



Longing for Humanity: The Process of Leaving a Context of Perceived Spiritual Abuse

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Abstract

This study provides an account of leaving a context of perceived spiritual abuse within some Pentecostal fellowships in Norway. We discuss how our 16 informants discovered the need for change and sought support to navigate challenging departure processes characterized by emotional strain. Three empirical themes emerged: (1) God’s will, as conveyed by leaders, evoked shame, (2) there were various sources of help in leaving a context of perceived spiritual abuse, and (3) the acknowledgment of vulnerability provided space for new images of God. Throughout the leaving process, many informants underwent a profound shift in their perceptions of God, marked by a heightened awareness of their vulnerability. This transformation encompassed a deep-seated desire to embrace their humanity and to accept the relevance of their thoughts and feelings. Acknowledging their own vulnerability allowed them to have more humanized images of God. Our analysis employs Kenneth Pargament’s notion of orienting systems and his theory of religious coping to elucidate how their images of God changed. The process led to a perceived sense of freedom from spiritual abuse. We understand the informants’ experiences of leaving the church and affiliated organizations as instances of deconversion through what empirically emerged as “deprogramming” processes in our material. Deprogramming involves disentangling individuals from what they perceived was conveyed and thus “programmed” by spiritual leaders. Deprogramming processes emerged as a new exploration of images of God, shame, power, and human vulnerability.

Keywords Spiritual abuse · Power · Deconversion process · Images of God · Inflicted shame · Religious coping

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Introduction

In the Norwegian context, instances of spiritual abuse within some Pentecostal settings have gained media attention, thereby fostering research interest. This study contributes to a better understanding of what characterizes the process of leaving situations of perceived spiritual abuse in some Pentecostal fellowships in Norway. The data for this article derive from interviews with seven men and nine women who reported experiences of spiritual abuse during their time in various Pentecostal fellowships. It is important to note, however, that spiritual abuse in a religious context may not be exclusive to Pentecostalism.

We regard spiritual abuse as manipulative and exploitative as it is associated with controlling behavior and the expectation of obedience from those subjected to it (Oakley et al., 2018). Oakley and Kinmond (2013) have argued that spiritual abuse can be understood as a specific type of abuse that differs from other types (Ward, 2011). As Oakley et al. (2018) put it:

Spiritual abuse is coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. The target experiences spiritual abuse as a deeply emotional personal attack. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or the pulpit to control behavior, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a “divine” position, isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context. (p. 146)

As presented in our study, the process of leaving a religious community is related to the deconversion and religious disaffiliation processes. Disaffiliation may be understood as a part of deconversion (Barbour, 1994), which can be described as leaving one way of believing for the benefit of another way of believing and viewing the world (Lee & Gubi, 2019). Streib and Keller (2004) describe deconversion as a movement away from religious fellowships, and the process may refer to “apostasy, defection, disaffiliation, falling from the faith, exit etc.” (p. 181). It can be seen as a gradual process rather than a sudden change in beliefs at a particular point in time (Streib & Keller, 2004).¹

Disaffiliation can be understood as “a lack of involvement in an organized religious group” (Gooren, 2007, p. 350), for example, when an individual still self-identifies as a believer but is no longer an active church member (Gooren, 2007). For some of our informants, the process of leaving a religious group, or deconversion, involved losing their religious faith. However, all of them went through a disaffiliation process in which their identification with a religious group changed, and although many canceled their memberships, they did not lose their faith.

The Pentecostal movement in Norway has approximately 340 independent churches (Eriksen, 2023). They are “connected in a denominational-like network sharing history, faith statements, a national leadership council, and various strategies and ministry initiatives” (Eriksen, 2023, p. 82). Pentecostalism is a movement focused on the experienced acts of the Holy Spirit and its gifts (Anderson, 2004), emphasizing healing and, at least traditionally, eschatology. Pentecostalism also has a focus on missional spirituality² and entrepreneurship (Tangen & Alegre, 2023). Although it is problematic to generalize about

¹ Streib and Keller (2004) use the term *crisis conversions*.

² Tangen and Alegre (2023) suggest that Pentecostalism should be studied as a certain spirituality that is understood as a way of “relating to the sacred” (p. 5).

Pentecostalism (Miller & Yamamori, 2007), Tangen and Alegre (2023) consider contemporary Pentecostalism to be influential among Christian fellowships in Norway, especially among young people concerned about reaching new people through the gospel combined with contemporary cultural expressions, including contemporary language and musical styles. Pentecostalism has exhibited a greater inclination toward ecumenism in recent decades, consequently gaining more influence among adherents from other denominations (Eriksen, 2023). Many Pentecostal churches have eliminated the requirement for adult baptism as a prerequisite for membership, effectively “opening the church to Christians from other denominations” (Tangen & Alegre: 2023, p. 16). Moreover, by allowing for the presence of multiple Pentecostal churches within each city, contemporary Norwegian Pentecostalism has ushered in a “new generation of entrepreneurial church planters” (Tangen & Alegre, 2023, p. 17).

Field of research

Deconversion

Although the concept of deconversion is relatively new (Streib & Keller, 2004), a significant amount of research on this notion has been conducted throughout the world, mostly in the United States (Lee & Gubi, 2019). Even though each deconversion process is unique, there are common core elements that characterize them all (Streib & Keller, 2004).

Lee and Gubi (2019) interpret deconversion as a gradual “process of moving away from a particular religion to a different religion or no religion” (p. 171) and note that it typically follows a period of cognitive dissonance because of a single catalyst or a series of catalysts. In their study, they sought to understand the psychological and social consequences of deconversion both during and after the process of deconverting. Specifically, the informants in their study struggled with difficult emotions such as regret, embarrassment, shame, anger, and feeling like a fraud (Lee & Gubi, 2019). The experience of leaving Jehovah’s Witnesses in the United Kingdom was similarly characterized by emotional trauma and existential insecurity (Aboud, 2020).

Several studies have highlighted the term *freedom* (Fazzino, 2014; Lee & Gubi, 2019; Marriott, 2015) in reference to the perceived sense of liberation achieved through deconversion. Lee and Gubi’s (2019) research also suggests that “some people are happier and function better without spiritual beliefs and need to let go of their religion to heal themselves” (p. 178). Gillette (2016) found that although leaving so-called fundamentalist Protestant organizations in the United States was often experienced as traumatizing, study participants also described it as a process through which they obtained the freedom to explore their identity after leaving. In the Nordic context, Björkmark et al. (2022) found that religious disaffiliation may have implications for well-being and health and “also includes many positive aspects, such as experiences of joy, freedom, relief, gratitude and empowerment” (p. 4721).

From a Nordic perspective, still more research on deconversion is needed. According to Mantsinen (2020), research on leaving Pentecostalism is scarce. He studied ex-Pentecostals who grew up in families in the Finnish Pentecostal movement and concludes that the movement

has not been successful in remaining relevant for a large number of children who grew up in Pentecostal congregations. . . . While some reject religion altogether, oth-

ers find the problem to lie with Pentecostal congregational culture, not Christianity or religion in general. . . . Reasons for leaving Pentecostalism vary, but a crucial issue for children of Pentecostal families is the generational difference in culture and habits, . . . radical separation from the past and “the world,” and the intensity of religion of first-generation Pentecostals. (p. 183)

In Sweden, Dahlgren (2008) found that two of the main reasons for leaving a religious congregation were unfulfilled expectations and excessive demands. Gilsvik (2023) interviewed 16 Norwegian ex-charismatics recruited from a Facebook group related to the podcast *Reisen*.³ Gilsvik’s study focuses on religious and non-religious identities of individuals who left a charismatic Norwegian context, which are characterized by ambivalence. Gilsvik suggests that there is a need for more nuance when it comes to experiences of disaffiliation (p. 45).

Spiritual abuse in Christian communities

The term *spiritual abuse* is relatively recent; Oakley and Kinmond (2013) became aware of it while reading non-scientific literature.⁴ The author of multiple studies on the subject, Oakley is recognized as a key contributor to the contemporary understanding and delineation of spiritual abuse (Oakley, 2009, 2014; Oakley & Kinmond, 2007; Oakley et al., 2018). Spiritual abuse has also been the subject of research across various denominations worldwide (Orlowski, 2010).

In a study of French Catholic fellowships, Demasure (2022) found that leaders seduced informants through their charisma, and the informants’ identities came under pressure. She summarized the experience of spiritual abuse as a loss of self. Ward (2011) found that informants experienced “acceptance via performance (approval of the leadership/group through obedience)” and “spiritual neglect” (p. 903). Furthermore, they “portrayed a confused distress as they tried to make sense of what was happening to them” (p. 913). In a study on religious trauma among queer people in evangelical churches in Australia, study participants commonly experienced mischaracterizations and being viewed as a threat, which led them to experience erasure and relational distancing (Hollier et al., 2022).

Research into power, its use, and its misuse in a Christian context reveals a risk of misappropriation of power when leaders claim that they are representing the voice of God (Kleiven, 2018). According to Kearsley (2008), spiritual power has “opened the door to forms of abuse” (p. 11). Spiritual abuse is a power issue, and power interactions between leaders and members are characterized by asymmetrical power relations, with leaders being in a “power-over” position that entails a primary responsibility for how power is executed (Kleiven, 2015).

What is considered a reasonable and necessary use of power and what is misuse needs to be analyzed and clearly delineated, and not just by those in a power-over

³ The podcast *Reisen* is about Christian faith and how it has changed for participants. The Facebook group related to the podcast “is specifically concerned with exploring the grey areas between non/religious categories” (Gilsvik, 2023, p. 37).

⁴ In the research literature, some scholars use the term *religious abuse* to describe what we call *spiritual abuse*, and it seems that these terms are used interchangeably (Ellis et al., 2022). We use the term *spiritual abuse* because we find that Oakley provides an operational definition capturing the phenomenon. The term has also been used to refer to abuse in religious contexts (Swindle, 2017). We are aware of debates concerning the difference between the terms *spiritual* and *religious*, but we are not concerned with these here.

position (Askeland & Kleiven, 2016). There is a need to understand the power interactions that exist in a context of spiritual abuse and thus unmask them to enable intervention in cases of abuse (Kleiven, 2006). Understanding this power dynamic makes it possible to hold accountable those who misuse their positions of power to invade and violate the dignity of other human beings (Kleiven, 2023).

Although research on spiritual abuse in Christian faith settings has been conducted worldwide (Orlowski, 2010), we did not find research focusing on church members' own perceptions of the process of leaving contexts of perceived spiritual abuse. Thus, the research findings presented here indicate how spiritual abuse can be experienced as a destructive situation worth leaving. As previously highlighted and shown in the research overview, there is no valid basis to assume that spiritual abuse is limited exclusively to the Pentecostal context. However, this study concerns Pentecostalism in Norway and addresses the following question: *What characterizes the processes of leaving a situation of perceived spiritual abuse in a Pentecostal context?*

Theoretical approach

Our empirical findings suggest that the process of leaving a situation of perceived spiritual abuse can be understood in light of Pargament's (1997) notions of coping activities and orienting systems. Regarding coping activities, Pargament writes that they "consist of concrete thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and interactions that take place in specific difficult situations" (p. 104). An "orienting system," meanwhile, refers to "a general way of viewing and dealing with the world. It consists of habits, values, relationships, generalized beliefs, and personality" (p. 99–100).

Orienting systems pertain to how individuals address challenges, and they can either facilitate or impede a constructive coping process. The effectiveness of coping depends on the attributes of a person's orienting system, which provides the coping conditions in a given situation (Pargament, 1997).

Our analysis shows that our central findings related to deconversion, namely, how informants' images of God changed, can be interpreted in light of Pargament's (1997) orienting systems. Informants' changing images of God during the deconversion process, which emerged in the material, was part of an orienting system that translated into concrete coping activities, in accordance with Pargament's theory.

Images of God are representations of God that relate to how people perceive God. Such images are often formed during childhood and modified throughout a lifetime in relation to other people through complex psychological processes involving "a multitude of cultural, social, familial, individual phenomena" (Rizzuto, 1979, p. 182). According to Frielingsdorf (2006), all humans have their own image of God, which can be nurturing and healing or destructive and unhealthy. Frielingsdorf (2001, 2006) proposes four subconscious images of God. Two of these relate to the conscious images of God in our study: "the accountant" (*Der Buchhaltergott*) and "the taskmaster" (*Der überfordernder Leistungsgott*) (Frielingsdorf, 2001, 2006). Frielingsdorf regards these images of God as destructive, qualifying them as demonic (*dämonische gottesbilder*).

Pargament's theory offers valuable perspectives for understanding the processes of the informants' longing for alternative images of God.

Methods

This study is based on and expands upon a prior study on spiritual abuse titled “Cultures Shaped by Elements of Ideological Totalism –Experiences of Misuse of Power in Some Pentecostal Christian Fellowships” (Vidgel et al., 2022). While the research question and the theoretical approach are novel, the material, drawn from the analysis of 16 interviews, and the choice of research methods are the same.⁵ Our access to informants within the Norwegian Pentecostal community allowed us to concentrate on a substantial and illustrative case study (Flyvbjerg, 2001). The informants were identified through a two-pronged recruitment strategy. They were recruited from the first author’s network through snowballing as well as from a Norwegian organization called Source of Help⁶ offering peer support for people who have left faith-based fellowships (Vidgel et al., 2022). The selection criteria for informants encompassed three key factors: (a) they had experienced something they understood as being related to the misuse of power in Pentecostal fellowships in Norway; (b) they were 15 years old or older when they experienced this misuse, which is the full age for engaging in religious life in Norway⁷; and (c) at the time of the interview, at least two years had passed since the experienced misuse, which gave the informants time to process what they had been subjected to before sharing their experiences. Nine informants were still members of a Christian fellowship at the time of the interviews, and seven informants no longer belonged to a Christian fellowship (Vidgel et al., 2022).

The first author’s position as a researcher was significantly influenced by his role as an insider in Christian activity, both through his firsthand involvement in Pentecostalism and his role as an ordained deacon in the Church of Norway. The first author had been a participant in Norwegian Pentecostalism as a young adult. He observed and had firsthand knowledge of Pentecostal leadership, which he found sometimes demanding and problematic. Years later, he joined public debates concerning Christian leadership. Through his public activity, he met people who shared their stories about what they perceived as a demanding Pentecostal leadership, which, along with his experiences with Norwegian Pentecostalism, awakened a research interest.

The involvement of a researcher with personal experiences in the area of study can present a unique set of viewpoints and bias. Going native in research has benefits and challenges (Repstad, 2007) and requires reflexivity on the part of the researcher to make qualitative research trustworthy (Sirris, 2022). However, in this case, personal experience enabled the research project. The first author had the necessary familiarity with the phenomenon being studied to understand what could be at stake for the informants, as well as access to and, not least, the trust of the informants and of Source of Help as a third party for recruitment. It is worth noting that while some of the informants had been previously acquainted with the first author, none belonged to the first author’s immediate social circle at the time of the interviews.

The first author’s primary objective was to provide novel insights into the perception of Pentecostal leadership as demanding. It is imperative to clarify that this study does not revolve around the experiences of the first author within Pentecostalism; rather, it exclusively delves into the experiences of the informants.

⁵ Because the material is the same, Table 1 presenting the informants in this article is the same as in a previous article (Vidgel et al., 2022).

⁶ Its name in Norwegian is Hjelpekilden.

⁷ This is the age of religious majority.

Table 1 Presentation of the Informants

Anonymized name	Age during the period of the reported misuse of power	Age when interviewed	Role in the fellowship	Place	Still part of the fellowship or left the fellowship?	Those who left: Did they belong to other Christian communities at the time of the interview?
Arne	15–21	34	Volunteer, mid-level leader	Congregation	Left the fellowship	No
Åshild	20–31	46	Volunteer, mid-level leader	Organization, Congregation	Left the fellowship	No
Ellen	15–40	42	Volunteer	Congregation, Organization	Still part of the fellowship	Yes
Erlend	19–30	40	Volunteer, mid-level leader	Organization, Congregation	Left the fellowship	Yes
Gry	21–23	48	Volunteer, mid-level leader	Organization, Congregation	Left the fellowship	Yes
Heidi	25–37	42	Volunteer, mid-level leader	Congregation	Left the fellowship	Yes
Henrik	25–27	29	Paid staff, leader	Organization	Still part of the fellowship	
Kamilla	15–26	29	Volunteer, mid-level leader	Congregation	Still part of the fellowship	
Kjell	17–30	45	Volunteer and paid staff, mid-level leader	Congregation	Left the fellowship	yes
Lisa	15–28	42	Volunteer, mid-level leader	Congregation, Organization	Left the fellowship	Yes
Mari	17–40	54	Volunteer	Congregation	Left the fellowship	No
Oddgeir	25–38	56	Volunteer	Congregation	Left the fellowship	No
Per	21–37	43	Volunteer, mid-level leader	Organization, congregation	Still part of the fellowship	
Pia	18–20	38	Volunteer	Congregation, Organization	Left the fellowship	No
Roar	15–20	37	Volunteer	Congregation	Left the fellowship	No
Trine	18–22	38	Volunteer, mid-level leader	Congregation, Organization	Left the fellowship	No

To mitigate the risk of confirmation bias, as expounded by Schumm (2021), the first author actively engaged in collaborative research and co-authored publications. This collaborative approach served to diminish potential biases that might have arisen from personal involvement in the field. The inclusion of co-writers, who maintained a certain level of detachment from the subject matter, enriched the interpretation of and discourse surrounding the collected data. The theoretical framework employed in this study also evolved through a collective effort, further ensuring a well-rounded and unbiased perspective.

Due to the extensive network and prior knowledge of the first author, the study was deliberately limited to Pentecostal fellowships in Norway. The decision to focus exclusively on Pentecostalism was made with the intent of providing concrete illustrations of perceived spiritual abuse within a spiritual context. It is worth noting that other Christian denominations could have been chosen for empirical investigation, but Pentecostalism was selected to delimit the scope of the study.

The first and second authors collaboratively established and employed a structured interview guide. Semistructured, anonymized interviews were conducted under the guidance of the first author, following the methodology outlined by Kvale et al. (2015). Subsequently, thematic analysis using an inductive bottom-up approach was employed to analyze the gathered data, enabling a close alignment with the empirical material, in line with Braun and Clarke's (2022) framework.

In conducting the interviews, our objective was to elicit highly detailed descriptions from the informants by encouraging them to respond comprehensively to facilitate the assessment of transferability to other contexts, as advocated by Seale (1999). The interview questions encompassed various topics, including whether the informants had had demanding or distressing experiences while participating in Christian activities and what the concrete repercussions of these experiences were for them. Additionally, we inquired about the characteristics of the congregations or contexts in which these experiences occurred, seeking to understand why they perceived these encounters as instances of misuse of spiritual power and soliciting their definitions of the term spiritual abuse. While the questions presented here represent the primary inquiries, they do not constitute an exhaustive list.

All authors independently identified themes and categories in the material they deemed the most relevant and eventually agreed on which to choose for further analysis. The process of choosing the emerging themes encompassed the following stages: (1) All authors read the interviews to become familiar with the material. (2) All authors conducted an initial analysis by write teams that are close to the text and setting up tentative categories related to the interview text. (3) The authors sorted the material using the tentative categories. (4) The authors then sorted the material according to the themes we agreed were most prominent and analyzed these. Themes were established through discussion until an agreement was reached. It was a back-and-forth process in which some tentative themes were left intact and others were integrated under existing themes.

Three main themes remained in the end as the most obvious for all three authors. Longing for humanity became the central theme of the entire analysis.

The project was ethically approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT).⁸

It is noteworthy that while most informants had disassociated themselves from the context of the abuse they had experienced, four (Per, Henrik, Kamilla, and Ellen) had not done

⁸ Formerly known as the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

so at the time of the interviews. However, even those who remained in their congregation appeared to be grappling with emotional distress similar to those who had left and had cultivated a critical perspective on the perceived imposition of these beliefs.

Results: Longing for humanity

In our material, the deconversion process consisted of three elements constituting movement to leave the church or organization: (1) the experience of shame evoked by the informants' perception of the will of God as communicated by church leadership, (2) resources that contributed to the process of leaving, and (3) the acknowledgment of vulnerability and the provision of space for new images of God.

The perception of God's will imposed by the leadership

The spiritual abuse that informants experienced relates to how some church leaders were perceived to convey, and thus impose, their interpretation of God's will on the informants. For some of the informants, this perceived imposition of leaders' view of God's will evoked feelings of shame.

Experiencing God as controlling The informants experienced leaders as presenting an image of God as controlling. Gry described an overdemanding God taking over her life when discussing how she, in frustration, had thought that "God is tiny.... He is such a poor thing." Gry referred to God as a controlling figure who was incapable of doing anything himself and who resembled a domineering boss. She explained that the God-willed responsibility that she perceived as being imposed on her seemed immense and unbearable. She pictured God sitting on her back, whipping her to do his bidding with no attention to what she needed or wanted.

In Roar's view, being controlled by the will of God was as follows:

The Holy Spirit and Jesus and this . . . becoming like they are [working full-time] to make sure you do not get to live the life you want. . . . They are there all the time to ensure that you, you will not be allowed to develop. You cannot choose yourself. You must be loyal to them [the Holy Spirit and Jesus].

Roar described God's will as working against the life he wanted and hindering his healthy development as a human. Similarly, Lisa detailed what she experienced as a destructive relationship with what she called the "fixing God." There was always something that God had to fix in her, and she experienced that God never approved of her. She described life with this controlling will of God as a "breaks-you-down-builds-you-up-relationship." She referred to a "psychopathic God" who had "stolen [her] life."

In general, the informants perceived the will of God, as it was communicated to them, as controlling and destructive and felt that it was forced upon them. Many of the informants seemed to think that the God that was described to them disapproved of their choices. Thus, they could not live their own lives but only a life loyal to God's will, as conveyed by the leaders. Thus, to stay in God's good graces, they felt that they had to give up their own will entirely. This perception of God's will created a feeling of captivity, which was expressed by metaphors as like being in "prison" and being "slaves."

Experiencing God as confusing The will of God, as conveyed by the leaders, was also experienced as confusing and hard to relate to by many of the informants. Ellen connected her idea of God to experiences with some leaders that profoundly and negatively affected her emotions. Regarding God, she said, “Who is he, really? Is he what they [the leaders] have represented, or is he something else entirely?” Trine asked herself, “What if they [the leaders] were right” and she was wrong about what God wanted for her? Henrik also expressed this doubt: “What if I am wrong... you don’t want to stand in the way of God.”

In a different vein, Kamilla felt included by God but excluded by the fellowship. It was as if they told her, “Come as you are, but do as we say,” and she thought church was “like being invited to a dinner party” where she and others who did not meet the perceived standard were forced to sit at a table on their own. This did not match her view of God as including her with all her values and perceived needs.

Specifically, some informants were confused about whether the will of God, as it was presented to them, corresponded to the truth and whether God actually approved of them. This confusion was oriented around who they experienced God to be in their hurtful encounters with their leaders and whether this God judged their lives to be right or wrong. In their confusion, they reduced this relationship to a dichotomy of being for or against God. Roar expressed this as trying to be “on the right side of God.”

Experiencing God as an excuse to remain passive Many informants experienced that their submission to God’s plan and will, as conveyed by the leaders, made them passive and led them to avoid taking responsibility for their lives. Mari felt that the idea that God had a plan for her life had made her passive due to her blind trust in this plan. In her words, “It led to so much passivity on my part then.” Åshild also described how trust in leaders and God kept her from taking the responsibility to leave the fellowship, leading her, finally, to ask God in prayer “to get me out of here.”

The fear of disobeying the will of God inclined the informants toward passivity. This state involved a willingness to conform to the directives provided by the leaders, leading the informants to underestimate their capacity to discern what was morally and personally appropriate. Consequently, they found themselves unable to make decisions guided by their own sense of what was right and conducive to their well-being. Afraid to break with what God had purportedly planned, informants found it challenging to leave the context in which this view of God’s will had been imposed. Nevertheless, they eventually did.

Experiencing shame evoked by perceived images of God Many of the informants explicitly reported feelings of inadequacy in the fellowships to which they belonged. Gry said, “No matter what I did, it turned out to be wrong.” Heidi, who occasionally preached in church, did not use the word “shame.” However, she explained that it was painful for her that her leader compared her to another preacher who had a different style from her own. Rather than encouraging her, the pastor told her that she should be like this other preacher. Heidi said:

I had prepared well. I had a message that I thought was important and good. I had a way of conveying it that I stood for, and I [comfortably] sat on a [bar] stool when I taught . . . the only thing he was bothered about was that I sat through the whole speech. He criticized me for that, and implied that I should move a lot more on stage.

Pia similarly described feelings of inadequacy regarding how strongly she felt about not living up to the standards and the tasks assigned to her. She said, “I felt extremely incapable of managing things.”

No matter how hard Pia and the other informants tried to fit in, they failed to meet expectations. The informants felt inadequate when it came to what they perceived God wanted. The experience of inadequacy seemed to facilitate feelings of shame; in other words, it was a shameful experience not to live up to a perceived standard allegedly set by God. It made many of them hide their faces to avoid revealing their supposed deficiencies. Roar described hiding who he was in the congregation due to “[feeling] ashamed all the time.”

Images of a shaming God emerged as a significant burden for some informants in these environments. The informants’ sense that they were not good enough or able to manage their tasks satisfactorily as representatives of God’s will left them feeling estranged and disaffected. Experiencing such shame was hurtful and brought forth a need for change.

For those who had lost their faith, this shame was anchored in a God they no longer believed in. For those who still believed, freeing themselves from shame involved humanizing their images of God. Leaving was a consequence of longing for humanity, and those informants who did not leave emphasized both the strain of remaining in the church or the organization and the longing for something else that would respond to their needs. The process of leaving entailed letting go of severe strain to make room for human needs and to be able to meet them.

Resources that contributed to leaving the context of perceived spiritual abuse

The informants described the aid they received from other sources to leave the situation in which they had these painful experiences. Various sources interacted with the informants directly and indirectly and challenged the imposed ideas that had led the informants to perceive God as controlling, confusing, shaming, and encouraging passivity. While the informants initially believed in what was communicated by the leaders, they gradually found that it turned out to be utterly wrong for them.

Receiving support from various sources Informants experienced support in the form of conversations, literature, Bible study, YouTube videos, education, traveling, and moving. These various resources facilitated the possibility of being heard and the ability to acquire new information.

In situations of crisis, conversations with persons outside the congregation or organization about their bad experiences gave some informants a sense of being heard. Thus, feeling acknowledged helped them leave the context of the perceived spiritual abuse. For instance, Oddgeir spoke with a person from an organization that helped people who had left various religious fellowships. According to Oddgeir, “It was a very uplifting conversation for me because then I could put into words the many things that I [had] not thought about.” Being listened to gave Oddgeir a new understanding and fresh words to articulate his past experiences. Similarly, during a health crisis, Kjell turned to his doctor, and this conversation allowed him to say aloud what was troubling him. He realized at that moment that he needed to get away from the church for health reasons.

In Lisa’s case, getting married gave her an excuse for the physical distance from the congregation she had left. As Lisa said, “When I moved... it was effortless for me just to move because we would get married eventually.... So, I did not really say why I moved. It

was an easy way to leave something.” Moving away from the perceived abusive fellowship opened a space for new impulses, thereby challenging the teachings and beliefs ingrained in the environment she had left.

Lisa benefited from talking with a deacon, indicating that this person helped her to change the way she had perceived God and made her, in her own words, “break up with God.” In contrast, Arne felt a responsibility concerning his faith, which led him to search for answers in conversations with others to gain understanding and leave the fellowship.

Some informants reported that they gained new information from education and literature that affected their decision to leave. As Heidi said, “[With] further education, you reflect a lot. You see things from the outside. So, it was very good. It was enough to contribute to me being able to break away, and we left.”

Others reported getting support from videos on YouTube that provided stories and ideas they could relate to when leaving a mindset related to Christian faith. Conversations, education, literature, and videos on YouTube provided the informants with new information and, thus, new perspectives on their situation. In doing so, these sources created room for new impulses by allowing them to cultivate new perspectives on situations they experienced as demanding and hurtful. In addition to this newly gained knowledge, listening to others’ similar experiences allowed the informants to see their own experiences in a new light.

Receiving support through prayer In addition to the above mentioned sources, solitary prayer emerged as a source of support for the informants. As Erlend stated, “I prayed and found peace in my heart. And then I did it [left]. And that is kind of what helped me.” Erlend presented prayer as a source of and a means to obtain peace. When he prayed, he experienced a kind of peace that enabled him to leave the organization he belonged to, despite the struggle he faced. This peace seemed to be a condition for him to go. Åshild also prayed for help to secure the conditions she needed to leave the fellowship to which she belonged.

Whereas some informants sought support to leave through prayer, others used prayer as a means of support to remain in what they perceived as a state of tension. For instance, Henrik prayed for an organizational leader with whom he disagreed. He described this need to pray as a matter of protecting his heart and motives, and it served as a reminder that he did not want this other person to be subject to any harm. Gry described sneaking away from outdoor evangelization to sit in a church building and cry because she could not manage to live a Christian life. Lisa described sitting in a car crying over the demands of the Christian life, which seemed emotionally and physically unbearable. Gry’s and Lisa’s solitude in these cases likely involved prayer.

The informants employed solitary prayer to create a space for the release of conflicting emotions and the expression of troubling thoughts and ideas they had kept hidden from the congregation. During these moments, they found themselves alone with God. Prayer in solitude seemed to give the informants the space they needed to process some of their negative impulses and relieve the tension they felt in the face of their circumstances.

Receiving support from writing letters and having conversations with leaders Some informants wrote letters to their leaders or former leaders after they left or had decided to leave the congregation/organization. Sometimes, the letters led to a meeting between the informants and the leaders. Trine said, “I remember I wrote a long letter to him [the leader] when I quit about things I had reacted to.” Writing letters allowed the informants to

convey to their leaders what they had found troublesome and problematic. They hoped that their experiences and opinions would be read and taken seriously, which seemed essential to some informants to process their decision to leave. In this way, they could address some of their concerns when conversations did not seem like an option. For Erlend, writing a letter after he left led to a conversation with the leader that made him feel calmer about the process after leaving. Oddgeir explained that he did not get the formal apology he had expected in reply when he wrote several letters to the leadership after he had left his congregation. He said that they did not take responsibility for the hurtful experiences he was reporting, but he still appreciated talking with the leader. At the end, they hugged and wished each other good luck. Trine, in contrast, said that the leader of the organization she was a part of provided some explanations after receiving her letter, admitting that he had not followed up with her in the way he should have.

Putting their bad experiences into words and, in some cases, being heard, acknowledged, and respected helped many informants process their feelings and move on.

Acknowledged vulnerability and space for new images of God

The informants' desire to be accepted by God seemed to create space for life-giving vulnerability and emerged as a longing for new images of God. They sought a God that would acknowledge them and be aligned with their needs. Erlend expressed this longing as follows: "I guess I generally missed it—an acknowledgment of our weakness as human beings and our common inadequacy." Erlend longed for his congregation to accept his vulnerability. However, in his perspective, the community he belonged to did not seem to endorse the acceptance of inherent human limitations. He felt that he did not live up to the Christian ideal as depicted there. Like Erlend, Ellen experienced that she was not supposed to show weakness in her congregation. Ellen reported that the leadership discouraged her from attending her close friend's funeral. They said, "Now you have to get up, and the joy in the Lord is your strength." She felt this treatment showed a lack of empathy.

In their quest for God's acceptance, the informants gave the impression that they were committed to embracing all facets of themselves, including their emotions. This journey led them to reject and ultimately sever ties with the ideals and attitudes communicated by their churches and affiliated organizations that failed to acknowledge their inherent vulnerability. Lisa expressed this need and described it as a wake-up call to start being genuine, not self-effacing, in Christian fellowship. Lisa had been unaware of and had yet to learn what was important in her life. It was compelling for her to find out who she wanted to be. She longed for another way of life where she could take herself seriously as an individual and be less concerned about what everyone else wanted for her. Pia, much like Lisa, aspired to lead a life of her choosing rather than adhering to the prescribed life dictated by a preacher. Consequently, she distanced herself from the preacher's expectations, which had proven to be challenging for her to live up to, demonstrating a profound acknowledgment of her own vulnerability.

It seemed that the informants yearned for God to accept them for everything they were and needed as vulnerable humans. Establishing new images of God would require breaking with the way of thinking imposed by fellowships that presumably did not embrace or accept vulnerability.

Summary of the analysis

1. *Informants experienced that leaders imposed their view of the will of God as controlling and confusing* in a manner that made them obey and thus devalue their own will and needs. They also felt that the will of God, as it was conveyed to them, encouraged passivity and remaining indebted to the notion of God's plan for their lives imposed by the leadership. The images of God imposed by leaders evoked shame in our informants, who felt that they did not meet expectations. They longed to escape this feeling of shame.
2. *Sources that contributed to leaving the situation of perceived spiritual abuse supported the informants' movement away from their congregations and organizations*, allowing them to be heard regarding their troubling experiences and to receive new, helpful information that put their experiences into a new perspective. Prayer in solitude gave the informants space to have thoughts and emotions they perceived as unwanted in their religious community and to handle complex and challenging thoughts and emotions, whether they stayed or left.
3. *Acknowledging vulnerability and creating space for new images of God allowed the informants to experience their humanity*. This theme was related to leaving a congregational and organizational context in which the informants' experiences were not taken seriously when they expressed difficult emotions in situations of crisis, mourning, and sorrow. They longed for God to accept all aspects of themselves as vulnerable beings. This acknowledgment of their vulnerability also applied to the informants who lost their faith in God.

Overall, these three points represent the informants' discoveries concerning the strain of remaining in a spiritual context where they experienced spiritual abuse; the need to leave, driven by a longing for humanity; and the support that made leaving possible.

Discussion

In this section, we discuss what characterizes the process of leaving a context of perceived spiritual abuse (Oakley et al., 2018). Driven by a longing for humanity, including space for human vulnerability, most of the informants in this study had left the context in which they experienced spiritual abuse. In the following, we discuss the informants' experiences in light of theories of spiritual abuse (Oakley et al., 2018), their longing to move away from inhuman images of God and inflicted shame, and the exit processes that empirically emerged in our material as deprogramming the perceived "programmed" images of God and the shame inflicted on the informants. Deprogramming refers to disentanglement from what was perceived to be conveyed, and thus "programmed," by church and organizational leaders.

The imposition of a certain view of God's will as spiritual abuse

The findings about how informants perceived the will of God as conveyed by leadership in this study correspond to Oakley et al.'s (2018) definition of spiritual abuse as "coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context" (p. 146). The most central theme of our findings, in relation to the context of spiritual abuse, is about the perception

of leadership as a mediator of God's will and of images of God. We understand that the informants felt that leaders' view of the will of God was imposed on them and challenged their own will, making some of them feel that they had to give up their own will. This perception of God and God's will seems to correspond to a "pressure to conform" (Oakley et al., 2018, 146) and to the abusers having a "divine position" (Oakley et al., 2018, 146). This perceived "divine position" created emotional personal pressure and led to feelings of confusion, ambivalence, and shame.

We found that informants experienced shame related to their perception of God, feeling inadequate and that there was something wrong with them. This experience of shame corresponds to Oakley et al.'s (2018) characterization of "spiritual abuse as a deeply emotional personal attack" (p. 146). Further, the informants reported feeling confused and trying to understand what was happening to them. This corresponds to Ward's (2011) findings of confused distress in a milieu of spiritual abuse.

We also found that the context described by the informants did not seem to include the integral aspects of vulnerability and humanity. Here, we understand vulnerability as an essential condition of what it means to be human (Henriksen & Vetlesen, 2006). Henriksen and Vetlesen view human vulnerability from an ethical point of view as a common trait among all human beings constituting an integral aspect of humanity. Consequently, vulnerability is not limited to certain groups considered extra vulnerable or needy; all humans are vulnerable. No one can successfully navigate life in isolation; everyone requires support from others.

A longing to move away from inhuman images of God and inflicted shame

In the material, we found a movement away from a perception of God's will as it was conveyed by leaders that appeared to put the informants' humanity at stake and cause them suffering. Driven by a longing for humanity, the informants sought a different image of God. Although some informants were confused about who God was supposed to be, various negative descriptions of God in our material indicated that the informants largely perceived God as having a dehumanizing influence and depriving them of human qualities. In their reported experiences, the informants presented conscious images of God as controlling, confusing, and encouraging passivity.

The ideas of God as an "accountant" or a "taskmaster" correspond to the image of God as controlling in our study, which our informants perceived as unhealthy. The accountant is a surveilling God, keeping track of everything a person does and ensuring they are held accountable, while the taskmaster is like a person's boss, driving them hard toward good deeds. The informants in our study experienced that whatever they achieved was never good enough.

The gap between the expectations conveyed by leaders and the perception informants had of themselves created tension regarding, on the one hand, how they should relate to and serve God according to God's will and, on the other hand, what they felt they needed to be healthy. In this gap between God's will, as represented by leaders, and the informant's own needs arose experiences of shame. We understand that this perceived shame had a destructive effect on the informants' lives because it led to a constant devaluation of their self-understanding concerning God, themselves, and the Christian community to which they belonged. Farstad (2016) uses the term "the God of shame" to refer to a God that is controlling, judging, and, therefore, shaming.

From what we see in the material, the informants' experiences of shame were generated by relationships (Kaufman, 1992) in a milieu representing God and were associated with an "acute reactive shame that occurs when a breach in social order and normal relations has occurred" (Pattison, 2000, p. 84). This acute, reactive shame was related to situations and conditions involving informants' emotional reactions in the fellowship context they had left, which included a particular imposed view of themselves.

Informants appeared to internalize their experiences of shame, which deeply touched their identities at an early stage of the church- and organization-leaving process but seemed to decrease through deprogramming when imagining humanized images of God. Hence, the process of disengagement from a shame-inducing environment served to prevent a chronic state of shame. To definitively ascertain whether a sense of shame resurfaced over the long term would require conducting longitudinal observations of the informants.⁹

Exit processes and deprogramming the imposed view of God's will

The informants desired to be accepted, to belong, and to be used by God, but their efforts to follow the will of a God they perceived as inhuman turned out to be counterproductive to these objectives. The longing to move away from images of God they perceived as unhealthy and from feelings of shame activated the informants' "orienting system" (Pargament, 1997, pp. 99–100). In a metaphorical sense, an orienting system is like a mental toolbox to be used in a crisis. This toolbox consists of tools whose usefulness depends on contextual factors; either they are the right tools to cope with a given situation and serve as resources or they are useless, creating an absence of resources to effectively deal with the situation and contributing to an unhealthy coping process. Establishing images of God that provide space for vulnerability is an example of a healthy coping activity or tool. With the help of various sources and driven by their longing for humanity, the informants were able to leave the situation they perceived as spiritually abusive and change their images of God and thus their orienting system.

The perceived images of God emerged in our material as part of a process of "deprogramming." As mentioned, deprogramming refers to a process of disentangling one's own beliefs from what was conveyed and thus "programmed" by church and organizational leaders (Vigdel et al., 2022). The perceived images of God imposed by leaders are "programmed" into their communities. In the process of leaving the spiritually abusive situation, a need to be "deprogrammed" emerged. Deprogramming involves changes in a person's orienting system, with an emphasis on the movement from the imposed, "programmed" will to disentanglement from the "programmed" content.

The perception of God as inhuman appeared to weaken the will of the informants because they felt that God did not consider their experiences and needs. In the process of deprogramming, the experience of restrictions in a context of spiritual abuse (Oakley et al., 2018) caused by a perceived inhuman God constituted a crisis resulting in a longing for change. This longing, in turn, became a point of departure for what Pargament (1997) calls a process of pursuing possibilities.

We see the process of deprogramming as a gradual removal from a situation of perceived inflicted shame. Even if the informants, when experiencing a crisis, managed to leave a context in which they felt they were shamed, deprogramming from the shame they

⁹ The interval between the interviews and the reported abuse of power was between 2 and 25 years.

experienced did not happen immediately; changing their orienting system was a process that took time and effort (Pargament, 1997). Informants were not necessarily conscious of the shame that was inflicted on them when it happened. Some of them seemed to recognize it, and the hurt that it caused, only later.

The fact that some of the informants described their image of God as destructive suggests that they had developed a new awareness of how they perceived God through what empirically emerged as deprogramming. Having acknowledged their vulnerability, they started longing for a humanized God. The process of deprogramming enabled them to discover new images of God and imagine a God that allowed space for their humanity.

The perceived infliction of shame in the context of spiritual abuse is a result of power relations (Kleiven, 2020). This shame may be a counterpower threatening to hold on to an individual and not let go unless revealed and addressed. By recognizing the shame and managing it, a person can stop feeling responsible for whatever caused the reaction of shame (Kleiven, 2021).

When the informants dealt with the shame related to the spiritual abuse that they perceived had been inflicted on them, it ceased to be the driving force in their lives. For them to accept closure regarding this shame that they were made to feel for not living according to God's will, as conveyed by leaders, the process of deprogramming and leaving needed to open new possibilities and opportunities. It allowed them to take responsibility for a new way of life, including acceptance of their vulnerability as human beings.

This acceptance provided new perspectives and allowed them to understand what they experienced in the context of spiritual abuse (Oakley et al., 2018) and thus to look at themselves in a new way (Kleiven, 2020). This responsibility implies accepting what it means to be human (Henriksen & Vetlesen, 2006).

Changing the image of God they had been brought up with required a comprehensive existential and emotional shift. The process of deprogramming allowed informants to disentangle themselves from firmly held convictions associated with a perceived imposed will of God, causing emotional pain when leaving the context of spiritual abuse (Oakley et al., 2018). As a process of changing their perceptions of God and God's will, deprogramming was associated with an existential risk, namely, not knowing how their changed relationship to the will of God as they had understood it would affect their lives, and it involved emotional strain for the informants in the form of "suffering... on an existential level" (Björkmark et al., 2022, p. 4733). Our findings revealed an ambivalence in informants' perceptions of God's will; they were confused about whether the hurt they felt was coming from a God who wanted what their leaders claimed God wanted or whether God was someone else. This emotionally demanding process of deprogramming, which involved risking disobeying God while acknowledging their own will opposing the alleged will of God, harmed the informants' health and well-being because of the existential insecurity it caused. The informants got help from various sources that supported them in leaving one variant of religious faith for another or, in the case of several informants, abandoning their faith entirely despite the emotional insecurity this decision entailed.

Even though the process of leaving the church was emotionally demanding for our informants, there were also positive outcomes, as described in the literature (Björkmark et al., 2022). Deprogramming allowed the informants in our study to "take the wheel" in their own lives, and although the process was arduous, the informants expressed that it was indeed worthwhile. It granted them a sense of freedom as they left behind formerly perceived restrictions and strain related to how God had been portrayed, which is in line with the literature on deconversion (Björkmark et al., 2022; Fazzino, 2014; Lee & Gubi, 2019; Marriott, 2015).

Our findings reveal a process of leaving a context of spiritual abuse that corresponds to the theory of deconversion (Barbour, 1994; Streib & Keller, 2004) and religious disaffiliation (Björkmark et al., 2022; Jindra, 2022). The deconversion literature refers to both losing religious faith (Barbour, 1994) and changing religious faith (Lee & Gubi, 2019). This process of leaving a context in which the imposition of a certain vision of God's will was perceived as abusive involved a struggle that had significant emotional costs, which are also referred to in the literature about deconversion and religious disaffiliation (Aboud, 2020; Björkmark et al., 2022; Gillette, 2016; Lee & Gubi, 2019). These findings correspond to what Barbour (1994, p. 2) calls "emotional suffering."

Conclusion

In the present article, we have analyzed the following question: *What characterizes the processes of leaving a situation of perceived spiritual abuse in a Pentecostal context?* Our research sought to address a gap in the existing literature by shedding light on the experiences of individuals leaving religious communities in which they experienced spiritual abuse, which we believe has broader global relevance beyond the specific Pentecostal setting in Norway that we examined. This exit process involved an acknowledgment of vulnerability that provided the informants with a more realistic view of human possibilities and limitations in opposition to the images of God imposed by leaders. Various sources helped with deprogramming, which many of the informants perceived as a process of liberation despite the costs they experienced. The deprogramming process changed their orienting system and allowed them to disentangle themselves from an imposed understanding of God's will that devalued them. The informants' longing for humanity drove them to leave the context of spiritual abuse. Through deprogramming, the informants were able to leave behind imposed ideas that led them to view God as controlling, confusing, and encouraging passivity and created feelings of shame. Deprogramming enabled the informants to take responsibility for their lives as a countermeasure against losing themselves and losing God. Many of the informants gained a sense of freedom in this process.

In summary, our study has provided an account of the complexities inherent in leaving a religious community in response to perceived spiritual abuse. These findings contribute to a broader dialogue on the processes of leaving abusive religious environments and the transformative journey toward embracing one's humanity and a more nuanced image of God.

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