Injury Project website - <https://moralinjuryproject.syr.edu/about-moral-injury/>

when they experienced a moral injury, either to themselves or witnessed in others.

Experiences of sexual abuse as moral injury (as well as a criminal act) were arguably more clear-cut in this movement. The women who experienced sexual abuse in the healing context fairly soon after encountering Z, often left the movement immediately. Whereas others left more gradually, perhaps unsure if they personally experienced sexual abuse at all; some remained in the movement, loyal to Z until his death. This resulted in a steady trickle of people leaving the movement over the 30 years or so of its existence. Many ex-members who spoke to Inform did not necessarily know one another in the movement (due to a lack of temporal overlap) and did not connect as ex-members. Due to the lack of information about the movement in the public domain, it was hard for new and potential members to find critical information or for ex-members to learn about their shared experiences. As a result, Inform continues to receive ex-member testimonies from people who were involved with Z, in line with academic literature which emphasises the delay between abuse experience and disclosure (Jay et. al. 2022; Oakley and Hardy forthcoming).

In contrast, there was a mass exodus of members from X's group within a more limited time period. It could be argued that abusive events and behaviours were interpreted more ambiguously here until the final catalyst. Former members have recognised this, as well as their own agency and actions supporting unhealthy behaviours and dynamics in the movement. Scholars such as Eileen Barker (2009) and Amanda van Eck Duymaer van Twist (2014) have described the ways in which members of new religions can be socialised into behaviours they would previously not have condoned through an 'ends justifies means' mentality. Members can be socialised into acts of deception or, occasionally, violence in the belief that serving the movement, spreading its teachings, gaining converts in order to save the world, is more important than any individual problematic act. Van Eck Duymaer van Twist (2014), former Deputy Director of Inform, who led Inform during both the Z and X

cases, has outlined this process with regards to the X case. She describes how members let “little deceptions” slide until “there was an accumulation that at some point amounted to too much deception to be able to ignore” (2014, 64). Using an enquirer’s own words, she describes this process as “accumulating truth”. This is a useful addition to the concept of moral injury. It reminds us that moral injury, whilst impacting one’s moral compass and worldview, does not always result in a snap action, such as immediate religious exit. Instead, it can be a slow process of accumulating ‘truth’ over time until the final breaking point. Most former members reported that there was no single transgression which caused them to leave, rather it was the build-up of many transgressions over the years.

For members in X’s group, the final breaking point came when a prominent couple within the movement decided to leave. It was the man in the couple who initially wanted to leave, primarily because of financial abuse, and he described a two-year process of making the decision, in discussion with his wife. Once they finally decided to leave, they told others within the movement about their decision, their reasons, their abuse experiences and interpretations of moral transgressions. Members within the movement began talking about their personal experiences for the first time and realised that they were not unique – others too had been bullied, humiliated, shamed and, for some women, coerced into sexual relationships with X. Each woman who had a sexual relationship with X had believed themselves to be the chosen goddess. The men came to realise that this special relationship between X and their partners was a sexual one. The social dynamics of leaving this movement were hence different to Z’s group. In the case of X’s group, two-thirds of the membership left within one year. They remained a strong social network after leaving and most reported a sense of empowerment from this: the network provided the support for them to leave. They referred one another to Inform to record their experiences, donate materials, participate in events and more, but within a time limited period. Inform has not received an

enquiry about X since 2015, although X is still teaching and has maintained a handful of the same followers from this period.

Having provided the broad patterns of religious exit from the two groups, it is important to also analyse the gendered dynamics. Women who left both groups unsurprisingly reported their own sexual abuse, the abuse of other women, or the general misogynistic culture and the use of religious teachings to justify unhealthy sexual practices as the primary reason for religious exit. These teachings around sex – sometimes leading to sexual assault or coercive sexual relationships – were experienced as a moral transgression and a catalyst to leaving the movement.

Some men within the movements also reported the realisation of the sexual abuse of women as one of the reasons for their religious exit. For instance, from X's group one man reported how angry he was when he discovered what the women had experienced, another reported initial disbelief and shock – but that it was this that finally caused him to leave. In general, the men in X's group reported feelings congruent with moral injury – shock, disbelief, anger. This was harm caused to others but also to themselves – and perhaps their masculinity – as the women abused were their wives, sisters, cousins, friends. In Z's group, male exit narratives prioritised the idea of something being taken from them, arguably focusing more on harm to self than to others. The two men's exit narratives both focused on the fact that Z had 'taken' their money and their girlfriends – a personal experience of moral injury. Whilst men in both groups experienced emasculation in their experiences, the men who had been involved with Z continued to uphold patterns of misogyny in their prioritising of harms to self over others and in their ongoing interpersonal relationships (as reported to Inform). The gendered experiences of abuse and of subsequent religious exit in both of these cases uphold

the hegemonic masculinities created within the groups without offering alternative models of masculinity.

Conclusion

In this article we have used two case studies to consider men's experiences in two controversial new religious movements. In general, there is less empirical work on cisgender, heterosexual men's experiences in new religions in which sexual abuse has occurred. These case studies have been selected to illustrate processes in which gendered religious teachings created gendered experiences of abuse and subsequent different reasons for religious exit for men and women. The small numbers of people involved in these movements, particularly men in the case of Z's movement, and their lack of social significance in the UK's religious landscape should be born in mind. Nevertheless, such small new religious movements are important to study, we suggest, following James Beckford's (1985) argument that as social experiments on the margins of society, new religions can provide wider insights into how controversies arise, are constructed and managed in other sections of society. The social dynamics and unhealthy behaviours we have discussed here are found in other religious movements, old and new, as well as non-religious organisations, such as in politics, education, entertainment, sport and more. In many ways, these movement's teachings were not dissimilar to wider patriarchal social structures and misogynistic world views circulating in wider society – although here they were justified with religious teachings.

Issues of gender, sexuality, race, age and class were at play in both groups discussed, although gender has been prioritised in this article. Both groups had gendered theologies and practices which supported heteronormativity and created misogynistic cultures. Women in both groups were considered inferior on the spiritual path, were devalued, humiliated, shamed and considered impure. As gender is a relational construct, it follows that this

conception of women meant that men in the movements automatically had a higher standing and status, including on the spiritual path, and that this was recognised by male leavers to different extents. Men in X's group acknowledged the mistreatment of women as a central reason for their leaving and some former members expressed shame in their role in supporting X and encouraging others to do so over the years. Some of the men mentioned a further feeling of emasculation in feeling a 'failure' in 'protecting' their female partners from abuse. While these reflections show some awareness and shame of a personal enabling of X's abusive behaviour, the underlying patriarchal structures were left unquestioned – at least at the initial point of exiting when Inform received most narratives. Men leaving Z's group did not seem to acknowledge the harms to women as an impetus to rejecting their association with the group, instead their narratives focused on the personal harms they experienced as the reason for religious exit.

Conceptions of masculinity circulated in both groups. In X's group it was an initial reason for some young men to join the movement, which was initially a fitness class in which physical prowess was prioritised. Z's alternative health movement had the potential to offer alternative models of masculinity, through its positioning in the holistic milieu and in encouraging members to attend at times teachings on Buddhist and Hindu non-dualism. However with a major focus in Z's teachings being on gender essentialism, this group's beliefs and practices never approached offering an alternative view of masculinity.

General violations of masculinity were experienced in both movements, including having their sexual partners 'taken', threats of or actual physical violence, fear of the leader or of divine beings or other spiritual consequences, and becoming indebted through donations and loans to the religious teacher. These techniques of emasculation upheld the charismatic authority of the two teachers. Other violations were specific to each movement – men in Z's

movement stressed that their money and girlfriends were stolen from them whilst men in X's movement stressed their humiliation in the purification practices and the disrespect shown to their female relatives and through that to themselves. All of these violations were moral injuries or transgressions on the part of the leader (and of the self - or at least in which the self had a role to a certain extent) which eventually led to religious exit.

As a generalisation, all leavers, men and women, recounted harms to self and others as reasons for exit, but these harms were gendered. Furthermore, in contrast to the male leavers in X's group who expressed more feelings of solidarity with the female victims, male leavers from Z's group recounted harms to self over and above harms to others. In this, Z's male leavers demonstrate some parallels with the grievance narratives found in the involuntary celibate spaces (Speckhard *et al.* 2021). Although a speculative parallel, there is a notable correlation between those who experience both a sense of grievance and a lack of political efficacy being more prone to use violence in other contexts (e.g. Dyrstad and Hillesund 2020). This might suggest more profound implications for the different reactions to the emasculation experienced by the men within each group after leaving. It is important to consider not only how abuse and religious exit is gendered but also how men's experiences differ between groups with ostensibly similar, heteronormative teachings.

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