

Title: Abuse, faith and secular culture: Friend or Foe?

Description:

Secular culture and faith, so often seen as pulling in opposite directions, but when it comes to the perpetuation and perpetration of abuse, are the foundations of both more intertwined than we realise? And how does this impact young people within faith communities?

Introduction

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Introduce myself

I'm a Christian and therefore what I say is coming from that perspective. I don't claim to be able to bring a perspective on faith from anything other than the Christian world, and totally acknowledge the ways in which those from one religious expression can use the term faith to mean "my religion", when in reality faith is so much more than one religion, one worldview, one belief system. I think it is important that we own the privilege we have and acknowledge how that blinds us to other perspectives. So throughout this I may use the term faith, but I hope you will understand that it may not relate to other faith traditions, belief systems or religious expressions. I also will be using the term secular, and in some ways I feel this term is unhelpful. For me God is love and is therefore in all things that are loving and to separate those who love without a belief system out as somehow lesser feels unhelpful and judgemental. However, for this session I feel it makes sense to separate out those holding a faith and those without one, and the term secular is a useful one for making that distinction.

It is great to hear from so many other excellent speakers, sharing from their perspective and I hope I can add another facet to this dialogue, while fully acknowledging it can only be relevant within a wider multi-faith context, which I am grateful to Jennifer and the Cassandra Learning Centre for providing.

With these caveats in place, I will begin

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Domestic abuse foundations

Before talking specifically about domestic abuse and faith I want to re-emphasise what domestic abuse is foundationally about.

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Domestic abuse is primarily about having power over someone and controlling them. The beliefs that underpin such behaviours are the ownership of the person being abused and the abusers belief that he is entitled to do what he wants. (Tree)

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I use the term he because the majority of abuse is male violence against women and if we are to see all forms abuse ended we must acknowledge the ways in which the patriarchal power structures the world is built on perpetuate the ownership of women and the reality of male privilege which converge to bring about domestic abuse. Male victims... This is not about being anti men, 80 – 90% of men...

If foundationally all abuse is about having power over and controlling, out of a belief in the ownership of women by men and the entitlement of men over women, is this a message that is foundational to many faiths or is it a message that has been read into, and out of those texts held sacred by people of faith?

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Discuss?

I believe ideas of ownership of women and entitlement of men stem from culture, and where these beliefs are found in faith, they are distortions of the true value of humanity. It is also important to acknowledge that although we may live in a secular world, it has been deeply influenced by Christendom and in particular Augustine, but also from individuals like Aristotle, Plato and Freud who all held very misogynistic views. We can't in some senses separate out what is faith and what is culture, but if we are to live out our faith with integrity we individually and as faith groups need to be clear on where faith has been distorted either by people, powers or wider culture.

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An example of this can be seen within our understandings of marriage. If we look at the historic cultural views of marriage they are of a woman being sold by her father, to her husband. These cultural ideas of marriage are shown throughout the Biblical narrative, and it is only as we have moved forward that the idea of marriage as a financial transaction between two men has become **un**acceptable, and instead it is the union of two people, seen in both Jesus' teaching and in the Genesis account of creation.

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If the devaluing of women is not founded in faith, but rather culture then this is extremely significant in addressing domestic abuse within a faith context and it would suggest that where the devaluing of women is seen in faith communities, this is actually conforming to society, rather than being set apart from it.

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Faith: Set apart from culture

There is a real sense that for each faith community there is importance in being set apart from secular society. For some faiths, clothing is a visual separation, for some it is taking part in regular meetings, for some it is choosing not to take part in certain activities, and for some it is having prayer times or practices that remind us of our commitment to a higher power.

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What is really significant about this, is that many faith groups, including some within the Christian faith would say the ways in which they rigidly stick to gender roles, believe in male rulership of women and subjugate women are about being set apart from secular society, about maintaining a “faith distinctive” and often fail to see that actually this “set apartness” is actually a distortion of faith and is more based in culture and history than in the values of any faith.

Young people and faith

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So if this is the case, how does it relate to young people?

Young people are much more able to connect with and see the outward signs of set apartness, than the specific value system that having a faith give us. So often it is impossible for young people (and many adults) to consider how their values interact with individual situations and so instead specific rules and dos and do nots are the way young people see their faith. As a young person growing up within a faith community I knew I wasn't allowed to do certain things, but I didn't necessarily know why. I wasn't able to apply a value system to my decisions, rather I knew things fell into a list of right and wrong. I think this very much fits with adolescent development and recognising that the less absolute and more nuanced concepts are, the more difficult they are for young people to grasp. It isn't until children reach the age of 11 that they begin to truly understand the concept of death, a very complex concept.

Black and white concepts, dos and do nots are clear in young people's minds, however the value systems behind them and the reasoning behind making a decision are much less able to be grasped

For example I lead the youth sessions for 11-14 year olds in my church. When I asked them what it means to be a Christian, their answers were “go to Church, read the Bible, don't watch certain programmes”. When in actual fact, the highest laws of the Christian faith are to love God and love others as we love ourselves.

If we consider how often the polarising of girls and boys, and the pushing of gender roles are given as measures of how set apart a religion is from society, it can lead young people into thinking that living out their faith means conforming to oppressive views of women.

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My Story

So with all that in mind I want to share with you my story.

As a young person I was passionate about my faith, I had a faith that was my own and wasn't just “doing what my parents said”. I loved God and tried to do what He

said. My entire world was within a Christian bubble. Both my primary and secondary education were at schools with a Christian ethos and all my close friends were from my Church.

I wasn't allowed to read teenage magazines, didn't have a television and wasn't allowed to listen to inappropriate music.

Nobody told me that if a boy wants to be with you all the time, that's really not normal. Nobody told me that he should be nice to my friends, or that if he cheated on me, it was because he didn't respect me. Nobody told me that a boy could sexually abuse me; that just because I said yes didn't mean I was in a position to give informed consent. Nobody told me anything about that.

So when I met a boy, and he put me down, devalued me and slept with other girls I didn't realise it was that bad. When he refused to use contraception and told me I shouldn't use the pill because then it wasn't "real", I didn't know that was unacceptable. When he manipulated and pushed me into sex I didn't realise it was actually sexual abuse and when he insisted on going everywhere with me, including the toilet I didn't realise something was very very wrong.

Instead what I had been taught was the following:

1. Fairy tales
2. Romantic comedies
3. Christian boys
4. Chocolate cake: Abstinence-only based education with no teaching on contraception
5. The primary way to live out your faith is to tell everyone you are a Christian, and never do anything wrong
6. Forgive those who hurt you, no matter what, or God won't forgive you,
7. Selflessness is key, I must put everyone else before myself, and sacrifice my feelings in order to love others
8. If you have sex, you're basically married to that person and must stay with them forever
9. Women are supposed to do the cleaning and childcare
10. Men need to learn to drive more than women did
11. God's love can change anyone and make them good
12. Nobody had really told me anything about men and women, but I did know it said in the Bible about submitting and I thought this meant I had do whatever I was told by a husband
13. All of this was part of what it meant to really be a Christian, to compromise on it was to sell out Jesus.

I was 17 years old when I met my ex-husband. I had my first child and got married when I was 18 and was so horrifically treated by him I became a walking dead person, hating myself and barely surviving. At 21 I escaped him when he assaulted me and my second child was born three months premature, weighing only 2lb 6oz.

I didn't have the skills to make good choices about relationships, in fact what I had been taught either deliberately, or in the modelling of those around me, was that I was a doormat. All it took then was for the misfortune of meeting an abuser and I endured horrific abuse for four years.

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Reframe experiences

It took attending the Freedom Programme (??) and masses of counselling and prayer for me get to a place of healing. I had to reframe my entire understanding of my faith, in order to reconcile it with the reality of abuse, addressing what I now would say are three specific areas of theology:

1. Theology of power
 - a. Who holds power
 - b. How we use power
2. Theology of gender
 - a. Roles of men and women
 - b. Value of men and women (evolutionary science)
3. Theology of relationships

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- a. Marriage and divorce
- b. Forgiveness and repentance
- c. Headship and submission
- d. Sex before marriage
- e. Prayer changes abusers
- f. The nature of suffering

And for each faith community or religion, there are different specific areas which must be considered and potentially reframed.

As a Christian working within the violence against women sector I have had to face individuals and organisations who believe that faith is the problem. (Harmful cultural practices event.)

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But we only have to look at the popularity of Fifty Shades of Grey, the horror of the Jimmy Saville abuse and the Rochdale abuse to see that patriarchal culture is everywhere. It is an all pervasive evil that although is not the fault of religion, has filtered its way into every expression of faith there is. And faith groups and individuals of faith have used their power to perpetuate abuse.

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With all that said, and having looked at the ways that wrong messages from my faith community disabled me from making good choices as a young person, I also want to

share with you that I stand here because of my faith. When I got to the bottom of everything else, it was the strength of an Almighty God that got me through, some people say God is a crutch, actually He's more than that, He's everything to me, and without Him/Her I would be dead right now.

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Before I finish, I want to say to you that some of what I have said may be considered controversial and potentially even heretical. I know that not everyone will agree with my perspective, all I ask is that as you process what I've said, you consider if the reason you disagree is because I am wrong, or whether it's because it challenges deeply seated traditional views that need a bit of shaking up.

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So as we consider the ways we need to go forward from this place, it is in the acknowledgement that on one hand we need to do better at providing young people with a framework for their faith that includes equipping them to understand abuse, not become doormats and understand patriarchal power structures, while on the other hand acknowledging the many ways that having a faith can enhance young people's lives and enable them to cope with all life throws at them. For many young people, their faith is as integral to their lives as any other facet of their identity and it is as we provide holistic services that acknowledge this that we will see all young people able to make good choices.