

HOW TO TRAIN UP A CHILD:
RATIONALIZATIONS FOR CHILD ABUSE IN FUNDAMENTALIST CHRISTIANITY AND
EFFECTS ON SURVIVORS

Miles Asher Dorai-Raj

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Introduction

In September 2003, *Parents* magazine ran an article called “Count Our Blessings” by Andrea Cooper. The article followed the life of Michelle Duggar (née Ruark) and her family.¹ At the time, she and her husband, Jim Bob Duggar, had 14 children together. While the family was already well-known in their hometown of Tontitown, AR, this article rocketed them into the forefront of American cultural consciousness. They were contacted by Discovery Health Channel, who did a special on the family that aired in 2004.² After two more specials in 2005 and 2006, they began to film a reality show with TLC called *17 Kids and Counting!*, which ran until 2015.³

What adoring fans and curious onlookers didn’t know, however, was what was going on behind the scenes in the Duggar household. In 2002, Jim Bob and Michelle were made aware that their eldest son, Josh, had sexually assaulted several younger girls, including several of his sisters, starting when he was 12 years old.⁴ In response, he was sent to a training center run by the Institute in Basic Life Principles (IBLP), a non-denominational Christian organization which emphasizes Biblical discipleship as being necessary to personal and spiritual growth.⁵ In the program, he was forced to do physical labor, and received “lust counseling.”⁶ When Andrea Cooper arrived at the Duggar home to interview them, she was not informed of this. In fact, she was given no explanation on the reason for Josh’s absence.⁷ It was not until an anonymous source sent information of Josh’s assaults and abuse to the Oprah Winfrey show that anyone outside of the family knew what had happened.⁸ However, he never

1 Andrea Cooper, “I Introduced The Duggar Family To The World. Am I Responsible For Their Rise To Fame?,” *Huffington Post*, May 24, 2022, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/introduced-duggar-family-josh-19-kids-counting_n_6283f1dde4b04353eb0a5ece.

2 Tiffany White, “We Rewatched ‘14 Kids and Pregnant Again’ and Feel Awful for Joy-Anna Duggar,” *inTouch*, March 16, 2018, <https://www.intouchweekly.com/posts/14-kids-and-counting-156209/>.

3 Cooper, “I Introduced the Duggar Family To The World.”

4 Abby Ohlheiser, “A Timeline of the Molestation Allegations against Josh Duggar,” *The Washington Post*, May 23, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/05/23/a-timeline-of-the-molestation-allegations-against-josh-duggar/>.

5 “Our Mission,” *Institute in Basic Life Principles* (blog), accessed September 24, 2024, <https://iblp.org/about/>.

6 Lydia Price, “Looking Back at Josh Duggar’s First Attempt at Recovery: Controversial ‘Lust Counseling’ and ‘Hard Physical Work,’” *People*, August 27, 2015, <https://people.com/tv/josh-duggar-how-he-sought-treatment-after-teen-molestation-incident/>.

7 Cooper, “I Introduced The Duggar Family To The World.”

8 Ohlheiser, “Timeline of Molestation Allegations.”

faced any legal action for the acts of sexual violence he perpetrated as a teenager, though he was interviewed by police three years after confessing to his parents.⁹ It was shortly after these revelations were made public that their show, now called *19 Kids and Counting!*, was canceled.¹⁰

Religious fundamentalism, as defined by the Encyclopedia Britannica, is a “type of conservative religious movement characterized by the advocacy of strict conformity to sacred texts.”¹¹ Originally created to refer to a certain set of Protestant Christian beliefs, the term fundamentalism has now expanded to refer to any and all types of religions.¹² In fact, the term Christian fundamentalism can refer to any number of Protestant or Catholic denominations, including the beliefs and traditions of this paper’s focus, the Independent Fundamental Baptist (IFB) movement, the New Independent Fundamental Baptist movement (NIFB), and IBLP.

Both the IFB and NIFB believe that the King James translation of the Bible (KJV) is the only accurate translation of the Word of God, and understand the world around them through Biblical interpretation.¹³ Hood et al. refer to the use of the Bible as the only way of understanding the world as the intratextual model of fundamentalist thought.¹⁴ As the central text of their belief system, the Bible is held up as the only way of determining the truth of the world, and the will of God. As Hood et al. explain,

the only objective reality for the person is that which is based on belief in the authoritative text, all who do not share this same belief cannot participate in the same reality and are thus viewed as outsiders and as sources of opposition.¹⁵

In the intratextual model, the believer’s entire reality, and therefore their beliefs and actions, are governed by literal interpretation of the KJV. Even those actions which may stem from their own

9 Cooper, “I Introduced The Duggar Family To The World.”

10 Ibid.

11 “Fundamentalism,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Britannica.com, Inc.), accessed September 24, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/fundamentalism>.

12 *Britannica*, “Fundamentalism.”

13 “Our Statement of Faith,” *IndependentBaptist.Com* (blog), accessed September 24, 2024, <https://www.independentbaptist.com/24105-2/>; *Old and New Independent Fundamental Baptist Differences (New vs Old IFB)* (YouTube, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFhC_585X6o.

14 Ralph W. Hood, Peter C. Hill, and W. Paul Williamson, *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism* (New York, NY, 2005): 22-3.

15 Hood et al., *Psychology of Fundamentalism*: 23.

inherent nature, or beliefs they might hold outside which come from a source outside of the Bible, are justified by words and stories found in scripture. While sometimes, such as in the case of Michael and Debi Pearl's book *To Train Up A Child*,¹⁶ this justification comes before the actual act of abuse, Biblical reasoning can be applied after the fact. Stephen A. Kent argues that, in the case of child sexual abuse (CSA)—though this can be extrapolated to other forms of interpersonal violence—beliefs or practices can be created by a religious leader to justify urges to perpetrate CSA, or having perpetrated CSA in the past.¹⁷ In cases of CSA, sexual assault (SA), and interpersonal violence (IPV),¹⁸ the feelings of power over others are what result in these acts of abuse.¹⁹

While religion may have a comforting or healing effect when dealing with trauma, associations with past abuse may lead survivors to associate all religion with those traumatic experiences.²⁰ This can lead to conversion to a new faith system, or leaving religion entirely.²¹

This paper will argue two points:

1. In the homes of those following IFB or NIFB thought (as well as in many other conservative Christian movements), IPV,²² SA, and CSA are explicitly justified through Biblical interpretation, and
2. Experiences of IPV, SA, and/or CSA that are justified through the Bible can impact the ways in which the victims interact with religion in the future.

16 Michael Pearl and Debi Pearl, *To Train Up A Child* (Pleasantville, TN: Michael Pearl, 1994), <https://archive.org/details/totrainupchild00pear/page/n3/mode/2up>.

17 Stephen A Kent, "Religious Justifications for Child Sexual Abuse in Cults and Alternative Religions," *International Journal of Cultic Studies* 3 (2012): 52.

18 Many people believe that using acronyms for these and other triggering subjects limits the negative effects of reading or hearing about these topics. While I couldn't find much actual evidence for this, I will be using these abbreviations throughout the paper in the event that this is true.

19 Lyn Yonack, "Sexual Assault Is About Power: How the #MeToo Campaign Is Restoring Power to Victims," *Psychology Today*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psychoanalysis-unplugged/201711/sexual-assault-is-about-power>.

20 Sarah Perry, "Religious/Spiritual Abuse, Meaning-Making, and Posttraumatic Growth," *Religions* 15 (July 8, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15070824>.

21 Lori L. Fazzino, "Leaving the Church Behind: Applying a Deconversion Perspective to Evangelical Exit Narratives," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29, no. 2 (2014): 249–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2014.903664>.

22 This includes both physical and non-physical forms of abuse, as discussed later in this paper.

First, I will explain the reasons why people join groups like the IFB, NIFB, and the IBLP, and the reasons that people find it hard to leave these groups. Then I will show the ways that these groups use the Bible and theology to justify IPV, SA, and CSA. This section will also include examples of well-known figures in US American conservative Christianity accused of SA and CSA, and the ways that theology was used against their victims. Finally, I will show the ways that the relationship that abuse survivors have to their religious beliefs can change due to experiences of Biblically-justified IPV, SA, and/or CSA.

What Draws People into High-Control Groups?

While the term “cult” is much more ubiquitous, the term’s judgmental connotations can often obscure some of the most important characteristics of abusive movements, religious or not. Referring to them as high control groups (HCGs) or high demand groups (HDGs) better explains the characteristics which set them apart from other types of religious, social, or political organizations. Dr. Steven Hassan’s BITE Model distinguishes how HCGs influence members’ behavior by exerting total control over their behavior, what information they have access to, how they think, and their emotions.²³ This sort of control seems rather oppressive from an outsider’s perspective, but Hood et al. assert that fundamentalist Christianity, like every other religion, provides a system of meaning which provides a person with beliefs about themselves and others.²⁴

For men specifically, entry into high control religious groups gives them access to power that they may feel they lack in mainstream religion or secular culture. Mark Jurgensmeyer’s *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* asserts that men who feel marginalized—either by age, race, class, or religious belief—in their communities are more susceptible to radicalization by religious extremists.²⁵ The narratives given to young men in the terrorist organizations Jurgensmeyer

23 Steven Hassan, “The BITE Model of Authoritarian Control: Undue Influence, Thought Reform, Brainwashing, Mind Control, Trafficking, and the Law” (Dissertation, Santa Barbara, CA, Fielding Graduate University, 2021): 52-6.

24 Hood et al., *Psychology of Fundamentalism*: 14.

25 Mark Jurgensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

discusses parallel those in the IBLP. By making men the head of their homes, they are given a power which they might not have otherwise felt they had.²⁶ Feelings of power can have a corrupting effect, decreasing empathy and compassion, and resulting in a higher predisposition towards violence.²⁷ In households which follow the aggressive patriarchal beliefs espoused by the IBLP, the IFB/NIFB, and other similar Christian groups, this results in a higher chance of domestic violence.

Non-religious Abuse in Christian Homes

Just because there is a strong connection between following conservative Christian teachings and perpetrating abuse doesn't mean that those two things are always related. John Anderson, the son of NIFB founder Steven Anderson, has come forward about his experiences of IPV as perpetrated by his parents. However, he has stated that this abuse was not explicitly related to his parents' religious beliefs.²⁸ While it may be in some way related to the teachings of the NIFB, the children are not being taught that their experiences of IPV are due to their sinful nature or because they are not obeying God. The relationship between religion and abusive behavior is likely still present in situations such as the Andersons', however, due to the hyper-militant masculinity that the NIFB, as well as the IFB and the IBLP, teach to their followers. The belief that a man is the head of his household, and that his wife and children must fully obey him can imply the need for manipulation tactics or violence to enforce these hierarchies.

Biblical Rationalizations for Abuse

"These truths are not new, deep insights from the professional world of research," the introduction of *To Train Up A Child* reads, "rather, the same principles the Amish use to train their stubborn mules, the same technique God uses to train his children."²⁹ This parenting advice book,

26 "Shiny Happy People: Duggar Family Secrets" (Amazon Prime, June 2, 2023).

27 Tobore Onojighofia Tobore, "On Power and Its Corrupting Effects: The Effects of Power on Human Behavior and the Limits of Accountability Systems," *Communicative & Integrative Biology* 16, no. 1 (August 24, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/19420889.2023.2246793>.

28 Steven and Zhusanna Anderson Exposed for Child Abuse, Violent Threats, and Online Hypocrisy, Preacher Boys, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRnmg2ZoEvM>.

29 Pearl and Pearl, *To Train Up A Child*.

originally self-published by Michael and Debi Pearl in 1994, was (and likely still is) one of the most popular parenting advice books amongst members of the IBLP,³⁰ as well as in the larger conservative Christian community. Throughout the book, the Pearls use quotations from the KJV to explain how their methods of child “training” (actually a mixture of physical and mental child abuse) are endorsed by God.

The popularity of the Pearls’ book is not surprising, considering the connection frequently made between fundamentalist religious belief and instances of IPV within the home. This is not an unfair assumption to make, considering that religious households, and specifically Christian households, are some of the most likely to feature child abuse.³¹ In these cases, religious justification can take several forms, though these types of justification overlap in some places. The first would be through attributing a child’s bad behavior to them being possessed by Satan or other demons.³² The second type of justification can be seen in *To Train Up a Child*—The use of quotations from the Bible to show that the parents’ abusive actions are condoned by God.³³ In either case, the parent believes themselves to be delivering the child from sin, making their own actions permissible, and in fact necessary, for the sake of proper child-rearing.

Abusers find Biblical support for their actions throughout both the Old and New Testaments. Proverbs is cited throughout *To Train Up A Child*. One line used especially often by the Pearls states that a parent who “spareth the rod” does not truly love their child.³⁴ The use of this verse has several effects which enable abuse and keep victims from protecting themselves. While the types of abuse which happen in fundamentalist and IBLP households can vary, three types are talked about or alluded to in *To Train Up A Child*:

30 “Shiny Happy People.”

31 Bette L. Bottoms et al., “In the Name of God: A Profile of Religion-Related Child Abuse,” *Journal of Social Issues* 51, no. 2 (1995): 85–111, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1995.tb01325.x>; Bette L. Bottoms et al., “Religion-Related Child Physical Abuse: Characteristics and Psychological Outcomes,” ed. Janet Mullins, *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 8, no. 1 (2004): 87–114, https://doi.org/10.1300/J146v08n01_04.

32 Bottoms et al., “Religion-Related Child Physical Abuse”: 90.

33 Ibid., 88-9

34 Proverbs 13:24 (KJV)

1. Physical abuse: Aggressive behavior which results in bodily harm to another person or people. Can include beating, kicking, biting, shaking, and burning, which can sometimes result in permanent damage or even death.³⁵
2. Emotional abuse: The use of non-physical tactics which have detrimental effects on a person's behavior, affective functioning, and overall mental health. Can take the form of verbal abuse, intimidation, humiliation, harassment, rejection, withholding of affection, isolation, and excessive control.³⁶
3. Spiritual abuse: A umbrella term for several types of religion-related physical and emotional abuse, including: Emotional abuse where someone uses religion as a justification for all negative events in another person's life, including further physical and emotional abuse; and the use of physical or emotional abuse to force a person to adhere to a certain belief system.³⁷

The idea that abuse equals love for one's child makes parents feel guilty for not physically abusing their children, and makes the children feel guilty for fighting back against or otherwise attempting to prevent abuse. In fact, children may not even know they can prevent the abuse, as books like the Pearls' normalize the act of child abuse. By normalizing this abuse, acts of violence can be seen as appropriate expressions of emotion,³⁸ and may lead to the victim further perpetrating the abuse later in life.³⁹

Another verse commonly used to excuse child abuse comes from Epistle to the Ephesians.

Chapter 6 includes a list of household codes which instruct wives, children, and enslaved people in how to interact with the head of the household, and vice versa.⁴⁰ In this, children are given the injunction to

35 "Physical Abuse," in *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (American Psychological Association, April 19, 2018), <https://dictionary.apa.org/physical-abuse>.

36 "Emotional Abuse," in *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (American Psychological Association, n.d.), <https://dictionary.apa.org/emotional-abuse>.

37 Andrea Mathews, "When Is It Spiritual Abuse?," *Psychology Today* (blog), May 11, 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/traversing-the-inner-terrain/201905/when-is-it-spiritual-abuse>.

38 Amanda Ruggeri, "How the Abnormal Gets Normalized - and What to Do about It," *BBC*, March 17, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20240314-how-the-abnormal-gets-normalised-and-what-to-do-about-it>.

39 Cathy S. Wisdom and Michael G. Maxfield, "An Update on the 'Cycle of Violence,'" *NIJ Research in Brief*, March 2001, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR09480>.

40 Kathleen Gallagher Elkins, "The Haustafeln (Household Codes) in Ephesians and the Potential for Child Abuse," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 23, no. 6 (2024), <https://learn.elca.org/jle/the-haustafeln-household-codes-in-ephesians-and-the-potential-for-child-abuse/>.

obey their parents, while parents must bring them up in “nurture and admonition” of God.⁴¹ These instructions to parents do not specify any specific sort of behavior, but some interpret Ephesians as saying that it is permissible to physically punish disobedience, which creates that same association between love, religion, and physical abuse. These associations between love and abuse can have long-term effects in the minds of the children, affecting them well into adulthood.

The “Necessity” for Abuse in Quiverfull Families

Even before the first episode of *19 Kids and Counting!* Aired in 2007, there had been several other reality shows and TV specials about large Christian families, some of them members of the IBLP.⁴² Afterwards, there was a boom in reality shows about families like the Duggars who follow the Quiverfull lifestyle. Quiverfull families believe that every child is a gift from God, meaning that the use of birth control or other forms of family planning are sinful.⁴³ The name of the movement itself comes from Psalm 127: “Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are the children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them.”⁴⁴ But having so many children is often be difficult to manage, especially if the mother is expected to do all of the childcare by herself.

The use of the “buddy system” is very common in Quiverfull families. By having older children—or, more accurately, the older daughters—take care of their younger siblings, the burden of parenting is somewhat lifted from the mother, and gives her “helpers” so that she doesn’t have to parent so many children on her own.⁴⁵ Also called parentification, this “buddy system” is a form of emotional abuse which forces children to take on adult roles within the household. These experiences can lead to feelings of shame, anxiety, and depression for the parentified child, but also have a negative impact on

41 Ephesians 6:4 (KJV)

42 Dan Clarendon, “Satisfy Your Duggar Addiction With These Five Other Extra-Large Families, One of Which Boasts 34 Kids!,” *inTouch*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.intouchweekly.com/posts/families-like-the-duggars-156245/>.

43 Kathryn Joyce, *Quiverfull: Inside the Christian Patriarchy Movement* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009).

44 Psalm 127:3-5 (KJV).

45 Andrea Francese, “‘Counting On’: How Does the Duggar Family’s Buddy System Work?,” *Showbiz CheatSheet*, July 27, 2019, <https://www.cheatsheet.com/entertainment/counting-on-how-does-the-duggar-familys-buddy-system-work.html/>.

the siblings they're raising, as they develop a parent-child relationship with the parentified child as opposed to with their actual parents.⁴⁶

Children in Quiverfull families are also likely to experience IPV. A cousin of the Duggar children, Amy King, stated in an interview that her cousins often experienced physical abuse, often called "encouragement." Having learned from the Pearls, the Duggar parents used IPV to instill obedience in their children. This is not uncommon within the Quiverfull movement—regardless of denomination or other beliefs, many turn to IPV as a way of not only keeping order amongst their children, but husbands are encouraged to physically abuse their disobedient wives as well.⁴⁷

Christian Community Responses to Alleged Abuse

The most well-known example of excusing SA and CSA, and protecting perpetrators in IFB and IBLP circles is that of Josh Duggar. When his abuse was reported to the Oprah Winfrey Show in 2006, it was the first time that the events discussed at the introduction of this paper came to light. Most concerning to many outsiders was the fact that his parents did not properly address the abuse of his sisters and other girls he interacted with. Instead, he was given Biblical counseling, and continued to be allowed around the survivors of his actions.⁴⁸ Along with this, the Christian summer camp organization Kanakuk Kamps covered for several people accused of SA and CSA, including their director, Pete Newman.⁴⁹ Instead of having the perpetrators face punishment, the Duggar parents and the head of Kanakuk, John White, hid these cases of sex abuse, and, in the latter case, rewarded the abuser by giving him a promotion, and firing employees who had called for his dismissal.⁵⁰ In both of these instances, as well as many other instances of SA and CSA by men in gender-traditionalist Christian organizations such as the IBLP, Kanakuk Kamps, and churches which fall under the fundamentalist or

46 Francese, "Duggar Family's Buddy System"; "What Is Parentification?," *Cleveland Clinic Health Essentials* (blog), October 14, 2024, <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/parentification>.; Marolyn Wells and Rebecca Jones, "Childhood Parentification and Shame-Proneness: A Preliminary Study," *American Journal of Family Therapy* 28, no. 1 (2000): 19–27, <https://doi.org/0192-6187>.

47 Joyce, *Quiverfull*: 207.

48 Cooper, "I Introduced The Duggar Family To The World."

49 *Kanakuk: Christian Sports Camp Hides Abuse, Silences Survivors*, YouTube Video, Fundie Fridays, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDEqOwnuLy0>.

50 *Kanakuk*, Fundie Fridays.

evangelical umbrella, the abusers are still permitted to be around the same demographics which they victimize.⁵¹

Many of those in these communities who attempt to speak out are often silenced using rationalizations associated with purity culture, which emphasizes one's virginity and the associated lack of sin.⁵² Purity culture teaches that women and girls are responsible for the sexual urges of the men and boys around them, which then results in victims not being able to identify that they have been assaulted or abused, and, if they do identify this, they are not believed or supported.⁵³ As McKinsie and Richards explain, women in gender-traditionalist Christian groups “are not seen as fully human [...] rather than autonomous individuals, they are vessels of purity possessed by others.”⁵⁴ By reducing their humanity, as well as their agency in the environment in which they live, women and girls are more vulnerable to victimization. This, too, can extend to boys (the aforementioned Pete Newman primarily abused young boys), but in the context of purity culture, the onus of maintaining the sinless nature of both themselves and others is firmly placed on the shoulders of women and girls.

Other ineffective responses to accusations of abuse by church leaders may be caused by a graduated perspective of abuse, as described by Houston-Kolnik et al.⁵⁵ Because they view different types of abuse as “better” or “worse” than each other, pastors are hesitant to address non-physical abuse, and (unintentionally) communicate that some experiences of IPV are more important than others. Along with this, unless the victim is facing serious bodily harm, they may be encouraged to forgive their abuser, and even return to the relationship.⁵⁶ In some cases, this can put the victim in more danger. A study of 683 abuse survivors in Japan found that, in 39% of cases, the abuse became much

51 Ashleigh E McKinsie and Patricia Richards, “Institutional, Ideological, and Interactional Constraints: The Case of Sexual Abuse in White Evangelical Settings,” *Sociological Forum* 37, no. 3 (September 2022): 744–65, <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12820>.

52 *Purity Culture & Abstinence Only Education in America | Politics, Religion & Disney Channel Stars*, YouTube Video, Fundie Fridays, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGXptwI91w>.

53 McKinsie & Richards “Sexual Abuse in White Evangelical Settings”: 756-7.

54 Ibid., 759.

55 Jaclyn D. Houston-Kolnik, Nathan R. Todd, and Megan R. Greeson, “Overcoming the ‘Holy Hush’: A Qualitative Examination of Protestant Christian Leaders’ Responses to Intimate Partner Violence,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 63, no. 1/2 (March 2019): 135–52, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12278>.

56 Houston-Kolnik, Todd, & Greeson, “Overcoming the ‘Holy Hush’”: 148.

worse after it had been reported.⁵⁷ Fear of abuse worsening after reporting can further decrease the chance of victims coming forward about what is happening.

Further contributing to this hesitancy is also a misunderstanding of what actually “counts” as IPV. Houston-Kolnik et al.’s found that, while many pastors reported not having experience with counseling victims and survivors of IPV, these same pastors reflected later during interviews that interactions that they had responded to may have actually been instances of abuse.⁵⁸ This, along with the beliefs McKinsie and Richards outlined which strip women of agency and autonomy,⁵⁹ contributes to pastors and other religious authority figures excusing or permitting IPV, SA, and CSA. In cases of religion-related CSA, Pereda et al. found that these experiences made survivors feel as if they had been abandoned by God.⁶⁰ Similar sentiments can be inferred in cases of religion-related childhood IPV, where the child may blame themselves for their experiences, seeing themselves as sinners or having otherwise disobeyed God.⁶¹

Proverbs 13:24 creates a similar sort of burden on parents, blaming them for not “properly” disciplining their child when they are acting outside of the community’s norms. Children who are not quiet, polite, and obedient are seen as a failure on the part of the parents for not “training” them properly. *To Train Up A Child*, as well as other child-rearing advice content created by Michael and Debi Pearl, frequently compare the “training” of children to the training of a dog or a mule, indicating the way children are thought about in IFB and NIFB groups. Like a girl or woman is a possession of a man in the context of purity culture, the child is a possession of the parent. The Pearls also frequently compare disobedient or fussy children to tyrants or dictators, similar to Bottoms et al.’s finding that perpetrators of religion-related IPV often believe that their children are being influenced by demonic

57 Hiroyuki Tanaka, “39% of Childhood Abuse Victims in Japan Survey Say Things Got Worse after Seeking Help,” *Mainichi*, November 21, 2023, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20231120/p2a/00m/0na/020000c>.

58 Houston-Kolnik, Todd, & Greeson, “Overcoming the ‘Holy Hush’”: 141.

59 McKinsie & Richards, “Sexual Abuse in White Evangelical Settings”: 759.

60 Noemí Pereda et al., “An Exploratory Study on Mental Health, Social Problems and Spiritual Damage in Victims of Child Sexual Abuse by Catholic Clergy and Other Perpetrators,” *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 31, no. 4 (2022): 393–411, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2022.2080142>.

61 Bottoms et al., “Religion-Related Child Physical Abuse”: 91.

forces, or are possessed.⁶² These comparisons suggest that, when a child does not heed their parents, they are subverting a ruler/subject type of relationship. In a ‘proper’ relationship, the parents are akin to God, and “through his earthly father [...] he [the child] understands his heavenly Father.”⁶³

Surviving Abuse and Continued Religiosity

While religion can have a positive effect in the lives of abuse survivors, the use of religion as reasoning for abuse has been found to have both positive and negative effects for adults who experienced IPV or CSA when they were younger. Approximately twenty-two percent of people who leave behind their religious beliefs do so because of religious trauma.⁶⁴ McLaughlin et al. define this as reaction to CSA scandals and perceived hypocrisy,⁶⁵ but it can expanded further to include experiences of CSA and IPV related to religious beliefs.⁶⁶ Experiences of abuse unequivocally cause a change in the way that the survivor relates to God and what they believe in terms of religious or spiritual affiliation.

While their belief in the religious system they were raised in may stay constant, the use of God or the Bible against children in fundamentalist Christian groups especially has been shown to have potentially worse mental health outcomes than those of survivors whose IPV and CSA experiences were not religion-related.⁶⁷ Bottoms et al. assert that,

[a]s Durkheim (1915/1965) speculated, one of the major functions of religion is to provide us with meaning, the sense of which offers us comfort when we are vulnerable. If abuse is perpetrated in the name of God, its victim may be robbed of the meaning and comfort that spirituality can provide, which might intensify the trauma of the abuse [...] any negative impact on spirituality or religiosity might itself add to the psychological impact of the abuse⁶⁸

By using religion as rationale for their actions, abusers create a divide between their victim and their religious beliefs, which narrows which healthy coping mechanisms are available to them. [MORE]

62 Ibid.: 90.

63 Pearl and Pearl, *To Train Up A Child*: 33.

64 “Losing My Religion: Who Walks Away from Their Faith and Why?,” *APA Journals Article Spotlight* (blog), March 1, 2023, <https://www.apa.org/pubs/highlights/spotlight/issue-255>.

65 Aaron T. McLaughlin et al., “Who Are the Religious ‘Dones?’: A Cross-Cultural Latent Profile Analysis of Formerly Religious Individuals,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 14, no. 4 (2022): 512–24, <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000376>.

66 Kim Mills, “Why People Quit Religion, with Daryl Van Tongeren, PhD,” *Speaking of Psychology*, accessed November 19, 2024, <https://www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/leaving-religion>.

67 Bottoms et al., “Religion-Related Child Physical Abuse”: 94.

68 Ibid.: 91-2.

Deleterious effects of religion-related abuse do vary based on the nature of the abuse, as well as the individual experiences of the survivor, but feature the same broad strokes in terms of outcomes. Survivors of CSA perpetrated by Catholic clergy have been found to have a decrease in religious belief.⁶⁹ The same has been found of those who experience religion-related IPV.⁷⁰ As predicted by Bottoms et al., psychological outcomes are worse for survivors of childhood IPV and CSA justified by or otherwise related to their religious beliefs.⁷¹ Feelings of self-blame that might already be present are amplified, with victims either feeling that they are being punished by God, or that God has abandoned them.⁷² These feelings of self-blame also prevent victims from being able to realize that what is happening is wrong, and therefore fighting back, as they feel that it is their fault, and not the fault of their abuser, that they are experiencing IPV or CSA.

A study of female CSA survivors who had been raised within the Orthodox Jewish community found that positive feelings about God were often more related to the survivor's adult spirituality than to their past negative experiences.⁷³ CSA was linked to more explicitly negative attitudes towards God whether or not the survivor had remained Orthodox. However, those who had disaffiliated were more likely to have negative implicit attitudes than those who had not.⁷⁴ While religious experience and expression differ greatly between Christians and Jews, it is likely that these attitudes are present amongst survivors of Christian religion-related CSA and childhood IPV. This further supports the idea that religion-related abuse has a negative effect on the survivor's relationship with religion. However, Pirutinsky's study introduces the possibility that this relationship may be subsumed by religious belief in adulthood, recreating the support system that was taken away from the survivor in childhood.

Conclusion

69 Pereda et al., "An Exploratory Study": 404.

70 Bottoms et al., "Religion-Related Child Physical Abuse": 108.

71 Ibid.: 107; Pereda et al., "An Exploratory Study": 405.

72 Bottoms et al., "Religion-Related Child Physical Abuse": 108; Steven Pirutinsky and David H. Rosmarin, "My God, Why Have You Abandoned Me? Sexual Abuse and Attitudes towards God among Orthodox Jews," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 23, no. 7 (2020): 579–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2020.1788523>.

73 Pirutinsky, "My God, Why Have You Abandoned Me?": 585.

74 Ibid.

Due to their strict patriarchal hierarchy, adherence to “Biblical” gender roles, and conservative ideas about sex and sexuality, families who follow the belief systems of the IBLP, IFB, and/or NIFB are very likely to have some sort of abuse going on in the household. Even outside of these groups, many cases of IPV go unreported, as do cases of SA and CSA. Adding fuel to this fire is fear of the abuser, and, in some cases, fear of God. By using religion and God against the victim, an abuser shields themselves from criticism or blame. All instances of abuse are the victim’s fault, because they had sinned, or drawn another person into sin. Religious justification also normalizes the abuse, so that the victim might not even be able to register that their experiences are uncommon and that the actions of the abuser are considered unacceptable by society. Within the IFB, NIFB, and IBLP, there is also an added layer of social isolation, where the only non-family members who a person interacts with are likely going through the same experiences. Ways of coping with abuse or leaving the abusive situation are cut off by way of the strict conservative beliefs that these groups espouse.

Knowing the ways in which people are drawn into groups like the IBLP, IFB, and NIFB is one tactic for preventing religion-related abuse. However, what is most important that the types of abuse discussed here are present in mainline Christian groups, too. All of the Bible verses which the Pearls use in *To Train Up A Child* are verses which anyone can read and twist to their advantage.

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