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Sexual Violence: Christian Theological Legacies and Responsibilities

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Abstract

Between the sustained focus of popular attention on the Catholic sexual abuse crisis and the current ubiquity of #MeToo and #ChurchToo discourse, it is clear that sexual violence is a problem within western Christianity. This article speaks to Christian theological legacies of complicity with systems of sexual violence. It sketches ethical, intellectual, and practical trajectories for scholars and practitioners engaging the Christian tradition today to address sexual violence well.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Recently, Into Account, a survivor-led organization committed to supporting survivors of sexual violence in Christian contexts put out a statement articulating the core principles that guide the organization's work. Here is the first line of that statement: "We believe that no institution, family, or community is more important than our right to autonomy over our own bodies" (Our Philosophy, 2017). As the directors of the organization (Stephanie is Executive Director; Hilary is Director of Theological Integrity), we invited feedback on a full draft of the document with the intention of including a broad range of survivors' voices in revisions. Not himself a survivor, a leader in one of the primary Christian communities in which survivors are served by Into Account responded to that invitation – We'll call him Mark. Mark's critique of the statement began by taking issue with the statement's opening line. "As a person of faith," he said, "there are MANY things more important than my very life, let alone autonomy over my body."[1] Though indirectly, Mark's critique rested on the common Christian theological position that Jesus' willingness *not* to claim autonomy over his body ("Not my will, but yours be done") and to, instead, sacrifice his body on the cross for the salvation of undeserving sinners, stands as an ethical model Christians are constrained to follow. "Not sure how to square this with what you are trying to communicate here," he concluded.

Mark's comments offer a point of entry into the subject of this article, which we will summarize as Christianity's entanglement with sexual forms of violence and the responsibilities consequently incumbent on those who critically engage the Christian tradition. Mark's comments demonstrate that sexual violence is not a phenomenon that can be neatly separated from Christian theology; that sexual violence is not a self-contained social malady that merely infiltrates and aggrieves Christian communities in the manner of an outside intruder. The relationship between

Christianity and sexual violence is more complex. After all, Mark's challenge to survivor advocates' statement of belief in survivors' right to autonomy over their own bodies was made on theological grounds. A true Christian, he suggests, ought not to claim autonomy over their body. To the contrary, he argued, following Jesus requires a willingness to relinquish bodily autonomy in service of self-sacrificial love.

Scores of feminist, womanist, and mujerista scholars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have shown that this theological position is widely linked with the perpetuation of sexual and gendered forms of abuse. Women experiencing domestic violence who seek help from their communities of faith are regularly counseled to stay with their abusers and to consider their bodily and psychic injury a holy sacrifice in service of the abuser's eventual conversion, repentance, and salvation. Victims of abuse who attempt to cut ties with abusers or hold abusers accountable for the harm they have caused are criticized as unchristian for appearing unwilling to prioritize the Christian ideals of reconciliation and forgiveness over their personal safety and wellbeing. In these cases and countless others, theology has an active hand in creating and sustaining violent conditions.

While, if explicitly asked, the majority of Christians would likely object to Christian theological principles being used to perpetuate gendered and sexual forms of violence, Mark's closing comment – "Not sure how to square this with what you have in mind here" – brings Christian theology's entanglement with sexual violence into exacting focus. For, what Mark is unable to reconcile is a commonly central tenet of Christian theology (the call for Christians to emulate Jesus' self-sacrifice for the sake of the undeserving) with what victims of sexual violence have deemed essential for their survival and wellbeing (autonomy over their bodies). Christian theology, here, is in direct conflict with survivors' basic needs, and Mark is right to notice that there does not appear to be any simple way to both preserve the theological principles to which he holds and make space for survivors of sexual violence to refuse others a calamitous claim to their bodies. Mark's comments, therefore, open onto a series of larger questions that tend to orient the work of those of us – intellectuals, caregivers, and activists alike – who both engage Christian theology and are committed to resisting sexual violence. First, *can* Christian theology be reconciled with that which would constitute an ethical, holistic, and effective resistance to sexual violence? If so, what does a theology like that look and act like? What kind of logic holds it together? What modes of thought and practice must be excised for this form of theology to take hold? If not – if Christian theology is found to stand fundamentally at odds with efforts to resist sexual violence and support survivors' flourishing – what then?

Christianity's entanglement with sexual violence places a particular set of ethical and intellectual responsibilities on students of Christian theology, the novice as well as the expert, the scholar as well as the practitioner. At the very least, those who critically engage the discipline must do so in ways that avoid reproducing the patterns through which theology is known to exacerbate systems of sexual violence. We propose that the intentional cultivation of at least three critical and constructive skills is necessary to this end. First, engaging theology well with respect to sexual violence requires that one understand what sexual violence is in both its personal and systemic dimensions. Second, it requires one to have a sturdy grasp on the myriad forms of complicity that Christianity has had in the perpetuation of sexual violence, both historically and now. Third, one must acquire a basic comprehension of psychological trauma and its import for theology and ethics in relation to sexual violence. After surveying the literature and ethical debates surrounding these three skills, we will conclude by listing the theological responsibilities that we believe are necessary in response to the legacies we have described.

2 | WHAT IS SEXUAL VIOLENCE?

There are important debates regarding the terminology that best describes the categories of violence at issue in this article. Terms that have proved useful in one context or another include, domestic violence, intimate partner violence, violence against women, sexual assault, and abuse. For the purposes of this article, we use the term *sexual violence* as an umbrella term that includes all of the above and more. We take sexual violence to be any mode of

interpersonal or systemic abuse, coercion, manipulation, silencing, or violence that has a sexual form of expression, a sexual logic, or both.

Sexual violence is always, simultaneously, both interpersonal and systemic. Its *interpersonal* dimensions come to the fore when, on one hand, the parties involved are primarily conceived as individuals – i.e. individual perpetrators, survivors, or enablers of sexual abuse – and on the other hand, when attention is focused on the motives and repercussions of sexual violence as they manifest in the lives of these specific individuals. Discourse emphasizes sexual violence as a *systemic* phenomenon when it is primarily concerned with, for example, the patterned ways that sexual violence is perpetuated and enabled with respect to broad collectives – institutions, religious groups, eras in history, dimensions of culture, and within discourse itself. While the interpersonal and systemic dimensions of sexual violence are always intertwined, the interpersonal is oft and problematically emphasized to the exclusion of the systemic. As Meredith Minister argues in *Rape Culture on Campus* (2018), this is characteristic of the criminal justice approach to rape. Because insufficient attention to the systemic dimensions of sexual violence itself leads to the systemic perpetuation that violence, a sufficient understanding of sexual violence requires that a systemic lens be intentionally maintained.

Such a lens will require that one become able to critically analyze multiple and intersecting dynamics of social power as they relate to sexual violence. Gender may be the most widely recognized category that mediates social power in sexual violence. Traci West (1999, 2019), Shawn Copeland (2010), and Meredith Minister (2018), however, are among those who articulate the raced dimensions of sexual violence. Andrea Smith (2005) speaks to the intersection of sexual violence with colonialism. *Women and Genocide* is a volume that breaks ground in its analysis of sexual violence as constitutive of political struggle, war, and genocide (Bemporad & Warren, 2018). Feminist, womanist, mujerista, liberation, black, queer, postcolonial, disability, and critical race theories are among the broader humanistic disciplines that have proved critical for developing an understanding of sexual violence as a kind of violence formed by and formative of a wide range of social systems of domination. To address the intersection of sexual violence with theology well, one's foundational concept of sexual violence must be cognizant of the interpersonal dimensions of sexual violence but grounded in a systemic lens constantly attentive to the landscape of social power.

3 | CHRISTIANITY'S COMPLICITY

Scholars who study sexual violence in connection with Christianity have examined extensively how it is that Christianity has been and continues to be systemically complicit with and responsible for perpetuating sexual and gendered forms of violence. The contours of Christianity's theological framework are one site of substantial critique.

3.1 | Theology

Take the Christian doctrine of atonement. Darby Ray's *Deceiving the Devil: Atonement, Abuse, and Ransom* is one of the most direct and comprehensive treatments of the links between sexual violence and the shared features of classical models of atonement in western Christianity.[2] By Ray's reading,

> *At the center of this doctrine … stands the claim that through the voluntary obedience and self-sacrifice of Jesus the Christ, perfectly exhibited in his life and especially in his death, the disobedience and willfulness of human existence are overcome once and for all; as a result, God's honor and authority are renewed, humanity's sin absolved, and right relationship between the Divine and humanity restored (Ray, 1998, p. 2).*

Ray argues that though atonement orthodoxy claims to be the doctrine that demonstrates how evil is overcome in the world, it actually produces evil in that it results in violence against women and children and others who are

oppressed. By glorifying death, suffering, self-sacrifice, obedience to an abusive God, hierarchical structures of relation, and by positing the victimhood of Jesus as salvific, the doctrine perpetuates the valorization of victimhood in society, particularly the victimhood of those already perceived to be socially subordinate. This doctrine is also the one that most directly informs Mark's critique of sexual violence survivors' assertion of autonomy over their bodies. When willing, violent, abusive self-sacrifice is held to be the source of salvation and, therefore, the quintessential expression of Christian piety, the self-preserving steps necessary for resisting sexual violence become heretical by relation.[3]

While those who are committed to resisting sexual violence tend to agree that traditional models of atonement are problematic, they disagree about solutions. Ray wants to retain some notion of Jesus's death as salvific while also reshaping the doctrine to clearly identify all unjust suffering as evil. JoAnne Marie Terrell (1998) soundly rejects any claim that God sanctions the violence of the cross but argues that an image of Jesus on the cross as divine co-sufferer with the world's oppressed has been central to black survival and liberation in the United States and, thus, ought to be specifically preserved. Nancy Pineda-Madrid (2011) opens space for the cross to have a multiplicity of symbolic functions for a community practicing resistance to sexual and other forms violence but articulates salvation in terms of its social and historical actualization in such communities. Wendy Farley (1990) recommends laying the doctrine of atonement to rest and tracing that which sustains the possibility of life to another source. Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker (Brock & Parker, 2001, 2008) are among those, like Farley, who argue that fully de-linking salvation from Jesus' death and suffering is essential for a theology that hopes to resist sexual violence and, for that matter, all other forms of social domination.

Delores Williams (Williams, 1993a, 1993b, Sisters), a way-paver of this latter position, demonstrates that equally problematic to the traditional atonement doctrine's glorification of victimhood, suffering, and death is its glorification of forced surrogacy. Classical models of atonement present Jesus as a surrogate for humanity insofar as his death stands in for others' guilt. Through the sacrifice of his body, others are saved. Williams emphasizes that, beginning in slavery, black women's bodies have been exploited in North America not only in terms of victimhood but in terms of surrogacy as well. When enslaved women were raped, the children they conceived through rape were treated as the property of their white enslavers. In this way, sexual violence was a mechanism that forced black women's reproduction to benefit white supremacist cultural and economic ends. Postbellum social conditions were such that, for the sake of survival, black women often had to prioritize giving care to the children of their white employers over tending as fully as they would like to the needs of their own children. Here too, black women were coerced by the conditions of a white supremacist society into roles of surrogacy that benefitted white communities. Valorizing forced surrogacy as the mode in which Jesus saves, then, justifies and enables the forced surrogacy of black women in the same way that valorizing Jesus' suffering justifies and enables the continued victimhood of the socially disempowered. Williams insists that a theology that resists the multifaceted, sexual, racial, and economic violence experienced by black women is a theology that refuses to make violent, unjust death (i.e. Jesus' crucifixion) necessary for life.

Scholarship on the complicity of theological conceptions of sin with sexual violence is just as extensive as that which focuses on atonement. Within the relevant literature on sin, there are at least two discernable points of focus. First, scholars committed to resisting sexual violence have argued that theology participates in systems of sexual violence when it casts human nature as wholly or fundamentally sinful (Scarsella, 2019). Psychologically, sexual violence inflicts a profound sense of shame and worthlessness on those who are victimized, and reciprocally, shame increases one's vulnerability to future harm. Theologies that picture the human being as wholly corrupt risk both confirming the sense of fundamental worthlessness that attends sexual violence and deepening its wounds. Sexual violence is perpetrated disproportionately against those whose perceived worth is historically precarious: women, people of color, LGBTQIA+ people, people with disabilities, people who are incarcerated, detained, undocumented, or without a home. The precarity that attends these social locations can be traced, in part, to Christianity's clear history of associating sin with particular kinds of bodies: women's bodies, black and brown bodies, LGBTQIA+ bodies, disabled bodies, criminalized bodies. Contemporary theologies that overwhelmingly define the human being as a sinful being, therefore, participate in the maintenance of theo-logical social constructs through which sexual violence operates.

The second point of focus in literature that takes up theological approaches to sin in light of sexual violence is on what, precisely, sin *is*. Namely, theologians have contended that theology perpetuates sexual violence when sin is defined in terms of prioritizing the self over others (Goldstein, 1960; Plaskow, 1980). The identification of sin with prioritizing the self is explicit throughout much of Christian history. Scholars invested in resisting sexual, gendered, and racial forms of violence have aptly argued, however, that while problematic forms of self-priority are characteristic of those who occupy social locations of safety and privilege, self-abnegation tends to be a more significant disturbance in the lives of the socially and psychologically disempowered (Hess, 1997; Lorde, 1988; Williams, 1993, A Womanist Perspective). This is particularly true in contexts of sexual violence where the cycle of abuse both creates and depends on a victim's self-neglect. To break the cycle of violence a victim must prioritize her own safety over the expressed needs of her perpetrator-other. If self-priority is the definition of sin, theology works against her survival.

In her book *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, psychotherapist and trauma expert Carolyn Heggen discusses another theological concept that exacerbates sexual violence: the belief that "Christians must promptly forgive those who sin against them" (Heggen, 1993, p. 96). A client of hers recalled the following pattern that is typical in child abuse, incest, abuse by clergy, and intimate partner violence:

> *"My dad would come into my room and fondle me at night. Before he'd even leave, he would demand that I forgive him. He said that if I ever told anyone, even when I was an adult, it meant that I hadn't really forgiven him. I would go to hell because God wouldn't forgive me" (p. 96).*

While direct perpetrators of sexual violence often use the concept of forgiveness to secure a victim's silence, it is also common that Christian faith leaders and communities will pressure a victim to forgive their perpetrator. In either case, the concept of forgiveness is wielded as both a silencing tool and as a mechanism for enabling abuse to continue. A forced, facile admission of forgiveness from a victim protects the perpetrator from wider accountability by discouraging the victim from continuing to voice complaint. It increases the victim's vulnerability to continued harm by preserving the perpetrator's emotional, spiritual, and physical access to the one he is abusing. Scholarly discourse on the intersection of sexual violence and forgiveness works, then, to reveal problematic forms of forgiveness, to analyze the relationship of these violent forms to alternative notions of forgiveness available in the Christian tradition, and to construct approaches that do right by victims and survivors (see, for example, Fortune & Marshall, 2002; Keene, 2010).

In addition to theologies of atonement, sin, and forgiveness, Christian theologies of obedience have been critiqued in light of sexual violence. If God requires dutiful obedience above all else, and if the kind of obedience God demands is exemplified by Jesus' endurance of violent (including sexually violent [Tombs, 2018]) abuse that ends in his death, then perpetrators and enablers of sexual violence today – particularly those who, as pastors, priests, or bishops, represent the Church – are in prime position to use a theology of obedience to manipulate victims into likewise enduring such harm.[4] Christian theologies that idealize purity have, likewise, been shown by scholars like Meredith Minister (2018) and popular writers like Jessica Valenti (2009) to cultivate the soil from which rape culture in the United States draws the energy it needs to thrive.

Any theological concept *can* be molded into a shape that perpetuates sexual violence. A student hoping to do theology well with respect to sexual violence must become able to identify, first, the conditions under which any particular concept functions to exacerbate sexual violence, and second, what makes for the kind of theological integrity needed for resistance.

3.2 | Ecclesial cover-ups

In addition to thinking through the complicity of particular theological frameworks with sexual violence, scholars who study the intersection of this violence with Christianity point to history as a significant site of critique. In every

era, representatives of the Church have directly perpetrated, justified, and enabled sexual violence. The contemporary sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church is one well-known example, but sexual abuse by clergy is not limited to the Catholic Church. Systematic cover-ups made by ecclesial bodies follow wherever sexual violence is found (For example: Downen, Olsen, & Tedesco, 2019; Fortune, 1989; Goossen, 2015).

When sexual violence is covered up in Christian settings, the patterns are similar to those of cover-ups in secular settings (i.e. Michigan State University's cover-up of Larry Nassar's serial sexual violence [Believed, 2018]). Cover-ups are best understood not as nefariously orchestrated plots that are conceived in whole and then executed by a few bad actors, but as a complex series of decisions both influenced by and reflective of shared institutional values and priorities – usually, the priority of institutional self-preservation over the wellbeing of survivors. In Christian settings, self-preservation is easily conflated with preservation of the Church writ large. When this happens, institutional (or community) self-preservation becomes a value infused with divine authority at the expense of victims and survivors (Wright, 2017).

In addition, many contemporary, western ecclesial systems process reports of sexual violence in ways designed to minimize the threat that a victim's voice poses to the status quo functioning of the community or institution. The first line of institutional defense is frequently to doubt or undermine a survivor's account. Minimization does not need to be a total denial to be effective. It can even be framed sympathetically. In any form, minimization works to build a shared understanding of a victim's report as less serious than the victim initially thought it was, and less worthy of significant action. While the elaborate machinations of the Catholic Church's cover-ups are what make the news, a more simple act of minimization is often all the cover-up that is needed to contain an abusive situation for many years. In ecclesial settings, the pervasiveness of beliefs like Mark's – that bodily autonomy is an inappropriate priority for Christian survivors of sexual violence to maintain – can also lead victims to minimize their own experiences with sexual violence in anticipation of the response they expect their faith community would give. The most effective cover-up is the one that begins and ends quietly with the victim.

Other common theological features of cover-ups are the prioritizing of perpetrators' "repentance" over rigorous accountability; the framing of unquestioning trust in someone accused of sexual violence as a spiritual virtue; and a heterosexist, purity-based sexual ethic so narrow that secrecy about perceived sexual deviance becomes routine.

Students of the intersection of Christianity with sexual violence will need to build a dynamic framework for understanding the place of sexual violence in the life and operations of the Church, both in the specific contexts with which such students are primarily concerned, and throughout the Church's diverse history and geography. Sexual violence manifests in each time and place of the Church differently. Comprehension of the subject in today's western ecclesial landscape demands attention to cover-ups.

3.3 | Engaging the work of theologians who have perpetrated sexual violence

Then, there is the matter of, not clergy, but prominent theologians who have been sexually violent toward others. John Howard Yoder is one example. Yoder received global renown in the late twentieth century for articulating a theology and ethics of nonviolence rooted in the Mennonite peace tradition. We now know that, all the while, Yoder was serially sexually violent.[5] In her groundbreaking essay on Yoder's violence, "Defanging the Beast," historian Rachel Waltner Goossen reports that "two mental health professionals who worked closely with Yoder from 1992 to 1995 as part of a Mennonite church accountability and discipline process believe that more than 100 women experienced unwanted sexual violations by Yoder" (2015, pp. 10–11). Protestant theologian Paul Tillich is another whose sexual violence is at issue. After his death, his wife, Hannah Tillich, published a book disclosing that he pursued sexual relationships with his women students (Tillich, 1973). Richard Fox also recounts Paul Tillich's sexually abusive misuse of his power and renown in Fox's biography of Reinhold Niebuhr. Fox writes, "Niebuhr once sent one of his female students to see Tillich during his office hours. He welcomed her warmly, closed the door, and – according to the student – began fondling her. She reported the episode to Niebuhr, who never forgave Tillich" (Fox, 1985, p. 257).

By Fox's account, Niebuhr's disapproval of Tillich's treatment of women students at Union Theological Seminary was central to Niebuhr's decision to end their longtime friendship.

By no means the only theologians who have behaved in sexually violent ways, the cases of Yoder and Tillich represent another manner in which theology has been complicit with sexual violence. To the extent that the discipline *is* those who write its literature, theology's perpetuation of sexual violence is explicit. However, a more pressing question is what it means for the rest of those who participate in theology – readers, practitioners, expositors, and composers – to continue to engage the work of influential figures who have perpetrated sexual violence. Should we continue to read Yoder and Tillich? Should their work be taught in the classroom? Should we continue to cite it in academic journals and live it in communities of faith?

Many who answer these questions with a "yes" have argued that the contribution an individual makes to the development of a scholarly discourse – be it chemistry, medicine, comparative literature, or theology – is distinct from the ethics of that individual's behavior, and that it is, thus, both possible and ideal to condemn a scholar's unethical behavior and go on reading, citing, engaging, and appreciating the knowledge that person produced. However, the attempt this kind of argument makes to draw a hard line between a scholar's thought and a scholar's behavior buckles under pressure. Particularly in humanistic and theological disciplines, which construct and critique thought-worlds bound to the ethical dimensions of social life, it is not at all clear that a scholar's thought is separable from the ethical shape of his own life. Thus, a more critical stance toward the scholarship of sexually violent figures is necessary.

Karen Guth is among those who take a more nuanced position (Guth, 2015a, Christian Ethics; 2015b, Doing Justice). For Guth (writing on Yoder), what is at stake in our decisions about how to engage the work of sexually violent theologians is, at least in part, the possibility of constructive discourse across intellectual divides in the academy. Guth is concerned, in particular, with what she sees as an unnecessary and unhelpful divide between inheritors of Yoder's thought (i.e. witness theologians) and those theologians and ethicists who are committed to feminist analysis. Guth considers it essential to the health of theology as a discipline that witness theologians and feminists engage and invest in one another constructively. She suggests that a way this might be accomplished is by, on one hand, acknowledging Yoder's violence transparently, and on the other, using Yoder's own theology as ground for building increased resistance to sexual violence. By her reading, such an approach has constructive potential because it insists on feminist commitments to resisting sexual violence without rejecting witness theologians' continued commitments to the broad contours of Yoder's thought. In other words, it creates space for conversation. Guth's project is more careful than those that attempt to hold the scholarship of sexually violent theologians entirely apart from such theologians' behavior. She does insist on the necessity of continual acknowledgement. However, in the name of creating an opportunity for dialog between witness and feminist theologians, the kind of argument Guth puts forward risks positing Yoder as a solution to the problem of sexual violence. Doing so places a perpetrator of sexual violence in a salvific position with respect to those injured by this kind of violence. It is an approach that reinscribes the systemic power dynamics of sexual violence by preserving a perpetrator's authority over the lives and thought-worlds of the people who are vulnerable to the impact of his wrongs.

In 2013, in the midst of a truth-telling process in the Mennonite church around Yoder's sexual violence, the publisher of the majority of Yoder's books, Herald Press, announced that, from that date forward, it would print in each of Yoder's texts a statement acknowledging both Yoder's theological influence and his history of violence against women. The latter portion of that statement reads:

> *At Herald Press we recognise the complex tensions involved in presenting work by someone who called Christians to reconciliation and yet used his position of power to abuse others. We believe that Yoder and those who write about his work deserve to be heard; we also believe readers should know that Yoder engaged in abusive behaviour.*

This book is published with the hope that those studying Yoder's writings will not dismiss the complexity of these issues and will instead wrestle with, evaluate, and learn from Yoder's work in the full context of his personal, scholarly, and churchly legacy (Agency reporter, 2013).

We do not agree with Herald Press that Yoder deserves to be heard. His sexual violence drove a considerable portion of an entire generation of women out of both theology and the church to which he belonged. Their voices are lost to us, and we see no reason that, in the wake of this loss, Yoder's voice is owed preservation. We do, however, propose that Herald Press's statement recommends a hermeneutic of suspicion that is unquestionably necessary when engaging the work of sexually violent scholars. Because thought and action cannot be neatly separated, the intellectual production of individuals who behave violently must always be interrogated for the links that may exist between the thought-world of the writer and the violence committed by the writer. Those who read Yoder and Tillich must do so, in other words, with a hermeneutic of suspicion. Because sexual violence perpetuates itself through silence, it is likewise necessary that those who continue to read, teach, and otherwise engage the thought of sexually violent theologians regularly voice the fact of that violence, prioritize pedagogical foci that contend with its implications, and do so in ways that intentionally express solidarity with sexual violence survivors.[6]

4 | TRAUMA AWARENESS

In addition to cultivating an understanding of what sexual violence is and how Christianity is complicit, students engaging Christian theology and practice seeking to address sexual violence ethically must develop a working knowledge of psychological trauma. Sexual violence is traumatic, and while *trauma* is a term now used colloquially for a range of different kinds of suffering, from the mundane to the severe, *psychological trauma* is a physiologically and socially specific descriptor. Judith Herman's important text *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (Herman, 1992) provides a rigorous theory of trauma written accessibly for non-medical audiences. Bessel van der Kolk's most recent volume *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Van der Kolk, 2014 summarizes and collects references for a number of studies leading the way in contemporary trauma research.[7] Two examples of theological texts that address sexual violence from a standpoint of trauma awareness are Serene Jones's *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Jones, 2009), and Flora Keshgegian's *Redeeming Memories: A Theology of Healing and Transformation* (Keshgegian, 2000). The possibilities for precisely *how* a student of Christian theology makes use of trauma research for scholarship at the intersection of Christianity and sexual violence are wide, but that one *has* a cursory familiarity with the category of psychological trauma is necessary.

Trauma, however, is not purely a psychological phenomenon. Like sexual violence, trauma has social, cultural, and other dimensions that are equally important to attend. Pursuing trauma as a cultural phenomenon is an endeavor that is critical for understanding the relationship of trauma to cultural forms of violence, such as white supremacist anti-black violence and the settler-colonial genocide of North America's indigenous peoples – two forms of cultural violence that widely use sexual violence as a tactic. Indeed, while a basic comprehension of psychological trauma is essential for those interested in the intersection of Christian theology and sexual violence, one must also understand how trauma works on a cultural level if one hopes to grasp and address that intersection well. For an introduction to understanding trauma in cultural terms, see Jeffrey C. Alexander's article “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma” (Alexander, 2004).

While trauma awareness denotes, on one hand, conversance with scholarly trauma literature, it can also be conceived as a set of practices. As the latter, trauma awareness insists on *space* for victims and survivors, both conceptually and literally. It uses frameworks for thought that are respectful and inclusive of survivors' lived realities. It prioritizes ways of being that enable survivors to participate, thrive, and lead in the setting at hand, be it academic or ecclesial. A trauma-informed theology holds space for the truth that trauma-induced emotions tell, while at the same

time equipping us through trauma research, theoretical literature, and healing modalities to recognize when there is a critical difference between emotions and present reality, between feelings and ethics.

One example of trauma awareness at odds with Christian communal norms is the trauma-informed imperative to protect victims from unwanted exposure to their perpetrators. Such exposure not only threatens personal safety for victims, but in many cases also causes intense emotional disruption. In churches in which both victim and offender are members, it is common for victims to feel pressure to "get over" their aversion to their perpetrator's presence for the sake of the perpetrator's continued welcome in the community. The victim's needs and emotions are, in this case, at odds with the theological imperative that energizes that pressure – the demand that the victim self-abnegate. The practical consequence is that communities that implicitly or explicitly put this kind of pressure on victims are frequently more hospitable to perpetrators than they are to victims, which, in turn, is systemically productive of further sexual violence within those communities. Denying survivors conceptual space to experience their full range of trauma-induced emotions thus leads to denying them literal space within the church building when they can no longer tolerate going to church with their rapist.

As a term, "trauma awareness" runs the risk of being subsumed by the priorities of marketing and institutional image management, especially as Christian institutions plagued by sexual violence-related reputational issues seek trainings and certifications geared toward those needs. While trainings and certifications may well operate in the service of victims, trauma awareness should not be treated as additive, but rather as a theological responsibility that will disrupt and transform core beliefs that exacerbate sexual violence, and push toward greater engagement with the systemic inequities in which Christianity has been complicit.

5 | CONCLUSION: JUSTICE, ACCOUNTABILITY, CHANGE

Significant thought has gone into developing modes of practical theology and pastoral care for survivors of sexual violence, and treatments of the subject are crucial for those who engage Christian theology within the context of caregiving roles. Marie Fortune made it her life's work to provide theological resources to those confronting sexual violence in ecclesial settings (see, for example: Fortune, 1983, 2005). That work continues through the organization she founded, FaithTrust Institute. Her contemporary, James Poling, wrote extensively on power in connection with pastoral care and sexual violence (for example: Poling, 1991, 2003). Toinette Eugene's work paved the way for scholarship that considers what it means to provide care to African American families facing sexual violence (Eugene & Poling, 1998). More recently, Stephanie Crumpton's, 2014 book *A Womanist Pastoral Theology Against Intimate and Cultural Violence* brings womanist theology and pastoral psychology together to recommend a contemporary program of care for black women. We recommend Pamela Cooper-White's, 2011 article "Intimate Violence Against Women: Trajectories for Pastoral Care in a New Millennium," as a point of entry into practical theology and pastoral caregiving literature that engages the subject of sexual violence.

As essential as it is for those in pastoral caregiving roles to be equipped to provide ethical and effective care in the wake of sexual violence, an emphasis on caring for survivors is often used disingenuously to distract from the need for communities to hold perpetrators and enablers of sexual violence accountable. Practical theology, pastoral care, and all other theological disciplines struggle to produce in-depth treatments of what a group of people is to do when a report of sexual violence is made by or against someone connected to that community. And yet, perhaps now more than ever, we are in critical need of thoughtful strategies for interrupting sexually violent patterns, holding those who do harm accountable, and pursuing justice in ways that transform the lives of our communities toward robust wellbeing and vitality.

Historically, many white scholars and activists working against sexual violence in the U.S. pushed heavily for the criminal justice system to be seen as the appropriate source of accountability for perpetrators of sexual violence. In this framework, accountability means criminal conviction. Certainly, there are situations in which using the criminal justice system is essential for victims' safety. It is also true, however, that the white anti-violence movement failed

(and too often continues to fail) to recognize that the criminal justice system frequently both retraumatizes survivors who try to use it, and itself perpetrates sexual violence against those subject to its power, particularly people of color, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and those detained or in prison. Further, white scholars and activists have often failed to respect that due to the racial injustices of police brutality, mass incarceration, and deportation, communities of color often cannot rely on the criminal justice system to be an ally in their pursuits of survival and wellbeing following sexual violence.

Thus, *accountability* for those who perpetrate and enable sexual violence ought not be understood primarily or only in criminal or legal terms. Rather, as we speak of it here, accountability refers to a wide range of creative processes that communities undertake in solidarity with survivors that limit a perpetrator's violent behavior and protect those who are vulnerable to future harm. Two volumes that speak to what creative accountability can look like in both theory and practice are INCITE!'s *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology* (2016) and Traci C. West's *Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality: Africana Lessons on Religion, Racism, and Ending Gender Violence* (2019).

For students of Christian theology and ethics to be well-prepared to confront sexual violence both intellectually and in practice, critical reflection is needed on what, specifically, it takes for a community to receive survivors' testimony, hold perpetrators accountable, and do what is possible to break cycles of continued harm.[8] Thus, we conclude this survey by motioning toward four areas of responsibility that we consider necessary for changing the destructive legacy we have described. The first responsibility: that processes for receiving and responding to survivors' disclosures of sexual violence have ethical and theological integrity. Second: that we recognize the current influence of legal and human resource frameworks in current approaches to processing reports of sexual violence, and that we have a conversation about the degree to which this influence is helpful or problematic. Third: that we continue to reflect on ethical and *possible* modes of accountability for perpetrators of sexual violence that reduce the risk of continued harm and avoid increasing the violence of the criminal justice system. And finally: that we envision and become prepared to enact community practices of sexual vitality.

It is our hope that scholars and practitioners who work at the intersection of Christianity and sexual violence will take these responsibilities to heart. Equipped with a robust understanding of what sexual violence is, the ability to analyze Christianity's complicity, and resources for producing new insight that is trauma aware, such scholars and practitioners will be well positioned to craft projects of critical inquiry and community practice that make these responsibilities alive in the church and in the academy, and in so doing, work toward a world that more effectively resists sexual violence and empowers survivors.

ENDNOTES

[1] Quoted from unpublished, written correspondence from Mark to Hilary J. Scarsella dated December 15, 2017, emphasis original.

[2] Ray's critique is focused on the Anselmian/Objective and Abelardian/Subjective models of atonement, summarized on pages 8–18 of *Deceiving the Devil*. For a more comprehensive treatment of these models, see Gustaf Aulén's *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (1931).

[3] For a survey of scholarship that develops the intersection of atonement theology and sexual violence see Townes, 1993; Brown, 1989; and Adams, 1995.

[4] For an analysis of the kind of power that attends clergy abuse we recommend Marie M. Fortune and James Poling's book *Sexual Abuse by Clergy: A Crisis for the Church* (Fortune & Poling, 1994).

[5] Yoder was prolific, but his most widely read text was *The Politics of Jesus* (1972). We cite it here not to recommend its insights, but to provide an example of a text that is directly implicated when we consider whether and how texts written by sexually violent theologians ought to be engaged. It is, likewise, our opinion that this particular text reveals itself as complicit with sexual violence in the theological argument it puts forward and not merely by way of its authorship. Elizabeth G. Yoder (1992) and Susan Thisthlethwaite (2015) each offer astute analyses of the complicity of Yoder's theology with sexual violence.

[6] This discussion just scratches the surface of what is at stake in debates around continuing to engage the work of sexually violent intellectuals. For example, a facet of the discussion not discussed here concerns citation practices. Brian Leiter (2018) has proposed that the work of so-called awful people should be cited in two cases: when doing so acknowledges a prior contribution on which one's own work depends, and to invoke that person's epistemic authority for a claim relevant to one's own work. Nikki Usher (2018) has argued, to the contrary, that continuing to use the work of sexually violent thinkers as an epistemic warrant for one's own work adds to the power that abusive figures have in academia and is a practice that ought to be resisted. The debate in academia is ongoing.

[7] Following our own recommendation that the violent behavior of scholars ought to be acknowledged and taken into consideration when engaging their intellectual work, we wish to note for the reader that van der Kolk was fired from his job at the Brookline Trauma Center for bullying and denigrating employees (Kowalczyk, 2018). This kind of behavior is not the same as sexual violence, and yet we would recommend that readers hold it in mind while consulting his work.

[8] Beyond those already cited, a short list of resources that attempt to work toward this end includes *The Revolution Starts at Home* (Chen, Dulani, & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2011), and a wide collection of the articles made publicly available through FaithTrust Institute's website (Articles).

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