Safeguarding and Spiritual Abuse: Pre-reads

John Smyth Scenario

(Based on the documented independent review and testimonies)

Pre-read version

From the late 1970s through the 1980s, abuse took place that was connected to the UK Christian holiday camps, associated with the Iwerne network. Although the Iwerne Trust produced a confidential report in 1982 documenting these concerns, the document remained undisclosed to the public until 2016. During this period, John Smyth, the central figure responsible for the abuse, later relocated to Zimbabwe, where further allegations emerged. Across the decades that followed, significant safeguarding failures continued to surface, revealing persistent institutional shortcomings.

The abuse itself involved severe and ritualised physical beatings inflicted by Smyth on boys he encountered through the camps. He framed these violent acts as a form of spiritual discipline, manipulating religious language and doctrine to enforce compliance. A victim’s testimony recorded in the 1982 report describes how boys collectively endured 14,000 lashes.

The independent Makin Review, published in 2024, confirmed the gravity of these actions, concluding that Smyth had committed “criminal acts of gross abuse.”

Survivor and whistleblower accounts repeatedly described the beatings as horrific, and the Church itself acknowledged that the consequences have had “lifelong effects, already spanning more than 40 years.” Archbishop Justin Welby stated that Smyth’s behaviour represented a profound betrayal, noting that “John Smyth’s abuse manipulated Christian truth to justify his evil acts, whilst exploiting and abusing the power entrusted to him.” Victims explained that as children they had been unable to make sense of what was happening. Many reported being overwhelmed by guilt and shame, having been conditioned to believe that the violence represented a legitimate form of spiritual correction.

Central to the case were the power dynamics that enabled such harm to continue unchecked. Smyth held significant spiritual and relational authority over the teenagers who sought his mentorship. A culture of secrecy within the camps further suppressed disclosure, while church institutions failed to report or intervene despite having knowledge of the situation. These failings—individual, cultural, and institutional—allowed the abuse to persist for years.

Summary version
Across decades and continents, a respected Christian leader conducted severe physical, psychological, and spiritual abuse of boys and young men under the guise of discipline and spiritual formation. Leaders in associated Christian structures knew of concerns but failed to report them. Spiritual language was used to justify violence, secrecy, and obedience. Survivors carried guilt, shame, and fear into adulthood; some believed they were spiritually at fault.

Spiritual Abuse?

- Spiritualised violence framed as ‘God’s discipline’.
- Coercive control: obedience enforced through fear.
- Use of Scripture or doctrine to validate abusive acts.
- Institutional suppression of truth in a religious system.

Link to the **review**

Wish – Animated film

(Based on the narrative themes of coercion, control of wishes, and abuse of authority)

Pre-read version
The story of Wish unfolds in the magical kingdom of Rosas, ruled by the sorcerer-king Magnifico. Citizens who come of age are required to surrender their deepest wishes to the King in a formal ceremony. Once a wish is surrendered, the person forgets what the wish was, trusting Magnifico to guard it safely.

Every month, Magnifico publicly selects a single wish to grant. The chosen individual experiences a moment of joy and recognition; the rest quietly accept that perhaps their wish wasn't meant to be. But there's a darker reality: Magnifico has no intention of granting most wishes, keeping only those that serve his own vision for the kingdom. Wishes in Rosas function almost like a spiritual identity — an inner calling, a hope that shapes a person's sense of meaning. When Magnifico confiscates them, he essentially takes control of citizens' inner lives. As one blog writer put it, he "took other's wishes and used them," and although he claimed this protected people from disappointment, "it also took away their hope."

As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Magnifico's benevolence is a façade. Having experienced trauma in his past, he justifies his extreme control as protective, but commentary notes that "no one should be able to control others' wishes," and that although he believes he is acting out of love, his actions are rooted in fear and a desire for dominance.

When citizens begin to question him or express ambitions that might disrupt the structured order of Rosas, Magnifico's response grows more authoritarian.

He uses magical surveillance, restricts dissenting voices, and insists that only he can discern which dreams are safe or worthy. Observers have argued that these behaviours mirror traits of political authoritarianism, not just narrative villainy — specifically control of expression, punishment of dissent, and consolidation of power at the expense of personal agency.

It is Queen Amaya — previously an enabler of Magnifico's system — who eventually admits she had been 'blind' to how much control he wielded, illustrating how systems of coercion often depend on compliant insiders who later recognise the harm.

Though fictional, the scenario strongly parallels real-world patterns of spiritual abuse.

These parallels make Wish an effective framing story, despite being a fictional narrative. Because it's fictional, it gives us a psychologically 'safer' way to examine spiritual abuse, but because it's fictional, we also need to use this with caution. It is not real life.

Summary version

In a fictional kingdom, citizens surrender their deepest wishes to the ruler, who claims he will keep them "safe". In practice, the ruler hoards the wishes, selectively grants those that benefit his power, and punishes dissent. He presents himself as benevolent and spiritually enlightened, justifying control as "protection". Citizens are taught that questioning him is dangerous or disloyal. A young woman realises the system is controlling rather than caring and begins challenging the narrative.

Spiritual Abuse?

- Coercive control under the guise of spiritual care (wishes = inner spiritual life).
- Authority figure weaponising fear ('your wish will harm you unless I control it').
- Suppression of autonomy: enforcing dependence on a singular spiritual/authoritative figure.

Rigpa / Sogyal Lakar Scenario

(From multiple testimonies and investigations describing patterns of coercive spiritual control within Rigpa)

Pre-read version

Allegations against Sogyal Lakar (known as Sogyal Rinpoche), the founder of the international Buddhist organisation Rigpa, first surfaced in the 1970s. Concerns became more visible when a civil lawsuit was filed in 1994, but the full scale of the allegations reached widespread public attention only in 2017, when eight former students published an open letter describing their experiences. At the time, Rigpa operated as a large global network with more than one hundred centres, a structure that amplified both Sogyal's authority and the reach of his influence.

The abusive dynamics within Rigpa were later examined through the independent Lewis Silkin investigation, commissioned in 2018, which concluded that "some students… have been subjected to serious physical, sexual and emotional abuse by him." The report also determined that senior figures within Rigpa had been aware of aspects of this behaviour for years and had failed to act, thereby exposing additional students to the risk of harm. This institutional inaction created an environment in which abuse could continue unchecked and in which victims were often isolated or disbelieved.

Survivors' own words make the nature of the abuse strikingly clear. In their 2017 open letter, long-term students described their deep concerns about Sogyal's "violent and abusive behaviour." They wrote of physical assaults severe enough to cause "bloody injuries and permanent scars" to monks, nuns, and lay students alike. They emphasised that these acts constituted crimes in the countries where they occurred. Emotional and psychological abuse was described as "perhaps more damaging" than the physical violence, leaving lasting harm. The authors also stated that Sogyal used his spiritual role to gain access to young women, coercing and manipulating them into providing sexual favours. Their accounts reveal patterns of coercive control deeply embedded within a spiritual framework, aligning closely with established definitions of spiritual abuse.

The power dynamics surrounding Sogyal were central to how the abuse was enabled and sustained. He occupied a position of absolute spiritual authority, bolstered by hierarchical Tibetan Buddhist structures and reinforced by cultural narratives around guru devotion. Within Rigpa, ideas associated with “crazy wisdom” were sometimes invoked to justify harmful behaviour as enlightened or transformative, further diminishing students’ ability to question or resist. As the founder and spiritual head of the organisation, Sogyal also held extensive organisational control, shaping the culture, expectations, and internal processes of Rigpa.

For students, these dynamics produced fear of spiritual consequences if they challenged the teacher, along with profound emotional dependency and a sense of isolation from alternative perspectives. Many felt they had no safe space to raise concerns or seek validation, and some believed that questioning Sogyal would jeopardise their spiritual path. This environment of dependency, secrecy, and doctrinal manipulation made it extremely difficult for individuals to recognise the abuse at the time, let alone speak openly about it.

Taken together, the allegations, survivor testimonies, investigative findings, and structural factors reveal a clear pattern of spiritual abuse: the misuse of religious authority, manipulation of doctrine to legitimise harm, and the domination of students through emotional, psychological, and physical coercion within an institution that failed to protect them.

Summary version

Over several decades, students within an international Buddhist organisation described experiencing physical, sexual, financial, and psychological mistreatment from their spiritual teacher. Testimonies reported that the leader claimed unique spiritual authority, used teachings about “wrathful compassion,” “crazy wisdom,” or karmic consequences to justify harmful behaviour, and framed obedience to him as necessary for enlightenment or for avoiding spiritual danger.

Students reported isolation, spiritual threats (“you will die a gruesome death if you disobey”), enforced secrecy, and distorted reinterpretations of doctrine to suppress dissent and maintain control. Investigations later validated many claims.

Spiritual Abuse?

- Coercive control: obedience framed as essential for spiritual safety.
- Spiritual threats: invoking karmic punishment to silence dissent.
- Manipulation of doctrine: reframing harm as enlightened “training”.
- Isolation: discouraging connection outside the guru–student relationship.
- These match the definition: “emotional/psychological abuse characterised by coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context.”

Link to **investigation**

The London International Christian Church (ICC)

(From BBC News reports)

Pre-read version

Jodie’s first months in the London International Christian Church were marked by a sense of warmth and belonging. She had connected with the group at a time when she felt adrift at university, and the welcome she received was immediate and enthusiastic. Former students said this initial attention could feel intense, with one describing it as “beyond love-bombing.”

The church presents itself as part of a global network of more than 130 congregations, with a strong emphasis on student outreach and rapid growth. For Jodie and others, that outreach included invitations to Bible studies, opportunities to get to know members socially, and an encouragement to become integrated into the church’s community life.

However, several former members said that as their involvement deepened, expectations began to shift. Some described feeling gradually steered away from pre-existing friendships and towards exclusive reliance on the church community. A number of students said they were encouraged to move into households, where day-to-day life became tightly intertwined with other church members. Those who made this move reported varied experiences: some found it supportive, while others noticed reduced privacy, fluctuating household numbers, and limits on social contact with non-members.

Financial expectations also featured strongly in several testimonies. Jodie said that conversations about giving emerged very early — even before her baptism — when she was asked about her income and encouraged to commit to a weekly contribution. Her account describes a period in which donations became difficult to maintain, especially as she was already using her overdraft and later diverted some of her student loan towards giving.

Hanu, another former member, reported that he permitted church members to look at his bank statements and recalled the situation becoming invasive. “They really got invasive where they started going through my bank statements seeing how much I earned… That’s where I went wrong. I let them,” he said. Bank records shown to reporters included a donation of the final 46p remaining in one of his accounts.

Some former members described sermons that linked spirituality and financial sacrifice. In one recorded service, a speaker said: “If you don’t love God, don’t give. If you do love God, you’ll give to help the churches grow.” Others told reporters that reluctance to donate could lead to conversations about their seriousness or being seen as falling back into sin, with one former member recalling repeated references to sin when discussing giving.

The London ICC strongly rejects claims of coercive fundraising, saying that all giving must be “voluntary, in keeping with one’s means and never coerced or demanded.” It also stated that requesting private financial documents “is not our practice or policy.”

Recruitment was another theme raised by former members, who said they were encouraged to approach other students on campus. One student reported gaining the impression that young people were viewed as the easiest to manipulate” a claim the church denies.

Leaving the ICC was described as emotionally challenging by several former members, who said they struggled with fear, guilt, and concern about their spiritual standing. The London ICC rejects any suggestion that it teaches salvation is forfeited by leaving.

Regulators note that charities must not place unreasonable pressure on donors, and that a donation, legally, “needs to be a voluntary act… something that you do freely without any undue pressure.” These standards exist to protect vulnerable individuals — including students, who formed the majority of those raising concerns.

Summary version

Former students involved with the London ICC reported feeling welcomed quickly, sometimes overwhelmingly so, before experiencing growing expectations around time, relationships, finances, and living arrangements. Several described being encouraged to disclose income, give beyond their means, or share private financial information. Others reported isolation from non-member friends, pressure to move into communal disciple households, and emotional or spiritual pressure around compliance. The church denies coercive practices and states that giving and participation are voluntary. Regulatory guidance emphasises that donations must be freely given without undue influence.

Spiritual Abuse?

- Spiritual language and teachings used to influence behaviour, including framing reluctance to give as lacking faith or “falling back into sin.”
- Pressure around financial giving connected to spirituality, including direct discussions of income, expectations to donate weekly, and messages such as “If you do love God, you’ll give.”
- Boundary-crossing oversight of personal finances, with some former members reporting requests to disclose bank statements and detailed income information.
- Social control through community structures, including reported isolation from non-members and expectations to live in communal households under spiritually framed rules.
- Use of spiritual consequences to deter non-compliance, where actions not aligned with church expectations were described as “sin” or a lack of seriousness about God.
- These reported dynamics reflect coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context, aligning closely with recognised patterns of spiritual abuse.

Link to **news article**

Optional examples for further learning—no requirement to read them.

Nithyananda Scenario

(Based on allegations, criminal charges, and disciples' testimonies)

Pre-read version

For more than a decade, Nithyananda, a high-profile Hindu spiritual leader, cultivated a large international following, presenting himself as a divine figure and establishing ashrams in India and abroad. Over time, allegations emerged that painted a very troubling picture of his leadership.

In 2010, an American disciple filed a complaint alleging that Nithyananda had raped her repeatedly over the course of five years, both in the United States and India. The complaint was filed with police in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and with the Karnataka Police in India. The Karnataka courts later reviewed the evidence from police and concluded there was enough material to proceed, believing there was a case to answer.

Several years later, new allegations began to surface. In 2019, shortly before fleeing India, Nithyananda was accused in a separate police complaint of kidnapping and illegally confining children at an ashram in Gujarat. The Gujarat Police registered a First Information Report, and the case reached the Gujarat High Court.

By this time, Nithyananda had disappeared. Interpol later issued a blue notice seeking to establish his whereabouts. From exile, Nithyananda claimed to have founded a sovereign nation called the United States of Kailasa, supposedly representing Hindus worldwide. The 'nation' made headlines when individuals claiming to represent it appeared at UN meetings in Geneva, prompting a UN official to state that their submissions were irrelevant and tangential.

The allegations against Nithyananda demonstrate a pattern in which spiritual authority and divine status were used to cultivate fear, dependency, and unquestioned loyalty among followers. The disciple who accused him in 2010 echoed this dynamic in her formal complaint, describing years of coercion masked as spiritual mentorship. Her accusation that she was raped “repeatedly over the course of five years” is one of the few publicly documented survivor statements available.

Later legal actions reveal further power-imbalanced relationships, including allegations relating to minors and financial misconduct. French authorities also began investigating financial crimes connected to his organisation.

Summary version

A high-profile spiritual leader developed a global following, presenting himself as a divine figure. Over time, allegations emerged of sexual assault, coercion, financial exploitation, isolation of followers, and misrepresentation of spiritual authority. Some disciples reported being told that disobedience or disclosure would bring spiritual harm or punishment. A fictional “spiritual nation” was later created to reinforce absolute authority.

Spiritual Abuse?

- Claims of supernatural authority used to pressure compliance.
- Spiritual threats regarding karma, loyalty, or divine displeasure.
- Isolation of followers from external support.
- Use of doctrine to silence, control, or exploit.

These elements align with the definition of psychological coercion in a religious setting.

Link to **news article**

Optional examples for further learning—no requirement to read them.

Hong Xiuguan Scenario

(19th-century leader whose spiritual visions led to a theocratic movement controlling followers' beliefs and behaviours)

Pre-read version

Hong Xiuquan emerged in 19th-century China during a period of social instability, poverty, and widespread discontent with the Qing dynasty. Born in 1814 to a poor Hakka family, Hong was recognised as highly intelligent, and his entire village invested in his education, hoping he would pass the imperial civil service exams — the only path to upward social mobility. But Hong repeatedly failed the examinations, finally suffering a severe emotional collapse in 1837.

During this collapse, Hong experienced a series of intense visions. In them, he believed he encountered a golden-bearded old man who complained about demons corrupting the world, and a middle-aged man who aided him in destroying them. Years later, after reading Christian missionary literature, Hong concluded that the old man was God, the middle-aged man was Jesus, and he himself was the second son of God.

These revelations marked a turning point. Hong felt he had a divine commission to rid China of demonic influence, which he associated with the ruling Qing dynasty and elements of traditional Chinese culture. He began preaching, eventually attracting followers who formed the God Worshippers' Society.

In 1851, Hong declared the establishment of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, proclaiming himself the Heavenly King. His movement instituted radical reforms, including communal ownership of property, strict moral codes, gender segregation, and the abolishment of practices he considered demonic, such as opium use and traditional ancestral rituals.

Followers were instructed to destroy cultural symbols, reflecting Hong's view that much of Chinese tradition was spiritually corrupt. The Taiping Army grew rapidly — eventually numbering into the hundreds of thousands — and captured Nanjing in 1853, renaming it Tianjing (Heavenly Capital), with Hong ruling as a divinely appointed monarch.

However, over time the regime became increasingly authoritarian. Decision-making was tightly centralised in Hong's inner circle, and dissent or deviation from doctrine was harshly punished. Hong himself withdrew from governance, spending long periods in seclusion while issuing edicts based on claimed divine guidance. His reliance on visions and refusal to heed military advice, even in dire situations, contributed to the eventual downfall of the movement. When Nanjing fell in 1864, Hong had already died — reportedly by suicide during the city's starvation siege.

Summary version

A charismatic leader experienced powerful visions he interpreted as divine calling, declared himself the second son of God, and founded a religious movement requiring absolute obedience, destruction of cultural traditions, and rigid moral control. Followers surrendered autonomy and personal decision-making to the leader and his inner circle. While the historical context differs from contemporary safeguarding, patterns of enforced loyalty, spiritual absolutism, and suppression of dissent echo modern understandings of spiritual control.

Spiritual Abuse?

- Total spiritual authority claimed for personal mandate.
- Suppression of alternative beliefs or voices.
- Enforced separation from "evil" culture; purity demands.
- Use of divine revelation to justify control.
- These historical patterns parallel contemporary spiritual abuse frameworks.

Link to **news article**