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ARTICLE

Distorting Concepts, Obscured Experiences: Hermeneutical Injustice in Religious Trauma and Spiritual Violence

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between hermeneutical injustice in religious settings and religious trauma (RT) and spiritual violence (SV). In it I characterize a form of hermeneutical injustice (HI) that arises when experiences are obscured from collective understanding by normatively laden concepts, and I argue that this form of HI often plays a central role in cases of religious trauma and spiritual violence, even those involving children. In section I, I introduce the reader to the phenomena of religious trauma and spiritual violence. In section II, I describe the role normatively laden concepts play in shaping our social experience. I then elucidate how they can contribute to HI. In section III, I provide a brief overview of the history of some significant identity prejudices in the history of Christianity and argue that children can properly be understood as victims of HI within some religious communities. I then return in section IV to the examples of religious trauma and spiritual violence offered throughout the article and demonstrate that HI plays an important causal role in each of them. HIs sometimes constitute spiritual and religious harms; at other times they create an epistemic environment conducive to spiritual abuse.

Many religious practitioners believe that the tenets and practices of their religion should help them better understand or experience the divine, make sense of their place in the world, and interpret their experiences of them both. But religious frameworks sometimes fail with respect to these goals. Rather than illuminating, they can distort the world, the divine (if it exists), and the believer's experience of them both. When the very nature of one's experience is obscured from collective understanding as a result of unjust social structures, we can call it *hermeneutical injustice* (Fricker 2007; Dotson 2012; Medina 2013; Barnes 2016). In recent years, philosophical literatures have begun to emerge about the spiritual harm that religious frameworks can enable (Tobin 2016; Panchuk 2018; Moon and Tobin 2018; Cockayne, Efird, and Warman 2020; Tobin and Moon 2020) and the epistemic injustices they can perpetuate (Anderson 2004; 2012; Kidd 2017; Merrick 2020; Panchuk 2019; Pogin 2019; 2020). This article explores the relationship between the two. In it I characterize a form of

hermeneutical injustice (HI) that arises when experiences are obscured from collective understanding by normatively laden concepts, and Iargue that this form of HI plays a central role in many cases of religious trauma and spiritual violence, even those involving children. In section I, I introduce the reader to the phenomena of religious trauma and spiritual violence. In section II, I describe the role normatively laden concepts play in shaping our social experience. I then elucidate how they can contribute to HI. In section III, I provide a brief overview of the history of some significant identity prejudices in the history of Christianity and argue that children can properly be understood as victims of HI within some religious communities. I then return in section IV to the examples of religious trauma and spiritual violence offered throughout the article and demonstrate that HI plays an important causal role in each of them. HIs sometimes constitute spiritual and religious harms and at other times create an epistemic environment conducive to spiritual abuse.

I. Religious Trauma and Spiritual Violence

"Religious trauma" (RT) refers to a broad category of traumatic experiences that includes (but is not limited to) putative experiences of the divine being, religious practice, religious dogma, or religious community that transform an individual in a way that diminishes their capacity for participation in religious life. Elsewhere I have suggested three common characteristics of distinctively religious traumas. First, the trauma is caused by something that the individual closely associates with the religion. Second, the survivor usually perceives the religion to have played a positive or negative causal role in the experience's coming about, either by motivating the perpetrator, justifying the behavior, or failing to forbid or protect against it. And third, some of the posttraumatic effects have a religious trigger or object. The survivor may be distrustful of God and religious communities, believe that clergy are especially likely to be predators, or believe that they are doomed to be rejected by religious individuals. They might experience intrusive memories triggered by religious practices, feel extreme fear, distrust, or revulsion toward the divine being, or internalize a deep sense of shame as the result of religious doctrines (Panchuk 2018, 513–18).
Consider the following example:

> [Mom] says that she is in a war against us and that God is on her side in that war . . . that she will keep fighting till she dies, we die, or we are finally broken of our will . . . that in the Old Testament rebellious children were stoned to death and that's what we deserve . . . . I can't remember the last time I had breakfast and this is the third day in a row that I have missed lunch. . . . Dad keeps going around the room, someone gets hit every time. . . . By the end of it he had gotten the fronts of my legs, shoulders, arms, chest, knees and stomach. Abby got hit everywhere too. (Mary 2013)

Although the above example is extreme, religious trauma, like all kinds of trauma, covers a broad spectrum of religiously valenced experiences that overwhelm the brain's normal coping mechanisms. Such experiences can have a long-term impact on the brain and nervous system. Survivors[1] of trauma often suffer from dissociation, intrusive memories, hyperarousal, hypervigilance, anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances, in addition to changes in beliefs about themselves, the world, and the divine (APA 2013, 271–73). These symptoms are associated with a number of negative outcomes in the life

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of someone living with PTSD. Some of the symptoms can diminish the individual's quality of life, and many constitute significant impairments to the individual's pre-trauma functioning. Furthermore, insofar as these symptoms promote behaviors that are not socially acceptable or cause dependency on the care of others, they may also render the survivor the object of social stigma, pity, or resentment. As such, PTSD can rightly be considered a form disability.[2]

One of the salient characteristics of specifically religious trauma is the way that it can be religiously disabling (Panchuk 2018, 510–15). The symptoms of religious trauma can create impairments to religious belief, affects, and practices within the religiously traumatized individual, which may, in turn, lead to beliefs or behaviors that are stigmatized (explicitly or implicitly) by the religious community. For example, "Mary" later describes a panic attack she experienced after receiving communion as an adult, years after escaping the abuse described above. She reports experiencing overwhelming terror, sobbing, and shaking, believing that God would kill her unborn child. This illustrates the long-term and spiritually salient impact that childhood religious trauma has on her long-term capacity to live out her own religious convictions. Whether one takes the content of any particular religious beliefs to be true, it seems obvious that a person is harmed if they are unjustly deprived of the capacities necessary to assess and respond to religious claims on their own terms.[3]

Theresa Tobin describes a closely related phenomenon: *spiritual violence* (SV). SV is inflicted not when religion is used to justify *physical* violence or domination, but when "sacred symbols, texts, and religious teachings themselves become weapons that harm a person in her spiritual formation and her relationship with God" (Tobin 2016, 134). Tobin offers examples of the self-loathing and emotional dysfunction that Catholic teaching on sexuality and gender can cause in LBGTQ+ Roman Catholics. She cites Andrew Sullivan's experience growing up as a gay Catholic:

> I found a way to expunge love from life. . . . [A] theological austerity became the essential complement to an emotional emptiness. And as the emptiness deepened, the austerity sharpened . . . [T]he Church's teachings created a dynamic that in practice led not to virtue but to pathology. . . . These doctrines could not in practice do what they wanted to do: they could not both affirm human dignity and deny human love. (Sullivan 1994, 50–55)

Tobin argues that the Roman Catholic Church's teachings on gender and sexuality inflict not only emotional harm, but also distinctly spiritual harms. One cannot appropriately engage in a loving relationship with God when one believes that God sees oneself as fundamentally flawed—flawed in a way that is somehow deeper or more fundamental than general Catholic teaching about human sinfulness.

There is significant overlap between SV and RT. Psychologists have increasingly come to understand that exposure to emotional abuse, discrimination, and oppression can cause symptoms that rise to the level of those experienced in PTSD, even when there is no threat of physical or sexual violence (Root 1992; 2001; Carter 2007; Szymanski and Balsam 2011; Holmes, Facemire, and DaFonseca 2016; Watson et al. 2016). Thus, when abuse and oppression are endorsed by the teachings, practices, symbols, or practitioners of a religion, there is the potential to satisfy both my own and Tobin's characterizations. However, it is worth distinguishing the two phenomena, because SV can also capture lower-level spiritual harms that do not rise to the severity of trauma, and RT includes the ways that physical and sexual violence or domination in

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the name of religion can undermine an individual's spiritual and religious capacities, which is excluded by Tobin's characterization.

Although the central harm picked out by the terms RT and SV is religious or spiritual, this harm has distinctly epistemic aspects: certain kinds of injury to an individual's religious or spiritual agency may be caused or constituted by epistemic harms, and certain kinds of religious epistemic environments are more conducive to RT and SV than others. In what follows, I argue that the relevant epistemic environment and harms are caused by HI.

II. Value-Laden Concepts and Hermeneutical Injustice

Social Groups and Concept-Formation

Historically, philosophers have tended to understand concepts as derived from our contact with the external world through experience: humans observe their environment, take note of similarities that exist among particulars, form concepts of those similarities, and give them names. But more recent work in social epistemology demonstrates that this is an overly simplistic view. Although humans do develop concepts and terms to make sense of their experience, their understanding is *also* influenced by the existing conceptual apparatus that they inherit from existing culture (Mills 2007; Pohlhaus 2012; Haslanger 2017; Pohlhaus 2017; Pogin 2019; 2020). The shape of our knowledge and our interpretations of our own experience are partially determined and constrained by our social situation. As Charles Mills puts it,

> The [concept] itself encourages if not quite logically determines particular conclusions. Concepts orient us to the world, and it is a rare individual who can resist this inherited orientation. Once established in the social mind-set, its influence is difficult to escape, since it is not a matter of seeing the phenomenon with the concept discretely attached but rather of seeing things *through* the concept itself. (Mills 2007, 27)

Religious communities are no exception. Although religious individuals sometimes prefer to think of their theological concepts as taken "directly" from some divine revelation with no influence from secular culture or personal bias, in reality these concepts develop within the religious communities over time and change as they are influenced by both social and religious forces. This is true not only of purely descriptive concepts but also those that are normatively laden.

Religions of all stripes are permeated with normativity. Many theists believe that moral obligations depend on the commands of a divine lawgiver or that goodness is grounded in the nature of a divine being. Nontheistic religions, too, include norms and values relevant to how human beings relate to one another and the rest of the universe—norms of family relations, veneration of the sacred in nature, or the abnegation of desire. In addition to explicitly religious and moral norms, religious communities also include concepts and terms that are *normatively laden*. Think of the distinction between a sinner and a saint, a pagan and a believer, the cultured and the savage (Barnes 2016, 173–80).[4] Although on the surface these terms are merely descriptive —no different from terms like *redhead* and *brunette*—such monikers have normative judgments built into them. Sinners are people who do *bad* things; saints are people who live religiously *exemplary* lives. In other cases, the normativity is even more subtle.

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Concepts like *forgiveness* and *pride* within Christianity, *desire* within Buddhism, or *tawhid* (union with God) within Islam are not simply nouns describing actions or states of being; rather, they are laden with normative significance. *Forgiveness* is a *God-like* attitude and, therefore, good. Something that poses an obstacle to *tawhid* is *bad*. These concepts serve as regulative ideals and are action-guiding for religious practitioners. Furthermore, normatively laden religious concepts often circumscribe what is *socially imaginable* within a particular religious group (Pogin 2019; 2020). By this I mean not *conceivability,* as understood by analytic philosophers, but what is considered a realistic description of the world, given the religiously and socially available hermeneutical resources (Fricker 2007, 23–29; Pohlhaus 2012, 724–29; Medina 2013, 64–70). When a Catholic woman says that God has called her to the priesthood, it isn't even conceivable to the rest of her Catholic community that she has accurately interpreted her experience, not because they don't understand the content of the claim, but because that content is incongruent with their moral vision. It isn't even conceivable that God would call a woman to the priesthood. In what follows, I demonstrate how these normatively laden religious concepts play (at least) three important roles for religious believers: epistemic, agential, and social or practical.

Hermeneutical Injustice

In a perfect world, our dependence on others for the conceptual resources that we need to understand the world and to make ourselves understood by others would not be a cause for concern (Pohlhaus 2012). But given that we live in a world where some groups of people have disproportionate social power to promote the conceptual resources best suited to explain their experience and where they may have little interest in understanding the experiences of others (or perhaps a positive interest in not understanding them), our epistemic dependence can result in hermeneutical and contributory injustices.[5] As Miranda Fricker defines it, *hermeneutical injustice* is "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource" (Fricker 2007, 155). By "hermeneutical resources," Fricker means something like the socially available conceptual schemes, the predominant understandings of the social world, and their semantic designations. By "structural identity prejudice," she refers to prejudices against individuals in virtue of their social identity that manifest not only in individual attitudes but in the very ways that societies are structured. Under unjust conditions, there are aspects of life where "the powerful have no interest in achieving a proper interpretation" (152). This can result, on the one hand, in the less powerful group lacking the conceptual resources necessary to correctly understand and communicate significant aspects of their experience or, on the other, in the more privileged group willfully refusing to learn or engage with the hermeneutical resources that marginalized communities have already developed. The latter is what Kristie Dotson calls *contributory injustice* (Dotson 2012), and Gaile Pohlhaus calls *willful hermeneutical ignorance* (Pohlhaus 2012). Fricker illustrates the phenomenon of hermeneutical injustice through the experience that Carmita Wood had prior to the women's movement's development of the concept of *sexual harassment*. Wood quit her job because of persistent and unwelcome sexual attention from a colleague. Unable to communicate exactly how the man had harmed her or to produce a "legitimate" reason for quitting, she was denied unemployment benefits (Fricker 2007, 149–50). According to Fricker, Wood suffered from HI. There was a lacuna in the conceptual resources of the day that prevented her from

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fully understanding and communicating her experience as a form of harassment: sexual harassment. In the absence of a concept of *sexual harassment*, the experience was categorized under something like "flirting" or "teasing," which are generally morally neutral. Of course, she didn't *completely* lack understanding. She knew that the experience was unpleasant, but her understanding was implicit and inchoate, rather than explicit and propositional.[6] Fricker often speaks of lacunae in reference to HI, but it would be a mistake to think that such gaps are a necessary condition for it. Neither Dotson's nor Pohlhaus's accounts involve lacunae, but this is because the marginalized community has developed resources that *would* fill in the gaps in the privileged group's knowledge and hermeneutical resources if they were to put in the effort to learn (or stop putting in the effort to remain ignorant). That is, the *victims* of contributory injustice and willful hermeneutical ignorance can understand and articulate their experience among themselves just fine. The injustice comes from the lack of uptake from privileged others. In this section, I turn to a slightly different set of cases where the conceptual resources exist (there is no lacuna) and are roughly shared across privileged and oppressed social identities, but because of other value-laden concepts in the hermeneutical resource, marginalized individuals' ability to understand and communicate their own experience is skewed (see Pogin 2019 and 2020 for a related account). I demonstrate that this kind of hermeneutical injustice, which results from normatively laden concepts, can happen at the first- or second-order level—with a skewed classification of token experiences under an inappropriate experience-type, or the misclassification of an experience-type under an inappropriate, broader type.

First, I turn to an example of first-order misclassification. Western Christians possess the concept of child abuse. They can recognize paradigmatic examples of child abuse and have some understanding of its negative effects. They may vocally condemn it when it manifests in particular conditions (for example, a drunk parent punching a child). Nonetheless, certain theological commitments (for example, original sin, divine justice) can create an epistemic context in which particular instances of abuse cannot be recognized *as abuse*.[7] When reflecting on her experience, Mary says that "*even if* [they] had known that what was going on was abuse, [they] would have never felt free to tell anyone" (Mary 2013, comments; emphasis added).

Because Mary's ignorance that she is being abused and her inability to make her experience communicatively intelligible arise from the way the concepts of *abuse* and *child* work together with other theological concepts held collectively across her community, her case meets Fricker's criterion of the experience being "obscured from collective understanding" (Fricker 2007, 155). However, it is less clear whether her understanding is obscured due to a "structural identity prejudice." Are children systemically marginalized either in Mary's community or in American society more generally? There are reasons to think they are, but I leave my defense of this view for the next section.[8] If I am right, hers is a case of HI involving first-order misclassification. Mary has the necessary concept, but she is prevented by other normatively laden religious understandings from recognizing that her own experience is an instance of abuse.

At the second-order level, an individual may appropriately conceptualize an experience, but understand the role of such experiences within their larger theological framework in a way that causes them to miscategorize the experience-type under the wrong, higher-order type. For example, because some Christians believe that submission to suffering is a way of becoming more like their atoning savior, silent submission to abuse is sometimes endorsed or even demanded. Rebecca Parker offers the following example. Her female parishioner tells her, "One time [my husband] broke my arm. . . . The priest

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said I should rejoice in my sufferings because they bring me closer to Jesus. He said, 'Jesus suffered because he loved us.' He said, 'If you love Jesus, accept the beatings and bear them gladly, as Jesus bore the cross'" (quoted in Brock and Parker 2001, 20–21). In this case, the parishioner recognizes her experience *as abuse*, but she is unable to understand abuse as something that may legitimately be resisted or escaped, rather than joyfully endured. This is hermeneutical injustice via second-order misclassification.

Whether hermeneutical injustice takes the form of lacuna or misclassification, a victim's inability to make sense of their own experience harms them in multiple ways. The victim is harmed *as a knower* because they are deprived of *knowledge* that they would otherwise have. They are harmed *as an agent* because this lack of knowledge prevents them from *acting* in accordance with their interests, goals, or values. Together, these two harms often result in other social and personal harms: Mary is subject to years of abuse because she cannot report abuse that she doesn't recognize; the parishioner thinks she can't flee her abuser *and* be a good Christian (Fricker 2007, 150). But in the cases I have offered, there is an additional spiritual or religious harm.

III. Identity Prejudice in Religious Trauma

With the above theoretical apparatus in place, we can return to religious trauma and spiritual violence. In this section I briefly characterize the kinds of structural identity prejudice and hermeneutical marginalization that are most common in Western religious communities. Doing so risks presenting an unfair caricature of complex social and religious traditions, but because systemic identity prejudice plays a causal role in hermeneutical injustice, it is necessary to offer reasons to believe that such prejudices have had and continue to have significant influence on religious communities and theological frameworks. I then return to cases of RT and SV to demonstrate the constitutive and environmental role that HI plays in them.

Religiously Informed Identity Prejudice

Before continuing, I should address a methodological concern. There are almost certainly examples of religious trauma in all world religions. Furthermore, it is well documented that analytic philosophy of religion suffers from an over-representation of Christianity, not only among members of the discipline but also in their writings (De Cruz 2019; Mizrahi 2019). Both are good reasons to consider the existence of religious trauma across a broad range of religions. However, other considerations speak against that approach. Because prejudice is always specific to a historical and cultural context, we can assess claims of HI only within those particular contexts. Surveying the history of identity prejudice within multiple religious traditions is too great a task for this article. Furthermore, when critiquing religion, it seems wise to first take the plank out of one's own eye, before worrying about the speck in others' eyes. In light of this, I focus exclusively on the history of identity prejudice within Christianity and emphasize Christianity in my examples of SV and RT. As the goal of this article is to sketch a model of a common interaction between epistemic injustice and RT and SV, these examples are illustrative, rather than constitutive, of the general phenomenon. But because the model should be applicable across religions and cultures, I offer one example of claims of spiritual violence in the feminist writings of Muslim sociologist

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Marnia Lazreg, assuming without argument that the relevant identity prejudices exist in her religious context (Lazreg 2009).

Within Western Christianity, as in Western society more generally, (at least) racial minorities, women, children, disabled people, and LBTGQ+ individuals have often been subject to systemic identity prejudices. It isn't the case that all of these groups are marginalized in all Western Christian communities at all times, but all of them have been marginalized on religious grounds by some Christian communities at some time. We can find examples of misogynistic claims as far back as the church fathers. Tertullian refers to women as those "who opened the door to the Devil" and says that they "too easily . . . destroyed the image of God: man" (Tertullian 1959, 118). A millennium later Thomas Aquinas argued that in virtue of her individual nature woman is "defective and misbegotten," although she is not defective in virtue of her general human nature (Aquinas 2009, 332–34). However, one doesn't need to go back so far to make a case for religiously reinforced, structural identity prejudice. It is widely known that white slaveholders justified enslaving Black people on religious grounds and that Christians were among those most vocally opposed to the abolition movement. The first seminary for Black Catholics in the US opened only in 1920; until the 1930s and 40s, women were not admitted to graduate programs in theology in the US; and whether to grant LGBTQ+ Christians church membership or admit them to religious colleges is currently hotly debated in many Christian denominations, as is the ordination of women and disabled persons. Even in contexts where there are no official policies excluding or subordinating members of these groups, the inertia of theological history continues to support their *de facto* exclusion and subordination. We need look no further than the dearth of women, people of color, and LBGTQ+ scholars in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion for an example of the ongoing influence of systemic power structures.

Womanist, feminist, critical-race, queer, and disability theorists have written volumes documenting this history of marginalization, and the effects of this oppression have been the subject of much of the recent work on epistemic injustice. In contrast, structural identity prejudice against children has received significantly less attention (Burroughs and Tollefsen 2016; Bartlett 2018). Yet, trauma experienced in childhood, especially when inflicted by trusted authority figures such as parents or clergy, tends to do greater harm and be more resistant to therapy than other forms of trauma (Courtois and Ford 2013; CDC n.d.). In light of these facts and my use of Mary's story to illustrate RT, it is worth defending the claims that children endure identity prejudice and can be subjected to hermeneutical marginalization and injustice.

Can Children Experience Hermeneutical Injustice?

Children are among the most frequently abused and systematically marginalized members of our society—oppression that is only intensified as one considers children's intersectional identities as BIPOC, Latinx, disabled, poor, or LBGTQ+ children (Young-Bruehl 2013; Child Maltreatment 2014; CDC n.d.). The average child is physically weaker and less knowledgeable than the average adult; children are completely dependent upon the adults in their lives; they can be legally, physically assaulted by parents and teachers;[9] they are frequently dismissed as competent witnesses to their own abuse, oppression, and marginalization within our legal system, yet can be tried for their own crimes as adults and incarcerated for long periods of time.[10] In light of these realities, Elizabeth Young-Bruehl argues that *childism*, defined as "a prejudice

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against children on the ground of a belief that they are property and can (or even should) be controlled, enslaved, or removed to serve adult needs" (Young-Bruehl 2013, 37) is so pervasive in American culture that it has become almost invisible to us (4).

Matters are no better within many Christian communities, where prejudices against children are sometimes compounded by theology. Evangelical preacher and writer Voddie Baucham describes infants as "vipers in diapers" whose wills must be broken, and goes so far as to urge parents who are concerned about beating their children *to death* not to worry, because the Bible teaches that children will not die from being beaten with a rod (Baucham 2007). The US's failure to ratify the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) is due largely to the efforts of the conservative Christian lobby, spearheaded by Michael Farris (see, for example, Smolin 2006; Attiah 2014), who, along with the Home School Legal Defense Association, has a history of opposing legislation that would strengthen laws against child abuse on the grounds that such laws threaten parental rights (HSLDA 2001; Baklinksi 2012).[11] Although it is true that women still face significant social pressure to bear and care for children, that they are often accused of child abuse for their reproductive decisions, and that there is significant support for pro-life/anti-abortion policies in many Christian circles, I argue that these considerations do not speak against the prevalence of childism and anti-child prejudice within our society or religious communities. A fetus is at a different developmental stage than a child, and it is a mistake to assume that the existence of prejudice against humans at one stage of their lives entails that it will also be present at others (for example, the fact that young adults do not face significant prejudice is not evidence against the existence of prejudice toward the elderly). The fact that many anti-abortionists fail to promote measures that would reduce harm to children provides some evidence that valuing fetuses does not automatically entail valuing children (in the right sorts of ways).[12] Furthermore, society's failure to value care-taking roles, while simultaneously evaluating women on their commitment to fulfilling them, is a common concern of feminist theorists. Thus we should be cautious about concluding that the anti-abortion movement is evidence against the existence of anti-child bias.

Still, one might acknowledge that children are subject to all manner of social injustice, but maintain that young children typically lack the epistemic capacities necessary to qualify as victims of HI. One might think that, given children's relatively limited epistemic capacities, hermeneutical marginalization would not be an injustice against them, but rather a reasonable, temporary state of affairs. This would be a mistake. Michael Burroughs and Deborah Tollefsen convincingly argue that the best research on children aged eighteen months to six years shows that, when provided with appropriate social scaffolding, even very young children are capable knowers and are able to offer reliable testimony about their experience (Burroughs and Tollefsen 2016). It seems plausible that anyone who is a knower (even in limited domains and under certain social conditions) and capable of offering reliable testimony is a potential victim of varying forms of epistemic injustice, including HI.[13] Yet children remain subject to a number of unjust power imbalances and consistently face barriers to contributing to the hermeneutical resources relevant to understanding and communicating about their own experience. In the case of children and others with limited epistemic capacities—where the individual's success as a knower is even more dependent on others than the average adult's is—what constitutes hermeneutical justice may differ from what constitutes justice for the average adult, and it may take greater effort to attain. However, taking a page from care ethicists and disability theorists like Eva Kittay and

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Kevin Timpe, I argue that children's additional needs and greater dependence for successful epistemic agency compound, rather than diminish, our ethical and epistemic obligations to create just epistemic environments in which children may contribute to knowledge-production (Kittay 2011; Timpe 2019). We owe it to children, in virtue of their greater dependence, to take greater pains to listen to their attempts to make their experiences communicatively intelligible and to take their point of view into consideration in the development of our conceptual world.

Identity Prejudice and Religious Knowledge

We might be inclined to disregard the above examples of various identity prejudices in Western Christianity as anomalies in an otherwise nonprejudiced religious system or as symptoms of problematic, but outdated, social norms rather than as products of Christian theology itself. No doubt forces other than Christian theology have played a role in producing and sustaining them. Nonetheless, as we have seen, even where Christian theology is not the primary source of prejudice, it can be deployed to bolster and defend existing prejudice. Furthermore, it would be a mistake to assume that the negative attitudes toward members of marginalized groups and their exclusion from those social spheres that have the most influence on the development of theology and religious hermeneutical resources (for example, from seminaries, church leadership, and theological teaching) in the past has had no influence on the kinds of theological views, categories, and vocabulary that have arisen over the course of Christian history. In fact, our understanding of HI predicts that the degree to which theological frameworks have lacked the resources to capture a marginalized group's experiences as religious, epistemic, and social agents will be proportional to the degree to which they are excluded from these spheres of influence. We should expect that there are areas of the religious lives of marginalized groups where middle-class, cis-gender, straight, Christian, adult, white men have little motivation to achieve a proper understanding (Fricker 2007, 152), and the continued *de jure* and *de facto* exclusion of members of these social groups helps ensure that any skewed resources remain as they are.

These are not original observations. Womanist, Mujerista, Black, feminist, and child-liberation theologians have been pointing to these theological issues for the past several decades (without using the vocabulary of "hermeneutical injustice"). In her groundbreaking work of feminist theology, Elizabeth Johnson claims that "[u]pon examination it becomes clear that this exclusive [masculine] speech about God serves in manifold ways to support an *imaginative* and *structural* world that excludes or subordinates women" (Johnson 2002, 5, emphasis mine). That is, she claims that the available hermeneutical resources prejudicially circumscribe the imaginative and structural possibilities of traditional theological discourse. Similarly, James Cone laments:

> The poison of White supremacy is so widespread and deeply internalized by its victims that many are unaware of their illness and others who are often do not have the cultural and intellectual resources to heal their wounded spirits. . . . Many are still worshipping a White God and a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus—still singing, "Wash me and I will be Whiter than snow." (Cone 2004, 141)

Alice Walker brings these two observations together poignantly in a conversation between her characters, Celie and Shug, in *The Color Purple*. Celie complains, "the God I been praying an' writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I

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know. Trifling, forgitful and lowdown . . . He big and old and tall and graybeards and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted . . . sort of bluish-gray, cool [eyes]. Big though. White lashes." Her partner, Shug, responds,

> Cause that's the one that's in the white folks' white bible. How come he looks just like them. . . ? Only Bigger? And a heap more hair. How come the bible just like everything else they make, all about them doing one thing and another, and all the colored folks doing is gitting cursed? . . . Ain't no way to read the bible and not think God white. When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest. (Walker 2003, 192–94)

If the theologians in these traditions are correct, Christianity suffers from deep-seated identity prejudices that continue to promote hermeneutical marginalization and skewed hermeneutical resources. We should expect this to cause a number of epistemic, agential, and social harms. In the next section, I demonstrate that RT and SV are particularly severe manifestations of those harms.

IV. Religious Trauma and Hermeneutical Injustice: The Causal Nexus

In order to clarify the relationship between HI and RT it will be helpful to return to the examples of RT and SV we have seen throughout this article. First, consider Mary, the victim of religiously motivated child abuse. Her words suggest that she possessed a concept of abuse, but because of other normatively laden concepts within her family's theological framework, she could not grasp that her experience fell under that concept. It isn't possible in an article of this length to analyze all of the concepts that "encourage[d] if not logically determine[d] [these] particular conclusions" (Mills 2007, 27), but I would like to gesture toward a few.

For most, the term *child* is value-neutral, but for the community in which Mary is situated, it carries negative normative significance. For that community, the child is a being who has foolishness bound up in their heart, which must be driven out with blows. A baby is a "viper in [a] diaper," a "depraved," "diseased" beast who would murder its parents if it were only strong enough to do so. A child's will must be broken. Given this normative context, the concept of *love* can be understood only relative to the normative significance of *child*. From the community's perspective, the most loving thing to do to a being who is a viper, but who can become a "saint" through application of the rod, is to punish them in ways that supposedly promote the desired transformation. In fact, Baucham claims that failing to beat a child frequently is a form of child abuse (Baucham 2011, 144). Mary, "established" as she is, "in [this] social mind-set," cannot easily escape it. If *abuse* means treating children in *unjust* and *harmful* ways (in the long run), then what she is experiencing does not fall under her concept *abuse*, no matter how painful and horrifying; it is *loving discipline*, *godly parenting*, just as the sexual harassment that Wood experienced was *flirting*. Because these concepts prevent Mary from understanding the nature of her own experience, she is harmed epistemically. Her lack of comprehension of her experience also prevents her from communicating it to others. She could not, as a child, tell a trusted person that her parents were abusing her, because she didn't *know* they were abusing her. This is not to say that it would have been *impossible* to make someone understand. However, the conceptual and epistemic obstacles in place make the task of abuse-disclosure especially burdensome. These are agential harms. Furthermore, the obstacles to communication ensure that she is exposed to the abuse for a longer period of time,

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which greatly raises the likelihood that she will experience complex posttraumatic stress (a practical harm). As mentioned above, PTSD and other long-term effects of child abuse can be disabling; they can make it difficult for individuals to exercise agency in various areas of their lives; they contribute to significant negative states of health; and they are accompanied by significant social stigma—further practical and agential harms. These are the standard epistemic, agential, and practical harms we expect to result from HI, but because the abuse is motivated and enabled *by religion*, all of these harms have a uniquely spiritual valence. Mary is *spiritually* and *religiously* harmed in virtue of believing that God endorses the abuse. She is spiritually harmed by the way her concepts of *child* and *love* and *discipline* obscured her understanding of her own inherent value and her right to respect and care. She cannot understand her relationship with God as anything other than punitive, at least as long as she embraces her mother's religious vision. Furthermore, it will likely not be sufficient for someone to convince Mary that God is a God of love, or even that God loves her in particular, in order for these spiritual harms to be ameliorated. She already believes this. God's love is the very reason she experiences incapacitating fear and shame when trying to relate to God. Mary's distorted conception of love is epistemically, emotionally, and even somatically tied to abuse.[14] From what we know of trauma, even if Mary becomes intellectually convinced that her conception of love is distorted, that discovery alone may do little to disentangle the visceral and affective associations between the two, because the processes that underlie posttraumatic stress function largely below the level of conscious thought. *Believing* that God is trustworthy and *being able to embrace* God often come radically apart in the experience of religious-trauma survivors, where posttraumatic response may not be sensitive to intellectual assent. Thus, the HI that results, in part, from an identity prejudice within the theological hermeneutical resource surrounding children both *constitutes* a form of spiritual violence and *creates a hermeneutical environment* conducive to religious traumatization, because the epistemic, agential, and social harms prevent Mary from identifying, communicating, or escaping the abusive environment. This is the twofold relationship between HI and RT that I mentioned in the introduction. We turn next to Tobin's case of spiritual violence: the Catholic prohibition against same-sex relationships.

As Sullivan describes his experience, as a young man he lacked a theoretical/theological framework in which to understand his natural desires for love, intimacy, and relationship as fundamentally good. He saw them instead as dangers to be eradicated. If Catholic teaching about sexuality is wrong, as I take it to be, and if Sullivan is correct in his assessment of the causal role that the teaching played in forming these beliefs, then Sullivan's experience is a case of second-order hermeneutical skewing because it involves classifying a neutral/positive experience under a negative experience-type. The hermeneutical injustice harms him as a knower as well as a social agent who has an interest in forming healthy emotional and romantic connections with others. Furthermore, it causes him great spiritual harm. As long as Sullivan embraces this hermeneutical perspective, he lacks the conceptual resources necessary to understand God as embracing him in a way that encompasses his sexual identity. This brings into focus a form of spiritual violence that Thomas Bohache describes as *christophobia*: "the deep-seated feeling among many gays and lesbians that Jesus Christ is not an option for them, that he, as the embodied representative of God, hates them, and that they have no place in either Christ's Church or the kingdom of God he announced during his early ministry" (Bohache 2008, 178). Bohache's characterization suggests that, given the hermeneutical resources available, it is socially unimaginable to many gay

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individuals that God could be for them or embrace them *as gay* individuals. Thus, the epistemic, social, and agential harms all constitute a form of SV, and create a hermeneutical environment that lends itself to SV and RT. Of course, Christians disagree both about whether the position of the Church is the *cause* of these detrimental interpretations of experience and about whether the church's position constitutes a form of identity prejudice. To whatever degree the critique offered by scholars and activists like Bohache and Tobin is correct, we have reason to think that LBGTQ+ Catholics are victims of HI.

Turning to Cone's and Walker's charge: as they describe it, the spiritual harm that people of color experience involves a second-order skewing. Cone suggests that many Black Christians cannot conceive of their mode of being in the world as Black people as the locus for religious experience or understanding.[15] Indeed, Celie cannot see God as reflected in her own face, in her own embodied experience. She cannot conceive of "Him" as differing significantly from either the men or the white people who have abused her and her community. Cone suggests that many people of color who remain Christians adopt the culturally embedded modes of white discourse and accept that the face of Christ is the face of a white man. If Walker and Cone are correct, then although Celie and other people of color may classify their own experience correctly, they understand that experience-type as falling under a negative rather than a positive higher-order type. Cone does not here give us reason to think that the spiritual harm involved amounts to a form of trauma, but he does use language that suggests a kind of spiritual violence. He claims that the skewed perspective "wounds their spirits" and robs them of the "cultural and intellectual resources to heal."

Finally, let us turn to another faith tradition. In *Questioning the Veil,* Muslim feminist Marnia Lazreg describes the relationship that some Muslim women have to the practice of veiling as spiritually violent.[16] She claims,

> what a woman is told [by the claim that the veil is essential to *tawhid* (the principle of oneness with God)] is that to be whole as a Muslim she must convince herself that she is blemished as a person. Implicitly, she accedes to an ethical life only if she transcends her body by veiling it. Thus the veil is transformed into a means for atonement [for being female]. (Lazreg 2009, 117–18)

Lazreg's point is not that veiling is spiritually violent as such, but that when religious teachers present it as *the means* by which women achieve union with God, it forces women to see themselves and their bodies as fundamentally bad, as needing to be atoned for in order to obtain that union. As Lazreg sees it, within this theological framework, women are unable to experience or interpret their bodies and selves as being as worthy of union with God as a man's. From her perspective, this harms them epistemically as knowers and interpreters of their own experience. It harms them as social agents insofar as they are socially limited and interpreted through their veils. And it harms them as spiritual beings who long to be united with God *in*, rather than *in spite of*, their female selfhood. They experience SV that is caused primarily by the way that *tawhid* is interpreted—as the result of HI. As an outsider to this tradition, I do not wish to evaluate the accuracy of Lazreg's assessment. I claim only that Lazreg's argument is best interpreted as defending the view that these theological views inflict spiritual violence.[17]

If the above analyses are correct, then in many cases of RT and SV, hermeneutical injustice either constitutes the traumatic experience or causally contributes to it by

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creating a hermeneutical environment conducive to it. In situations where people lack the resources to conceptualize various forms of victimization, their hermeneutical environment makes it much easier for would-be abusers to target victims without fear of being caught or censured. The wider the community that embraces the skewed hermeneutical resources, the easier victimization becomes. In cases where no individual person is the abuser, religious ideals can create a system where it is difficult, if not impossible, for people to reconceptualize their experience. Thus, to whatever degree those religious ideals are skewed, they have the potential to deeply harm individuals in their spiritual journey. This suggests that HI, in addition to the epistemic, agential, social, and religious harms it inflicts, can contribute to the development of certain kinds of disability, insofar as PTSD and some of its symptoms, such as severe depression or anxiety disorders, constitute disabilities. These disabilities, in turn, can render the victim more vulnerable to further epistemic, social, and religious injustices. Therefore, both within and apart from religion, where hermeneutical injustice is present, it plays a role in a self-perpetuating cycle of oppression.

Spiritual Harm

In each of the above examples, I have focused exclusively on the harms done to the *victims* of RT and SV. However, there might be reasons to think that they are not the only or even the primary victims of the relevant epistemic harms. First, insofar as a particular religious perspective is misguided, everyone who embraces the perspective is worse off, both epistemically and spiritually speaking. Second, there are precedents within the Christian tradition for thinking that the person who sins against another is harmed in a more fundamental spiritual way than the person against whom that person sins (Augustine 1993, 21–22; Boethius 1999, 93–102). On this view, someone like Mary's mother has done the greatest harm to herself. She has done spiritual violence to her own soul, making herself less like God, less of a human being (Boethius 1999, 93–94). Third, those who believe that sin primarily harms the sinner also tend to think that a person can *only* be spiritually harmed by their own sinful will and actions, not by the actions of others.

It should be clear from my explanation of SV and RT that I reject the third claim outright. It is wrong to conceive of an individual's spiritual well-being as completely autonomous and invulnerable to the spiritual, epistemic, and social environment in which they find themselves. The actions of others and the epistemic resources available to individuals *can* do great spiritual harm.

Others have done helpful work in distinguishing among the various epistemic harms and advantages that exist in systems plagued by prejudice (Mills 2007; Dotson 2011; 2012; Pohlhaus 2012; Medina 2013, Pohlhaus 2017). We can distinguish among epistemic marginalization (exclusion from the production of epistemic resources), hermeneutical skewing (the harm of lacking the epistemic resources to correctly understand certain kinds of experience), the epistemic harms that cause agential and practical harms, and those that promote social and practical advantages. Insofar as embracing misguided religious ideals is spiritually harmful, the whole community is spiritually harmed by skewed religious concepts. However, they will not all be spiritually harmed in the same way as the primary victims of hermeneutical injustice—as the result of hermeneutical marginalization and identity prejudice. I doubt that there is anything fruitful to be gained from trying to untangle who is most deeply harmed by RT in cases where there is a clear perpetrator of abuse (such as Mary's mother or a clergy member who is a sexual predator). It

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seems sufficient to say that the spiritual harms are *different* in the two cases, and the victim of religious trauma is not culpable for the harm they incur whereas the perpetrator is. Furthermore, those who have the greatest social power—those not subject to hermeneutical marginalization—will bear the greatest moral responsibility for perpetuating, or failing to offer epistemic resistance to, identity prejudices within the community.[18]

V. (RE)Learning the Words

In this article I have argued that hermeneutical injustice is a common companion and causal factor in RT and SV because it prevents victims from recognizing the nature of the trauma and from responding to it in appropriate ways. This discussion is not intended to prove that HI is a necessary condition for RT or SV. Rather, it seeks to establish that HI often plays a key role in the power dynamics and spiritual harm done. Where it is present, it constitutes and intensifies some of the spiritual harms inflicted. I suspect that hermeneutical injustice of some kind is present in the majority of, if not all, cases of RT and SV; however, because these phenomena are underresearched, I cannot substantiate this intuition with concrete data. Nonetheless, in addition to the evidence provided by the claims of various liberation theologians, significant anecdotal evidence supports my intuitions. In the online survivor communities that I have followed in the course of my research, it is common to find articles discussing how survivors relearn the meaning of widely used normative concepts when they discover that others use the concepts in very different ways than they do. One popular former-fundamentalist blogger, Samantha Field, hosts a series called "Learning the Words," which she describes as "a series on the words many of us didn't have in fundamentalism or overly conservative evangelicalism—and how we got them back" (Field 2013). It includes articles on words like *love*, *abuse*, *justice*, *disorder*, *selfishness*, *self-esteem*, *conviction*, *liberation*, and *consent*. These are all value-laden concepts that she and her readers feel have either been absent or twisted within their former religious communities. Part of the recovery process involves learning these words all over again and associating them with different kinds of experiences and different normative implicatures. The fact that this series resonates with so many of her readers strongly suggests that hermeneutical injustice is a widespread aspect of religious trauma that resonates with survivors from a broad range of contexts. Indeed, one might surmise that it is a hallmark of abusive religion.

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Notes

1 Throughout this article I refer to someone who has experienced religious trauma in the past as a *survivor*. This should not be read as a stand on the vexed question of whether the term *victim* or *survivor* is more respectful of, or empowering for, such a person.

2 And it is covered by the Americans with Disability Act. Furthermore, at least some manifestations of post-traumatic stress count as disability on many prominent theories of disability.

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3 One need not see disability necessarily as a bad difference to feel the force of this claim. One might follow Elizabeth Barnes in saying that even if the disability caused (or constituted by) PTSD is a mere difference, and therefore value-neutral, it can be bad for S just insofar as S had plans, preferences, and goals that are thwarted by the disability (Barnes 2016, chapter 3).

4 I thank Rebecca Chan for pointing out the connection to Barnes's work to me.

5 These are just two kinds of injustice that fall under the broader categories of epistemic injustice and oppression. Other kinds of epistemic injustice and oppression include testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007; Dotson 2012), testimonial quieting and smothering (Dotson 2011), epistemic exploitation (Berenstain 2016), gaslighting (Abramson 2014), and willful ignorance (Mills 2007; Pohlhaus 2012).

6 I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me to make this point explicit.

7 One might wonder if it is accurate to characterize such religious communities as possessing the concept of child abuse, if they cannot recognize a case as paradigmatic as Mary's. I do not wish to say that they possess an *adequate* concept, but their ability to recognize some paradigmatic cases suggests that they do possess a concept that we can legitimately refer to as their concept of "child abuse" as opposed to a concept of some other thing.

8 If the reader remains unconvinced, it should not be difficult to construct a similar case involving adults.

9 Although this physical violence is not legally considered assault when inflicted on children, it is considered abuse or assault when inflicted on any other human being, and even on animals.

10 This is so despite the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) requiring that children be incarcerated only as a last resort and for the shortest period of time possible.

11 For example, they opposed a Mississippi bill that would make it illegal to "whip, strike or otherwise abuse any child" so as to cause "bodily harm," except in cases of "reasonable discipline." In other words, parents would still legally be permitted to cause bodily harm as part of reasonable discipline, but HSLDA opposed the bill as anti-spanking and anti-parental rights.

12 To the best of my knowledge, there is no positive correlation between holding that fetuses have high moral standing and promotion of child welfare. In fact, there is some evidence of an inverse relation. States with the most restrictions on abortion score lowest on measures of support for women's and children's health (Thompson and Seymour 2017).

13 Gary Bartlett raises some important concerns about Burroughs and Tollefsen's claims about the frequency and extent of epistemic injustice against children (Bartlett 2018). However, he acknowledges that children do, in fact, experience testimonial injustice, so I will leave debates about the severity of the problem to one side for now.

14 Indeed, for many survivors of religiously motivated child abuse, the crucifixion easily becomes bound up in that distorted connection between love and brutality. Viewed in a certain light with certain theological commitments, the atonement looks like a story of a child who is tortured and murdered by an angry father who can only be appeased by inflicting pain. For this reason, it seems to some survivors that child abuse is the very core of Christianity. I thank Eric Steinhart and several anonymous religious-trauma survivors for encouraging me to make this point explicit.

15 I leave questions about the metaphysics of race and whether there is such a thing as Black experience to one side. In the given context, it seems clear that Cone is describing people who take their experience to be one of alienation in virtue of their race, regardless of what actually constitutes the phenomenon of race.

16 I do not wish to totalize this experience. Other Muslim women have a very different relationship to veiling and some find it empowering rather than spiritually oppressive.

17 This raises a worry about whether Muslim women who find liberatory meaning in veiling are engaging in a form of spiritual self-harm (indeed, the same could be asked about celibate gay Catholics, or Christian women who endorse Christian patriarchy). This worry takes us beyond the scope of the present article, but I think two helpful directions to go in answering this question are: (1) Muslim feminists who veil may simply reject Lazreg's view of veiling, or they may accept it and claim that other theological frameworks surrounding veiling avoid the spiritually violent aspects that concern Lazreg; (2) the phenomenon of internalized oppression is well established in feminist and critical race theory. It is open for Lazreg to claim that feminist proponents of veiling are, despite their best efforts, displaying evidence of internalized oppression. An outsider like myself is not in a good position to take a stand on which of these two responses is most plausible. I thank an anonymous referee for raising this worry.

18 This points to the need for what José Medina calls "epistemic heroes" (Medina 2013, 225–49).

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