**Hegemonic masculinities and sexual abuse: two case studies**

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**Abstract**

This article discusses male experiences of hegemonic masculinity and abuse within two small, anonymized new religious movements, drawing on primary source material from the educational charity Inform. Both groups created patriarchal, misogynistic cultures in which women were inferior to men and the leaders used teachings to justify restricted gender roles, sexual activity and sexual abuse of women. Both men and women experienced additional abuse, including physical, psychological, spiritual, and financial. We argue the revelations of sexual abuse irrevocably damaged the systems of hegemonic masculinity. Drawing parallels with literature on charisma and charismatization, we explore how charismatic leaders enforced gendered expectations and unequal relationships. Employing the concept of moral injury, we explore how revelations of sexual abuse disrupted the shared worldview and precipitated religious exit. These case studies add a gendered perspective to the literature on both religious exit and religious abuse through heterosexual men's experiences.

KEYWORDS:

- Abuse
- gender
- sex
- religious exit
- moral injury
- masculinities
- charisma
- patriarchy

**Introduction**

Religious exit following experiences of sexual abuse or restrictions on sexual freedom (such as reproductive control, purity culture, conversion therapy, and more) has predominantly focused on women's and, to a lesser extent, LGBTQIA + experiences (e.g., Allison Citation2021; Gaddini Citation2022; Jacobs Citation1989; Puttick Citation1997; Rantala Citation2022; Van den Brandt Citation2024, Citation2025; Van den Brandt and Rantala Citation2024). This is unsurprising given that women and LGBTQIA + people are more likely to experience gender-based violence – that is, violence because of their actual or perceived gender or sexuality – as well as sexual violence. However, men have also been victims of sexual abuse in religious movements and have been members in movements in which religious teachings have justified restricted gender roles and sexual activity. To date, there has been a lack of empirical study of cisgender, heterosexual men's experiences in such movements and of masculinities and religion in general (but see Banerjee Citation2005; Imhoff Citation2017; Krondorfer

and Hunt Citation2012; and Van Es Citation2021). In this article, we seek to add nuance to the feminist scholarship on women as victims of patriarchy by considering how this structure has also harmed men.

The case studies we explore here are two small, informal networks built around charismatic male leaders with interesting similarities. We refer to the two men as Leon (an alternative healer) and Ali (a fitness instructor). Within both movements, some female followers were victims of sexual abuse, and both male and female members reported experiencing physical, financial, psychological, and spiritual abuse.Footnote[1] The two case studies of new religions we explore here present what Laura Vance terms 'contradictory strains of dominant thinking on gender and sexuality,' which include elements of gender empowerment for women within gendered patriarchal patterns of socialization and sexual abuse (Citation2015, 124–125). In this, the two case studies follow Janet Jacobs's insight that gendered abuse in new religious movements (NRMs) tends to be found particularly with 'a charismatic social structure that is patriarchal in nature' (Citation2007, 234).

It is our proposal that the revelations of sexual abuse in these two groups irrevocably damaged the system of hegemonic masculinity that developed around the male charismatic leader, but for different reasons. Raewyn Connell (Citation1987) introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity in response to seeing the negative impacts of the legitimation of patriarchy in situations where an unequal power dynamic exists between genders, with a dominant form of masculinity occupying the highest position. Connell's use of the term 'hegemony' points to the way unequitable power structures are socially maintained not by 'force alone but also by ideas' (Bates Citation1975, 351; see also Connell and Messerschmidt Citation2005). As Thomas Bates explains, 'the concept of hegemony … means political leadership based on consent by the diffusion and popularization of the world view of the ruling classes' (Citation1975, 352). Both small religious groups we discuss were led by male leaders considered to be charismatic by their small groups of convert followers.Footnote[2] Both groups made essentialized, binary gender identities central to their ontology, and practices related to gender identities were central to both groups' practical soteriology. Put more simply, both leaders promoted a conception of the world that differentiated sharply between men and women: men were seen as spiritually superior (although still in need of advancement), and women were expected to undertake specific, gendered practices in order to advance spiritually.

In both cases, there were extensive reports of sexually abusive behavior that led to several men leaving the group. However, the reasons for leaving in each case were different. Given that we agree with Connell (Citation2005) in emphasizing that masculinities are plural and multifaceted, we will consider important nuances in each case study and compare significant similarities. In both cases, the seeds that disrupted the hegemonic power structures and led to the exit of members came from within the ideological structures of the hegemonic worldview itself. Although we will be discussing small, anonymized case studies here, the gendered dynamics we observed within these two groups are at play in other new religions and in groups within more 'mainstream' or 'old' religious movements (Harvey CitationForthcoming).

**Data and research methods**

Information about the two movements discussed in this article is not in the public domain. Instead, the data is primarily composed of confidential enquiries received by the educational charity Inform (Information Network on Religious Movements)Footnote[3] and materials held in its archive in London. Both authors of this article have been researchers with Inform for over twenty years.Footnote[4] And

though we have spoken to and recorded the testimonies of the enquirers, they cannot be considered interviews in the usual academic sense.

Inform's mission is to provide information about new and minority religions that is as accurate, up-to-date, and evidence-based as possible. Founded by sociologist of religion Eileen Barker in 1988 (during the height of the 'cult wars' – see Ashcraft Citation2018), Inform seeks to make academic, empirical information about new religions publicly accessible in order to reduce harms caused by lack of information and/or misinformation.

To do this, Inform maintains an enquiry service whereby anyone can contact Inform staff to ask about a new religion or to provide Inform with information, including testimonies of their own experiences. Inform maintains one of the world's most comprehensive databases of new and minority religions, with 5,190 entries as of July 2024. Inform relies on its extensive international network of experts to provide information, and it is committed to sociological research methods and principles of comparison and contextualization. Inform staff obtain data from as many sources as possible, while noting their biases; they also (try to) maintain contact with the religious movements themselves – as well as with their critics, ex-members, friends and relatives of members, and other interested parties (Newcombe and Harvey Citation2024; Van Eck Duymaer van Twist Citation2015).

In this article, we focus on ex-member narratives provided to Inform about two small groups. Both groups were active in London from at least the early 1990s and both groups were involved in court cases in the period 2009–2010. We have selected these two case studies from the Inform database primarily because of the wealth of information we hold about them, including data from enquiries, from the court cases, and the group's primary materials in the case of Ali. That both of these cases went to court is relatively unusual, but the dynamics of harm and abuse that we outline here are found across other movements in the Inform database.

Both sets of former members narrated that the teachings and practices of their groups were harmful to them, and the perspectives provided in their accounts were as valuable as they were varied. We are fully cognizant that a bias is at play here – if the former members had not experienced harm, they would unlikely be motivated to report their experiences. To capture a wholistic understanding of either movement, ideally the perspectives of the small numbers of people who continued to be members of these two movements would also be included. It is the working practice of Inform to seek out as many different perspectives as possible, including maintaining contact with the groups themselves. However, it is often difficult in practice to maintain equal contact with both 'sides' of a particular group, and in these two cases the majority of Inform's information derives from former member narratives.

Inform's database and archives contain a great deal of confidential and sensitive information. This raises significant issues with regard to how we work with the data (Van Eck Duymaer van Twist and Harvey Citation2025). Inform is bound both by its own confidentiality policy protecting enquirersFootnote[5] and by UK laws around privacy and sexual offences legislation. Inform does not have legal privilege and so cannot withhold information if required to disclose by a court of law. This type of request has occurred, although we fought – and won – to maintain our inquirers' confidentiality (Katz Citation2014; Van Eck Duymaer van Twist and Harvey Citation2025).

Considering the former-member narratives described here, we would like to note that, while wishing to remain personally anonymous, the enquirers also gave consent, in line with Inform's mission, that their

narratives could be retained and used in redacted form to inform others. These former-member inquirers explicitly wanted to do something to prevent others from having similar experiences but simultaneously were eager to move on with their own lives and not be asked to replay their trauma or engage further with the leaders or those continuing as followers. For this reason, here we maintain the two groups' anonymity and provide only broad descriptions of their religious teachings. On occasion we directly quote from our exchanges with former members, particularly where the same phrase was used by multiple sources.

There are significant difficulties in writing about religious movements with sexual assault allegations. Sexual offences legislation protects both victims of sexual assault and the accused (at least up until a conviction) – as well as the accused's family members and other members of the religious community, if relevant. Because the majority of the testimonies Inform holds about the two movements were either not reported to police or did not result in conviction, we have anonymized the leaders and their movements. This both protects Inform from libel claims and upholds the wishes of inquirers who want their identities to remain confidential. At the same time, we recognize that anonymization offers a level of protection for religious leaders and movements and contributes to the protection of the movement at the expense of individual victims of abuse.

**Theoretical framework and key terms**

The core assumption of our analytical framework is that beliefs and norms within groups are observable and reinforced through social constructions (Barker Citation1993). In recent years, the study of masculinities has re-emphasized the multiplicity of ways that gendered expectations are expressed and enforced *through relationships* that legitimate unequal gender relations (Messerschmidt Citation2019). That is to say, a particular practice of masculinity develops through 'the politics of norms: the interests that are mobilized and the techniques used to construct them [the masculinities]' (Connell Citation2005, 35). As emphasized by Connell, hegemonic masculinity is a *process* that incorporates various levels of encultured models of idealized identities, aesthetics, and behaviors that serve to establish and maintain unequal relationships based on gender. The identities, aesthetics, and behaviors associated with gendered power imbalances manifest with unique specificity in local contexts (Connell Citation2005).

This emphasis on the co-construction of unequal power relationships parallels the understanding in New Religious Movement studies of charisma and charismatic leadership. And while it is true that charismatic leaders are often seen as having unusually captivating personas in the wider arena, for them to also have charismatic authority requires significant cocreation, such as through the endorsement of key followers (especially in encouraging those outside the movement to recognize the leaders' charisma). But the assessment is not uniform; in studies of masculinity it has been recognized that there is variable acceptance of and rebellion against the hegemonic norms (Connell Citation2005; Van der Gaag, Massoumian, and Nightingale Citation2023); likewise, charisma is recognized to have variable results on individuals, both within and outside a tradition (Barker Citation1993; Lucia Citation2018; Prophet Citation2016).

Both of our case studies involve small groups[Footnote6] with male leaders who were experienced as charismatic. The worldviews of both movements were gender essentialist, with gender coterminous with binary biological sex, and both movements had heterosexual, gender-specific embodied practices and roles and responsibilities. There was no room for nonbinary or nonheterosexual identities within either of these movements. Catherine Wessinger suggests in her *Theory of Women in Religions*

(Citation2020) that clearly defined and binary gender roles are a defining feature of patriarchal cultures. She theorizes that this binary easily supports other forms of binary thinking that 'demonise(s) the "other,"' making it socially acceptable to commit acts of violence against them. The ideological teachings of both groups demonstrate an intensification of mainstream patriarchal social structures and worldviews found in wider society, and in both groups physical violence was used against both genders.

Although there have been significant expansions to scholarship on nuancing understandings of religious exit, there is limited work specifically dealing with religious exit and issues of gender and sexuality (see, for instance, Enstedt, Larsson, and Mantsinen's *Handbook of Leaving Religion* Citation2020).Footnote[7] However, increasing attention is being placed on women's experiences of leaving religious movements that curtail their sexual freedoms in some way, particularly in milieus where there is a focus on purity cultures and reproductive control (see, for instance, Allison Citation2021; Gaddini Citation2022; Rantala Citation2022; Van den Brandt Citation2024, Citation2025). We argue that important parallels can be elicited from our looking more closely at gender, hegemonic masculinities, and the male exit narratives of our two case studies. That said, there are also notable differences in the male exit narratives between groups.

In her conception of hegemonic masculinities, Connell also points out that: 'Hegemony … does not mean total control. It is not automatic, and may be disrupted – or even disrupt itself' (Citation2005, 37). In the two case studies below, we argue the male exit narratives can be found precisely within an experience of rupture with the specific structures of hegemonic masculinities presented in each group. In each case, events around the sexual abuse of women precipitated a crisis in the structure of the hegemonic masculine culture and was highlighted in the exit narratives of male followers.

We found significant differences in how the men in each group narrated their reasons for leaving. The two men we spoke to who had left Leon's group focused on both grievances related to their status within the group and personal harms they experienced. Both pointed to specific harms of financial 'theft' by Leon and a lack of autonomy, and choice of sexual partners. They conveyed that the harms they experienced within the hegemonic structures made staying within the milieu intolerable; they did not distinctly challenge Leon's patriarchal assumptions.

In the second case, which we are calling Ali's Fitness Club, we found it useful to think about the catalysts for exiting the group more broadly as 'moral injuries.' With origins in military studies, particularly applied to veterans of war (e.g., Shay Citation1994), *moral injury* has been defined as 'the damage done to one's conscience or moral compass when [a] person perpetrates, witnesses, or fails to prevent acts that transgress one's own moral beliefs, values, or ethical codes of conduct.'Footnote[8] Though it does overlap with trauma, moral injury focuses specifically on the individual's interpretation of the event and whether that interpretation impacts their own moral compass and worldview. The concept of moral injury also takes into account the individual's agency and role in the event. Applied to religious exit, it suggests that an event or behavior that transgresses the individual's deeply held moral values may cause them to question their own actions and/or those of the religious leaders, as well as their commitment to the religious movement. Moral injury is an ethical transgression that invalidates a promise or expectation and necessitates a break with the leader and/or movement, sometimes after the transgression has been rationalized or ignored for a long time.Footnote[9] We argue that moral injury is useful in thinking about the different exit pathways from the two groups discussed here – specifically

the moral injury of disrupted hegemonic masculinity presented by revelations of sexual abuse against the women in Ali's group.

Members of both groups were spiritual 'seekers' (Sutcliffe Citation2022; Wuthnow Citation2000) who had the financial and social capital to explore their spiritual interests. They were 'converts' to their new religious movements, reflecting the characteristics Barker (Citation2004) has identified as following from conversion, including high levels of commitment and enthusiasm and a recognition of the leader's charismatic authority, which allowed him to make proclamations across all areas of their lives. We will provide more detail as we discuss the dynamics of each movement in turn below.

**Leon's 'dharmic community'**

Leon presented himself as a Buddhist and an alternative healer. His group was involved in hosting international Buddhist teachers, attending and organizing events in the United Kingdom, particularly in London and Manchester, and visiting and financially contributing to ashrams and retreats in India. Leon's primary occupation was as a healer, including naturopathy, osteopathy, massage, and what could loosely be called life coaching. According to the former members we spoke with, he was strongly influenced by the Indian teacher Osho (originally called Rajneesh, 1931–1990), particularly in his ideas around breaking down ego and sexual activity as part of the spiritual path. Leon's group of about thirty core followers were mostly women – the majority of whom were white although from international backgrounds, with ages ranging from the early twenties into middle age, and including some professional women with successful careers. Generally speaking, women may experience empowerment in movements within the holistic milieu because of numerous interlinked factors, including validation of women's embodiment, emotions, and intimate relationships (Sointu and Woodhead Citation2008) and conceptions of a female divine. In the court case against Leon, current members and some former members described feeling liberated or empowered by beliefs and practices they encountered through Leon – statements made in some cases by the same individuals who also claimed to have been victims of sexual abuse or rape.[Footnote10]

Inform received 160 enquiries about Leon between 1997 and 2024. 51 of these were from former members, including 23 who provided statements about their experiences in the group. Many individuals contacted Inform more than once; sometimes with long breaks between contact, or the reasons for contact were different, their statements were logged as individual enquiries.[Footnote11] Only two of the former members we spoke to in this case were male, which is reflective of gender ratios within this group. It should be reiterated that the case studies were not collected as part of a standard academic research project, and so we did not interview specifically with questions targeting gendered experiences. These insights are drawn from how former members reported their general exit narratives to Inform. In both cases, beliefs and behaviors relating to gender were a spontaneous focus of the narratives, which highlights the salience of this theme to the experiences of those leaving the groups. We acknowledge that there are gaps in the data and a lack of follow-up questions.

Teachings were heteronormatively gendered, with women's practices focusing on their embodiment, deportment, dress, and sexual activity. Allegedly drawing on an interpretation of Osho's teachings, Leon taught both that people needed to be free of their 'attachments,' working on their own 'egos' (specifically 'breaking them down'); and that sexual activity was an important part of this spiritual work. It should also be noted that for both men and women, and in line with Osho's teachings, sexual activity was divorced from reproduction and there were no children within the movement. This was sexual

activity as a spiritual technique rather than for creating a second generation to vitalize and continue the religious movement (for Osho see Goldman Citation1999 and Urban Citation2015). Women in the movement reported that Leon recommended women work as dancers in 'gentlemen's clubs' and have 'one-night stands,' and that they embrace body practices such as dressing in a 'feminine' way, eating 'sensually' and putting on weight,Footnote[12] and behaving diffidently around men (such as not looking them in the eye), and more. These teachings encouraged women to be demure and subservient while also being sexually available. In Leon's conception, women had more ego 'issues' than men did and thereby had to work harder to break down their egos to progress along the spiritual path.

As previously noted, the conception of hegemonic masculinities emphasizes that gender is a relational construct. Movements with a divine feminine sometimes also offer men alternative modes of masculinity (Hunt Citation2022). Leon's alternative health movement had the potential to offer alternative models of masculinity, both through its positioning in the holistic milieu and in its encouraging members to attend teachings on Buddhist and Hindu nondualism. However, since a major focus in Leon's teachings was gender essentialism, this group's beliefs and practices did not offer an alternative view of masculinity.

The few men in the movement were offered a worldview in which men were considered to be superior to women, and women were devalued in numerous ways. Short-term relationships and multiple sexual partners were held as the ideal model of sexual relations since these behaviors exemplified nonattachment and 'freedom.' But the men we spoke to had not internalized any religious justifications for these sexual practices or for dictates around dress and deportment. Men were also encouraged to have multiple sexual partners – but not, it seemed, for their own spiritual progression. Rather, the group's promotion of short-term, multiple sexual partners was framed for men as a conquest, as representative and constitutive of their masculinity and a demonstration of hypervirility. The few men in Leon's movement thus automatically had a higher standing – including personal access to Leon and the movement's financial resources – than the women had, regardless of their time involved, knowledge of religious teachings, or capacity to be involved with the organization of events.

Masculinity within Leon's group was not created only through sexual practices. In his younger years, Leon had reportedly been involved in a life of petty crime, and some of his male network had similar backgrounds. Leon was reportedly often accompanied by a male acquaintance when he approached women to offer healing treatments in public spaces such as health food shops. He and other men in the movement drove expensive cars and dressed alike in displays of wealth and status. Ex-members reported to Inform a sense of in-group superiority and demeaning language used toward those outside, including critical family and friends, as well as, sometimes, toward LGBTQI + or nonwhite people – despite Leon being nonwhite himself. Gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class all intersect in Leon's movement to create a culture in which Leon himself represented the ideal masculine to which male followers aspired, and women became tools in this process. Also, physical violence was understood to be a male activity. Note, however, that some women who left Leon's group described being 'roughed up' or 'bullied' or 'harassed' (including with abusive phone messages) by other women within the movement.

**Male exit narratives and Leon's hegemonic masculinity**

In Leon's movement, people left individually when they experienced a personal moral injury, either to themselves or witnessed in others. Experiences of sexual abuse as moral injury (as well as a criminal act)

were relatively clear-cut in this movement. Around twenty women reported (to Inform) experiencing sexual abuse in the healing context fairly soon after encountering Leon, after which they immediately left the movement. Other women were slower to leave, perhaps unsure if they experienced sexual abuse at all. This resulted in a steady trickle of people leaving the movement over the thirty years or so of its existence. Some women remained in the movement, loyal to Leon until the day he died.

Many ex-members who spoke to Inform did not necessarily know one another in the movement (due to a lack of temporal overlap) and did not connect as ex-members. Due to the lack of information about the movement in the public domain, it was hard for new and potential members to find critical information or for ex-members to learn about their shared experiences. As a result, Inform continues to receive ex-member testimonies from people who were involved with Leon. This is in line with academic literature, which emphasizes that there is often a delay between abuse experience and disclosure (Jay et al. Citation2022).

Leon sexually assaulted a number of women who came to him for healing treatments. The testimonies of sexual abuse that led to convictions against Leon in court (and to an extended prison sentence) came from women who had attended only a couple events with the group or who had seen Leon specifically for a healing treatment. In the successful cases, victims reported rape and/or sexual assault soon after the event to a credible third-party professional who was also able to testify in court. The testimonies of these women were strikingly similar in that they described social situations in which the group of followers socialized at one of their homes, cooking and eating together, listening to Leon or others discuss religious teachings. They described waiting long periods of time for their expected treatment from Leon, usually in the form of a massage, and how during the massage Leon penetrated them with either his finger or penis. When the women challenged him, either at the time or shortly after, he justified his actions in various ways – from saying he was rebalancing energies or realigning the chakras in order to release toxins or negative mental states and attachments, to simply claiming his penis was enlightening. Leon framed his sexual assaults as healing, utilizing the language and ideas of the holistic milieu (with which the women were familiar). There were a number of other women who testified in court to experiences of rape and sexual assault by Leon that did not directly lead to convictions. These included testimonies from women with more extended experiences within the group, narrating longer and more complex interactions. Moreover, some followers reported incidents of Leon intimidating them with threats of physical violence and pressuring them to support him financially. Since these were considered irrelevant to the jury's specific duty to decide on the charges of rape and sexual assault, they were not allowed to be presented to the jury.

The two male former members of Leon's movement independently spoke with Inform at different times before and after Leon was sentenced to prison. This is not surprising given that the prison sentence provided a more definitive disruption to this particular subculture of hegemonic masculinities. Both men had left the group a long period before the court case began. Both men's exit narratives focused on a personal experience of grievance: the fact that Leon had 'taken' their money and their girlfriends. Although both men had for a period of years consented to and benefited from the movement's hegemonic patriarchy, which provided living accommodation and access to multiple female sexual partners, both had eventually grown disillusioned with their lower social status in comparison to Leon and the harmful behavior they experienced to themselves. When speaking of financial contributions to the movement, both men reported that he had 'stolen' from them – perhaps indicating a sense of emasculation. Both men described the harms they experienced from the culture of promiscuity within

the group; one alleged that Leon had slept with his partner, and the other alleged that his partners were Leon's 'cast-offs,' that he did not have permission to find his own partner. Both men had been socialized into the misogynistic culture and had contributed to it and upheld it – which can be seen as a form of sexual violence for all involved. The men who left Leon's group did not seem to include the harms done to women as part of their reason for leaving; their narratives focused on only the personal harms they experienced.

As noted earlier, there was a small group of female core members who maintained their loyalty to Leon through the ordeal of his trial and his years of imprisonment. Core members continued to look after Leon until his death of natural causes a few years after being released from prison.

**Ali's fitness club**

Ali's group began life as an alternative fitness practice geared toward young men from a particular immigrant community in London. Originally the format was a fitness class in which physical prowess and martial arts were prioritized. Here, constructions of masculinity played a part in the raison d'être of the early group and arguably in young men's reasons for joining and participating. Inform received fifty-five enquiries about Ali between 1999 and 2024; thirty-four of these statements were made by twenty-five ex-members. The fact that sixteen of the statements were from male followers reflects that there was a more balanced gender ratio in this movement than in Leon's. Ali's group eventually consisted primarily of heterosexual couples.

Ali's fitness-practice focus morphed into more political and religious discussions with the young men who attended his classes, who then brought in other friends and relatives. Discussion meetings were held at Ali's home. Initially focusing on Islamic traditions, Ali's teachings became both more structured and more idiosyncratic over time, until they were presented as a culmination of the 'Abrahamic traditions.' Simultaneously, Ali progressed from being an individual with mystical experiences to one who received divine revelations as a messenger or prophet of God – and then to the personification of God with a unique role to play in humanity's salvation. His proclaimed ability to purify his followers was believed to be central to their salvation.

Ali and his family became explicit role models for the movement. Ali was a strong, charismatic masculine figure, an expert at his fitness technique; over time he also became a revered philosophical teacher and author. His sons were poised to follow in his footsteps, while his wife was portrayed (at least by Ali, according to ex-members) as the ideal woman – meek and subservient and sexually loyal to Ali. A social element was emphasized – the young people involved in the movement spent most of their evenings and weekends with Ali and his family, usually in their home but also at restaurants, and sometimes took vacations together.

Everyday practices within Ali's movement were gendered. Male followers of Ali took on stereotypically 'masculine' roles within the movement, such as driving him to appointments and helping with construction and maintenance work on his properties. Women, on the other hand, took on more of the embodied, intimate, and subservient roles, such as preparing and serving food and providing massages – although women also had opportunities within the movement for activities such as public outreach and assisting Ali with his teachings and publications. And though both women and men were expected to contribute financially to the movement, there were even forms of hegemonic masculinity in this aspect; ex-members reported competition among members about donations – higher donations demonstrated

not just greater commitment but also a stronger masculine identity. There was also a dynamic of ongoing competition for physical proximity and access to Ali; males who gave larger donations were rewarded by being asked to travel with him, acting as his driver and being invited to more intimate conversations. But these rewards were reserved for men; the women's donations did not result in similar benefits.

On the surface, Ali's religious teachings did not discriminate by gender. His main teaching was that he, as a divine being, would usher in a 'New Age' in which the human and divine realms were reconciled. In the resultant new realm, select and purified individuals would attain a new level of consciousness – a 'metaphysical immortality.' One means through which Ali could reconcile the two realms, and ensure an individual's place in the new realm, was by petitioning angels to remove an individual's 'bad deeds' (including sexual encounters) from the 'heavenly record.' This involved a process of purification, for both male and female members, in which they shared their past sexual histories with Ali, who then offered techniques of reparation – from a physical healing ritual to various purification practices, such as the consumption of purified substances and proscriptions around couples' sexual activity.

However, these teachings were gendered because Ali, like Leon, presented women as inferior on the spiritual path – it was women who were the bearers of impurities; impurities 'stuck' to women more than to men, and hence women had to work harder to attain salvation. Furthermore, it was sexual activity that caused the greatest risk of impurity. Former members reported to Inform that even from the earliest days of the fitness club, Ali extolled the virtues of female virginity while encouraging men to be sexually promiscuous. Men were automatically of a higher standing because the impurities of sex did not remain in their bodies to the same degree, and hence they could enjoy sexual activity without threatening their salvation. These ideas about purity may relate to the resurgence of belief in telegony seen in some alternative spiritual milieus (particularly in Slavic New Age and Pagan networks). (Telegony is a pseudoscientific theory of heredity dating back to Aristotle that suggests women continue to hold the 'seed' of all past sexual partners, which are then mixed together in any future offspring; fortunately, this was discredited with the emergence of modern genetics.) Pseudoscientific theory aside, Ali constructed a particular hegemonic masculinity that was closely tied with sexual activity.

Unsurprisingly, the male former members who reported their stories to Inform did not admit to being sexually promiscuous and/or to upholding Ali's view of women, but they did report that such ideas were circulating in the group to create a general misogynistic culture. While this was particularly damaging for women, it was also harmful to men. Like the women in the group, men also had to recount their past sexual histories in group meetings and undergo purification rituals – which they reported they experienced as emasculating. Specifically, these rituals entailed recounting the number of past sexual partners and then the men, who were in a prone position, received a tap on the genitals for each partner. Whilst the men did not describe this as a particularly painful process, they described it as demeaning and humiliating. However they all recognized that the process was much harsher and more intense for the women in the movement, whom Ali held accountable for impurities. Women were not physically touched in these rituals in the same way but they were publicly humiliated by Ali, made to feel dirty and shameful, their bodies devalued. Men also recognized that their female partners underwent purification processes in order to protect them, the men, from impurities. This led to a situation in which Ali controlled the sexual activity of couples within the movement; they could have sexual relations only if specific purification practices had been followed at certain times. A number of ex-

members, both men and women, described the strain of this on their marriages, as well as difficulties with physical intimacy even after leaving the movement.

**Male exit narratives and Ali's hegemonic masculinity**

For members in Ali's group, the final breaking point came when a prominent couple within the movement decided to leave. It was the man in the couple who initially wanted to leave, primarily because of financial abuse; he described a two-year process of making the decision in discussion with his wife. Once they finally decided to leave, they told others within the movement about their decision, their reasons, and their abuse experiences and interpretations of moral transgressions. As a result members within the movement began talking about their personal experiences for the first time and realized that they were not unique – others too had been bullied, humiliated, shamed and, for some women, coerced into sexual relationships with the leader.

During private interviews for purification, Ali had suggested to some women (although not all) that desiring a sexual relationship with him, a divine being, could prove the woman's divine status. Furthermore, he claimed that engaging in a sexual relationship with him would purify her. Some of the women in the group reported desiring a close, physical, and sometimes intimate relationship with Ali. This can be understood through Amanda Lucia's framework of 'haptic logics' (Citation2018): the women – and men – in the movement desired to be close to Ali and to have physical contact with him in order to partake of his sacred presence. Women were encouraged to explore their sexual feelings for Ali, at first in letters, and then in sexual activity with him. Former followers reported feelings of competition and of jealousy when other women were shown favor – such was the desire to be the 'chosen goddess.' (These women had not realized at the time that Ali, in fact, had sexual relations with more than one woman.) As with Leon's group, sexual activity was justified as essential to the women's spiritual progress. In this case the activity was framed as purification rather than healing, but the arguments were similar.

The social dynamics of leaving this movement were hence different from those of Leon's group. In the case of Ali's group, two-thirds of the membership left within one year. Unlike in the case of Leon, they did not report their experiences to police, as they were uncertain about issues of consent. They had consented to sexual relationships at the time and only later had recognized the unequal power relationships and unhealthy group dynamics. It was only in hindsight that the women were able to characterize Ali's sexual relationships with them and the wider social context as abusive and harmful and the result of pressures and manipulation on Ali's part. The former members maintained a strong social network after leaving, and most reported a sense of empowerment from this. They referred one another to Inform to record their experiences, donate materials, participate in events, and more – but only up to a point. Although Ali is still teaching and has maintained a small group of the same followers from this period, Inform has not received an inquiry about him since 2015.

In their exit narratives, most of the men in Ali's group acknowledged the mistreatment of women as a central reason for their leaving; some former members expressed shame for their role in supporting Ali and encouraging others to do so over the years. Some of the men mentioned a further feeling of emasculation, feeling a 'failure' for not 'protecting' their female partners from abuse. In general, the men in Ali's group reported feelings congruent with moral injury – shock, disbelief, anger. This was harm caused to others but also to themselves – and perhaps their masculinity – as the women abused were their wives, sisters, cousins, friends. For instance, one man reported how angry he was when he

discovered what the women had experienced, while another reported initial disbelief and shock; both conveyed it was abuse of the women that finally inspired them to leave.

Given that the mass exodus of members from Ali's group occurred within a limited time period, it could be argued that abusive events and behaviors had been interpreted ambiguously until the final catalyst. Van Eck Duymaer van Twist (Citation2014, Citation2017), former Deputy Director of Inform, who led Inform during both the cases discussed here, has outlined this process. She describes how members let 'little deceptions' slide until 'there was an accumulation that at some point amounted to too much deception to be able to ignore' (Citation2014, 64). Using an inquirer's own words, she describes this process as 'accumulating truth.' This is a useful addition to the concept of moral injury. It reminds us that moral injury, while impacting one's moral compass and worldview, does not always result in a snap action such as immediate religious exit. Instead, it can be a slow process of accumulating 'truth' over time until the final breaking point.

The sexual abuse experienced in Ali's group was gendered in its being directed toward women. But there was physical abuse as well, which was also gendered in that it was more directed toward men. At Ali's encouragement, a number of remaining male members had physically assaulted two male members who had left the movement; the assault was so severe that Ali and the perpetrators ultimately received prison sentences for the crime. Though in the legal case it was framed as resulting from a financial dispute, the victims interpreted it as a punishment for leaving Ali, given that they had believed he was a divine teacher. It can also be read as Ali this time choosing physical violence as his method of exerting his dominant masculinity.

**Conclusions and discussion**

Though Leon and Ali had different religious teachings, drawing on different traditions and promoting different practices, their teachings on gender and sexual relations both exemplify specific constructions of hegemonic masculinities. Then, when the promises of the model of masculinity were disrupted, these hegemonic masculinities disintegrated amid the experience of moral injury. In both cases the followers of Leon and Ali actively participated in creating heteronormative communities, displaying hegemonic masculinity and a subordinate role for women. In both cases the long-term male and female followers participated in this co-creation of subcultural social relationships largely structured around gender normativities (Connell Citation2005). This encultured enactment of hegemonic power has important intersections with the dialectical process of charismatization, in which it is recognized that charismatic power is in a large part given by followers to a leader rather than the leader having inherent charismatic authority (Barker Citation1993). Scholars Barker (Citation2009) and Amanda Van Eck Duymaer van Twist (Citation2014) have described the ways in which members of new religions can be socialized into behaviors they would previously not have condoned through an 'ends justifies means' mentality. Members can be socialized into acts of deception or, occasionally, violence in the belief that serving the movement, spreading its teachings, and gaining converts in order to save the world is more important than any individual act that might be understood to be morally problematic. In both of these groups, the socialization into the abusive norms of a more extreme hegemonic masculine culture, in Connell's phrasing, 'do(es) not correspond to a one-way socialisation model' (Citation2005, 37). Members are active participants.

Although gender has been prioritized in this article, issues of gender, sexuality, race, age, and class were all in play in both groups discussed here. Both groups had gendered theologies and practices that

supported heteronormativity and created misogynistic cultures. Women in both groups were considered inferior on the spiritual path and were devalued, humiliated, shamed, and considered impure. As gender is a relational construct, it follows that this conception of women meant that men in the movements automatically had a higher standing and status, including on the spiritual path. This concept was recognized to different extents by the males who left both groups. The women who left unsurprisingly reported that their primary reasons for religious exit were their own experiences of sexual abuse, their witnessing of abuse directed at other women, and/or the general misogynistic culture and the use of religious teachings to justify unhealthy sexual practices. For both genders, these teachings around sex – sometimes leading to sexual assault or coercive sexual relationships – were eventually experienced or reevaluated as a moral transgression that then became a catalyst for leaving the movement.

The two groups demonstrated different nuances to the structuring of hegemonic masculinities and models of ideal masculinity – a fact that illustrates the importance of understanding masculinities as multiple and performatively constructed even within patriarchal structures. In both groups it was the conscious acknowledgment of ethical transgressions and hypocrisy *within* the previously accepted model of masculinity that was experienced as a moral injury and an important precipitating factor for leaving the group. For the male members of both groups, the revelation of the sexual abuse of women was a contributing factor in their religious exit, precipitating a re-evaluation of their own experiences of harm. However, these evaluations took very different form in each group. Arguably it was the personal grievances that caused the male leaders in his group to feel emasculated, whereas it was the extent of the harm caused to the women in Ali's group that led to his followers re-evaluating their norms.

In both cases, male members reported to Inform experiences of emasculation at the hands of their religious teacher. Their own masculinity and sense of self was at times threatened by regulation of their sexual activity, fear of physical or spiritual violence, financial indebtedness, and more. Thus, the religious teacher was upheld as the ideal masculine role model, one that was unattainable for the men in the group – who therefore had to be cast into a subservient (feminized) role in order to maintain the approval of and access to the teacher's charismatic authority. As a generalization, all leavers, men and women, recounted harms to self and others as reasons for exit, and these harms were gendered. Furthermore – in contrast to the male leavers in Ali's group, who expressed more feelings of solidarity with the female victims – male leavers from Leon's group recounted harms to self over and above harms to others. In this, Leon's male leavers demonstrate some parallels with the grievance narratives found in involuntary celibate spaces (Speckhard et al. Citation2021). Although this is a speculative parallel, there is a notable correlation between those who experience both a sense of grievance and a lack of political efficacy being more prone to use violence in other contexts (e.g., Dyrstad and Hillesund Citation2020). This might suggest more profound implications for the different reactions to the emasculation experienced by the men within each group after leaving. It is important to consider not only how abuse and religious exit is gendered but also how men's experiences differ between groups that have ostensibly similar, heteronormative teachings.

The general dynamics of subcultural hegemonic masculinities are not at all unique to these two movements. There are other examples of new religious movements in which the male charismatic leader has claimed sexual rights to female followers (such as David Koresh, leader of the Branch Davidians); has claimed to be able to purify female followers through sexual activity (Sun Myung Moon of the Unification Church); has encouraged female followers to use sexual activity as a recruitment tool (David Berg of the Children of God); and has arranged marriages of (underaged) female followers to

senior male members, casting out the 'excess' young male members (the 'lost boys' of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, led by Warren Jeffs).[13] These are all techniques that maintain patriarchal, misogynistic worldviews and social structures in which the male charismatic leader stands at the apex of a gender-based hierarchy. While women, children, and LGBTQI + people are at the bottom of this hierarchy, men are also subservient to the leader and experience related harms.

In the two cases we explored, general violations of masculinity were experienced, including having their sexual partners 'taken,' threats of or actual physical violence, fear of the leader or of divine beings or other spiritual consequences, and becoming indebted through donations and loans to the religious teacher. These techniques of emasculation upheld the charismatic authority of the two teachers. Other violations were specific to each movement: men in Leon's movement stressed that their money and girlfriends were stolen from them, whereas men in Ali's movement stressed their humiliation in the purification practices and the disrespect shown to their female relatives and thus to themselves. All these violations were moral injuries or transgressions on the part of the leader (and of the self – or at least when the self had some sense of role) that eventually led to religious exit.

The early work of feminist scholars with a focus on 'new religious movements,' such as Jacobs (Citation1989; Citation1991; Citation2007) and Puttick (Citation1997), holds that the majority of new religions replicate wider patriarchal structures and resultant subordination of women – despite there being some examples of gender equality or even superiority of women (Puttick Citation1997, 152) and a variety of different types of female roles on offer (Palmer Citation1994 ). Research on joining NRMs suggests that, while some groups are more attractive to either women or men, resulting in imbalanced gender ratios, the reasons behind this are complex and likely group-specific (Tøllefsen Citation2016). Moreover, it is likely that gender does not make anyone more or less likely to be involved in an NRM per se, and 'there is no strong evidence that women are more susceptible to joining NRMs than men' are (Dawson Citation2003, 123). In both cases discussed here, both women and men actively created a subculture of hegemonic masculinity that had more extreme gender polarity than did the general culture. The beliefs and practices they found in these groups were often initially supportive and empowering; they were only later re-evaluated after a realization of moral injury – whether sudden or gradual – that was very much embedded within the gendered worldview of the movement.

We argue that small new religious movements such as those presented by Ali and Leon are important to study, following Beckford's (Citation1985) argument that, as social experiments on the margins of society, new religions can provide wider insights into how controversies arise and are constructed and managed in other sections of society. The social dynamics and unhealthy behaviors we have discussed here are found in other religious movements, old and new, as well as in nonreligious organizations in politics, education, entertainment, sports, and more. In many ways, Leon's and Ali's teachings are not dissimilar to wider patriarchal social structures and misogynistic worldviews circulating in wider society – although they were justified with religious teachings. The male exit narratives are, we argue, particularly illuminating in how the damage to the group constructions of hegemonic masculinity could be understood as a kind of moral injury that precipitated leaving the group – providing specific examples of how, as Connell suggests, '[h]egemony … can disrupt itself' (Citation2005, 37). This article therefore offers two unique examples of how 'patriarchy plays out in practice' (Van der Gaag, Massoumian, and Nightingale Citation2023, 1), contributing to the literature on multiple masculinities as well as literature on leaving religious movements and sexual abuse within minority religions.

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**Notes**

1 In the data gleaned in exit narrative interviews with members of Inform staff, participants self-identified as either male or female; no respondents self-identified as queer, trans, or intersex.

2 From an emic perspective both groups would not necessarily self-describe as religious groups. Leon described himself more as a 'healer' than a 'guru,' and attending the teachings of a variety of Hindu and Buddhist teachers was a standard group activity; nevertheless, Leon's group did develop distinct beliefs and practices, as well as a social structure that can usefully be described as a religious movement. Likewise, Ali's Fitness Club developed explicit religious teachings over a period of time. After the large exit of membership described in this article, Ali has not publicly promoted himself as a religious leader, although he is still teaching martial arts.

3 See the Inform website (https://inform.ac, accessed May 4, 2025). Inform is an organizational partner with the Religion and Sexual Abuse Project (R&SAP), funded in part by the Henry Luce Foundation.

4 Suzanne Newcombe is currently Honorary Director; Sarah Harvey is Senior Research Officer. Both worked on these cases when they were live, spoke directly to enquirers and watched related court cases in the gallery reserved for the public and press.

5 'Personal data and GDPR Policy' (Inform Citationn.d.). Inform's archive is available to researchers upon request; access to confidential files requires the consent of Inform's Management Committee and the signing of a confidentiality agreement to not reveal any details that could identify individuals who did not consent to their names being made public.

6 Leon's group had a small core of about thirty very committed followers, including the men discussed in this article, and a much larger network of several hundred women who attended activities with the core members – some just once, some regularly for several years. According to our former-member reports

for Ali's group, approximately seventy to eighty people regularly attended. There were never more than 150 people present at meetings.

7 One exception is Carol Cusack's (Citation2020) reference in the *Handbook* to Jacobs (Citation1989), one of few NRM studies authors to address this specific issue. Jacobs argues that women leave NRMs when their emotional bond with the charismatic leader breaks down.

8 From the Moral Injury Project website (accessed May 28, 2025, https://moralinjuryproject.syr.edu/about-moral-injury/). In recent years this concept has been applied in the study of religion, for instance to describe experiences of conversion therapy (Jones, Power, and Jones Citation2022).

9 This is not dissimilar to the catalysts that lead to religious exit in Oakley and Humphrey's conceptualization of spiritual abuse (Citation2019).

10 For explorations of similar tensions see Crockford Citation2024.

11 The majority of the other inquiries in both cases were either from the media or from various professionals such as lawyers and police.

12 A number of women reported this; recognizing that it is perhaps at odds with Western beauty standards, they explained it as a proclivity of Leon, who himself liked to eat well. Another religious group with teachings that could be framed as gender polarity and 'sacred eroticism,' as well as having allegations of sexual abuse by some adult former members, is the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA). MISA's imagery also promotes an ideal feminine aesthetic that is more Rubenesque than mainstream female beauty images (see, e.g., MISA Intensive Tantra Course 'Natha Yogacenter 2008–2010' in the Inform files and Sublima Citation2018). For more on this group see Introvigne Citation2022 and Olsson Citation2024.

13 For the sexual practices of the Branch Davidians see Tabor and Gallagher Citation1995; for the Unification Church see Nevalainen Citation2011; for the Children of God see Vance Citation2015; and for the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints see Wright and Richardson Citation2011.

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