

Distorting Concepts, Obscured Experiences:

On the Role of Hermeneutical Injustice in Religious Trauma and Spiritual Violence

For most religious practitioners religion serves several important functions, including providing a more thorough understanding and experience of the world in general, and sacred reality in particular. The tenants and practices of religion are supposed to help practitioners better understand or experience the divine, make sense of their place in the world, and interpret their experience of it. But religious frameworks sometimes fail with respect to these goals. Rather than illuminating, they can distort the world, the divine, and one's experience of them both. When one's experience is obscured as a result of unfair social structures, feminist philosophers have called it *hermeneutical injustice*. While some work has been done within philosophy of religion to demonstrate the psychological and spiritual harm that religious frameworks can enable,¹ less has been said about the epistemic injustices they can perpetuate.² In this paper I identify a form of hermeneutical injustice that arises when experiences are obscured from collective understanding not by a lacuna in the conceptual resources, as others have described, but by the widespread acceptance of normative concepts. I then argue that this form of hermeneutical injustice is often at play in cases of religious trauma and spiritual violence, either by causing the trauma directly or by creating a hermetical environment in which marginalized people are especially vulnerable to it. In section one, I introduce the reader to the phenomena of religious trauma and spiritual violence. In section two, I sketch a model of hermeneutical injustice that is adequate to capture the multiplicity of ways that such injustice can harm those

¹ Wendy Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away: A Theology of Incarnation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press). Michelle Panchuk, "The Shattered Spiritual Self: Philosophical Reflections on Religious Trauma, Worship, and Deconversion," under review. Theresa Tobin, "Spiritual Violence, Gender and Sexuality: Implications for Seeking and Dwelling among Some Catholic Women and LGBT Catholics," in *Seekers and Dwellers: Plurality and Wholeness in a Time of Secularity*, ed. Philip J. Rossi, (Washington D.C.: The Council of Research in Values and Philosophy, 2016), 133-166;

² Very recently, some work is being done in this direction, arguing that particular Christian populations, such as women and intersex individuals, are victims of epistemic injustice. Two examples of which I am aware are: Kathryn Pogin, "Conceptualizing the Atonement," manuscript. Available here: <https://northwestern.academia.edu/KathrynPogin>; Teri Merrick comes close to this issue in her paper "Listening to the Silence Surrounding Nonconventional Bodies" in C. Smerick and J. Brittingham, eds., *This is my Body: Reflections on Embodiment in the Wesleyan Spirit*. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications) forthcoming, but does not actually describe the silence as a form of epistemic injustice. However, she has argued for the existence of theologically motivated epistemic injustice against intersex Christians in a recent presentation, "Religious Authority, Testimonial Justice and Intersex Christians," at the Easter Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers, Sept. 23, 2016. Though she does not use the language of epistemic injustice, Farley describes the same phenomenon, or something very close to it, in the first chapter of *Gathering those Driven Away*, "'He Feeds on Ashes': Christology and the Logic of Domination," 15-36.

who fall prey to it. To do so, I first present Miranda Fricker's understanding of hermeneutical injustice. I then describe the epistemic and normative roles that normative religious concepts play for religious individuals. Next, I argue that the epistemic, agential, and social harms of skewed hermeneutical resources can come apart from hermeneutical marginalization in ways that Fricker fails to consider. Finally, I demonstrate that normative religious conceptions can cause a kind of hermeneutical injustice that does not involve a lacuna in the socially available conceptual resources, but nonetheless obscures aspects of the victims' experiences from collective understanding. In section three, I return to the examples of religious trauma and spiritual violence offered throughout the paper and argue that hermeneutical injustice plays an important causal role in each of them. The epistemic harms of hermeneutical injustice itself constitutes a spiritual and religious harm and creates an epistemic environment conducive to various spiritual abuses.

I. Religious Trauma and Spiritual Violence

Religious Trauma (RT) and Spiritual Violence (SV) are both phenomena that involve harm inflicted by religion that negatively impacts one in one's religiosity or spirituality. Rather than offering a strict philosophical definition of RT, complete with necessary and sufficient conditions, I suggest that it is more apt to think of RT as a category unified by family resemblances.³ Roughly, religious trauma includes (but may not be limited to) traumatic experiences of the divine being, religious practice, religious dogma, or religious community that transform the individual in a way that diminishes their capacity for participation in religious life.⁴ On this conception, RTs will meet two criteria. First, the trauma is inflicted or caused by something that the victim deeply associates with the religion.⁵ Second, some aspects of the post-traumatic distress caused by the experience must be directed at, or triggered by, the religion. One could be trapped in religious structure that collapses during an earthquake and be traumatized by the experience without that trauma having any religious significance. But it is

³ Laura Ekstrom offers a definition like this of Religious Experience. Indeed, on her account, religious trauma may be considered a kind of religious experience. "Suffering as Religious Experience," in *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Peter van Inwagen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Press, 2004), 95-110.

⁴ Panchuk, draft.

⁵ Here what is most relevant is the victim's perception. While coming to believe that this perception was misguided might aid in recovery, that discovery alone is unlikely to completely reverse the effects of trauma. Rape survivors may know that relatively few men engage in rape, but this is unlikely to completely resolve their fear of men, since the effects of trauma are often caused by processes that happen below the level of conscious thought.

difficult to imagine that being sexually abused by a clergy-member would have no religious significance for the survivor.

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 he goes around but we never know who or where.... By the end of it he had gotten the fronts of my legs, shoulders, arms, chest, knees and stomach. Abby got hit everywhere too....“What possessed you to think you had permission to sleep?”...Mom then tells us that we have not done a bit of school work today. So now we get to stay up until that day's school is done....I am so hungry and so tired that I cannot think.... I wasn't able to put a pair of socks on this morning so she is spanking my bare feet.... Somehow we all earned 10 hours in the corner and now is when we have to spend it.... I wake to my head hitting the shelf and the wall as I collapse onto the floor. Mom is standing over me in a minute with the belt in her hands yelling that I had better stand back up this instant or she was going to start spanking....⁶

We know from the burgeoning research on trauma in psychology and theology that trauma can deeply impact the victim in a number of ways, ranging from shattered beliefs about the safety of the world, to strong, negative physiological and psychological symptoms. In the most severe cases, the survivor may have difficulty constructing a coherent concept of themselves, a narrative of their life, or their place in the world.⁷ They may lack critical emotional capacities such as emotional regulation, attachment, and or even the ability to feel anything at all. Survivors of trauma often suffer from dissociation, intrusive memories, hyperarousal, hypervigilance, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and more. Theologian Jennifer Beste has argued that in their

⁶ “Home is Where the Hurt is” on Homeschooler’s Anonymous platform:<https://homeschoolersanonymous.org/2013/04/24/home-is-where-the-hurt-is-marys-story-part-nine/>. This is a nine-part narrative. The quote is assembled from various parts to give the reader a taste of the severity of the abuse the narrator experienced, although even this leaves out many other kinds of abused involved. The bolded portion of the quote is from the comment thread to part nine, in Mary’s response to Sarah.

⁷ Throughout this paper I referring 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. Rather, I mean simply to note the fact that the person physically survived their particular ordeal. I do not mean to suggest that the person who survives is better, stronger, or more resilient than the person who does not. It is descriptive rather than normative.

most severe manifestations these symptoms alone, quite apart from any religious cause or object, may render an individual temporarily or permanently incapable of responding to God's offer of relationship.⁸ How much more, then, may an individual be spiritually impacted when these effects are triggered or exacerbated by the very things that the individual associates with religion. While the effects of non-religious trauma must be severe enough to undermine the survivors's capacity for agency in some significant way in order to cause spiritual harm, there are reasons to think that religious trauma can inflict spiritual harm even when agency, as such, is preserved.

The author of the above testimony, 'Mary,' describes a panic attack she has after taking communion as an adult, years after escaping the physical and emotional abuse described above. She reports experiencing a feeling of terror, accompanied by fits of sobbing, believing that God would punish her for some forgotten sin by taking away the child that she and her husband were expecting. Though certainly not an example of the most severe effects of RT, Mary's experience illustrates the spiritually salient effects that childhood religious trauma had on her longterm experience of religion. Mary's particular story ends on a hopeful note, when she has a very different kind of religious experience, which serves to mitigate (though not completely erase) some of the negative effects of the childhood trauma. She says that "it was like Jesus came down and was holding [her], whispering to [her] that how [her] parents and [her] homeschool organization portrayed Him to [her] was very, very wrong."⁹ However, we should not assume that Mary's experience is normative in this regard (i.e. that the most severe effects of religious trauma will always be mitigated by a positive religious experience). Literature on trauma more generally and work religious experience in particular teach us that post-traumatic resilience varies greatly across populations and that not all those who yearn for a sense of the presence and love of God are granted their heart's desire.

Theresa Tobin defines spiritual violence as a kind of harm that 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."¹⁰ Tobin offers examples of the self-loathing and emotional dysfunction that Catholic teaching on sexuality and gender can cause in LBGQTQ and female Catholics. One point of evidence to which she appeals is Andrew Sullivan's experience growing up as a gay Catholic:

⁸ Beste, *God and the Victim*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁹ "Home is Where the Hurt is," part 9.

¹⁰ Tobin, 134.

I resorted to what many young homosexuals and lesbians resort to. **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... By crippling the potential for connection and growth, the Church's teachings created a dynamic that in practice led not to virtue but to pathology; by requiring the first lie in a human life, which would lead to an entire battery of others, they contorted human beings into caricatures of solitary eccentricity, frustrated bitterness, incapacitating anxiety—and helped perpetuate all the human wickedness and cruelty and insensitivity that such lives inevitably carry in their wake. These doctrines could not in practice do what they wanted to do: they could not both affirm human dignity and deny human love.¹¹

Tobin argues the Church's teachings on gender and sexuality inflict not only emotional harm, but also distinctly spiritual one. 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 the normal human proclivity to sin. If she is right, LGBTQ Christians are spiritually harmed. While Christians with various theological commitments will disagree on exactly what constitutes an instance of SV, this disagreement should not prevent us from recognizing the importance of this category of religious experience.

There is some overlap between SV and RT. If religious teachings or texts inflict such great harm that an individual is traumatized by it, the case satisfies both mine and Tobin's characterizations. However, SV can capture harms that may not rise to the level of trauma, while RT includes the ways that physical violence and domination in the name of religion can harm a person in their spirituality. One distinction between the two cases that will be relevant to our discussion below is that SV requires that the victim accept or internalize the spiritually harmful epistemic perspective to some degree, while RT is, in principle, possible even when the victim completely rejects the perspective of the person or community that inflicts the harm.

The central harm in both RT and SV is not primarily epistemic, but religious or spiritual. However, a certain kind of epistemic environment seems to make both of them much more likely than they would be under other conditions. Indeed, the spiritual/religious harms appear to be inextricably linked to the community's and the victim's theological framework. In what follows, I will argue that the relevant epistemic environment is one characterized by systemic identity prejudices, and that the epistemic harm caused in these two phenomena is a kind of hermeneutical injustice. In the next section I first introduce Miranda Fricker's definition and

¹¹ Andrew Sullivan, "Alone Again, Naturally: The Catholic Church and the Homosexual," *The New Republic* 22 (1994), 50-55. Qtd. in Tobin (2016), 146-148.

explanation of hermeneutical Injustice. Second, I explain what I mean by normative religious conceptions. Third, I will suggest some refinement of the relationship between identity prejudices, the injustice of hermeneutical marginalization, and the injustice of distorted hermeneutical resources. Finally, in the last section, I present a model for hermeneutical injustice without lacunae. All of these considerations will prepare us to identify the relationship between hermeneutical injustice and the spiritual harm in RT and SV.

II. Hermeneutical Injustice

a. Fricker's Model

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.”¹² It arises when, because of an identity prejudice, certain social groups are significantly excluded from participating in the development of the socially available hermeneutical resources. Under such conditions, there are likely to be aspects of life where “the powerful have no interest in achieving a proper interpretation.”¹³ The result will often be that the less powerful group lacks the conceptual tools necessary to correctly understand and communicate these significant aspects of their experience—aspects that they may have a deep interest in understanding and communicating. By “hermeneutical resources,” Fricker means something like the socially available conceptualizations of various experiences, the predominant understandings of the social world, and their semantic designations.

Fricker uses the example of Carmita Wood, who quits her job because of persistent and unwelcome sexual attention from a colleague. Unable to describe how exactly the man has harmed her or to produce a “legitimate” reason for quitting, she is denied unemployment benefits.¹⁴ According to Fricker, Wood suffers a hermeneutical injustice. There is a lacuna in the conceptual resources of the day that prevents her from understanding and communicating her experience as a form of harassment—sexual harassment. In the absence of a concept of ‘sexual harassment,’ the experience gets categorized under something like “flirting” or “teasing,” which are generally morally neutral. Or consider the woman who experiences postpartum depression

¹² *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2007), 155.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 149-150.

before the phenomenon is identified by psychologists and becomes part of the social consciousness. Such a woman may not only be unable to competently communicate her experiences to others, she may also conceive of her emotional and psychological state as some sort of moral failure or weakness of will. According to Fricker, this too is a case of hermeneutical injustice because prejudiced beliefs about female weakness and proclivity to hysteria are part of the reason postpartum depression was not taken seriously sooner.¹⁵

According to Fricker, any sort of lacuna in the socially available conceptual resources can harm any person by obscuring some aspect of their experience from collective understanding. However, whether this counts as an *injustice*, rather than a case of epistemic *bad luck*, and whether the harm is *systemic* rather than *one-off* depends on a number of historical and social factors. In particular, if the concept's absence is not the result of hermeneutical marginalization that results from identity prejudices, then the harm is likely to be an incidental misfortune rather than a systemic injustice.¹⁶ To support this, Fricker offers an example from Ian McEwan's novel *Enduring Love*. Joe is stalked by a religious fanatic. When he reports the stalking, first to his partner and later to the police, neither interlocutor is able to grasp that the interaction between Joe and his stalker is harmful or threatening rather than a mere nuisance. Although Joe suffers significantly as the result of this lacuna in the social understanding, Fricker argues that his experience is a case of one-off, rather than systemic, hermeneutical injustice, because Joe experiences it "not *because of*, but rather *in spite of*, his social type."¹⁷ Because Joe is a member of a privileged social group—men—this failure to be properly understood is an aberration from his usual social privilege.

Others have critiqued this picture along a number of lines, many of which boil down to the observation that Fricker's account is too narrow to capture either the frequency or the variety of hermeneutical injustices in our world.¹⁸ My critique of Fricker will largely agree with and build on this general observation. In what follows I will object to Fricker's picture along two

¹⁵ Ibid., 148-149. This example is helpful to hold up in contrast with the example that Fricker gives of epistemic bad luck. A person whose illness is not yet understood by modern science may fail to understand aspects of their experience that it is in their interest to understand, but this is not a form of injustice. The postpartum depression case shows that it may be an open question why a particular experience is not understood. If the illness has not been the subject of scientific inquiry just because it disproportionately affects the members of an oppressed group, then it will be a case of injustice and not merely bad luck. As a matter of empirical fact, we probably will not always be in a position to know which is the case.

¹⁶ Ibid., 161-169.

¹⁷ Ibid., 158. Emphasis mine.

¹⁸ Jose Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2013); Kristie Dotson, "A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression," *Frontiers* 33 (2012): 24-47.

lines. First, I will argue that there are good reasons to detach the injustice of being deprived of the proper hermeneutical resources to understand and communicate one's experience from the injustice of hermeneutical marginalization. Second, I argue that normative ideals or social values can obscure the nature and significance of important areas of one's experience even when there is no lacuna in the hermeneutical resources. The kind of hermeneutical injustice that I target can arise any time there are structural identity prejudices grounded in social values, but because of my particular interest in the role of hermeneutical injustice in RT and SV, I will focus here on the values or normative ideals of religious communities.

b. Normative Religious Concepts

Religion is by no means necessary for the development or embrace of normative ideals, but it is hard to imagine a religious worldview that is not permeated with normativity. For example, many theists believe that moral obligations depend on the commands of a divine law-giver and that goodness is somehow grounded in the nature of that being. Non-theistic religions, too, include norms and values relevant to how human beings relate to each other and the rest of the universe—norms of sacrifice to ancestors, veneration of the sacred in nature, or the abnegation of desire. Sometimes religious views involve particular interpretations or understandings of more widely recognized value-laden concepts that are not intrinsically religious, such as love, honor, or humility. Other times, the normative ideal is specific to a particular religion or set of religions. Atonement, karma, and prayer might fall into this category. I call these 'normative religious concepts.' By this, I refer, as Fricker does, not to an abstract concept—an abstract object in some platonic heaven or divine mind—but to the socially available way of understanding particular aspects of religious or moral experience.¹⁹

Normative religious concepts play an important role both in shaping the religious individual's understanding of the world and in guiding their actions. Consider how one's conception of love, together with the attitudes and behaviors prescribed by it, allows one to understand the actions of others. For many Christians, for example, the self-sacrificial love of God demonstrated in the atonement becomes the paradigm of love, and all other claims to love are measured against this ideal. If a person claims to love another, but is systematically unwilling to sacrifice even small things for the supposed beloved, this common Christian conception dictates that the person does not, in fact, love the other. They have confused

¹⁹ Depending on one's philosophy of mind, semantics, and metaphysics, it might turn out that what unites all of the individual human conceptions and the diverse semantic means of articulating them is that they all refer to some abstract universal. These considerations are orthogonal to my current concerns.

something else, passion or infatuation, with love. Indeed, normative religious concepts often circumscribe what is *socially imaginable* within a particular religious or social group.²⁰ By this I mean, not *conceivability*, as used by analytic philosophers, but what could be considered a realistic description of the world, given the the socially available hermeneutical resources. Both Fricker and Jose Medina use the example of Tom Robinson's trial in *To Kill a Mockingbird* to illustrate the point. In Jim Crow Alabama it is not socially imaginable, at least not to white southerners, that a black man could feel sorry for a white woman.²¹ This is why the jury can hardly comprehend, much less accept, Robinson's explanation of his behavior. Within a religious community normative religious concepts can produce similar results.

In addition to this epistemic role, normative religious concepts are (or should be) action-guiding. The Christian understanding of love tells believers that they *should* be willing to sacrifice for the beloved. It may also be what motivates them to do so. Muslims submit to Allah *because* he is the law-giver. Christians joyfully submit to suffering because it is part of what shapes them into "perfect and complete" followers of Jesus.

When this sort of normative religious conception develops within religious communities where identity prejudices cause systemic hermeneutical marginalization, hermeneutical injustice is likely to result. When it does, it harms members of the community with respect to the two roles mentioned above: the epistemic and the agential. Hermeneutical injustice harms people *as knowers* by obscuring some aspect of their experience, and it harms them *as agents* by misguiding them with respect to the actions that are appropriate, obligatory, or permissible. Furthermore, both of these harms can contribute to a third social/political harm. In Fricker's example of Carmita Wood, Wood cannot respond to the harm of sexual harassment in the right sort of way, because she lacks the hermeneutical resources to accurately characterize it. The social harm that this inability causes is evident in her failure to receive unemployment benefits, which results in an economic disadvantage. Thus, the injustice of having one's experienced obscured from collective understanding inflicts a three-fold epistemic, agential, and social harm. But before we can put these notions to use in exploring the epistemic environments conducive to RT and SV, we need to correct some problems in Fricker's model of how they interact.

²⁰ Medina makes this point quite clear in his discussion of *To Kill A Mockingbird*. The problem is not that it is inconceivable in the modal sense that a black man feel sorry for a white woman, but that such a scenario eludes the social imagination. It is not something that white people could imagine as a realistic scenario.

²¹ Medina, 64-70; Fricker, 23-29.

c. Hermeneutical Marginalization and Injustice

While Fricker argues that in most circumstance these three harms coincide and systematically disadvantage those who suffer from systemic identity prejudices, in his book *The Epistemology of Resistance*, Medina has shown that they come apart too frequently to think of those scenarios as anomalies. Not only are hermeneutically marginalized groups not always the ones to experience the greatest epistemic harms involved in hermeneutical injustice, at times a privileged group's epistemic disadvantage can serve their own social/political interests. He argues that in the case of white ignorance, for example, it is the privileged group that lacks the hermeneutical resources necessary to understand their racial identities and experiences, but this failure of understanding arises from the hermeneutical marginalization of others and socially and politically harms those same others, rather than the privileged individuals who lack the understanding.²² It makes sense to call this lack of understanding an epistemic harm, since racially ignorant people are worse off, epistemically speaking, than racially aware individuals. So, racially ignorant white people are epistemically harmed by hermeneutical marginalization without themselves being the victims of hermeneutical injustice.

However, the three harms also come apart in other ways that even Medina does not consider. This is illustrated by how society reacts to male victims of intimate partner violence and sexual assault, especially when the perpetrator is a woman.²³ Both male victims and the rest of society have an incredibly difficult time recognizing such physical, emotional, or sexual abuse *as abuse* or *as rape*.²⁴ Identity prejudices—such as gender stereotypes that paint men as strong, self-sufficient, and as desiring any and all sexual encounters, even those forced on them by a woman, and stereotypes that paint women as weak, gentle, caretakers in need of protection—make it socially *unimaginable* for a man to be a victim of a woman's abuse.²⁵ This lack of social imagination is depicted vividly in Bill Maher's appalling sketch on "Real Time." He jokes that male victims of sexual assault by women suffer from "Lucky Bastard Syndrome" and assures

²² White Ignorance is, roughly, "that privileged white subjects have become unable to understand the world that they themselves have created....[It is]the cognitive dysfunction and pathologies inscribed in the white world [that are] constitutive of its epistemic economy, which revolves not only around the epistemic exclusion and stigmatization of people of color, but also around a carefully cultivated racial blindness of the white gaze....[It is] a form of self-ignorance: the inability to recognize one's own racial identity and the presuppositions and consequences of one's racial positionality." (105)

²³ I thank Michael Rea for pressing me to think through this particular case and critiquing my initial responses to it.

²⁴ The reader may notice that this case does not involve a lacuna in the conceptual scheme. I will discuss this below.

²⁵ For scholarly treatments of this topic consider: Ronald Hall, "The Feminization of Social Welfare," *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, 39 (2012): 7-27; Babette C. Drijber, Udo J. L. Reijnders, and Manon Ceelen, "Male Victims of Domestic Violence," *Journal of Family Violence*, 28 (2013):173-178.

them that life doesn't really get any better than having "chicks pressuring you for sex."²⁶ In some religious contexts, these stereotypes have an added layer of theological normativity—God has created men to be leaders, protectors, to inflict and experience violence without being traumatized by it, etc..

On Fricker's account, male victimization by women should be an example of one-off, rather than systemic, hermeneutical injustice, because the victims do not suffer from systemic hermeneutical marginalization. *Qua* man, they are privileged with respect to their ability to contribute to the formation of socially available hermeneutical resources. However, in the case of abuse, men are not disadvantaged *in spite of* their social type, as Fricker suggests will be the case in one-off injustices. Just the opposite. It is *in virtue of* their social type that their victimization is unimaginable to people like Maher and much of society. On one hand, there is an argument to be made that the obscured understanding of male victimization arises primarily from the systemic marginalization of another group (i.e., women), just as in the case of white ignorance.²⁷ In most other contexts, the identity prejudices described above work for the social and political advantage of men and against women. On the other hand, unlike the case of white ignorance, male victims *do* have a deep practical interest in rendering their experience intelligible to themselves and to others. To it makes sense to call them victims of hermeneutical injustice.

These two examples show that we need to pull apart several related notions that Fricker ties too closely together in her work. First, we need to distinguish the injustice of hermeneutical marginalization from the injustice of skewed hermeneutical resources, since one can experience the latter without experiencing the former. Second, we need to distinguish the epistemic, agential, and practical harms that result from hermeneutical injustice from each of those two injustices. Fricker herself acknowledges that they can sometimes come apart, but her distinction between one-off and systemic injustice is not nuanced enough to account for the the multiplicity of ways which these harms and injustices can interact. What we need is model that allows hermeneutical marginalization to inflict practical harms without epistemic ones, that epistemic harms do not always entail practical ones, and that unjustly obscured experiences are not always caused by identity prejudices against those who experiences are obscured. However, once we

²⁶ "Real Time," 04/04/2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EA-Kyo1UU6w#t=19>, accessed 1/20/2017). See also Tucker Carlson calling a 16 year-old male victim of statutory rape by a female teacher "whiney" (<http://www.rawstory.com/2014/06/foxs-tucker-carlson-whiny-teen-couldnt-have-been-raped-by-teacher-because-hes-a-boy/#comment-1423118039>, accessed 1/20/2017).

²⁷ Another interpretation is that Feminism has created a "reverse hermeneutical marginalization" of men. I do not think this is the best interpretation of the phenomenon, but giving a fully developed argument against it is beyond the scope of this paper.

pull these notions apart, and allow for various nuanced interaction, it might no longer be clear how we can distinguish between cases that involve epistemic oppression and those merely involving epistemic bad luck.

I propose that the condition that unites the cases of epistemic oppression and distinguishes them from one-off injustice and epistemic bad luck is the *causal role* of identity prejudice. Each case we have considered—Fricker’s case of Carmita Wood, Medina’s White Ignorance, and my male victim—is made possible by some kind of systemic identity prejudice. White people could not tenably maintain their white ignorance if people of color were equal participants in constructing understandings and meanings in social life. It seems unlikely that it would be socially unimaginable for a man to become prey to a woman’s sexual domination if women had not be subject to the sort of identity prejudice that I described above. So, identity prejudice plays a causal role in these epistemic, agential, and social harms.²⁸ When the epistemic and agential harms accrue to those not subject to identity prejudice and they coincide with a group’s social and political interests, we will say that the epistemic harms are not injustices. When the epistemic and agential harms work against the group’s or individual’s social/political interests, we can call it a case of hermeneutical injustice whether or not the victims themselves are the ones also subject to hermeneutical marginalization. And finally, following Fricker, if the obscured experience is not caused by a systemic identity prejudice or hermeneutical marginalization, then we will call it a one-off case of injustice or epistemic bad luck. Thus, I propose that under the broader category of hermeneutical injustice, we identify two sub-categories of injustice: the injustice of hermeneutical marginalization and the injustice of hermeneutical skewing, both of which can inflict various epistemic, agential, and practical harms. Although this suggestion constitutes is a significant departure from Fricker’s explication of hermeneutical injustice, it conforms to the definition she offers, insofar as the hermeneutical injustice arises “owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource.” These reflections will be significant below when we consider who is harmed by religious trauma and spiritual violence.

²⁸ An additional upshot of this model is that it renders systemic hermeneutical injustice against young children possible. If hermeneutical marginalization is a necessary condition for systemic hermeneutical injustice, and children simply aren’t in a position to contribute to the development of social hermeneutical resources, then children cannot properly be understood as victims of hermeneutical injustice. However, it would be at least surprising if it turned out that Mary could not experience hermeneutical injustice, for she seems like a paradigmatic example if anything is.

d. Hermeneutical Injustice Without Lacunae

In this section I demonstrate that normative religious concepts can obscure substantial aspects of one's experience from collective understanding, not because they necessarily create a lacuna in the religious hermeneutical resources (though of course theological narratives can contain lacunae), but by encouraging interpretations of experience that distort the moral and theological significance of that experience by misclassifying it. This misclassification 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. Furthermore, the experience may be skewed in either direction, either by classifying a positive or neutral experience as negatively valenced, or by presenting a harmful experience as neutral or positive.

First we will consider an example of first-order misclassification. Western Christians possess the concept of child abuse. They can recognize paradigmatic examples of child abuse, have some understanding of its negative effects on childhood development, wellbeing, and religious education. They even vocally condemn it. However, when certain interpretations of the nature of the fall combine with particular understandings of retributive justice and punishment, these concepts can create an epistemic context in which particular instances of abuse cannot be recognized *as abuse*.²⁹ In religious abuse survivor communities, it is incredibly common for survivors to say that they were well into adulthood before they realized that they had been abused as children. This isn't a claim about recovered memories. Rather, it is the claim that the survivor only gained the hermeneutical resources necessary to interpret their experiences *as abuse* later in life.

Indeed, when reflecting on her experience, Mary, whose experience I described above (in ways that are completely inadequate in capturing the degree of brutality she experienced), says that “even if we had known that what was going on was abuse, we would have never felt free to tell anyone.” Her observation testifies to the degree of maltreatment a person can experience while not knowing that they are being abused.³⁰ This degree of ignorance about one's own experience is almost incomprehensible to someone who has never experienced such pervasive hermeneutical skewing. To be brutalized is bad enough, but not to know that one is being brutalized or that such treatment is not typical of loving relationships is an even more

²⁹ It is important for our purposes for these theologies to have developed largely without reference to or empathy for the experiences of the children living under them. I think this is a plausible claim, but do not do the work in the history of theology necessary to substantiate it. This example also makes clear that the unjust epistemic environments usually arise not from a single theological commitment but within a framework of interconnected normative religious concepts.

³⁰ This phenomenon is not unique to abusive religious contexts, but does seem to be exacerbated by it. Citations of relevant psych research.

fundamental attack on human dignity, because it obscures some of the most fundamental facts about human value. But given the environment of Mary's childhood, her ignorance is hardly surprising. As children tend to do, Mary believed (to some degree) her mother's claims to divine endorsement.³¹ This shows how, given certain hermeneutical assumptions, one can have the concept of abuse and believe that abused people are greatly harmed, but still fail to recognize that one is being harmed or abused.

At the second-order level, the individual may appropriately conceptualize the experience, but because of their understanding of the role of such experiences within their theological framework, they mis-categorize the experience-type. For example, Kathryn Pogin argues that prominent theories of the atonement valorize suffering in ways that encourage women to submit to abuse and suggests that this is a case of hermeneutical injustice. While spousal abuse is just as common in Christian families as in the general population, Christian women are less likely to attempt to get out of the abusive relationship than other women are. Pogin argues that this is, in part, because all of the most prominent theories of the atonement see Jesus' submission to suffering as a great good and an example to follow. Christians tend to believe that submission to suffering is both inherently valuable and the best means by which an abuse victim can love their abuser.³² This perspective echoes the work of feminist theologians like Rita Nakashima Brock who cites the follow example as part of her argument that traditional Christology is fundamentally harmful to women.³³

[My husband] beats me sometimes. Mostly he is a good man. But sometimes he becomes very angry and he hits me. He knocks me down. One time he broke my arm and I had to go to the hospital. But I didn't tell them how my arm got broken. . . I went to my priest twenty years ago. I've been trying to follow his advice. The priest said I should rejoice in my sufferings because they bring me closer to Jesus. He said, 'Jesus suffered because he loved

³¹ This oversimplifies the picture a bit. Even as a child Mary was angered by and morally objected to her mother's behavior. This may be a case of some cognitive dissonance, or it may be that Mary knew by intuition that the behavior was wrong, but didn't know that it fell into the category of violence from which she had legal right to be protected.

³² In its current draft I think Pogin leaves out other relevant theological considerations that may contribute to the explanation of why Christian women don't leave abusive relationships at the same rate as the general population. However, I think Pogin is ultimately correct because there is good reason to think that theology of the atonement plays a significant role in shaping those other aspects of the theological framework. Consider the passage from 1 Peter 3:1, which encourages women to win over their unbelieving husbands "without a word." This discussion of silent submission comes in the context of a discussion of Jesus' silent submission to abuse before the crucifixion, which calls believers to follow Jesus' example in their response to unjust suffering (2:21-25).

³³ Pogin cites this passage as well.

us.’ He said, ‘If you love Jesus, accept the beatings and bear them gladly, as Jesus bore the cross.’ I’ve tried, but I’m not sure anymore.³⁴

In this case, the wife recognizes her experience *as abuse*, but she is unable to understand abuse as something to be resisted or escaped, rather than joyfully endured.³⁵ This is a second-order misclassification.

To sum up, in this section I have argued that hermeneutical injustice includes both the injustice of hermeneutical marginalization and the injustice of skewed hermeneutical resources and that both these contribute to various epistemic, agential, and practical harms. I have also shown that hermeneutical injustice can arise out of misclassification, rather than exclusively from conceptual lacunae. Both points are significant for the discussion below because the cases of RT and SV that we will consider involve hermeneutical injustice without lacunae and because they inflict epistemic and spiritual harms that extend beyond the harms to the primary victims of RT and SV.

III. Hermeneutical Injustice in Religious Trauma

With this theoretical apparatus in hand, we now return to religious trauma and spiritual violence. In this section I briefly characterize the kinds of identity prejudice and hermeneutical marginalization that are most common in western religious communities. While doing so runs the risk of presenting an unfair caricature of complex social and religious traditions, because I have argued that identity prejudice plays a causal role in cases of hermeneutical injustice, it makes sense to at least gesture at why one might believe that such prejudices are and have been present in religious communities. I then return to the putative cases of RT and SV described throughout the paper and demonstrate the constitutive and environmental role that hermeneutical injustice plays in them.

³⁴ Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 20-21

³⁵ James 1:4

a. Religiously Informed Identity Prejudice

Before we move on, it will be helpful to address a methodological concern. There are almost certainly examples of identity prejudice in all world religions. However, coming, as I am, from the Christian tradition, I am most familiar with the history of Christianity and (perhaps) less likely to misconstrue it based on lack of understanding of the religious framework. Furthermore, it seems appropriate to begin critiquing religion with one's own. Insofar as the goal of this paper is to sketch a modal of a common interaction between epistemic oppression and RT and SV, the examples used are not central to the main point. Thus, the model should be applicable to other religions and cultures. I leave it to those more familiar with them to provide specific examples.

Because prejudice is always specific to the historical and cultural context of particular societies and communities, we can only assess particular cases of epistemic harm to decide whether they are part of systems of hermeneutical injustice within those particular contexts. Within western Christianity, as in western society more generally, racial minorities, women, children, the disabled, LBTGQ individuals, and the poor have most often been subject to systemic identity prejudices. It certainly 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 least some of the time.³⁶ An additional difficulty in addressing identity prejudices within religious contexts arises because religious communities constitute a subset of the broader society. Thus, it is often difficult to disentangle the role of broader cultural systems of oppression from the role of theological commitments in order to identify which puts the greater pressure on the other. The answer will probably differ from context to context and from issue to issue, but it seems likely that there is often an interplay between the two, where each reinforces the other.

So why think that these groups have been subject to identity prejudices in Christianity? One can find examples of apparently misogynistic claims as far back as the church fathers. Tertullian referred to women as the 'devil's gateway' and blamed them for the destruction of God's image: man; Jerome cites women as the source of all heresy; and Augustine claims that women bear the image of God in their humanity only, while men reflect the image of God both in their humanity and in their masculinity, just to cite a few examples. However, one doesn't need to go back to previous millennia to make a case. White slaveholders justified the enslavement of black people on religious grounds. The first seminary for black Catholics in the US opened only in 1920. Until the 1930s and 40s women were not admitted to graduate

³⁶ I would guess that this generalizes globally, but various social and religious factors may contribute to very different structures of marginalization.

programs in theology in the US. Infants are described as “vipers in diapers” whose wills need to be broken by some branches of the evangelical movement. Whether to grant LGBTQ Christians church membership or admit them to religious colleges is hotly debated in many Christian denominations. Churches that teach a gospel of prosperity often blame the poor, the sick, and the disabled for their “misfortunes.”

On one hand, we might simply think of these facts as indications of cultural and theological disagreement, debate, and developments over the past two millennia and especially in the past two centuries. On the other, we cannot assume that the exclusion of members of these groups, with their unique experiences and perspectives, has had no influence on the development of theological views and even on the very theological categories and vocabulary that have developed over the course of Christian history. Whether one thinks that membership in each of these groups is grounded in some essential nature (as many Christians believe sex and gender are) or is socially constructed (as many Christians now acknowledge is the case with race), it would be naive to assume that systematic exclusion of these groups from those social spheres that have the most influence on the development of theology has had no impact on the normative categories that Christians have apply to them or the degree to which theological frameworks have had the resources to capture their experiences as religious, moral, and social beings. Indeed, the exclusion of members of these social groups from those institutions and social roles that might put them in a social position to contribute to the religious hermeneutical resource in a more meaningful way helps ensure the any skewed resources remain as they are.

This is not a particularly original claim. Womanist, Mujerista, Black, Feminist, and child liberation theologians have all leveled accusations in this general neighborhood against traditional theologies. My goal is simply to suggest that we understand those accusations as falling within the framework of hermeneutical injustice. Consider Elizabeth Johnson’s claims that, “[u]pon examination it becomes clear that this exclusive speech about God serves in manifold ways to support an *imaginative* and *structural* world that excludes or subordinates women.”³⁷ The reference to the “*imaginative* and *structural* world” makes clear that she is pointing to the very phenomenon that Fricker, Medina, and Dotson identify. The available hermeneutical resources prejudicially circumscribe the imaginative and structural possibilities of theological discourse. Similarly, James Cone laments that

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

³⁷ *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 5. Emphasis mine.

and intellectual resources to heal their wounded spirits. In my travels around the world, I am amazed at how much people of color want to be White. They want to look like Whites, talk like Whites, and even pray like Whites. 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.’³⁸

If these theologians are correct, Christianity suffers from deep-seated identity prejudices that promote hermeneutical marginalization and skewed hermeneutical resources. However, even if these claims are true, that alone does not demonstrate any principled connection between hermeneutical injustice and SV or RT. To see the constitutive and environmental role hermeneutical injustice plays, I now return to the examples that we have seen throughout the paper thus far. We have seen cases of religiously motivated child abuse, the pernicious effects of racism on black Christians’ spiritual consciousness, and the deleterious results of at least one person’s understand of the Catholic teaching on sexuality.

b. Religious Trauma and Spiritual Violence

Mary, let’s assume, possesses the concept of abuse, but because of her theological framework surrounding sin and punishment, she cannot conceptualize her experience *as abuse*. As I argued above, this is a case of first-order misclassification. Furthermore her lack of comprehension of her experience prevents her from communicating it to others. If she were in a community that embraced the same normative religious concepts as her mother, the community might hear even the horrifying details of her abuse and be unable to recognize it for what it is. However, in Mary’s case, this seems unlikely because she is situated in a broader social context that has normative ideals which allow them to correctly categorize her experience, once they have sufficient information. Few people in Mary’s Southern Baptist church shared the normative framework that her mother had created within their family. Nonetheless, hermeneutical injustice still plays a role in obscuring her experience from collective understanding because, like Carmita Wood, Mary lacked the conceptual resources necessary to properly communicate it. 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. The thing she was most likely to be able to articulate—my mom punishes me when I’m bad—does not properly communicate the nature of the experience.³⁹ That is not to

³⁸ James Cone, “Theology’s Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy,” *Black Theology* (2004): 141.

³⁹ Janet Heimlich cites the child of brutally abusive religious leaders (they not only beat but also bound and gagged children regularly as punishment, leaving ligature marks on their arms and chests) saying in her testimony at the trial that, “We were really, really bad...To learn, you must love discipline.” *Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2011), 96.

say that it would have been *impossible* to make someone understand, but the obstacles would have made the already difficult task of abuse disclosure even more difficult. These obstacles to communication help ensure that she will be exposed to the abuse for a longer period of time, which greatly raises the likelihood that she will experience religiously significant post-traumatic distress (as she did). Thus, the hermeneutical environment, complete with skewed hermeneutical resources are especially conducive to the possibility of RT. They make Mary more vulnerable than she would otherwise be.

Furthermore, the skewed understanding itself—the belief that God endorses her suffering—causes spiritual harm. Her belief that God endorses her experience makes it nearly impossible for Mary to understand her own identity as a being with inherent value who is owed a basic degree of respect and care. Nor can she understand her relationship with God in anything other than punitive, at least as long as she embraces her mother’s religious vision. Indeed, insofar as she believes that God’s endorsement of the treatment is in fact an expression of *love* (a further hermeneutical injustice), this will make the epistemic and spiritual harm more resistant to healing. It will not be sufficient for someone to convince Mary that God is a God of a love or that God loves her in particular. She already believes this. God’s love is the very reason why she experiences incapacitating fear and shame when trying to relate to God, because Mary’s distorted conception of love is fundamentally tied to brutal punishment.⁴⁰ And, from what we know of trauma, even if Mary becomes intellectually convinced that this conception of love is in fact distorted, that may do little to disentangle the visceral and affective associations between the two, because the processes that underlie post-traumatic distress largely take place below the level of conscious thought.⁴¹ *Believing* that God is trustworthy and *being able to embrace* God often come radically apart in the experience of religious trauma survivors. Thus, in addition to creating an epistemic environment conducive to traumatization, it makes sense to see the epistemic harm of skewed perception is constitutive of the spiritual harm that Mary endures.

Next consider Tobin’s case of spiritual violence: the Catholic prohibition on same-sex relationships. As Sullivan describes his experience as a youth, he lacked a religious framework

⁴⁰ 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, 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. It, thus, seems to some survivors (and none 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.

⁴¹ This is not to suggest that her situation is completely hopeless. As her own testimony indicates, her later positive religious experiences did a great deal to counter this deep implicit association. Furthermore, we have made great strides in our understanding of the treatment of trauma. Therapies such as EMDR, Neuro-feedback, and Yoga are promising avenues to disruption these deeply problematic associations. However, there is some evidence that all of them are least effective in treating persistent childhood trauma, as opposed to trauma experienced in adulthood.

in which to understand his natural desires for love, intimacy, and relationships as fundamentally good. He could only see his desires as dangers to be eradicated to whatever degree possible and then avoided where they remained. If it is the case that the Catholic teaching on this issue turns out to be wrong, then Sullivan's experience is a case of a second-order misclassification because it involves classifying a neutral experience under a negative experience-type. Furthermore, it makes sense to see this epistemic perspective as not only wrong, but also as spiritually harmful. As long as Sullivan embraced this hermeneutical perspective, he lacked the conceptual resources necessary to understand God as embracing him. 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."⁴² Bohache is claiming that, given the hermeneutical resources available, it is socially unimaginable to many gay individuals that God could be *for them* or *embrace them* in any fundamental way.

Of course, Christians disagree both on whether the actual position of the church is the cause of these detrimental interpretations of experience, and on whether or not the church's position constitutes a form of identity prejudice. But to whatever degree the critique of people like Bohache and Tobin is correct, to that same degree we have reason to think that LGBTQ Christians are victims of hermeneutical injustice. Indeed, even if the church's position is correct in principle, it may still be the case that the kinds of discourse that have in fact been used in this debate have inflicted a spiritually violent form of hermeneutical injustice on LGBTQ individuals. It would be utterly surprising if Christian discourse on sexuality was completely innocent in the christophobia that Bohache describes. So, at best, Christians have helped to create a hermeneutical environment conducive to SV against LGBTQ Christians, and at worst, they are collectively responsible for skewing these Christians understanding of their own experience of sexuality and of God.

Finally consider, Cone's charge. As Cone describes it, the spiritual harm that people of color experience also involves a second-order skewing of experience. Cone suggests that many people of color cannot conceive of their unique way of being in the world as the locus for religious experience or understanding. They cannot see God as reflected in their own faces, in their own embodied experience, or as attainable through their culturally embedded modes of speech. Rather, they (consciously or not) adopt the culturally embedded modes of white discourse, and see the face of Christ as the face of a White man. So, while they classify their

⁴² *Christology from the Margins*, (London: SCM Press, 2008), 178.

own experience correctly, they understand that experience-type as having negative rather than positive normative implications. While Cone does not here give us reason to think that the spiritual harm involved amounts to a form of trauma, he does use language that suggests a kind of spiritual violence. He claims that the the skewed perspective “wounds their spirits,” and robs them of the epistemic resources necessary for healing.

We might be inclined to conceive of the harm involved in these latter two cases primarily as SV and not as cases of RT. But this impression may arise primarily because the situations are under-described. One can imagine the spiritual harms I mentioned scaling up to a level that would constitute a form of trauma. Indeed, some feminist psychologists have argued that racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism constitute a unique kind of chronic trauma that deserves as much attention as “circumscribed” traumas and that contribute to vulnerability to PTSD.⁴³ If this is right, it might turn out that when identity prejudice is endorsed or justified on religious grounds it can cause religiously significant traumatic distress. Furthermore, even if the normative religious ideals addressed by Tobin and Cone do not directly justify abuse severe enough to constitute trauma, they may create an epistemic environment conducive to more severe religiously-motivated abuses. One thinks of cases of religious parents trying to beat the demons, or the gay, or the rebellion out of their children.

If the above analysis is correct, then it makes sense to think that in many cases of RT and SV, hermeneutical injustice plays a significant role. In situations where people lack the conceptual 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 censored. The wider the community that embraces the skewed hermeneutical resources, the easier victimization becomes. In cases where there is no abuser, religious ideals can still make it difficult, if not impossible, for people to re-conceptualize their experience. Thus, to whatever degree those religious ideals are skewed, they have the potential to deeply harm individuals in their spiritual journey. In this case, the epistemic harm of hermeneutical injustice both constitutes and causes spiritual harm.

⁴³ Maria Root, “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality,” in *Personality and Psychopathology: Feminist Reappraisals*, ed. Laura Brown and Mary Ballou (New York: Guilford Press, 1992), 229-266.

c. Spiritual Harm

In each of the above examples, I have focused exclusively on the harms done to victims of RT and SV. But one might wonder if it is really appropriate to think of the groups I have described as the exclusive or even the primary “victims” of the skewed hermeneutical resources. There are reasons to think not. First, insofar as the religious perspective is misguided, everyone who embraces it is worse off, epistemically and spiritually speaking. Second, there are respected strains in the Christian tradition that argue that the person who sins against another is always harmed in a more fundamental spiritual sense than the person against whom that person sins.⁴⁴ On this view someone like Mary’s mother will always have harmed themselves first and foremost. They have harmed themselves by doing spiritual violence to their own soul, making them less like God, less of a human being. Third, those who have thought that sin primarily harms the sinner have also thought that a person can only be spiritually harmed by their own sinful wills and action, not by the actions of others.

It should be clear from the discussion in the first section that being committed to the existence of SV and RT just amounts to the rejection of the last point. I have argued that it is wrong to conceive of an individual’s spiritual wellbeing 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 them *can* do great spiritual harm, and individuals can be non-culpably spiritually wounded.⁴⁵ This is a heavy reality for social beings, but one that should not be surprising to anyone who thinks that religious communities have a significant role to play in religious development.

We can see the payoff of the theoretical work done in the second section when we consider the first and second aspects of this objection. Once various harms and injustices are distinguished, it is no longer mysterious that the perpetrators of RT, the entire religious community, as well as those whose personal experiences are obscured by skewed hermeneutical resources will fall prey to some of the epistemic and harms. Insofar as embracing misguided religious ideals is spiritually harmful, the whole community may also be spiritually harmed. However, they will not all be spiritually harmed in the same way. 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 seems sufficient to say that the spiritual harms are *different* in the two cases, and the

⁴⁴ This perspective seems to underlie Augustine’s comments in “Of the Violation of the consecrated and other Christian Virgins,” *City of God* I. 16, and is present throughout Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*.

⁴⁵ See Beste (2001).

victim of religious trauma is not culpable for the harm they incur in the way that the perpetrator is.⁴⁶ 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, the identity prejudices within the community.

IV. Concluding Thoughts

In this paper I have defended a two primary premises. First, I have demonstrated that some forms of hermeneutical injustice need not involve hermeneutical lacunae. Second, I have argued that this kind of hermeneutical injustice is a common companion and causal factor in RT and SV, because it prevents the victims from recognizing the nature of the trauma or from responding to it in appropriate ways.

This discussion is not intended to prove that RT or SV involve hermeneutical injustice *by definition*. Rather, it seeks to establish that hermeneutical injustice often plays a significant role, and where it is present, intensifies the spiritual harms inflicted. I suspect that hermeneutical injustice of some kind is present in the majority of cases of RT and SV; however, because they are under-researched, I cannot substantiate this intuition.

Nonetheless, in addition to the evidence provided by the claims of the various liberation theologians that I mentioned above, there is significant anecdotal evidence that supports the intuition. In on-line survivor communities, it is common to find articles discussing how the survivor had to re-learn the meaning of widely used normative concepts when they found that others did not mean the same thing as the survivor when they appealed to these ideals. One popular former-fundamentalist blogger, Samantha Field, hosted a series called “Learning the Words,” which she described as “a series on the words many of us didn’t have in fundamentalism or overly conservative evangelicalism— and how we got them back.”⁴⁷ It included articles on words like: love, abuse, justice, disorder, selfishness, self-esteem, conviction, liberation, and

⁴⁶ Though there may be facts about the epistemic environment in which the perpetrator finds themselves that may lessen the degree of culpability. While there is no doubt that Mary’s mom is culpable for the abuse she inflicted, it may also make sense to think that the religious leaders who encouraged this sort of treatment bear some of the blame. At the far end of the spectrum, we can imagine a person so indoctrinated that we might not want to blame them much at all, such as cases where parents encouraged their older children to abuse their younger children.

⁴⁷ Interestingly, the series addressed some concepts that really were absent from the religious community—like consent—while others were concepts that they clearly had, but assigned vastly different meanings to. So the series addressed hermeneutical injustices of both my and Fricker’s description.

consent.⁴⁸ These are all value-laden concepts that she and her readers felt had been either absent or twisted within their former religious framework in ways that prevented them from understanding their own experience or communicating it to others. Part of the recovery process involved learning these words all over again and associating them with different kinds of experiences and different normative implicatures. This strongly suggests that hermeneutical injustice played a significant role in their experience of abusive religion and spiritual violence.

⁴⁸ <http://samanthapfield.com/?s=Learning+the+Words>.