

# Safeguarding & Spiritual Abuse

Handbook

# Introduction

Welcome to the Thirtyone:eight Safeguarding and Spiritual Abuse course. This handbook is designed to accompany the webinar and contains the case scenarios, discussion questions and polls we will be using in the webinar.

Safeguarding and Spiritual Abuse is a four UK nations friendly course. Most of the information in the handbook is applicable to all four nations, but there are a few nation-specific pieces of information which we've signalled. This handbook has a lot of information and isn't designed to be read cover-to-cover. We do encourage you to use the contents page to identify the information relevant to you, and to revisit this information when you need a refresher and as things arise.

As you move through this course, you may come across moments that invite reflection or gently challenge the way things are done in your community. That's a natural part of learning and growth. Our hope is that this process will help you recognise when someone may need support, respond with wisdom and care, and continue building faith communities where safety and compassion are woven into everyday life.

We're honoured to walk alongside you as you nurture safer, more welcoming spaces within your faith and religious communities – places where every person is valued, protected, and able to flourish.

The Thirtyone:eight team

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## Pre-reading: Summaries of framing scenarios

We begin by offering a choice of ‘framing scenarios’ that we will refer to at the end of each module. Most scenarios are real life situations, while one is fictional. If you are a victim-survivor who may find the scenarios triggering, the Wish case study may provide more psychological safety to you.

You are welcome to familiarise yourself with just one, or all. Summary versions are added below, full versions are included after the questions and exercises in the webinar.

### **John Smyth Scenario – summary**

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.

# Summaries of framing scenarios (cont.)

## **Wish: Animated film – summary**

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.

## **Sogyal Lakar Scenario – summary**

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.

## **International Christian Church – summary**

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.

# Questions and Exercises in the webinar

Throughout the webinar there will be opportunities to have discussions, share knowledge and participate in activities to apply our learning in context. These are included here for reference only. **There is no need to work through anything other than the pre-read.**

**Poll:** What brings you here? Select one or more.

- a) Learn to prevent spiritual abuse
- b) To respond to concerns of spiritual abuse
- c) I'm a victim-survivor. I support a victim-survivor and want to learn more
- d) I'm interested in the topic.
- e) Other [free text box]

## Module 1: The Harm

### Existing knowledge

1. What is abuse?
2. What is emotional / psychological abuse?
3. What is spiritual abuse?

### Case Scenarios – Questions for discussion:

Group 1: What elements of coercive control can you see, if any?

Group 2: What elements of harm can you see, if any?

Group 3: What spiritual or religious elements can you see, if any?

### Alex:

Alex is a mid-level employee in a faith-based organisation when a senior leader asks her to ensure the team is 'in alignment,' including monitoring attendance, and financial giving. Over time, the expectation expands. Alex is asked to keep informal notes on how much individuals donate, how often they volunteer, and whether their spiritual enthusiasm seems to rise or fall. When giving increases, Alex is praised; when it drops, her leadership is questioned.

## **Alex (continued)**

Team members confide that they feel pressured, but Alex is urged to remind them of their responsibility before God. The senior leader implies that withholding time or money shows spiritual immaturity and could threaten their roles. Two years in, a staff member is dismissed for failing to be 'truly aligned.'

When Alex raises concerns, the weekly leadership meeting is suddenly 'paused for reflection.' Weeks later, Alex sees the same group meeting without her. She's told, "This is a new group. You're not needed for this."

## **Existing knowledge**

1. What kinds of power might be held?
2. How can power be used well?
3. What is an 'abuse of power'? How does this sit with spiritual abuse?

## **Framing questions: The Harm**

From your framing scenario:

- Who had power?
- Who had been vulnerable?
- What could safety have looked like?
- What community narratives made harm possible?

# **Module 2: The Distortion**

## **Pause and consider (poll):**

If you're a person of faith, has your faith acted as a support or protective factor at some time in your life?

- Yes
- No
- This question isn't relevant to me

If you would like to give a brief example, you are welcome to do so (optional).

## **Case Scenarios – Questions for discussion:**

Group 1: What elements of pressure / fear / threat can you see, if any?

Group 2: Are people able to make decisions freely?

Group 3: Is there control of daily behaviour or spiritual life?

All: What would safer/healthy version of this situation look like?

### **Musa:**

Musa is a new believer, eager to serve but he has a mortgage and cannot reduce his paid work. When the church announces an unpaid internship - shared as a fast track to real calling - the senior pastor's assistant, Olu, says that only the 'strong in spirit' will thrive, implying others may not be ready for deeper things.

Musa knows he cannot join, yet Olu focuses on him privately, praising his potential while stressing that 'real growth requires sacrifice', and that God cannot use those who stay comfortable. Musa is urged to prove his readiness by serving more. Tasks multiply, often last minute, reinforced by reminders that true believers "don't say no."

Exhausted, Musa feels guilty even thinking of stepping back. Olu frames burnout as spiritual attack. Gradually, Musa realises he is serving out of fear of seeming weak, disappointing Olu, or losing his place in the community.

### **Spiritual abuse: Full definition**

Spiritual abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context or with a religious rationale. This context includes religious or spiritual institutions, places of education and homes in which there is a religious, spiritual or faith belief. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it and can be experienced in a variety of different relationships. (Oakley, 2023)

### **Minimising harm**

- What 'good practices' have you seen?
- If a teaching / practice harms a subgroup, do we change it or defend it?
- Can someone say no to a spiritual request without a penalty?

## Framing questions: The Distortion

From your framing scenario:

- How was spirituality distorted?
- What could healthy practice have looked like?
- Whose voice was missing or silenced?

## Module 3: The Ambiguity

**Pause and consider:** What situation would make you think, ‘This needs an informal conversation,’ rather than, ‘This needs a formal safeguarding measure’?

**Pause and consider:** If someone meant well but harm was still caused, what is the appropriate next step?

**Pause and consider:** What examples of healthy/unhealthy challenge have you seen? What language or actions made a difference?

### Talven

In the House of the Dawn, High Guide Talven shaped every facet of temple life. His closest attendants—the Circle—quietly controlled access to him, deciding which students practised where, or sending individuals to remote huts so Talven could concentrate on those he favoured.

Talven’s teaching was severe. In meditation and ritual, he used harsh language to ‘break resistance,’ calling struggling students ‘weak,’ or ‘a burden’. The Circle understood this as sacred discipline. When students left, each departure had its own explanation.

During a retreat, a novice named Rami endured a prolonged, humiliating rebuke and was called “a disappointment to the temple.” That night, Rami left and later posted on social media a clear, calm account of sustained verbal abuse disguised as spiritual growth. Former students quickly added similar experiences: public shaming, years of shouting, and isolation used as punishment. The Circle recognised every name—and remembered Talven’s justifications for them leaving. What once seemed isolated was now a clear pattern. A decade of harm had been normalised. One of the Circle said, “We always had a reason. We never asked why there were so many reasons.”

**Pause and consider:** A person’s perception may not describe the whole situation, but it always describes their experience. How does this shape our safeguarding responsibilities?

**Consider the following mini-case scenario: How should you respond?**

During a planning meeting, you and one of the youth leaders are discussing potential locations for a youth event. When he opens his phone to search for the venue’s social media account, the ‘based on your viewing’ feed appears briefly – filled with inappropriate images of young-looking girls. He quickly closes the screen. You follow safeguarding procedure and report what you saw to the safeguarding lead.

A week later, you’re surprised to hear that he has been telling others you are a “spiritually abusive leader who invades people’s private lives” and “polices people’s holiness.” Rather than engaging with the safeguarding concern, he reframes your action as overreach, saying that you were spiritually abusive.

**Poll:** What is an appropriate safeguarding response?

- Report the concern and let safeguarding leads handle it
- Apologise and drop the safeguarding issue.
- Publicly defend yourself and explain what you saw
- Ignore it to avoid conflict

**Framing questions: The Ambiguity**

From your framing scenario:

- What had clouded perception?
- Was there a complicit inner circle?
- What made it hard for a survivor to speak?

# Module 4: The Practice

**Poll:** Rate your group on your policies (1 = very low, 3 = average, 5 = strong)

**Poll:** Rate your group on your accountability structures (1 = very low, 3 = average, 5 = strong)

**Poll:** Rate your group on your people-centred practices (1 = very low, 3 = average, 5 = strong)

## Framing questions: The Practice

From your framing scenario:

- What accountability had existed?
- What had happened when concerns were raised?
- What would have strengthened safety?

**Our task:** To build communities where safety is intentional, not assumed; where accountability is normal, not exceptional; and where victim-survivors are believed, protected and centred.



## Framing Scenarios - Full Versions

### John Smyth Scenario

*(Based on the documented independent review and testimonies)*

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."

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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.

### **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)*

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.

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## Wish – Animated film (continued)

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.**

### 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.

### Sogyal Lakar Scenario

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

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.

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## **Sogyal Lakar Scenario (continued)**

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

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.

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## **Sogyal Lakar Scenario (continued)**

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## Sogyal Lakar Scenario (continued)

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.

### 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)*

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 preexisting 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.

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## **The London International Christian Church (continued)**

*(From BBC News reports)*

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.

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## The London International Christian Church (continued)

### 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 for the course.

### **Nithyananda Scenario**

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

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.

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## Nithyananda Scenario (continued)

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.

### 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](#)

## Hong Xiuquan Scenario

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

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.

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## Hong Xiuguan Scenario (Continued)

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.

### 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](#)

# Possible Answers for Framing Scenarios

You may have thought of some of the following answers:

Module 1: The Harm			
	Who had power?	Who was vulnerable?	What community narratives made harm possible?
<b>John Smyth Scenario</b>	Smyth  The Iwerne leadership structure	The teen boys attending camps: UK and Africa  Victim-survivors not responded to well after reporting	'Spiritual discipline' as a justification for harsh treatment.  A culture of secrecy, elitism, and protecting reputations rather than victims.  Narratives that suffering = holiness, making boys believe punishment was spiritually necessary.
<b>Wish Scenario</b>	Magnifico, who controlled citizens' deepest wishes (symbolising inner spiritual identity).  The palace system that enabled surveillance and obedience.	Citizens whose sense of purpose was taken from them.  Young people coming of age who were required to surrender their wishes.	'The King knows best'  Fear of disappointment used to justify giving up wishes.  Belief that questioning authority is dangerous.
<b>Sogyal Lakar Scenario</b>	Sogyal Lakar as revered guru with unquestioned authority.  Senior Rigpa leadership who enabled or ignored abuse.	Students seeking spiritual growth or enlightenment.  Isolated disciples.	'Crazy wisdom' justifying violent or sexual behaviour.  Karma-based fear narratives: disobedience brings spiritual danger.  Guru devotion culture requiring surrender of autonomy.

## Possible Answers (continued)

Module 1: The Harm			
	Who had power?	Who was vulnerable?	What community narratives made harm possible?
<b>London ICC Scenario</b>	<p>Church leaders directing finances, relationships, and daily life.</p> <p>Discipler–disciple structures with high levels of oversight.</p>	<p>Students away from home seeking belonging.</p> <p>Those in financial difficulty or emotional need.</p>	<p>“Real disciples sacrifice everything.”</p> <p>Giving equated with holiness.</p> <p>Questioning leadership framed as sin or spiritual decline.</p>
Module 2: The Distortion			
	How was spirituality distorted?	What could healthy practice have looked like?	Whose voice was missing or silenced?
<b>John Smyth Scenario</b>	<p>Violence reframed as discipleship. Scripture used to justify punishment, shame, and unquestioned submission.</p> <p>Smyth portrayed himself as a spiritual father with special discernment.</p>	<p>Mentorship grounded in respect, collaboration, consent, and clear boundaries.</p> <p>Accountability to safeguarding processes, not individual authority figures.</p>	<p>The boys themselves. Whistleblowers whose warnings were ignored.</p> <p>Survivors who were trained to feel guilt, sin, and shame instead of validation.</p> <p>Smyth’s family.</p>

## Possible Answers (continued)

You may have thought of some of the following answers:

Module 2: The Distortion			
	How was spirituality distorted?	What could healthy practice have looked like?	Whose voice was missing or silenced?
<b>Wish: Animated film scenario</b>	<p>Wishes representing identity and calling were seized 'for protection.'</p> <p>Magnifico framed control as benevolent spiritual guardianship.</p>	<p>Empowering people to discern their own dreams.</p> <p>Leadership that nurtures freedom and growth, not dependency.</p>	<p>Citizens who questioned the system.</p> <p>Queen Amaya's voice until she finally recognised her complicity.</p>
<b>Sogyal Lakar Scenario</b>	<p>Harm reframed as 'wrathful compassion.'</p> <p>Manipulative use of Buddhist teachings to demand obedience.</p>	<p>Teacher–student relationship grounded in respect and ethical boundaries.</p> <p>Discernment, dialogue, and mutual accountability.</p>	<p>Survivors who were shamed, isolated, or spiritually threatened.</p> <p>Dissidents treated as betrayers of the spiritual practice.</p>
<b>London ICC Scenario</b>	<p>Financial pressure framed as evidence of love for God.</p> <p>Obedience equated with spiritual maturity.</p> <p>Emotional dependence mistaken for discipleship.</p>	<p>Voluntary giving without scrutiny of private finances.</p> <p>Encouraging balanced relationships and autonomy.</p> <p>Respect for personal limits.</p>	<p>Students who hesitated to give or felt uncomfortable.</p> <p>Those who tried to step back from church commitments.</p>

## Possible Answers (continued)

Module 3: The Ambiguity			
	What had clouded perception?	Was there a complicit inner circle?	What made it hard for a victim-survivor to speak?
<b>John Smyth Scenario</b>	<p>Spiritual language masking violence.</p> <p>Smyth's reputation, charisma, and intellectual standing.</p> <p>Cultural narratives of 'toughening up' young men spiritually.</p>	<p>Yes – leaders who knew but chose secrecy.</p> <p>Those who protected the institution rather than victims.</p>	<p>Being children with no vocabulary for what was happening.</p> <p>Shame and spiritual guilt.</p> <p>The normalisation of the abuse by the wound care following beatings.</p>
<b>Wish Scenario</b>	<p>Magnifico's façade of benevolence.</p> <p>Citizens' trust in tradition.</p> <p>Magical language masking authoritarianism.</p>	<p>Yes – loyal palace staff who enforced compliance.</p> <p>Queen Amaya initially supported the system.</p>	<p>Lack of awareness that anything was wrong – complete trust in leadership.</p> <p>Fear of retaliation.</p> <p>Belief that dissent was selfish or unsafe.</p>
<b>Sogyal Lakar Scenario</b>	<p>Spiritualised language masking coercion.</p> <p>Cultural pressure not to question a revered spiritual leader.</p> <p>Isolation from alternative Buddhist voices.</p>	<p>Yes – senior Rigpa figures who protected Sogyal.</p> <p>Administrators who dismissed complaints.</p>	<p>Fear of spiritual consequence.</p> <p>Loyalty to the guru.</p> <p>Threats of karmic punishment or exclusion.</p>

## Possible Answers (continued)

Module 3: The Ambiguity			
	What had clouded perception?	Was there a complicit inner circle?	What made it hard for a victim-survivor to speak?
<b>London ICC Scenario</b>	<p>Intense early welcome (love-bombing).</p> <p>Social isolation from external friends, limiting perspective.</p> <p>Emotional dependence on disciple households.</p>	<p>Leaders overseeing finances and discipleship relationships.</p> <p>House leaders enforcing social and spiritual expectations.</p>	<p>Fear of being labelled sinful.</p> <p>Guilt about 'not being committed enough.'</p> <p>Losing one's entire social world on leaving.</p>
Module 4: The Practice			
	What accountability had existed?	What happened when concerns were raised?	What would have strengthened safety?
<b>John Smyth Scenario</b>	<p>Practically none.</p> <p>Internal investigation kept secret; no reporting to authorities.</p>	<p>Documented but hidden.</p> <p>Leadership prioritised reputation over protection.</p>	<p>Mandatory reporting laws.</p> <p>Transparent culture.</p> <p>Independent safeguarding oversight and survivor-centred responses.</p>
<b>Wish Scenario</b>	<p>None – a single person held all of the decision-making power.</p>	<p>People were punished or magically restrained.</p> <p>Dissent treated as rebellion.</p>	<p>Shared leadership, transparency, and independent oversight.</p> <p>Ethical limits on magical power.</p>

## Possible Answers (continued)

Module 4: The Practice			
	What accountability had existed?	What happened when concerns were raised?	What would have strengthened safety?
<b>Sogyal Lakar Scenario</b>	<p>Internal structures entirely controlled by Sogyal.</p> <p>No independent safeguarding or external oversight.</p>	<p>Dismissed, minimised, or spiritualised.</p> <p>Whistleblowers intimidated or pushed out.</p>	<p>Clear ethical codes.</p> <p>Independent complaint systems.</p> <p>Leadership not centred on one 'infallible' figure.</p>
<b>London ICC Scenario</b>	<p>Internal structures designed around obedience but not safeguarding.</p> <p>Little external oversight.</p>	<p>Concerns reframed as spiritual weakness.</p> <p>Complaints minimised or denied.</p>	<p>Independent pastoral oversight.</p> <p>Clear safeguarding policies on finances, relationships, and boundaries.</p> <p>Education on coercive control and healthy discipleship.</p>



## Behavioural Risk Assessment Template:

In faith and spiritual communities, any incident of harm, abuse, or misuse of spiritual authority requires careful assessment.

When concerns arise—including those related to abuse—it is vital to understand the potential ongoing risk to individuals or the wider community, especially if the person responsible continues in, or may be restored to, a position of spiritual leadership or influence.

A behavioural risk assessment provides a structured and objective way to consider patterns of behaviour, relational dynamics, and contexts in which harm has occurred. This process is usually undertaken by the Safeguarding Lead and supports accountable decision-making that prioritises the safety and wellbeing of all within the community.

***Risk Assessment Template on next page***

# Behaviour Risk Assessment

<b>Church / Organisation</b>			
<b>Subject of Risk Assessment</b> (if child, include age)		<b>Location</b>	
<b>Date of Risk Assessment</b>		<b>Date for Review</b>	
<b>Responsible Leader</b>		<b>Review Frequency</b>	
<b>Professionals/others involved</b> (if applicable)			
<b>Reason for risk assessment</b> (including a view on the individual's awareness and acknowledgement of the concerns)			

What are the concerns?	Given this, what are the possible risks? Who is at risk?	Can the risk be managed? What measures can be adopted to safeguard in this situation?	Action by whom?	Action by when?	Date Completed

## Guidance notes

1. This document will primarily be overseen (and possibly even completed) by the safeguarding coordinator within the organisation. It may be filled-in, in conjunction with a worker or volunteer or leader who knows the situation or individual (adult/child) well.
2. It is important to remember that a tool like this will be useful for dealing with:
  - a. risks that are known and substantiated or
  - b. those that are unsubstantiated but still warranting some form of safeguarding arrangements or
  - c. on receipt of a blemished disclosure during the recruitment process (read InFocus on Dealing with Blemished Disclosures for how to do this well)

Therefore, communication is key when seeking to put an assessment in place. Encourage your workers to raise/share concerns appropriately so you can make an informed decision about the nature and detail of the risk assessment.

1. Information about risks an individual may pose maybe received from anyone of these following services: Social Services or Police or Probation or Health services. Seek to contact them to clarify information and where possible seek to gather their view on your risk assessment. Other organisations such as schools, churches or voluntary organisations may be able to indicate the presence of a safeguarding concern in relation to a child or adult though not the details of the relevant concerns.
2. Possible measures (as stated in Column 3) could range from a stringent contract/covenant of care to informal supervision/monitoring arrangements. Depending on the nature of the risk and the potential groups that may be vulnerable through coming into contact with the individual, consider realistic ways of managing and also supporting the individual concerned.

3. Read our InFocus on Handling and Storage of disclosure information for advice on storage and retention of these records (Standard 3.23)
4. Read Standard 9 within our online safeguarding manual for further information on working with those who may pose a risk and clauses to consider in a contract.
5. If your risk assessment indicates that your church is unable to manage the risk the individual poses (either due to the scale of your work with vulnerable groups or lack of resources to offer accountability arrangements and/or pastoral support), you are able to advise the individual that your church may not be the appropriate place for them to attend. You can support them to seek to explore an alternate church and encourage them to share the concerns with the relevant safeguarding lead and/or minister.
6. It is important to remember that when working with individuals and vulnerable groups, risk cannot be completely eliminated but can definitely be mitigated and managed safely.

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# Characteristics and Consequences of Spiritual Abuse

Below are the common ways spiritual abuse is enacted and experienced, grouped under the domains of harm, coercive control, and spiritual/religious dynamics. Remember, this is a guide, not a comprehensive list. This can look different across varying cultures, situations and faiths.

## **Harm:**

These themes capture how victim-survivors commonly experience and internalise spiritual abuse, including both short- and long-term effects.

- Feeling afraid of leaders, community, or God's judgement
- Developing distrust in others, institutions, or spirituality
- Feeling unable to make independent decisions
- Feeling responsible for the abuse or for 'spiritual failure'
- Internalising blame projected by the perpetrator or group
- Experiencing confusion caused by gaslighting or spiritualised reinterpretation of events
- Having difficulty trusting one's own perceptions, beliefs, or intuition
- Early experiences of belonging or warmth later become controlling
- Feeling confused by the shift from support to coercion
- Being caught in repeated patterns of idealisation, control, punishment, and reconciliation
- Struggling to recognise the cycle due to spiritual framing
- Feeling silenced or responsible for what happened
- Fearing that reporting will damage reputations, faith, or community standing
- Losing faith or spiritual identity
- Experiencing trauma, anxiety, or depression
- Becoming disconnected socially, relationally, or from community
- Facing ongoing vulnerability due to damaged trust
- Harm to the victim-survivors reputation when perpetrator controls narrative

# Characteristics and Consequences of Spiritual Abuse (continued)

## **Coercive Control:**

*Coercive control in the context of spiritual abuse often includes behaviours that restrict autonomy, create dependency, and limit a person's ability to make free choices.*

- Manipulating or exploiting someone for time, labour, resources, or personal gain
- Pressuring individuals to give money, donate, or volunteer beyond what they feel able to
- Enforcing accountability through intrusive monitoring, confession, or oversight of personal behaviours
- Demanding unquestioning obedience to leaders or group norms
- Imposing strict conformity and discouraging doubt, questions, or alternative viewpoints
- Censoring expression, limiting dissent, or restricting access to outside information or support
- Creating secrecy and silence around harmful behaviour
- Requiring individuals to keep concerns within the group and avoid external help
- Isolating a person from family, friends, or wider community connections
- Creating dependency on the leader, group, or belief system
- Controlling someone's movements, choices, or relationships under the guise of spiritual guidance
- Exercising ownership over a person's time, decisions, or identity
- Using shame, guilt, or fear to enforce compliance
- Undermining confidence or agency to increase reliance on the perpetrator or group

# Characteristics and Consequences of Spiritual Abuse (continued)

## Spiritual / Religious:

*The spiritual or religious element of spiritual abuse involves the misuse of beliefs, teachings, authority, or spiritual practices to justify control, increase dependency, or legitimise harmful behaviour.*

- Using scripture selectively to justify obedience, silence, or submission
- Presenting personal interpretations of religious texts as absolute, unquestionable truth
- Using theology to reinforce guilt, shame, or obligation
- Claiming divine authority, special revelation, or unique spiritual insight to override someone's autonomy
- Suggesting that disagreement or questioning is spiritually dangerous or sinful
- Threatening divine punishment or spiritual consequences to enforce compliance
- Using teaching platforms to target, shame, or manipulate individuals
- Framing harmful actions as spiritually necessary, ordained, or 'for the person's good'
- Positioning those with power as the only legitimate source of spiritual guidance
- Equating loyalty to the leader or group with loyalty to God
- Using spiritual language to minimise harm or discourage people from reporting concerns
- Portraying leaving the group as a sign of spiritual failure, rebellion, or moral corruption
- Controlling a person's spiritual practices, rituals, or access to sacred spaces
- Defining someone's spiritual worth or identity based on compliance rather than genuine belief



# Coercive Control / Controlling or Coercive Behaviours in UK Law

## England and Wales

### Controlling or Coercive Behaviour (Domestic Abuse Act 2021)

Under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, controlling or coercive behaviour (CCB) is a form of domestic abuse. Statutory guidance defines it as behaviour through which an abuser seeks to control, frighten or dominate another person, often alongside other forms of abuse.

Controlling or coercive behaviour may include:

- Acts designed to make a person feel inferior and/or dependent, for example by isolating them from friends, family or sources of support
- Exploitation of a person's financial resources or possessions
- Restricting a person's independence and controlling what they can do
- Assaults, threats, humiliation, intimidation, or other conduct intended to harm, punish or frighten the victim

In England and Wales, controlling or coercive behaviour is a criminal offence where the perpetrator and victim are "personally connected". This includes:

- Intimate partners or ex partners
- Family members

The offence applies whether or not the parties live together.

*(Continued on next page)*

# Coercive Control / Controlling or Coercive Behaviours in UK Law (continued)

## Is controlling or coercive behaviour in spiritual abuse a criminal offence?

Usually, no. Controlling or coercive behaviours that arise solely within a spiritual, religious or faith context do not automatically constitute a criminal offence. However, there are important qualifications.

### 1. Where the parties are personally connected:

If the perpetrator and victim-survivor are personally connected (for example, spouses, partners, ex-partners or family members), controlling or coercive behaviour may constitute a criminal offence, even where the behaviour is expressed through religious or spiritual beliefs, practices or justifications, or take place as part of spiritually abusive behaviours that affect a wider group of people. There are significant overlaps between recognised indicators of controlling or coercive behaviour in domestic abuse and behaviours commonly reported in spiritual abuse, including:

- Financial abuse (for example, taking or controlling someone's money)
- Forcing a person to act against their wishes
- Isolating a person from family, friends or professionals who may offer support
- Preventing or monitoring communication with others

In such cases, the spiritual or religious framing does not negate potential criminal liability.

*(Continued on next page)*

# Coercive Control / Controlling or Coercive Behaviours in UK Law (continued)

## 2. Where the behaviour falls within honour-based abuse or harmful practices:

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has expanded its guidance to reflect growing understanding of abuse linked to faith, belief or ritual. This includes harm justified by accusations of:

- Witchcraft
- Spirit or demonic possession
- Involvement in ritual or satanic practices

This type of abuse can affect children, adults and 'vulnerable adults', and may involve financial, physical, emotional or sexual abuse, neglect, or homicide. Reported manifestations include:

- Violent or coercive 'exorcisms'
- Beatings, starvation or forced ingestion of harmful substances
- Scapegoating individuals for perceived misfortune
- Extreme psychological and emotional abuse

There is no standalone criminal offence specific to abuse justified by spiritual or faith-based beliefs. Prosecutors assess which criminal offences apply on a case-by-case basis. However, CPS guidance makes clear that such cases of spiritual abuse should be treated as serious criminality within the broader framework of:

- Harmful practices
- Honour based abuse

# Coercive Control / Controlling or Coercive Behaviours in UK Law (continued)

## Northern Ireland:

Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021: The Act criminalises a course of abusive behaviour (two or more incidents) directed at:

- An intimate partner
- A former partner
- A close family member

## Is controlling or coercive behaviour in spiritual abuse a criminal offence?

Usually, no. However, it may constitute a criminal offence where the perpetrator and victim-survivor fall within the above relationship categories. As in England and Wales, the presence of a religious or spiritual context does not, in itself, remove potential criminal liability.

## Scotland:

Scotland does not use the term 'controlling or coercive behaviour' in standalone criminal legislation, but the concept is embedded within existing law, and widely taught in guidance.

Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018: The Act criminalises a course of abusive behaviour towards a partner or ex partner, where:

- There are two or more incidents of behaviour
- A reasonable person would consider the behaviour likely to cause physical or psychological harm, including fear, alarm or distress

Scottish Government guidance makes explicit that coercive and controlling behaviour is domestic abuse and a crime, particularly where there is a systematic pattern of psychological abuse resulting in loss of autonomy, isolation or fear.

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# Coercive Control / Controlling or Coercive Behaviours in UK Law (continued)

## Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007

Statutory guidance recognises coercive control as a relevant concept, particularly where an adult may be unable to safeguard themselves due to:

- Trauma or adverse life experiences
- Undue pressure or control exercised by another person

In such circumstances, coercive control may mean that an adult is unable to make or act on decisions to protect themselves from harm. The definition of 'harm' under the 2007 Act is broad enough to encompass coercive control, even where it is not named explicitly, or where it arises in a spiritual or belief-based context.

## UK-Wide Clarification

Across all UK nations, it is important to note that even where controlling or coercive behaviour linked to spiritual abuse does not, in isolation, meet the threshold for specific domestic abuse or adult support and protection offences, it may still constitute a criminal matter where:

- It co-occurs with other recognised forms of abuse
- It falls within other criminal offences (for example, assault, fraud, neglect, or child abuse)

Such cases should be considered as a whole and, where appropriate, reported.



## Considerations for non-UK / non-Western perspectives

Spiritual abuse does not look the same in every culture. While the core issues—harm, coercion, and misuse of spiritual and religious ‘goods’—may be present across contexts, the way these show up can be shaped by cultural, social, and spiritual norms.

Most of the existing research and guidance on spiritual abuse comes from modern Western settings, where ideas like personal autonomy, individual belief, and the ability to question authority are to some extent taken for granted. These assumptions do not always fit well in cultures where spirituality is shared, community-based, strongly hierarchical, or closely tied to daily life and survival. This means that some signs of spiritual abuse may be missed or misunderstood when applying Western frameworks to other cultural contexts.

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# Considerations for non-UK / non-Western perspectives (continued)

One alternative definition suggests spiritual abuse involves:

**Actions that damage one's subjective experience and personal practice of the sacred, creating a severe disconnection from a higher power or other spiritual sources of meaning, resulting in harm to one's spiritual integrity, lack of access to spiritual resources for coping, and/or an inability to pursue spiritual growth.**

(Grey et al., cited in Roudkovski, 2024, p.41)

This view is helpful in non-Western settings because it emphasises access, relationship, and continuity in spiritual life—not just personal freedom or individual belief. Even so, it's important to note that the impact of spiritual abuse is rarely only spiritual; it often affects people physically, psychologically, and socially too.

## **Additional cultural considerations**

In many cultures, spiritual abuse may be influenced by dynamics such as:

### **1. Collective, not individual, identity**

For some communities, spiritual life is lived through family, tribe, or group. Harm may occur not only through direct control, but through exclusion, shame, or being cut off from the group's spiritual or social life.

### **2. Strong respect for elders and authority**

In cultures where respecting leaders is a deeply held value, questioning or challenging someone in authority can feel wrong, disrespectful, or spiritually unsafe. This can make people more vulnerable to misuse of power.

### **3. Belief that spiritual roles are beyond question**

Leaders may be viewed as divinely appointed or inherently trustworthy, which can make it harder to recognise abusive behaviour or to speak up when something feels unsafe.

# Considerations for non-UK / non-Western perspectives (continued)

## **4. Dependence on faith communities for everyday needs**

In some settings, access to food, housing, education, relationships, safety, or finance is connected to being part of a faith community. In these situations, spiritual abuse may involve controlling or threatening access to these essentials—even without any obvious force.

Because of these factors, spiritual abuse in some cultures may rely more heavily on controlling access to belonging, legitimacy, spiritual identity, or survival itself. This can make the abuse harder to identify, name, report, or leave—especially when stepping away from a faith community also means losing family, identity, or safety.

**Indicators of spiritual abuse developed in Western contexts shouldn't be assumed to apply everywhere in the same way. In many cultures, not showing resistance does not mean a person agrees with what is happening -especially if questioning authority is frowned upon or unsafe.**

**Safeguarding practice therefore needs to look not only at individual behaviour, but also at cultural norms, community structures, and wider forms of pressure or coercion.**



## Core Safeguarding Roles and Tasks:

Safeguarding in religious and faith communities means doing practical tasks.

We've broken these down into three categories: Policies, accountability and people-centred practices. But those in different roles will be responsible for (and hold enough power) to outwork certain tasks. We've listed some here – but the specifics may look different within your own organisation.

The different role levels likely include:

1. **Everyone:** Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility
2. **Direct work** – with children and adults at risk of harm
3. **Safeguarding responsibility for practice** – e.g., Safeguarding Leads and Trustee for Safeguarding: *Those who take action on formal safeguarding tasks.*
4. **Safeguarding responsibility for governance** – e.g., leaders, elders, trustee board: *Those who set the direction of the faith community.*
5. **Statutory agencies:** Police, Social work, etc.

These roles are also reflected in the [National learning frameworks](#) for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

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# Core Safeguarding Roles and Tasks (continued):

## Policy Related Tasks:

### 1. Everyone:

- Give input
- Provide honest feedback

### 3. Safeguarding responsibility – practice:

- Ensure policies fit practice
- Outwork the tasks described in policies
- Carry out safeguarding risk assessments
- Report concerns to the right people as needed

### 4. Safeguarding responsibility – governance:

- Write policies
- Frequent reviews and updates of policies
- Communicate content of policies to everyone

## Accountability related tasks:

### 1. Everyone:

- Notice patterns
- Report concerns early
- Question gatekeeping that seems to shut down healthy scrutiny (when it's safe to do so)

### 2. Direct work:

- Maintain strong boundaries
- Record concerns carefully
- Escalate issues when something doesn't seem right

*(Continued on next page)*

# Core Safeguarding Roles and Tasks (continued):

## Accountability Related Tasks (continued):

### 3.Safeguarding responsibility – practice:

- Protect the people who raise concerns
- Making sure everyone in the community is appropriately overseen
- Ensure reporting routes actually work.

### 4.Safeguarding responsibility – governance:

- Bring in external consultants when needed
- Communicates safeguarding decisions clearly
- Pay attention to patterns, including themes in why people leave.

### 5.Statutory agencies:

- Step in when thresholds are met
- Share information as needed to keep people safe

## People-Centred Practice Related Tasks:

### 1.Everyone:

- Prioritise safety over loyalty
- Encourage healthy challenge

### 2.Direct work:

- Support consent-based spiritual support
- Create safe disclosure spaces.

### 3.Safeguarding responsibility – practice:

- Respond with trauma awareness
- Make sure there are multiple, useable reporting routes

### 4.Safeguarding responsibility – governance:

- Resource safeguarding efforts - time and money
- Review power dynamics and make changes as needed
- Prioritise potential harm over assumed intention



## Emotional / Psychological Abuse:

Emotional and psychological abuse are closely connected forms of harm that often overlap in practice. Although many organisations use the terms interchangeably, they describe two distinct impacts:

- **Psychological abuse** refers to behaviours that **affect cognitive functioning**— for example, undermining someone’s sense of reality, inducing confusion, fear, or self-doubt.
- **Emotional abuse** refers to behaviour that **damages a person’s emotional development or wellbeing**, such as persistent criticism, humiliation, or rejection.

Because these behaviours commonly occur together, most UK safeguarding guidance use the combined term **emotional/psychological abuse**.

### UK-Wide Terminology and Definitions:

#### England, Wales & Northern Ireland

These nations use the term Emotional/psychological abuse and share the same definition. In children’s safeguarding, emotional abuse is defined as the persistent maltreatment that causes severe, long-term effects on emotional development. Examples include humiliation, intimidation, silencing, and preventing normal social interaction.

‘Emotional or psychological abuse’ is also captured in adult safeguarding legislation (e.g., Domestic Abuse Act 2021) as behaviour causing emotional or psychological harm, including coercive control, intimidation, threats, and manipulation.

# Emotional / psychological abuse (continued)

## Scotland:

Scotland uses the term Emotional/psychological harm, reflecting a slightly different framing.

## Important Cross-UK Principle

Across all UK jurisdictions, safeguarding guidance recognises that:

- **Some level of emotional/psychological abuse is present in all other forms of abuse**, even when it is not the primary concern.
- It can also occur **on its own**, without physical, sexual, or financial abuse being present.

We intentionally use the combined term emotional/psychological abuse because:

1. **It aligns with statutory language** used across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and much of Scotland's terminology, and:
2. **It reflects the full scope of harm**, recognising both cognitive (psychological) and emotional impacts.



## Spiritual Abuse and Harmful Practices

Harmful traditional practices (HTPs) are commonly understood as customs, rituals or social behaviours that persist across generations and are justified by cultural, religious or social norms, yet cause physical, psychological or social harm. **Spiritual abuse fits alongside this because both operate at the level of identity, belonging and meaning – not just behaviours.**

Unlike some other forms of abuse, harmful practices are rarely isolated incidents or involving individual relationships. They are about **who a person is expected to be** and the conditions under which they are allowed to belong. Harm occurs when conformity to these identities is enforced through pressure, fear or punishment.

In both spiritual abuse and other harmful practices, control is exercised by appealing to duty, obedience, purity and loyalty. Individuals may be pressured to submit for the sake of faithfulness, righteousness, family honour or community standing, with shame, exclusion or fear of spiritual consequences used to maintain compliance.

This helps explain why harmful practices may not initially look like abuse to those within those faith settings. They may appear as sincerely held belief, moral concern, spiritual authority or care for the integrity of the community. **Spiritual abuse sits alongside other harmful practices because it uses shared belief systems to enforce control and silence. Faith is not incidental – it is often the mechanism through which harm is justified.**

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# Spiritual Abuse and Harmful Practices (continued)

Another defining feature is that enforcement rarely rests with one person alone. Pressure may be reinforced by family members, faith leaders or respected community figures, and maintained through expectations of silence for the sake of the family or the community's reputation. In these contexts, resisting abuse may mean loss of identity and belonging, and profound social isolation – not simply leaving a relationship.

## CPS Guidance – England and Wales specific

In February 2026, the Crown Prosecution Service updated its guidance on so-called honour-based abuse and harmful practices to **explicitly include spiritual abuse and immigration-related abuse for the first time**. The guidance recognises that abuse linked to beliefs about sin, possession, curses, moral wrongdoing or divine punishment can form part of wider patterns of coercive control, and must not be treated as cultural, religious or private family matters [cps.gov.uk](https://www.cps.gov.uk).

This is a significant shift. The CPS is deliberately moving away from culture as an explanation and towards patterns of harm, signalling that:

- Belief-based control can be as serious and harmful as physical violence
- Community and family enforcement are critical risk factors
- Abuse justified through faith is not exempt from safeguarding or criminal scrutiny

For faith communities, this guidance reinforces a clear message: **sincere belief does not neutralise harm**, and faith-framed abuse must be named and responded to as a safeguarding issue.

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# Spiritual Abuse and Harmful Practices (continued)

## Culture, bias and consistency

Harmful practices are not evenly recognised. They are more readily named in racialised or migrant communities, while similar dynamics in white Christian settings are frequently overlooked or reframed as strong faith, traditional values, biblical authority or private family matters.

Using the term **harmful practices** helps bring consistency, shifting the focus away from ethnicity or culture and onto how power, belief and belonging are used to coerce, control and harm – wherever this occurs.

## Important differences to hold in mind

There are, however, distinctions worth flagging. **Spiritual abuse often relies on intangible threats** – fear of divine punishment, spiritual failure or loss of identity as a believer. Other harmful practices more commonly involve visible or immediate consequences, such as social exclusion, physical harm (for example through practices like female genital mutilation), abandonment or loss of practical support. It's important not to understate the seriousness of this harm.

Spiritual abuse is harder to recognise - other harmful practices are increasingly named within safeguarding frameworks, making them easier to identify.



## Trauma-Aware Practice

As understanding of the effects and prevalence of trauma has grown over recent years, national and organisational policies have sought to respond. You may have heard the term 'Trauma Informed Practice' in the context of health and social care or justice systems, for example.

Different organisations and individuals have varying levels of responsibility and expertise when it comes to trauma. For example, this course encourages you to become more **trauma aware**. When we are trauma aware, we recognise that trauma affects many people and in a variety of different ways. Trauma awareness helps remove the stigma surrounding trauma and enables us to have a compassionate and understanding approach to anyone we encounter.

Other levels of trauma support require professional training. For example, some organisations are **trauma specific** or **trauma specialist**. This refers to services and therapies that have a focus on trauma and exist to help an individual process their own trauma and work towards recovery.

Trauma informed practice is not designed to specifically treat trauma-related difficulties, but to remove the barriers that those who have experienced trauma can encounter when accessing health, support and other services. It takes the understanding of trauma (and a practitioner's training) to a higher level than trauma awareness. Professionals are trained to identify trauma triggers and respond appropriately, and systems and processes are examined and adapted to be more accessible for those who have experienced trauma.

All four nations of the UK are looking to build Trauma informed practice into people-centred services.

# Trauma-Aware Practice (continued)

## Wales:

Wales has the [Trauma-Informed Wales Framework](#), which 'aims to set out an all-society Framework to support a coherent, consistent approach to developing and implementing trauma-informed practice across Wales, providing the best possible support to those who need it most.'

## Scotland:

In 2023, Scotland published its [Roadmap for Creating Trauma Informed and Responsive Change](#), building on previous national guidance around Trauma Informed Practice. It is part of a larger suite of resources available through the [National Trauma Transformation Programme](#), for example this informative paper: [nationaltraumatrainingframework-execsummary-web.pdf \(scot.nhs.uk\)](#).

## Northern Ireland:

In 2018, the Safeguarding Board of Northern Ireland (SBNI) commissioned a rapid evidence assessment (REA) to 'facilitate and support the adoption of Trauma informed practice across health, social care, justice, education, and community and voluntary systems in NI'. In 2024, SBNI published an evidence report of the impact of the [Implementation of Trauma Informed Approaches in Northern Ireland](#).

## England:

In 2022, gov.uk published a working definition of [Trauma Informed Practice](#) and Trauma Informed Practice is part of policy and training in many NHS Trusts and other public services.



## Vulnerability - Legal vs General Meaning

Within safeguarding, the word 'vulnerable' can mean two distinct things – it can refer to a legal concept, or to the general relational meaning.

### **Vulnerability as a legal concept**

Across the UK, 'vulnerability' in law is not a universal emotional or relational state. It is a specific legal category used to determine when extra protections, duties, or interventions apply. For example:

In England and Wales, Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act (2006) views a vulnerable adult as one accessing regulated activities and is therefore decided on the context they're in.

More recently, all law has used the phrase 'at risk' to avoid labelling people, and to emphasis protection and capability.

### **General relational meaning of vulnerability**

Outside the legal world, vulnerability simply means being open to influence and connection. It's not a flaw or a weakness; it's a universal part of being human. Vulnerability only becomes risky when someone with more power chooses to misuse that power, not because the openness itself is dangerous.

Seeing vulnerability as a shared human experience helps us practise safeguarding with empathy and dignity. It reminds us that our role is not to define people by their risks, but to use our power responsibly to protect them.

It also keeps responsibility where it belongs: on the actions of the perpetrators, not on the circumstances of the victim-survivors.

# Appendix 1: Signposting to other useful organisations and resources

Please note: These links are accurate at the time of course preparation. Thirtyone:eight don't recommend organisations, but you may find these links useful when looking for support and guidance.

## Books:

- A Church Called Tov by Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer
- A Heavy Yoke by Selina Stone
- Navigating the Maze of Spiritual Abuse by Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys
- Understanding Spiritual Abuse by Karen Roudkovski

## Websites and Podcasts:

[Charity for action on Spiritual Abuse](#) - A UK charity that aims to ensure anyone who experiences harm in a spiritual setting can access high-quality support.

[Sikh Women's Aid](#) - a UK charity that supports women facing gendered harm within Sikh and South Asian communities, including cases involving faith and spiritual abuse. The charity provides bilingual services in Panjabi and English.

[Tears of Eden](#) - Supports the community of survivors who have experienced abuse in the evangelical community.

[The Bodies behind the Bus \[podcast\]](#) - amplifies the voices of religious abuse survivors. The organisation believes that by listening to and honouring each other's stories, meaningful systemic change can be catalysed.

[Survivors Voices](#) - a survivor-led organisation that uses lived experience to improve how society responds to abuse and trauma.

[Safe Spaces for England and Wales](#) - Free, independent, confidential support for adults affected by church-related abuse.

# Appendix 2: Links commonly shared in the webinar

Please note: These links are accurate at the time of course preparation. Thirtyone:eight don't recommend organisations, but you may find these links useful when looking for support and guidance.

These are shared in the order they're likely to be mentioned during our webinar. Some of these are also included in our signposting section.

## Session 1:

Source of introduction quote: [UNDERSTANDING-SPIRITUAL-ABUSE-FINAL-AGREED-03.03.2025-V1P.pdf](#)

## Module 1 – The Harm

Source of quote slide 12: [Gender Power and Abuse by Sikh Womens Aid 2024 compressed.pdf](#)

Reference for slide 13: [Spiritual Abuse | Thirtyone:eight](#) and Understanding Spiritual Abuse by Karen Roudkovski (book)

Bodies behind the bus podcast: [Bodies Behind The Buss | Sacred Wilderness](#)

Source of quote slide 23: [I Left Yesterday – Tears of Eden: Supporting survivors of Spiritual Abuse and Religious Trauma](#)

Source of responding well guidance: [Respond | Thirtyone:eight](#)

## Module 2 – The Distortion

References for spirituality as protective factors: [Safeguarding in faith communities | NSPCC Learning](#)

Religion, belief and social work by Sheila Furness and Philip Gilligan

Pitt, R. N., Sharma, L. S., Belback, D. J., & Smith, S. R. (2025). The Social Fabric of Faith: The Interconnectedness of Community Influence and Authentic Religious Expression. *Review of Religious Research*, 67(2), 231-256.

Cook CCH. Suicide and religion. *British Journal of Psychiatry*. 2014;204(4):254-255. doi:10.1192/bjp.bp.113.136069

Source of quote slide 36: [UNDERSTANDING-SPIRITUAL-ABUSE-FINAL-AGREED-03.03.2025-V1P.pdf](#)

# Signposting: Resources Commonly Shared in the Webinar (continued)

## Session 2:

### Module 3 - The Ambiguity

Source of quote slide 51: Tears of Eden, [Too Little Too Late \(Poem\) – Tears of Eden: Supporting survivors of Spiritual Abuse and Religious Trauma](#)

### Module 4 – The Practice

Source of quote slide 78: [UNDERSTANDING-SPIRITUAL-ABUSE-FINAL-AGREED-03.03.2025-V1P.pdf](#)