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AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Religion and Domestic Violence: Let's Talk About God

**By Sandi Thompson-Royer, Rabbi Drorah O'Donnell Setel,
Reverend Aubra Love, Reverend Marie Fortune and Judith Hertz
For the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence**

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"Do No Wrong or Violence," Jeremiah 22:3 was written by Sandi Thompson-Royer who served as the Societal Violence Network Coordinator for the Women's Ministries Division of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

"To Save a Life is to Save a World," Rabbinic Jewish Teaching was written by Rabbi Drorah O'Donnell Setel. Rabbi Setel was a congregational leader in the Seattle area and co-facilitated (with Leigh Nachman Hofheimer) the Jewish Advisory Committee of the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence.

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A Commentary on Religious Issues in Family Violence was written by Reverend Marie Fortune and Judith Hertz. This article was excerpted with permission from "A Commentary on Religious Issues in Family Violence" written by Reverend Marie M. Fortune, an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and Founding Director of the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, 936 N. 34th Street, Suite 200, Seattle, WA 98103, (206) 634-1903 and Judith Hertz, Women of Reform Judaism, The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, 633 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017-6778 (212) 650-4051. If you would like a complete copy of this article, please contact The Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, (206) 634-1903. This article was originally published in: *Violence in the Family: A Workshop Curriculum for Clergy and Other Helpers*, Reverend Marie Fortune, (The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, 1991), pp. 137-151.

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Introduction

For years, we feminists have decried the oppressive, patriarchal structures, doctrines, symbols and rituals that constitute “religion.” And rightly so. Our bodies, our choices, our mobility, our images of ourselves and each other have been defined and restricted by mainstream interpretations of chapter and verse. The religious right has waged a sustained war against our efforts to liberate women and children, and there are days when it looks like they’re winning. And the “good guys” (like the Promise Keepers and the Million Man March), are mixed blessings, at best.

I believe it is important to think critically about religion and its place in American culture. I believe it is equally important to attend to the fact that religious tradition and spiritual practice are a foundation for a great many people in this world. Including advocates. And, most important, including battered women.

For every woman who has been trapped and abused by her religious beliefs and community, there is another woman for whom faith is a source of strength, hope, and life. As advocates, we must simply do what we always do: listen to both what is said and what is unsaid, have information, discuss options, and support and act on each woman’s decision. Period. Religious institutions are much like every other institution we work with, within, and, at times, against. Therefore, our job is no different. We must acknowledge religious institutions as a potentially viable resource for battered women. We must help them keep women’s safety and women’s lives sacred -*Nan Stoops, Executive Director, WSCADV*

What follows are four articles written by authors who are both leaders in the anti-violence against women movement, as well as leaders in each of their own respective religious communities. All of the authors reflect on important issues for advocates as we converse with survivors about the religious and spiritual issues in their lives.

“Do No Wrong or Violence,” Jeremiah 22:3 by Sandi Thompson-Royer

In this article, I would like to share my experience as a Christian and also an advocate for battered women and children. This is strictly from my Christian experience and although I strongly believe programs need to be available for victims from all religious beliefs, I will focus on my Christian experience. For about 13 years, I have been a Christian and also an advocate for battered women. Much of the time, this has been a struggle for me. In the domestic violence movement, there are many strong feminist women that are very anti-Christian and quite vocal about this. It took me many years of working in the movement before I would even talk about being a Christian. It also took me many years to feel comfortable in my own church and I kept my work as an advocate, and especially as a feminist, to myself. A huge change came when I was able to realize that these are not two separate worlds for me. I cannot separate the fact that I am a Christian and God has called me to this work. I can bring my faith to work and my work to church!

If I am to say I follow Christ, I must do this. Jesus’ focus was on social justice and he intentionally put himself in situations where he was with women, the poor, and the homeless. Jesus suffered immensely but he never lost his commitment to the oppressed. Just as Christ, my soul longs to make

sense of this crazy world we live in!

I have recently left my job as Program Director of CONNECTIONS, Ferry County's domestic violence program to take a part time position with the Women's Ministries Division of the Presbyterian Church (USA) as the Societal Violence Network Coordinator. About a year ago, 100 Presbyterians were trained by the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence on how church responses to domestic violence. Those trained were to return to their communities and continue the efforts. My role as Network Coordinator is to keep this group connected, provide them with support and resources on the issues of violence against women and church members concerned about domestic violence. I have been amazed at how folks all across the nation are working with their churches, community programs, and coalitions. These are folks that are as passionate as you and I, and are very creative in their efforts.

My pastor, Barbara Baum, in a reference letter for me, has described the alliances Church and secular communities can build together.

"Sandi is known throughout our county, and indeed beyond, for her work with Connections, the community services agency here which is concerned with issues of domestic violence against women and children. She has served as both program director and advocate for women in our small towns, as well as providing education and service to the Colville Indian Reservation on the southern half of the county.

I have been pastor of the Republic congregation for one year, and I am delighted to know Sandi as one of our members. She nudges and stretches us, indeed sometimes to a point of discomfort, as she caringly and carefully confronts us to keep mindful of some daily realities of domestic violence in our own community and our responsibility for education, awareness and action. She has been wonderfully instrumental in bridging communication between the secular community services and the ministerial association representing many of our local churches.

Sandi has already done some work on the presbytery level in this area and has recently stepped again into presbytery connection as a member of the peacemaking task force. Her skills and training, as well as her personal commitment to Jesus Christ and the issues of love and justice, serve the local congregation and presbytery well as she continues and expands her ministry among us."

Barb's letter illustrates how I have been able to merge my faith and work together. In the movement, I think we find that not only do we have many formerly battered women but also many advocates are in programs because of their faith. We need to use these advocates to work with not only the churches but also the victims that come to our programs. Like advocacy programs, churches are also called to work for justice, offer compassion and love to hurting people. This is a common ground we share.

Over the years, I have worked with many Christian women. If asked, I am open about my faith and then we are often on common ground. I have been able to use my faith and knowledge of scriptures as a resource for women. Victims need to know that it is not God's intention for them to suffer from abuse and as an advocate, I want to help them find a supportive spiritual community. This is vital, as their faith may be their best survival skill during this difficult time. Their faith is

used to make sense out of the horrific situation. By building a relationship with the pastors in our community, I know which churches and pastors will be sensitive, supportive and provide the spiritual guidance needed. If we are responding to the needs of all victims, we must put aside our preconceived notions about religious communities and work along side pastors, priests, nuns, conservative and liberal churches that are willing to provide both safety and spiritual support.

Battered women include women who sit in the pews of churches and remain silent because they feel the church is not a safe place for them. The education of our religious community is critical. Many women and children depend on the church's willingness to confront the violence. As domestic violence programs and advocates, this is part of our responsibility.

If we work with churches and ask them to be responsive and a part of social change, we also need to ask ourselves as advocacy programs what we can do to help battered women who are in churches? How can we work with the religious community to make our churches a safe place for victims? Are our programs a safe and comfortable place for Christian women and other religious women? I am challenging the programs to think about these questions.

I believe God is a God of love, justice, healing and hope and God hears our pain and anguish. In Jeremiah 22:3, he is clear with his mandate: "Do No Wrong or Violence." This scripture and the response of the Societal Violence Initiative Team reminds me a lot of our programs' and State Coalition's mission. We can work together to eliminate violence!

Suggestions for Working with the Christian Community:

1. Identify staff that are willing to learn about Christian beliefs and ask them to approach the churches.
2. Identify staff that can be a resource for Christian women.
3. Work with clergy leadership to preach about domestic violence, ask to help with worship during Domestic Violence Awareness Month, talk with church boards, and be responsible for information and resources.
4. Programs should have information available for all religious perspectives in your community.
5. List particular churches that you know are sensitive to domestic violence, use them as referrals.
6. Offer to go with victims to meet with their pastors or invite the pastors to your office to meet with victims.
7. Invite church leaders to come educate you! Yes, you need education and so do they!
8. Formally invite church leaders to speak at events such as Candlelight Vigils and Memorials for those who have died. These are partially spiritual events that provide an opportunity for reflection on the loss and grief many are experiencing.
9. Ask questions on your intakes about church involvement and sources of spiritual support. Open the door for victims to feel safe and comfortable to talk about their religious beliefs.

10. Ask the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence to be a leader in the nation and have a statewide conference bringing our programs and churches together!

“To Save a Life is to Save a World,” Rabbinic Jewish Teaching by Rabbi Drorah O-Donnell Setel

I began working with battered Jewish women in 1985 while volunteering with a Jewish alcoholism and addiction outreach program in Los Angeles. Although I had grown up in a physically and psychologically violent Jewish family, I had never connected my experience to the term “domestic violence” or heard any discussion of the topic in a Jewish context. Since that time a great deal has been done to disclose the hidden traumas within Jewish families but the level of silence and denial is still great. The historical reality of anti-Semitism has made Jewish organizations (including synagogues and social service agencies) reluctant to address publicly any issue that could make Jews look “bad.” This sense of vulnerability is shared by many ethnic and racial minority communities. In addition, myths surrounding the Jewish family and Jewish women as the central strength and means of Jewish survival have placed the blame on battered women as shaming or betraying their community if they disclose the reality of violence. All these factors make it very difficult for Jewish women to discuss battering in the first place and have an impact on how and why they seek services.

Here are several points I hope will be of use to you as you work with battered Jewish women.

There is no single definition of “Jewish.” Judaism is both a culture and a religion; Jews are both an ethnic community and a religious one. This is confusing for Jews as well as non-Jews! Some Jews would say that you are only really Jewish if you have a belief in God; others point to a long, proud history of secular, even anti-religious Jewish organizations. Even among religious Jews there are differences as significant as that between comparable Christian denominations in terms of conservatism (including fundamentalism) and liberalism. The idea of being part of a single people is important to some Jews; other Jews identify more with one specific religious or geographic subgroup. In the nearly four thousand years of their existence, Jews have lived in every part of the world and integrated customs from nearly every culture. In the Seattle area we have a large, vibrant population of Jews with strong roots in Mediterranean cultures, especially that of Rhodes, as well as the generally more familiar Jewish groups from Central and Eastern Europe.

Battered Jewish women understand their Judaism in many different ways. This point follows, of course, from the previous one but I believe it’s important to spell out what that means. Because many, perhaps even most, Jews experience their Judaism as a cultural rather than a religious or institutional affiliation they may not themselves be familiar with religious resources. They may have only a slight knowledge of Jewish rituals or have had no previous contact with a rabbi or synagogue. Yet, at the same time, a period of crisis in their lives may make them turn to religion for support. Other women may associate their abuse with Jewish life and reject any contact while still others will have already had and want to maintain religious observance. Finally, women who identify themselves as secular Jews may want to relate to Jewish community through support groups or agencies, such as Jewish Family Services, rather than connecting to a synagogue or spiritually-based group.

Synagogues are only one way that Jews affiliate with the Jewish community. Many Jews are active in membership organizations and/or social service and funding agencies. Many of them involve and educate their members around issues related to domestic violence. The largest Jewish membership group in the world is Haddassah, a women's organization. Two other women's organizations, the National Council of Jewish Women and Jewish Women International also have chapters in Washington State. All three of these groups have developed programs and educational materials on domestic violence in the Jewish community. In Seattle, Jewish Family Services has recently hired Michele Lifton as their Domestic Violence Program Coordinator. The Jewish Federation, a community fundraising agency, has a Community Relations Council, which addresses a wide range of legislative and community issues. Most synagogues have a Social Action Committee which coordinates efforts related to *tikkun olam*, "world repair."

How to Develop Resources for Battered Jewish Women.

Call your local synagogue(s) and speak to both the rabbi and the Social Action Committee Chair. Rabbis are increasingly aware of domestic violence and are often themselves looking for resources. It's extremely helpful for them to have had an opportunity to speak with you and know something of your agency so that they can make referrals or call upon your expertise. The Social Action Committee may want to help you in variety of ways. These include inviting someone from your agency to speak at the synagogue, providing you with prayerbooks, candlesticks, and other items that would make Jewish women feel at home in your shelter, or finding volunteers.

If you need to find out about synagogues in your area you can look in the Jewish Transcript, a state-wide community paper published biweekly (phone: 206-441-4553 or email: JewishTran@aol.com). Warning!: If you look in the phone book, only those groups listed under "Synagogue" are Jewish. Evangelical Christian groups are sometimes listed under "Synagogues-Messianic" — they are not Jewish.

Call a local chapter of one of the national Jewish women's organizations. Like the synagogue Social Action Committees, they are interested in speakers and can assist you with Jewish resources and volunteers. In addition, you may want to have their domestic violence materials on hand for your own program. Haddassah, Jewish Women International, and the National Council of Jewish Women should all be listed in the phone book. If not, you can reach them through the Seattle Jewish Federation: 206-443-5400.

Contact Michelle Lifton at Jewish Family Services, 206-461-3240. She can tell you what programs are being offered or developed by the Jewish Family Violence Program, such as support groups specifically for battered Jewish women.

The Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence works specifically with religious communities and has a wide range of materials addressing religious and spiritual concerns. Their video, *To Save a Life*, is the only film specifically addressed to battered Jewish women and is an excellent educational resource for staff members as well. The Center has also developed a clearinghouse of materials on domestic violence in the Jewish community, which they are currently working to put on line. The Center can be contacted by phone: 206-634-1903 or via their website: www.cpsdv.org.

Two recent books may be useful resources as well. Rabbi Naomi Levy was the first rabbi I knew who worked with battered Jewish women. She has written a book called *To Begin Again* which isn't specifically about battering but discusses abuse and suffering from a (non-victim blaming) Jewish perspective and is excellent for Jewish women seeking spiritual guidance. The other book, *Silence is Deadly* by Naomi Graetz, is specifically about spousal abuse. I personally disagree with many of Graetz's perspectives on the material but the book is a good collection of traditional Jewish sources on the topic.

Suggestions for Working with Battered Jewish Women

1. There is no single definition of "Jewish." Judaism is both a culture and a religion; Jews are both an ethnic community and a religious one.
2. Battered Jewish women understand their Judaism in many different ways. Because many, perhaps even most, Jews experience their Judaism as a cultural rather than a religious or institutional affiliation they may not themselves be familiar with religious resources.
3. Synagogues are only one way that Jews affiliate with the Jewish community. Many Jews are active in membership organizations and/or social service and funding agencies.
4. Develop Resources for Battered Jewish Women:
 - Call your local synagogue(s) and speak to both the Rabbi and the Social Action Committee Chair.
 - Call a local chapter of one of the national Jewish women's organizations, such as, Haddassah, Jewish Women International, and the National Council of Jewish Women. Each have developed domestic violence materials.
 - Contact Michelle Lifton at Jewish Family Services, 206-461-3240.
 - Contact The Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence. Preview their video, *To Save a Life*, is the only film specifically addressed to battered Jewish women and is an excellent educational resource for staff members as well.

"We Demand the End of Woman Battering" by Reverend Aubra Love

*We are one in the Spirit, We are one in the blood
We are one in the Spirit, We are one in the blood
And we pray that our unity will one day be restored
And we'll know we are Sisters by our love, by our love
And we'll know we are Sisters by our love, by our love*

Good evening, all you sisters of various traditions, experiences, values and beliefs. This evening in our time together, I want to talk with you a little bit about the complexities of what it means to be

totally committed to our liberation. What it means to love our freedom more than life itself.

Today we gather to observe, reflect and give honor to those sisters who loved themselves some freedom so much that they risked their lives to be free, I want to acknowledge the Women's Resource Center for the justice-making work that they do. And to thank you for asking me to come and speak. Actually, I was a little surprised when you asked me to do this. I have been known to gather with our sisters and "take back the night," but my understanding is that this is more solemn. And when I was invited to speak, the coordinator called me Rev. Aubra Love, she didn't call me the Imam Aubra Love nor did she call me the Rabbi Aubra Love. She asked me, a United Church of Christ pastor, to come and address this candlelight vigil. So, I want to acknowledge that I know that some of you maybe haven't been to church in twenty years for varied and sundried painful or political reasons. I know a few of you may have never been to church in your life. And I know many of you are from traditions that do not encompass the Afro-Christian, womanish consciousness. So, I come to bring you some of what you have been missing.

To my sisters of the Islamic faith, to my Jewish sisters, Buddhists and all women of faith — I have tried to take the burden of translation off you as the hearer, but if I became preoccupied with that, I wouldn't be able to say what I came to say. And I am determined that we are going to talk about this stuff on our most sincere level which may include some unintentional slights but surely nothing that will distract us from attaining our collective freedom. So stay with me and listen for the word of God.

As I was approaching this moment, it occurred to me that to speak at a candlelight vigil is a lot like doing someone's eulogy. Only this is a mass eulogy of many women that many of us don't know. This is sort of like when the bereaved family approached the clergy to speak a few words in the chapel of the mortuary about the life of someone whom we have never met or never had a chance to get to know. Sometimes, the deceased, in these cases is a person without close familial ties or without friends. Sometimes the person has led a transitional life due to alcohol or drugs — or simply unjust poverty, never getting an even break. Maybe the person was just isolated due to illness and most of their friends have slowly faded from their life. And whomever is responsible for seeing that this person's characteristics and attributes are lifted up in this final celebration of their life, will ask a minister to say a few words about this person. Now, my grandfather never refused a bereaved family and he eulogized many such persons. He was never at a loss for what to say, as he began with, "I didn't know Nathaniel Roy — but the Lord knew him. And from what I can make out from what folks tell me about him, his life was often wrought with persecution and he didn't get nearly what he deserved in this life."

Sisters, I want to start right there. I am thinking about all of those women who have been slain in domestic violence-related incidents, since time began. And I want you to just hold these sacred women in your hearts and receive some healing here as we are gathered together this evening. Most of these slain women, I didn't know — but the Lord knew them. And from what I can make out from what folks tell me about them, their lives were often wrought with persecution and they didn't get nearly what they deserved in this life.

Research over the last ten years indicates that these women who leave their batterers are at 75% greater risk of being killed by the batterer than those who stay. Our popular statistics state that nine out of ten of these murdered women are murdered by men. Four out of five of these women

are murdered at home. Additionally, 75% of all murdered women were murdered by husbands or lovers. And finally, abusive men, who kill their partners, serve an average of two to six year terms. From all that folks say about them, these slain women were the ones who were trying to get away. Those who kept trying to live and be free.

I chose a text for us this evening. You don't have to be religious to get in on this. Our scripture lesson, this evening, is taken from the book of Mark 10:17-26. It is a conversation between Jesus and a person seeking some counsel on what to do in order to live forever. This person has led a principled and disciplined life, but has now come to ask what else is necessary to preserve his life.

I was taught this lesson as I was nurtured in the Christian faith; and this was called the parable of the rich, young ruler. It is interesting to note that none of the synoptic gospels describe this person as a "rich, young ruler." Matthew (19:16-22) refers to him as a young man. And yet the gospel according to Luke (18:18-30) states very clearly that a certain *ruler* asked this question of Jesus. Mark (10:17-26) on the other hand, says that "one came running and knelt before Jesus" asking, "What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life." These are the accounts of the witnesses who attest to how this interaction went down between Jesus and the one who needed counsel on what to do in order to stay alive. The gospel accounts don't agree on the details. Matthew says the person just came and asked Jesus. While Luke says this person simply asked the question, Mark's gospel tells us that the person came running and was soon on his knees. I am reminded of the accounts of witnesses attempting to reconstruct the incidents surrounding those women who were murdered while diligently asking, "what must I do to live?" Some of us can remember them coming and asking for help. Some of us can recall that they came running and kneeling and crawling. Did you look at them and *love them* before responding?

Some of them came to us and said, "I own my own home. He just lives there. If someone could sell my home and my car, and allow me to keep my whereabouts confidential for six months — I could figure out what else to do. I have no cash money but I have assets. What must I do to live?" And were told her that we could maybe get her a special provision on a section 8 certificate within 90 days — but she could only stay in our shelter for 30 of those days. And while she was in transition from house to house, her assailant convinced her friends that if they would butt out, the two of them could work out their problems. And after he choked the life from her, her children became the financial responsibility of the state because her car had been repossessed and her home had been foreclosed on while she was hiding and trying to save her life. We say domestic violence occurs with women regardless of social status or income, but we don't really believe it or we would advocate with more of a sense of entitlement for those whom we are acting on behalf of. We would insist that the continuum of care for domestic violence survivors looked more like our own lives look — with homes, cars, recreation and medical care.

Some of them came to us crying, "I need a place to stay for a few days. If I could sleep a full night, I could figure out what else to do. I am running with my 16 year-old son, who has been threatened by my husband. What must we do to live?" And we told her we don't shelter males over twelve years old. And she spent the night in her car with her son and her assailant found them. And her young son, who could not defend her, put up enough of a fight to get six years in prison, before she was murdered.

Some of these women came running and kneeling, saying "I just need food for a few days. My

hunger is distracting me from my thinking. If I could have a decent meal, I could figure out what to do next.” And we responded by telling her that emergency food stamps were available at social services — who in turn told her that in order to access any of this assistance, she needed a permanent address to prove residency in this country.

And someone on the street told this woman about a restaurant that served homeless people and offered them rehabilitative services. And she tracked them down, only to learn that their program was only for men. But she could go directly to the food bank or community pantry. And she went there to get assistance and one of the retired volunteers offered her a place to stay in this home, if she would just let him . . . you know the rest).

Each of these gospel accounts are fairly consistent on how Jesus answered this question. The first answer instructs this person who wants to live to be obedient to the law and the prophets. Jesus reminds him that he know the rules, “Do not commit adultery. Do not murder. Do not steal . . . etc., and the list goes on.” But this person who was trying to preserve his life had to let Jesus know that he had obeyed all of this stuff from the time he was a child.

The rich, young ruler pressed Jesus further. And Jesus responds by telling him that there is one thing missing. Jesus tells the rich, young ruler to give up his possessions — to sell what he has and give to the poor — and to take up his cross and follow. But this was not what the petitioner wanted to hear because he had great possessions and he went away sorrowful, saddened by this word. He could not grasp this concept of letting go of his material wealth to preserve his life. And women of God, I tell you that this is a hard teaching — but this is not unlike the answer that we, in this movement, offer to women who were fleeing domestic violence.

These women have kept the rules so well that people have accused them of an intolerable level of neurosis. They search for what good thing they can possibly do to change the behavior of the abusive force in their lives. And as painful as it is, we, the advocates and other helpers, can only say, “If you want to live, you have to give up everything and take up your issues and follow wise counsel.” I have heard people in the field say, “it’s not my place to tell a woman to leave her partner.” Why not? In every other skill or profession, we offer some prognosis, or an experience assessment of the situation. Doctors say, “if you keep eating donuts, you will eventually suffer a heart attack or stroke.” Plumbers tell us, “if you don’t replace this line, you will eventually have turds in your living room.” We must be committed enough to our liberation to tell another sister, “if you don’t effectively remove yourself from that situation, you will be killed.” I’m ready to tell the truth as I know it. “If you want to live, you must pursue *only that* for a while. You must be only about your freedom. You must love your liberation more than you love this current life.”

This is a high, spiritual concept that translates well into any faith or set of beliefs. In spirit and in truth, “If you want to live, you must renounce the entrapments that distract you from your freedom.” The sanctity of marriage is not more important than the sanctity of life.

I am ready to see our movement grow up. Finally, sisters in faith, I’m going to tell you what time it is. In this current wave, we are a movement that is at least twenty-five years old, isn’t it time to abandon some of this caution and pretense? This is the place in the Black Power Movement when Malcolm declared, “By any means necessary!” Oh, this is rather like the point in the Civil Rights Movement where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. so bluntly declared that “if you haven’t

found something worth dying for, you are not fit to live.” I’m telling you what time it is. This is the place in the second wave of feminism where the honorable Gloria Steinem said, “you may as well be a feminist, because the only other choice is to be a masochist.” This is the very place where Sojourner Truth thought it was time for women to vote and Black folk to be free — when she asked the prophetic question, “Ain’t I a Woman?” Hallelujah?

I am sorry that the women’s movement has had to carry this burden alone for so long without any systemic support. We tried hard but we couldn’t stop their batterers; we conducted batterer treatment programs; we supported programs for children in transition; we wrote proposals and awarded grants. We marched, we preached and we prayed. We did what we could — but in some cases, our best just was not quite enough.

And, for you brothers in this struggle, who have come out tonight — I want to share a quick story to illustrate how you can be most helpful in this movement. I was at a Waffle House in the mountains of North Carolina, which is known for its ultraconservative views on women’s rights. (This is where Eric Rudolph, accused of the Birmingham abortion clinic bombing, is alleged to be in hiding.) I saw a female server being harassed by a male customer in this restaurant full of truckers. The irate customer yelled at her that he was from South Carolina and “down there, a man was allowed to beat a woman if he used a stick not thicker than her arm.” One of the truckers, in a checkered flannel shirt and work boots rose from his booth with, “And over here in the mountains we got a law that says we can kick a fool’s ass, just so long as we don’t kill him.” The rowdy one left and we all continued our breakfast in peace and tranquility. Brothers, we appreciate your help when you take on men who bully women. We don’t need you to tell us how much you hate battering . . . tell the batterers!

In our parable, Jesus finally responds to the disciples who want to know who then can be saved if the very rich cannot. Jesus makes the answer clearer by assuring them that this is not about social classes in this society but about the value of freedom, which we can only learn by placing it above anything else in this material world. Jesus concludes by saying that “there is no one who has left house or parents or brothers or children for the sake of their most sacred convictions, who shall not receive many times more in this present age and in the age to come eternal life.”

We have been required, as a movement, to think outside the familiar, and rig up solutions to save the lives of women and children who suffer through intimate relationship violence. But like the rich, young ruler who left the conversation disappointed that the expectation was that he would forsake all that was important to him, women who are battered are wanting us to come up with some different answers. They are not asking us spiritual questions when they say they want a safe place to stay. There’s nothing otherworldly about the need for medical attention. There is not a thing mystical about the need for supportive employers, who use their influence to make her safe rather than firing her because she cries at work.

Tonight we gather to remember and honor those prisoners who loved their freedom enough to run right into eternity. Those prisoners who are now free, who left home, and all that was familiar in the quest for their personal freedom. We claim and honor these slain women as the foot soldiers of this movement to end domestic violence. We remember the MIAs and KIAs. We carry on the proud legacy of those who loved their freedom more than possessions or status. Those to whom freedom was more important than this life. How happy are the sisters above who once were sorry

here!

*O-oh freedom, o-oh freedom, o-oh freedom over me.
And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free.*

A Commentary on Religious Issues in Family Violence by Reverend Marie Fortune and Judith Hertz

The Importance of Religious Issues: Roadblocks or Resources?

The crisis of family violence affects people physically, psychologically, and spiritually. Each of these dimensions must be addressed, both for victims and for those in the family who abuse them. Approached from either a secular or religious perspective alone, certain needs and issues tend to be disregarded. This reflects a serious lack of understanding of the nature of family violence and its impact on people's lives. Treatment of families experiencing violence and abuse requires integrating the needs of the whole person. Thus, the importance of developing a shared understanding and co-operation between secular and religious helpers to deal with family violence cannot be emphasized too strongly.

Occasionally, a social worker, psychotherapist, or other secular service provider will wonder, "why bother with religious concerns at all?" The answer is a very practical one: religious issues or concerns which surface for people in the midst of crisis are primary issues. If not addressed in some way, at some point, they will inevitably become roadblocks to the client's efforts to resolve the crisis and move on with her/his life. In addition, a person's religious beliefs and community of faith (church or synagogue) can provide a primary support system for an individual and her/his family in the midst of an experience of family violence.

For a pastor, priest, rabbi, lay counselor or other person approaching family violence from a religious perspective, there is little question about the relevance of religious concerns; these are primary for any religious person. Rather, they may doubt the importance of dealing with concerns for shelter, safety, intervention and treatment. "These people just need to get right with God and everything will be fine." This perspective overlooks the fact that these other issues are practical and important as well. Family violence is complex and potentially lethal; these seemingly mundane concerns represent immediate and critical needs.

When confronted with a personal experience of family violence, like any other crisis whether chronic or sudden, most people also experience a crisis of meaning in their lives. Very basic life questions arise and are usually expressed in religious and/or philosophical terms. Questions like, "Why is this happening to me and my family?" or "Why did God let this happen?" or "What meaning does this have for my life?" are all indications of people's efforts to understand, to make sense out of experiences in a context of meaning for their lives. These questions are to be seen as a healthy sign because they represent an effort to comprehend and contextualize the experience of family violence and thereby regain some control over their lives in the midst of crisis.

Thus for many individuals and families in crisis, the questions of meaning will be expressed in

religious terms, and more specifically, in terms of the Jewish or Christian traditions, since the vast majority of people in the U.S. today grew up with some association with these traditions. Many continue as adults to be involved with a church or synagogue. In addition, Jewish and Christian values overlap with cultural values of the majority American culture, so most Americans carry a set of cultural values, consciously or unconsciously, which are primarily Jewish or Christian in nature.

Religious concerns can become roadblocks or resources for those dealing with experiences of family violence because these concerns are central to many people's lives. The outcome depends on how they are handled.

The misinterpretation and misuse of the Jewish and Christian traditions have often had a detrimental effect on families, particularly those dealing with family violence. Misinterpretation of the traditions can contribute substantially to the guilt, self-blame, and suffering which victims experience and to the rationalizations often used by those who abuse. "But the Bible says..." is frequently used to explain, excuse, or justify abuse between family members. This need not be the case. Re-examining and analyzing those Biblical references which have been misused can lead to reclaiming the traditions in a way which supports victims and those who abuse while clearly confronting and challenging abuse in the family.

A careful study of both Jewish and Christian scriptures makes it very clear that is not possible to use scripture to justify abuse of persons in the family. However, it is also clear that it is possible to misuse scripture and other traditional religious literature for this purpose. This is a frequent practice (see below). Attempting to teach that there are very simple answers to the very complex issues which people face in their lives is another potential roadblock within contemporary teachings of some Jewish or Christian groups. Thus, religious groups have often not adequately prepared people for the traumas which they will face at some point in their lives: illness, death, abuse, divorce and so forth.

"Keep the commandments and everything will be fine."

"Keep praying."

"Just accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and you will be healthy, prosperous, popular, and happy."

"Go to services each week."

"Pray harder."

While these teachings may be fundamental teachings of religious faith, alone they are inadequate to deal with the complexity of most experiences of human suffering like family violence. When offered as simple and complete answers to life's questions, they create in the hearer an illusion of simplicity which leaves the hearer vulnerable to becoming overwhelmed by an experience of suffering. In addition, the teachings set up a dynamic, which blames the victims for their suffering.

"If you are a good Christian or a good Jew, God will treat you kindly, or take care of you, or make you prosper as a reward for your goodness."

"If you suffer, it is a sign that you must not be a good Christian or a good Jew and God is displeased with you."

If one accepts this simple formula (which makes a theological assumption that God's love is conditional), then when one experiences any form of suffering, one feels punished or abandoned by God. The simple answer alone cannot hold up in the face of personal or familial suffering. When people attempt to utilize the simple answer and it is insufficient, they feel that their faith has failed them or that God has abandoned them. In fact, it may be the teachings or actions of their particular congregation or denomination, which have been inadequate to their needs. Thus they may be feeling abandoned.

The religious teachings of the Jewish and Christian traditions are adequate to address the experiences of contemporary persons when the traditions acknowledge the complexity, the paradox, and sometimes the incomprehensible nature of those experiences. The most important resource which the church or synagogue can provide is to be available to support those who are suffering, to be a sign of God's presence, and to be willing to struggle with the questions which the experiences may raise. Offering sweet words of advice to "solve" life's problems reduces the experience of the one who suffers to a mere slogan and denies the depth of the pain and the potential for healing and new life.

Cooperative Roles for Secular Counselor and Minister/Rabbi

Both the secular counselor and the minister or rabbi have important roles to play in response to family violence. Families in which there is abuse need the support and expertise of both in times of crisis. Sometimes the efforts of the two will come into conflict, as illustrated by the following situation:

We received a call at the Center from a local shelter for abused women. The shelter worker indicated that she had a badly beaten woman there whose minister had told her to go back home to her husband. The worker asked us to call the minister and "straighten him out." Ten minutes later we received a call from the minister. He said that the shelter had one of his parishioners there and the shelter worker had told her to get a divorce. He asked us to call the shelter and "straighten them out."

In the above case, both the shelter worker and the minister had the best interests of the victim in mind. Yet they were clearly at odds with each other because they did not understand the other's concerns which related to the needs of the victim. The shelter worker did not understand the minister's concern for maintaining the family and the minister did not understand that the woman's life was in danger. We arranged for the minister and the shelter worker to talk directly with each other, sharing their concerns in order to seek a solution in the best interest of the victim. This was accomplished successfully.

The need for cooperation and communication between counselors and ministers or rabbis is clear so that the needs of parishioners/congregants/clients are best served and the resources of both religious and secular helpers are utilized effectively.

Role of the Secular Counselor

In the secular setting, a social worker or mental health provider may encounter a victim or abuser who raises religious questions or concerns. When this occurs, the following guidelines are helpful:

1. Pay attention to religious questions/comments/references.
2. Affirm these concerns as appropriate and check out their importance for the client.
3. Having identified and affirmed this area of concern. If you are uncomfortable with it yourself or feel unqualified to pursue it, refer to a pastor/priest/rabbi who is trained to help and whom you know and trust.
4. If you are comfortable and would like to pursue the concern, do so, emphasizing the ways in which the client's religious tradition can be a resource to her/him and can in no way be used to justify or allow abuse or violence to continue in the family.
- 5.

Role of Clergy

The minister/rabbi can most effectively help family abuse victims and offenders by co-operating with secular resources. Combined, these provide a balanced approach, which deals with specific external, physical, and emotional needs while addressing the larger religious and philosophical issues. When approached about family violence, the minister/rabbi can use the following guidelines:

1. Be aware of the dynamics of family violence and utilize this understanding in evaluating the situation.
2. Use your expertise as a religious authority and spiritual leader to illuminate the positive value of religious traditions while clarifying that they do not justify or condone family abuse.
3. Identify the parishioner/congregant's immediate needs and REFER to a secular resource (if available) to deal with the specifics of abuse, intervention and treatment.
4. If you are comfortable pursuing the matter, provide additional pastoral support and encouragement to help families dealing with violence to take full advantage of available resources.

Conclusion

This commentary addresses some of the common religious concerns dealing with family violence. It is an attempt to help the reader begin to see ways of converting potential roadblocks into valuable resources for those dealing with violence in their families.

Personal faith for a religious person can provide much needed strength and courage to face a very painful situation and make changes in it. Churches and synagogues can provide a much needed network of community support for victims, abusers, and their children.

It is clearly necessary for those involved in Jewish and Christian congregations and institutions to begin to address these concerns directly. In ignorance and oversight, we do much harm. In awareness and action, we can contribute a critical element to the efforts to respond to family violence in our communities.