

Professor Ingrid Mattson

Spiritually Abusive Sexual Misconduct in the Muslim Community: Findings from the Hurma Project

What is “spiritual abuse”? It is the misuse of religious power, authority, status, or teachings to violate the *hurma* – the sacred inviolability - of one of the Children of Adam. Spiritual abuse can impair a victim’s ability to connect with God, their religious community, and their own spiritual selves. Spiritual abuse can steal from a believer the sources of comfort, hope and resilience that others may rely upon when they face hardship.

Among the many dozens of reports specifically related to spiritually abusive sexual misconduct we have heard are the following:

- Preachers, scholars and imams engaging in secret marriages with students, naïve converts or vulnerable congregants such as abused women. Religious charisma is leveraged to entice vulnerable women into these relationships which are then terminated after a brief period. Women report feeling deceived about the nature of these relationships which they experience as sexual exploitation; some of these women (especially recent converts) have left Islam in the aftermath.
- Women who have been driven away from religious learning spaces because of persistent approaches by scholars or teachers to enter into sexual relationships with them.
- Men who, as children or youths, were sexually molested by their Quran tutors and are alienated from Islam as a result and/or cannot engage in healthy and halal sexually intimate relationship.
- Victims who disclose their abuse being disbelieved, blamed, or ignored by other Muslims who cite religious concepts such as *husn al-dhann* (thinking well of others), *sitr* (covering another’s faults), forgiveness and *tawba* (repentance), *sabr* (patience), the prohibition of gossip and backbiting, and the need for Muslim unity to prevent the reporting and investigation of an abuse.

In this presentation, I will discuss the importance of safeguarding policies and procedures, as well as professional boundaries for vulnerable persons, but also dig deeper to interrogate common theological, epistemological and spiritual discourses that spiritually disempower a large segment of the Muslim community stripping them of agency, confidence, and value, thus rendering them vulnerable to abuse and with no means to seek accountability.



Professor Ingrid Mattson

Huron University College, London, Ontario

Prof. Ingrid Mattson, PhD (U. Chicago) is the London & Windsor Chair of Islamic Studies at Huron University College at Western University in London, Canada. Previously she was Professor of Islamic Studies at Hartford Seminary (CT) where she founded the first accredited graduate program in Islamic Chaplaincy in North America and directed the Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations.

From 2001-2010, Mattson served as Vice-President, then President, of the Islamic Society of North America (USA). In that position she established the Office of Interfaith and Community Engagement in Washington DC, facilitating new partnerships with other faith-based and civic organizations. Mattson's writings focus on Qur'an interpretation, Islamic ethics and interfaith relations; her book, *The Story of the Qur'an* is an academic bestseller. Currently, Prof. Mattson is directing the Hurma Project, a research and educational initiative she founded in 2018 to prevent and respond to violations of trust and spiritual abuse in Muslim spaces.