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Theology in the Wake of Survivor Testimony

Epistemic Injustice and Clergy Sex Abuse

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Abstract

This paper develops a theological understanding of the harm done when survivor testimony regarding clergy sex abuse is not believed. Using recent philosophical research in epistemic injustice, I trace the epistemic challenges to survivor testimony being both given and received, and argue that they constitute an injustice in their own right. I develop the concept of “theological harm” to speak precisely about both the epistemic and spiritual harm that is done when a person’s testimony is not received by her community; and to name the harm to theology itself when it fails to listen to the God-talk offered by survivors. A theology of testimony may play a part in helping us cultivate the very virtue we need in order to listen to it well and, therefore, to prevent abuse and support survivors.

Keywords: clergy sex abuse, epistemic injustice, spiritual violence, testimony

Introduction

The last few years have seen a rise in public testimony about the sex abuse that has always existed in our homes, workplaces, and places of worship. The release of the 2008 Pennsylvania grand jury report on the sex abuse of minors in the archdiocese of Philadelphia has once again placed the testimony of survivors of clergy sex abuse in the spotlight. In this paper I examine testimony regarding clergy sex abuse in a number of Christian churches – from the 2001 Spotlight reports on the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston to the 2019 Houston Chronicle reports about abuse in the Southern Baptist Church. Reading these reports requires not only grappling with the horror of clergy sex abuse, but also how the testimony of those who did come forward was often silenced, ignored, or disbelieved.

The secondary harm that comes to survivors when they are not believed is well documented in the literature on trauma and abuse. It keeps survivors from getting the support they need, and keeps communities from reckoning with the abuse. What I want to add to this is an understanding of the harm that is done in the moment when testimony is not believed – or when it cannot even be given. Using work in epistemic injustice, I want to trace the obstacles to the church receiving survivor testimony and argue that they constitute an injustice in their own right.

Drawing on the work of Theresa Tobin and Michelle Panchuk, I argue that the rejection of survivor testimony is a form of spiritual violence, in which the subject is not merely harmed in her capacity as a knower, but in her capacity as a knower and lover of God. I develop the concept of “theological harm” to speak precisely about both the epistemic and spiritual harm that is done when a person’s testimony is not received by her community, and to name the harm to theology itself when it fails to listen to God-talk offered by survivors. I explore the idea of testimony not merely to name this harm, but also to offer a solution. A robust theology of testimony may play a part in helping us cultivate the very virtue we need in order to listen to it well and, therefore, to prevent abuse and support survivors.

Tracing the Operation of Epistemic Injustice in Clergy Sex Abuse

In her *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Miranda Fricker develops the concept of epistemic injustice to describe when someone is “*wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower*” (20). Fricker identifies two primary forms of epistemic injustice. The first is *testimonial injustice*, when someone is not considered to be credible. Fricker’s go-to example of testimonial injustice is the trial of Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, where Robinson is perceived to be a liar because he is black (36). The second is *hermeneutical injustice*, when someone lacks the resources to make sense of their experiences and is unable to give intelligible testimony in the first place. Fricker highlights the case of Carmita Wood. As an employee at Cornell University in the 1970s, she was frequently touched and kissed by a professor. The stress of navigating his advances led her to experience chronic pain, and as a result she eventually quit. When it came time to file for unemployment, her claim was denied because Wood was unable to provide a reason she was forced to leave her job. All she knew to say was that the reasons were “personal.” This hermeneutical injustice contributes to testimonial injustice; her claim was denied (150).

What distinguishes epistemic injustice from merely error is the operation of identity power – Tom is not believed precisely because he is black (36). In the case of Wood, both she and her harasser lacked the hermeneutical resources to understand the behavior, but consider how that lack benefited him – by enabling him to continue the behavior – and disadvantaged her (151). Such asymmetry was possible because women were excluded from fully participating in the process of creating social meaning, by virtue of their identity (152-55).¹ The hermeneutic resources were slanted against them, obscuring sexual harassment as mere flirting (155).

Since prejudice is critical to its operation, epistemic justice tends to exacerbate and compound other forms of injustice. Tom faces grave legal, material, and physical harm as a result of his testimony not being taken seriously – by the end of the book he is dead. But Fricker’s most original point is that it constitutes a form of harm in itself. Testimonial injustice indirectly attacks the humanity of the one giving testimony, insofar as it questions an essential human capacity (44-45), hermeneutical injustice separates someone from the ability to make sense of their life, and both may degrade the person with respect to the identity the prejudice is built on (44, 54) and function to exclude the person from human community and social discourse (54, 145).²

In his *The Epistemology of Resistance*, José Medina attends to the structural, intersectional, and political operations of epistemic injustice. Here he offers two helpful corrections to Fricker’s account that are relevant to the topic at hand. First, while Fricker argues that testimonial injustice can only occur in the case of identity-based credibility deficits, Medina makes a compelling case that credibility *excess* leads to multiple forms of epistemic injustice. For example, persistent and systematic credibility excess leads subjects to develop the epistemic vices of “laziness and closed-mindedness” that shore up an active ignorance, which can in turn perpetuate other forms of social injustice (57). It may lead to a bombastic and dogmatic way of speaking that is harmful to others, or lead to other’s credibility being harmed. Indeed, the entire economy of credibility can be affected and become dysfunctional (60-61).

Fricker posits that credibility is not a distributive good, and therefore she does not link credibility excess to credibility deficit. But as Medina argues, while credibility is not scarce, it does function in a comparative or contrastive way – one is relatively credible, or believed *over* another (62). In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the credibility deficit Tom suffers is related to the excess from which Mayella benefits – not merely because they offer conflicting accounts of events in the scenario of the trial, but because of how blackness and whiteness are constructed (65-66). An intersectional analysis noting the structural relationship between excess and deficit gives

¹ In her symposium presentation “EnGENDERing Authority in Biblical Tradition: A Question of Justice,” Susan Calef helpfully noted the connection between authority as *power* and authority as being the *author* of meaning. Recognition of this kind of AUTHOR-ity, that is the ability to narrate the meaning of one’s life and have it heard and recognized, is critical to Fricker’s work on epistemic injustice and my thesis on testimony.

² Here I want to challenge her claim that the intellect is an essential human capacity – Fricker repeats this point throughout the text but does not do much to nuance it, and I worry about the potentially ableist implications of how she moves from the recognition of one’s intellectual capacity to the recognition of one’s humanity. I agree they are closely linked in epistemic injustice, but in the other direction. Tom is perceived to be as untrustworthy because he is perceived, on account of his blackness, to be less than human. Here we see how identity prejudice, credibility bias, and denial of one’s humanity are intertwined.

us a more complete understanding of the trial in which “there is an entire hierarchy of credibility presumptions at play: white women are more credible than Negroes; and white men are more credible than white women – hence it is not surprising that both Finch and the prosecutor are depicted as speaking for Mayella in a more credible voice than she can muster” (66).

This leads us to Medina’s helpful second correction. Tom Robinson is convicted not only because his credibility, as a black man, is considered suspect. It is also because he testifies to having felt pity for Mayella, an idea that was almost unintelligible for the jury (67-68). The testimonial injustice Tom experiences is therefore not just a matter of his credibility deficit (and the prosecution’s excess) but because of the broader, racist social imaginary of the jury which shapes what is plausible to them. The jury’s ability to hear Tom’s testimony is affected by a social imagination in which both Tom and Mayella experience hermeneutic marginalization. The jury cannot imagine a white woman so lonely as to desire the company of a black man; they cannot imagine a black man either feeling pity for or resisting the advances of a white woman (71). The jury suffers from a kind of meta-ignorance, in which they are not even aware that Tom’s and Mayella’s lives are unintelligible to them (76-77).³ And this meta-ignorance is social too, a result of scripts about race and gender, and the relative lack of power women and black people have (78). Thus Medina offers us a broader understanding of the structural and intersectional operations of epistemic injustice, in which our social imaginaries structure who can speak and be believed.

It is with this expanded account of epistemic injustice that I turn to the issue of clergy sex abuse. As we will see, hermeneutic resources are slanted against survivors, and when it comes to giving testimony survivors suffer not only from a credibility deficit but from the excess given to clergy. This epistemic injustice plays a key role in enabling, covering up, and excusing clergy sex abuse. It also compounds the harm survivors experience, inflicting epistemic, spiritual, and theological damage.

Hermeneutical Injustice and Clergy Sex Abuse

Despite the gains made since Carmita Wood’s harassment at Cornell University, the hermeneutical resources are still slanted against those who experience sexual harassment and sexual assault. People regularly struggle to identify what they experience as abuse. Many victims, young children for instance, lack the categories necessary to understand what they are experiencing and/or the capacity to describe it to others. Others may have an insufficient grasp of the relevant categories – they may assume that sexual assault must involve a stranger and physical force, for instance (Cuddeback; Yap), or not understand consent (McCabe).

While Fricker defines hermeneutical injustice as occurring when someone lacks the resources to name what they experience, Michelle Panchuk offers a helpful corrective in her work on child abuse in Christian communities. As Panchuk notes, it is not merely that abuse victims *lack* the resources to identify what they experience as abuse. Rather, in many cases other normative concepts serve to distort and obscure the capacity to identify abuse when it

³ With caveats about ableism, Medina uses “meta-blindness” for this concept in order to better connect to literature that has used visibility as a structuring metaphor, and to make more obvious connections with terms like “color-blindness,” (xi-xiii). Operating under different constraints, I have chosen “meta-ignorance.”

happens. For example, in fundamentalist communities where the command “not to spare the rod” is taken literally, hardly anything will qualify as child abuse. It is not that members in these communities cannot conceive of child abuse, it is that their theology constrains what is socially imaginable. In other cases, someone may be able to identify what they are experiencing as abuse, but theological ideas about suffering may lead them to believe they must endure it.

Something similar is happening in the case of clergy sex abuse, where not only a lack of resources, but also the operation of other normative concepts, prevents people from identifying their own assaults. For example, children’s presumption that adults are trustworthy may make it difficult for them to reach the conclusion that an adult can do anything wrong. A cultural presumption of the availability of women’s bodies (McCabe: 638), or of men as aggressors (McCabe: 638; Panchuk), may make it difficult for members of each community to identify their own assault as an assault. In this latter set of cases, it is not that we lack a category for rape, nor a cultural denunciation of it, but that rape culture distorts and obstructs our ability to apply this category well (Jackson: 11).

The hermeneutic marginalization that keeps victims from understanding their sexual assaults as assaults appears particularly unusual, because in this case almost everyone lacks the resources to conceive of the assault *in virtue of* their own social type. Our social imaginary provides the resources for understanding a certain “standard story” of rape, that leaves only young attractive white women assaulted by strangers capable of accessing that narrative easily (Yap). Everyone else operates at a disadvantage in making sense of their experience (Jackson).

Within Christian communities, theological concepts and ritual practices can contribute to this distortion. McCabe notes for instance how the Catholic Church’s teaching on sin perpetuates rape culture. Despite the Catechism of the Catholic Church’s condemnation of rape, it “is framed as an offense against charity, along with masturbation, lust, fornication, pornography, and prostitution”; the Catechism therefore “presents rape as primarily a manifestation of uncontrolled lust” (636). This specific way of identifying the sin of rape – which foregrounds sex over power and purity over harm – distorts our ability to name and resist rape and rape culture in our midst.

Additionally, consider the power a member of the clergy or other person of authority may exercise in their community, and how socially unimaginable it may be that they might commit abuse. The Philadelphia grand jury report, published in 2005, notes this phenomenon in explaining delayed reporting:

Most of the victims are devout and/or come from devout families. Therefore, many of them regard priests as God’s representatives on Earth. The well-educated priests, for their part, know very well the esteem in which trusting children and parents hold them, and they manipulate that trust to ensure the victim’s silence. Some of the priests whose cases we examined told their victims that God had sanctioned the sexual relationship and would punish them if they revealed it. Others told children that they loved them, and that the sexual abuse should be their little secret. Still others told their prey that they, the victims, were responsible for the abuse, and that no one would believe them if they told (Pennsylvania 2005: 1: 14-15).

In the Houston Chronicle's coverage this past winter on the sex abuse and cover-up in the Southern Baptist Church, psychiatrist Harvey Rosenstock argues that the power clergy wield sometimes leaves victims unable to even recognize themselves as such: "If someone is identified as a man of God, then there are no holds barred . . . Your defense system is completely paralyzed. This man is speaking with the voice of God . . . So a person who is not only an authority figure, but God's servant, is telling you this is between us, this is a special relationship, this has been sanctioned by the Lord. That allows a young victim to have almost zero defenses. Totally vulnerable" (Downen, Olsen, and Tedesco). Here an understanding that a member of the clergy is "speaking with the voice of God" obscures the ability to name a given experience as abuse.

Both an understanding of the priest as a "man of God" and an understanding of rape as an issue of sex rather than power seem operative in the decades of silence regarding the abuse of Roman Catholic women religious. The Associated Press cites "the universal tradition of sisters' second-class status in the Catholic Church and their ingrained subservience to the men who run it" as factors in the abuse and coverup (Winfield and Muhumuza). Consider Lucetta Scaraffia's findings from interviewing hundreds of nuns who were assaulted by Catholic priests: "It's very hard for a nun to report she has been raped by a priest, says Scaraffia, because of the mindset that, in sex, women can always say no. 'These nuns believe they're the guilty ones for having seduced that holy man into committing sin,' she says, 'because that's what they've always been taught'" (Poggioli 2019).

Epistemic injustice keeps victims from reporting, but note the broader and underlying harm of this epistemic dysfunction: believing that one's assault is one's own fault, or is not an assault but is in fact good and normal. Being separated from the resources to understand one's own assault is to be separated from the resources to understand one's dignity and the resources to develop healthy relationships.

This harm exists prior to and apart from any abuse. As McCabe argues, the existence of rape culture shows how much our experience of the world is shaped by violence: "Awareness of the blurriness between consent and violence does not justify sexual assault and rape as mere accidents or examples of confusion. Rather it indicates the way that sexuality in the American context is socially conditioned by violence and gendered expectations regarding women's availability and submission and men's correlative sexual dominance" (639). The blurred understandings of consent and coercion that distort our ability to identify sexual violence is a form of violence in its own right. The conception of women as sexual objects for instance is always and already violent because it separates them from the ability to understand their own experiences, denying their capacity as knowers and their ability to resist violence. Expanding this work to apply to clergy sex abuse allows us to see how the default to a priest's holiness and one's own sinfulness, to an adult's rightness and a child's wrongness, and to sexual assault being a sin of desire or an extension of homosexuality, are not only features of our epistemic landscapes that prevent us from clearly seeing abuse, but are always and already distortions of the dignity of all members of our communities. This hermeneutical injustice leaves people vulnerable to being abused. As we saw in the passage above from the Philadelphia grand jury report, predatorial clergy intentionally manipulate this epistemic dysfunction in both committing the abuse and convincing victims to remain silent.

Testimonial Injustice and Clergy Sex Abuse

But many survivors do have the capacity to name their abuse, and they do speak out, despite many disincentives, but are simply not believed. As Judith Hermann writes in response to the clergy sex abuse in Boston,

The survivors' stories had a terrible similarity: many came from devout families who held priests in the highest esteem, as representatives of God. Their anguish at their betrayed trust was evident. Many had vainly sought redress from within the Church and had turned to the media or the law only after being met repeatedly with cold indifference. Individual survivors who had recourse to the law of course had to endure aggressive challenges to their credibility (256).

The Houston Chronicle's report documents multiple cases where survivors were not believed or taken seriously in reporting abuse to churches even when the perpetrator had already been legally convicted. The Pennsylvania grand jury report describes a case where victims' testimonies were confirmed by "souvenirs" a priest collected, and yet they still were not believed by the diocese (Pennsylvania 2018: 5). The John Jay report, which surveyed diocesan records of allegations from 1950-2002, found that 10 percent of Catholic priests with substantiated allegations against them were sent back to ministry (USCCB: 97).

Such disbelief can have many causes, not all of them related to credibility. Judith Herman notes that the more embarrassing it will be for the institution to admit, the less likely they will respond in good faith to survivor testimony (255). Similarly, the Philadelphia grand jury report roots the motivation for the coverup in a "conscious effort simply to avoid civil liability" (Pennsylvania 2005: 1:4), and the Pennsylvania grand jury report in the desire to "avoid 'scandal'" (Pennsylvania 2018: 2). Others may just not wish to have their worldview – that "the world is essentially just and that persons are free, self-determining individuals responsible for their destiny" – shattered (Beste: 6). Consider how *theological* ideas about the justness of the world or the goodness of God might strengthen these impulses; even here, then, epistemic injustice reigns.

Many of the same distortions in the social imaginary that keep victims from recognizing their assaults also keep others from recognizing and believing them (Jackson: 5-6). In an article on the abuse of women religious in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Lucetta Scaraffia writes that the "idea of a woman as a dangerous temptress lead people to classify these acts of violence, even if they have been reported, as sexual transgressions freely committed by both parties," and therefore has made it more difficult for women, as opposed to minors, to receive justice. We see this dynamic play out in the story of Doris Wagner, who described to National Public Radio what happened when she reported her rape to her Mother Superior: "She became furious," says Wagner. But the fury was not at Wagner's abusers. "She was literally jumping on her feet," says Wagner. "She was shouting at me. The first question she was able to ask was "Have you used contraceptives?" And it was then that I understood that she just refused to understand" (Poggioli). The disbelief Wagner received from her Mother Superior was less a matter of credibility, and more an inability on behalf of the Mother Superior to imagine the assault as an assault, rooted in the way hermeneutic resources are slanted against women. As Karlijn Demasure, former executive director of the Center for Child Protection at the

Pontifical Gregorian University said in explaining the abuse of nuns: “They (the priests) can always say ‘she wanted it’ . . . It is also difficult to get rid of the opinion that it is always the woman who seduces the man, and not vice versa” (Windfield and Muhumuza).

Other concepts distort. For instance, fears about sexual orientation and gender identity keep communities from responding to allegations, as evidenced in the frequent and inaccurate diagnosis of clergy sex abuse in the Catholic Church as a problem of “homosexuality” (that is, misplaced desire) rather than power. Consider this example from the Philadelphia grand jury report: “A seminarian studying for the priesthood who revealed that he himself had been abused as an altar boy was accused of homosexuality – and was dismissed from the diocese. He was able to become a priest only by relocating to another area” (Pennsylvania 2005: 21-22, 79-88). Not only is the harm of child rape eclipsed by panic about gay sex, it is the victim rather than the perpetrator who was under investigation. In another case mentioned in the report, a child who did report his abuse was called “Daniella” rather than “Daniel” in class, the implication being that being raped by a priest made him a girl, rather than the priest a criminal (Pennsylvania 2005: 25-26).

Predators often choose victims precisely because their identity – for example, as children, as students, as women, as people of color – renders them with less credibility in their community. The Philadelphia grand jury report for instance describes how priests groomed children in vulnerable situations, including winning over their families (Pennsylvania 2005: 13). The Archdiocese of Los Angeles intentionally sent accused priests to non-English-speaking immigrant communities in order to hide abusers, based on the belief that undocumented victims would not report (Schrank).

Regardless of the identity of the victim, clergy benefit from an excess of credibility when they are accused. In fact, when it comes to sexual assault, almost anyone does. As Audrey Yap has argued, the insufficient notion of sexual assault in our social imaginary leads to a credibility excess for who she calls “non-ideal perpetrators” – that is, people who do not fit the stereotype of a rapist (2). Unfortunately, our idea of what a rapist looks like is rather narrow, and it is this idea that is then used to discredit accusations. Consider how the judge who sentenced Brock Turner to only six months in jail – despite his rape of a woman being interrupted by two witnesses – justified the sentence by appealing to his character, including a statement from a friend that Turner was “not a monster” (Cuddeback; Yap). The logic goes something like this: Rapists are monsters. Brock Turner was not a monster. Ergo, Brock Turner did not deserve to be treated like a rapist.

But we can expect that as leaders of the community, members of the clergy will benefit from additional excess. Recall how respect for clergy can keep victims from recognizing the assault in the first place. When a predator’s power is connected to their role as clergy or in church leadership, the religious beliefs of the victim and the community serve to underline this power dynamic even more. Consider this account from the Philadelphia grand jury report: “A boy who told his father about the abuse his younger brother was suffering was beaten to the point of unconsciousness. ‘Priests don’t do that,’ said the father as he punished his son for what he thought was a vicious lie against the clergy” (Pennsylvania 2005: 101-5). The inability to see the clergy member as a rapist – a combination of their privilege in their community and

a lack of hermeneutical resources regarding the nature of rape – lead the community to give an excess of credibility to their protestations of innocence, or even to protest on their account.

The prevalence of clergy abuse may be common enough that jokes about pedophile priests exist – but I wonder if this idea is simply not enough to counter the more common notion that sexual violence is committed by monsters who are easy to spot. The specter of this myth haunts even the Philadelphia grand jury’s response in 2005:

What surprised the Jurors most in [expert on child sex abuse, and former FBI Kenneth] Lanning’s lengthy testimony was that so many of these men come across as “nice guys,” that they can be so outwardly likeable. Mothers and fathers like them. The children who are their targets often love them. These are not “Stranger Danger” predators who look shady or menacing; they are the pillars of the Catholic community, respected and admired by all. Meanwhile, many of the targeted children do not understand sex in the first instance, so that when the priest reaches the point where he begins to act out sexually, the victims are utterly defenseless. As the abuse continues, their initial confusion turns to guilt and shame over what they believe they have allowed to happen. Many victims continue to think that priests can do no wrong or feel responsible for making a “good” priest go bad.

For the vulnerable child who craves love and security, and the devout child raised never to question the clergy’s authority, it becomes nearly impossible to break free from the abusive priest, even after the sexual abuse begins. Experts refer to this phenomenon as the “trauma bond.” Even though the abusive relationship is terribly damaging to the victim, he finds it difficult to remove himself from it because of the priest’s power over him and the psychological and emotional bond that has resulted (Pennsylvania 2005, 13-14).

Note the intertwining of different forms of epistemic injustice here. A lack of hermeneutical resources regarding sexual assault and the authority of the clergy member contribute to the abuse and the clergy member getting away with it. These same dynamics contribute to the psychological – and I will argue later in this paper, spiritual and theological – harm to the victim.

Much has been made of clericalism in the Roman Catholic Church and its role in sex abuse. But clericalism alone does not explain all of what I am describing here – credibility excess does not demand a particularly robust ontology of the priesthood, only that we tend to believe men over women, adults over children, leaders over the traumatized, seminary professors over seminarians, “nice guys” over alcoholics. For example, Dan Hybel’s charisma at the non-denominational Willow Creek Church (which bucked trends in evangelicalism by putting women in leadership roles, Pashman and Coen) served him just as well as an understanding of the sacramental order of the male-only priesthood.⁴ His leadership was grounded in the affective power of his preaching and his ability to grow a mega-church. As *The New York Times* reported, “in many evangelical churches, a magnetic pastor like Mr. Hybels

⁴ I am grateful to Kris Norris for helping me think more clearly about the power church leaders have across Christian denominations, including ones that do not have formal ordination.

is the superstar on whom everything rests, making accusations of harassment particularly difficult to confront. Such a pastor is seen as a conduit to Christ, giving sermons so mesmerizing that congregants rush to buy tapes of them after services” (Goodstein). When the accusation of Ms. Baranowski and others were made public last year, Hybels denied the accusations at a church-wide meeting and “received a standing ovation from the congregation” (Goodstein). Since then, even the council of Christian leaders charged to investigate the accusations has found them credible (Coen).

Victims are often aware of the testimonial injustice they will suffer if they speak out and instead keep silent, suffering what Fricker calls pre-emptive testimonial injustice. They may know that no one will believe them because they are children (Pennsylvania 2005: 81-82). The John Jay report notes that there is a correlation between both older and more astute children – that is, those who are perhaps more aware of the negative consequences of reporting – not reporting abuse. Others fear retaliation, or feel shame (USCCB: 86). Consider the testimony of two of the four survivors who shared their story of being assaulted by priests to Catholic News Service: “Being raised Catholic, I remember – you don’t speak out against your own church,” said [Jim] VanSickle. “Nobody’s going to listen to you” (Fletcher). And “We lived in a neighborhood where most of the people in the subdivision were Catholic. Everything in our lives revolved around the church,” said [Judy] Larson, who is now retired and in her 70s. “To be in that kind of environment and try to say something horrible happened to you, by a person everybody thinks is a god on earth, you’re all alone” (Jackson: 3).

For survivors of sex abuse, epistemic injustice replicates the dynamics and amplifies the harm of the original abuse. As Debra Jackson argues in her analysis of #metoo, giving testimony is a way for victims to reclaim “their status as agents” (8). Because the victim’s agency was violated in the abuse itself, it is all the more critical that survivors receive support when they exercise their agency in giving testimony:

When hearers respond to a victim’s testimony with incredulity, they deny her the status of someone who can authoritatively speak to the facts of the events she endured, and deny her the status of someone who others can rely upon to gain knowledge about the world... A sexual predator, in committing a crime against a person, attacks the victim in her capacity as a subject, refusing to recognize her as an individual agent with her own life plans, project, and perspective. When a victim discloses her experience to another person, her status as a subject is on the line. If the hearer responds with disbelief, her diminished status is reinforced (8).

Survivors often blame themselves for their abuse – their predators may have even manipulated these feelings. Thus survivors also need validation from their communities; affirmation that it is their abuser who is to blame and not themselves (van der Kolk: 265; see Jackson: 8; Kidd: 679-80). When communities fail to believe survivors, survivors may lose confidence not merely in their capacity as knowers, but confidence in their belief that what happened to them was wrong, confidence that they deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

Spiritual Violence and Theological Harm

I have so far tried to highlight the epistemic dysfunction that keeps victims from being able to understand and communicate their abuse, and keeps them from being believed when they do. As we have seen, theological and broader cultural ideas distort our ability to see sexual assault clearly and to respond to it appropriately. This epistemic injustice both enables predation, and is a form of harm in its own right. Epistemic injustice denies the subject's capacity as a knower. When it comes to testimony regarding sex abuse, epistemic injustice cuts even deeper – threatening one's sense of self in a way that mimics the original abuse.

Such harm also has a spiritual component. As the Philadelphia grand jury report notes, "We saw firsthand what Father Thomas Doyle calls 'soul murder.' As Father Doyle, a conscientious Dominican priest who has assisted clergy-abuse victims around the world, points out, these children suffer from the abuse not just physically and psychologically, but spiritually" (Pennsylvania 2005: 16). Many Christian survivors of abuse report specifically feeling judged by God. As Jennifer Beste explains, "Just as children resort to self-blame to justify an abusive parent's behavior, children and adult survivors alike employ the same defense mechanism to explain how a benevolent God could allow such abuse" (56).

Unfortunately churches often feed into rather than alleviate such fears. Survivors are not only *not* believed, but accused themselves – of sexual sin, of disobedience, of bearing false testimony. Their behavior in the wake of trauma is used to corroborate the fact that it is they who are to blame. Labelled sinners, many withdraw or are cast out of the community and thus become further isolated and without social support (Shooter: 12-17; see Kidd: 675-76). Per Rosenstock: "Defensive responses from church leaders rank among the worst things the abused can endure . . . They can rewire a developing brain to forever associate faith or authority with trauma or betrayal" (Downen, Olsen, and Tedesco). Thus when survivors give testimony, it is not merely their identity as *knowers* that needs to be affirmed, nor as *humans* who should not be treated this way, but also their identity as *beloved* by God.

This is why I agree with Michelle Panchuk that epistemic injustice in religious contexts can constitute a form of spiritual violence. Theresa Tobin, whose work on spiritual violence Panchuk depends upon, defines it accordingly: "in spiritual violence sacred symbols, text, and religious teachings themselves become weapons that harm a person in her spiritual formation and in her relationship with God" (2016: 134). Tobin uses the example of those who do not merely disagree with, but have been specifically harmed, by the Catholic Church's teaching on women's ordination and homosexuality – they have had "experience of being spiritually harmed as a result of spiritual formation within a religious community that aligns these teachings with the will of God and implements them in liturgical and ritual life" (2016: 134). In spiritual violence one has been harmed in her capacity for spirituality; her ability to love, and to see herself as loved by, God have been diminished. In a more recent article, Tobin (2019) argues that clergy sex abuse constitutes a form of religiously traumatic spiritual violence. I want to show how this violence extends beyond the abuse itself when survivor testimony is rejected.

In her work on distorting concepts, Panchuk argues that epistemic injustice can both facilitate abuse and indirectly contribute to spiritual violence, but also that it can constitute spiritual violence in itself. With regard to the former, we have seen how epistemic injustice

facilitates both the abuse and the cover-up, hinders our ability to recognize and respond to it, and therefore indirectly causes spiritual violence. But Panchuk argues that the epistemic injustice itself does spiritual violence. Focusing on hermeneutical injustice, Panchuk notes that when someone in a religious community struggles to recognize abuse as abuse, she may come to equate abuse with God's love, and this may rob her of the chance of a healthy relationship with God.

This seems particularly likely when it comes to survivors of clergy sex abuse, who may, as we have seen, often see clergy as representative of God in the first place. For survivors of clergy sex abuse, giving testimony is not merely a matter of reclaiming one's agency, but also one's spirituality. In giving testimony, one challenges the lie that such abuse is of God. To have that testimony rejected is to be insulted *qua* spiritual being. Thus just as epistemic injustice constitutes a form of harm in itself, in certain cases, it also constitutes a form of spiritual harm. The subject is diminished in her capacity as a knower and lover of God.

What I want to add to Panchuk's account is that together these harms give rise to something like *theological harm* that is not merely epistemic and not merely spiritual, but relates specifically to the ability to give testimony to one's understanding of the ultimate. Naming theological harm highlights that the spiritual harm done to individuals is also a loss for the community, who loses the insight of the survivors' theological wisdom. Consider the kind of hope expressed in survivor testimony – hope that the hearer will respond with belief and initiate justice; hope that others may be spared predation. The one giving testimony offers herself not merely as a knower but as one committed to justice, open to transcendence, as one in a privileged position to speak about ultimate things. In these capacities, she is wronged as well, and her community too loses out on the value of her testimony. If we began our analysis of epistemic injustice and clergy sex abuse thinking about how our concepts (theological and not) distort our ability to recognize and resist abuse, here we come full circle to recognize that the silencing of victims (and hermeneutical marginalization in general) impoverishes our theologies. Epistemic dysfunction is theological dysfunction that keeps our ecclesial communities from making meaning of not only the world but of God.

Receiving and Believing Survivor Testimony

If churches are to receive this testimony, they will need to develop ears to hear it. As Fricker argues, our day-to-day credibility judgments are “trained, socially situated perceptual judgements typically made spontaneously” (80). Countering the effects of prejudice on these judgments requires re-training one's *testimonial sensibility*: “For a hearer to identify the impact of identity power in their credibility judgement they must be alert to the impact not only of the speaker's social identity but also the impact of their *own* social identity on their credibility judgement . . . [It] requires a distinctly *reflexively* critical social awareness” (91). In practice this may mean inflating the credibility, or withholding judgment, when we are aware that our perception is compromised (91-92).

But we cannot put all our hope in the cultivation of merely *personal* virtue. We must address the hermeneutic marginalization that leads to credibility bias in the first place. I have argued here that both rape culture and credibility excess for clergy contribute to our inability to respond appropriately to sexual assault, including survivor testimony. In both cases we need to engage in what Medina refers to as “*hermeneutical resistance*, that is, exerting epistemic friction

against the normative expectations of established interpretative frameworks and aiding dissonant voices in the formation of alternative meanings, interpretations, and expressive styles” (Medina: 48). In terms of challenging rape culture, this could take the form of teaching children they have the right to control who touches their bodies, and educating the entire community about enthusiastic consent and about how trauma and stressor-disorders affect testimony (for example in the way that survivors may struggle to give linear testimony); protests like “Take Back the Night” or art like the University of Kansas’ “What Were You Wearing” exhibit (Stevens), which expose in relief our knee-jerk habit of victim-blaming; or writing, preaching, and teaching on feminist theological anthropologies and sexual ethics.

Challenging clergy credibility excess may require changing or revitalizing theologies and practices related to ordination. Though as I have argued in this paper, credibility excess often tracks who functions as a leader in the community, regardless of whether or not they are ordained, or in a denomination that has a formal ordination process. Credibility excess appears to cut across these politics. The epistemic friction we need to move away from this excess may require greater ability to imagine our leaders failing us: spiritual practices of indifference that might help us resist a kind of hero-worship; education around what grooming looks like; expanding our standard stories about who abusers are and what assault is.

Here we reach an unfortunate circularity; the resources we need the most in order to receive testimony are those offered in the testimony (Yap: 17-18). To expand our “standard stories” of what assault looks like means that we must listen to survivor testimony. But it is our ability to listen to this testimony that is precisely our problem. Awareness of our ignorance helps. Knowledge that my standard stories are too narrow prompts me to withhold judgment, to attend more closely to non-standard stories. In this way we can proceed, slowly and incrementally. This is why I agree with the recommendation of the Pennsylvania grand jury report that voiding non-disclosures is a critical component to reforming the way we handle sexual violence in this country (Pennsylvania 2018: 312-13).

Using Johann Baptist Metz’ account of “dangerous memories,” Megan McCabe argues that survivor testimonies “serve to unveil and interrupt the current socio-political situation. They interrupt the understanding of the current situation to make possible new ways of seeing the world, challenging the present consciousness, exposing it for what it is” (652). We have seen this interruptive power recently in the rise of the #metoo moment. Multiple sources attest to it playing a causal role in the ability of women religious to come forward, and be believed, about their abuse (Poggioli; Winfield and Muhumuza). Testimony gives rise to testimony.

We must also broaden our analysis beyond the merely epistemic. Hermeneutical marginalization is dependent upon and reinforces other forms of marginalization – the hermeneutic resources are slanted against women, for instance, because women have by and large not been a part of creating those resources. As Fricker writes, “if you have material power, then you will tend to have an influence in those practices by which social meanings are generated” (Fricker: 147). Panchuk notes for instance that in many churches women and people of color only began to be admitted to Christian colleges and seminaries in the twentieth-century; and LGBTQ+ Christians still cannot openly attend many. Both contemporary and historical exclusion matter when it comes to the availability of hermeneutical resources, as material and social power *and* theological frameworks have

afterlives. Panchuk points to who remains underrepresented in the study of religion, but we could add to this the demographics of those who are ordained, whose theologies are read in seminaries, and who can preach in Christian churches. We cannot make hermeneutical progress without attending to who has and who has had power, more broadly, in our communities.

It is worth asking as well whether or not communities have the competency to evaluate testimony from people they are not used to listening to in other contexts – especially children, women, and/or other minorities. A broader concern for all forms of testimony – not just survivor testimony – may attune our ears to the way each of us tell our stories. It may also allow us to reframe those who come forward as truth-tellers and preachers of the gospel rather than antagonists or attackers of the church.

Survivors need to be heard and believed. The #metoo slogan “Believe Women” has taught us that who we listen to and who we believe is political (Hessa). Credibility tracks who is valued and who has authority in our communities. I have tried to argue here that it is theological too. There is much more to do in regards to studying the credibility economy in Christian churches and to developing a theology of testimony informed by feminist epistemology. To do so, I have argued, is necessary for the good of survivors. But it will be necessary for the Christian church as well if it is to regain credibility.

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