



WHEN PRAYING ISN'T ENOUGH: RELIGION, PREJUDICE AND ABUSE

Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen

I am a social psychologist with particular interests in cross-cultural psychology and in the psychology of gender. I am also a Calvinist Christian who affirms that the themes of creation, fall, and redemption are at work simultaneously in the lives of all Christians, and that because of this there is no area of life — including our faith life, our family life, and our civic life — that is guaranteed to be free of distortion.

As I examine the interrelatedness of religion, prejudice and abuse, I am aware that abuse — whether physical, sexual or psychological — is a profoundly gendered concept. The majority of abusers are male and the majority of victims are women and children.¹ And prejudice — the unjustifiably negative attitude toward a group and its members, with supporting beliefs, emotions and behavioral predispositions — has both cross-cultural and gender implications, since the targets of prejudice are typically members of a less-powerful cultural, ethnic or gender group.²

However, it is difficult to expose the relationship between religiosity and prejudice in a time when admitting to prejudice has become socially unacceptable. And if anything, it has been harder to get an accurate picture of physical, sexual or emotional abuse among religious populations, because abuse is often claimed not to exist among such populations.

In addition, abuse (unlike prejudice) mostly takes place within the confines of a domestic unit, and we live in a culture which has long defended both a public/private dichotomy and also a *hierarchically gendered* public/private dichotomy. A man's home, in this ideology, is his castle — both in the sense of being insulated from external interference, and in the sense of being *his domain*, over which his

word is rule. Sometimes this is justified by the notion that the family is like a "little church," and the husband/father is God's priest or representative within the unit, and therefore that defying him is tantamount to defying God.

Now although I personally support a theology of mutual submission between spouses, it needs to be said that a theology of male headship does not necessarily open the door to domestic abuse provided that it is accompanied by a realistic theology of pervasive depravity — that is, the recognition that no sphere of life, and no human institution (including the family) is exempt from the effects of sin. As I and my colleagues pointed out in the 1992 report on abuse prevalence in the Christian Reformed Church,³ our Puritan forebears had just such a realistic theology. They regularly brought abusive husbands and fathers before church courts (sometimes putting them in the stocks or having them flogged for overstepping the bounds of their domestic authority), and far from believing that a man's home was his castle, they turned neighborly meddling into a positive virtue — that is, they expected people to keep an eye on each other and to report instances of domestic cruelty to the church authorities.⁴

However, as the agricultural and craft-based life of the colonies gradually yielded to the industrial revolution, a more-rigidly gendered division of labor was instituted. No longer were work place, dwelling place, and child-rearing place all together for both men and women. Instead, men were sent out to the harsh public world of office, shop and factory (the so-called "temples of commerce") while women were designated "angels of the home" — that is, they were to be the emotional comforters and moral uplifters of their male relatives who had to face the brutish, competitive public world day by day. Home was to be "a haven in a heartless world," a place of natural affection unregulated by the long arm of government or the "bottom line" of commerce.

In retrospect, one can understand the societal impulse to preserve such a "haven" in light of the steadily expanding,

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ever-more impersonal public sphere. Nevertheless, the resultant gendering of the public/domestic dichotomy — which romanticized the home, cut it off from outside interference, and rendered women economically dependent on men and legally "dead to the law" — left the door wide open to unchecked domestic violence among those already inclined to it. If women were called to be "angels of the home," and failed to fulfill that calling in the eyes of their husbands, why (some men would reason) should they *not* be punished, especially if husbands were theologically designated as the earthly representatives of a judgmental God?⁵

The record of the institutional church during this period of change was mixed. By the end of the 19th century, many ministers had joined ranks with philanthropists, physicians, and feminists to press for legal sanctions against domestic abuse, as abuse rates had risen steadily with the urbanization and industrialization of society. But many other ministers preached against state interference in the family under any circumstances, and urged a return to greater respect for parental (and especially paternal) authority. Having abandoned the Puritans' realistic theology about the mixed character of family life for a sentimentalized substitute, nineteenth-century pastors found it easy to deny the existence of domestic violence.

A century later, pastors as a group still seemed unaware of the scope of the abuse problem (and here, for reasons of space, I will concentrate mostly on studies of wife-battering.) A 1984 survey of helping professionals — physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and clergy — found that social workers identified the largest number of abused women, while physicians and clergy identified the fewest. Most social workers are women and most clergy and physicians are men, so it may well be that a generalized male denial of the scope of abuse, and its effects on victims, accounts for this difference.⁶ Indeed, when James Alsdurf solicited information from 5700 conservative Protestant pastors in the United States and Canada on their ways of counseling abuse victims, fewer than ten percent (of a sample that was ninety-nine percent male) responded. Of those who did respond, over a quarter stated that wives' unwillingness to be submissive to their husbands was the reason for much marital violence, and over a third said that wives overestimated their husbands' responsibility for such violence. A quarter of the respondents said that abused wives should submit to their husbands and trust God to honor such submission by either stopping the abuse or giving the women the needed strength to endure it. The pastors with the strongest "submission theology" were the ones most likely to discount women's reports of abuse and/or to oppose advising such women to obtain legal or medical aid. Seventy-one percent of Alsdurf's respondents said they would not advise separation because of abuse, and ninety-two percent would never tell a woman to divorce her abuser.⁷

To date, I have been able to find no studies which have examined the relationship between religious orientation (i.e., extrinsic vs. intrinsic religiosity) and proneness to abuse. In addition, the prevalence study done for the Christian Reformed Church in North America (mentioned earlier) appears to be the only such denominational survey yet undertaken. That survey showed that, in this theologically conservative and very family-oriented denomination, the prevalence rates for physical, emotional, and sexual abuse were within the same ranges typically found in surveys of the general population. In this denomination, at least, being a Christian does not lower the probability of being an abuse victim.⁸

There is, however, evidence in the abuse literature which supports a conclusion mentioned previously with regard to religiosity and prejudice — namely, that high church attendance is *not* a reliable predictor of wife abuse. In 1982, when psychologist Lee Bowker analyzed a national survey of a thousand battered women, almost half their male partners were reported as never attending church; thirty percent attended less than once a month, and only ten percent attended weekly. Unlike the studies on religiosity and prejudice, however, the relationship between church attendance and likelihood of being a batterer was not curvilinear: In this case both *no* religion *and* a little religion turn out to be "a dangerous thing."⁹

In Bowker's study, fully a third of the respondents sought help from clergy. Those most likely to do so were those who were most religious (as measured by church attendance rates), but other factors inclining them to seek clergy help (in decreasing order of predictive power) included the husband's rate of church attendance, the number of times the woman had been forced to seek shelter away from home, and the relative absence of alcohol as an accompaniment to the battering episodes. Unfortunately, however, these same women rated clergy (*and* physicians — confirming Burris' 1984 study mentioned above) as less effective helpers (in decreasing order) than women's support groups, battered women's shelters, lawyers, social service or counselling agencies, police, or district attorneys. Ironically, James Alsdurf's North American survey done at about the same time yielded a portrait of pastors as being naively self-satisfied with their own efforts as counsellors to battered women, despite their actual ignorance of the legal, psychological, and relational complications that accompany abuse cases: "The majority of pastors [who responded to our survey] reported that they were not personally uncomfortable with the topic or frustrated by the lack of information available to them on the issue. Nor did they find the emotional demands of victims or their own lack of training in counseling creating problems for them in their work with victims."¹⁰

Church-related efforts to educate both clergy and laity about abuse have become much more common in the decade

since these studies were done, so, one hopes (in the absence so far of systematic data to confirm it) that this level of unjustified self-confidence among clergy is decreasing. And clearly, in the relatively unresearched area of the connection between religiosity and abuse, there is much research to be done. We need (and are still lacking) agreed-upon definitions of various kinds of abuse.¹¹ Having established such definitions (and defended them not just methodologically, but theologically) we need to examine the relationship of abuse-proneness (among abusers) to such measures as intrinsic vs. extrinsic religiosity. We need to examine this same connection among abuse survivors as well — although my best guess is that a better predictor of abuse receptivity among survivors would be some measure of strength or weakness of creation theology. Christian counselors often report that one of the most difficult tasks they have with female abuse victims is convincing them that they are, in fact, made in the image of God and as such deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Victims of all ages have difficulty believing they are not to blame for their abuse, and that abusers should be held responsible for their behavior.¹² In theological terms, they have failed to realize that an adequate theology of sin, self-sacrifice and reconciliation can only be built on a creation theology of legitimate self-esteem.

In a recent review of research on abuse across the lifespan, psychologist Martha Straus noted the following:

Theories and research on abuse and victimization have mushroomed over the past two decades. From detailed case analysis up through the national survey, we now know as much as we probably need to know about how many people are doing which types of horrible things to whom and at what emotional, physical and economic expense. However, we have not made much of a dent in prevention or in prescribing the best combinations of treatments for different types of victims or offenders. Social reforms are necessary, and new policies await the fertile foundation now laid out.¹³

Straus could well have added that we know even less about religion as a mediating variable both in abuse proneness and abuse treatment: Her (otherwise excellent) edited volume does not even list "religion" as a topic in its index.

Clearly, there is much basic research to be done in this area before it even begins to approximate the level of knowledge we have about the relationship between religiosity and prejudice — which, as noted earlier, is an area that has also been under-researched for the past twenty years. But we do know enough to know that, to overcome both prejudice and abuse, praying is not enough. We have yet to show, in any systematic way *why* this is the case and *what* can be done to make religion (as it should be) a better predictor of *non*-abuse and *non*-prejudice. There is enough here to keep

several generations of doctoral students (and others) very busy indeed!

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- ¹ For prevalence patterns see Martha B. Straus (ed), Abuse and Victimization Across the Life Span (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).
 - ² Gordon Allport, The Nature of Prejudice (Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1954).
 - ³ "Report 30: Committee to Study Physical, Emotional, and Sexual Abuse." Agenda for Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (C.R.C. Publications, Grand Rapids, MI, 1992), pp. 313-358.
 - ⁴ Elizabeth Pleck, Domestic Tyranny: The Making of American Social Policy Against Family Violence from Colonial Times to the Present (New York: Oxford, 1987). Pleck notes that the first draft of the 1630's Puritan Legal code, written by Rev. John Cotton, included a provision (later rejected) for hanging in the case of incest.
 - ⁵ Two books by religious historians which document the rise and the results of this gendered "separate spheres" doctrine are: Barbara Leslie Epstein, The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth Century America (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981) and Betty A. DeBerg, Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).
 - ⁶ C. A. Burris, "Wife Battering: A Well-Kept Secret," Canadian Journal of Criminology, Vol. 26, (1984), pp. 171-177. See also Carolyn F. Swift, "Surviving: Women's Strength Through Connection," in Straus, Abuse and Victimization Across the Life Span, pp. 153-169.
 - ⁷ James M. Alsdurf and Phyllis Alsdurf, "A Pastoral Response," in Anne L. Horton and Judith A. Williamson, Abuse and Religion: When Praying Isn't Enough (New York: Lexington, 1988), pp. 165-171. A somewhat similar 1984 survey of 44 conservative Protestant denominations by the National Association of Evangelicals had a similarly low response rate.
 - ⁸ Twelve percent of the respondents reported having experienced physical abuse or neglect; 13 percent reported sexual abuse, and 19 percent reported emotional abuse.
 - ⁹ Lee H. Bowker, "Religious Victims and Their Religious Leaders: Services Delivered to One Thousand Battered Women by the Clergy," in Straus, Abuse and Religion, pp. 229-234. See also her "Battered Women and the Clergy: An Evaluation," Journal of Pastoral Care, Vol. 36 (1982), pp. 226-234. Bowker used a non-random sample of women responding to a questionnaire in a magazine; however, there is no *prima facie* reason to believe that this would systematically bias the types of husbands they had in terms of the latter's church attendance rates. In addition, it is possible that the well-established curvilinear relationship between church attendance and prejudice will also be shown to exist with regard to abuse-proneness and church attendance as more studies accumulate which examine this relationship. There is some possible *indirect* evidence to this effect in the C.R.C. Synodical Study on abuse prevalence referred to earlier; that study found that self-reported abuse *survivors* were more likely to be moderate (rather than high or low) church attenders. To the

extent that the church-going behavior of abuse survivors is similar to their abusers (who are usually in the same family) a curvilinear relationship between abusiveness and church attendance is supported.

¹⁰ Alsdurf and Alsdurf, "A Pastoral Response," p. 168.

¹¹ For a preliminary debate on definitions of (especially physical) abuse in the context of the C.R.C. abuse prevalence study, see George Mavrodes, "May We Call This Abuse?" and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, "It's Abuse, and It's Ours." *The Banner* (denominational weekly publication of the Christian Reformed Church in North America), Vol. 127, No. 21 (June 1, 1992), pp. 12-15.

¹² See for example Martha Straus, "Family Violence Across the Life Span," in Straus, *Abuse and Victimization Across the Life Span*, pp. 1-6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

THE BIBLE AND RAPE

Craig Keener

When Desiree Washington charged that Mike Tyson had raped her, some Christians retorted that it was her fault for getting herself into the situation. To my horror, the Bible study group at our church was divided on the issue, and paradoxically most of the women support Mike Tyson (I later learned that one of the few women who remained silent was a rape victim herself). I was further horrified that some of the more vocal leaders in our denomination (the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A.) reiterated the same views; although some of us spoke out on behalf of Ms. Washington, it was those who favored Mr. Tyson who garnered the publicity.

But while blaming the victim may accord with some of the ethics of our culture, it does not accord with the Bible. It may be true that *some* rape victims could have taken better safety precautions, but inadequate safety precautions in no way merit rape. Further, even the best of safety precautions have not always prevented it, and lack of precaution may sometimes follow from virtuous innocence as easily as from carelessness.

Condemning a rape victim makes about as much sense as condemning a murder victim — none. In fact, I would venture to suggest that those who condemn the innocent (the rape victim, the incest victim, the abandoned spouse, etc.) stand under God's judgment, as the Bible indicates (e.g., Exod. 23:7).

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Rape in Israelite Law

Israelite law sometimes fell short of the ethics of the Kingdom, choosing to regulate rather than tolerate structural evil still too entrenched to be abolished outright (e.g., indentured servanthood). Sexual offenses, however, were viewed as unfaithfulness to one's spouse, betrayal of one's deepest covenant, and hence merited death.

Yet as strictly as Israelite law forbade sexual relations with someone to whom one was not married, the law was careful to point out that rape was a different, special case. Rape was not an act determined by mutual sinful consent, like premarital sex; rape was a sin imposed by one person on another, like murder or theft. The rape victim had no choice in her situation.

If an engaged woman was raped, the man who raped her was put to death for committing adultery against her impending marriage union (Deut. 22:25). She, however, was not to be punished, for as the Bible explicitly says, "there is no sin in her worthy of death, for just as a man rises against his neighbor and murders him, so is this case" (22:26). In fact, if no one else was present as a witness of her innocence but she was clearly penetrated, biblical law assumes her innocence without requiring witnesses (22:27); the burden of proof is not on her to prove that she did not consent.

Ancient Israelites' usual chastity undoubtedly made for stronger marriages, but the cultural perspective on virginity that accompanied it posed a problem to rape victims. Most men choosing a wife for the first time wanted a woman who had never had intercourse before. The rape victim, like the divorcée or widow, had lost future proof of her virginity, and some men would have been tempted to view her as other than a virgin in a society where most potential spouses were virgins. Since she could prove the circumstances of the rape, she would not be subject to shame or penalties after marriage (Deut. 22:17), but it would still have been somewhat harder (though not impossible) for her to find a husband, just as it was for widows and divorcées. The man who had raped her had thus potentially deprived her of her future hopes, including financial security. (The Bible does not suggest that this situation is the Kingdom ideal; but Israelite civil law worked with people in the society in which they lived.)

To protect the woman placed in this situation, two options were provided. The first option was that the man had to marry her and support her financially all her life; although this could provide the woman permanent financial security, more rape victims probably preferred the second option. The second option, here assumed as self-evident but explicitly stated in Exod. 22:17, was that her father as legal guardian could exercise the right of refusal on her behalf, and demand instead sufficient monetary payment to cover her dowry. (Her father would normally have been her legal guardian in that society; as an unmarried virgin, she was a minor, since most girls were married in that culture by age 14.) If the