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From Spiritual Authority to Religious Manipulation: Psychological and Sociological Dimensions in the History of Christianity

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Abstract

A downhill narrative of the loss of charismatic spiritual power to institutional power play is common in the history of the Church. It's a convenient theological linear story, and not very well supported by history! It doesn't explain how good leaders are different from bad leaders, either. The purpose of this paper is to develop criteria that would help to distinguish spiritual from religious manipulation. It challenges this model in four past scenarios and one present one. It also outlines the psychological and institutional processes which enable manipulation to occur. The framework provides a common terminology for historians, theologians and clinicians. It also de-emphasizes theory and documentary evidence. The research method used in this study was qualitative and used an interdisciplinary approach to studying historiography, sociological, social psychology and Christian theology. The finding in this study indicates that "Legitimate" and "Manipulative" uses of authority existed in all periods studied. Three factors combined to bring about manipulation again: asymmetric control over sacred resources, low accountability and psychological dependency. There was a reform and resistance in each period. The present progression thesis needs to be replaced with a concept of recurrent, contested possibility with direct implications to safeguarding this work. This work covers gaps such as the paper's making links between the historical and clinical literatures, which have but rarely met, and its explicit statement of the limits of evidence.

Keywords: spiritual authority and religious manipulation, spiritual abuse, pastoral power, clericalism and Christian history.

Introduction

Context and problem

Dominating was not the leadership model that was accepted by Christianity, as it started with a founder who disavowed it. Jesus was saying to His disciples that the rulers "lord it over" men and women (Matthew 20:25-28, New International Version Bible 1978/2011). But Christian

institutions have also bred inquisitions, forced confessions, cover-ups by the clergy and drunken leaders. These both are a part of the history of Christianity. The question is, how to relate them.

One of the prevalent responses is a downward story. This is the perspective that saw the development of an early community of believers becoming in time an institution which exercised a manipulative influence over believers. The tale has an obvious message for Protestant polemicists, for the secular critics and for modern reformers. It's also a bit of a line of bullshit. Lay religious belief and practice was sometimes active and vigorous in the Middle Ages (Duffy 2005). The results of the reforming movements were their own disciplinary systems (Eire, 2016). From the first generation (Meeks, 2003) the question of charismatic authority was challenged.

Gap in the literature

The current scholarship can be divided into four streams and they seldom intersect. There are theories of authority and symbolic power that can be found in the fields of sociology, such as by Bourdieu (1991) and Weber (1978). Obedience, coercive groups and religious struggle are the focuses of psychologists' studies (Lalich, 2004; Milgram, 1963; Pargament & Exline, 2022). Ward (2011), Oakley & Humphreys (2019) and Johnson & VanVonderen (1991) report on spiritual abuse in the present-day. There is a diversity of Christian practice, and historians demonstrate this (Brown, 1971; Duffy, 2005; Moore, 2007). Three gaps follow. First, the key words, like 'authority' and 'manipulation' are rarely defined; thus depending on the writer's sympathies the same action can be interpreted one way or another. Secondly, research on spiritual abuse is not usually tested against particular case studies and theory in respect of historical case studies is rare. Thirdly, interpretation is often given as evidence. Theories and assumptions about medieval confession that "produced guilt" are not actually known to have occurred.

Purpose and argument

The aim of this paper is to fill these gaps. It denounces and rejects as successive stages in Christian history spiritual authority and religious manipulation. These are two ways the same two situations (leaders and followers) can play out and have both happened in every period. Conditions which make manipulation likely are that three things come together: (a) leaders have control of

sacred goods; (b) there is little accountability, or none; (c) followers are psychologically dependent. There appears to have been a movement of resistance in each period, some of which have come from within the Christian theology itself.

Research questions

1. How has Christianity defined the legitimate spiritual authority from illegitimate domination?

2. What are some psychological and institutional factors that give legitimate authority the power to be manipulated?

3. Is there a pattern of contestations or recurring pattern in selected historical cases or is there a linear progression?

4 What contributions have contemporary empirical studies on religious trauma and the abuse that occurs in the church made to the historical picture?

Methodological Approach

Design

The study is interdisciplinary in nature and is a synthesis, comparative and critical interpretative. Does not create any new primary data. It uses an explicit framework to re-read the existing evidence, and compares cases over time.

Case selection

The early Christian period (first to fifth centuries) and the various institutional forms of Christianity (medieval Latin Christianity, the sixteenth-century Reformations, and modern and charismatic Christianity) were purposively selected in order to cover the major times and forms of Christianity in history. A fifth case (Clerical abuse and religious trauma) has been treated separately as it has the most clear circumstances and clinical evidence. Subjects for the cases were selected to assess the progression thesis. These are the periods when it forecasts the least manipulation (earliest church) and most manipulation (Middle Ages), and the periods of reform and renewal.

Evidence tiers

Each source is identified by a number (1, 2, or 3) and the number is stated in the analysis in front of the claim to which it corresponds.

Tier 1: Primary & documentary evidence. Standard edicts of ancient and medieval documents, conciliar documents and official investigations.

Tier 2: Historiographical findings. Historical research, based on primary sources, presented in a scholarly way by other historians.

Tier 3: Theoretical interpretation. Theories that are sociological, psychological or theological in nature that are applied to the evidence.

Analytic procedure

The paper summarizes the documentary and historiographical evidence, evaluates it according to the five criterion developed in section 3 and provides a clearly labelled interpretation of the evidence for each of the cases. Cases are then compared to each other and two sets of mechanisms are selected, psychological (Section 6) and institutional (Section 7).

Discussion on the Justification of an Interdisciplinary Approach to Solving Problems

There is no single discipline that is able to address the research questions. History sets the record straight, and prevents anachronism. The process of the legitimization and maintenance of authority is described by sociology. There are mechanisms that are identified in psychology when a person is harmed and when a person becomes compliant. By using the concepts of theology, the normative criteria were used to assess how authority has been judged by Christians themselves. All disciplines aren't entirely wrong, but help correct each other. History corrects the psychological excesses and psychology fills in the personal for which institutional history may be lacking.

A few limitations of the method

The method has the following limitations:

Three limits apply. First, psychological constructs of the first and twentieth centuries can't be tested on the dead, which means that Tier 3 claims are `interpretative. Secondly, those that survived are over-represented in terms of clergy and elites. Third, these cases can only stand for

certain Christian traditions, not Orthodox, Oriental and non-Western Christianities. The conclusions are statements about trends in these cases, but not laws.

Conceptualizing Spiritual Authority and Religious Manipulation

Definitions

Spiritual authority refers to what is recognized as the ability of a person, or an office, to lead others in spiritual matters and practice. The legitimacy of this is based on a relationship in which followers can comprehend, evaluate and potentially reject the guidance of the leader.

Religious manipulation occurs when a member of a religion is manipulated to act against their free will, via religious roles, symbols or fears, to the benefit of the religion's leader/body. It is not a way of persuading, which takes into account the follower's ability to make a judgment. Spiritual abuse can be considered coercive control in a religious context, its clinical counterpart (Oakley & Humphreys, 2019).

The following definitions are normative. They are not based on observation alone, but are based on the theological and ethical considerations listed below. So the paper proposes to distinguish between the claims involving what the leaders did, and what the sources said and the claims involving whether what the leaders did was legitimate.

A Theological criterion: Authority as service.

The theological criterion that the paper uses is taken from the NT. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is contrasted with the domination of the rulers, and says “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10:42-45, New International Version Bible 1978/2011). We are told in the First Letter of Peter to lead the way by voluntary service and not by "lording it over" others (1 Peter 5:1-3, New International Version Bible, 1978/2011). Paul was able to stand up for his own authority in Corinth with the understanding that it was to be used "for building up, not for tearing down" (2 Corinthians 13:10, New International Version Bible, 1978/2011). The Pattern is consistent. Authorities only exist, and only operate as long as they are good for the community, and are evaluated through their results.

This criterion has been elaborated on by Christian ethicists. Yoder (1994) interpreted the Gospels as a rejection of the power model of coercion that was in use in the church. The Christian identity is not exclusionary - it is embracing the other, says Volf (1996). Gutiérrez (1988) had a stance that authentic Christian theology was on the side of the poor against oppression. On numerous issues these authors offer a conflicting perspective. They concur that there are Christian tests of abuse of authority that are provided by Christian tradition. The paper thus does not measure Christian history in terms of an outside measurement. It further explores if Christians were aware of and opposed manipulation based on Christian criteria (RQ1).

Five operational criteria

The sociological and psychological theory are added to the theological criterion, to yield five analytic criteria. They're all a spectrum and they all can be asked of any historical case.

1. Basis of legitimation. Is authority derived from the leader's service and proven teaching or from claims which do not lend themselves to testing?

2. Accountability. Are leaders subject to peer, text, council, and/or the laity corrections?

3. Consent and exit. Do followers have a grasp of and do they have questions and leave without undue loss?

4. Information control. Are texts, rites and interpretation available or not?

5. Outcomes. Is there an exercise of authority which is designed to safeguard the vulnerable or puts them at risk of harm?

Theoretical Framework

Weber: legitimate domination and routinization

The point to start is to take up from Max Weber (1978) the typology of authority. He identified the three types of authority as traditional authority, legal-rational authority and charismatic authority. He also gave the term “routinization of charisma” which refers to the founding leader's personal gift becoming a lasting institution. There is a trend of some readers making this a down slant. It was, however, reutilization’s very necessity, as Weber saw it, to the process of socialization, not a fall from grace. Institutions can perpetuate a movement, as well as weaken it.

The paper, therefore, claims that manipulation is not solely driven by institutional growth as is suggested by the work of Weber.

Bourdieu: symbolic power

Bourdieu (1991) included an explanation/supplement of symbolic power. Religious leaders have authority when people take it for granted that it is a natural or sacred authority. This insight is the reason why those abiding in the manipulation feel devoted to it. Berger's (1967) conclusion also noted that religious allows social arrangements to be given a sacred legitimacy regarding them as something unquestionable.

Foucault: pastoral power

According to Foucault (2007) "pastoral power" has its origin in the practice of Christianity. It is a power which governs people by continually caring for them, guiding them and asking them if there are any regrets in their conscience. It is individualising as it cares for each member of the flock and it requires an knowledge of inner lives. It is helpful in spiritual direction and/or confession. It is not a measure; however, it is an interpretation and has no proven level of manipulation.

Psychological theories

Social psychology provides mechanisms. Milgram (1963) demonstrated that the people are willing to obey the stranger authority even if it harms them. Lifton (1961) identified eight characteristics of “thought reform” as: the demand for purity, milieu control, and others. Lalich (2004) has suggested an explanation for the phenomenon of committed members freely giving in to their own submission to charismatic groups that is termed ‘bounded choice'. Pargament and Exline (2022) demonstrate that the religious harm often is followed by spiritual struggle; and Park et al. (2017) integrate spiritual struggle into meaning-making theory. These studies were written from a perspective that is not specifically on premodern Christianity, therefore care needs to be exercised in applying them to history.

Working hypothesis

The paper's working hypothesis is the combination of the sources. It's likely to occur when three things come together in manipulation.

Inequalities of access to sacred resources: A limited number of leaders (Berger, 1967; Bourdieu, 1991) are able to act as mediators of sacraments, forgiveness or salvation.

Weak accountability: There are not many mechanisms that allow the control of leaders (Chaves, 1994).

Psychological dependence: Followers need the group to provide them with identity, belonging and meaning (Lalich, 2004).

This is not a special time or a special thing for Christianity. It's not just the passage of time that makes their convergence, their prediction, for manipulation.

Historical Development of Christian Authority

The position of Christian Authority in history

Early Christianity (first - fifth centuries)

Evidence: From the start in the New Testament letters, there is a lack of authority. In Corinth, Paul had some critics, who questioned his credentials (10:1-13:13, New International Version Bible, 1978/2011). A prophet who remains for a short time or requests money is false (Holmes, 2007) is the practical test for itinerant prophets (A prophet is someone who goes from place to place, spreading his message), provided by the Didache. In the early second century, Ignatius of Antioch called Christians to obey their bishop; he was doing so in a context where there was conflict with the other teachers (Holmes, 2007). Meeks (2003) demonstrates the smallness, urbanity, and social mix of the early Christian communities, and the different forms of household organization had distinct effects on the leadership of these communities.

Starting with Constantine, bishops were given legal rights and social status (Brown, 1992). Rapp (2005) recounts the merging of spiritual and civic leadership by the "holy bishop. Gaddis (2005) demonstrates how Christians tried to suppress those who disagreed, especially when it came to conflicts between different factions of Christians from the Empire. But Ambrose of Milan

insisted on the emperor Theodosius' public penance after the massacre in Thessalonica in 390 (Brown 1992). Brown (1971) demonstrates how the holy men were able to succeed because of the communities' need for them to be independent from local factions.

Interpretation: The first church did not have the features of an unmediated charisma. From the start, communities were confronted with the issue of manipulation, and subsequently they developed testing procedures to address this issue. Ignatius's doctrine of obedience may be viewed as the beginnings of a hierarchical system of control. It may also be interpreted as a challenge to fragmentation and the sources can't resolve this issue. In the late antiquity, there was an office which performed both functions. But the same bishop could also monitor the use of force by the emperor and can also allow forcible action against his opponents. This change can be understood with the help of Weber's (1978) concept of 'routinization' and Bourdieu's (1991) symbolic power. There are no stories of a decline in either of these.

Medieval Christianity (12th – 15th centuries)

Evidence: The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) decreed that all adults have to confess once a year. Evidence of the history of the use of confession as a familiar means of pastoral care and moral guidance is recorded by Tentler (1977) and Bossy (1975). The papacy and local authorities created inquisitorial methods to find out the heresies (Lambert, 2002). Moore (2007) claims that these were part of a broader trend of marginalisation of Jews, lepers and the heretics. However, Duffy's recent book (2005) is full of evidence for the adoption and transformation of traditional religion by parishioners in English parochial communities, in the form of the institution of the parish guild, bequests and devotion. Other reforming and lay groups are documented by Lambert (2002) including the Waldensians, and the Franciscans, who argued against the wealth and power of the clergy.

Interpretation: Foucault's (2007) pastoral power is a useful interpretation of confession as a technology of governing the individual, through the knowledge of his/her soul. This is a Tier 3 Reading. Confession is required but it is not evident here how penitents experienced it. Duffy's evidence casts doubt on the idea that practicing meant that the victim was passive. There was a

mixture of coercion, popular participation and reform movements, and the proportions fluctuated from one area of the country to another—and from one decade to the next.

The Reformation (sixteenth century)

Evidence: Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers called into question the exclusive priestly function of bringing salvation. Pettegree (2015) demonstrates that printing was integral in Luther's ability to get to many people and to disseminate reform rapidly. But the churches, in turn, were reformed, establishing new disciplinary institutions. In Calvin's Geneva, the Consistory was responsible for moral and doctrinal issues, and was able to impose church discipline (Eire, 2016; Kingdon, 1995). In Protestant, as well as Catholic states, there was a rule of religious conformity (Eire, 2016). However, Gregory (2012) suggests that disagreements that reformers had not planned arose as a result of the principle of individual interpretation.

Interpretation: The Reformation did NOT come from manipulation to freedom. It redistributed authority. New means of supervision grew and access to scripture and lay agency grew. The power of information was diminished with the growth of vernacular Bibles and the accountability to magistrates and consistories grew strong. The case nullifies any narrative which places manipulation to one side, in the period prior to the Reformation.

Christianity in the modern period (Up to 1945) and its appeal

Evidence: There is empowerment and risk in the Charismatic and Pentecostal movements. Their world-wide distribution and their popularity among individuals who do not have social power is described by Robbins (2004) and Coleman (2000) and their variety is documented by Anderson (2004). Some critics point out that prosperity teaching may create an incentive for the poor to respond in a positive way to the economic dimension, leading them to give economically, as Gifford (2004) discovered in Ghana and Bowler (2013) discovered in the United States. A few examples of American evangelical leadership that Du Mez (2020) interprets as being influenced by militant masculinity and some survey data on Christian nationalism by Whitehead and Perry (2020). But Raboteau (2004) demonstrates how enslaved Christians resorted to reinterpretation of the Christian faith in an effort to challenge the religion of their masters, and Gutiérrez (1988)

demonstrates how liberation theology becomes a kind of Christian challenge of structural oppression.

Interpretation: Chaves (1994) proposes that the religious authority in the modern world is more voluntary, thus raising the likelihood of people leaving, but also enhancing the possibilities of competing leaders to gain the allegiance of the flock. When evaluating claims of prosperity teaching and Christian nationalism, a combination of ethnography, data from surveys and questionnaires, along with interpretation must be taken into account. In the modern period both forms of leadership and strength of resistance to leadership are found.

Summary of the historical cases

In none of the four settings was there a time when all three enabling conditions were absent and in none was there a time when all three conditions were present to the same extent in all settings. The first church did not have much authority over sacred goods and a vibrant community examination of leaders. The systems of the late antique and medieval period focused on sacramental power, and were accountable in different ways. The Reformation did not remove control; it was a change in control. But within each period there were also variations as, for example, between Lutheran Saxony and Calvinist Geneva. It isn't a straight downward trend, it is recurrent contestations.

Psychological mechanisms of religious manipulation

In this section, the theory of psychology is applied to the above cases. The whole area is rated Tier 3. In contemporary research the mechanisms are well supported, but in the application to past time periods it is an interpretation. In modern times, they are backed up by clinical and survey evidence (Section 8).

Conformity

In critical trials, wrong answers are given by individuals to conform to the majority opinion, about one third of the time, according to Asch (1956). This pressure is exacerbated by religious communities, for there is a connection between belief, belonging and identity. When it's frowned upon in a group to have reservations about something, they may be channelled into doubt to ensure

they're accepted. The results of Milgram's (1963) experiments further suggest that while a person's conscience may come into conflict with a perceived legitimate authority, personal conscience will yield to this perceived legitimate authority. In both studies, it is revealed that pathological nature is not necessary in the context of harming a person in their compliance.

Fear

Sometimes fear of a punishment from God can be an effective lever. In the medieval west fear was part of the pastoral practice because of the threat of punishment (exclusion from the sacraments), penance, and confession (Tentler, 1977). The current empirical literature on spiritual struggle suggests fears of punishment from God and abandonment from God are related to distress (Pargament & Exline, 2022). Fear isn't manipulation, it's a reaction to real-life situations. Judgments can be taught in a sincere fashion. It turns into manipulative when leaders use it to get people to comply with demands which benefit the leaders.

Shame

Tangney and Dearing (2002) differentiate between guilt and shame, guilt being related to a particular act, while shame is related to the whole self. An increased association with shame is found with withdrawal and psychological distress. Religious groups or systems that take this view (the person is corrupt to begin with) can lead to reliance upon the leader or institution as the only means of purification. This is the same in thought reform as is seen in Lifton's (1961) "cult of confession". Historical period: This is an interpretive link; with modern groups it is a testable link.

Cognitive dissonance

Miller (2015) proposed two mechanisms for decreasing the tension generated by conflicting beliefs and actions: changing the beliefs or reinterpretation of the evidence. Festinger et al., (1956) noticed a group whose prophecy failed, and that after the prophecy was disconfirmed, members of the group increased their efforts to convince others. In religious environments dissonance can also provide an account as to why religious members support leaders in the face of evidence of wrongdoing. The longer a leader has been involved in a community, the more difficult it will be to

accept the leader's underperformance. Lalich (2004) says that the long-term effect is a "bounded choice" as the members perceive their own submission as a free one.

Attachment and dependency

According to Bowlby (1982) attachment is a system that "wants" security from a trusted one. Both Kirkpatrick (2005) and Granqvist (2020) noted that the concept of God as an attachment figure is often held by people who believe in God. Insecure attachment is related to increased spiritual struggle, according to Pargament and Exline (2022). Leaders who portray themselves as God's representatives may have the ability to satisfy the attachment needs of followers. Leaders that make themselves out to be God's representative can have the capacity to satisfy that attachment needs of followers. This type of dependence isn't necessarily bad. When the leader is able to use it to manipulate the follower(s) or when the individual's lack of community and sense of secure relationship with God are lost upon leaving the group, it becomes dangerous.

These are all five mechanisms which act together. When people are forced into conformity, they will feel the need for the leader because they fear and they will feel shame because they need to stay attached and conform, and when they feel dissonance, they will rationalize their need to stay attached and conform. They are associated with the third enabling condition (psychological dependence) and they address the process of its becoming (RQ2).

The Sociological and Institutional Mechanisms

Instincts play a role in institutions. This section describes six institutional characteristics which favour or hinder manipulation.

Hierarchy

It is not manipulative to have a hierarchical structure. When it prevents the lower ranks and laypeople from challenging the higher ones it becomes so. Weber (1978) describes the way in which authority in the office can shield leaders from challenge. As in the medieval West, the more important the role of the sacrament, the more the laity relies upon the clergy in the above examples.

Information control

One of the key elements of coercive systems, according to Lifton (1961), is "milieu control. Religious restrictions of information control involve prohibiting texts, interpretation and discussion of internal issues. This is reflected in the Reformation. Print and vernacular scripture opened up information (Pettegree, 2015) and, in the case of confessional states and consistories, belief and conduct was monitored (Eire, 2016). Information control is therefore a continuum, with its advocates being either a few or many.

Patronage

Religious patronage is the link between the religious elites and economic and political power. During the late antique period, bishops had power and resources as a gift of the emperor (Brown, 1992). In contemporary prosperity movements, giving money to leaders is sometimes done in the guise of a gift of God; this is seen as benefiting the leaders at the expense of their followers (Bowler, 2013; Gifford, 2004). The service criterion is affected by the importance of patronage as it can lead to the involvement of leaders' interests in outcomes other than the good of the community.

Clericalism

The ideology that the ordained people are superior to the laypeople and that they are to be respected is called Clericalism. Pope Francis (2018) identified clericalism as a disease in the Catholic Church which allows abuse to occur. Clericalism is a sociological term and is the merger of the giving of a sacrament in an unequal manner and a culture of deference. It is also connected with the symbolic power as described by Bourdieu (1991) since deference is described as reverence towards the sacred. There is no reason why the principle should not be applied to other faiths. The same dynamics can apply anywhere where there are leaders whom people take for given.

Institutional reputation

An institution's reputation is important. In official investigations of clergy abuse, it was often discovered that church leaders have been able to remove accused clergy and/or not publish their names (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004; Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General,

2018; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017). Often the motive was a defence of the church, or a defence of the trust of the faithful. This led to the children being vulnerable to additional harm. The case of a religious mission for concealment is illustrated by reputation protection.

Accountability

All of these features have a counterpart: Accountability. For Chaves (1994), religious authority is dependent on structures which have the power to enforce compliance; when they fail, then so does religious authority. Oakley & Humphreys (2019) state that the following are characteristics of spiritually abusive cultures: weak accountability and suppression of dissent. Councils, canon law, visitations, consistories, and lay movements were all mechanisms of accountability and in varying degrees of success in the past. A paper policy of accountability has little relationship to real accountability.

The Episcopal Church in the United States of America: Clerical Abuse and Religious Trauma, a contemporary case.

Documentary evidence

Tier 1 Evidence is from official investigations. In 2004, the John Jay College of Criminal Justice (JJCCJ) conducted a study (2004) that found that there were allegations against 4,392 priests and deacons in the United States from 1950 to 2002. The Australian Catholic Church was found to have a rate of approximately 7% of alleged child sex offenders among the total number of Catholic priests in Australia between 1950 and 2010 (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017). In six PA's dioceses, a grand jury (Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General, 2018) identified over 300 priests and over 1,000 identifiable child victims. These reports tend to follow a theme: that there were weaknesses in oversight and actions taken that acted to preserve the institution.

Religious trauma

In the following cases, harm does not necessarily refer to physical or sexual harm. So far, a systematic review of the studies on the impact of Catholic clergy abusing children as adults has

found an impact on both spiritual and psychological well-being (Dhirachaikulpanich et al., 2025). Similar results can be seen in other Christian contexts, with children losing trust in their church, an erosion of their relationship with God, and struggles to leave the church (Oakley & Humphreys, 2019; Ward, 2011). Oakley et al. (2024) present some ideas for the counsellor's response. According to Pargament and Exline (2022), spiritual struggle is a typical consequence of this harm while Park et al. (2017) situate it in the larger issue of meaning following trauma.

Applying the framework

In this instance the three conditions enabling are present. There was moral prestige (asymmetric access) for priests and they controlled access to sacraments. There was poor oversight and internal controls sometimes provided for protection of the accused clergy (weak accountability). Many were taught to defer to the clergy (dependence) and victims and families were often dependent on the church for belonging and for a sense of security (safety). These are documented in the two sections of the psychological mechanisms and institutional mechanisms, but not in the reports themselves.

This module will focus on evidence and its boundaries.

Although the documentary evidence is robust, it is only for specific institutions, countries and time periods. Figures should not be compared since the methods and definitions of the different reports differ. Specific mechanisms (e.g., clericalism or shame) have an interpretation of being causal and have not been tested in controlled research and are of Tier 3. The case provided in the paper is meant to support the argument of the paper and not to prove any one cause.

Implications for Institutional Reform and Safeguarding

The framework proposes that the focus of safeguarding be directed towards the circumstances that allow manipulation, as well as the individual perpetrators of such manipulation.

1. **Limit unchecked control over sacred goods**. Access to vulnerable persons roles should be screened, trained, supervised and have a code of conduct. In the Royal Commission (2017), it was recommended to make changes in the way information is disclosed in the confessions, the training of confessors, screening, and/or governance.

2. **Build independent accountability**. Reporting/review should not be restricted to the institution that is being reviewed. Pope Francis issued his document Vos estis lux mundi in 2019, which set out the reporting process and was an attempt to cover accountability for Bishops. This is further enhanced by external scrutiny panels, and lay involvement and open procedures.

Be sure to safeguard consent and exit. Members should have the opportunity to ask about things, to complain and to go without punishment. Healthy Christian cultures embrace disagreement and hold accountability in common, Oakley and Humphreys (2019) say.

4. Address clericalism and deference. A clericalism is an enabling condition", Pope Francis (2018) said. Shared Governance, Formation stressing the service and educating the laity about their rights and responsibilities are some practical responses.

5. **Give spiritual care in a trauma-informed manner.** Spiritual struggles are to be expected and theological issues should be included in the process of recovery. Therapists, Pastors, and Chaplains can work together to help rebuild survivors' trust (Park et al., 2017; Pargament & Exline, 2022; Oakley et al., 2024).

6. **Use tradition as a resource**. This is not the first time that Christians have come up with tests of authority, as in the rules for prophets in the Didache, or liberation theology's look at oppression. These tests can be used as "home" tests within the community.

Discussion

Answering the research questions will be a major component of this work.

RQ1. Self-systems of tests of authority have been part of Christian traditions for long. The criterion in Gospels and the tests of false prophets in the Didache seem to be from the earliest sources. Other conservatives, such as the Franciscans, Luther, and liberation theologians used similar criteria later on. In Christian tradition a criticism of manipulation is provided.

RQ2. Three conditions that were tracked in the manipulation were found to converge: (1) unequal access to sacred goods, (2) low level of accountability, and (3) psychological dependence. How these conditions are manifested is described by the psychological mechanisms (conformity, fear,

shame, dissonance, attachment) as well as the institutional mechanisms (hierarchy, control of information, patronage, clericalism, reputation protection, and low accountability).

RQ3.The following thesis does not support the progression. In each of the cases, there was an appropriate and an inappropriate exercise of authority. The first church was given a challenge by manipulative prophets. Power was checked and not only authenticated, but also legitimated, by the late antique bishops. Christians were not only policed, but they were active too in the Middle Ages. Liberation and discipline - reformers. Abuse scandals and strong movements of resistance, such as those of today, are part of Christianity. An evidence-based model of recurrent contestation is able to capture the evidence better than a model of decline.

RQ4. Modern studies shed light on the characteristics of harm, encompassing psychological and spiritual injury (Dhirachaikulpanich et al., 2025; Pargament & Exline, 2022). Provides justification for seriously considering the possibility of past harm. This does not constitute evidence of harm to medieval penitents, or parishioners during the Reformation, because there are no similar data.

Replacing the progression thesis

The results corroborate the shift of the decline model to a recurrent contestation model. Each age has the potential of serving and dominating. Whether it is the former or the latter will prevail, depends on the institutional conditions and on the resistance of the followers and the reformers. This model is more accurate than the decline model and more useful as it suggests measures needed to protect, rather than a lost golden age.

Theological implications

When service is always based on the Gospel, manipulation is not a given when living in institutions. It's a step away from the standards which Christians themselves hold. This provides an opportunity to do internal critique. It also implies that the Christian community has a special responsibility to develop the accountability that they need to develop, which their own texts demand.

An ethical warning is also included in the framework. The use of the term 'manipulators' for past leaders is a moral judgment and should be based on evidence of their knowledge or that of

their institutions that harm was done. Many confessors, pastors and clergy did good work based on the assumptions and perspectives of their time. It differentiates between buildings which support manipulation and people's intentions. Most people in a structure may have good intentions but that doesn't mean it can't cause harm.

Contribution

The paper will make three contributions. It provides a theology, sociology and psychological approach to a framework in which to operate. It takes into account that framework in four historical contexts and one contemporary context. It also marks evidence as tiered in order to let readers know on documents where a claim is based and where it is based on theory.

Limitations and further studies

There are too many Christian traditions to be covered by the cases. The analysis of Orthodox, Oriental and Global South Christianities (Jenkins, 2007) would need to be conducted separately from these patterns, and would have the potential to complicate them. Some of the criteria reflect the western and Protestant notions of consent and choice. The tier system diminishes, but doesn't eliminate, the danger of proffering reading of modern psychology on past societies.

Future research might (a) employ the framework for cases outside of the Western tradition, including Orthodox contexts, (b) take advantage of archival information to reconstruct the experience of ordinary believers such as visitation records and court cases, (c) test the three-condition hypothesis in contemporary congregations through comparative empirical studies, and (d) investigate how reform movements succeeded in lowering the conditions of manipulation.

Conclusion

No spiritual authority or religious manipulation is a single story. They are alternate options in the same relationship and they have existed, in all periods of Christian history. The dependence of followers on the group, the control of sacred goods by the leaders and the erosion of accountability caused manipulation to be possible. How these conditions fix in place is through psychological processes of conformity, fear, shame, dissonance, and attachment as well as institutional factors of

clericalism, information control, patronage, and reputation protection. An escape and a reformation seemed to have been present when conditions were noted.

This paper presents the separation of documentary evidence from the theorizing of it, demonstrating what can be said and cannot be said about the past. It also indicates that the test of manipulation which is implicit in Christian tradition is whether authority is used for service or not. Faithful safeguarding will take care of structures and conditions, rather than individual offenders.

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