

The Harm Principle and Christian Belief

Adrian Thatcher

a.thatcher@exeter.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

The article addresses the question why Christians often fail to achieve even the minimum standard of secular morality. It isolates from a long list of failures the undermining and maltreatment of women and sexual minorities. It describes four types of violence – gender, epistemic, symbolic, and hermeneutic – they are made to endure. It then undertakes a theological and philosophical analysis of some of the causes of failure, locating them in i) the moral hazards of “divine command ethics”; ii) the promulgation of immoral doctrines; iii) the perils of “costly discipleship”; iv) the quest for certainty; and v) adherence to the scripture principle or *sola scriptura*.

KEYWORDS

Discipleship; euthyphro dilemma; gender violence; hermeneutics; sexual ethics; sola scriptura

Introduction

In 1859 John Stuart Mill formulated one, and only one, “very simple principle,” which was “to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion.”¹ That principle, he went on, is “self-protection [...] That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.” What became known as the “harm principle” still remains influential in non-religious ethics, in particular in law, politics, and medicine.

Aim

The aim of this paper is to establish that much Christian morality falls short of the harm principle and to inquire why. Christians of course have fuller, richer, more demanding and comprehensive principles which govern their doing and thinking, so this falling short is doubly perplexing. They think that God is Love (1 John 4:8, 17). They are to love their neighbours as themselves (Mark 12:31; Matt 22:39; Luke 10:27; Rom 13:9), to follow the Golden Rule (Matt 7:12), and even to love their enemies (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27, 35). Yet

¹ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1st published 1859]), 21-22.

Christian beliefs emphatically *do* coerce opinion, public and private, towards the infliction of intense harms, all on a global scale. How so?

Religion Hurts

Religion Hurts (the title of John Bowker's recent essay).² While his claim applies to all religions I will be concerned only with Christianity. Religion hurts, he explains, "*both* because it causes damage (in many senses) *and* also because it is costly and painful to its adherents when it is lived to the full: it can then become demanding and precious beyond price."³ This is "the paradox of religions."⁴ Damaging though his admission is, his second sense of "hurt" fails to acknowledge that some people's living religion "to the full" can cause immense stress and suffering to others and to themselves. It fails also to acknowledge that the "demanding-ness" of some beliefs coerces adherents into another kind of hurt, for example, the internalization of low self-esteem; the acceptance of impossible moral standards and requirements, leading to abjection and failure; the necessity of enduring pointless suffering; and *hubris* (once regarded as one of the seven deadly sins), the arrogance that accompanies the proclamation of certainties. Believers may well endure "cost" and "pain" believing it to be the will of God. But some of it might not be. Harmful beliefs harm believers as well as the Others who figure negatively and prominently within them.

Gender Violence

In this short essay I shall confine myself further, mainly to some of the harm in the realm of sexuality and gender. I have written elsewhere⁵ about the moral carnage inflicted by Christians, acting on cruel and savage readings of the Bible, on non-Christian others. The narratives of the "Mark of Cain" (Gen 4:15)⁶ and the "Curse of Ham" (Gen 9:18-27)⁷ provided authoritative support for the owning and trading of slaves, while lynching as a deterrent to non-compliant slave behaviour was justified on the basis of a single Bible

² John Bowker, *Religion Hurts: Why Religions Do Harm As Well As Good* (London: SPCK, 2018).

³ Bowker, *Religion Hurts*, 8.

⁴ Bowker, *Religion Hurts*, 8.

⁵ Adrian Thatcher, *The Savage Text: The Use and Abuse of the Bible* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

⁶ Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁷ David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 175-6; David M. Goldenberg, *Black and Slave: The Origins and History of the Curse of Ham* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017).

verse (1 Cor 5:13).⁸ The creation of *apartheid* followed from a Calvin-inspired doctrine of an “elect” people surrounded by “unelected” peoples in a doomed world.⁹ The persecution of Jews, culminating in the Shoah, cannot be disentangled from the sustained hate-speech of Martin Luther and his emphasis on *sola scriptura*, together with many proof-texts, culminating in one of the most distressing antisemitic works (*On the Jews and their Lies*) ever written.¹⁰ Whether it is the stigmatization of sick and disabled people,¹¹ (for example the identification of HIV and venereal diseases as divine punishments for sin),¹² the justification of genocide,¹³ the punishment of bastards,¹⁴ the “loving chastisement of children,”¹⁵ or the death of millions in the carnage of colonial conquests,¹⁶ Christian beliefs are disastrously implicated in untold harms across the centuries down to the present day.

Returning to gender violence, I begin with a symptom of a deep moral malaise: the exclusive and seemingly impermeable male priesthood in Catholic, Orthodox, and many Anglican and Protestant churches. It will soon become apparent that “violence” is an appropriate term for the so-called “reservation” of priesthood to men alone.¹⁷ That women still cannot be ordained throughout most of the worldwide Church is scandalous, a stark fact the implications of which extend far beyond the self-imposed restriction of the preaching of the Gospel, disintegration of congregations through pastoral scarcity, and “Eucharistic famine.” It signals that women are inferior because they are not part of the sex to which Jesus once belonged. This inferiority, and its

⁸ Kelly Brown Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do with It? Black Bodies / Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 3-4.

⁹ Moritz Gräper, *The Bible and Apartheid: Contested Interpretations in the History of Christianity in South Africa and Beyond* (Harrassowitz Verlag, 2019); J. A. Loubser, “Apartheid Theology: A Contextual Theology Gone Wrong,” *Journal of Church and State* 38.2 (1996): 321-338.

¹⁰ See e.g., essays in Dan Cohn-Sherbok (ed.), *Holocaust Theology: A Reader* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2015); Marvin A. Sweeney, *Reading the Hebrew Bible after the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

¹¹ Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2019); Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Towards a Liberation Theology of Disability* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1994).

¹² Christina Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern: Women’s Sexuality from the Progressive Era to World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹³ Eryl W. Davies, *The Immoral Bible: Approaches to Biblical Ethics* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010).

¹⁴ John Witte, Jr., *The Sins of the Fathers: The Law and Theology of Illegitimacy Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Katherine Covell and R. Brian Howe, *Children, Families and Violence – Challenges for Children’s Rights* (London & Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2009).

¹⁶ Raimundo Barreto and Roberto Sirvent, eds., *Decolonial Christianities: Latinx and Latin American Perspectives* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (“On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone”)(1994), para. 1. http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html.

endorsement by the Household Codes of the New Testament and many other passages of the Bible, has been consistently called out and exposed, yet with little hope of early success against the entrenched patriarchy of Catholic and Orthodox male gerontocracies. No wonder humanists ask *Does God Hate Women?*¹⁸

The recent, and perhaps ongoing, Covid-19 pandemic, has eclipsed a different pandemic, that of escalating worldwide violence against women.¹⁹ Indeed the Covid-19 pandemic has made the incidence of domestic violence still worse. Prior to the Novel Corona virus, gender violence had already “reached endemic levels in many countries and communities around the world, where sexual violence, family violence, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia have become a lived reality for many people.”²⁰ “Rape culture” is the apt name given to the global backgrounds that endorse gender violence, and the reading of sacred texts is a major factor in allowing rape cultures to maintain themselves unremarked and unnoticed. “Rape cultures create an environment in which gender violence can flourish; and the Bible – with its myriad traditions about gender violence and its endorsement of the patriarchal discourses that sanction such violence – plays an undeniable role in this process.”²¹

Epistemic Violence

Acts of physical violence, of course, have their antecedents, and not all acts of violence are physical. “Epistemic violence”²² assists rape culture in several ways. A term coined by Gayatri Spivak in 1998,²³ it is the name given to the effect that overarching structures of knowledge have upon particular minorities of people who challenge it.²⁴ That is why I have categorized the male priesthood as, ultimately, an act of violence against women. The biblical silencing of women in the churches (1 Tim 2:11) is an earlier example of it. Elsewhere Pierre Bourdieu has introduced the term “gentle violence,” a violence that masks the injuries it causes by passing itself off as entirely natural and, in the religious

¹⁸ See Ophelia Benson and Jeremy Stangroom, *Does God Hate Women?* (London & New York: Continuum, 2009).

¹⁹ See for example, Elaine Storkey, *Scars Across Humanity: Understanding and Overcoming Violence Against Women* (London: SPCK, 2015).

²⁰ Caroline Blyth, Emily Colgan, and Katie Edwards, eds., *Rape Culture, Gender Violence, and Religion: Biblical Perspectives* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

²¹ Blyth, Colgan, and Edwards, *Rape Culture*, 2.

²² See e.g., Neel Maitra, “Feminism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Methodology*, ed. Herman Cappelen, Tamar Szabó Gendler, and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 690-708.

²³ Gayatri Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 282-3.

²⁴ See Adrian Thatcher, *Gender and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

case, divinely ordained.²⁵ Another example is provided by the “two integrities” rule in the Church of England. This is a church which ordains women (and out gays who promise to remain “celibate” and remain unmarried) but requires them to work alongside “colleagues” who (to speak bluntly) believe their bodies, lacking a penis, are unfit for representing Christ, and are in danger of “tainting” and invalidating the entire handing down of apostolic succession by penis-endowed Christians laying their hands on each other.²⁶ This is “integrity.” The question is less about the harm done by the use of individual proof-texts from the Bible (which is considerable) and more about whether the single over-arching structure of religious doctrines and beliefs (such as the one offered in 1 Tim 2) is itself irredeemably violent. The seemingly endless discussions about whether homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and more recently the bodies of intersex and trans people can be incorporated, or licensed to appear, within these structures, postpone the deeper issue: whether the whole imaginary is a framework of “epistemic violence,” one which requires everyone to be like, or pretend to be like, its authors and proclaimers before they can be “in Christ” and experience for themselves God’s love and acceptance.

Symbolic Violence

An appropriate term to affix to systems of thought which are responsible for harming minorities is “symbolic violence.” “To speak of...symbolic violence is to say that, except in the case of a subversive revolt leading to inversion of the categories of perception and appreciation, the dominated tend to adopt the dominant point of view on themselves.”²⁷ The term is additionally appropriate in a Christian theological context because *symbolon* means “creed.” Beliefs form a system, and within that system women were once regarded as the Devil’s gateway,²⁸ imperfect and deficient bearers of the image of God,²⁹ inferior in every respect, helpers of men and bearers of men’s children, and for their own sake subordinate to men in everything. This is the system that in 1487 produced the *Malleus Maleficarum*,³⁰ one of the most misogynistic works ever written, and an influential contribution to the judicial killing of thousands of innocent women (in accordance with Exodus 22:18) believed to be witches. It is possible to modify one’s

²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, tr. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001 [original French edition 1998]), 1-2.

²⁶ Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, *The Five Guiding Principles: A Resource for Study*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2018).

²⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 119.

²⁸ Tertullian, *De Cultu Feminarum*, Book 1. Translated as *On the Apparel of Women*. See <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0402.htm>.

²⁹ See e.g., Aquinas, 11 *Sent.* 16. 1. 3, *sed contra*, ed. Mandonnet, vol. 2 (Lethielleux, Paris, 1929), 402. Cited in Lyndon Reynolds, “Bonaventure on Gender and Godlikeness,” *Downside Review* 106 (1988), 186.

³⁰ Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum* (Kessinger: 1st published 1487).

sense of disgust at works such as these by allowing for the influence of forgotten contexts, or for past permission granted to engage in polemical styles of writing which to us seems slanderous, and so on. What is harder to forgive is the continuation of these shocking prejudices, often in new more “gentle” forms, instead of honest acknowledgement and deep corporate repentance for them and their continued influence.

Feminist and womanist theologians have repeatedly drawn attention to gender and symbolic violence in the Bible, by for example, “trivializing the violence of rape and depicting females as property and female virginity as a commodity.”³¹ David Clines counted 500 terms for “violence” in the Hebrew Bible, over 10,000 incidences of violence, of which 1865 are ascribed to the deity.³² There is a particularly strange and repellent narrative in Numbers 5 (the *Sotah* – a wife suspected of adultery) which contributes indirectly to modern rape culture through its enduring influence, and directly to the misery of many thousands of Christian women through contemporary conservative interpretations of it. I have chosen Numbers 5 in particular because of the use still made of it in modern versions of religiously-sanctioned gender violence (see below). A husband only has to be “jealous of his wife” (Num 5:14, 29 NRSV) or to suspect her of adultery for the *Sotah* law to operate. The priest, in a Tabernacle ceremony, dishevels the woman’s hair, and mixes holy water with dust from the floor (“the water of bitterness that brings the curse” – Num 5:18). The wife is made to take an oath (Num 5:19, 22). The oath is written down on parchment; the ink washed off into the water; the wife is required to drink the water, “and the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain” (Num 5:24). The Lord, apparently, guarantees that if her husband’s suspicions are justified, “her body shall swell, and her thigh shall fall away, and the woman shall become an execration among her people” (Num 5:27).

The narrative has been extensively analysed, most recently by Johanna Stiebert, who exposes the violence that the narrative assumes, legitimizes, and enacts. The violence is not just physical, but “psychological and emotional,”³³ and it illustrates the epistemic and symbolic violence already referred to. As she says, “The biblical scholar’s role in highlighting and challenging the Bible’s problematic depictions of GBV [gender-

³¹ Most recently, Johanna Stiebert, “Brother, Sister, Rape: The Hebrew Bible and Popular Culture,” in Blyth, et.al., *Rape Culture*, 32.

³² David J. A. Clines, “The Ubiquitous Language of Violence in the Hebrew Bible” (Unpublished paper presented at the Joint Meeting of OTW, SOTS and OTSSA, Groningen, The Netherlands, 22 August 2018). No pagination.

https://www.academia.edu/37260426/The_Ubiquitous_Language_of_Violence_in_the_Hebrew_Bible. Cited in Johanna Stiebert, “Divinely Sanctioned Violence Against Women: Biblical Marriage and the Example of the *Sotah* of Numbers 5,” *The Bible and Critical Theory* 15.2 (2019), 88.

³³ Stiebert, “Divinely Sanctioned Violence Against Women,” 95.

based violence] and the ideologies that underpin them is therefore timely and urgent.”³⁴ I draw attention here to an example of the continuing use of this ghastly narrative to *reinforce* in the contemporary church the grovelling expectations that many earnest Christian men expect of their wives. Supported by a website, study guide and voted “World Book Magazine 2015 Book of the Year (Accessible Theology),” Sam Andreades revels in the clarity of his divinely-authorized misogyny. There are, he says, “Grand Asymmetries” (i.e., inequalities) between the sexes, and understanding these “opens up for us true womanliness and real manhood.”³⁵ Among other biblical sources, Andreades appeals to the *Sotah* to justify his life-denying view. The violence of the narrative is said to have a positive, limiting function. It “protect[s] a wife from abuse while upholding a husband’s limited authority over her.”³⁶ Women who have babies are “unclean” through original sin, he continues (Lev 12). They are unclean for twice the time if the baby is a girl. This is okay, according to Andreades, indeed just, because “the principle of masculine representation explains the meaning of this law.”³⁷ Oh. Liturgical and judicial violence against women is mandated by God (and Andreades) to protect women from even greater violence that unrestrained patriarchy might want to impose, whether or not she is guilty.

Hermeneutical Violence

Strong epistemic violence can still be found in mainstream theological works. Christian gay men are still described as *Bougres* (Cathars) deserving any persecution they receive,³⁸ or as pagans in their behaviour.³⁹ Conversion therapy and exorcisms are still practised despite the enormous damage they do, along with their total ineffectiveness. The influence of the gendered theologies of two theological “giants” of the 20th century, Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar, remains strong, yet their theologies of sexuality and gender are deeply discredited.⁴⁰ Sometimes biblical texts which do not appear to endorse any of the types of violence so far considered are appropriated for equally violent ends. A prime example is Genesis 1:27 (“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them”). Stephen Greenblatt has detailed *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve*,⁴¹ tracing the uses of the early

³⁴ Stiebert, “Divinely Sanctioned Violence Against Women,” 84.

³⁵ Sam A. Andreades, *enGendered: God’s Gift of Gender Difference in Relationship* (Wooster, OH: Weaver Book Company, 2015), 71.

³⁶ Andreades, *enGendered*, 98.

³⁷ Andreades, *enGendered*, 105.

³⁸ Patrick Riley, *Civilizing Sex: On Chastity and the Common Good*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

³⁹ Peter Jones, “Androgyny: The Pagan Sexual Ideal,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43.3 (2000): 443–469.

⁴⁰ For an account, see Thatcher, *Gender and Christian Ethics*, chapters 4 and 5.

⁴¹ Stephen Greenblatt, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017).

Genesis chapters over 2,500 years. Not until Augustine was the literal meaning of the narrative insisted on (his *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis* “opened the floodgates to a current of misogyny that swirled for centuries around the figure of the first woman”).⁴² But while the narrative in the modern period became a myth (albeit a positive one), Greenblatt could not have anticipated its further “rise” in the latter third of the 20th century in Christian theologies of sexuality. The churches, in report after report, have hijacked this text, to oppose same-sex marriage, to assert the modern (and inadequate) theory of complementarity;⁴³ to enforce compulsory heterosexuality; and insist that marriage *cannot* be extended to same-sex partners because the text confines marriage to partners of the so-called “opposite” sex. This is itself an act of wilful *hermeneutical* violence. It is violent hermeneutically because justifications for using the verse in this way prove impossible to establish,⁴⁴ and violent in contributing directly to characterizing homosexuality as a deviation from the divine will. It makes persecution, discrimination, and criminalization easier.

The doctrine of “complementarity,” based principally on this verse, is not fashioned as a contribution to gender equality but is now used as a reason for interfering in the lives of gay people now that use of the usual clobber texts has been completely discredited. The Vatican uses the text in its “war on gender,”⁴⁵ an assault which amounts to an elaborate calumny, an entire series of misrepresentations of intersex and trans people. As Monseigneur Krzysztof Olaf Charamsa has written (from a former insider’s point of view)⁴⁶ the Catholic Church “needs an enemy.” Once communism obliged. Or Protestantism. Or “gays and sexual minorities.” Now, he testifies, a complex of enemies is solidified, and “gender” is its name:

The Church fails to see real people, communities or movements. It identifies something without real knowledge of it; without awareness of the human and sexual identity and life of these people, who must remain invisible. They are viewed as an object upon which hate and fear can be projected, and which can be destroyed. “Gender” emerges as the slogan-name of a theoretical elaboration against which the Church can build its identity.⁴⁷

⁴² Greenblatt, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve*, 121.

⁴³ For a full history of the doctrine of complementarity and its many defects, see Thatcher, *Gender and Christian Ethics*, chapters 4—6. See also Adrian Thatcher, *Redeeming Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 101-112.

⁴⁴ Thatcher, *Gender and Christian Ethics*, chapter 6.

⁴⁵ David Paternotte, Mary Anne Case, and Sarah Bracke, “The Sin of Turning Away from Reality: An Interview with Father Krzysztof Charamsa,” *Religion and Gender* 6.2 (2016): 231.

⁴⁶ Charamsa is a former member of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and a former second secretary of the International Theological Commission. In 2015 he came out as gay and was immediately suspended. Anthony Faiola, “Not All Gay Catholics are Pleased About How Vatican Priest Came Out of the Closet,” *Washington Post* (11 November 2015) Retrieved 4 February 2021.

⁴⁷ Paternotte, et.al., “The Sin of Turning Away from Reality,” 227.

Neither ecumenical politeness nor academic deference (nor the reluctance of academic societies to court controversy or risk ecclesiastical displeasure)⁴⁸ must be allowed to inhibit the exposure of the war on gender.

The role of the *Sotah* in relation both to the building of the centuries-old edifice of prejudice against women, and to the maintenance of explicit structures of discrimination in contemporary churches, has just been described. It is a particular text set within a particular context. But sometimes apparently innocuous teachings have unexpected and deleterious consequences, and Christian teaching about marriage is an obvious example. Exploring domestic violence in Argentina and England, Rachel Starr identifies among the risk factors to women “dominant Christian teachings and practices around marriage.”⁴⁹ Christian traditions are mostly silent about domestic violence, she thinks, because ambiguous attitudes to the body and sex have led to a “spiritualization of marriage, the physical realities being pushed to one side,” and because of the widespread influence of the doctrine of headship.⁵⁰ One of the “three goods of marriage,” children, has been used to deny contraception and abortion to women, and to emphasise motherhood “as the natural vocation of women, and the means by which they are saved.”⁵¹ Covenantal models of marriage, popular in Protestantism and more recently in Catholicism, have a grave defect: “that the biblical covenant takes the form of a binding agreement between unequal partners, through which a set of obligations are imposed onto the weaker party.”⁵² While the idea of covenant, qualified by mutuality, *can*, she thinks, be positive for women, “covenantal models of marriage may need to be abandoned as intrinsically violent and inescapably hierarchical.”⁵³

Sacramental models of marriage, she continues, are no less dangerous. The idea of the “indissoluble bond” has made escape from domestic violence more difficult or impossible. She describes “how dominant sacrificial understandings of atonement function in situations of domestic violence,”⁵⁴ so that survival in such instances *is* salvation (“When Salvation is Survival” is her sub-title). Even “[T]he denial of violence is a form of violence in itself.”⁵⁵ There is a long list of deleterious consequences for women as a result of biblical teaching about e.g., Eve’s disobedience, the silencing of women in

⁴⁸ Stan Hawthorne, “Religion and Gender,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, Peter B. Clarke ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 134-150. Her criticism is towards Religious Studies.

⁴⁹ Rachel Starr, *Reimagining Theologies of Marriage in Contexts of Domestic Violence: When Salvation is Survival* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018), 2.

⁵⁰ Starr, *Reimagining Theologies of Marriage*, 41.

⁵¹ Starr, *Reimagining Theologies of Marriage*, 60.

⁵² Starr, *Reimagining Theologies of Marriage*, 73.

⁵³ Starr, *Reimagining Theologies of Marriage*, 82.

⁵⁴ Starr, *Reimagining Theologies of Marriage*, 126.

⁵⁵ Starr, *Reimagining Theologies of Marriage*, 128.

churches, the prevention of their leadership, their definition “as self-for-others and therefore suited to caring for others.”⁵⁶ The Church of England report *Responding Well to Domestic Abuse*⁵⁷ illustrates the veracity of Starr’s analysis. A short appendix to the report provides a table of “helpful” and “unhelpful” “applications” of problematic biblical texts,⁵⁸ yet fails completely to acknowledge or critique the theology that utilizes and endorses the gender inequality, male headship, and the enforcement of obedience, that is based on them. It illustrates the danger that marriage will be treated, say, as the sole context for sexual intercourse, or as an appropriate institution to be offered to same-sex couples, or not, and so on, without regard to its intensely problematic biblical and doctrinal foundations, and gendered inequalities. Such topics, important though they undoubtedly are, can distract attention from the ambiguous legacy of theologies of marriage and the reworking they require.

Why Religion Hurts

In this section I make five suggestions towards an explanation of Christian moral failure.

The Moral Hazards of “Divine Command Ethics”

“Divine command ethics” is the name given to a common set of assumptions: that Christian ethics is best characterised by obedience; that God wills what is best for all that God has made; and that God shows us what God wills. An early Greek conundrum, the Euthyphro dilemma, may help us see the flaw in this cosy *schema*. The dilemma, which originates in a question put by Socrates in Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*, is sometimes presented in its modern form by the question: “Are morally good acts willed by God because they are morally good, or are they morally good because they are willed by God?” There are different ways of thinking about the will of God which are represented in the dilemma itself. The first alternative, that morally good acts are willed by God because they are morally good, suggests the goodness of such acts is intrinsic to the acts themselves, and can generally be recognized and performed by agents whether or not they believe in God. The second alternative, that morally good acts are morally good because they are willed by God, suggests that God alone is the arbiter of what counts as a morally good act. This alternative has a consequence that if God alone can judge what is a morally good act, human judgment is irrelevant. This way of thinking

⁵⁶ Starr, *Reimagining Theologies of Marriage*, 143.

⁵⁷ Church of England, *Responding Well to Domestic Abuse: Policy and Practice Guidance* (London: Church House Publishing, 2017). Or online, <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/responding-well-to-domestic-abuse-formatted-master-copy-030317.pdf>.

⁵⁸ Church of England, *Responding Well to Domestic Abuse*, “Appendix 3: Theology,” 43-44.

about God leads to what is sometimes called the “problem of abhorrent commands.” Believers grant themselves a license to hold that God might require, for God’s inscrutable reasons, morally abhorrent acts such as rape, torture, genocide, and discrimination of every kind, leading them to suppose that they must obediently carry them out.

I suggest that something like this alternative view has in fact been held, and continues to be held, within the religions. According to the “divine command theory” of ethics (or at least some versions of it), what is morally good is what God commands. According to the first alternative, the knowledge of what God wills may be known, in the Christian case by means of various agreed sources – scripture, tradition, reason, experience, wisdom and conscience – and primarily the totality of God’s self-revelation in Christ. However, once a particular source (usually scripture) is selected, and then combined with particular ways of reading it (usually with little or no regard for other elements of disclosure such as reason or conscience), grave danger lurks, and abhorrent acts receive their justification. If an individual, a church or religious group, a nation, an empire, a ruling class, or a male élite can persuade itself that God commands them to do x, then compassion is “legitimately” suspended, and any human reservation based on solidarity with the victims of x if it exists) is stifled. If God wills hierarchical social structures, God surely authorizes punitive measures to maintain what God has willed. Given the ease with which humans act wrongly in order to preserve their self-interest and their power over others, the conviction that God commands them to act unjustly provides the ultimate self-justification for acting viciously in the guise of virtue. It doesn’t matter that the commands of God are cruel or malicious: what matters is God’s will, not ours. Since the commands of God are inscrutable, who are we to scrutinize them? Abhorrent commands may even be abhorrent by *our* standards, but who are we to judge the mind of God? God alone is the righteous Judge. God has the benefit of omnipotence and omniscience, so if the longer-term beneficent purposes of God extend beyond the myopic horizon of human calculation, then from horrendous evils good may surely come. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:8-9 KJV).

The Promulgation of Immoral Doctrines

The long history of colonialism, racism, antisemitism, *apartheid*, and slavery within Christian empires, makes better sense when belief in divine command is identified as a strand in its tawdry self-justification. Horrendous evils are tolerated, if not encouraged, because the divine will is inscrutable. When women are the Devil’s gateway, homosexual

men are sodomites, Jews are murderers of God, non-white persons are non-persons, and the unbaptized are sent to hell, it becomes necessary to examine the broader epistemological and metaphysical scheme—the *sumbolon*—which integrates these judgement-bearing epithets into a single framework of epistemic and symbolic violence.

The beginning of the scheme in the early chapters of Genesis is not encouraging. The ecocidal God who regrets having made a world and proceeds to destroy it, and everything in it (apart from the contents of an ark), by drowning, (Gen 6:6-8) may justly be feared but hardly worshipped or loved. The God who demands of a father the sacrifice of his son as a test of faith (Gen 19, the *aqedah* or “binding” of Isaac) is a child-killer, and represents himself as such to Abraham, part of whose faith is to consciously overlook the moral enormity of the character of the God who asks. But when, in Christian thought, the entire process whereby this Father-God becomes “at-one” with the fallen sinful world is effected by the *real* sacrifice of a son (the metaphysical Son), whose sacrifice is *necessary* to appease the wrath of this still angry God, doctrine descends into moral turpitude. Turning away from such a God becomes a moral imperative. But the scheme is nonsense, even on its own terms. God the child-abuser becomes God the masochist; the God who punishes God in an act of divine self-harm; and the just God who undermines any sense of justice in punishing the innocent in order to set the guilty free. But doctrines and narratives such as these, by their endorsement of *divine* violence, make horrendous evils more likely because they model what God “wills.” No matter that abhorrent commands are abhorrent: sometimes God does abhorrent things.

The Perils of “Costly Discipleship”

Christians for two millennia have learned that *The Cost of Discipleship*⁵⁹ sometimes has to be paid with their lives (like the author of the work of that name, Dietrich Bonhoeffer). Christians, along with people of every faith and none, have sometimes made costly decisions to, say, pursue careers in low-paid professions out of a sense of vocation, and so to “sacrifice” a higher pecuniary reward. But there is a gulf of misunderstanding between the demanding *voluntary* sacrifice Christians may make when they present themselves and their bodies “as a living sacrifice” to God (Rom 12:1), and the demanding but entirely *unnecessary* sacrifices that many Christians feel called to make because they have internalized unbalanced and abusive doctrines.

Flagellation, and the disciplining of the body by the wearing of hair shirts and so on, used to be practised (and still sometimes is) in an attempt to “subdue” the body and

⁵⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, Cheap Edition, 1964).

remind the soul of its perpetual discomfort in being temporarily attached to it. It belongs to living religion to the full (Bowker's phrase, above). The modern equivalent may be the torture of the soul (and the body) when gay Christians, internalizing Christian teaching about the sinfulness of same-sex love, catapult themselves into heterosexual marriages, or live a closeted double life, or declare they have "unwanted" same-sex attraction (the term itself, or SSA, is a conscious avoidance of the word "homosexual"), unwanted because God thinks it is an abomination. While voluntary celibacy has always been regarded highly in the Catholic tradition (more highly than marriage), involuntary celibacy becomes a requirement for gay people. This is a fifth type of violence associated with Christian sexual teachings – masochistic violence which instead of causing weals to the skin lashes the soul. The cognitive dissonance between the teachings on the one hand and self-knowledge and identity on the other, becomes also a spiritual dissonance between the desires of the heart and the desire for God. The intensity of the desire for obedience to the will of God becomes the ground for accepting demands that are impossible (even with the grace of God). Yet the failure may be less to do with the failure of grace than in the inability to see how grace is channelled, i.e., through the giving and receiving of love and through self-acceptance.

Melissa Fisher, a Christian with SSA, has composed a tortuous spiritual autobiography in which same-sex love is depicted as "the way of the monster."⁶⁰ She compares her condition and her need for healing with that of the leprous Naaman, the Syrian army commander (2 Kings 5).⁶¹ The book explains that, despite the intense emotional pain, God has cured her from the disease of SSA by restoring her to God's original design. She mocks critics of gay conversion therapy,⁶² even though it is useless, psychologically dangerous and banned in some countries, but it is clear from the book she knows no other theological framework than the one that her conservative upbringing has given her, and so, on a different reading of her experience, she has fallen prey to the epistemic and symbolic violence that the framework imprints deeply on her very being. It authorizes her suffering, anticipates and exults in it. Has anyone explained to her, and millions of people like her, that self-love and *not* self-sacrifice, is the precondition of being able to love at all, for how can anyone "love your neighbour as yourself" if "you" do not love yourself equally? Has anyone suggested that another way of interpreting the vicarious sacrifice of Christ on the cross is not that his followers should imitate his sufferings, but that in becoming a victim of terrible violence, he taught *A Way of Hope* (Fisher's title)? The way of hope is one which deals decisively with all the forms

⁶⁰ Melissa Fisher, *The Way of Hope: A Fresh Perspective on Sexual Identity, Same-Sex Marriage, and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 57.

⁶¹ Fisher, *The Way of Hope*, 151.

⁶² Fisher, *The Way of Hope*, 194.

of violence people inflict on each other and on themselves, by substituting instead love, justice and peace.

The sad story of Lizzie Lowe, the British teenager who committed suicide because she could not reconcile being Christian and gay,⁶³ is testimony to the lethality of Christian teaching when it is reproduced in the doctrine and practice of local churches in many denominations. “I have personally known at least three young people who have killed themselves for similar reasons,” writes a Church Times correspondent three years later, noting that the bishop who confirmed him killed himself a week later when the story of his having had sex with a rent boy became known.⁶⁴

Nadia Bolz-Weber was once the remarkable pastor of a Lutheran Church in Denver called the House for All Sinners and Saints. The congregation consisted of people who had been gravely harmed by standard, conservative sexual teachings, and whose lives had been marred by guilt, shame, and self-hatred: in short, deep unhappiness. As a Lutheran, Bolz-Weber is well aware of the old controversy whether salvation is secured by faith or by works (or both), and accuses evangelicalism of a new form of salvation by works, i.e., compliance with its impossible sexual teachings and theologies of the body. She seeks a new Christian ethic that is “based not on a standardized list of *thou shalt nots* but on concern for each other’s flourishing.”⁶⁵ She diagnoses “that many of us need a space where we can grieve lost or twisted sexuality [...] Let us grieve that we were not taught to love and respect the inherent dignity of our own human bodies. Grieve the decades we avoided sex when we could have been enjoying sex.”⁶⁶ Drawing on the image of Satan, the Accuser, in the Book of Job, she identifies the Accuser with “the crippling messages on repeat in our heads,”⁶⁷ that is, religiously induced shame.

The Quest for Certainty as the Nemesis of Faith

Analyses of “postmodern[ism],” usually identify particular troublesome features of it, such as “a lack of certainty about ethical foundations,”⁶⁸ a suspicion of overarching systems of thought, intellectual and moral complexity, lack of respect for traditional authorities, and so on. Within religions, a response to postmodernism is increasing

⁶³ “Death of Teenager ‘Struggling with Sexuality’ Prompts Soul-Searching” (*Church Times*, Jan. 9, 2015).

⁶⁴ Letters (*Church Times*, 29 June, 2018).

⁶⁵ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation* (London: Canterbury Press, 2019), 13.

⁶⁶ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 158.

⁶⁷ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 180.

⁶⁸ Reinhold Kramer, *Are We Postmodern Yet? And Were We Ever?* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 6.

extremism, or neo-fundamentalism: another, of course, is indifference, like the “nones”⁶⁹ in England, the majority who have “no religion” and who are often “alienated from the churches” by their very moral conservatism.⁷⁰ Within much conservative thought there is an attempt at evasion of many of the aporias that postmodernism brings. Yes, the conclusions of biblical criticism are seriously unsettling, so let’s adopt a new literalism which does not require attending to them. Yes, there is a disorientating complexity about all the issues the world faces, so let’s invent a soothing simplicity in order to feel better. Let’s pretend that we (and no-one else, especially if they are academics or liberals) have direct access to the meanings of ancient texts (aided by the Holy Spirit) and the intentions of their authors. Let’s bypass tradition and reason. They are optional at best. The “three-legged stool”⁷¹ may have only a single leg, but since that single leg is unbreakable we can place an enormous weight on it with full confidence and without losing our balance.

But one of the remaining attractions of faith is that it places itself against certainties. If it were certain, it would not be faith. Faith is the practice of living without the final answers we may crave. Faith enables us to say “We believe...” in the absence of certainties. Faith exposes all certainties as uncertainties, for there is nothing that is that does not also become, no belief-system that does not change, no empire that does not crash. Uncertainty is the precondition of faith. It is what makes faith possible. Faith requires hope to sustain it and love to practice it. These are the three “theological virtues” (i.e. not commands, not certainties, all requiring character rather than obedience). This side of eternity they, alone, “last for ever” (1 Cor 13:13).

The Sola Scriptura Principle

The *sola scriptura* principle lies at the root of Protestant Christianity. While it restores to the Bible its proper importance, it ultimately negates other sources of revelation. I have recently compared attitudes to sacred texts as they appear in Islam and Christianity.⁷² While there are close parallels there is a qualitative difference. In one faith the revelation is a book: in the other it is a Saviour, a Person, the Word made flesh. The *Qur’an* refers to Christians and Jews (and unknown Sabians) as “People of the Book,” and many Protestants (unaware of the term’s origin?) have been happy to apply the term to themselves. But Christians are not, and never have been, People of the Book. It is

⁶⁹ Linda Woodhead, “The Rise of ‘No Religion’ in Britain: The Emergence of a New Cultural Majority,” *Journal of the British Academy* 4 (2016): 245-61.

⁷⁰ Woodhead, “The Rise of ‘No Religion’ in Britain,” 256.

⁷¹ The term is regularly used of the trio of scripture, tradition, and reason as sources of revelation or theology.

⁷² Thatcher, *Gender and Christian Ethics*, chapter 10.

apparent that *sola scriptura* interpreters of the Bible have more in common with Islam than with Christian theologians who strive, like the New Testament writers themselves, to witness to God's incarnation in Christ.

When the witness to revelation (the Bible) usurps the revelation itself (God in Christ), all five types of violence (section 1) and the hurts they cause (section 2) become justifiable, perhaps inevitable. And this is probably true across the whole canvas of Christian ethics, not simply sexuality and gender. Gender violence is authorised by the Household Codes and allowed to over-ride profound yet contrary theological arguments such as Paul's in Galatians 3. The 10,000 incidences of violence in the Bible⁷³ provide the unrelenting back-story: belief in God and violence are inextricably linked. Epistemic violence impairs the self-understanding of all those required to submit to it, while those who promulgate it rest in their Euthyphro-like appeal to divine authority. Symbolic violence is inflicted, not merely as a total system requiring acceptance, but as the authorization of the Cross of Christ as a symbol of pain, loss and defeat, to be emulated. Hermeneutical violence is done to the biblical text by forcing it to become revelation instead of allowing it to point to the revealed One. And masochistic violence is required from all those who will not or cannot conform to the system. They must enjoy their suffering as best they can, "called," in the words of Cardinal Ratzinger (speaking of gays), "to enact the will of God in their lives by joining whatever sufferings and difficulties they experience in virtue of their condition to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross."⁷⁴

The "inflated Bible" is deeply implicated in all four of the hurts in this section. Because the biblical God is regularly and inexplicably violent, violence meted out in this God's name need not clash with scriptural discernment. Since immoral doctrines such as penal substitution and original sin are in the Bible (neither, of course, turn out to be biblical), any mitigation of divine cruelty by revising them can be assigned to "liberals" "watering down" "biblical truth." No feat of costly discipleship can ever be *too* costly, it will be said, "because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Pet 2.21).

None of the violence discussed in this paper is necessary. Perhaps a system that is so deeply complicit in producing it cannot be redeemed. But that system does not require to be understood, or read, or implemented, or handed on in violence-endorsing

⁷³ See Clines (above, p. 10 n.32).

⁷⁴ Cardinal Ratzinger, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1986), para. 12.
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html.

ways. It *can* be “re-visioned,”⁷⁵ or “re-imagined.”⁷⁶ More radically, it can be, or must be “queered.”⁷⁷ But until it is, the “good news” that gave rise to it cannot be served by it.

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⁷⁵ Margaret Farley’s *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006) is a fine example of the revisionary genre. The “framework” is fully Catholic, but the “lens” is God’s “just love.”

⁷⁶ Starr’s work on re-imagining marriage is a model of this kind of approach. Marriage is not rejected but re-imagined in the light of a more adequate reading of the Bible and doctrine which places God’s revelation of love and justice above the legalistic reading of texts.

⁷⁷ See for example, Chris Greenough’s *Queer Theologies: The Basics* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019).

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