Killing the "Sinner" Within:

Spiritual Violence Against LGBTQIA+ People in "Conversion Therapy"

Soulforce
Institute on Spiritual Violence, Healing and Social Change

Executive Summary

History shows how colonial projects around the world have weaponized religion as part of their conquering strategies. **This appropriation and contortion of religion invisiblizes Spiritual Violence, weaving it into the cultural and political structures of society.** This hinders its recognition, and as a consequence, the possibilities to confront it head on. The social sciences can support activist struggles for human rights and dignity by naming and uncovering these invisible truths.

As we are more able to identify different forms of violence fueled and/or justified by religious beliefs or spiritual practices, the scientific evidence that explains their nature, impacts and implications also continues to grow. One such example of Spiritual Violence is a set of practices known collectively as **sexual orientation and gender identity and expression change efforts (SOGIECE)**, interventions commonly and inaccurately referred to as **"conversion therapy"** or **"reparative therapy."**

The interdisciplinary work of Soulforce's Institute on Spiritual Violence, Healing and Social Change brings together professionals from the social sciences, activists, religious leaders and other civil society actors. Together, **we work to confront spiritual and religion-based violence** in hostile contexts affecting LGBTQIA+ people, women, People of Color, and other marginalized groups.

Soulforce has spent the last 25 years working to end the religious and political oppression of LGBTQIA+ people and heal our communities' spirits from Spiritual Violence by **decoding and organizing against the ways in which systems of power use the language, capital, and power of Christianity to dominate, colonize, and harm —a parasitic relationship we call white Christian Supremacy.** We develop political analysis, radical theological education, and spiritual power for activists and people of faith across all social justice movements, wherever the rights and dignities of all marginalized peoples are threatened by Christian fundamentalisms.

Social scientists in many disciplines and countries have studied the effects and harms of SOGIECE for decades. **This literature review is the first of its kind, seeking to globally aggregate these studies and their results for activist, organizer, and philanthropic audiences.** We believe the results of our collective research can yield a powerful change making tool to understand how exactly weaponized religion operates, alongside its impacts on the health and wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ communities. It provides insight into the ideologies of white Christian Supremacy that legitimize these practices, reinforcing fear and hostility against LGBTQIA+ people under the guise of "Christian morality." From there, it is not difficult to connect the dots as to how ideas about who/what is considered good/evil then leads to emotional, spiritual, and physical violence. For this literature review, we examined 60 studies written between 2012 and 2023 focusing on LGBTQIA+ communities in Latin America, North America, Europe and Oceania, **examining the psychological impacts of Spiritual Violence particular to "conversion therapy."**

Key Findings

1 Spiritual Violence proliferates in strongly hierarchical social, cultural, and political contexts. This creates an ideal environment for major abuses such as conversion "therapies."

The places that prove to have the most unequal power relations, especially where faith communities are structured by hierarchical power, are those in which (1) heteronormativity has rooted deep into the culture and (2) Christianity is the hegemonic religion (Alves & Silva, 2021; Ballesteros, 2022; Hollier et al., 2022).

This is almost always accompanied by conservative, homophobic, anti-LGBTQIA+ theological rhetoric used by people in the highest levels of power in governments, such as presidents and senators (Cruz Iglesias, 2022).

There are significant correlations drawn in the literature between a rise in political groups that support strict religious dogmas, the proliferation of pseudoscience, and the growth of conservatism that supports practices that seek to change a person's sexual orientation and/or gender identity (De Novaes, 2021 and Ballesteros, 2022).

> *"This study displays that demeaning church doctrines could force many Christian gays and lesbians into a difficult, and potentially dangerous, choice: their religion or their sexuality. For the most part, our participants seemed to choose their sexuality."*
>
> *Lapinski & McKirnan (2013)*

2 Spiritual Violence comes in many forms and carries with it complex and profound consequences for those who survive it.

LGBTQIA+ community members experience many forms of Spiritual Violence and aggression. Some of the most commonly reported experiences in the literature came in the form of mischaracterizations of one's LGBTQIA+ identity. This includes: being viewed as a threat to the larger population, being "erased" by overlooking or ignoring one's existence, being forced into social isolation, being silenced, and/or being denied recognition of one's identity as both Christian and LGBTQIA+ (Hollier et al., 2022).

> *"In a study of LGBTQIA+ youth ages 14 to 21, those who were exposed to conversion 'therapies' were at least one-and-a-half times more likely to have a mental health diagnosis, and three times more likely to have PTSD diagnoses. They were also at increased risk of homelessness, particularly on the basis of being LGBTQIA+."*
>
> *Jones et al. (2022)*

3 Psychological, physical, and/or religious or spiritual practices that seek to change or modify sexual orientation or gender identity are NOT recognized within the field of psychology as professional therapies, nor are they well-founded in legitimate scientific research.

As stated by Alempijevic et al. (2020), "Conversion therapy has no medical or scientific validity. The practice is ineffective, inherently repressive, and is likely to cause individuals significant or severe physical and mental pain and suffering with long-term harmful effects."

Not only did the promised change correspond to a false expectation of being "healed" or "cured," the practices involved violate basic human dignity.

The studies revealed that young people frequently experienced coerced conversion practices without their parents knowing. Most commonly, the counselor or pastor leveraged their fear of being rejected or causing shame to their family as a justification for withholding information from parents.

In other cases, it was parents, family members, or other close friends who participated in pressuring or deceiving the person into submission (Jones et al., 2022 and Dehlin et al., 2015).

"Conversion practices could be kept secret from young people's parents through the use of shame to invoke secrecy, as one non-binary asexual person (20s) commented: 'I was going through this whole process without my main parental figure knowing, it was a terrible culture of shame and secretiveness.'"
Jones et al. (2022)

4 Complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) can be one of the most severe lasting effects for someone who has experienced ongoing Spiritual Violence.

Spiritual Violence, especially in the form of ongoing Religious Abuse, can have serious mental health ramifications. The most commonly reported experiences are mired in intense feelings of shame, guilt, and fear. Some of the mental health consequences described in the studies include complex episodes of anxiety and depression, the belief that one has failed as a Christian, self-denial of pleasure and sexuality, disconnection from one's own body. These added to a profound sense of loss of community and self in a variety of forms, which almost inevitably led to isolation and suicidal ideation (Dahl, 2012, Hollier et al., 2022, Jones et al., 2022, Cole & Harris, 2017, Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015).

"Participants who were obviously coerced or tricked into conversion practices expressed stronger trauma responses to their experiences than other participants. They did not, however, express the same degree of shame or moral distress as participants who had internalised the ideology of LGBTQA + conversion and who consequently had been more complicit in their experiences."
Jones et al. (2022)

CPTSD, also called **complex trauma**, refers to the experience of those who have endured more long-term and chronic exposure to interpersonal forms of abuse that threaten one's self-integrity, developmental capacity, or ability to interact with others in an emotionally healthy manner.

Complex traumatic stressors may include "abandonment, neglect, lack of protection, and emotional, verbal (including bullying), sexual, and physical abuse by primary caregivers or others of significance or loss of these primary attachment figures through illness, death, deployment, or displacement of some sort" (Ford & Courtois cited in Yates & Snodgrass, 2019).

5 Practices to try to modify sexual orientation and/or gender identity are not limited to religious spaces; conversion "therapy" also occurs in psychological counseling and clinical care spaces.

Conversion practices were reported as taking place in formal psychological counseling settings (Jones et al., 2022). There are significant health risks for patients when psychology professionals practice forms of "Christian psychology" to impose the dogmas of religion or legitimize pseudoscience in defense of heteronormativity (De Novaes, 2021). Forced hormone treatments and coercive psychiatric evaluations were two commonly reported ways that "Christian psychology" practitioners compelled change in LGBTQIA+ people (Ballesteros, 2022).

> *"Participants expressed concern that helpers have preconceived assumptions about their reasons for seeking counseling... In most cases, participants sought counseling for the same issues as any other client and resented the inference that they were coming to counseling to try to change their sexual orientation."*
>
> *Cole & Harris (2017)*

6 Psychology as a discipline faces significant challenges in terms of its ability to offer care services to the LGBTQIA+ community.

From therapists who outright refuse to provide services to LGBTQIA+ people (Ballesteros, 2022) to the clear presence of heteronormative prejudices in psychological clinics, the field of psychology struggles to provide culturally relevant care to the LGBTQIA+ community.

Many studies showed that psychology professionals are unaware of the distinctive characteristics and specificities of the LGBTQIA+ community, its struggles, and the economic and social disadvantages that hinder access to optimal health services. Clinicians are at a loss particularly where sexual orientation and gender identity intersect with religion, spirituality, and religion-based violence in their practices. This extends to university and clinical training settings, where intersectional approaches to gender and sexuality are scarce or non-existent (Jones et al., 2022).

> *"Unfortunately, mental health clinicians receive little or no training on the demands of religious disenchantment, as it is a complex psycho-religious phenomenon for which there is currently a dearth of clinically relevant, empirically descriptive, and theoretically informed analyses."*
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> *Brooks (2020)*

7 **Though it may seem counterintuitive, theology has been found to be a valuable resource in terms of strategies for healing and identity integration.**

Some studies have found that the most beneficial course of action for many survivors of Spiritual Violence has been to distance themselves from their religion or religious institution of origin (Dahl 2012, Alves & de Assunção, 2021, Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). In many other cases, studies evidenced theological studies as an opportunity for Spiritual Violence survivors to question religious teachings they had received since childhood. Theological studies thereby offer a possibility for LGBTQIA+ individuals to gain deeper insight into their own spirituality and transcend previously imposed beliefs that stem from more conservative and rigid religious dogmas (Hollier et al., 2022).

"Interestingly, those who had studied Christian theology intensely appeared to have much less internal conflict about their LGBTQ identities. They saw teachings condemning homosexuality as (flawed) human interpretations of Biblical teachings.

'For me, it's never been a theological issue. This is not God's problem with me. This is other people's problem. This is the perception of some of the church community. This is not God; this is other Christians you have to worry about. (laugh).'"

Beagan & Hattie (2015)

Next Steps:

- Develop more research to better understand the ways in which gender identity and sexual orientation are central variables in the ways in which religiosity impacts mental health (Dahl & Galliher, 2012).
- Map out the particular ways in which conversion "therapies" arise and are implemented in different contexts according to the history and culture of each locality (Dehlin et al., 2015).
- Delve into the perceptions and prejudices of health professionals in their work with the LGBTQIA+ population (Cole & Harris, 2017).
- Develop specialized training for health professionals to foster understanding and cultural competence related to religion and spirituality in the context of LGBTQIA+ people.
- Explore what safe and supportive religious spaces for LGBTQIA+ people could look like (Foster et al., 2015).

Responding to SOGIECE: Soulforce's Approach

Because of its pervasiveness within structures of power, **Spiritual Violence happens at all levels of society. It is reproduced in faith settings, health care, and public life in general.** The set of practices known as sexual orientation and gender identity and expression change efforts (SOGIECE) reveal some of the most perverse forms of violence that weaponize religion to undermine the authenticity and human dignity of LGBTQIA+ people. Thus, it is imperative to recognize the ways in which these are **ideologically and politically sustained by white Christian Supremacy.**

To combat this, **our approach is community-centered and interdisciplinary.** In Soulforce, we accomplish this by putting those with the most knowledge at the center of our work: **knowledge that comes from research and study as well as the embodied knowledge that comes from lived experience.** Almost all of our staff and volunteer teams are survivors of SOGIECE, Religious Abuse, and/or Spiritual Violence. We build and maintain strong community relationships with activists and survivors, researchers, faith leaders, social scientists and mental health service providers, as well as public actors seeking to create change on a broader scale. We are constantly monitoring and adapting our organizing strategies to understand and ideologically neutralize the interminable ways in which Christianity is weaponized as power to oppress our communities.

Other strategies to ensure that our work against SOGIECE is effective and relevant:

- We work with **psychologists and social workers** to assess the impact of these practices on our communities, create tools and education materials for service providers, speak out against pathologizing narratives in the mental health field, **educate the public and train other providers** on the effects of religious trauma and structural oppression against LGBTQIA+ people while also elucidating the often **complex relationship between religion/spirituality and sexual orientation or gender identity for LGBTQIA+ people.**

- We stay current with popular discourse on various forms of religion-based violence, particularly how **new strategies can be used in legislative actions** to attack and endanger our community. We also denounce the extensive **financial and ideological resources**, both religious and political in nature, that flow **from the Global North to promote these initiatives in the Global South.** We are in proactive transnational dialogue and solidarity about the ways in which the Global South and certain areas of the United States, such as the South, are used as testing grounds for copycat legislation so that they can be more efficiently and successfully implemented globally.

- We act as a **strategic thinking-partner and capacity builder** for legislators, decision-makers, legal experts, and other strategic actors to understand the ideological roots of this issue to strengthen their initiatives against it.

- We create, translate, and distribute **free politicized theological resources that address controversial topics in the Bible from a radically inclusive standpoint.** For each resource, we have the support of a community review board and focus on using accessible language that is respectful of religion in order to encourage open and honest dialogue about gender, sexuality, and faith.

- We partner with **LGBTIQA+ faith leaders from around the world** to create contextualized tools to fit their specific needs, and collaborate with them through online and in-person events.

To learn more about Soulforce and the Institute on Spiritual Violence, Healing and Social Change, visit our website: soulforce.org/spiritual-violence-institute

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