

## Digging out the Roots of Spiritual Abuse

While the Roman Catholic Church continues to struggle with its numerous sexual abuse scandals, I would like to offer for our consideration another form of abuse that is more pervasive – spiritual abuse. I will use Pia Mellody’s definition of spiritual abuse. Mellody is an internationally recognized authority on codependence, addictions, and relationships. Although Mellody uses the following definition to describe abusive situations in childhood, I believe its definition is also applicable for adults, because the Roman Catholic Church’s approach to its adult laity is comparable to a dysfunctional and paternalistic parent – child relationship, whereby the clergy act like the parents in this relationship and its laity are treated like children. Mellody contends, “[spiritual] abuse includes experiences that distort, retard, or otherwise interfere with a child’s [laity’s] spiritual development.”<sup>1</sup> This form of abuse has the insidious ability to penetrate minds and hearts and keep the abused passive, complacent, obedient, silent and subservient, leaving its victims spiritually stunted, unimaginative and disempowered – in effect *dispirited*.

Mellody identifies several aspects of spiritual abuse. My citations below align with Mellody’s work, but I have italicized them and freely substituted Mellody’s “parent” and “child” for “Institution” and “adult laity” respectively. I will only leave one footnote at the end for all italicized citations. *Functional institutions know of their fallibility* whereas dysfunctional institutions claim infallibility, characterized by authoritarian absolutism. Infallibility is inextricably linked to another aspect of spiritual abuse, namely, that *dysfunctional institutions claim to speak on behalf of God*, know what God wants and what God’s plan is. To make such a claim is to be in violation of the third commandment<sup>2</sup>, taking God’s name in vain, as this claim suits a patriarchal institution’s socio-political, economic and theological agendas of power and control to the detriment of the laity and the world. Those on top can speak for God, while those on the bottom lack such a capacity. Those on top know what is best; those on the bottom need to follow.

Spiritual abuse is also over- controlling. *A dysfunctional institution demands that the laity do or believe only exactly what the institution does and that anything else is unacceptable*. The consequences for the laity are stifled growth, creativity, and freedom, as well as passive obedience and spiritual inauthenticity. One is not allowed to question the institution’s theological authorization. If someone does, they are silenced, or, better still, they are anathema.

One more aspect of spiritual abuse worth mentioning is its provision of *an inhuman set of rules*. *Functional institutions provide rules that are clear and can be followed by human beings*. *Inhuman rules are unachievable rules*<sup>3</sup>. No one can reasonably live up to them. In striving to live by unachievable expectations, it sets the laity *and* clergy up for inevitable failure and shame. An example of one such rule is mandatory celibacy. This is incredibly inhumane, as is the denial of a healthy sexual relationship among the LGBTQ community.

Spiritual abuse doubly magnifies if the person’s biological sex is female, or whose gender identity is that of a woman, because in the Roman Catholic Church, women, by virtue of their biological sex, are second-class members. Their biology bars them from leadership positions in the church such as the

priesthood, and relegates them to a subservient role. Women, I believe, struggle with, or more concerning, *normalize* the oppressive twins of spiritual abuse and sexism.

A common thread among the aspects of spiritual abuse mentioned above comes from the institution's misuse of Scripture. We find the foundation of the Roman Catholic tradition in Scripture. However, its theology of Scripture makes for a very weak foundation. The structure upon which it stands continues to crumble. I wish to briefly examine this misuse and suggest a way forward for those still struggling to live as a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth.

## **Towards a viable hermeneutic**

The weakness of the Roman Catholic tradition's foundation lies in its theology of Scripture. In short, it seems that no matter what hermeneutic (method of interpretation) is applied, the interpretation has a tendency to bend towards a claim on Jesus' divinity, which both validates and maintains patriarchal power and control via apostolic succession. This sounds like Docetism and is self-serving, as it leads to stagnant institutional self-preservation – whoever controls scriptural interpretation also controls the institution, the laity, and access to the Divine. It also reinforces patriarchal privilege and entitlement and socializes its laity into a faith characterized by unquestioning obedience, privatized pietism and a futuristic, Christianity-lite, passive and flaccid praxis. Lastly, it culturally appropriates the Tanakh<sup>4</sup> (the Hebrew Scriptures – how can the Roman Catholic Church, or *any* Christian for that matter, assume that they know how to interpret the Tanakh *better than* the authors and the Jewish people themselves?) and legitimates sexism.

While it is unlikely we will ever have a precise interpretation of scripture, I think there is room to consider that there are varying degrees of valid interpretations. This brings us to the question: what constitutes a valid interpretation? Of the many considerations to make, I will only offer as a starting point that a valid interpretation, or hermeneutic, considers the inextricable link among *politics, socio-economics* and *religion* in Jesus' and the writer's world. Jesus' words and actions did not happen in a cultural and historical vacuum. His words and actions not only had an impact on the religious sphere of his day, but also on the socio-economic and political spheres as well. He and his movement embodied the inseparability of good news for the poor and a threat to the dominant order that controlled and maintained oppressive boundary systems. A more authoritative or valid interpretation of his words and deeds, then, needs to encompass as many of these spheres as possible.

We must also be mindful of at least three, if not more, of the following provisos when we read scripture:

1. We honor our own subjectivity – we are aware of our own unique set of biases.
2. We are aware of our own reading site (in my case: male, middle class, white, North American and all that that privileged mix implies)
3. We do our best to rid ourselves of historical anachronisms.

The disciplined application of these provisos can lead to an authoritative interpretation. It is imperative *to let the text speak on its own terms and allow it to interpret us.*<sup>5</sup> This in turn facilitates a concurrence between committed Christian praxis and hermeneutics, as you will see below. I do not consider the Roman Catholic theology of Scripture as an appropriate tool by which to construct a valid praxis of

Christian discipleship, since it is more interested in institutional maintenance and ecclesial survival. One cannot dismantle the master's house using the master's tools, to paraphrase Audre Lorde.

## **The Tools of Radical Discipleship**

How do we know when we have arrived at an authoritative interpretation? How can we make an authoritative claim to our discipleship praxis? From a radical discipleship<sup>6</sup> perspective, Biblical authority is apparent only insofar as it leads its disciples to repentance, resistance, reparations and reconciliation. This insightful proposal and its first two themes are from Ched Myers, noted author and activist theologian. The last two combined themes are my suggestions. Both Myers and I offer some brief detail to explain them:

1. **Repentance**: not only the conversion of the heart, but a concrete process of turning away from empire, its distractions and seductions, its hubris and iniquity<sup>7</sup>.
2. **Resistance**: is shaking off the powerful sedation of a society that rewards ignorance and trivializes everything political, in order to discern and take concrete stands in our historical moment, and to find meaningful ways to impede imperial progress<sup>8</sup>.
3. **Reparations/Reconciliation**: The beneficiaries from current colonial systems via socio-economic and political privileges must journey toward first repairing and then restoring relationships with those impoverished by colonial practices.

Reading the text to inform our radical discipleship will create a solid foundation for Christian praxis that challenges both the oppressive patriarchal/empirical manifestations of our present society and our own complicity. I will now explain how we can do this by revisiting John 4:4-45.

## **John 4:4-45**

Wes Howard –Brook uses 14 pages to explain this passage in his book, *Becoming Children of God: John's Gospel and Radical Discipleship*. I will offer a brief summation, skipping his many important exegetical details for the sake of expediency, brevity and relevance. The material from “background” to “conclusion” is almost all Howard-Brook, save for several “I” statements. I will reference this material with a single footnote at the end.

### ***Background***

While we consider John's abbreviated story below, I invite the reader to keep the following important elements in mind:

#### ***Local geo-political***

No Galilean nor any Judean would set foot in Samaria. The historical enmity between Samaritans and Judeans had its beginnings in 722 BCE with the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. To

eliminate the chance of rebellion, the Assyrian king replaced the inhabitants of Samaria (then a portion of Israel) with people from **five** different nations (2 Kings 17:30-31), the religious result being a blending of Israel- God and other-gods worship.

After the Babylonian conquest of the Southern Kingdom of Judah in 587 and the exile, the returnees wanted to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple, and the mixed-blood Samaritans offered to help. However, as the Judeans saw it, the Samaritans, with their cultural and cultic blending, were impure and idolatrous, so they were rebuffed. The Samaritans, insulted, protested the construction of the Jerusalem Temple to the Persian king, but the Judeans appealed and won. The hatred between Samaritans and Judeans was thus entrenched.

This also led to an issue of geographical religious legitimation – where was the location of true worship – the Jerusalem Temple, or the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim.

### *Gender-political*

In the culture of the day, discourse to exist between a man and a woman in a public place would be highly unlikely – with an increasing correlating degree of unlikeliness within the broadening concentric circles of city, clan, or nation. Therefore, a Jewish man speaking to a Samaritan woman would be a cultural code transgression of great magnitude.

### *Literary*

- A) This story is a “type-scene.” A type-scene is a story told in a predictable pattern. One can consider this passage as following *well courtship* stories. The Jesus and the Samaritan Woman story roughly follows the pattern of how Isaac met Rebekah, Jacob met Rachel, and Moses met Zipporah. This provides an important clue about how to read this passage.
- B) Characters in John’s story are not so much individuals as they are representative of an entire group. Therefore, Nicodemus is representative of the Pharisees, the Samaritan Woman is representative of Samaritans, Peter is representative of Apostolic Succession, and the Beloved Disciple is representative of the Johannine Community.

### ***The Abbreviated Story and Accompanying Commentary***

I encourage the reader to see this story in light of its unifying theological elements of water, marriage, and mountain. When viewed this way, the story is theologically seamless, and we no longer become distracted by a woman’s apparent infidelity and Jesus’ apparent preternatural abilities. For clarity’s sake, I have **bold typed** the abbreviated story and *italicized* the commentary and scripture quotations.

### *Water*

**Jesus asks a Samaritan woman for a drink at Jacob’s well. The woman retorts, suggesting that Jesus has transgressed the cultural code. Jesus’ reply is that she should instead be asking him for a life-giving drink and ups the ante, moving from a simple request from earth-bound water to divine sustenance. Her counter both reflects a defense of her own ancestry, and a challenge to Jesus’ authority: Jesus is not superior to her “father,” Jacob. Jesus ignores the challenge, and once again reiterates his initial offer of living water. The woman then requests the water.**

*When Jesus offers this water, its source, and the Greek word that is used refers to a fountain, whereas the woman's source and the Greek word used references a cistern.*

*The background from which we should read this passage is from Jeremiah 2:1-13, which is about how the house of Jacob (in Samaria) has turned away from God. As it pertains to this part of the discussion between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, we need only focus on God's voice in Jeremiah 2:13:*

*For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.*

#### Marriage to Husband

**Then Jesus suddenly shifts the dialogue from water to her husband, telling the woman to get him. The woman's reply is that she does not have one, to which Jesus affirms her statement, acknowledging that she had five husbands, and the man with whom she currently lives is not her husband.**

*This reflects the nature of Samaria's colonial past, with the marriage to five foreign nations and the worship of their gods to which I alluded to in Background, Local geo-political above. The Samaritans, however, under Roman occupation, did not intermarry with the Romans, and thus the woman could say that the man she "lives" with now is not her husband.*

#### Mountain

**The woman then shifts the topic from husband to the place and nature of worship. This is about the contesting legitimacy of the Samaritan's and the Judean's place of worship – Mt. Gerizim, or the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, respectively.**

*Jesus' response is striking:*

*Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem...But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." John 4:21, 23, 24*

#### Apostling

**The woman apparently ignores Jesus' assertion, and "probes for his credentials" as one who can replace their father, Jacob, as messiah. Jesus' response is "I AM." This is the only time in John's gospel that he acknowledges the title, and he does so, to a Samaritan woman!**

**The woman then leaves, and I would argue of her own volition because it was not to get her husband, but rather to witness to her people. The Samaritans listen to her and go to see Jesus and *already* believe in him because of the woman's witnessing. The Samaritan woman's status as a witness is now on par with John's, and exceeds that of the rest of Jesus' disciples. She is indeed in privileged company!**

**The Samaritans then ask Jesus to remain with them, and he does for two days. The courtship at the well (see above under Background Literary A) is complete with the "marriage" of the Judeans and Samaritans. Where contesting patriarchal succession and its theological legitimation once divided a**

*people into Judeans and Samaritans, Jesus has supplanted with his “Father,” unifying, reconciling and reclaiming both Judeans and Samaritans as children of God, rather than children of men. This unified people are reborn in the Spirit, something Nicodemus could not comprehend.*

### Conclusion

Patriarchal lineage (Jacob and his sons), from which the Samaritan woman used to get her nationality, economic security (animals drinking from the well) and its temple worship are no longer a means to base one’s identity. John’s community repudiates such patriarchal structures, supplants it with an egalitarian community under a common Father that transcends the boundaries of gender and nationality in its discipleship missioning.<sup>9</sup>

## **Viability Revisited**

I hope that this abbreviated story and its accompanying commentary has demonstrated the need to interpret scripture within its socio-economic, political and religious spheres of both Jesus’ and the writer’s worlds. Such an interpretation rightly elevates the woman’s role as an equal partner in theological discourse that goes to the heart of what it means to be a beloved disciple in John’s community, rather than relegate her role to a diminutive, inconsequential, sexually promiscuous prop that demonstrates Jesus’ divinity. How can this story interpret us in our own historical moment within the confines of the Roman Catholic Church?

## **Biblical Authority and Radical Discipleship – Dismantling the Master’s House**

How can John 4:4-45 lead men and women to Biblically authoritative discipleship practice? I allude to the *tools of radical discipleship* above. Of what do we need to repent? How do we repent? What do we need to resist? How do we resist? What kind of reparations are required? How do we reconcile?

### **A Hint**

I do not see Jesus in John’s gospel validating in any way either patriarchal temple. Nor do I see Jesus pining for a change of heart from the temple priests, hoping that a change of leadership will finally change its structure from being a “den of thieves” that not only robs its people of their money but also of their humanity. Nor do I see a Jesus who equates a “trust in the slow work of God” with institutional change. Nor do I see Jesus devoutly and regularly attending the temple. Rather, I see Jesus in conflict with the temple state– in all four gospels no less. Jesus paid the ultimate price for laying bare the temple’s injustices – its playing the Man-Whore with empire in the name of political expediency, self-aggrandizement, status, and riches. (If a man can write about the feminine “Whore of Babylon,” surely I can appropriate it.)

Curiously enough, John’s gospel does not even have the noun “apostle” in it. Not even once. It uses the *verb* form twenty-nine times instead.<sup>10</sup> Nouns can lead to stifling institutions, whereas verbs can lead to thriving communities and movements. Consider this a powerful repudiation of apostolic authority, and

by extension, apostolic succession in John's own time, and even more so ours! What would an egalitarian institution look like, or is that an oxymoron?

### **Where do we go from here?**

What follows below are a series of thoughts on our dysfunctional and spiritually abusive relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. Their intent is to provoke further thought, reflection and dialogue on spiritual abuse and sexism and are by no means exhaustive nor prescriptive.

1. If women and men are counselled in abusive marriages to leave their spouses or significant other and find another home, why cannot we counsel leaving a spiritually abusive institution and find another home – one that honors their humanity?
2. It is often puzzling for people to ascertain why victims of abuse do not just leave their abusive spouses. What is often over-looked is how powerful the fear of the unknown, the lack of self-worth, the need for security, rationalization, cognitive dissonance, denial, delusion and co-dependence all collude in maintaining an abusive relationship. To what extent are these unhealthy processes evident in the institution and yourself?
3. Our society emphasizes that everyone is supposed to “have it all together,” suggesting a certain amount of control and independence. Victimization runs counter to this cultural value, and reinforces denial. Coming from a victim stance is not very empowering. I propose, then, that victimization and resiliency be considered together as a means of conceptualizing the issue of spiritual abuse.
4. To what extent have we become well-adjusted to the institution's indifference, and well-adapted to its injustices? (paraphrased from Cornell West)
5. Will our desire for freedom and equality transcend the need for security? Will it be enough to lay bare the injustices of the institution, or do we need to be healed of our own indifference and complicity?
6. Can we redefine faith as a calling to imagine the dismantling, restructuring and rebuilding of a church based on radical discipleship – or should we rather sit content in having our faith defined for us, which calls for the destruction of our hearts, minds and bodies?
7. How long must our silence perpetuate the normalization of injustice?
8. How long must we wait for women to be declared equal in every aspect in the Roman Catholic Church? Waiting is a luxury for the oppressor that the oppressed can ill afford.
9. One of the characteristics of patriarchal power is the power to name. How long, oh women, must you be characterized as either a virgin or a whore? How long do you want to put up with a patriarchal-constructed subservient identity? How long do you want to put up with the destruction of your humanity?

10. The degree to which one is self-sustaining, self-defining, and self-directed is the degree to which one is free, equal, and human. It is how one measures self-worth. Does our current experience with the institution reflect this?
11. I mourn the loss of approximately 2000 years of women in the subservient position in the Church. I wonder how much different we would be if we had held on to Jesus' inclusive model of a discipleship community. I remember Jackie Robinson, in the movie, 42, cracking the color barrier for professional baseball. Arguably, we see a better product on the field when all men, regardless of their race, can play the game. I believe this can be analogous to sexism, and not just within the Roman Catholic Church, but also within our entire society – if we had an equal representation of women and men in all positions of power, to what extent would we have a better *planet*?
12. This institution forces us to make sense of the nonsensical – we have a loving God that desires the subordination of women. Keeping a population confused is one way to maintain power and control.
13. “Normalization is the colonization of the mind, whereby the oppressed subject comes to believe that the oppressor’s reality is the only “normal” reality that must be subscribed to, and that the oppression is an unpleasant fact that must be coped with.” - Samah Sabawi

Are we currently seeing women leave the Roman Catholic Church because their relationship to the Church is strikingly similar to that of a spiritually abusive husband? Do they suffer from infantilization fatigue - too tired of being treated like a child, of not being taken seriously? Are they tired of being excluded from the ecclesial table? Is the Church fearful that such an inclusion would demand a restructuring of the table itself - to one that is round? Ah, to worship in Spirit and truth - what a dream!

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