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## **Religious Faith in the Unjust Meantime: The Spiritual Violence of Clergy Sexual Abuse**

Theresa W. Tobin

### **Abstract**

Clergy sexual abuse is both sexual and psychological violence, but it is also a paradigmatic case of spiritual violence that rises to the level of religious trauma. In this paper I argue that the spiritual violence of clergy sexual abuse diminishes, and in some cases may even destroy, a survivor's capacities for religious faith or other forms of spiritual engagement. I use and illustrate the value of feminist methodology, as developed and advanced by Alison Jaggar, for generating and pursuing philosophical questions about religious experience. Feminist methodology's sensitivity to theorizing situated subjects who stand to each other in relations of racialized male dominance helps us see the ways in which clergy sexual abuse is gender-based violence in both its causes and effects. It also helps us both ask and answer questions about religious faith in the unjust meantime from the perspective of those who endure spiritually violent faith communities.

**Keywords:** spiritual violence, clergy sexual abuse, gender, religious faith, feminist methodology

### **Introduction**

In July 2018, the high-ranking Roman Catholic Cardinal, Theodore McCarrick, resigned from the College of Cardinals as news broke of allegations that he had sexually abused children and adults for decades while serving in the Washington, DC, diocese (Zauzmer and Harlan 2018). In August 2018, a grand jury investigation reported that since 1947, across six dioceses of Pennsylvania, at least 301 Roman Catholic priests had sexually abused over 1,000 children and that Church officials knew about and covered up the abuse (O'Loughlin 2018). These stories mark the latest in mounting evidence emerging over nearly twenty years of a global clergy sexual abuse epidemic within the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> When people express

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<sup>1</sup> In 2002, the *Boston Globe* reported the first story to expose the crisis in the US, reporting sex abuse allegations from over 130 survivors against Boston diocesan priest Fr. John J. Geoghan and the cover-up by then bishop of Boston Bernard Law,

moral outrage about clergy sexual abuse cases, they often focus on the psychological and sexual harms and betrayal of trust survivors suffer and the Church cover-up of the abuse. In this paper, I foreground survivor experiences of the *spiritual* harm clergy sexual abuse inflicts when priests “weaponiz[e] the Catholic faith and us[e] it as a tool of their abuse” (O’Loughlin 2018).

Clergy sexual abuse is both sexual and psychological violence, but it is also a paradigmatic case of *spiritual* violence that rises to the level of what Michelle Panchuk (2018) calls religious trauma. I argue that the spiritual violence of clergy sexual abuse diminishes, and in some cases, may even destroy a survivor’s capacities for religious faith and other forms of spiritual engagement. Recent work in Christian philosophy of religion argues that worship is a primary way we come to know and love God and is partially constitutive of a relationship with God (Roberts 2007; Smith 2013; Wolterstorff 2015; Cueno 2016). Clergy sexual abuse uses religiously significant objects, spaces, texts, and prayers through which people engage in worship as instruments of sexual violation. This can transform worship into a religiously traumatic experience, leading some survivors to experience God as hostile, even abusive, or diminishing their ability to participate in worship altogether. A survivor who cannot step foot in a church without vomiting at the trace smell of incense, or cannot recite the “Our Father” without flashbacks of being raped by a priest is unable to participate easily or at all in Christian worship. In some cases, the abuse may irreparably damage a person’s capacities for spiritual engagement of any kind. One male survivor shared that as a result of the abuse his “spirituality and ability to believe in a higher power were destroyed” (Gartner 2007, 98).

A second aim of this paper is to use and illustrate the value of feminist methodology for generating and pursuing philosophical questions about religious experience. My approach is deeply indebted to and shaped by the work of Alison Jaggar, who over the past several decades has developed feminism as a methodology—a way of doing moral and political philosophy that foregrounds gender as a central category of philosophical analysis (Jaggar 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2016; Jaggar and Wisor 2014; Jaggar and Tobin 2017). Jaggar distinguishes feminist ethical theory “by its exploration of the ways in which cultural devaluation of

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who knew about the abuse and transferred Fr. Geoghan from parish to parish instead of removing him from ministry. (See: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/special-reports/2002/01/06/church-allowed-abuse-priest-for-years/cSHfGkTlrAT25qKGvBuDNM/story.html>.) The 2016 Oscar winning film, *Spotlight*, details the story of the Boston Globe team that investigated and broke the story. The website Bishops Accountability documents abuse cases globally (<http://www.bishop-accountability.org>).

women and the feminine may be reflected and rationalized in the central concepts and methods of moral philosophy” (Jaggar 2000c, 1). I adopt a similar approach, in part, because I am concerned that gender bias may be reflected in or at least obscured by philosophical accounts of worship and religious faith that operate too much in the abstract and analyses of clergy sexual abuse that neglect its gendered dimensions.

Feminist methodology’s sensitivity to theorizing situated subjects who stand to each other in relations of social power, and specifically relationships of racialized male dominance, makes relevant the religious experiences of more than the spiritually privileged who can take for granted their basic worthiness for spiritual thriving. It helps us both to ask and answer questions about religious faith in the context of spiritually violent faith communities and to “reveal rather than obscure empirical inequalities related to gender” in these experiences (Jaggar 2000a, 458). My methodology in this paper is feminist in at least three ways. First, I analyze clergy sexual abuse as gender-based spiritual violence, highlighting how structural male dominance in the Catholic Church contributes to the vulnerability of victims of both sexes to clergy abuse and impacts how survivors experience the abuse. Second, I situate philosophical claims about the role of worship in faith formation in a specific religious and social context and bring survivor testimony to bear on these claims. Third, I urge researcher responsibility to prioritize research questions that address religious experience in the unjust meantime, rather than assuming ideal conditions (Jaggar 2000a, 2000b, 2016; Jaggar and Wisor 2014; Jaggar and Tobin 2017).<sup>2</sup>

In the first section, I define spiritual violence and religious trauma and establish clergy sexual abuse as religiously traumatic spiritual violence. Section two distinguishes interpersonal and structural modes of spiritual violence and describes *structural gender-based* spiritual violence as a background condition that enables clergy abuse and impacts victims’ experience. Analyzing clergy sexual abuse as gender-based spiritual violence is vital for grasping its structural causes and fully

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<sup>2</sup> Feminist methodology also generates analyses that counter misleading narratives from some in the Church about the abuse. It is common to hear Church leaders speak about priests who abuse as immoral or psychologically unstable individuals who did bad things, and bishops who covered up the abuse as weak or neglectful. Some Church officials saw clergy sexual abuse as more of a violation of the priest’s vows than a crime and sin against the victim (Sands 2003, Kaveny 2019). This focus on “bad apple” priests whose primary sin is against the priesthood frames the Church as a *victim* rather than a culprit or accomplice. Feminist methodology draws attention to a spiritually violent church culture of male dominance and entitlement that enabled and sustained abusive priests and left thousands of survivors spiritually traumatized.

appreciating its damaging spiritual effects for both male and female survivors.<sup>3</sup> Section three shares survivor testimony, highlighting the spiritual injuries they endure as a result of the abuse and the institutional betrayal. Sections four and five then bring this testimony to bear on philosophical arguments about the role of worship in religious faith. By tarnishing a survivor's relationship to worship, clergy sexual abuse can diminish and may in some cases destroy a person's capacities for knowing and loving God and for other forms of spiritual engagement. I conclude by returning to the significance of feminism as methodology and praxis for religious faith in the unjust meantime.

### **1. Clergy Sexual Abuse as Religiously Traumatic Spiritual Violence**

Philosophical accounts of how worship cultivates religious faith tend to assume that background conditions of faith communities are spiritually safe and healthy and theorize the believer irrespective of their social identity (Roberts 2007; Smith 2013; Wolterstorff 2015, 2016; Cuneo 2016). This results in conceptions of worship and theories about its role in religious faith that privilege the experiences of those who are not vulnerable to or survivors of spiritual violence. The term "spiritual violence" was coined by lay Christians as an umbrella term to name a variety of ways that churches and their members use religious means to degrade or demean people

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<sup>3</sup> In the majority of reported cases of clergy abuse (a range from 64% to 78%), the victims are males between the ages of 11 and 17. A 2004 report from John Jay College of Criminal Justice found that approximately 64% of accused priests abused males only, 22% abused females only, and 3% abused both; and in 10% of cases, the gender of the victim was unknown. A 2005 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops report found that 78% of victims are male and 22% are female. These data are summarized in Frawley-O'Dea and Goldner (2007). (See also: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/upload/The-Nature-and-Scope-of-Sexual-Abuse-of-Minors-by-Catholic-Priests-and-Deacons-in-the-United-States-1950-2002.pdf>.) An anonymous reviewer of a previous draft of this paper questioned whether it was appropriate to consider clergy sexual abuse gender-based violence since the majority of victims are male. I disagree with what may be implied by this objection—that gender-based violence is, by definition, male-perpetrated violence against females. Male-on-male sexual abuse can and should be analyzed as gender-based violence. Nonetheless the question helps clarify my analysis of clergy sexual abuse in this context as gender-based violence: gendered (patriarchal and clerical) power abuse is at the root of a church structure and culture that encourages and sustains clergy sexual abuse against victims *of all sexes*, and against these background conditions, gender identity shapes a survivor's experience of spiritual violence and paths to healing.

spiritually (Truluck 2001; Manson 2010). Spiritual violence is violence in the sense of violation of persons. It shares some features with psychological violence, which may or may not use force or be bodily or physical in nature but violates a person by diminishing or degrading the integrity of the self in some way (Bufacchi 2007; Galtung 2007; Garver 2007). Spiritual violence is distinctively spiritual both in terms of its means and its target. It occurs when churches or their agents use religiously significant symbols, texts, teachings, rituals, prayers, or religious leaders to violate or threaten a person's spiritual self, including their experience of or capacity for relationship with God (Tobin 2016). Spiritual violence can diminish their religious capacities, which include the cognitive, affective, and imaginative capacities through which a person comes to know and love God.

“Spiritual violence” is a broad term denoting any use of religious means to violate a person's spiritual self, and it can be more or less severe.<sup>4</sup> On the extreme end, spiritual violence inflicts what Michelle Panchuk (2018) calls religious trauma. Religious trauma is a traumatic experience that has a religious cause, something that the individual believes is closely connected to the religion, and results in a religious effect by transforming the person's beliefs about God or generating emotional experiences of extreme fear or distrust of the divine being and/or the religious community (Panchuk 2018, 516).

Victims of clergy sexual abuse often believe that their priest perpetrators are God's specially designated representatives. Because children are not yet easily able to comprehend the notion of symbolic meaning, they are often unable to understand that “‘God the Father’ is a symbolic way of referring to the ineffable” and are likely to equate the priest with God (Redmond 1989, 73–74).<sup>5</sup> Even when priestly status is understood symbolically, sexual abuse by a priest who is imbued by the community with religious authority can convey a message that God condones or approves of the abuse. Some perpetrators explicitly frame or “justify” the abuse to

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<sup>4</sup> Spiritual violence is not unique to theistic or Christian faith communities. It denotes the use of spiritually significant texts, rituals, objects, symbols, or roles to violate a person spiritually by diminishing human capacities to experience and connect with the transcendent and develop a spiritual self. I focus here on how spiritual violence perpetrated by the Roman Catholic Church against its own members impacts their religious faith. Survivor testimony indicates, however, that clergy sexual abuse can also impact survivors' capacities for other, non-Christian or nontheistic forms of spiritual engagement.

<sup>5</sup> Redmond's analysis comports with a large body of testimony from adults who were childhood victims of clergy sexual abuse and who identified the priest with God. For a fairly comprehensive record of the damage detailed in testimony from clergy abuse survivors, see <http://www.bishop-accountability.org/accounts/>.

victims using religious teachings, or telling them that the abuse is God's will or that if victims told about the abuse God would severely punish them. The abuse also often takes place in sacred spaces such as altars, sacristies, or confessionals, sometimes using sacred objects such as crucifixes, rosaries, or holy water. When religious objects, symbols, language, or rituals are used as instruments of sexual violation, the trauma is often experienced as having a religious, even divine, cause or source.

Religious trauma also has religious effects and can yield a shattering of the victim's spiritual self, which can include both a shattered worldview and shattered affective and imaginative capacities (Panchuk 2018). As a result of the abuse, some survivors come to believe that God despises them or that they are fundamentally evil. Some come to distrust God or experience extreme anxiety or dread about addressing God. Some survivors are able to distinguish the will of God from the will of the perpetrator but, as a result of the abuse, become incapable of entering a church, participating in communal worship, or reciting traditional prayers and so are significantly diminished in their ability to participate in religious life. One male survivor who was abused for three years by his parish priest, who was also his spiritual mentor, explained:

I went to seminary because Catholicism meant something to me. But now I can't go into a church without feeling I will vomit. My wife says, "Let's go to an Episcopal Church—it's almost the same!" But it is not the same. I am not an Episcopalian, I'm a *Catholic*. And there's nowhere I can go to be one." (Gartner 2007, 94–95)

As a result of the abuse, this survivor was left feeling spiritually homeless.

Panchuk distinguishes three general forms of trauma, all of which are relevant to analysis of clergy sexual abuse. First, the *DSM-5* medical definition of *traumatic experience* for the purposes of medical diagnoses includes "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence" that is directly experienced (Panchuk 2018, 507). Second, some psychologists identify what they call *complex trauma*, which results from exposure to "severe stressors that are (1) repetitive or prolonged, (2) involve harm or abandonment by caregivers or other ostensibly responsible adults, and (3) occur at developmentally vulnerable times in a victim's life, such as early childhood or adolescence" (Courtois and Ford 2013; Panchuk 2018, 507–508). Finally, feminist psychologists have identified *chronic trauma*, which refers to a buildup of routine, everyday experiences of racism, sexism, classism, or heterosexism that can, over time, make a person vulnerable to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Panchuk 2018, 508).

Clergy sexual abuse perpetrated against children or adolescents inflicts all three forms of trauma. As a direct experience of sexual violence, it is *medically*

*diagnosable trauma* on the *DSM-5* definition. Because it is often repeated sexual violation occurring in early childhood or adolescence by adults who are entrusted with a person's spiritual and moral care, it also meets all three conditions for what constitutes *complex trauma*. Finally, as I will explore further in the next section, clergy sexual abuse in this context is also arguably *chronic trauma*, to the extent that institutionalized male dominance within the Church (and broader society) imbues sexual violence by male perpetrators on male and female victims with additional layers of meaning (Card 1994; Brison 2002).

## **2. Structural Gender-Based Spiritual Violence in the Catholic Church**

Spiritual violence can be both interpersonally and structurally inflicted. In its interpersonal expression, an individual uses a religiously significant object, text, or their religious authority to violate another individual, as, for example, when a priest rapes a child with a crucifix grossly abusing both his religious role and authority and the symbolic meaning of the crucifix.<sup>6</sup> In structural spiritual violence, violating norms or teachings, which *partially constitute* the religious environment in which a person is spiritually formed, are upheld and sustained through collective human agency.<sup>7</sup> For example, sexist or misogynist interpretations of scripture that become part of the tradition of the Church and are passed down through generations would constitute structural spiritual violence against women. In this environment, women are at risk of distorted spiritual formation through their routine participation in the ritual life of a faith community whose central doctrines or teachings incorporate interpretations that express spiritually demeaning views of women.<sup>8</sup> The boundaries between interpersonal and structural violence are often blurred in practice because interpersonal violence very often has pronounced structural causes and structural

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<sup>6</sup> There are multiple modes of violence inflicted in this case, including sexual, psychological, and physical violence. I mean here to highlight the spiritually violent dimensions of this form of interpersonal abuse.

<sup>7</sup> For a general account of structural violence see Galtung (2007) and Garver (2007).

<sup>8</sup> Not all spiritually harmful institutional norms are themselves violent. We have to distinguish between aspects of the institution that are violent and aspects of the institution that themselves may not be violating but that support violence. Sexist or misogynist interpretations of scripture are violent on my account because they are agent caused and maintained, express spiritually demeaning attitudes toward women, and are capable of extensively damaging the spiritual identities of women who pursue formation in this community. Theological teachings that valorize suffering as a way to draw one closer to God may themselves not be violating, but in conjunction with other aspects of the institution, these teachings may function to enable or support spiritual violence.



violence can manifest in interpersonal encounters. In the Roman Catholic Church, ongoing *structural gender-based* spiritual violence enables and sustains interpersonal clergy sexual abuse and its institutional cover-up and impacts victims' experience of the abuse (Frawley-O'Dea 2007).

Feminist theologians have documented a long history of the conceptual and material devaluation of women in Christian thought and tradition. In her book *Just Love*, Margaret Farley (2018, 42) summarizes aspects of this conceptual history that are especially relevant for our purposes:

Though the Eve of canonical scriptures does not bear the same weight of responsibility for the Fall as the Eve of apocryphal literature, her role was nonetheless frequently interpreted as that of a seducer of Adam. And whether or not women were consciously thought to be a threatening force, the great temptresses of men, they nonetheless appeared throughout Christian writings as a special agent of evil. Instead of losing an identification with pollution and defilement through the development of Christian thought, the notion of "woman" became theoretically entrenched as the dangerous "other" in theologies of original sin, of higher and lower nature, mind and body, rationality and desire. Even without attributions of evil, women were considered intellectually inferior to men, naturally more passive, less important in the movements of history, and only derivatively and partially participants in the *imago dei*, the image of God.

As Farley's summary indicates, Christian thought has portrayed women as spiritually inferior to men, as participating less fully than men in the image of God, and as agents of evil who are especially responsible for sexual sin. This spiritual diminishment of women is tied to the spiritual valorization of men. The Christian worldview presents God almost exclusively in male terms. This suggests, as Sandra Schneiders (1983) puts it, that "God . . . is man 'writ large'" and "men are God 'writ small,'" such that "God and man belong to the same order of things and from that order women are excluded." The Roman Catholic Church formalizes exclusion of women in its institutional structure by enshrining spiritual and moral authority in an all-male clerical hierarchy.

To the extent sexism or misogyny are built into the structure and expressed in dominant narratives of the Church, women spiritually formed in this environment are vulnerable to experiencing *chronic religious trauma* that thwarts their spiritual agency. The impact of structural gender-based spiritual violence may appear less severe than other forms or be less visible because it is what Newton Garver (2007) calls "quiet violence," which gradually builds over time and can erode a person's agency, in this case their spiritual agency. The point here is that people may

experience spiritual violation without being victims of interpersonal violence.<sup>9</sup>

However this spiritually violent male power structure contributes to the vulnerability of children of *both sexes* to interpersonal clergy abuse by encouraging uncritical obedience to and unwavering trust of priests who are believed by many to be imbued with God-given spiritual and moral authority over the laity.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, a culture of clericalism in the Church has emphasized the ontologically privileged status and power of clergy as somehow metaphysically closer to and more like God than lay people are (Doyle 2006). Clericalism bolsters priests' power to abuse with impunity by legitimating their desires and actions and making them seem irreproachable.<sup>11</sup> Survivor Steve Lynch shares how this structural violence made him vulnerable to abuse and silenced him from reporting it at the time:

Do you know that my parents considered the priest to be God and my society revered this man as God himself? So when a nine-year-old boy is in the room with God, and there is unfathomable shame, excruciating stress, pain, confusion, guilt, uncomfortableness, and more shame absolutely filling the room. . . . Does a nine-year-old boy blame God or put the shame on God? Do you speak against God, knowing the whole of society reveres this

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<sup>9</sup> This diminishment of spiritual agency as a result of structural gender-based spiritual violence is analogous to the experience Susan Brison (2002) discusses in her account of sexual violence. Brison shares that *prior* to her experience of rape, in virtue of her social identity as a woman, she was already experiencing the “quiet” violence of a violating structure that makes differently situated women differently and disproportionately vulnerable to sexualized violence and to living with a sense of violability, even if many manage to avoid its interpersonal manifestation (18, 89–90, 98). Of course, a person may also experience increased sense of violability from an interpersonal attack that does not have structural causes, if the attack is traumatic enough.

<sup>10</sup> This Church culture also gave priests greater access to males who were allowed and encourage to be altar servers or to go on weekend camping trips or retreats with priest.

<sup>11</sup> The sacramental character of the priesthood exacerbates the abusive potential of clericalism. Sacraments in the Catholic Church are formal rites or rituals, said to be instituted by Christ, through which a person can experience God's grace. As Kathleen Sands explains, the priest “not only administers the sacraments but is himself a sacrament. The priest's own body . . . is consecrated. It is the priest's touch that sanctifies and the priest's words that forgive. How vulnerable, then, are children when their own sexuality is touched by a priest and their own forgiveness promised” or denied (Sands 2003, 81).

incarnation of God? It is an unresolvable, insane, impossible choice to make at nine years old. (Lynch 2006, 6)

Structural gender-based spiritual violence in the Church, amplified by broader socially enforced gender norms and rape myths, also impacts how some survivors differently interpret and experience the abuse. For instance, male and female victims are likely to experience shame differently as a result of the abuse. Some male survivors report shame about failed or weak masculinity, internalizing social narratives that “real men” aren’t victims, or wonder if they were targeted because they are too effeminate (Frawley-O’Dea 2007, 30–31; Figueroa and Tombs 2016, 19; Garter 2007, 88). Church teaching that same-sex attraction is a “grave disorder” and same-sex sex a “sinful perversion” leads some male survivors to feel spiritual terror about their own sexuality if they interpret the abuse to mean that they might be gay<sup>12</sup> or if they are blamed by the perpetrator for tempting a priest into this sinfulness. By contrast, female victims of clergy sexual abuse report feeling shame not for failing gendered expectations but for confirming them (Bartky 1990). For some, including a survivor whose story I share in the next section, the abuse cemented messages that girls are spiritually inferior to boys, inherently sinful for possessing a female body, responsible for sexual sin, and despised by God because they are girls.

In the following section, I share testimony from two female survivors who were sexually abused by Catholic priests in order to examine more closely the nature of the *spiritual* wounds they have suffered. I foreground testimony from female survivors here because their experiences provide an especially clear illustration of the complex interrelation between interpersonal and structural gender-based spiritual violence operative in experiences of clergy sexual abuse that inflicts both *complex and chronic religious trauma*. I also share testimony from one secondary victim who was not directly abused by an individual perpetrator but experienced a crisis of faith as a result of structural spiritual violence that sustained a culture of sexual abuse and the spiritual diminishment of women. Collectively these three cases illustrate different levels at which clergy abuse distorts capacities for worship and the impact on a survivor’s possibilities for recuperating religious faith or other forms of spiritual engagement.

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<sup>12</sup> Based on a qualitative study of the shame experiences of LGBT conservative Christians, Moon and Tobin (2018) argue that the Church’s teaching that same-sex attraction is sinful, which is part of its broader narrative about gender, is itself spiritually violent or too easily enables churches to inflict spiritual violence on their LGBT members.

### 3. Survivor Accounts of Clergy Sexual Abuse as Religious Trauma

*Dr. Ann Hagan Webb*

Beginning at age five, Ann Hagan Webb endured eight years of sexual abuse at the hands of a Monsignor who was her “grandfather’s golf buddy” (Webb 2006, 23). In a 2003 speech given at a Voice of the Faithful conference, Webb described the abuse:

I remember an awful feeling that I know now to be fear and anxiety. As the years went by, molestation became oral rape, and ultimately vaginal and anal rape with a crucifix. It was not all violence and it took a long time in therapy for me to put this label on it. It was mixed with nurturing, soft words, sitting on his lap, and being special. (2006, 23)

As a result of the abuse, Webb consciously rejected Catholicism for nearly 20 years, but she reports that she continues to experience spiritual injury through her interaction with Catholic clergy. As horrific as the abuse was, Webb claims that the experience of being silenced, ignored, and even censured by members of the Catholic hierarchy when she came forward to testify to the abuse was equally if not more spiritually damaging. Yet she finds this baffling given that she no longer consciously identifies as Catholic. As she puts it: “Each time they disappoint me, I am shaken to the core which makes no sense since I renounced the religion long ago” (27). The fact that someone who has for twenty years consciously renounced Catholicism nonetheless can be *shaken to the core* by the behavior of its leaders suggests that the spiritual wounds Webb endured are enduring and deep. Despite her spiritual recovery within the Unitarian Church, the damage to her spiritual capacities sustained through her Catholic spiritual formation and violation was nonetheless extensive enough to make her vulnerable to spiritual revictimization by the “second wound” of being ignored or silenced by Catholic clergy.

Understanding Webb’s experience as religious trauma helps explain this baffling experience. Traumatic experience that results in PTSD often intrudes memory, is easily triggered, and drags people back to the past to relive the experience over and over again despite their conscious beliefs. As with other forms of trauma, it is difficult to heal from religious trauma, even when one has “moved on” to a new spiritual home and has managed to retain some sense of connection to the transcendent, as Webb has through participation in a Unitarian faith community.

*Kathleen Dwyer*

A second survivor, Kathleen Dwyer, endured three years of ritual, sexual abuse at the hands of Roman Catholic priests and also involving her biological father

that began when she was five years old. In an essay about the abuse Dwyer describes her experience:

They cloaked their abuse in sacredness and used God's name to justify and sanctify the sacrifice of me . . . and framed it in what was supposed to be a sacred space. And, as the blood poured out, over, on and through me, I remembered two of the ten commandments [*sic*] and I said to God "Yes, yes I will. I will 'Love the Lord Thy God with my whole heart and with my whole soul and with my whole mind' and yes, yes I will, I will 'Honor thy Father (both priestly and biologically) and Mother' but please dear God" I prayed . . . "please . . . please make me not be." (2002, 2)

Dwyer endured repeated rapes by multiple clergy all which were "done in God's name by those [she] was taught were God-like" (Dwyer 2006, 40). The abuse took place in her home parish, which she describes as "the church where my Catholic foundation was cemented, trusting that indeed priests were next to God and whatever they said I was to follow. That they were the ones who knew best how to help me be less sinful . . . less evil . . . more worthy of God" (Dwyer 2006, 36). As those she took to be God's representatives were raping her, Dwyer frantically prayed, promising God that she will obey His commandments requiring her to love Him and honor her parents, while simultaneously begging God to destroy her. As a result of the abuse, Dwyer's experience of God might be described as pathological. She was left with the belief that she is fundamentally evil and that she never should have been born. She prayed regularly, but her regular childhood prayer was that God would make her a boy or, preferably, that God would make her "not be" (Dwyer 2006, 42).

In her journey toward recovery, Dwyer has written several poems about her experience, which convey better than any narrative reconstruction the spiritual injury she has endured. One of her poems, "Peace Be with Who?" (Dwyer 2006, 38–39), is particularly illuminating and is worth sharing here in its entirety.

**"May the Peace of the Lord Be with you Always"**

And the sun shone through the stained glass windows,  
embracing statues, robes and people.  
It was as if, while they knelt worshipping, praising and listening  
to "His" word, they were wrapped in a ray of holiness . . .  
And that evening, as the sun began to set,  
she slowly crawled into his bed, for  
the "Word" had said that God is Father and Father is God . . .

And that to be in “His” grace you must honor Thy Father and Mother”

**“The Mass Has Ended . . . Go In Peace”**

And the penis became the exploding bomb,

And the semen the fall-out that could not be cleansed;

But the Red Cross did not come . . .

For there was no war . . .

There was no death . . .

There was no destruction

Just

“Our Father, who ar’t in Heaven . . .”

**Remember O’Lord, Those who have died . . .**

**May these . . . Find . . . Peace . . .”**

And she still doesn’t understand why death  
seems a viable alternative to life.

She has grown now . . .

Many things are good.

She knows that the scriptures and attitudes  
that say women must serve men . . .

That women are evil . . .

That women are responsible for everything, even death itself

Are not true . . .

Or, does she?

**“May the Souls of the Faithfully Departed Rest in Peace” Amen!**

The first three bolded lines (bolded in the original) are direct quotes from the ritual of the Catholic mass. These lines, coupled with Dwyer’s references to the “Our Father” prayer and the misogynist interpretation of scripture she was taught as a child, are intertwined with descriptions of her experience of the abuse, indicating how the abuse conveyed spiritual damage through religious means and illuminating the interplay between structural and interpersonal gender-based spiritual violence.

As Dwyer describes it, her Catholic environment furnished her with an image of God as a harsh tyrant who watched her every move and would punish her for all the wrongs she committed. She internalized the view that as a girl she was especially bad and that priests “were the only ones that could make [her] worthy of God’s love” (Dwyer 2006, 36–38). She was also taught that non-Catholics were going to hell, which instilled in her a sense of being trapped (36). The emphasis on blind obedience to priests, coupled with the view that priests were unerring, made Dwyer especially spiritually vulnerable and made it easy for her perpetrators to abuse their power. Dwyer describes her images of and beliefs about God, and the religious teachings about women, as terrorizing and filling her with anxiety. As a result of

structural gender-based spiritual violence in her religious upbringing, and independently of the abuse, Dwyer experienced *chronic religious* trauma—internalized religiously imbued sexism and misogyny. The interpersonal violence Dwyer endured when she was raped by priests who “justified” the abuse as God’s will affirmed, strengthened, and integrated the “truth” of these broader narratives into her young spiritual personality. It also extended their meaning by introducing what Dwyer perceived as divinely ordained sexual torture as punishment for her very existence. Dwyer was caught in a web of interpersonal and structural forces, some of which issued direct violent assaults on her religious capacities and others of which functioned to create an environment that supported interpersonal spiritual violation.

### *Debbie*

A white, middle-class Catholic woman in her sixties who I call Debbie, was not directly sexually abused but shared in an interview her experience of the profound spiritual injury she endured from spiritual formation in a Catholic environment that encouraged a sense of spiritual inferiority in women as sexually deviant while sustaining a culture of clergy sexual abuse. Debbie had lived most of her life as a rigidly rule-following cradle Catholic who pitied non-Catholics who she believed were hell-bound. Faith was a matter of conforming to Church rules, which instructed her especially in how to be a “good girl” in God’s eyes, which meant sexual purity at all costs. Her faith was based on fear of God’s punishment should she step out of line and on the sense that as a girl she was especially prone to sexual sin. Since she couldn’t change the fact that she was a girl, she says she spent the bulk of her life trying to justify herself to God by putting herself down, belittling and judging herself as a way of making restitution with God.

Debbie described experiencing an overwhelming sense of betrayal by the Church and a crisis of faith when the clergy sexual abuse crisis broke publicly in 2002. She had spent her whole life fearfully obeying priests and trying to live out the teachings of the Church. All along, Church leaders were violating those teachings in especially egregious ways while condemning lay Catholics, and women in particular, as hell-bound for the smallest transgressions. In her journey toward recovering her faith, she said she came to the quite painful realization that she had never actually experienced relationship with God. She lamented that the “god” she had worshipped for over sixty years was “the Roman collar” and not the God of the Gospels whom she realized she didn’t even know despite sixty years as a church-going Catholic. The structural spiritual violation she endured led to a form of idolatry in which she worshiped not God but male priests who had shepherded her into a false faith based on extreme fear, distressing anxiety, and debilitating shame about being a woman.

#### 4. Faith and Worship

The spiritual violence these survivors experienced erected enormous barriers to their ability to know and love God and harmed their faith. This section draws from recent work in Christian philosophy of religion to explore the link between worship and faith, in order to analyze more precisely *how* clergy sexual abuse and its institutional bulwark can undermine faith in God and other forms of spiritual engagement.<sup>13</sup>

When people speak of having faith in God, they can mean many different things, ranging from mere belief in the existence of a transcendent being that has some interaction with the world, to a more robust and active sense of having a relationship with God that anchors one's search for meaning and purpose, shapes one's values, and influences one's life choices. Spiritual violence can tamper with faith at any place on this spectrum. Here I examine harms to faith in the more robust sense of having a relationship with God, as knowing and loving God. Faith in this sense is underwritten and partially constituted by an attitude of worship, which is a mental state that includes beliefs, desires, and emotions according to which a person knows and loves God and desires communion with God (Wolterstorff 2015, 2016; Cuneo 2016). Nicholas Wolterstorff defines this attitude as a "particular mode of Godward acknowledgement of God's unsurpassable greatness . . . in a stance of awed, reverential, and grateful adoration" (2015, 26).

Christians develop and express an attitude of worship toward God through practices of worship, which include personal devotion and communal worship. Roman Catholics are among the Christian denominations to engage in liturgical worship, which refers to formal, communal rituals with set readings and prayers placed in a specific order. Worship practices reflect a faith community's doxastic commitments and provide opportunities for affective and imaginative experience of God through activities such as prayer, meditation, blessings, chanting, and petitioning. Practitioners may use incense, music, mantras, sacred symbols, or movements, all of which engage a person's senses and imagination, and work to coordinate her desires and emotions both to reflect and reinforce the basic beliefs of the faith and to express "awed, reverential, grateful adoration" toward God

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<sup>13</sup> In an unpublished manuscript, Joshua Cockayne, David Efird and Jack Warman (2018) cite (disapprovingly) a meme circulating on Christian Facebook pages stating, "Church Hurt: If being hurt by church causes you to lose your faith in God, then your faith was in people and not in God." They argue that in addition to being callous and insensitive to survivors' experiences, this view ignores the corporate nature of worship, including personal devotion, and the role of a community in our experience of God.



(Wolterstorff 2015, 26). Over time, through participation in worship practices, a person learns from and with others *how* to be in relationship with God, how to know and love God, and can develop an attitude of worship that orients and expresses this relationship.

Knowing and loving God is embodied, practical knowledge and involves implicit understanding that is not reducible to propositional knowledge. Worship practices facilitate personal knowledge of God, in a way analogous to how we come to know a friend and acquire the skill-based knowledge and attitudes that constitute being a good friend, for example.<sup>14</sup> Nondissenting participation in worship, meaning that the person performs actions of worship with the intention that those actions be acts of worship as opposed to enacting the behavior without intending to be worshipping, is a primary way Christians develop and express an attitude of worship toward God (Wolterstorff 2016).<sup>15</sup>

Importantly, worship is not a mere means to knowing and loving God; worship *partially constitutes* our relationship with God. As Robert Roberts writes,

The point of worship is not *performance*, but *expression*. Worship is . . . an expression of our hearts, of our lives, of our character. It is communion with our God. . . . Thus worship cannot be detached from spirituality . . . worship has to be the same *kind* of activity that shapes our hearts. (2007, 21–22; italics in original)

Without worship—both the attitude and the activities that give rise to and sustain it—there is no relationship with God or substantive spiritual identity, even though there may be a religious affiliation in the sense of nominal group membership. To worship is to participate in and express relationship with God. Extending the analogy

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<sup>14</sup> In order to explain the activity of worship, Wolterstorff draws analogies to other examples of skill-based knowledge, such as painting—which is never complete and cannot be learned except by doing and acquiring a kind of feel for it—and examples of knowing another object, such as the way biologist Barbara McClintock came to know her corn plants by spending long periods of time simply observing them and tending them carefully. We don't come to know God in quite either of these ways, but Wolterstorff's insight is that over time, by engaging liturgical practices of worship, a person can get a feel for who God is, and how to relate to God (2016, 9).

<sup>15</sup> Wolterstorff and Cuneo discuss specifically practices of liturgical worship in coming to know and love God. Roberts (2007) and Smith (2013) speak more broadly about worship to include nonliturgical and liturgical forms. The claim here is that worship, defined broadly, is necessary for developing, sustaining, and expressing relationship with God.

with friendship may be useful here. Friendship designates a relationship, but it is also an activity, and there are certain practices and attitudes both that enable a person to experience friendship and that are also partially constitutive of the kind of activity friendship is. For example, friendship requires, at the very least, spending quality time together; people who never spend any time together or never communicate cannot maintain a friendship. Spending time with a friend both enables friendship and partially constitutes the friendship. Similarly, coming to know God is an activity—it is something we do and not just something we have or acquire, and practices of worship both enable and partially constitute a person’s relationship with and experience of God. Terence Cuneo speaks of knowing and loving God as developing *rapport* with God. To have rapport with someone includes “privileged epistemic contact with that person” but also knowing “how to engage that person” and “what that person cares about” (Cuneo 2016, 148). Rapport is a skill-based, personal knowledge that can effect a state of mutual recognition. In this case, rapport with God can effect “divine-human mutual recognition” and love (Cuneo 2016, 149n9).

Acts of worship through which a person develops and expresses rapport with God are not unidirectional, just as genuine friendship with other people is not one-sided. Through worship people engage in mutual acts that generate opportunities to express awe and adoration toward God and for God to respond by listening and speaking to them (Wolterstorff 2015, 66–67, 71). As Wolterstorff puts it, in worship there is reciprocity of orientation which “brings into existence an I-thou relationship between God and us. God is a thou for us” (2015, 61). When a person worships, she orients herself toward God in “a mutual relationship, which involves mutual address and adoration” (Cockayne, Eford, and Warman, 2018).

In summary, having faith in God involves having a relationship with God expressed through an attitude of worship: to adore God and to be open to God adoring us. Having an attitude of worship is a mode of knowing and loving God and being receptive to God knowing and loving us. Nondissenting participation in worship practices is a primary way that Christians develop, sustain, and express an attitude of worship, and “if all goes well,” worship generates an experience of human-divine mutual recognition and rapport with God. We are now in a better position to examine more precisely how religiously traumatic spiritual violence of clergy sexual abuse undermines religious faith by diminishing survivors’ religious capacities—the cognitive, affective, and imaginative capacities activated in worship and through which they come to know and love God. Clergy sexual abuse erects obstacles to the attitude of worship by tarnishing a person’s relationship to practices of worship through which a person develops and expresses this attitude. In the next section, I return to survivors’ testimony to analyze how clergy sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church damages a survivor’s relationship to two kinds of liturgical

worship practices: liturgical address, or speaking to God, and liturgical actions that engage what Cuneo calls liturgical props, which are ordinary objects that liturgy transforms into sacred, dynamic mediators of our relationship with God.

### **5. Clergy Sexual Abuse: A Barrier to Knowing and Loving God**

Clergy sexual abuse harms a person's capacities for religious faith, in part, by damaging their relationship to religiously significant objects, texts, prayers, rituals, and religious leaders a person engages in worship, leading a person to develop a toxic or troubled faith (i.e., an attitude of worship that is harmful to them) or disabling a person altogether from being able to worship. One way worship facilitates relationship with God is by teaching a person how to address God (Wolterstorff 2016). Addressing God is a form of speaking to God, which can yield personal knowledge of God in at least two ways. First, the *form* of liturgical address takes certain features of God for granted. The form of address in Christian liturgical enactments address God in the second person, as a being capable of listening and apprehending what is said: "we bless you, O God"; "we praise you, O God;" "we thank you, O God"; etc. (Wolterstorff 2016, 11). As Wolterstorff continues, this form of address

would make no sense if God could not apprehend what they say. . . . When addressing God in praise and adoration, one takes God to be worthy of praise and adoration for being how God is and for doing what God has done. Whatever they take God to be like when performing the actions of the liturgy, if God is in fact that way, then by learning to perform those actions and performing them, they come to know God as being that way. (2016, 12–13).

In light of this, we might ask what Kathleen Dwyer learned to take for granted about who God is and what God is like through her participation in Catholic worship. Dwyer's liturgical address of God is troublingly nondissenting, and the trouble is a direct result of being raped repeatedly by those she believes are God's representatives, in sacred spaces such as altars, and having the abuse "justified" by her perpetrators (and the broader religious environment) in God's name and with reference to scripture. As the abuse was taking place, Dwyer spoke to God using forms of liturgical address common in Catholic worship and referencing the Ten Commandments,

"Yes, yes I will. I will 'Love the Lord Thy God with my whole heart and with my whole soul and with my whole mind' and yes, yes I will, I will 'Honor thy

Father (both priestly and biologically) and Mother' but please dear God" I prayed . . . "please . . . please make me not be." (Dwyer 2002, 2)

Dwyer's poem (shared above) recites several lines from the Catholic mass, including lines that address God during the eucharistic prayer, lines that address God during the mass of funeral rite (Remember, O Lord those who have died), and the "Our Father," which is recited during the liturgy of the Eucharist at Catholic mass.

Dwyer addresses God in the second person as a being who is worthy of praise and capable of listening and understanding her, and her prayers reflect aspects of the central pattern of Catholic liturgy—blessing and petitioning God. Yet her liturgical address indicates that she "knows" God as a being who condones what is happening to her, perhaps even one who commands sexual torture as punishment for being a girl. Her address expresses a reciprocal orientation between her and God, but not one of mutual adoration or rapport. She addresses God as a being of unsurpassable greatness and begs God to make her "not be." Dwyer's priest perpetrators inflict egregious spiritual violation by hijacking liturgical forms of address and using them as instruments of sexual violence. The spiritually violating force of the abuse is amplified by structural spiritual violence against women, which prior to the abuse primed Dwyer to experience God as hostile toward girls.

Participants in liturgical worship also come to know God through the *content* of the addressee-identification terms they use to speak to God, terms like "Father," "Almighty God," "Comforter," which tell us something about what God is like (Wolterstorff 2016, 13–14). When using these terms over and over to address God, if these terms fit God, then in using them we get a feel for what God is like (Wolterstorff 2016, 14). For Dwyer, this too is a site of religious trauma. She learns to address God as "Father," for instance, but the knowledge of God she comes to have through repeatedly addressing God as "Father" draws analogously from what she knows about other fathers: she is raped by priests who she calls "father" who work in conjunction with her biological father who also sexually violates her. In light of this, using "Father" to address God reinforces her personal knowledge of a Father God who condones sexual abuse and like human "fathers" also harbors hostility toward her.<sup>16</sup> It may also imbue her human father with godlike authority reinforcing her sense that the abuse is warranted or deserved.

In addition to practices of address, liturgical worship also makes available an array of ritual actions and objects through which a person engages God (Cuneo

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<sup>16</sup> Feminist theologians have long emphasized the significance of names for God in a person's experience of God and the impact of exclusively masculine terms and imagery for God on women's experience of God especially against background social conditions of male dominance. See especially Johnson (1992).

2016, 159–160). Terence Cuneo explains two ways that liturgy contributes to coming to know God in a way that can effect divine-human mutual recognition: First, “liturgy makes available act-types of a certain range such as chanting, kissing, prostrating, and eating that count in the context of a liturgical performance as cases of blessing, petitioning, and thanking God” (161). Second, “liturgy furnishes an array of conceptions of God and God’s activity under which to perform such actions” (161). Liturgy provides, then, a certain conception of God and God’s activity in the world, and *actions* and *objects* for engaging God under this conception. If “all goes well,” liturgical worship leads a person to engage God in ways that are fitting of God, that track who God is (162). Cuneo calls material objects of worship liturgical props. Liturgical props are ordinary materials that in the context of liturgy acquire a numinous quality, becoming vehicles of blessing, veneration, or petition. For instance, in the context of liturgy, water becomes a vehicle for blessing, and the wood out of which a crucifix is constructed becomes an object of veneration (161).

Clergy sexual abuse turns liturgical props and actions into spiritual weapons, which can furnish the person who engages them in the practice of worship with harmful images of and desires regarding God. Consider Ann Webb’s experience of being raped with a crucifix by a monsignor.<sup>17</sup> A crucifix depicts Jesus being crucified on the cross and is often constructed from wood or metal or some combination of these. Different religious environments may encourage different interpretations of the symbolic meaning of the crucifix. For instance, theologian Rita Nakashima Brock (1989) maintains that when the crucifixion is interpreted as atonement for our sins, this may be taken to convey a narrative of divinely ordained child abuse in which God demands the torture unto death of His only child in order to absolve the sins of humanity. If Webb internalized the crucifix as symbolizing divinely ordained child abuse, the monsignor’s use of a crucifix as an instrument of sexual violation reinforces the message that God, the ultimate source of value and life, sanctions abuse. When coupled with the Christian tendency to valorize suffering as a way to draw one closer to God, this primes the child with a spiritual character that makes her especially vulnerable to both sexual and spiritual violation—communicating that this form of suffering is the price to pay for knowing God or being accepted by God. The violence of the cross is extended to make the violence of rape spiritually significant. If, on the other hand, Webb’s religious context taught a meaning of the

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<sup>17</sup> The Christian symbology of the cross has varied historically. It was originally intended to represent the Resurrection rather than the Crucifixion, and veneration of the bloody, nail-pierced, crucified Christ, which became an “idealized icon of pathos and pain,” were not customary on church altars until the late fourteenth century (Frawley-O’Dea 2007, 40). Theologians debate the spiritual meaning and symbolism of the crucifix.

crucifix as signifying divine love and hope, the symbol is made spiritually ruinous by the Monsignor who uses it as an instrument of sexual violation teaching the child sexual violation as a model of divine love.<sup>18</sup> In Webb's experience, for example, the sexual abuse was delivered with soft, nurturing words and being special. This confused Webb, making it difficult for her as a child to recognize what was happening as abuse and reinforcing the idea that sexual violation is what divine affection *feels* like.

The spiritually violent impact of the abuse is even more extensive when we consider the centrality of the crucifix to Catholic worship and the centrality of worship to developing a relationship with God. If participating in worship partially constitutes relationship with God, then Webb's *experience* of God (and not just her beliefs about God) are threatened by the Monsignor's use of a crucifix as an instrument of sexual violence. The crucifix typically figures prominently on the altar of Catholic churches as a symbol to encourage the attitude of worship—awed, reverential, grateful adoration of God. The crucifix adorns the end of rosaries that people use in worship and personal devotion, and it functions as a central liturgical prop in the Good Friday rite during the Easter season, which is the holiest time of the liturgical year for Catholics. One can imagine Webb as a child praying her rosary, or at a Good Friday service, kissing the feet of the crucified Christ: kissing the sacred symbol that God's representative used to rape her. Kissing is one of the act-types Cuneo names, which in the context of liturgy becomes a vehicle for honoring God. If worship partially constitutes and is an *expression* of a person's relationship with God, this makes the child vulnerable to experiencing God as an abuser.

## 6. Religious Faith in the Unjust Meantime

Clergy sexual abuse can undermine faith in God in part because it turns worship into a religiously traumatic activity. When practices of worship and the actions and objects central to those practices become sources of religious trauma, then engaging in worship is unlikely to yield personal knowledge of a loving God and mutual human-divine rapport; it is more likely to yield quite the opposite. Survivors are vulnerable either to cultivating a troubled, toxic attitude of worship whereby God is experienced as hostile or abusive, and/or being incapacitated altogether from having an attitude of worship toward God because it becomes impossible to engage in the practices of worship that develop and sustain this attitude. And even when

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<sup>18</sup> Some theologians have demonstrated a potentially less violent or liberating theology of the cross (Wink 1998). Serene Jones (2009) examines how female victims of domestic violence have reimagined the imagery of the cross as a symbol of a God who understands the pain of unjust and unwarranted suffering and who desires that it be healed.

people are capable of distinguishing God from the human institutions and religious leaders who abused them, they may still be incapable of mutual divine-human rapport with God because their relationship to the practices of worship that foster and express this kind of relationship is irreparably damaged (Panchuk 2018).<sup>19</sup> This appears to be Kathleen Dwyer's experience. She laments that as a result of the abuse, her faith has been forever "broken, shattered, and bloodied" (Dwyer 2006, 42). For Dwyer, the religious trauma of clergy sexual abuse globally incapacitated her religious capacities for engaging God, resulting in a shattered faith and making rapport with God impossible. In her recovery, Dwyer speaks of recuperating some ability to connect with transcendent value, developing what she calls a "spirituality of justice" that connects her to an ideal of "humanity." But her capacity for religious faith was, by her own description, destroyed by the abuse.<sup>20</sup> Some survivors as a result of the abuse feel incapable of any form of spiritual engagement because the abuse has so fundamentally violated their capacity for trust in and vulnerability to something greater than the self (Gartner 2007, 95).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Panchuk argues that religious trauma gives people a justified reason to de-convert because in some cases the trauma so ruins their relationship to worship that they are globally incapacitated from participating in religious life, even if they retain a belief in God.

<sup>20</sup> Theologians have debated whether or not one's ability to respond to God can be irreparably destroyed by human acts, or whether God's grace is powerful enough to overcome the harm. See for example, Jennifer Beste's (2007) work on the spiritual impact of childhood incestuous abuse. For now, I want to leave open the possibility of spiritual death since from the perspective of at least some victims who underwent extremely horrific experiences of clergy sexual abuse, it is not clear that a relationship with God is any longer possible, or, more precisely, that access to that relationship is any longer possible. Furthermore, it may be more common that *religious* faith is destroyed but that spiritual death, when 'spiritual' is defined more broadly in terms of self-transcendence, is less common as a result of this form of violence. Still, some survivor testimony indicates that the abuse diminished their capacity for spiritual engagement of any kind, and not just their capacity for religious faith.

<sup>21</sup> Understanding precisely how spiritual violence inflicted through religious worship could disable a person from other nontheistic or nonreligious forms of spiritual engagement requires more argument than I can develop in this paper. This phenomenon raises questions about the fundamental human capacities: a person engages in spiritual experience that can but need not take religious form. Here it suffices to note that for some victims this does appear to happen.

Philosophers writing about the role of worship in religious faith do not consider experiences like Dwyer's, but they likely would say that the twisted, violating meanings of the terms of address Dwyer uses to speak to God do not fit God and are not true of God. They might say, then, that Dwyer does not come to know God through her participation in liturgy because the liturgical forms of address she uses have been tainted; they don't track what God is in fact like and so she comes to misunderstand who God is.<sup>22</sup> But this is where the communal, corporate aspects of religious faith become vital to appreciate. The religious meaning and significance of liturgical texts, objects, symbols, prayers, rituals, and roles are communally given and sustained and are learned and reinforced in the context of corporate worship.<sup>23</sup> These meanings often carry over to and are reinforced in personal devotion and individual prayer. Clergy sexual abuse, especially when the abuse is perpetrated against children, can cement a spiritually violent foundation for a person's relationship to the religious objects, texts, prayers, and rituals that a person engages in the activity of worship. If God is not a hostile abuser, how is a person to come to know this?

One possible avenue is to engage alternative interpretations of scripture and alternative worship practices that convey a conception of God and God's activity in the world as loving. But it may be enormously difficult, or even psychologically and spiritually impossible, for a person to engage scripture at all (or central prayers or worship objects and spaces) without being triggered and experiencing PTSD symptoms (Panchuk 2018). One survivor named Carolyn, speaking publicly just after

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<sup>22</sup> Wolterstorff might say that since the attitude of worship is defined as an attitude of adoring God *and being open to God adoring us*, then Dwyer does not *worship* God, since she is incapable of being open to God adoring her and instead develops a sense that God despises her. Her behavior mimics worship but is not genuine worship. The point still stands, though, that religiously traumatic spiritual violence (structural and interpersonal) disables her capacities for worship.

<sup>23</sup> Joshua Cockayne and David Eford (2018) argue that the corporate nature of worship is central to our knowing God better than we otherwise would know God through individual, personal worship because of how other people can improve our second-personal knowledge of others. For instance, we can gain deeper second-personal knowledge of a friend through the way other people interact with and experience that friend and the way the friend interacts with other people. Similarly, our second-personal knowledge of God can become deeper by witnessing how others interact with and experience God in corporate worship. This also makes us vulnerable, though, to other people poisoning our knowledge of God, especially when those people are religious leaders the community designates as God's special representatives who have privileged epistemic contact with God.



the release of the Pennsylvania grand jury report, shared that “whenever she hears the word ‘God’ [. . .] flashbacks of the abuse keep coming back. . . . The word ‘God’ makes me think of him” (Yan 2018). The most basic Christian term for addressing the divine is a traumatic trigger for this survivor.

I am not here claiming a necessary connection between *a particular set of liturgical practices* and a relationship with God. Nor is the claim that participating in liturgical worship is the only way a person can develop and express relationship with God. But if a person’s relationship to worship practices is tarnished because their relationship to liturgical prayers, liturgical actions, and liturgical objects and spaces is violated, this can make it difficult to cultivate an attitude of worship even in an alternative religious community with nonliturgical worship practices or outside of religiosity altogether. A person who cannot step foot in a church without getting nauseous or having a panic attack, or cannot hear the word “God” without flashbacks of the abuse, has a significant barrier to recovering their faith even in a different Christian tradition or new religious home and may be disabled from other nonreligious forms of spiritual engagement.

When people like Ann Webb do recover their faith in a new faith community, this indicates a new understanding of the divine and the person’s relationship to it, which demonstrates the centrality of worship to faith. A change in worship practice reflects a change in one’s conception of and relationship with the divine, for instance, whether a person conceptualizes the divine as a personal being, rather than a force or power. And the fact that, after twenty years of renouncing Catholicism and recovering in a different faith community, Webb can still be spiritually injured as a result of the actions of Catholic clergy suggests the extent to which damage to one’s religious capacities as a result of religiously traumatic spiritual violence is difficult fully to overcome.

I am also not claiming that survivors never recover faith within a Christian faith community. Some clergy sexual abuse survivors remain in the Catholic Church, although many also report that the abuse diminished their ability to participate fully in the sacraments or ritual life of the community. Debbie is not a survivor of interpersonal abuse, and so her experience is not analogous in important ways to Webb’s experience and Dwyer’s experience. When Debbie realized that she had spent her whole life to that point worshipping priests and missing out entirely on a relationship with God, the betrayal and anger she felt led her to leave the Catholic Church for a while. It did not poison her longing for faith in God, though, and she sought spiritual renewal initially in other theistic traditions and in Buddhism. She has since returned to worship in a Catholic community with a renewed faith forged through interpretations of scripture and worship practices that counter the spiritually demeaning views about women that were the cornerstone of her “faith” for sixty years.

## Conclusion

The primary goals of this paper have been to foreground the religious trauma suffered by survivors of clergy sexual abuse; to analyze clergy sexual abuse as gender-based spiritual violence in order to grasp its structural causes and appreciate its spiritual harms; and to show how this kind of spiritual violence is a serious threat to faith in God and spiritual thriving. For many clergy sexual abuse survivors, the Church has been a barrier, indeed *the* barrier, to faith. And for some, the abuse robbed them of their ability to develop the human capacity for spiritual engagement even outside of religiosity.

By drawing attention to a church structure of male dominance and entitlement, feminist methodology enables us to see the nuanced ways that clergy sexual abuse is gender-based violence in both its causes and its spiritual effects. This methodology also encourages theorizing from the experiences of survivors, and doing so generates a different set of research questions than the questions that occupy many philosophers interested in religious experience and the connection between worship and faith: how does one come to know and love God in the context of spiritual violence and its aftermath? What role can or does worship play when worship objects and rituals have been sources of spiritual violation and religious trauma? What dispositions and attitudes enable resistance to or healing from spiritual violence, or what attitude of worship might facilitate knowing and loving God in a spiritually violent environment? Is there a role for lament or righteous anger in such an attitude (Rea 2018)? Are their possibilities for liturgical worship to function as a form of protest?<sup>24</sup>

Finally, I also hope more feminist philosophers might find questions about religious experience and the spiritual dimensions of human life important to pursue. Many expressions of spiritual violence are forms of gender-based violence, and for many gender and sexual minorities, religious faith or spirituality is partially constitutive of their sense of flourishing, and it is a great loss when spiritual engagement seems forever tarnished, out of reach, or oppressive. I am one such person. Religious faith is central to my identity and sense of meaning and thriving, but I live this faith in the unjust meantime as someone who has experienced gender-based spiritual violence as a barrier to faith.

Early in my career as a philosopher, Alison Jaggar's scholarship and mentorship gave me the tools to recognize and articulate experiences of gender-based spiritual violence, the nature of which had been impossible to capture with philosophical approaches I had been introduced to up to that point. Drawing on

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<sup>24</sup> I thank Michelle Panchuk for raising this question, which she pursues in an unpublished manuscript.

feminist methodology did not necessarily rule out faith-based forms of identity; it provided resources to build and own a new religious faith and religious identity that I could inhabit with integrity, although always also with tension and sometimes contradiction. This tension is a gift because it prevents complacency about Christianity's role in gender-based violence and its complicity in gender injustice, in spite of its professed values and those arms of the Christian tradition that enact radically inclusive love and justice. Feminist methodology has equipped me to investigate philosophical questions that arise in the lived experience of religious faith in the unjust meantime, and to live the tension of this experience philosophically, by which I mean reflectively, critically, and creatively.

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