

Self-Blame – Shame

Abuse from Religious Authority Figures

Shame – Perception of God

Crystal Anzalone MS, PLMHP, NCC



Religious Abuse

Self-blame compounds the issue as abuse victims will typically fault themselves as discovered through various testimonies of regret: “I knew the difference between right and wrong, and I still let him touch me.”; “If only I had told someone; I should have told someone” or “I never really said, ‘No’.” Even when clients are psychologically able to place responsibility on the perpetrator, they may continue to struggle with two issues—spiritual unworthiness and forgiveness. Clients may feel that they do not deserve or are unworthy of a spiritual relationship. (Ganje-Fling and McCarthy, 1996, p. 254) The authority figure or institution in which someone has entrusted her soul now hinders spiritual development. “God is viewed as an authority figure who is judging, ominous and overbearing, their mistrust can extend to that God or Higher Power. Clients frequently transfer their feelings about the perpetrators to God” (1996, p. 254).

A particularly enlightening source of information surrounding religious abuse was found in an analytical ethnography conducted by a former cult member from Children of God/The Family; doctoral candidate, Miriam Williams Boeri (2002). As an ethnographer Boeri examined the aftereffects of living in the cult. Many of the early members of this cult joined during the sexual revolution when *free love* was the norm in these subcultures; nevertheless, once inside the cult, the sexual experiences turned coercive, abusive and manipulated by the patriarchal hierarchy. Those who were able to leave the cult embody similar characteristics of hidden shame which has impacted their perception of God, and has been hypothesized for this article.

Perception and Emotional Well-being

Abuse from authority figures interplay in how shame is formulated within one’s psyche with transference to a victim’s perception of God. Usually the violation of the woman occurs within a patriarchal system (Frazier, 2000) thus impacting the Father God concept. An exploratory study was conducted by Kane, et al. (1993) to determine if, “Adult women survivors of childhood incest, perpetrated by a father-figure, have a more negative view of God, compared to adult women who were not sexually molested” (p. 228). The results were significantly supportive of the hypothesis. These authors affirmed the scarcity of literature dedicated to a religious belief system and how incest impacts belief (perception).

A time-series design was used by (Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005) to observe spiritually integrated effectiveness for two female survivors of sexual abuse dealing with spiritual struggles. This study measured

both pre- and post-intervention in spiritual well-being, religious coping and images of God. The authors indicated that in the past 10 years, researchers are beginning to understand the importance of the effects of sexual abuse and the impact in the spiritual sphere. There are wide-ranging results with many survivors placing confidence in spirituality as a treasure chest for inner healing with the pendulum effect of intense spiritual battles (Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005).

Summary

Determining the power of perception relating to image of God as a contributor to feelings of shame in a woman has not been directly researched. Yet, the literature has identified there are many contributors to a woman’s feeling of shame. The author of this article hypothesizes that a *particular perception* of God is another contributor to the guilt/shame cycle which is debilitating to a woman’s psyche. Although unintentional, religious dogma, perfectionism, and abuses in the patriarchal system supplant a healthy imagine of a Father God. The very resource that spirituality can offer in an affirmative way is undermined, inadvertently creating isolation and disconnect. “Few interventions explicitly integrate spirituality in the recovery process and address spiritual struggles” (2005, p. 202).

There are identifiable crossroads/indicators that influence a woman’s perception of God; this is perpetuated by subtleties in various life circumstances and beliefs, which contribute to feelings of shame and are part of the formulation of *the lies* women believe about self, resulting in stunted emotional wellness. In careful consideration of those seeking a safe sanctuary in which you might desire to discuss the inner pain of shame related to the perception of God, this is your invitation to explore without further shame and condemnation.

For more information on issues of shame

Please contact Crystal Anzalone at
Crystal@CrystalandAssociates.com

Bibliography

- Frazier, R. T. (2000). The subtle violations: Abuse and the projection of shame. *Pastoral Psychology*, 48(4), 315-336.
- Murray-Swank, N. A., & Pargament, K. I. (2005). God, where are you?: Evaluating a spiritually-integrated intervention for sexual abuse. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 8(3), 191-203.