

Religious Views & Domestic Violence

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By conservative estimates, a million Christian women in America are abused by their husbands (Ingram, 1985), but this is grossly underestimated (Pagelow & Johnson, 1988). A survey done in 1993 by the North American Council for Muslim Women found that domestic violence occurred in 10% of the Muslim population (Alkhateeb, 1999). However, this study assessed only physical abuse: if verbal and psychological abuse were added, this percentage would be greatly increased. One study in Denver found that 4% of the victims of domestic violence served in that community were Jewish (Walker, 1997). Clearly, the religious community is not immune from the existence of domestic violence—and, in some cases, may actually encourage it through teachings and traditional beliefs about the roles of men and women.

While the society struggles to accept the reality of violence in the family, many within the religious community, as well as members of the “clergy... refuse to believe that abuse exists within their congregations” (Bussert, 1986, p. 2). This denial further compounds the sense of isolation and shame that many victims of domestic violence endure. Pagelow & Johnson (1988) write: “Silence within the religious community has served to keep the lid on the simmering pain that not only immobilizes victims but encourages the behavior of the perpetrators” (p. 9).

Davidson (1978) claims that male-oriented church doctrines and teachings “about a woman’s place, duty and nature have added

to the problem (p. 207). This is true not only of the Judaic and Christian traditions, but of virtually all religions. According to Gardner (1977): “All religions preach subordination of women not just to God, but to men, as an article of faith.... Moreover, Judeo/Christian theological writings are explicitly misogynous.”

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In one study on wife abuse, several wives were abused by their husbands, who were ministers (Pagelow, 1984). Another study of 350 battered women found that 28% had sought counsel from the clergy (Pagelow, 1981b, pp. 277-300). In this study, the top responses the women received were a) a reminder of their wifely duty and instructions to forgive and forget, b) referral to another resource to limit church involvement, and c) impractical advice based on religious doctrine that was not only insensitive to their needs, but at times, dangerous. Some were reminded of their vows “for better or worse,” and were exhorted pray more. “One, scolded by her minister for ‘betraying’ her husband by revealing what had occurred in the privacy of their home, was beaten harder by her husband when the pastors told him of her visit” (Pagelow & Johnson, 1988, p. 5).

Victims are often told by their pastors: “stay and work things out. God expects that” or “Christians don’t get divorced unless adultery is involved,” or “Hope for the best. God will change him. Pray,” and “He is hopeless and cruel but you are married to him,” and the useless advice: “try harder not to provoke him” (Horton, Wilkins & Wright, 1988). Although ministers are often the “counselors of choice” for many victims, many are uneducated about issues of abuse and appropriate methods to respond to it (Horton, 1988); some pastors admit their lack of training on the issue of domestic violence (Pagelow & Johnson, 1988), but these are among the very few. One study of the clergy found that only 8% felt they were equipped to deal with family violence, and 37% rated themselves as poorly equipped (Nason-Clark, 1997).

71% of pastors surveyed would not advise a battered woman to leave because of the abuse

Studying the pastoral response to domestic violence, the Alsdurfs (1988) surveyed Protestant ministers, across thirty-four denominations. Their findings were alarming: one-third of the pastors disbelieved the woman’s account of which party was responsible for the violence. Twenty-eight percent attributed the abuse to the woman’s unwillingness to submit to her husband, and thirty-five percent felt the wives had overestimated their husband’s responsibility for violence in a marriage. Twenty-six percent thought a wife should submit to her husband, believing that God would either honor her commitment by ending the violence or by supplying the strength to endure the abuse.

A pattern of responses was identified that connected the pastors’ discounting of the women’s reports of the violence and the wife’s spiritual responsibility to endure the abuse as a means of submission. These pastors also opposed legal protections and medical aid for victims. Overall, the pastors in the Alsdurfs’ study were more willing to accept violence in a marriage even though it is “not God’s perfect will” than they were to consider a separation that might end in divorce. Seventy-one percent would not advise a battered woman to leave because of the abuse, and 92 % would counsel her to never divorce the abuser. Moreover, one-third believed the wife should remain until the abuse became severe, and 45% were concerned that the abused wife might use the violence as a “justification” to end the marriage.

Thankfully, this is not a universal pastoral response—although it is common enough to be extremely troublesome. Horton writes: “clergy must recognize that battering, not divorce, destroys abusive marriages” (1988).

Domestic Violence in the Muslim community

While the bulk of the research that has been done on the pastoral response to domestic violence has been done on the Christian community, other religions are not immune to abuse. Eight to ten million Muslims live in America, and over half are African American: the remainder are immigrants; most recently from Europe, and the bulk from Middle Eastern and Southwest Asian regions of the globe.

There are similarities between these disparate groups: “Unfortunately, the most negative behavioral common denominator between the African American and the

immigrant Muslim communities is the socialization process which presents ... the father as having the last word on everything” (Alkahateeb, 1999, p. 51). This authoritarian family structure, Alkahateeb continues, may actually

...predispose many Muslims in America to be abused in some way and possibly to become the victims of violence...Muslim American immigrants fleeing oppressive governments may not yet have realized that their own family dynamics are a microcosm of the tyranny and despotism they so actively oppose, and mistakenly think a tyrannical family structure is an Islamic one (1999, p. 51).

This is not to imply that family violence is any more endemic in Muslim homes than it is among any other religion, however.

In the most abusive homes, the father believes ... that whatever he wants the family to do is the same as what Allah wants them to do. He, in effect, makes himself into something of a god....Some Muslims believe it is the man’s Allah-given right to abuse his wife and children in any way he sees fit. Other [imams] recognize the behavior as Islamically unacceptable, but have no training in the area of domestic violence....many imams, though, blame the situation on the wife (Alkahateeb, 1999, p. 51 & 53).

But Muslim teaching specifically prohibits abuse of wives by their husbands, by the very words of the Prophet Mohammed, who in his last sermon commanded men to “Be kind to women – you have rights over

your wives, and they have rights over you” and “treat your women well, and be kind to them, for they are your partners and committed helpers” (quoted in Alkahateeb, 1999 p. 54). But just as many so-called Christian abusers twist and distort the scriptures of the Bible in an attempt to justify their violence, some Muslim men misinterpret two thorny verses in the Qu’ran to try to rationalize their very irrational behavior, although the Prophet vehemently opposed men hitting their wives (Alkahateeb, 1999 p. 54).

37% of the clergy rated themselves as poorly equipped to deal with family violence

Domestic Violence and the Jewish victim

In the Jewish community, a Yiddish expression is used when a shameful secret is exposed: “it’s a *shonde*”—this is the response when the subject of Jewish battered women is discussed (Walker, 1997). It is considered an unspeakable shame that should never be uttered. This is because the family value of *Shalom Bayit*, or peace in the home, is a major ideal of Judaism. The Hebrew word “Shalom” is translated peace, completeness, fulfillment, and wholeness. *Shalom Bayit* conveys domestic tranquility in the home as sanctuary, providing for the welfare of all its inhabitants (Fortune, 1991). Rabbis consider *Shalom Bayit* one of the very most important ideals, viewing it as prerequisite to the attainment of peace on earth: “Peace will remain a distant vision until we do the work of peace ourselves. If peace is to be brought into the world, we must first bring it to our families and communities” (Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1978, p. 67).

Unfortunately, many Jewish families heap upon the woman the responsibility for the Shalom Bayit, although it is a joint responsibility of both the husband and the wife (CPSDV, 1994). The religious and cultural values in the Jewish community that are meant to promote healthy families may actually ensnare victims of domestic violence:

“When abuse occurs and the family breakdown occurs, the Jewish wife has great difficulty reaching out. She is trapped by the very myths that she helped create. Because her role is one of bonding and divorce is unacceptable, the religiously observant Jewish woman cries in silence so no one will know of her shame and disgrace” (Harris, 1988, p.133).

The unfortunate community reaction to domestic violence is often isolation of the woman from her support systems: friends, family and religious community (Harris, 1988). Jewish victims may be even less likely to flee to a shelter that cannot accommodate their special dietary laws or whose policies disallow keeping of the sabbath and observances of high holy days. Harris writes that only one shelter in the nation offers kosher facilities, and that many victims choose to remain in abusive homes rather than leave since community resources were not appropriate (1988, p. 135).

A religious domestic violence victim faces an ethical and spiritual dilemma: fleeing to safety results in guilt for breaking her commitment, and remaining in the abusive relationship promises more violence (Eilts, 1988). This unhappy conundrum is sometimes exacerbated by religious leaders, as this example clearly illustrates: The director of a battered women’s shelter was

called by the pastor of one of the women who had fled her husband’s abuse. The pastor demanded that if she was not home by the next morning “she would be excommunicated from the church because it was her duty to keep the family together and submit to her husband in all things” (Bussert, 1986, pp.60-61). These beliefs are sometimes internalized by religious victims. “It is common for the victim to persist in the hope that her patience will last longer than his abuse. Often this attitude is reinforced by church teachings on long suffering....” (Eilts, 1988).

clergy must recognize that battering, not divorce, destroys abusive marriages

On the other hand, religion itself can be a powerful tool to heal from the abuse, and is a method of coping with it or changing it (Adams, 1999). A 1986 study of 187 survivors who had been abuse-free for a year or more found that 45 reported that their religious beliefs gave them courage, hope and strength. Seventeen said their beliefs gave them support and increased their self-esteem. Six claimed their religion had aided them in getting free from the abuse. Many of these survivors felt that the power of forgiveness and understanding were real strengths. Perhaps most importantly, eleven of these survivors reported that their religious convictions had prevented them from taking their own lives or killing someone else (Horton, Wilkins & Wright, 1988). As religion is “the most important thing” to 31% of the population, and is “very important” to another 55% (Marx and Spray, 1969), it is a crucial part of the picture to consider in exploring the experience of domestic violence survivors.

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