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Perfect obedience. Narratives of spiritual abuse told by Koinonia John the Baptist disaffiliates

Abstract. Cultural changes have strongly affected human value system over the last decades. Consequently, an individual's sense of security has also been disrupted, which can be observed when analyzing numerous cases of mental health crisis. Self-centeredness, pressure to perform, and the chronic lack of time combined with one's relentless efforts to improve their financial status due to consumer culture requirements are common in this day and age. Extreme burnout caused by the aforementioned factors may lead to inner emptiness and loss of control. Those who suffer, tend to look for a practical solution themselves or quite the opposite, they respond to someone else's invitation. In other words, they search for comprehensive guidance that will help them to restore their lives outside their current environment. Religious groups, especially the ones focused on supernatural phenomena, spiritual awakening and transformation, provide the seekers with a wide range of opportunities to recover and start from scratch. However, previous studies indicate that the benevolence shown by group leaders and existing members is not unconditional. What they expect in return is perfect obedience. This research focuses on the problem of spiritual abuse experienced in a religious setting as exemplified by Koinonia John the Baptist disaffiliates from Poland. Narrative interviewing together with netnography have been employed to collect relevant data.

Keywords: Koinonia John the Baptist, spiritual abuse, religious disaffiliation, charismatic Christianity, coercive control

Introduction

Several attempts have already been made to define spiritual abuse properly. A clinical approach has been offered by Kathryn Kinmond and Lisa Oakley who described this phenomenon thoroughly, giving priority to therapeutic challenges from a first-hand perspective (Kinmond, Oakley, 2013). Their work is a frequent reference point for further investigation in this area. An insider's stance, on the other hand, has been expressed by Janja Lalich, currently a Professor Emerita of sociology at California State University as well as the founder of Lalich Centre on Cults and Coercion, who herself spent a few years in a radical community she later termed destructive. In her books (Lalich, 2004, 2006, 2018), she raises issues such as leadership and authority, indoctrination mechanisms and eradication of individuality. The same is true for Steven Hassan's testimony which is also an introduction to a useful compendium of knowledge about exit counseling (Hassan, 1990). Spiritual abuse, as suggested by various scholars, is closely associated with thought control, often referred to colloquially as brainwashing. Its characteristics have been carefully explained by Kathleen Taylor (2004). Christian insights into the subject matter have been given by Neil Damgaard (2022), a former pastor whose collection of essays sheds new light on reconciliation strategies when talking about the wounded and church people. Misguided religiosity and its addictive nature have been addressed in detail by Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton (1991). They juxtapose what they call healthy and toxic faith systems. When it comes to the Polish religious landscape, Andrzej Kobyliński serves as an expert. He has recently published a series of academic papers on contemporary Pentecostals and the pentecostalized, highlighting ethical matters, among which psychological manipulation driven by religious motives plays a vital role (Kobyliński, 2016, 2017, 2021, 2022). His conclusions have been complemented by the findings I revealed after I finished my project based on extensive empirical research into Neo-Pentecostals and power evangelism practitioners in general. It was carried out between 2019 and 2023, both in Poland and Italy.

Kinmond and Oakley (2013, p. 8) argue that although the concept of spiritual abuse has emerged not long ago, the practices it applies to had been documented much earlier throughout history. The Shepherding Movement which developed in America in the 1960s, is believed to have been the stirring of what spiritual abuse looks like nowadays (Kinmond, Oakley 2013, p. 8). Interestingly, the movement in question gained wide recognition among charismatic churches whose popularity have dramatically increased ever since, also in Poland. Particularly noteworthy is the target audience. It attracted mostly those who were disappointed with the surrounding reality marked by moral

decline and secularistic tendencies. Therefore, they needed a safe haven. The results of my in-depth study on Neo-Pentecostals (Berdowicz, 2022, 2023) show that the broadly understood insecurity caused by enduring tensions as well as one's inability to meet the societal demands, are main reasons why individuals decide to join specific religious groups. John Lofland and Rodney Stark (1965) speak of a tailored resolution program put forward by religious recruiters and aimed at religious shoppers to attract prospective converts. Both the investigation I have just related to and the one that is under consideration in this paper, concern supernatural phenomena-oriented communities where signs and wonders are part of the ritual. Their enthusiasts accept total submission to the leaders, hoping to receive the kind of guidance they lack in everyday life. When carrying out my research between 2019 and 2023, I observed that the intra-group procedures followed now, bear striking resemblance to the ones that were established by the pioneers of the Shepherding Movement. To exemplify: in the 1960s, the movement's affiliates would form the so-called house churches to ensure intimacy and concentrate on relationship building. They were meant to be a family-like mutual support network, supervised by an appointed shepherd (Kinmond, Oakley, 2013). The groups I examined rest on an identical system.

For the purpose of this study, I have adopted the definition of spiritual abuse proposed by Kinmond and Oakley whereby

[...] spiritual abuse is coercion of one individual by another in a spiritual context [...]. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or the pulpit to control behaviour, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a divine position and isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context (Kinmond, Oakley, 2013, pp. 21–22).

With respect to manipulation and exploitation, they stand for interfering with how an individual perceives reality. For example, an abuser may be portrayed in a positive manner whereas the real victim, who is still an active member but dares to voice concerns, in a bad one. All this can be achieved by means of plausible arguments (Kinmond, Oakley, 2013, p. 38; Demasure, 2022, p. 8). The same applies to disaffiliates who have already left the abusive system. It is a common practice to provide the worshippers with false accounts of their alleged misconduct which is termed the transferal of blame (Kinmond, Oakley, 2013, p. 41). Regarding enforced accountability, it deals with the requirement to stay transparent. Privacy does not exist. (Kinmond, Oakley, 2013, p. 26; Demasure, 2022, p. 6). Censorship, on the other hand, affects the entire

inner communication between fellow worshippers, since it extends to decision making, external relationships, and exchange of thoughts (Kinmond, Oakley, 2013, pp. 27–32; Demasure, 2022, p. 7). Pressure to conform may be exercised through excessive commitment to the group. To be precise, the worshippers are expected to prioritize community welfare over their own needs, and that may eventually lead to the loss of the Self (Kinmond, Oakley, 2013, p. 33; Demasure, 2022, pp. 4–5). In cases where abuse is generated by a group leader or a particular minister in charge, the divine element seems to play a significant role. More specifically, certain religious figures claim to have been appointed by God Himself and therefore, whatever they think or do, should not be subject to criticism. The status of the anointed one gives them right to set the rules and hence to reward loyalists or punish rebels. The former manifests itself through special privileges or moving up in the hierarchy whereas the latter means marginalizing or disfellowshipping (Kinmond, Oakley, 2013, pp. 46–47; Demasure, 2022, pp. 6–7). Some scholars interested in the subject matter tend to adopt the kind of framework which uses a wider scope and therefore, does not concentrate solely on the leadership. However, the narratives presented by the interviewees and the data gathered online clearly specify who was responsible for what and where the worrying signs came from. That is why, referring here to leaders and ministers as figures exercising obedience, is fully justified.

In the pages that follow, I will elaborate on Koinonia John the Baptist's (It. Koinonia Giovanni Battista) case. This particular religious group, established in the 1970s in Italy, operates in the marketplace as a private association of the faithful which means that it has not been formally recognized in the Catholic Church as an ecclesiastical movement (Coppen, 2023). There has been fierce debate in Poland since Koinonia's emergence in 1992 about whether or not it is dangerous due to the practices it promotes (Świerczyńska, 2009; Chudy, Wilczak, 2011). Koinonia's *modus operandi* has even drawn the attention of the Dominican Center on Information about Sects located in Warsaw, mostly because of its training program, transactional approach to faith (i.e. the more financial resources you donate the more blessings you will receive from God), and the requirement to submit to the Shepherd. The founder, namely an Argentinian priest Fr. Ricardo Argañaraz, was convicted of fraud in the 1990s when ministering in Italy (Chudy, Wilczak, 2011; Coppen, 2023). He was paid a lot of money in exchange for healing which ultimately did not happen. Miracle trading has led a great number of Catholic priests to stop cooperating with Koinonia. In 1997, a Mexican theologian and the father of St. Andrew School of Evangelization – José H. Prado Flores, wrote a detailed letter to the representatives of the Catholic Church as well as to other Koinonia members in which he both condemned Koinonia's authoritarian system and

mentioned all the alarm features worth paying attention to (Prado Flores, 1997). These were: (1) dominant position of Shepherds, (2) lack of privacy, (3) disregard for the bishop, (4) gradual identity deconstruction, (5) absolute fidelity to the superiors, (6) secrecy and silence, (7) critical attitude towards Church doctrine, (8) heavy reliance on random prophecies instead of close adherence to the Bible, (9) excessive deliverance, (10) exaggerated cult of Fr. Argañaraz, (11) materialism, (12) considerable dependence on the Prosperity Gospel, (13) megalomania, and (14) scheming (Prado Flores, 1997). Regarding the measures taken by the Polish clergy, Rev. Prof. Andrzej Kowalczyk, a former lecturer at Higher Theological Seminary from Gdańsk, accused Koinonia's leadership of spreading profoundly damaging content which in his view, poses a serious threat to one's mental health (Chudy, Wilczak, 2011).

Although Koinonia is reported to have recently lost the support of the Vatican Dicastery for the Laity, Family, and Life (Chudy, Wilczak, 2011; Coppen, 2023), its inglorious past did not stop the Association from growing rapidly and attracting members from all over the world. The Polish community consists of consecrated brothers, sisters, priests, and laymen. The biggest units are called Oases (Błotnica, Nowy Radzic, and Wrocław). They are made up of Communities of Consecrated Life, Familial Communities and Houses of Prayer (Koinonia Jan Chrzciel, 2024a). Communities of Consecrated Life fall under the supervision of Shepherds, also termed Pastors, whereas Familial Communities are monitored by Coordinators. According to what Koinonia's statute says, its main mission is to undertake activities connected with evangelization, education and charitable work. A candidate is expected to deliver a formal letter, that is, an admission request. Full membership requires financial contributions (tithes) and can be terminated any time either by members themselves or by the executive board in case an individual does not follow the rules (disfellowshipping). To be more accurate, no matter how dedicated a particular person has been. As soon as the leadership determines that one "has lost the qualities necessary upon admission and therefore is no longer able to contribute" (Koinonia Jan Chrzciel, 2024b; my own translation), one becomes excluded. None of the passages clearly defines what features are regarded as desirable and what as disqualifying. This raises grave concerns about Koinonia's transparency. The same document emphasizes Koinonia's non-profit approach which may suggest that worldly possessions are of secondary importance to the Association in question. Remarkably, the subsequent paragraphs of its statute seem to deny this statement: affiliates and their families are neither entitled to share in the estate nor have they the right to demand reimbursement of all the membership fees upon leaving or death (Koinonia Jan Chrzciel, 2024b). The high priority given to money-making can also be noticed when studying

one of Koinonia's initiatives, namely Aggeo. It is a tailored program aiming to train entrepreneurs in such a way that they voluntarily distribute part of their profit to the Association. Aggeo's cornerstones include spiritual and biblical formation, motivation, support, and what appears most crucial – generosity, understood as members' moral duty to donate as much as possible in response to God's financial blessing (Koinonia Jan Chrzciel, 2024c; Aggeo, 2024).

The major objective of this study is to specify the characteristics of Koinonia's discourse and to explore how words and phrases that carry a spiritual message work when implemented in Koinonia's communicative space and uttered by those in power. A special emphasis has been placed on emotional, cognitive, and behavioral shifts evoked in the aftermath of being continuously exposed to the aforementioned verbal stimuli. Another problem raised here is the problem of identity reconstruction, that is, the process of re-evaluating and reshaping a sense of Self after leaving the high-control system permanently. The research therefore addresses the following questions: Q1: What are the features of Koinonia's leadership style? Q2: How does it shape the intra-community discourse? Q3: What types of linguistic catalysts do Koinonia's leaders tend to employ when interacting with community members? Q4: How do the worshippers respond to verbal stimulation? Q5: What coping strategies have been most helpful for Koinonia's disaffiliates in the process of rebuilding their perception of Self? I will use terms spiritual abuse and religious abuse synonymously when referring to Koinonia's case despite different views on their proper application.

Recent years have shown a growing trend towards incorporating elements of Pentecostal religiosity into the Catholic ritual which manifests itself, *inter alia*, in highlighting the significance of intergenerational healing, spiritual awakening, and a personal breakthrough. The same is true for demonic interference and hence deliverance ministry which is believed to be a must on one's path to complete renewal (Berdowicz, 2021; Kobylński, 2022). Religious groups promoting signs and wonders usually target those in need. It can therefore be assumed that vulnerable religious seekers are put at risk of being taken advantage of upon joining the community promoting utopian visions. The investigation I have carried out provides a considerable opportunity to advance the understanding of what exactly spiritual abuse stands for when talking about the interplay between Catholic leaders and their followers. The findings should make a valuable contribution to the areas including cognitive psychology, behavioral psychology, discourse studies, and sociology of religion. Finally, since the research concentrates on a particular group of believers, namely Koinonia John the Baptist's enthusiasts operating in Poland, its results may contribute to the popularization of knowledge about this specific environment. So far,

there has been little scientific discussion on Koinonia's *modus operandi* in the Polish religious marketplace.

Materials and methods

Narrative interviewing, netnography as well as document analysis have been used to gain a detailed insight into the subject matter. Because of Koinonia's policy according to which only full members are allowed to participate in dedicated courses, workshops, and prayers where verbal stimulation plays a pivotal role, an on-site observation, though probably most suitable for such an investigation, was not possible. The research has been carried out in phases to avoid confusion when dealing with data.

Interviewees have been chosen based on a purposive and snowball sampling strategies. The inclusion criteria were as follows: age – between 18 and 75, the status of Koinonia's ex-member, regular attendance at Koinonia's meetings for a minimum of 6 months, lack of one's involvement in Koinonia's current projects, and one's emotional readiness to recall past hurts. Taking substances that may affect logical thinking and concentration, anxiety disorder, disaffiliation resulting from violating Koinonia's interests on purpose, mental health treatment in progress, or one's unwillingness to sign an informed consent form, were considered factors excluding an individual from the study. Obviously, the verification process did not involve checking respondents' medical reports. Therefore, they were required to provide an official statement referring to their psycho-physical condition. Both men and women were invited to share their stories by means of a team collaboration application known as Microsoft Teams. Importantly, the subjects represented different Oases and hence Koinonia's overall image seems more objective. The interviews were unstructured which is typical of the narrative approach. Respondents were given an opportunity to speak spontaneously about their experiences. However, they were also told they might be asked additional questions in case they lose the thread. The questions concerned the key themes, namely linguistic catalysts, emotional, behavioral and cognitive changes, and identity reconstruction.

As for netnography, it involved a thorough study of the content created by online communities focused on the Koinonia phenomenon. A great amount of data was found on an Internet forum established with the intention to exchange messages about what is going on in the local area. One of its entries turned out to be a moving testimony of a man who had been attending Koinonia's services together with his wife for more than a year and whose life, in effect, changed for the worse, bearing in mind a painful divorce (Jan70, 2020). He openly admits

that Koinonia's leadership expects absolute obedience and seeks to separate family members if one of them is not their enthusiasts. His confession was a starting point for a lively debate on social influence techniques. It encouraged others to share their memories connected with this particular group of believers. The online gathering under consideration is a good example of what Robert V. Kozinets (2010) terms bonding communities. He explains that the relationship between their participants is strong and long-lasting. They may even want to meet in person and stay in touch for further cooperation. This is exactly what happened to the initiator of the aforementioned conversation who eventually got a lot of support from others and managed to overcome his trauma. Social media profiles and groups devoted to Koinonia's case studied for the purpose of this investigation, work in a similar fashion.

Concerning the documents which have carefully been examined, the correspondence between laymen and local clergy as well as that between laymen and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, online press releases, and Koinonia's training resources, have proved to be crucial. They had been written in English, Italian, Polish, and Spanish. This category encompasses, for instance: (1) a letter composed in 1998 by the aforementioned Jose Prado Flores and his fellow preacher Fr. Emilien Tardif in which they express their apprehension about the way Fr. Argañaraz runs his ministry. Besides, they also accuse Fr. Argañaraz of misappropriating the KEKAKO pastoral project for his own gain (Prado Flores, Tardif, 1998), (2) a letter written by a former Koinonia's member and addressed to Rev. Prof. Andrzej Siemieniowski in which he discloses Koinonia's unfair practices directed at both novices and the already trained ones. Moreover, he raises an issue of enforced silencing in relation to Fr. Argañaraz's past (respondents were guaranteed anonymity and hence I cannot provide his real name in the reference list), (3) another letter of the same author written in 1998 when he still formally belonged to Koinonia. The document was sent to Rev. Prof. Andrzej Kowalczyk who served as an exorcist and simultaneously held the position of a lecturer at Higher Theological Seminary in Gdańsk. The sender's intention was to understand why the recipient, who is a widely-recognized and respected figure, publicly shows considerable reluctance towards Koinonia, (4) a letter that has already been referred to in the previous sections, namely the one containing all the alarm features connected with Koinonia's system (Prado Flores, 1997), (5) online news articles issued in 2002 by *Il Giornale di Vicenza*, an Italian newspaper; these particular articles deal with Fr. Argañaraz's trial and final sentence (they can only be accessed by means of a mobile application once payment has been made), (6) Koinonia's conference brochure which was distributed to the participants of Koinonia's 7th National Convention that took place on October 10, 2003 (Koinonia Jan

Chrzciel, 2003), and (7) faith formation books used by Koinonia's leadership. The vast majority of the documents employed for this research have neither been officially published nor shared externally, which only confirms the thesis about Koinonia's censorship tendencies. I was granted access to this enormously important database thanks to the courtesy of my interviewees.

Results

The present study has been designed to identify the characteristics of Koinonia's discourse, mainly in terms of the linguistic catalysts responsible for emotional, cognitive, and behavioral shifts. Moreover, the research has also attempted to investigate how Koinonia's disaffiliates reconstruct their identities after months or years spent in what is believed to be an abusive environment. Relevant questions have been posed to get a more in-depth understanding of the subject matter and to minimize the risk of omitting key facts.

The first question concerned Koinonia's management style. Precisely speaking, special attention was given to its qualities which made the Shepherds run Oases as well as interact with the members in a specific way. The analysis reveals that Koinonia's leadership model features authoritarianism. The Shepherds promote a transactional approach to faith which means that the more individuals donate the more they are likely to receive from God in exchange:

After hearing such a sermon I thought of a Coca-Cola vending machine: you pay and God will bless you (R4, female, age: 72).

What emerges from the study is the fact that a strong emphasis placed on financial prosperity is Koinonia's dominant feature. Therefore, efficient targeting involves a thorough review of one's material status. Those who run their own businesses or have well-paid jobs are more than welcome. An additional criterion is the candidate's age and psychophysical condition. The results indicate that fishing for the elderly and distressed is one of Koinonia's well-known policies:

When I was a child, I experienced extreme poverty. They knew we had been facing hardships [...]. Furthermore, I was sexually abused by my grandfather (R2, female, age: 34).

I affiliated with Koinonia because I was a single mother of two (R5, female, age: 50).

Koinonia's endless quest for wealth takes the form of large-scale real estate investments. However, it all starts at the local level. Koinonia's leadership, as suggested by one of the interviewees, tends to directly interfere in members'

private businesses and family life, urging them to contribute more to the group which goes in line with the Aggeo project:

They were pushing me to resign from my business activity. They were annoyed. They did not want me to work for the benefit of others. They claimed that I should provide solely for the community (R5, female, age: 50).

Besides, some respondents argued that those in charge try to make the vulnerable economically dependent by hiring them in Koinonia's structures and paying the lowest wages:

Mr. and Mrs. X started a cleaning company which developed rapidly. They would employ Koinonia's novices, but the salary was poor (R4, female, age: 72).

Apart from what has just been said, there are also other points worth stressing when talking about Koinonia's management style. When it comes to the rewards and punishment domain, these include, for example, excessive surveillance, requirement for accountability, restriction of contact with the outside world exercised through the practice of depreciating Koinonia's opponents, and disciplinary meetings ending up with one's degradation or relocation:

I would be taken advantage of. They would tell me to do community service, to work for free. That was my punishment for refusing to tithe (R5, female, age: 50).

The research found out that the aura of mystery and uniqueness Koinonia's leadership creates when, for instance, organizing divine healing sessions, is what particularly attracts believers. At the initial stage they are not aware of what comes next. The findings imply that Koinonia's managerial success lies in the skillful application of common manipulation tactics such as love bombing or the distribution of mutually exclusive messages. An interviewee recalled a random meeting with one of the leaders during which he had been made an offer:

She came closer and asked Can I look deeply into your eyes? Can I bless you? (R1, male, age: 54).

With respect to the second question, the results clearly demonstrate that the *modus operandi* adopted by Koinonia's leaders, largely shapes the intra-group discourse. Firstly, it determines the choice of a concrete linguistic formulae depending on the scenario and interlocutors. In cases where the leader wishes to convince Koinonia's member to take a loan and get involved into multi-level marketing such as Mary Kay, only because the leader herself did so and seems to be satisfied, it is necessary to perform the so-called bestow ritual (my own translation; original term: *rytuał obdarowywania*) (Drabik, 2010), which in

turn rests on the use of a whole range of expressives (Searle, 1979). Consider, for example, the following utterance:

Great cosmetics! You are worth them. You can have what you say. Imagine that you yourself buy this kind of a car in 5 years (R2, female, age: 34).

Instead, Koinonia's phatic exchange ritual (my own translation; original term: "rytuał wymiany fatycznej") (Drabik, 2010), which serves to begin or maintain social relationships, relies heavily on the implementation of magical speech acts (Chudzik, 2002), made, *inter alia*, of directives and declaratives (Searle, 1979), as observed by one interviewee who recalled Koinonia's greetings: "Peace, joy, and material possessions" (R3, male, age: 52). Secondly, the findings also indicate that leaders' attempts to create the aura of mystery, have a considerable impact on meaning-making. What is more, they frame Koinonia members' linguistic worldview by encoding the interpretations of reality. These interpretations affect their intra-group experience. The former can easily be found in a respondent's narrative:

I was asked to write a letter to God and provide a comprehensive description of my dream boyfriend. Then, I was told to put that letter into a special prayer basket (R2, female, age: 34).

In this instance, the basket has nothing to do with usual storage. Its function changes and now it is believed to be an exceptional gate connecting the mundane with the supernatural. As for the latter, an interviewee quoted a part of a conversation between him and the leader during which he heard: "Your resistance will be knocked down" (R3, male, age: 52). This sentence deserves readers' attention due to a clever play on words. Resistance is an abstract noun which means it refers to something non-physical. That is why, it cannot be demolished in a similar fashion to a real building. Thirdly, the data show that in Koinonia's realm, prophecy, teaching, prayer, and sharing are those genres of a charismatic ritual language which help the leadership to win the audience and thereby make the attendees even more submissive as well as eager to donate. They have become fixed components of Koinonia's discourse, however, under certain circumstances their use may cause severe emotional damage, as reported by one individual:

In our group there was a young married couple. The woman could not get pregnant. A prophecy was uttered. They were promised that by this time next year they would have become parents. Unfortunately, the prophecy turned out to be false. The couple suffered a lot (R3, male, age: 52).

Identical consequences were mentioned in relation to Koinonia's healing prayers that largely rest on remove-a-spell formulae (my own translation; original term: "akty oczyniające").

The third question addressed the problem of verbal catalysts and their potential to modify recipients' emotions, cognition as well as behavior. The concept of verbal catalysts stands for words and phrases whose introduction provokes a specific response. The study allowed to distinguish four major categories whose name correspond to the spheres they affect. These are: (1) emotional triggers, (2) cognitive triggers, and (3) behavioral triggers. The first category includes vocabulary that carries an emotional load, either positive or negative. Such catalysts tend to be employed, for example, at the beginning of a worship service when the singing part starts. They aim to attune the participants and make them more receptive to further stimulation, as noted by one of the interviewees who belonged to Koinonia's worship ministry:

We were told to play fast and slow music. The meeting would start with joyful and energetic songs but after a while, we had to switch to tearjerkers. We would invoke the Holy Spirit, and people would cry as a result (R5, female, age: 50).

Besides, they are also characteristic of the deliverance ministry and intercessory prayers. The following words are examples of the first category: renewal, awakening, wealth, prosperity, shepherd, generational sin, spiritual bondage, demons, evil forces, peace, illness, healing, blessing, word of knowledge, trust, friendship, and love. When it comes to phrases or sentences, these were frequently recalled: "You should always expect God to take care of you", "You are a pearl in God's crown", "divine madman", "gusts of the Holy Spirit", and "God's chisel". Regarding the second category, it concentrates on linguistic stimuli which have a significant impact on recipients' perception, reasoning, and comprehension. It is worth pointing out that continuous exposure to such stimuli may influence individuals' mental representations. The findings indicate that relationship-together with existence-oriented triggers play a crucial role in Koinonia's discourse, giving rise to a gradual identity deconstruction and attitudinal shifts, even towards close relatives, bearing in mind the practice of portraying them in an unfavorable light. To illustrate: "We invite you to experience the living Christ and true friendship", "You are our sister", "X are mother and father to us", "Only family members care about one another in this way. Indeed, we are a family" (Kornacki, 2017), "The outsiders are pagans" (R2, female, age: 34), "The real father is the one who cares about us" (R3, male, age: 52). Interestingly, existence-oriented triggers make Koinonia's enthusiasts reformulate their beliefs about agency. Take, for instance, the case of Koinonia's weekly encounters known for their strong focus on prophesying: "While we

were praying, I spoke out loud my requests to God. I needed money for my rent. Shortly after we finished, a lady approached me and said God has just told me that I should give you 150 PLN” (R2, female, age: 34), or leaders’ overall performance where they act as if they had been divinely anointed “I proclaim God’s victory over this matter” (R3, male, age: 52). In respect of the third category, it comprises action-oriented catalysts which empower individuals to do things they might not have ever thought of doing: “You have to be generous”, “You have to be a faithful donator”, “You have to be the voice of one calling in the desert”, “God wants you to...”, “God said to me that you have to...” (R2, female, age: 34). As time passes, new patterns become habits:

We were required to pray according to the imposed scheme: 5 minutes for thanksgiving, 5 minutes for invoking the Holy Spirit, and 5 minutes for reading. There were instructions for everything (R2, female, age: 34).

We were expected to raise our hands when praying [...]. We were also encouraged to hug one another [...]. My husband did not accept that since he was an introvert (R4, female, age: 72).

The fourth question was closely linked to the preceding one, because it raised an issue of the long-lasting repercussions such stimulation may cause, especially when thinking of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral domains. Therefore, the categories that emerged from data analysis, directly correspond to those specified when discussing the aforementioned triggers. With regard to emotional shifts, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, thoughts of harming oneself, feelings of sadness, emptiness, hopelessness, insecurity, and guilt, fear, tearfulness, and irritability, were the consequences most often pointed out to. Noteworthy is that fact that certain rituals, which might have been harmful to participants’ mental health, were performed without any professional supervision, as reported by the respondent who had been sexually abused by a family member:

Deliverance prayers would take place in leaders’ homes [...]. One of the Shepherds, accompanied by a self-declared prophetess, lit a candle and told me to close my eyes. They started speaking in tongues and invoking the Holy Spirit. They would keep repeating – Enter the depths of your past. Imagine you are holding the photo of your grandfather. Enter that photo in your thoughts. How do you feel about your grandfather now? Jesus is coming. Jesus is healing you right now. Calm down and try to think of something nice – I was terrified. I was shaking. They said I was demonized. It resembled a hypnosis session. They expected me to quote my grandfather’s perverted utterances he would speak out loud when playing doctor with me [...]. Those ladies were obviously not mental health specialists. One of them was an accountant (R2, female, age: 34).

A propos of the changes in the cognitive domain, the most crucial shift concerned the way Koinonia's members perceived inner and outer worlds, whereby the former applies to Koinonia's interactional space and the latter to non-affiliates and their realms. The findings show that the inner world was portrayed by the leaders as safe and trustworthy whereas the outer environment as dangerous and deceptive. Furthermore, the data also suggest that Koinonia's members would conceptualize the ideas they had already been familiar with, differently than before, which can be observed, for example, in how they define an illness. In the outside world, infertility is subject to medical treatment while Koinonia's enthusiasts tend to impute blame to evil spirits. The analysis revealed that continuous exposure to verbal catalysts carrying a spiritual message and spread in a high-control context, largely affected Koinonia members' self-perception:

Prayer meetings were a combination of extremes. At the initial stage of the gathering, the ministers would lower a particular participant's self-esteem by dragging their weaknesses out. After a while, they would come up with a perfect solution to those deficiencies. Next, they would get an individual down again by threatening them with a sin and finally, they would praise that person as part of a ritual resembling a hypnotic trance (R5, female, age: 50).

Behavior is the last topic to cover in this section. Koinonia's disaffiliates admitted that they would, for instance, cut ties with friends and relatives, neglect household and work responsibilities, try to self-harm, attempt to commit suicide, misuse drugs, practice ritual purification, blindly follow leaders' commands, even when it came to decision-making, collect items whose role was to protect an individual from demonic forces (e.g. stones around the house), exorcise one another, and practice Christian channeling, as recalled by an interviewee:

My wife would lay down flat on the floor and speak to God. She would recite Pompeian Novena for a few hours. Every time she finished, she was semi-conscious for the rest of the day (R1, male, age: 54).

The analysis of the Koinonia phenomenon demonstrates that religious indoctrination based on dos and don'ts, significantly affects one's identity. The fifth question in this research dealt with how Koinonia's disaffiliates managed to reconstruct their sense of self after parting ways. In the literature (Johnston, Johnston, 2000), coping strategies are understood as cognitive and behavioral efforts employed to reduce the distress an individual once experienced. It is perhaps not surprising that in the case of Koinonia's ex-members, the strategy of seeking help from a mental health specialist prevailed. Although turning to

professionals seems most appropriate, the examined subjects would also seek advice from close friends:

Thanks to X's involvement, I have recovered and matured emotionally. I have regained motivation to finish my studies. In Koinonia, they would keep telling me that I was too weak to go back to university. X made me realize that I had been manipulated (R2, female, age: 34).

Other strategies that emerged from the data included: rejoining the Church, however, as a member of a different community, converting to a different religion, deconverting, withdrawing from a community life while still being a believer, pursuing hobbies, starting a business, and taking up educational challenges.

Conclusions

The project was undertaken to identify the key features of Koinonia's discourse and to explore the influence of verbal catalysts loaded with spiritual content on recipients' emotions, cognition and behavior. Introductory paragraphs addressed the problem of religious abuse and its contemporary varieties. Little is known about the subject matter when speaking of the Polish religious landscape. Therefore, this study has made a major contribution to research on intra-group relationships that are far from those socially acceptable. Importantly, it should be noted that the investigation under consideration may turn out to be scientifically valuable to more than just one discipline due to the issues it raises. It is not only about the language. It is also about promoting certain business models in the religious marketplace and about human vulnerability. Returning to the questions posed at the beginning, it can be assumed that the answers provided by the respondents, who were eyewitnesses of specific events, and the data gathered when conducting netnography, will serve as reference points for further insights.

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from the present research. Firstly, not everything that carries a spiritual label guarantees spiritual freedom, and sometimes the more spiritual a group of believers claims to be, the more detrimental to one's psyche it becomes as time passes. The findings indicate that coercive control, even though justified by higher purposes, may prove counterproductive, leading to social disintegration, as disclosed by one of the interviewees who referred to having been disfellowshipped in consequence of her disobedience. What is more, a determined opposition to the ideas promoted by people describing themselves as prophets and healers working for God, may give rise to a series of retaliatory measures, as in the case of the

respondent who admitted to having been harassed as soon as she left Koinonia's structures or an individual who confessed to online community participants about his marriage being in meltdown only because he said "no" to Koinonia's *modus operandi*. Secondly, the findings also suggest that one's verbal choices made within a religious context frequently give a hint about that person's true intentions. A strong emphasis placed on financial prosperity which can be observed in Koinonia's discourse may, at some stage, provoke doubts among its users who may eventually start voicing concerns and hence put themselves at risk of what is known as cognitive dissonance. Thirdly, the results prompt reflection on the need to introduce relevant legal solutions in Poland; such solutions whose application would prevent self-declared miracle workers from taking advantage of people experiencing emotional distress caused by a whole range of life hardships. Currently, the Polish Penal Code does not provide for penalties against those who abuse the vulnerable religiously making them totally submissive and reluctant to get involved in a substantive debate. That is why, the Polish religious marketplace should be approached with a great deal of caution, regardless of the target group's denomination.

Further research on Christian discourse would be worthwhile. Special attention should be given to various types of ritual speech, mostly in terms of its practical implementation. It would be interesting to compare linguistic catalysts identified in this study with their counterparts characteristic of another group which is both referred to as a private association of the faithful and oriented towards signs and wonders. A good example could be Shalom Catholic Community (It. Comunità Cattolica Shalom) known for their strict rules and international expansion. The study should be interdisciplinary to enable a better understanding of the investigated phenomenon.

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