

Spiritual Violence

Interview with Dr. Theresa Weynand Tobin of Marquette University

By Tammy Winn, "Spirituality Gal"



Dr. Tobin

I first came upon the term “spiritual violence” last year while attending a lecture given by Dr. Theresa Tobin, Philosophy Professor at Marquette University. Dr. Tobin is studying this concept as part of her broader work in ethics, yet the subject also impacts her life personally. Her research intrigued me so much that I decided to interview her to learn more.

According to Dr. Tobin, spiritual violence happens “when a person’s faith tradition is used against that person to damage them in their capacity for healthy spirituality.” Citing Dr. Tobin’s work, “Spiritual violence does not name [the] physical harm perpetrated through the use of arms, in the name of God or for religious purposes. Rather, the term refers to violence committed through the use of teachings, symbols, texts, and rituals that are central to peoples’ spiritual identity. In spiritual violence, religious teachings and rituals themselves become weapons used to degrade, humiliate, or otherwise damage a person, especially in her capacity for healthy spiritual development. Spiritual violence is a form of psychological and social violence.” She further states that it is also a moral harm because of how it deprives a person of the ability to develop a healthy spirituality.

Dr. Tobin first began studying the notion of spiritual violence because she was devastated by the sexual abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church, and what she found to be the Church’s grossly inadequate response to it. Furthermore, she was deeply affected by the document released from the Vatican in 2010 that included listing women’s ordination as a crime against the sacraments. This document places any attempt to ordain women among the most egregious sins in the Church. In the midst of these events, Dr. Tobin realized her “own personal struggle to cultivate a healthy spirituality that’s identified as Catholic.” Unsurprisingly, she was not the only one to feel this way. Many other Catholics have come forward to express how intensely painful it was to hear this report. This, for many, was an act of spiritual violence, whether realized or not.

Sadly, there are a variety of examples of spiritual violence, and it is not limited to one faith tradition or denomination.

“One common thread in everything I’ve looked at,” Tobin shares, “is that the very symbols through which spirituality is cultivated, that make it concrete, are the very symbols that produce the violation – both the path to the sacred and the violation of the sacred.” Priests and pastors, for example, are spiritual symbols. Thus, should one engage in abusive behavior, he or she becomes an agent of spiritual violence. Additionally, there is a structural meaning to a harm done by a religious leader within

an institutional framework, and one cannot make sense of the harm outside of the context of the system. Dr. Tobin explains, “If violating elements are built into central symbols or rituals, then participating in those rituals or connecting with the sacred through those symbols gives one the sense that she is complicit in her own spiritual abuse.”

“Spiritual violence targets people in their spiritual identity,” writes Dr. Tobin, an identity that is grounded in one’s “beliefs, behaviors, and values concerning the transcendent.” This formation includes one’s “cognitive, affective, and moral capacities,” and “it often informs many other aspects of a person’s life, including her moral orientation, civic engagement, life goals and pursuits, and her relationships with others.”

The benefit to naming this idea of spiritual violence is that it can be a step toward justice and positive change. Tobin points out that within the human rights movement and in various U.N. documents, we recognize why religious life should be protected, because a healthy spirituality is fundamentally good. “Making a case that spirituality is good, lends itself to make a case of why spiritual violence is a serious moral harm,” she states.

Regarding how one might heal from spiritual violence, Dr. Tobin thinks it depends on the nature of the spiritual violence. When the violence has institutional or structural causes, as in the cases she has studied, a collective remedy has to take place.

“People don’t recover or heal their capacity to have a healthy spirituality by themselves. The brokenness is social, not just an individualistic harm.” This is highlighted by the comments of sexual abuse victims when they say the most devastating thing that ever happened to them was the abuse, until the institution denied it. “It’s a re-victimization of that moral vulnerability to not even have the status of entering the claim, that you don’t have moral standing, that you’re not recognized, that you don’t exist.” In order to really promote healing, reparations need to be created that reestablish the victim’s stance as legitimate.

Dr. Tobin believes knowledge is power, and by talking about these matters we can help promote positive transformation. While attention has been given to other violating effects of abuse in religious contexts – such as the sexual, physical, and emotional harms done – not as much attention has been given to spiritually devastating offenses. Thus, naming and trying to understand spiritual violence is useful to give it the attention needed. In exploring the topic of spiritual violence herself, Dr. Tobin aims to understand it in as many dimensions as possible.

“I’m interested in broadening the concept, making it visible, naming it more publically for what it is so we can come up with strategies for addressing it and overcoming it.”

For information about Dr. Tobin and her work, you can visit her page on MU’s philosophy department website: http://www.marquette.edu/phil/faculty_tobin.shtml