

**UNCHRISTIAN**  
**How Trauma and Abuse are Normalized in the Western Christian Church**

**by**  
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**A Thesis Submitted to the Theology & Culture Department**  
**St. Stephen's University, St. Stephen, New Brunswick**  
**in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for**  
**the Degree of Master of Ministry**

**May, 2024, St. Stephen, New Brunswick**

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**ABSTRACT**

The Western Christian Church is unwell. What passes for “normal” shows every evidence of trauma and abuse, damaging how people experience God, themselves, and others. Rather than dismantle individual theologies and practices of specific religious communities, this thesis will demonstrate the *causes and effects* of normalized trauma in the Western Church writ large using relational practical theology with trauma-informed psychology. The problem of acculturated trauma will be laid bare through explorations of ontology, attachment theory, nervous system responses, and the nature of abusive power. In short, any faith paradigm that produces chronic dysregulation, disembodiment and disconnection is unworthy of God, antithetical to the nature of Jesus and is demonstrably “unchristian.” It is time for a radical reorientation in the Western Church towards a new normal that follows the *way* of Jesus, built on a relational foundation that bears the fruit of secure attachment, embodiment, accountability and repair.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge the traditional, ancestral, unceded territories of the S'ólh Téméxw (Stó:lō), Semiahmoo, Kwantlen, and the Cayuse, Umatilla and Walla Walla peoples. I am indebted for the privilege of living, learning, and bringing this academic work to life as a settler here.

To Josh, my partner and love, and the rest of Team Loewen: Morgan, Brennan, Nathan, Tyson, and Keaton. Together with you is my favourite place to be. Nobody is funnier, more kind, or more supportive. You have my whole heart and there is not a day I don't wake up knowing that I am the luckiest human alive to have you all in my life. I love you.

Mom and Dad, and the rest of the Strahl bunch. So many good things in my life begin with you. I have never been unloved. Wherever we go, I want to sit at your table and misbehave with you. Love you all so much! To Dad and Mom Loewen et al. Thank you for being the local support team - the meals, the help, the timeshare points...how fortunate am I to have married into such supportive care!

It took a village to raise this thesis. If you held space and endured my verbal processing at any point in my writing process, you are included here too! To my never-miss-a-day friends: Anna, Melissa, Nichole, Romay, Shawna, and Tabitha (thanks for being my head editor too, Boo!) Thank you for holding both the ecstasy and despondancy of the writing process. Thank you for the Marco Polos, coffees, texts, chapter feedback and resource recommendations. And to the too-many-to-be-named who continued to check in and see that I still had a pulse—Thank you. I love you all. Above all, thank you friends for blessing me with the ministry of GIFs at just the right time. You are the very best there is.

To Loraine, my supervisor. Thank you for your authenticity. Thank you for telling me that I had something to contribute and that its okay to make the right people uncomfortable to make it happen.

To Leah and Emma, the healers who helped me find my way back to myself as I processed my trauma in the midst of every. damn. chapter. I'm so grateful.

To the faculty, staff, and cohort members at SSU, thank you. Brad, I'm grateful for your "yes." Walter, thanks for fielding questions and convincing my neurodivergent brain it could write a thesis.

To the young adults and others I pastored for too short a time. Every story, every laugh, every song, every snack and every tear we shared were precious gifts.

To Rev. René August and Lisa Sharon Harper. Nothing has transformed my perspective more than Freedom Road's *How to Decolonize the Bible* courses. You disrupted my life in the best way by teaching me to look for the way, the nature and the movement of power. This thesis would not exist without your influence. I'm forever grateful.

Finally, to the victim-survivors of religious trauma. This thesis is for you. I believe your wounds and even more, I believe in your healing.

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## INTRODUCTION

I was the darling of Sunday School. A sword drill winner, a memory verse champion, and a youth musical superstar.<sup>1</sup> A virgin bride, I married my first and only boyfriend at 18, then came five neatly pressed and well-behaved children.<sup>2</sup> I was a chronic volunteer, worship team member, casserole maker, women's bible study-er, and more. There were few corners of the Church where I didn't give my time, energy, and earnest devotion in service to God and others. From an early age, I devoted my life to being a servant and apostle of Jesus. I sincerely believed in the beauty and possibility of the Church.

But over time, the varnish of the happy-clappy exterior began to fade. Trouble was brewing underneath. My heart was tallying faith-inflicted wounds—traumatic experiences from the doctrine, dogma and systems endemic in the Western Church. Undaunted, I took the blame, doubled down, and worked harder to get it right. Over and again, I told myself and others, “This place could be beautiful, right? This place could be beautiful.”<sup>3</sup> Eventually, I spoke out. I quickly discovered that it's challenging to disrupt whatever the religious community deems to be normal, non-negotiable, and necessary, even if it isn't working well or causes harm. Needless to say, I was shown the door. Once an apologist, now an apostate. In my distress, I wondered - is it me? Or is there a deeper sickness in the heart of the Western Church?

This thesis will examine the *causes and effects* of theological and relational trauma and abuse in Western Christian culture. Like Jesus in Mark 11, religious trauma survivors are “cursing the fig tree” of normalized trauma within it. It promises sustenance and life at a distance but bears no fruit up close. *The Western Church is an entire empire with no clothes*. The truth is, for all the certainty and consolations the system offers, many are incurring deep moral injury and genuine trauma at the hands of this empire, revealing its barrenness with alarming clarity. As will be shown over and over—religious trauma is real trauma. Its victims deserve repair, and perpetrators and bystanders of religious trauma and abuse must be held accountable.

In the past, much of the research around spiritual abuse and religious trauma was limited to exploring the harm of physical or sexual abuse perpetrated within the context of a religious environment or lauding the benefits of religion to help mitigate trauma perpetrated elsewhere. However, as awareness of religious trauma and spiritual abuse grows, more avenues of study are being conducted. Marlene Winell was a pioneering voice in the field of religious trauma, naming the abusive impacts of culture and indoctrination in fundamentalist cultures. More recently, authors and

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<sup>1</sup> Just giving a shout out to all my church musical superstars. The 80s were really something, weren't they?

<sup>2</sup> In theory, anyway.

<sup>3</sup> Maggie Smith, *Good Bones* (North Adams, MA: Tupelo Press, 2017), 47.



researchers like Laura Anderson, Hillary McBride, and Michelle Panchuk are expanding the field, looking at the abusive and traumatizing impacts of beliefs, systems, and cultural practices within the Church. This thesis is intended to be included among these bellwether voices, calling not just for better-behaved people but better systems altogether.

This thesis is interdisciplinary. Each chapter will add another strand woven together using relational practical theology with trauma-informed psychology. Together, it will illuminate the normalization of abusive power and validate religious trauma experiences. Taking a victim-centred and accessible approach, highly technical language will most frequently be found in the footnotes and used only when necessary.<sup>4</sup> Theology belongs to all of us.

This thesis uses a narrative approach and critically analyzes the *impact* of religious doctrines, dogma, and practices from a feminist perspective. As such, I will begin by locating myself in this research. I am a fourth-generation settler in Canada. As a white woman without visible disabilities, I have been afforded countless privileges and opportunities due to my race and economic status. As a female, I have experienced the sexism, misogyny and patriarchal limits that are generally part and parcel of life in the Western Church. Though I use a Western psychological and theological approach, whenever possible, I have centred the work of marginalized and minoritized voices within those fields to help mitigate power and privilege.<sup>5</sup>

My writing is influenced by those who may not be considered theologians in the traditional sense. However, this work is deeply theological. Our bodies are the locus of our theology, omnipresent to our life experiences and how we experience the Divine. For this reason, and in this writing, the body should also be considered to be *made in God's (omnipresent) image*. The body is a fastidious and persistent truth-teller of how the world, our internalized beliefs, and experiences affect us.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, this work will show that our incarnational experiences must be a primary interpretive and formative tool of our theology and community formation.

Staci Haines states, "The body is an essential place of change, learning and transformation."<sup>7</sup> To offer embodied personal transformation that leads to systemic change, I close each chapter with

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<sup>4</sup> In *Repentance and Repair*, Danya Ruttenberg says "I also periodically cite people who comment on social media; I mean, this is the place where people write, think, share, and say wise and true things here in the twenty-first century. Many of the most insightful folks around offer thoughts online in addition to, or instead of publishing in conventional venues. This too—as the rabbis of the Talmud were wont to say about less traditional sources of wisdom—is Torah." I have limited myself to using social media quotes sparingly, and only from verified authors. I believe that theology belongs to all of us, and accessibility to information through social media, though complex, is generally positive. Danya Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2023), 19.

<sup>5</sup> I recognize that dismantling and divesting from power and privilege is an ongoing unfinished work.

<sup>6</sup> Hillary L. McBride, *The Wisdom of Your Body: Finding Healing, Wholeness, and Connection through Embodied Living* (Toronto, ON: Collins, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Staci Haines, *The Politics of Trauma: Somatics, Healing, and Social Justice* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2019), 20.

an embodied practice, creating opportunities for experiential engagement with the ideas presented. Invitations to self-locate and increase somatic awareness will be intertwined in this writing to help disrupt what has become normalized. As Gabor Maté poignantly writes, "If what's normal is assumed to be natural, the norm will endure. On the other hand, when suspicions emerge that the way things are may not be how they're meant to be? Well...the quo may not be status for long."<sup>8</sup>

Because this work brings so many concepts into conversation with one another, there will be many key contributors. Maté's most recent tome, *The Myth of Normal*,<sup>9</sup> and Staci Haines's *The Politics of Trauma*<sup>10</sup> are essential to the general scope of this project because they address and identify the challenges of acculturated trauma, both personally and systemically. Hillary McBride's work, *The Wisdom of Your Body*,<sup>11</sup> her podcast series, *Holy/Hurt*,<sup>12</sup> and Laura Anderson's *When Religion Hurts You*<sup>13</sup> will also frequently be referred to as they highlight the impact of religious beliefs and systems on the body and give a rationale as to why this realm of religious trauma is both relational and complex.

The first chapter levels the playing field by defining overall terms and concepts important for the scope and sequence of the project. "Definitions anchor us in principles. This is not a light point: If we don't do the basic work of defining the kind of people we want to be in language that is stable and consistent, we can't work toward stable, consistent goals."<sup>14</sup>

Building on the common terminology of chapter one, the next chapter uses Brent Slife's work on abstractionism and relationality to understand the philosophical underpinnings of Western Society.<sup>15</sup> Engaging with the realm of philosophical psychology helps define the context and setting in which traumatic and abusive patterns are normalized in the Church. Religious systems rooted in an abstractionist ontology are fertile breeding grounds for traumatizing beliefs and practices. In light of this, I offer an assessment lens to help expose abusive and traumatizing acculturated ideologies.

Chapter three gives special attention to exploring attachment theory and the nervous system, showing how disrupted and unresolved relational disconnection has a traumatic impact on the body and psyches of people and systems. Building on this information, chapter four demonstrates how

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<sup>8</sup> Maté Gabor and Maté Daniel, *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness and Healing in a Toxic Culture* (Toronto, ON: Knopf Canada, 2022), 122.

<sup>9</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*.

<sup>10</sup> Haines, *Politics of Trauma*.

<sup>11</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*.

<sup>12</sup> McBride, "A Podcast Exploring Spiritual Trauma and Healing," *Holy/Hurt Podcast*, September 21, 2023, <https://holyhurtpodcast.com/>.

<sup>13</sup> Laura E. Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You: Healing from Religious Trauma and the Impact of High-Control Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York, NY: One World, 2019), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Brent D. Slife and Eric A. Ghelfi, "A New Wave of Thinking in Psychology: Relationality versus Abstractionism," *Re-Envisioning Theoretical Psychology*, 2019, 239–71, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16762-2\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16762-2_10), 240–241.

deep and wide the impact of acculturated trauma is in the Western Church—theology, culture, and systems included.

Chapter five focuses on the relationship between power and trauma and how it contributes to normalizing religious abuse. It uses Martin Luther King Jr's work, *Where Do We Go From Here*,<sup>16</sup> along with insight from Michelle Kim and Michelle Panchuk. Together, they illuminate the nature and role of abusive power in Western Christianity.

In the final chapter, highlighting the work of J.S. Park and Danya Ruttenberg, I summarize the material covered and offer a final appeal to those who remain in the Western Church. Next, I imagine what a trauma-informed, power-aware religious community might look like, concluding with a reparative practice that honours the lived experience and multilayered grief of religious trauma survivors.

Trauma and abuse have become insidiously intertwined in the fabric of the Western Church. It has conflated tradition with truth, normalized harm and called it good. To heal, the Church must walk the path of repentance, relinquishing power and control while embracing accountability and victim-centred repair. The power-emptying path is contextual and complex, much like Jesus' invitation to "love one another" is contextual and complex. The Western Church must deliberately embody new ways of being fully and divinely human together. This transformation must produce mutually life-giving outcomes, leaving behind the death-dealing and damaging paradigms disguised as virtue.

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2010).

## CHAPTER 1 - READING THE FINE PRINT

*“When I criticize a system, they think I criticize them  
and that is of course because they fully accept the system  
and identify themselves with it.”<sup>17</sup>*

When I am critiquing the Western Christian Church<sup>18</sup>, it is in the same spirit that Martin Luther King Jr. critiqued America. “I criticize America because I love her. I want her to stand as a moral example to the world.”<sup>19</sup> This thesis does not take gleeful pot-shots at the Western world's most prevalent and influential religious ideologies and communities. Instead, it is the result of intensive research, interacting with and understanding my own heartbreak and trauma with an institution that promised to be so good and yet, in the end, proved to be a source of harm that seemed unwilling to enter into meaningful repair. It is an attempt to bring clarity for victim-survivors of religious trauma by exposing beliefs and behaviours that are *fundamentally toxic but considered good* within religious cultures.

Throughout this work, many comprehensive ideas are brought into conversation with each other. This chapter gives some common language, definitions, and understandings to hold them together. I will define who I am speaking to/about: the Western Christian Church. Then, I will define some key terms and concepts such as “normalization,” trauma, religious trauma, rupture and repair. I will also share key theological concepts that inform and influence the content of the following chapters.

Additionally, this work makes the case for a radical approach to addressing the harms that concepts like “orthodoxy” and “orthopraxy” have caused. Like many Western systems and strongholds of power, the Western Christian Church is sick. It baptizes and normalizes toxicity buried in doctrines, practices and culture. This normalization creates cognitive dissonance, providing belonging for some at the expense of others. Systems of normalized trauma and abuse are, at their core, anti-Christ. The church must take this accusation as seriously as it sounds.

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York, NY: Image Books, 1968).

<sup>18</sup> The following terms will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis: Western Christian Church, Western Christianity, or the Church.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Luther King and Peter Holloran, *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr* (Boston, MA: Grand Central Publishing, 2001), 89.

## What's In a Name

This thesis identifies normalized toxic paradigms peppered throughout various expressions of Western Christianity.<sup>20</sup> Religious trauma researchers refer to traumatizing “religious containers” in multiple ways. Some catch-all descriptors include High Control Religion, High Demand Religion, Fundamentalism, and more. However, as this paper is taking a broader and more systemic view of religious trauma, it will generally reference the broader category of Western Christianity. A caution arises: as awareness of religious trauma grows, the movement to see it as another group’s problem also seems to expand. I invite all who have participated in or benefited from affiliation with any paradigm of Western Christianity to ask, “*How might this be true of me and my community?*” rather than assuming it is referencing some other group “out there.” Some anecdotes presented here specifically reference Evangelicalism/Evangelicals because it is particular to my experience.

## Normalized vs. Normal

“Normalized” is an awkward but helpful conjugation and verbing of the word “normal.”<sup>21</sup> Normalization may be positive or negative, and it can happen in any context, from within a person, a culture, or a global experience. One doesn’t have to look far to remember how a global pandemic in 2020 disrupted “normal.” New ways of interacting and relating were quickly “normalized.” *Normalization is an adaptive process that happens over time when the customs, mores, traditions or practices are so regular, and the meanings become so socially accepted that they eventually occur without much thought or interrogation.* In Japan, for example, wearing masks in public places had been normalized for years. But in other parts of the world, mask-wearing was utterly abnormal. Disrupting the usual way of things is often met with resistance and protest, even if the new way is for the benefit of humankind.

In this thesis, normalization is a central concept and will generally be applied negatively. Many things in Western Christian cultures are abnormal or harm-inducing but normalized to the point where the adverse effects are glossed over or even sought after, disconnected from the harm they cause. The primary purpose of this thesis is to name, disrupt, and expose trauma and abuse that have been normalized and are demonstrably “*unchristian.*”

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<sup>20</sup> When I say the Western Christian church, I am referring to the entire cultural spectrum including Evangelicals, Progressives, High-Church, Non-Demoninational etc. That is to say, most expressions of Christianity in North America have their histories rooted in Eurocentric patriarchal systems, perspectives and ideologies that have been normalized within it. Anyone —those socialized as men or women, white people or people of colour, straight people or queer persons—anyone can internalize and embody this toxic system when it is all they know.

<sup>21</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 6.

“Normatively laden”<sup>22</sup> concepts are deeply embedded in religious cultures. This normalization can contribute directly to religious trauma and spiritual violence. Michelle Panchuk notes that although most religious cultures claim they are receiving their spiritual imperatives “as taken ‘directly’ from some divine revelation with no influence from secular culture or personal bias, in reality these concepts develop within the religious communities over time and change as they are influenced by both social and religious forces.”<sup>23</sup> As chapter two will show, Christian culture is very much a product of Western culture. The world we live in has many normalized ways of being that, at minimum, don’t serve us well and, at most, are expressions of chronic trauma. Naming how things are normalized helps us “notice them in action, see the polluted water we have been swimming in, and craft a new set of ideas that help us move forward.”<sup>24</sup>

If the abnormal can become normalized, it raises the question—how do we know what is normal? For this paper, the plumline for what is “normal” is simply *embodied and interconnected relationships and systems that function, flourish, and can depend on repair, bearing the hallmarks of life for all*.

## **Trauma, Trauma Everywhere**

Trauma is the result of any experience—physical, emotional, spiritual, or mental—that overwhelms the capacity of one’s emotions, body, and brain; impairing one’s ability to reestablish internal or external safety. According to Bessel van der Kolk, *anytime* the body perceives it is in danger and is not safe, the potential for trauma is present.<sup>25</sup> Maté puts it succinctly when he writes, “Trauma is not what happens to you, it is what happens inside of you as a result of what happened to you.”<sup>26</sup> Resmaa Menakem notes, “It can be a response to *anything* that is experienced as too much, too soon, or too fast.”<sup>27</sup> “Trauma is... the body’s protective response to an event.”<sup>28</sup> Hillary McBride adds, “Trauma responses are unique to each of us—what is benign to one can feel overwhelming to another.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Michelle Panchuk, “Distorting Concepts, Obscured Experiences: Hermeneutical Injustice in Religious Trauma and Spiritual Violence,” *Hypatia* 35, no. 4 (2020): 607–25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2020.32>, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Panchuk, “Distorting Concepts,” 4.

<sup>24</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> “One does not have to be a combat soldier, or visit a refugee camp in Syria or the Congo to encounter trauma. Trauma happens to us, our friends, our families, our neighbours.” Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2015), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 20.

<sup>27</sup> Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 14.

<sup>28</sup> Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 7. It’s important to note that even if it is “imaginary” the internal wound is real and needs care in order to heal.

<sup>29</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 51.

Stress and trauma are related, though not the same thing. “The stress response is good. We need it for survival!”<sup>30</sup> Like trauma, stress is a subjective, inner response to strain, tension, or difficulty. A stressor, like trauma, begins with nervous system activation. However, if you maintain a sense of control and can complete the stress cycle, it generally will not cause trauma and may even result in a meaningful experience.<sup>31</sup> When completing the cycle is impossible, or we feel alone or powerless in the experience, any stressful event may become a traumatic experience.<sup>32</sup>

## It’s Complex

Trauma may include everything from single, “capital-*T*” traumatic events<sup>33</sup> to “small-*t*”<sup>34</sup> trauma that comes from “long-term exposure to traumatic stress”<sup>35</sup> or the chronic experiences of *not having* essential emotional, physical, or relational needs met. “Trauma is a foundational layer of experience in modern life, but one largely ignored or misapprehended,”<sup>36</sup> Maté writes. As relational creatures that make *meaning and associations*<sup>37</sup> to interpret our experiences, we will likely accumulate complex “small-*t*”<sup>38</sup> traumatic experiences that shape us. “The threats we experience most often happen between us and others.”<sup>39</sup>

As Anderson states, “Religious Trauma is trauma.”<sup>40</sup> This paper is responding to the growing research related to the often ambiguous, repeated, and harmful experiences of complex trauma within

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<sup>30</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 59.

<sup>31</sup> McBride talks about how the body may be stressed when training for a marathon, but if it was something you wanted to do, it would be interpreted as a positive event. She contrasts that to being forced to run the same marathon against your will. This experience could be internalized as a traumatic experience. McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 59.

<sup>32</sup> Traumatization is not an indication of moral or mental weakness. No one chooses to be traumatized by an event, nor do they have a choice over their embodied response to it. When someone experiences trauma, their body and inner world deserve care and a compassionate witness. The traumatized person is not fundamentally broken, though trauma often feels that way.

<sup>33</sup> Capital-*T* trauma includes things like catastrophic accidents, incidents of violence, war, life-threatening weather events, physical abuse - events that can be identified as having caused an inner injury in the wake of the event. Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 22.

<sup>34</sup> small-*t* trauma is the type Maté refers to as being almost universal. It can be from chronic relational disruptions, bullying, lack of emotional connection, or the *absence* of good things that should have happened. Like capital-*T*, they create inner experiences of disconnection that Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 23. Small-*t* also can be synonymous with complex trauma, or C-PTSD.

<sup>35</sup> Arielle Schwartz, *The Complex PTSD Workbook: A Mind-Body Approach to Regaining Emotional Control & Becoming Whole*. (London, UK: Sheldon Press, 2016), 16.

<sup>36</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 10.

<sup>37</sup> Hillary L. McBride, “Holy/Hurt Podcast Episode 1: The House Is Haunted,” Holy/Hurt Podcast, August 2, 2023, <https://holyhurtpodcast.com/ep-01-the-house-is-haunted/>.

<sup>38</sup> “Small” is in no way meant to indicate that trauma from layered experiences of neglect or ambiguous harm are “lesser” or smaller the capital-*t* in terms of impact. As Maté says, “in real life the lines are fluid, are not easily drawn, and should not be rigidly maintained.” Maté, *Myth of Normal*: 23.

<sup>39</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 60.

<sup>40</sup> Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 31.

religious environments.<sup>41</sup> Religious trauma can result in complex trauma.<sup>42</sup> Experiences that contribute to complex trauma “may seem less significant, even part of everyday life, but when they happen frequently enough, they can affect our emotional and nervous systems even more significantly than capital-*T* traumas.”<sup>43</sup> Spiritual trauma may also impact and affect every and any area of life: physical, mental, emotional and so on.<sup>44</sup>

It bears repeating: so long as one sees trauma as something that happens to “other people” or in “other places,” so long as people resist exploring their own inner landscape or questioning the systems and structures of their institutions, they run the risk of not offering or receiving the healing and repair needed. Or, perhaps worse—they resist transformation and mindlessly continue to participate in or perpetuate systems of harm. Victim-survivors<sup>45</sup> of religious trauma know the Church can and has caused damage, whether the Church acknowledges it or not.<sup>46</sup>

The reader will continually be asked to see patterns of normalized trauma expressed individually, culturally, and systemically. Throughout, I will extend the invitation to befriend the traumatized body and believe the pain and conditioned responses are worthy of care.

## It’s Historical

The growing body of research around epigenetics,<sup>47</sup> generational,<sup>48</sup> and historical<sup>49</sup> trauma suggests that *even if it were* possible for a person to have never experienced or internalized any type of relational trauma, they are likely being impacted and influenced by the unhealed narratives and

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<sup>41</sup> Anderson, *When Religious Hurts You*, 31.

<sup>42</sup> “...complex PTSD, C-PTSD...occurs as a result of long-term exposure to traumatic stress, rather than in response to a single incident. C-PTSD typically arises as a result of ongoing stress or repeated traumatic events that occur during childhood...Growing up afraid has ramifications on cognitive, emotional, and physical development that can persist into adulthood...C-PTSD is not a character weakness, it is a learned stress disorder.” Schwartz, *The Complex PTSD Workbook*, 16.

<sup>43</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 59-60.

<sup>44</sup> McBride, “Holy/Hurt Podcast Episode 1.” Because the body doesn’t differentiate between types of trauma and abuse, I will be using the descriptors “religious” and “spiritual” interchangeably.

<sup>45</sup> I primarily use the term victim-survivors, though at times will defer to one term or the other. The hyphenated label is meant to hold two truths: the harm the victims have experienced is real, they are actually victims; at the same time, they have capacity to grow and heal and overcome the injustices they’ve incurred. They are also survivors.

<sup>46</sup> Because of the general assumptions of safety, trust and lowered defences that go along with church and those who lead/attend/participate, there is greater opportunity to harm.

<sup>47</sup> Epigenetics is the study of how your behaviors and environment can cause changes that affect the way your genes work. Unlike genetic changes, epigenetic changes are reversible and do not change your DNA sequence, but they can change how your body reads a DNA sequence. “What Is Epigenetics?,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, August 15, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/genomics/disease/epigenetics.htm>.

<sup>48</sup> Generational trauma, also known as intergenerational or transgenerational trauma, is a cycle of trauma that passes through families. Claire Gillespie, “Generational Trauma Might Explain Your Anxiety and Depression,” Health, accessed May 1, 2024, <https://www.health.com/condition/ptsd/generational-trauma>.

<sup>49</sup> Historical trauma is multigenerational trauma experienced by a specific cultural, racial or ethnic group. It is related to major events that oppressed a particular group of people because of their status as oppressed, such as slavery, the Holocaust, forced migration, and the violent colonization of Native Americans. “What Is Historical Trauma,” Administration for Children & Families, accessed May 1, 2024, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/trauma-toolkit/trauma-concept>.



behavioural adaptations silently handed down from generations past.<sup>50</sup> In his book *My Grandmother's Hands*, Resmaa Menakem states,

Historical trauma, intergenerational trauma, institutionalized trauma (such as white-body supremacy, gender discrimination, sexual orientation discrimination, etc.), and personal trauma (including any trauma we inherit from our families genetically, or through the way they treat us, or both) often interact. As these traumas compound each other, or as each new or recent traumatic experience triggers the energy of older experiences, they can create ever-increasing damage to human lives and human bodies.<sup>51</sup>

He further explains:

Trauma also spreads impersonally, of course, and has done so throughout human history. Whenever one group oppresses, victimizes, brutalizes, or marginalizes another, many of the victimized people may suffer trauma, and then pass on that trauma response to their children as standard operating procedure...As we have seen, the result is a soul wound or intergenerational trauma.<sup>52</sup>

### **Open the Door and See All the Trauma**

We must connect and extend this wealth of information to the trauma passed down through the ages, normalized and hidden in accepted religious practices, beliefs, and systems within Western Christianity. It's unreasonable to think that people indoctrinated into the "faith once delivered" *won't* be traumatized when harmful theologies, normalized and rebranded as goodness, are slapped on a flannelgraph or shouted in a sermon week after week. It's also illogical to think that those of us inculcated into these trauma-saturated systems won't have individual and collective inner-healing and embodiment work to do. Regardless of how many adverse religious experiences<sup>53</sup> or spiritual harms we are *aware* we have endured, regardless of who is or isn't to blame,<sup>54</sup> every time we notice a trigger, it is our good bodies communicating another place we may repair, heal, and write a new story within ourselves and with each other. Our collective healing can begin if we can see the many

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<sup>50</sup>Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 42.

<sup>51</sup>Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 45

<sup>52</sup>Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 38.

<sup>53</sup> According to the Religious Trauma Institute, an "Adverse Religious Experience" (ARE) is "Any experience of a religious belief, practice, or structure that undermines an individual's sense of safety or autonomy and/or negatively impacts their physical, social, emotional, relational, or psychological well-being." These are experiences that can often be traumatic to individuals in religious environments. Religious Trauma Institute, "Adverse Religious Experiences Survey," Adverse Religious Experiences Survey, accessed May 2, 2024, <https://www.religioustraumainstitute.com/adverse-religious-experiences-survey#:~:text=Our%20working%20definition%20of%20Adverse,%2C%20or%20psychological%20well%2Dbeing.>

<sup>54</sup> As Maté writes, "Here's something else I've come to know, which I hope will be heartening for you as it is for me: it is not only necessary to leave blame and guilt behind on the road to healing, to move from self-accusation to curiosity, from shame to "response ability"—it is also and always possible." Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 112. Keep in mind, this is addressing how we access healing for ourselves, *not* about holding a person or system accountable.

places where the experiences of religious trauma are echoing in different ways. Trauma can be generational— *and so can the healing that leads to liberation*. That’s good news.

### Theological Framework

The theological lens of this thesis is what I define as a *theology of trust*— a hermeneutic rooted in a mutuality of trust between God and people. A theology of trust grows and adapts in light of increasing revelations of God’s love and goodness expressed through interconnected human flourishing and experience. Within a theology of trust, God only produces/instigates things that reflect God’s elemental nature: love. We can know God’s love via experiences and expressions of the “fruit of the spirit”: love, goodness, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.<sup>55</sup> Anything less is unworthy of God.

Furthermore, God-sourced goodness and flourishing are not ambiguous or amorphous constructs. Theologies of trust tangibly express goodness through embodied experiences of love and justice. Trust is inextricably connected and manifest in the good bodies and good world God loves. Further, if Jesus is the full manifestation of God, anything antithetical to Jesus cannot be from God. Contrary traditions, interpretations, and experiences of “God” contain an implicit invitation to reinterpret as Jesus modelled: “You have heard it said, but I say...”

In contrast to theologies of trust are *theologies of terror*,<sup>56</sup> expressed and normalized throughout Western Christianity. A theology of terror is any belief, practice, or construct about God, the Divine, or spirituality that promotes ideals that put the body, mind, or emotions into a state of (usually chronic) distress, fear, or paralyzing shame. Theologies of terror could include, but are not limited to, beliefs about eternal punishment, original sin, glorification of suffering, gender and sexuality, omnipotence, supremacy and more. Though they are accepted and promoted as biblical, inerrant, or positive, they are lacking when held up to the light of human experience. Theologies of terror cause cognitive dissonance and suppression in the individuals and communities that have normalized them. Though often accepted as orthodox, a theology of trust asserts that a theology of terror could not be true *or* divinely inspired because of the death-dealing emotional, physical, and relational “fruit” it bears. Rather than pulling apart specific beliefs and practices, this work will illuminate the *impact* of theologies of terror and the systems that implicitly and explicitly support them.

Finally, because the incarnate Christ is fully human, our humanity and embodied experience are fundamentally blessed, good, and integral to our spirituality and pathways for how we may know

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<sup>55</sup> Galatians 5:22-23

<sup>56</sup> Theology of a Terror is a spin on the phrase “texts of terror” coined by Phyllis Trible. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1984).

God. As McBride says, “If your body is a place where the Divine dwells, then you always have direct and imminent access to the Divine.”<sup>57</sup>

The body isn’t typically considered a critical theological interpreter in Western Christianity. The body has not only been dismissed or ignored; it is intentionally vilified in many streams of faith, from ancient Gnostic paradigms to many expressions of modern-day Evangelicalism. Disembodiment is a normalized part of many Christian faith traditions. In addition to the phenomenon of cultural disembodiment, many theologies of terror related to the wickedness and untrustworthiness of the “flesh” (when equated with the body) create a perfect setting for estrangement from our incarnational experience and God-given pathways to discovering truth and wisdom.

Richard Rohr said, “the first act of divine revelation is creation itself. I call it the very first Bible of nature itself.”<sup>58</sup> One of Western Christianity’s earliest missteps was thinking that our bodies were not an essential part of creation to begin with. The body bears witness to life and is always with us, even if our minds determine they must disconnect from feeling our human experience. It is Body-with-us like God-with-us in all things. Our bodies don’t always function perfectly. However, they are always there and tell us the truth about *how it feels to be a body in a sometimes very broken world*. This research will demonstrate that the body is a necessary and wise sentinel. The interconnected relationships between God, self, the earth, and others will be positively informed by including and expanding somatic engagement in the context of our spirituality.

### **The Body/Soma/Somatics**

Our minds are brilliant and essential for life. However, when it comes to trauma, the bulk of the harm and the pathway to healing exists in our bodies.<sup>59</sup> Healing through reestablishing disrupted connections to the traumatized body will be a recurring theme. “Embodied experience is undeniably the most powerful channel of change,”<sup>60</sup> collectively and individually.

The body, embodiment, soma, somatics - these labels concern something more than just the “skin suit of the soul.” They are more than the sum of their parts. For this work, we will engage with the body as Susan Haines and other trauma specialists recommend, in terms of the Greek word *soma*,

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<sup>57</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 48.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony, 2008), 13.

<sup>59</sup> In the West, cognition is so generally privileged that it creates a perceived dualism between the mind and body. While in truth they are connected and the body is indivisible from the mind, in context, a “bottom up” body-first approach (as opposed to a “top-down” mind-first modality) that engages somatically and experientially with the trauma is often necessary to mitigate the cultural imbalance in a way that promotes integration and healing.

<sup>60</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 43.

“the living organism in its wholeness.”<sup>61</sup> Embodiment/Body/Soma and its derivatives are interconnected or relational terms that include body, emotions, actions, relating and thinking.

Embodiment is a positive experience of connection and oneness with the body.<sup>62</sup> Disembodiment includes having low self-trust or awareness of our bodies, forgetting or dismissing bodily needs, self-harming, trying to make the body invisible or small, and pushing ourselves to the emotional and physical limit regardless of pain.<sup>63</sup>

Healing disembodiment through somatic engagement is a slow and multilayered process. It requires more than switching beliefs about the body or adding a “body-based” practice to existing structures and experiences.<sup>64</sup> Somatic engagement can be challenging because “In Westernized cultural and economic systems, we fundamentally live within a disembodied set of social beliefs and practices. This means we have learned to hold the body as an object separate from the self.”<sup>65</sup>

## Rupture and Repair

In psychology, *rupture* is a term used to describe any interaction or experience where a relational disconnect has happened.<sup>66</sup> A rupture may describe anything from a minor infraction to experiences of trauma and abuse. When a rupture happens, relational repair is needed. Without it, the ruptures add up over time and erode trust, making reconnection and restoration of trust increasingly difficult. In her Ted Talk, Becky Kennedy succinctly articulates the experience:

Repair is the act of going back to a moment of disconnection, taking responsibility for your behavior, and acknowledging the impact it had on another. And I want to differentiate a repair from an apology, because when an apology often looks to shut a conversation down, *hey, I’m sorry I yelled, can we move on now?* A good repair opens one up.<sup>67</sup>

The experience of ruptures and the need for repair are larger than the scope of the parent-child relationship. In her book, *On Repentance and Repair*, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg writes that repair is a process for “meaningfully addressing harm—from the daily intimate sorts of harm that

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<sup>61</sup> Haines, *Politics of Trauma*, 36.

<sup>62</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 38.

<sup>63</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 39.

<sup>64</sup> Haines, *Politics of Trauma*, 19.

<sup>65</sup> Haines, *Politics of Trauma*, 19.

<sup>66</sup> Hilary Jacobs Hendel, *It’s Not Always Depression: A New Theory of Listening to Your Body, Discovering Core Emotions and Reconnecting with Your Authentic Self* (London, UK: Penguin Life, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2018), 35.

<sup>67</sup> Becky Kennedy, “Becky Kennedy: The Single Most Important Parenting Strategy,” Becky Kennedy: The Single Most Important Parenting Strategy | TED Talk, April 2023, [https://www.ted.com/talks/becky\\_kennedy\\_the\\_single\\_most\\_important\\_parenting\\_strategy?utm\\_campaign=tedsprea&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_source=tedcomshare](https://www.ted.com/talks/becky_kennedy_the_single_most_important_parenting_strategy?utm_campaign=tedsprea&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare).

manifest in personal relationships to larger wrongs perpetrated at the level of a community or a culture, right up to genocide.”<sup>68</sup>

Ruttenberg further states, “We all cause harm... We have all been harmed... We are also all bystanders to harm.”<sup>69</sup> The Western Church must learn to navigate ruptures and seek to repair them in a way that restores connection. The goal is not to avoid every rupture but to get good at repairing them. Repairing ruptures is about understanding and responding to the *impact* of harm, as determined by the victims, rather than the *intentions* behind whatever or whoever caused it.<sup>70</sup> For victims of religious trauma, attempts at repair have often increased harm. Poor repair attempts generally centre the feelings of the offenders and are muddled with quick apologies to assuage the perpetrator's guilt followed by expectations of quick forgiveness.<sup>71</sup> Authentic repair is a multilayered, victim-centred *process* of perpetrator accountability and transformation.<sup>72</sup> When repairing, the offender does the work needed for personal or systemic transformation. Repair happens when a perpetrator takes responsibility for harm and does what is needed to come back into alignment according to the victim.<sup>73</sup>

## **Buckle Up**

Defining the terms helps to create a level playing field as we explore the broad concepts in subsequent chapters. This work is written *for* those aware of or waking up to the religious trauma and terror they have experienced in their bodies. I hope this work will proceed in ways that are both gentle and bold, centring care for those most affected. Naming traumatic experiences and identifying patterns of harm can be clarifying and, at times, overwhelming. Victim-survivors of religious trauma are invited to proceed with deep self-care at a pace that feels right to them. May this work lead you closer to repairing and reclaiming your very good selves.

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<sup>68</sup> Ruttenberg, *On Repentance*, 3.

<sup>69</sup> Ruttenberg, *On Repentance*, 4.

<sup>70</sup> Centering the victim's needs is often where accountability efforts go off track. “As soon as we get to debating the inner state or intention of a perpetrator, the focus of the conversation moves away from any actual injury or injustice and the question of how to set things right. When this happens, the needs of the victim are rarely met in meaningful ways.” Ruttenberg, *On Repentance*, 9.

<sup>71</sup> Ruttenberg breaks down the history and outcomes of privileging forgiveness over repentance and transformation. She further explains “...This focus on forgiveness has, however, had results that its originators likely did not intend. It was originally almost certainly not meant to elide questions of accountability, disincentivize perpetrators from taking responsibility, or put the onus of forgiveness on victims without meaningful redress.” Ruttenberg, *On Repentance*, 8.

<sup>72</sup> Ruttenberg does an excellent job of addressing the many different layers of complexity in a potential repair process throughout *On Repentance and Repair* ie: The power dynamics involved, how to proceed when there isn't a clear victim or perpetrator etc. But the bottom line remains: victims deserve repair and offenders need to be accountable for the impact of their actions.

<sup>73</sup> See Appendix One for a basic overview of a victim-centered repair process.

This work is also written *to* those perceiving or receiving benefits from the Western Church. Exposing normalized harm is bound to cause discomfort. *This is necessary* for our collective healing. To use the analogy of the patient—it makes little sense when there is a cancerous growth in one’s abdomen to respond with, “but my arm feels fine.” Naming and locating the invasive growth and developing a care plan centred around the illness is the only way a body riddled with disease can hope to survive. Exposing and naming the shadows of our systems and the well-kept secrets within ourselves is the only pathway to repair.

There is a vast chasm between oral confession and repentance; the church often mistakenly equates them.<sup>74</sup> Though some might believe they have not been personally impacted by religious trauma, this doesn’t reduce the need for care or a radical approach to healing for those who have. Consider any discomfort or resistance as an invitation to curiosity and co-suffering rather than a reason to dismiss or look away.

## Body Engagement

As mentioned in the introduction, each chapter will conclude with a somatic practice to help metabolize the information in an embodied way. Haines has said, “Through increased somatic awareness, sensations become sources of information.”<sup>75</sup>

In *The Wisdom of Your Body*, McBride advocates that it is kindest and least (re)traumatizing to choose a slow and gentle pace when (re)engaging with the body. “*Titration* is the clinical word for exposing ourselves to traumatic content in small portions so we do not become overwhelmed or retraumatized.”<sup>76</sup> Though our bodies have been present for every event that has happened to us, our awareness and ability to connect with our body’s sensations and messages have not always been available. “All of us heard stories spoken about our bodies that we had no say over...Most of us were handed distorted mirrors on a larger scale too...and most of the time, we didn’t even know it was happening.”

If you grew up in a Western Church environment, there may have been many opportunities to practice habitual disconnection, hatred, or shame toward your body. This disconnection might look like assuming your physiological responses are “stupid,” “sinful,” or “unhelpful.” Or you might try very hard to suppress any emotions or feelings contradicting what has been normalized. Body disconnection can happen when we assume certain body sizes, genders, or sexualities are morally

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<sup>74</sup> Dominique Dubois Gilliard, *Subversive Witness: Scripture’s Call to Leverage Privilege* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2021), xviii.

<sup>75</sup> Haines, *Politics of Trauma*, 22.

<sup>76</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 77.

superior or inferior to others.<sup>77</sup> Disconnection is practiced when we assume that spiritual knowledge is in opposition to, or the simple solution for, the complexity of the human experience.

When you intentionally (re)engage with the body, going slow and gently taking yourself no further than the edge of your discomfort will best serve your body's reclamation over the long run. When offered a body practice, your autonomy and choice are affirmed and of prime importance.

## PRACTICE GUIDELINES

Some things to be mindful of for these and all subsequent self-led experiences appearing in each chapter:

- **Start with self-location.** As stated in the introduction, it is helpful to locate yourself in relationship to the types of power, privilege and experiences your life has afforded you. Social location is not a practice of judgement but awareness. Regarding this work, social location may influence how essential these practices feel. Specifically, suppose you are male, cis-gendered, white, straight or held positions of power. In that case, you may have been socialized to dismiss or overlook the need for (re)embodiment and emotional awareness. Should any of these “social locations” be descriptive, I invite your curiosity about normalized cultural scripts that may have impacted your relationship with your body or created resistance toward (re)embodiment.
- **Practice a foundation of consent and non-judgement.** At any point, you may engage or disengage as needed. Any feelings or thoughts that arise, both feelings that resist or cooperate with the information and invitations presented, may be met with unconditional positive regard.<sup>78</sup>
- **There are no bad feelings.** If uncomfortable feelings or sensations arise, you have permission to gently stay with them without trying to change them, or you may back away from them. You may simply notice and “be with” what your body is experiencing without figuring out if the experience is good, bad, logical or otherwise. There is no wrong feeling and no incorrect felt sense.
- **Don’t forget to breathe.** If you ever feel overwhelmed, simply return to your breath: slow and steady, in through the nose, out through the mouth.

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<sup>77</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 32-37

<sup>78</sup> “Unconditional Positive Regard is an attitude of caring, acceptance, and prizing that others express toward an individual irrespective of their behavior and without regard to the others’ personal standards. Unconditional positive regard is considered conducive to the individual’s self-awareness, self-worth, and personality growth; it is, according to Carl Rogers, a universal human need essential to healthy development.” American Psychological Association, “Unconditional Positive Regard,” APA Dictionary of Psychology, accessed May 2, 2024, <https://dictionary.apa.org/unconditional-positive-regard>.

- **Noticing is enough.** "Numbness " or "Nothing" may also be engaged with as a feeling<sup>79</sup>. You have permission to notice it and be curious about that experience.
- **Expect resistance.** Consider that inner messages of "this is stupid/this isn't working" might be protective scripts. Don't force it, but if you want, you can thank those parts for trying to help and then see what happens if you ask them to take a step back while trying something new.

Your body is a part of every experience you have. Whether these types of somatic practices are new or familiar, consider when practicing: *you have a body, you are your body,*<sup>80</sup> *and your body is a resource.*<sup>81</sup>

## PRACTICE 1

This simple exercise acknowledges the body and begins a conversation with its messages.<sup>82</sup> Deb Dana wrote, "With the act of listening and attending to what is happening in our bodies, we gain some management over our system and more regulation in our lives. When we learn to listen, we create the ability to reflect and not simply react."<sup>83</sup>

### In Practice: *I Have a Body*

- Seated comfortably, place your hand over your heart and close your eyes. Take a deep, slow breath through your nose and exhale gently and slowly through your mouth. When it feels right, say out loud: "I have a body."
- While you do this, consider:
  - Do you notice any areas of the body in particular? Is there tension, spaciousness, a temperature difference, energy, or a heightened feeling there?<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Think of numbness or no-feeling as a protective feeling that might be communicating, "It's safest to not feel" or "there is too much feeling to feel right now." I understand you won't find "nothing" on the feelings wheel, but I've found it so much more helpful to think of "numb/nothing" as *something to engage with* rather than an absence or void that you can do nothing about.

<sup>80</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 14-16.

<sup>81</sup> Hillary L McBride, "141: Your Body Is a Resource: Where Do We Go from Here?" Your Body is a Resource Podcast, January 31, 2024, <https://wheredowegopod.com/141-2/>.

<sup>82</sup> This is a practice that springs from the content in chapter 1 in Hillary McBrides book, *the Wisdom of Your Body*.

<sup>83</sup> Deb Dana, *Anchored: How to Befriend Your Nervous System Using Polyvagal Theory* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 29.

<sup>84</sup> "Since many of us have needed to turn away from our sensations because of trauma and oppression, or have been trained out of paying attention to them, here are some things you can pay attention to, to feel more of them: temperatures—more warm or more cool; movement, pulsing (heartbeat, pulses, throbbing sensations), breath (in and out), tingling, streaming, twitching; and pressure—places you feel more contracted and places you feel more relaxed. When you notice your sensations try and be inside or with them, rather than being an outside observer." Haines, *Politics of Trauma*, 23.



- If it feels right, move your hands from your heart space to whatever parts of your body are making themselves known.
- Does this feeling shift or change as you continue to breathe and direct your attention and breath towards those places?
- Does the felt sense in your body change when you say the words “I have a body” out loud?
- Next, share with your body that you want to learn to hear and understand its language. This may sound like, “I’d like to hear you better.” “I’m here now, and I’m ready to listen.” Offer what feels right to you.
- To complete the exercise, take a final intentional breath and thank your body for what was shared. If what you experienced felt significant or if you are curious to engage more with it, journaling or talking with a compassionate friend, therapist, or spiritual director may be meaningful.
- Remember, there are no right or wrong answers — the goal is to notice *you are a being with a body, and you want to learn what the body has to say*.
- To take this practice further, consider interacting with the other two statements: *I am my body*, and *my body is a resource*. Notice how your body responds to these further statements. How is it different or the same as noticing *you have a body*?

## CHAPTER 2 - SOMEBODY'S POISONED THE WATERHOLE!

*"Two young fish ...happen to meet an older fish... who nods at them and says,  
"Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on...  
eventually, one of them looks over at the other and goes,  
"What the hell is water?"*"<sup>85</sup>

### A Prison of Pinnacle Beliefs

As a precocious preschooler, I said the "sinner's prayer"<sup>86</sup> every night before bed. It was more than a cute phase of spiritual sensitivity. This pattern of checking the salvation box with obsessive frequency continued well into early adulthood. Every recommitment<sup>87</sup> opportunity, I'd raise my hand and proclaim once again, *"It's me. Hi. I'm the problem. It's me."*<sup>88</sup>

Fueled by Sunday School lessons and sermons, the angst forecast being welcomed into heaven while walking past distraught friends and family headed for eternal damnation because *I failed* to share and convince them of the "Good News." Sure, Jesus would "let me in." Hopefully. Maybe. But even if Saint Peter walked me through the pearly gates, I learned that Jesus was perpetually disappointed in his ROI.<sup>89</sup> The internalized turmoil, terror, and shame I felt were excessive. I wanted salvation for everyone, but my conversion rate was terrible!

It was clear that having the correct beliefs *and* behaviours *and* convincing others to do the same was my only hope of *avoiding* hell.

When I questioned church leaders about our doctrines and dogma, responses were incredulous—*how could I even ask that?* They emphatically reminded me that our superior faith was objectively and provably true! Alternately, questions were met with a shrug and pious resignation. It didn't matter what *we* felt. We were sinful and, therefore, incapable of knowing what was right.<sup>90</sup> Questions betrayed a lack of trust in God's omnipotence and perfection, and we had the beliefs to prove it. Never one to back away from a challenge, I gave myself wholeheartedly to a life of

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<sup>85</sup> David Foster Wallace, Commencement Speech at Kenyon College, 2005.

<sup>86</sup> The sinner's prayer is a pathway to salvation for many within the Evangelical Church, it is part of the process of becoming "born again" and being a "true Christian." It usually includes the following components: a prayer that includes the acknowledgement of depravity/ wickedness/sinfulness and our need for Christ's death to save us from our sin, asking Jesus to "come into our hearts," and gratitude for the gift of salvation.

<sup>87</sup> After one has said the sinner's prayer, if they feel they have fallen by the wayside, or "backslidden" they are offered an opportunity to recommit themselves to God. Essentially it is saying the sinner's prayer all over again, with just a bit more guilt because somewhere along the way you fell away to warrant probably/possibly losing the salvation you previously procured.

<sup>88</sup> Taylor Swift, *Anti-Hero*, MP3, *Midnights (The Til Dawn Edition)*, 2022.

<sup>89</sup> Return On Investment.

<sup>90</sup> Ironically, the people in charge always knew what was right.

sanctified (and communally celebrated) hypervigilance. I was obsessed with figuring out how to be more on fire *for* God rather than suffering the eternal fire *from* God.<sup>91</sup>

Looking back, *the way* the church determined truth and belonging amplified the terror and trauma. *Evangelicalism elevated, defended and made belonging contingent upon believing the right things, no matter the implications or impact they caused.* This way of being has a name—abstractionism—and its fingerprints are all over Western society.<sup>92</sup> It is here that our journey to name and understand systemic patterns of trauma and harm begins.

### **Zoom Out. Zoom Way Out.**

This chapter zooms out to identify a much deeper aquifer—*abstractionist ontology*—poisoning the wells of Western Christianity. Ontology refers to the underlying “assumptions about what is most real or fundamental in the world.”<sup>93</sup> Ontological frameworks create the *normalized modes of unspoken and unquestioned values* that contribute to how people live, move, and have their being. Understanding the big picture of *why and how* something feels normal is essential groundwork.

This chapter will show the disembodied belief system of abstractionism is contrary to the way of Jesus and causes harm.<sup>94</sup> By contrasting *ontological abstractionism* with *ontological relationality*, this chapter will show how experiences of trauma and terror are ubiquitous within Western Christianity. Abstractionism bears the markers of coping mechanisms emerging from unhealed trauma. Through the wide-angle lens of this chapter, it will become clear that “*It’s turtles all the way down.*”<sup>95</sup> In response, I will expose the urgency for collective consciousness-raising<sup>96</sup> and re-embodiment grounded in relationality and propose a new lens for assessing beliefs and practices.

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<sup>91</sup> While many may share experiences of religious trauma similar to mine, all stories of trauma are unique—as are the ways we respond to them. Every story of trauma and pain is valid and worthy of care.

<sup>92</sup> Abstractionism will be explored in the next section. It is an ontological paradigm that assumes the most real or beneficial constructs are those “abstracted” or “objectively separated” from their contexts. Slife, “A New Wave of Thinking,” 240-241.

<sup>93</sup> Slife, “A New Wave of Thinking,” 240-241.

<sup>94</sup> Further chapters will explore how diverse experiences may be in response to beliefs and practices. The variance does not dismiss the fact that they are causing harm for many.

<sup>95</sup> Brandon Monk, “Some Context for the Saying, ‘It’s Turtles All the Way Down,’” Medium, April 7, 2023, <https://brandonmonk.medium.com/some-context-for-the-saying-its-turtles-all-the-way-down-19d8c5a21a77>.

<sup>96</sup> I’m speaking of whole-being consciousness-raising in the same spirit as bell hooks writes about in many of her published works. In her book *Feminism is for Everybody*, she laments the loss of consciousness raising groups that were essential to the Women’s Rights Movement. “Feminists are made, not born. One does not become an advocate of feminist politics simply by having the privilege of have been born female. Like all political positions, one becomes a believer in feminist politics through choice and action.” bell hooks, *Feminism Is For Everybody* (Cambridge, MA: Pluto Press, 2020), 8. Change doesn’t happen by accident. Becoming a changemaker—aware and acquainted with the problems of the marginalized, victimized and minoritized—is an intentional act.

## Abstractionist Assumptions, Relational Realities

“Ontological abstractionism assumes that the objects and events... are *most* real or fundamental when they are understood as *abstracted or separated from their contexts*.”<sup>97</sup>

Abstractionism values tenets formed “objectively,” without the perceived taint of experience and emotion. Individualism, simplification, separability, and conflict avoidance<sup>98</sup> are also expressions of abstractionism. One does not have to look far to see evidence of abstractionism in the church. The rise and prominence of apologetics and its attendant claims of spiritual superiority through “objective truth” is abstractionism on full display. The traumatic experiences and impact of these truths are minimized or dismissed because of their alleged objectivity.

Many victim-survivors of religious trauma can attest to the ways conflict avoidance, another symptom of abstractionism, has contributed to the harm they experienced. Further, traits of individualism—expressed through the epithet of a “personal relationship with God”—have allowed many within Christianity to feel spiritually safe while ignoring the need for collective repentance and change.<sup>99</sup>

Relationality, on the other hand, “...assumes that the objects and events of the world are most real or fundamental when they are understood as having an inextricable relationship with particular contexts.” Ideas and beliefs have weight and value within relationality. Still, relationality first holds that all things are in relationship—interconnected, influencing, and impacting each other. Therefore, objectivity is essentially impossible.

Interconnectedness, complexity, engagement and mutuality are hallmarks of relational communities. *All my relations* is a colloquialism expressing the interconnection or relationality between all things for First Nations, Inuit and Metis worldviews.<sup>100</sup> The ancient Southern African concept of *Ubuntu*<sup>101</sup> is another example of relationality: “I am because we are.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Slife, “A New Wave of Thinking,” 240-241.

<sup>98</sup> Slife, Brent D. “Taking practice seriously: Toward a relational ontology,” *Journal of theoretical and philosophical psychology* 24, no. 2 (2004): 172.

<sup>99</sup> Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg shares personal correspondence from Rev. Bromley McCleghan, “...this emphasis on salvation by faith alone, and the resulting emphasis on one’s inner state over one’s outward actions, may have had a cultural consequence of privileging intent over impact when considering our actions and their outcomes.” Ruttenberg, *On Repentance*, 8.

<sup>100</sup> “Interconnectedness,” Interconnectedness overview from the First Nations Pedagogy Online Project, accessed May 1, 2024, <https://firstnationspedagogy.ca/interconnect.html>.

<sup>101</sup> The relational concept of *Ubuntu* is central to Rev. Desmond Tutu’s work on reconciliation. He explains, “*Ubuntu* is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human...It is to say “my humanity is inextricably bound up, in yours.” We belong in a bundle of life. “We say, a person is a person through other persons.” It’s not, “I think therefore I am.” It says rather: “I am human because I belong, I participate, I share.” Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2009), 31.

<sup>102</sup> Steve Paulson, “‘I Am Because We Are’: The African Philosophy of Ubuntu,” *To The Best Of Our Knowledge*, September 30, 2020, <https://www.ttbook.org/interview/i-am-because-we-are-african-philosophy-ubuntu>.

In abstractionist communities, strength and connection come through beliefs and belief-confirming practices.<sup>103</sup> Because of this, the greatest threat is anything that challenges beliefs or causes one to veer off the expected path. Abstractionism is evident in the 200-plus different denominations in Western Christianity, many with contrary but “objectively” correct doctrines vying for societal and spiritual dominance.

In contrast, relationality values interconnectivity. The “relationship between,” rather than the things themselves, is what is most tangible and valued.<sup>104</sup> This betweenness helps defray the tendency towards binary us/them thinking. When rooted in relationality - difference is not a threat. Rather, it enriches a community- “the ground of relationship – shared being – is not jeopardized by disagreement.”<sup>105</sup> When founded on relationality, disagreement and difference can be the agents of positive change or lead to relational repair and an overall increase in the depth and intimacy of relationships.<sup>106</sup>

### Is It Though?

Some may protest the abstractionist designation. The Evangelical church frequently touts it is “all about relationship!” Abstractionist communities fail to acknowledge that most relationships they care about are formed and founded on sharing the same beliefs. Evangelicalism may value relationships; however, beliefs that provide connection and communal safety are *valued more*. Questioning threatens the relationship between people’s experience and the established “objective” beliefs and practices.

When parents must choose *between* religious beliefs about sexuality, gender identity, and faith *or* their relationship with their queer children, or worse, where their 2SLGBTQIA+ children have to choose between *themselves or* the faith community and the all-powerful God they wish would accept them,<sup>107</sup> the fragility and non-primacy of relationships are exposed. When

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<sup>103</sup> Slife, “A New Wave of Thinking,” 243; “This ontological framework implies that unity occurs through common abstractions, such as opinions, theories, principles, values, and beliefs. Because abstractions are the most real and fundamental entities, fundamental unity requires their commonality. Furthermore, this ontology implies that abstractions are a likely source of any disunity.” Slife, Brent D. “Taking practice seriously,” 168.

<sup>104</sup> “One of the most important tasks of a relational community is to protect difference and otherness, so as to form the complementary functions of a richly textured community. Again, this task does not mean that common beliefs are unimportant. It just means that these beliefs are secondary to and *ultimately should be in the service of* facilitating something more basic—complementary and intimate relationships.” Slife, “Taking practice seriously,” 169.

<sup>105</sup> Slife, “Taking practice seriously,” 169.

<sup>106</sup> See Appendix 2 for a chart that further outlines some basic tenets of abstractions and relationality.

<sup>107</sup> For examples of the devastating impact see these works by Crocker, Stone, and Joel Hollier et al. Seth Crocker, *Persevering Faith: A Qualitative Exploration of Religious Trauma and Spiritual Resilience in Sexual Minority Christians* (Regent University, 2021), 12; Alyson M Stone, “Thou Shalt Not: Treating Religious Trauma and Spiritual Harm with Combined Therapy,” *Group* 37, no. 4 (2013): 323, <https://doi.org/10.13186/group.37.4.0323>, 336; Joel Hollier, Shane Clifton, and Jennifer Smith-Merry, “Mechanisms of Religious Trauma amongst Queer

abstractionism is the cultural soil, changing beliefs is rarely as simple as picking and choosing one over the other. As the following chapters show, the body's nervous system can't help but automatically respond to these "choices" as a high-level threat.

Because beliefs *sustain belonging* in abstractionist systems, people aren't *just* choosing a new idea. The body senses it is choosing *between* the new idea and everything that has brought it stability, familiarity and normalcy. That is to say—it likely does not perceive a *choice* but a *threat*. These inextricably connected beliefs relate to scriptural authority, salvation, the holiness of God, eternal destiny and everything attached to safety, cultural acceptance and belonging.

The Western Church may sell these decisions as oversimplified tough love scenarios, framed as a simple choice between faith and something else: faith *or* science, faith *or* interracial relationships, faith *or* community privileges for women, for divorced persons, or for those with queer or marginalized identities. These faith-or questions are fraught with loss, create internal and existential crises, and run counter to forming healthy relational bonds. Regardless of how relational a person or system claims to be, when adherence to objective truths ultimately determines belonging, it isn't relational but abstractionist.

### **Relational Relativity?**

A criticism of relationality is that it is essentially relativism, where everything goes and nothing matters. However, this is not the case. "All belief structures and ethical values are evaluated in the light of whether they facilitate authentic relationships—love, intimacy, and closeness—even among people who are different."<sup>108</sup> Consider how different the history of Church-sanctioned harm would be if the church had valued relationality and, therefore, the impact of supposedly irrefutable ideologies on people from other religions, races, genders and sexualities.<sup>109</sup>

Abstractionism normalizes trauma responses like rigidity and low response flexibility, as chapter four will demonstrate. The normalization makes it easier to dismiss or blame victims for their trauma rather than turning inward to assess the beliefs that cause them. Abstractionist communities must double down and defend beliefs rather than be curious and open to transformation.

Relationality offers a more complex but inclusive paradigm. "Instead of merely tolerating moral ideals, which may presuppose a lack of real unity or deep commonality, a relational approach can lead to very real and supportive moral beliefs. These beliefs are secondary to concrete

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People in Australia's Evangelical Churches," *Clinical Social Work Journal* 50, no. 3 (March 29, 2022): 275–85, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-022-00839-x>, 276.

<sup>108</sup> Slife, "Taking Practice Seriously," 171.

<sup>109</sup> By Church-sanctioned harm I am referring to almost every chapter in church history, including the usual suspects: the Crusades, the transatlantic slave trade, residential schools, doctrinal opposition to minoritized groups, etc.

community relationships, to be sure, and their meaning and applicability, because they only exist in living relation to particular contexts, must regularly be reinterpreted anew.”<sup>110</sup>

### **Name it and Claim It**

Personal or communal strength and unity in the Western Church tradition often rest on the certainty of indisputable doctrine, dogma, and theological constructs. Dismissing or rationalizing the traumatic implications of theologies and practices is par for the course. Within abstractionism, impacts and contexts aren’t deemed relevant compared to what is *most* important: the sanctity and objectivity of beliefs.

Growing up in the Church, I discovered the more I questioned, the more it became clear I had to ignore the alarm bells going off in my body. To survive, I had to move my faith into my head where the “correct beliefs” roamed unimpeded. Eventually, I no longer needed external correction—I started policing myself instead.<sup>111</sup> But alongside my faithful hypervigilance, there was a nefarious secret pinging around the recesses of my mind that I hoped no one, especially God, would find out: the secret formula of faith and salvation assurance that seemed to work for everyone else eluded me. No matter how I tried, or believed, or fasted, or prayed—I couldn’t get the equation right, and I was terrified it would cost me my eternal life.

Using Maté’s definition—that trauma occurs not because of the event itself but due to one’s internalized experience of the event,<sup>112</sup> —it’s not hard to see that part of what I, and countless others with stories like mine, experienced in our faith formation was traumatic. Nobody laid a hand on me. Nobody threatened my physical bodily safety, but the elevation of beliefs and the ways beliefs incorporated into life (the impacts of abstractionism) caused a chronic state of harm that disrupted my sense of safety and my connection to my body. My religious context, beliefs and experience caused trauma because they continually generated intense fears and anxieties that were unable to be resolved, preventing a return to embodied safety.<sup>113</sup> It’s like Anderson says, “religious trauma is trauma.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Slife, “Taking Practice Seriously,” 171.

<sup>111</sup> This may be described as a religious “Panopticon” effect. High control religion uses the threat of always being watched so that a single entity might be able to affect the behaviour of masses of people, resulting in “self-policing.” A basic overview of the Panopticon concept: The Ethics Centre, “Ethics Explainer: The Panopticon—What Is the Panopticon Effect?,” The Ethics Centre, December 14, 2021, <https://ethics.org.au/ethics-explainer-panopticon-what-is-the-panopticon-effect/#:~:text=The%20panopticon%20is%20a%20disciplinary,not%20they%20are%20being%20watched.>

<sup>112</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 20.

<sup>113</sup> van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 1.

<sup>114</sup> Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*: 31.

## Ortho-what-now?

What high-control variants of Western Christianity generally offer to the spiritually distressed is more abstractionism: more beliefs, more orthodoxy.<sup>115</sup> When that doesn't work, it offers orthopraxy:<sup>116</sup> practices like prayer, bible study, confession, holy days, and service to others, all meant to bolster and prove the beliefs so central to the faith.<sup>117</sup> Pursuing correct creeds and appropriate spiritual exercises has been part of the church's *modus operandi* for centuries. But it should matter that beliefs and practices, however well intended, can cause trauma and terror in the body of believers. Something in the formula is amiss. The church needs a third way or a third part to the equation that makes it safe to assess beliefs and systems without destroying the whole thing. The *experience and outworking* of beliefs need to matter. As Marlene Winnell points out, "a dogmatic religion is one that does not truly honor the thoughts and feelings of the individual. It is also one that is static, without room for development. Doubt is considered sinful, and contradicting information is screened out."<sup>118</sup>

Relationality offers something desperately needed: beliefs, practices *and* experiences relating to one another in a way that produces the *right outcomes*- collective human flourishing- including dependable repair. As far as I can tell, there is no "official" experiential assessment mechanism; if there is, it doesn't have a name. In keeping with church tradition and lexicon, I offer the term *Orthokarpos: right-results* or *right- "fruit."* Orthokarpos is a relational lens that searches for *evidence* of mutual goodness and ought to be the cradle that contains, protects, *and* permits the evaluation of orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

Throughout the Christian Scriptures, there are stories of people living out their beliefs and practices "correctly." Time after time, Jesus challenged the status quo because of how their orthodoxy and orthopraxy *impacted* people, especially those with less access to power and privilege. Jesus flipped tables because the "right beliefs and right practices" were negatively impacting the poor.<sup>119</sup> In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the religious leaders behaved according to their religious laws. Jesus called them to account because their dogma was producing death and harm.<sup>120</sup> Jesus cursed the fig trees that promised fruit and bore nothing.<sup>121</sup> He condemned fruit trees with rotten fruit and declared unproductive vines good for nothing but kindling. *Orthokarpos is a*

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<sup>115</sup> From the greek *Orthodoxos*, of the right opinion/ belief <https://www.britannica.com/topic/orthodox>

<sup>116</sup> Derived from the Greek *orthos* ("straight, right") and *praxis* ("doing, practice"), *orthopraxy* refers to "correctness of a practice or a body of practices accepted or recognized as correct," <https://www.encyclopedia.com/philosophy-and-religion/islam/islam/orthopraxy>.

<sup>117</sup> In theory, orthopraxy could be a relational action—but as Winell points out, in the Western church, experiences are often co-opted as *proof* of doctrine. Marlene Winell, *Leaving the Fold* (Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile, 2007).73.

<sup>118</sup> Winnell, *Leaving the Fold*, 5.

<sup>119</sup> Matthew 21:12-17.

<sup>120</sup> Luke 10:25-37.

<sup>121</sup> Mark 11:12-25.



*necessary lens* to help us find what is just, beautiful and true. Orthokarpos is needed to name beliefs and practices that are no more than cups full of filth and whitewashed tombs<sup>122</sup> filled with nothing but dead ideas and good intentions.

### **Orthokarpos? It's Jewish, Really.**

Orthokarpos is relational, but it's not a new idea. It didn't begin with this essay, modern psychology, philosophy, or even with Jesus. In valuing orthokarpos, Jesus was just being a good Jew.

The tension of abstractionism and relationality is as old as the oldest story in the Hebrew Scriptures. The creation narrative in Genesis demonstrates that pursuing the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil* cannot and will not save humankind; it will only bring death. Only the *Tree of Life* produces relational goodness.

Lisa Sharon Harper's book, *The Very Good Gospel*, expounds on the Hebrew word *tov*, which means good or goodness. Peppered throughout the creation account in Genesis 1, the Hebraic concept of *tov* was not an abstraction but a relational concept: "...the Hebrews understood that *tov* refers to the goodness demonstrated between things in the creation narratives."<sup>123</sup> Creation was good because the *relationship between* all aspects of creation and the Creator produced goodness.

The original hearers and readers of Genesis 1 would have understood that the writers were not merely saying that each part of God's creation was very good but rather that God's mighty web of interconnected relationships was forcefully good, vehemently good, abundantly good!<sup>124</sup>

From the very beginning, relationality, interconnection, complexity, and mutuality have led to human flourishing! And, from the very beginning, abstractionism tempts humanity with simpler dualisms that result in tremendous human suffering. Abstractionism is the well that Western Christianity is drawing from. It has caused disconnection and dismissed the bodily impact of beliefs and ideas. Intended or not, this has been harmful.

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<sup>122</sup> Matthew 23:13-38.

<sup>123</sup> Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can Be Made Right* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2020), 31.

<sup>124</sup> Harper, *The Very Good Gospel*, 31-32. In the context of her work, I believe that Harper's use of the word forceful is not connected to coercion or control but in alignment with magnitude, thrust and the amount of goodness God expresses.

## The Body Keeps the (Theological) Score

Abstractionism relies on supposed objectivity to strengthen it. Abstracted ideals inevitably cause an elevation of the mind and disconnection from our bodies. Author and activist bell hooks noted,

The erasure of the body encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing information. We are invited to teach information as though it does not emerge from bodies. Significantly, those of us who are trying to critique biases in the classroom have been compelled to return to the body to speak about ourselves as subjects in history.<sup>125</sup>

In the same way hooks critiques biases in the classroom, I am critiquing abstractionism and its “objective” biases in the church.

Increased bodily awareness is a positive, though sometimes uncomfortable, reality when reclaiming the body as a source of information. Beliefs are not abstractions held outside of the body; they are always in relationship with the body. In *The Politics of Trauma*, Haines says, “The embodied or survival-based habits cannot be changed through conversation or thought alone.”<sup>126</sup> Further, “If we do not open and process contractions that have held a certain embodiment in place, transformation does not happen.”<sup>127</sup>

Abstractionism minimizes embodiment and experience and elevates cognition and intellect as superior. The strongest argument wins the day, paving the path for normalized power-over systems. The Western Church must learn to see abstractionism for what it is and resist the urge to solve the problems of abstractionism with more of the same. Even deconstructing one’s faith can be abstractionist if one switches beliefs and ignores the embodied impact of previously held ideals.

The path to repair begins when those who participate in and benefit from Western Christianity name and locate themselves within the ontological systems and foundations that have, knowingly or unknowingly, caused real religious, theological and relational trauma. Ontological Relationality is the ancient path we must (re)discover to repair the trauma and damage our faith paradigms have caused. The remainder of this project will implicitly and explicitly use an *orthokarpic* lens as it dives into the intersections of psychology and practical theology. The next chapter will explore attachment theory and nervous system responses, showing how religious trauma, codified in theology and culture, becomes embodied and normalized.

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<sup>125</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2014), 6.

<sup>126</sup> Haines, *The Politics of Trauma*, 26.

<sup>127</sup> Haines, *The Politics of Trauma*, 25.

## PRACTICE 2

Throughout this research and writing process, my body continually asked for a chance to discharge her suppressed embodied responses from previous traumatic experiences.<sup>128</sup> Though I had mentally deconstructed, there were places where my body was still holding onto existential terror.

Healing must include the body. As this work will continue to show, “the soma will not relinquish an embodied pattern protecting safety, belonging, or dignity if a better embodied option is unavailable.”<sup>129</sup> I have spent years working to reclaim and reconnect to my body. Writing this thesis often required creating a somatic outlet for theological trauma that surfaced.

Sometimes, naming and describing the embodied experience can help normalize sensations and somatic responses. When writing this chapter, I sometimes felt a tightness and constriction in my throat as I wrote out my experience. I felt resistance connected to speaking out and using my voice this way. My old somatic pattern revealed itself: *shove it down and believe right!* At times, my thoughts felt foggy and unclear. Sometimes a deep weight of grief settled in my chest.

Rather than intellectualizing or “fixing” my emotions or telling my body the better thing it should feel, I offered myself a new somatic experience through embodied journaling.

As I wrote, I pictured myself moving closer to this part that was expressing itself. In my mind's eye, I saw that earnest four-year-old who wanted to be safe and connected with God and her family. My body reacquainted me with what it felt like to want love and security from God but be given shame and fear under the guise of love instead. I wrote down every word she told me. As I wrote, she appeared to grow older and articulated more clearly and fiercely what she felt. I felt the dissonance of these theologies of terror and the shame they produced being called “good” and “right.” I let my writing be as angry and full of protest as was needed. When finished, I offered myself compassion. I began to tremble, and tears fell. It felt remarkably good to cry. I felt like I needed to shake.<sup>130</sup> So I did. I remarked to my body, “Of course you felt that like that; it makes so much sense.” My body began to relax, the fog lifted, and it felt like I was coming home to myself. “That was terrifying for you. I’m so glad you felt safe to share that with me,”<sup>131</sup> I said to my body.

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<sup>128</sup> “Calling your body “she,” “he,” “they,” or “you” can cue your brain to remember the personhood of your body.” McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 45.

<sup>129</sup> Haines, *The Politics of Trauma*, 36.

<sup>130</sup> This felt sense of “goodness” here is likely the result of a lot (years) of previous therapy for me. If the goodness feels far from you, there is nothing wrong with that. This is merely indicative of my particular journey. If it’s something you hope for in the future, maybe tuck my experience away for later— perhaps it will give you hope that even if you feel locked down in shame, you can, with time, find your way back to compassion .

<sup>131</sup> It may sound like this was a one and done exercise. All my religious trauma in one journal entry. Far from it! Often, in a single exercise I will have an experience of completing a stress/trauma cycle— from dysregulation back to regulation, but it is an experience that I will need to practice many times to return to these newly formed neural pathways and connections making a “new normal” for my body and brain.

I have a body. I am my body. She is a resource, and she is good.

These writing exercises have increased my ability to relate to my trauma responses and internalized traumatic beliefs with compassion and understanding rather than shame and judgement. It has allowed me to identify the embodied relationship between experience and ideas.

### **In Practice: Embodied Journalling**

This exercise will work best if you are in a place where you are on your own and can be free from distractions. If writing is unavailable or inaccessible to you, feel free to engage through stream-of-consciousness speaking in the same manner as will be described for writing. If you are journaling, you will need

- Approximately 20 minutes of uninterrupted time.
- a notebook
- a few pieces of paper
- a writing instrument of your choice
- a timer.

You will write for fifteen minutes for this exercise, followed by at least a five-minute loving-kindness meditation or practice. You are free to begin, end, shorten or extend the exercise as it feels right.<sup>132</sup> If you extend the writing exercise, consider extending the restorative meditation practice at the end as well.<sup>133</sup>

- The primary goal of this exercise is to feel and allow any body sensations or emotions that arise when you think about an experience or idea. It is a great practice for anything you feel a “stuckness” about. Given the nature of the last chapter, you may write about a religious belief or idea you have changed or deconstructed. Or you may start with a body sensation and see where that takes you. When the time comes to write, you may begin by writing, “When I think about (*the sensation, the former belief etc*) I feel...” Then, let the words flow, and your feelings rise!<sup>134</sup>
- If possible, write with absolute freedom, more in the spirit of a toddler having a tantrum than a grown person writing a dissertation. Give yourself as much permission as possible before you begin writing to say whatever comes up, including saucy or swearsy language, bold

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<sup>132</sup> There are some studies like the one noted here that show that 15 minutes and beyond are where the magic of these practices happen. However, my suggestion is you honour your capacity first, and build to 15+ minutes at a pace that feels right. James W. Pennebaker, “Writing about Emotional Experiences as a Therapeutic Process,” *Psychological Science* 8, no. 3 (May 1997): 162–66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.1997.tb00403.x>.

<sup>133</sup> Adapted from Nichole Sachs Journalspeak method. Nichole Sachs, “How to Journalspeak,” The Cure for Chronic Pain, accessed May 1, 2024, <https://www.thecureforchronicpain.com/journalspeak>.

<sup>134</sup> Sachs, “How to JournalSpeak”, <https://www.thecureforchronicpain.com/journalspeak>.

accusations, and to whomever you feel the need to write. This is radical truth-telling about *how it felt and the meanings you made*. As Nicole Sachs, creator of the Journal-Speak method, advises: “Tell the truth and don’t be afraid to go deep.”<sup>135</sup>

- This is not intended to be writing you will read over again. When done, consider destroying it or “overwriting,” as I will describe in the following point. This exercise aims to teach your body it is safe to access emotions and body sensations through writing. It is a consciousness-raising exercise, not a meaning-making exercise.<sup>136</sup>
- As you write, let yourself go down any rabbit trails. You’ll start with a prompt, but where you finish may surprise you, and that’s perfectly normal. If you get stuck and can’t think of anything to write/say, keep writing/talking anyway. Literally anything: “here,” feeling,” or “bagel,” over and over to keep writing or speaking until something else comes to mind. You might feel like you have all the words or none of the words - it’s not a failure to go “word numb” when you try this exercise. Plan to write with as much freedom and radical acceptance as you can muster.
- To prevent my meaning-making brain from taking over, I practice “overwriting.” I start the timer and scrawl my way down the page, then rather than turning to the blank side or a new sheet, I give the page a quarter turn and write overtop of what I previously wrote. If I have time left and reach the end of the page again, I give it another 45-degree turn and write over *that* on the diagonal.
- You can write longer than the allotted time. If possible, write at least until the timer goes off. Then, put down the pen.
- If you feel any emotions or sensations while writing, express them, name them and thank yourself for your vulnerability. Embodied journaling is hard work! When done writing, consider placing your hands anywhere you feel intensity. Name the sensation if you can and thank your body for feeling safe to share it with you
- As in the previous exercise, if you felt nothing, that is also perfectly acceptable.
- Then, choose something like this<sup>137</sup> or this<sup>138</sup> link for a loving-kindness meditation, or do a restorative practice of your choice. The point of this closing portion is to intentionally move from intensity back to a more settled state and honour the “emotional workout” you’ve just engaged in.

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<sup>135</sup> Sachs, “How to JournalSpeak”, <https://www.thecureforchronicpain.com/journalspeak>.

<sup>136</sup> An example of overwriting is included in Appendix 3.

<sup>137</sup> Happier TV, “5 Minutes Loving Kindness Meditation,” 5 Minutes Loving Kindness Meditation, November 18, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=syKqFFd1Rm0>.

<sup>138</sup> Memorial Hermann, “Guided Meditation | Loving Kindness for Self Compassion,” Guided Meditation Loving Kindness for Self Compassion, February 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-z4HqdTQFw>.

## CHAPTER 3- THAT’S GONNA LEAVE A MARK

*“Traumatic events are extraordinary. not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life.”*<sup>139</sup>

### **The Myth of Normal**

Much of what passes for “normal” in Church culture looks and behaves like unresolved traumatic experiences. The Church cannot be a life-giving relational community without healing the impact of the beliefs and systems within it. While theological and systemic threats in a religious community may not appear as overt, the social, emotional, and spiritual danger is clear to the body.

Trauma is the subjective and protective inner response to any experience or event—spiritual, mental, emotional, or physical—that overwhelms our sense of safety, belonging, and dignity. Decades ago, Winell coined the phrase “religious trauma.”<sup>140</sup> McBride, Anderson, and others are adding nuance, knowledge, and expanding the field and expertise around religious trauma. They are all pointing to the same phenomenon—religious trauma is a form of complex trauma and must be taken seriously.

The previous chapter proposed that orthopraxy and orthodoxy should be filtered and assessed through a *relational* lens, *orthokarpos* - the embodied and mutually life-giving outcome of beliefs and practices. Orthokarpos is essential because it can help differentiate between what constitutes embodied human flourishing and goodness versus that which may be acculturated trauma and abuse but is considered normal in an abstractionist culture.

This chapter introduces a primer on attachment theory, the basics of the nervous system, and the instinctual embodied responses to threats, setting the stage for the next chapter, which exposes the trauma and abuse embedded in the abstractionist culture of the Western Church.

### **Scary Mary**

When I was twelve years old, I landed the coveted female role in the children’s Christmas pageant: Mary, mother of Jesus. I wondered if I could suppress the bigness of my personality. Would the pale blue veil tame my dirty blonde waves so I could appropriately embody the demure, calm and quiet nature of the Virgin Mary? It was a tough sell for at least one man in the church. “You?” he chortled. “Mary?” I was certain he’d been elected to speak what everyone else was afraid to say. “That’s a good one. Where will they put all that energy?” My body froze. My inner self contracted. I laughed, though everything in me felt ashamed and small. While I was not conscious of this pattern

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<sup>139</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2015).33.

<sup>140</sup> Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 32.

then, my body instinctively knew that the only safe thing to do was to disconnect from my authentic self and please and appease God's spokesperson. Obviously, I had to be someone and something different to stay in God's good graces.

As I grew up, I subconsciously maintained this disconnection, making the pursuit of smallness a conscious practice of holiness. For the uninitiated—I have anything but a small personality. My success rate was abysmal, and shame was a constant companion in this lose-lose scenario. This freeze-fawn response didn't start or end with the fateful pageant interaction but became a pivotal part of a vicious cycle of self-contempt.<sup>141</sup>

### **Attached to God and God's People**

Multiple studies show people develop attachment relationships with God and within their faith communities.<sup>142</sup> There are positive and negative implications of our faith constructs and communities fostering attachment relationships. It can be positive because when one is experiencing distress, they may feel assured that they have a reliable attachment figure in God with which to interact and help them.<sup>143</sup> However, suppose those places, practices and beliefs require expressions of happiness, cooperation or compliance on the outside but create an internal and inescapable experience of shame, fear, or suppression of authenticity to stay in God's or the community's good graces.<sup>144</sup> In that case, the potential for a traumatic wound looms large.<sup>145</sup>

### **Attachment, Rupture, and Repair.**

In *Attached to God*, Krispin Mayfield writes, "... there are patterns for how we reach out for connection... we all find ourselves starving for connection at one time or another. And when we feel

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<sup>141</sup> Menakem writes, "Unhealed trauma acts like a rock thrown into a pond; it causes ripples that move outward, affecting many bodies over time. After months or years, unhealed trauma can appear to become part of someone's personality. Over even longer periods of time, as it is passed on and gets compounded through other bodies in a household, it can become a family norm. And if it gets transmitted and compounded through multiple families and generations, it can start to look like culture. But it isn't culture. It's a traumatic retention that has lost its context over time. Though without context it has not lost its power. Traumatic retentions can have a profound effect on what we do, think, feel, believe, experience and find meaningful." Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 39.

<sup>142</sup> Here are four different resources that demonstrate the attachment relationships formed with God and in religious communities: John Bracy, *Yearnings: Stories of Insecure Attachment and the Journey to Connect to God* (Loma Linda University, 2011), 22; Lee Kirkpatrick, "An Attachment-Theory Approach Psychology of Religion," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 2, no. 1 (January 1, 1992): 3–28, [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327582ijpr0201\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327582ijpr0201_2), 6; Stone, "Thou Shalt Not" 323, <https://doi.org/10.13186/group.37.4.0323>, 329; Wade Rowatt and Lee A. Kirkpatrick, "Two Dimensions of Attachment to God and Their Relation to Affect, Religiosity, and Personality Constructs," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 4 (December 2002): 637–51, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5906.00143>, 637.

<sup>143</sup> Kirkpatrick, "An Attachment-Theory Approach", 7.

<sup>144</sup> Stone, "Thou Shalt Not" 325. For more examples, see Matt Bradshaw, Christopher G. Ellison, and Jack P. Marcum, "Attachment to God, Images of God, and Psychological Distress in a Nationwide Sample of Presbyterians," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 20, no. 2 (March 29, 2010): 130–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508611003608049>, 134.

<sup>145</sup> Crocker, *Persevering Faith*, 64.

that starvation, we have different ways of trying to get the connection we long for.”<sup>146</sup> According to Maté, humans have two basic needs that exist in tension with one another: *authenticity* and *attachment*.

A recurring theme—maybe the core theme—in every talk or workshop I give is the inescapable tension, and for the most of us an eventual clash, between two essential needs: *attachment* and *authenticity*. This clash is ground zero for the most widespread form of trauma in our society: namely, the “small-*i*” trauma expressed in a disconnection from the self even in the absence of abuse or overwhelming threat.<sup>147</sup>

Authenticity is “the quality of being true to oneself, and the capacity to shape one’s life from a deep knowledge of that self.”<sup>148</sup> Attachment refers to the inner drive for physical and emotional connection with others.<sup>149</sup>

Attachment theory began with the pioneering work of John Bowlby, who studied the effect of maternal-child separation.<sup>150</sup> This work was expanded on by Mary Ainsworth, who studied the security of parent-child relationships.<sup>151</sup> Together, they advanced the understanding of how humans connect, respond to and develop relationships with primary caregivers.<sup>152</sup> In their research, they discovered that attachment styles are established in early childhood relationships and are expressed consistently on a spectrum of secure to insecure attachment.<sup>153</sup> As research has progressed and expanded, it’s become apparent that attachment relationships don’t end there. People of all ages generally continue to repeat their attachment patterns throughout life within primary adult

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<sup>146</sup> Krispin Mayfield, *Attached to God: A Practical Guide to Deeper Spiritual Experience* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Books, 2022), xviii.

<sup>147</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 105.

<sup>148</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 106.

<sup>149</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 105.

<sup>150</sup> These are two of Bowlby’s earliest studies: John Bowlby, “The Nature of the Child’s Tie to His Mother,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 39, no. 5 (1958): 350–73. John Bowlby; and “Separation of Mother and Child,” *The Lancet* 271, no. 7029 (May 1958): 1070–71, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(58\)92031-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(58)92031-2).

<sup>151</sup> “Strange Situation” was a groundbreaking study that created a way to assess and identify various attachment patterns between parents and children and the impact of these relationships on later development. Mary D. Ainsworth and Silvia M. Bell, “Attachment, Exploration, and Separation: Illustrated by the Behavior of One-Year-Olds in a Strange Situation,” *Child Development* 41, no. 1 (March 1970): 49–67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1970.tb00975.x>.

<sup>152</sup> This was a collaborative study between the two: John Bowlby et al., “The Effects of Mother-child Separation: A Follow-up Study,” *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 29, no. 3–4 (September 1956): 211–47, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8341.1956.tb00915.x>; This paper gives a general summary of their separate and collaborative contributions: Inge Bretherton, “The Origins of Attachment Theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth,” *Developmental Psychology* 28, no. 5 (September 1992): 759–75, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.28.5.759>.

<sup>153</sup> There are different sub-categories or behavioural “styles” of insecure attachment. Generally they are broken up into three categories: Anxious, Avoidant, and Disorganized.



relationships, their communities, nature, and God.<sup>154</sup> “The need for attachment does not expire once we’re out of diapers: it continues to motivate us through our lifespan.”<sup>155</sup>

When individuals reach out for connection by implicitly or explicitly expressing their emotions, ideas and experiences (authenticity) and are dependably<sup>156</sup> met with compassion, attunement or repair, they generally develop “secure attachment.”<sup>157</sup> Being able to share who you are and how you are experiencing the world without fear, shame, or judgement is essential to developing secure attachment.

Note that ruptures happen, even in secure relationships. “When there is a rupture in our sense of connection (losing our sense of self, experiencing a misstep in a relationship, being cut off from nature, or becoming distanced from our experience of spirit), our ability to anchor in safety and regulation is challenged.”<sup>158</sup> Secure relationships aren’t perfect. However, secure relationships foster a safe-enough environment where hurt and distress can be authentically shared, seen, heard, and accounted for. When secure, one can address inevitable conflict in a way that repairs the broken connection without sacrificing one’s genuine sense of self. When securely attached, the body can flourish, moving through states of nervous system activation and back to regulation.

Connections become tenuous and problematic when the needs for healthy attachment are consistently *unmet*. Constant or chronic unresolved ruptures often make people subconsciously sacrifice authenticity to maintain safety, connection, and familiarity. This sacrifice comes at the cost of nervous system dysregulation, and through repeated experience, dysregulation can become the norm. “It’s only when we move out of safety and connection into one of the adaptive survival responses and can’t find our way back to a state of regulation that we suffer physically and psychologically.”<sup>159</sup>

When it comes to repair, impact matters more than intent. Repair is essential to healthy relationships, and reducing opportunities for perpetual harm is important. However, as will be repeated many times in this thesis, using trauma theory, better theology, or embodiment practices attempting to create a perfect system where repair is never needed is another measure of conflict avoidance and high control that works against the repair relationships *will* need.

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<sup>154</sup> Dana, *Anchored*, 11.

<sup>155</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 106.

<sup>156</sup> The good news is that “dependable” means getting it right about 50% of the time. Susan S. Woodhouse et al., “Secure Base Provision: A New Approach to Examining Links between Maternal Caregiving and Infant Attachment,” *Child Development* 91, no. 1 (February 11, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13224>.

<sup>157</sup> Here are some common mutual attributes of secure attachment relationships: they are emotionally supportive, you feel seen and understood, you feel appreciated and valued, you can reach out for help and depend on a response that fuels authentic connection, you trust you can navigate conflict authentically, they are emotionally safe, and there is a confidence in the connection. A summary from Julie Menanno, *Secure Love: Create a Relationship That Lasts a Lifetime* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2024), 4-5.

<sup>158</sup> Dana, *Anchored*, 12.

<sup>159</sup> Dana, *Anchored*, 23.

## It's Not What You Think

Much of the Western world, including the church, is oriented around the illusion that we are thinking-first and thinking-most (abstractionist) creatures. However, Deb Dana, says the opposite is true. “While we may think our brains are in charge, the heart of our daily experience and the way we navigate the world begins in our bodies with the autonomic nervous system.”<sup>160</sup>

Encouraging someone to pray, trust God, have more faith, or that their suffering is all part of God’s plan may be well-intended. Still, it generally results in suppression and bypassing of authentic needs. As McBride writes, “Theology and intellect aren’t superior to the physical aspect of human experience, but we have a history of using them as a way to escape, or bypass, the difficult realities of our bodily existence.”<sup>161</sup>

Upholding systems and beliefs that run counter to human flourishing has a negative and lasting impact on our individual and collective bodies.<sup>162</sup> Though a belief or practice may look like it has helped, this chapter will show that the body, specifically the nervous system, knows the difference.

## Notes on the Nervous System

The nervous system is activated when the body senses a threat. Anderson explains:

The nervous system is our body’s command center—think of a motherboard from *Star Trek*. The nervous system originates in the brain and controls everything we do, including breathing, body temperature, movement, thinking and feeling; it controls our automatic response and the various systems of our body; such as our digestive and immune systems. The nervous system is made up of our brain, our spinal cord, and all the nerves in our body; our nerves carry messages to and from our body and brain so that we can take in the information around us and respond accordingly.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Dana, *Anchored*, 13.

<sup>161</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of the Body*, 37.

<sup>162</sup> The previously mentioned pageant comment may have been just another poorly timed “dad joke.” Though I laughed along, it was an internally confirming and condemning moment. This man represented the church and was God’s authoritative spokesperson. He unknowingly poured salt on a psychic wound my body received loud and clear. Like myriad young women before me, I learned that being my true self was a problem that jeopardized my relational and eternal safety. Cultural mores around the role of women in the church and doctrinal teachings of innate depravity and original sin solidified my experience. The only “repair” available was connecting the dots and falling in line, no matter how it turned my stomach in knots and made me hate who I was. And once again, the church affirmed my self-loathing and called it spiritually good.

<sup>163</sup> Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 64.

The body moves in and out of different nervous system states all the time.<sup>164</sup> In the best sense, these states work together, getting activated in ways that make it possible for us to play or rest.<sup>165</sup> Our nervous system is appropriately activated when we need the courage to stand up and fight against injustice or to set a boundary and flee a situation that isn't good for us. When the nervous system is functioning, we reach out to people to meet our needs.<sup>166</sup> The nervous system is part of what keeps us safe and makes us aware of what needs to be felt and expressed. "Even a trauma response is a resource, helping you to get ready just in case and to stay safe after things have been very unsafe."<sup>167</sup> Healing and embodiment aren't in competition with nervous system activation. There is no need to vilify or try to get rid of nervous system responses.

We naturally travel between states, routinely moving out of ventral regulation into sympathetic or dorsal dysregulation and back again. Leaving regulation isn't the problem. In fact, the goal is not to stay in a state of regulation but rather to know where we are, recognize where we're moving out of regulation and being pulled into a survival response, and be able to return to regulation.<sup>168</sup>

Ideally, the body has an adaptive and flexible nervous system and we learn to be in conversation with our soma, so we can confidently move through the activation cycle in a way that promotes flourishing and healing.<sup>169</sup> If we have a positive and secure relationship with ourselves and the nervous system, we will discover that "...our body already knows the answers about how to live a full, present, connected and healthy life."<sup>170</sup>

### **The Sabre-Toothed Conundrum**

When the nervous system is activated in response to any kind of threat, internal systems get the message that they must *get ready to do something*. Those "somethings" are related to different levels of nervous system activation and have been categorized as fight, flight, freeze and fawn.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> The entire subconscious system is referred to as the Autonomic Nervous System. There are three main components to the nervous system. The ventral vagal, the sympathetic and the dorsal vagal.

<sup>165</sup> Activation is one term used when describing how the nervous system moves from the "regulated" Ventral Vagal system into "dysregulated" states of Sympathetic and Dorsal Vagal states. Others use "up-regulate" or "down-regulate" to describe the path away from or towards regulation. "Dysregulation" is technically correct as well, though in my experience, it tends to carry a negative or pathologized stigma. Because of this, I will generally use activation as the processes can be positive, neutral or negative depending on the context.

<sup>166</sup> This initial impetus of the nervous system to reach out to others is called the social engagement system or SES.

<sup>167</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 46.

<sup>168</sup> Dana, *Anchored*, 22.

<sup>169</sup> An ideal nervous system arc starts with moving from the Ventral Vagal to the Sympathetic, and if necessary, to the Dorsal Vagal, then back through the Sympathetic to the Ventral Vagal again.

<sup>170</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 46.

<sup>171</sup> The term *fawn* is credited to Pete Walker who first used it in his book *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*. The collective terms fight, flight, freeze and fawn are frequently referred to as the 4Fs.

These embodied responses “happen subconsciously in a split second... We do not rationally think through our options. Instead, our nervous system begins determining if we can intimidate the threat (fight), get away from the threat (flight), appease the threat (fawn) or make the threat lose interest (freeze).”<sup>172</sup>

Nervous system activation is often explained by imagining the somatic response to being chased by a sabre-toothed tiger. The tiger chase is a helpful example because it normalizes how the human body historically responded to threats, *and* one can easily imagine how that physical threat might impact the body.

Upon sensing or seeing the threat, the body sends a surge of adrenaline and cortisol, and the heart rate increases.<sup>173</sup> One might yell for help and if no help comes, the body gets ready to fight or run from this formidable threat. If the body assessed that combat or escape wasn’t possible, it might escalate the activation by trying to befriend the threat or reduce engagement by dropping down and playing dead. After surviving the attack, the body may shake or cry to release the tension and adrenaline, and the survivor may find themselves telling the story of their harrowing experience to anyone who will listen.<sup>174</sup>

In this extreme scenario, the arc of a healthy nervous system and the physical manifestations of moving from danger and activation back into rest and safety seem clear. The *trouble* with the sabre-toothed tiger example is that it might seem like overt physical danger is the *only* threat that should cause this type of embodied response or that nervous system activation is an unhelpful leftover from the Paleolithic Period that has no business in our current context.

The brain-body system is wired for both survival *and social connection*. “Because we are social creatures who need connection and relationship to survive, the threats we experience most often happen between us and other people.”<sup>175</sup> The autonomic nervous system is as relational as it is physical. Our nervous system covertly converses with other people’s nervous systems<sup>176</sup> all the time!<sup>177</sup> It always scans the environment, subconsciously looking for connection, context and choice that communicates the presence or lack of safety. The body is meant to respond to all types of threats, whether those threats are real, remembered, or perceived.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 70. We will explore these responses further along in this chapter.

<sup>173</sup> Deb Dana, *Polyvagal Flip Chart Understanding the Science of Safety* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Incorporated, 2020), n.p.

<sup>174</sup> This describes a completed “trauma cycle”. When this happens, the body will have experienced stress, but it will generally not be stored as trauma. It is in the interrupted or incomplete cycle that the body will store the stress-energy as trauma and have triggers and trauma responses because of it.

<sup>175</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 60.

<sup>176</sup> Deb Dana, *Polyvagal Flip Chart*, n.p.

<sup>177</sup> This process of taking in information about risk and safety without conscious awareness is referred to as neuroception. Dana, *Polyvagal flipchart*, n.p.

<sup>178</sup> Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 29.

Our body has learned from our earliest environments that the world is *also* full of *relational* sabre-toothed tigers. Relational or otherwise, the nervous system responds whether the body *sees* a tiger, *sees a threat similar to* a tiger, or *thinks* it sees a tiger. Further, the more (relational) sabre-toothed experiences the body has, the more acutely aware, adaptive and protective it becomes. With enough traumatic and unrepaired experiences, the nervous system might be triggered, and the body may jump and run or get ready to fight whenever it hears the (relational) leaves rustle! This activation may indicate a chronically unsafe environment *or* it may mean that we need to do the work to downregulate our system to become familiar with what feeling safe feels like again.<sup>179</sup>

### **Attachment, Nervous Systems, and Trauma**

Understanding the autonomic nervous system can illuminate how we build secure or insecure connections and how relational trauma, including religious trauma, happens. Imagine the subconscious conversation in the autonomic nervous system: “Something feels off between us/in this place. Is this person unsafe? They look upset. What did they just say? Is that my fault? I feel anxious—help!” The body is flooded with the same sabre-toothed responses as before because of the threat to the *relational connection*. When reaching out for connection is met with attunement<sup>180</sup> and co-regulation,<sup>181</sup> the activation cycle can complete its loop. The body learns that in this context, the authentic self is welcome and relational connection is safe. On the other hand, when reaching out is met in an unsafe and mismatched way, or the body receives messages that it is bad or shameful, the nervous system will continue to escalate. The body will learn that these types of relationships are unsafe. They may subconsciously conclude that the authentic self must adapt to maintain a “safe” connection.<sup>182</sup>

### **Nervous System Stuckness**

Through repeated experiences or inescapable relational threats, the nervous system can get chronically stuck. When caught in chronic mobilization energy, the body can be emotionally reactive,

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<sup>179</sup> I maintain that the relational element is far more precarious for the body to navigate. People can “sabre-tooth attack” you— first by harming you, then by telling you it never happened, or that you imagined it, or that you caused it, making nervous system regulation all the more challenging. This is in part why relational complex trauma is so very complex.

<sup>180</sup> Attunement is the felt sense that somebody “gets us,” when someone shifts their emotional responses to match the needs of the situation we feel attuned to.

<sup>181</sup> Co-regulation is when someone is able to offer their regulated nervous system to someone who is experiencing activation and dysregulation. This includes reassuring, allowing emotional expression, amplifying the message of emotional and physical safety, etc. This helps the dysregulated system “return home” to a regulated state.

<sup>182</sup> “We can be in a safe place, with a safe person, and “feel unsafe,” to the extent that we assess them, their actions, and intentions as harmful, when there is little or no grounding for this. Other times, we can be in an unsafe place or with a person who is harming us, and “feel safe.” In other words our “feeling” of safety can be a mis-assessment based on the familiarity of harmful environments, and the effects of trauma and oppression on our somas. Tricky.” Haines, *Politics of Trauma*, 137.

hypervigilant, anxious and alarmed. Here, the nervous system is stuck in the “on position”—the first stage of activation. Conversely, chronic immobilization may look like emotional shut-down, depression, or feeling disconnected from the body in many ways. In this case, the nervous system is stuck in the “off” position. Therefore, the context of relational threats is just as real to the body as physical threats, and relational, religious and theological trauma is just as impactful as any physically traumatic incident.

In all scenarios, problems emerge when one can’t complete a nervous system cycle from activation back to regulation. Over time, the nervous system will choose the familiar pathways of “stuckness” even though it negatively impacts the body. This familiar stuckness also relates to the normalization of insecure relationship patterns. If one must continually suppress or deny authenticity to achieve belonging, the nervous system will also adapt to those familiar relational patterns. Having a nervous system chronically stuck “on” or “off” is traumatic and can lead to many psychological and physiological complications.<sup>183</sup> And, as the next chapter will show, when dysregulation becomes systemically acculturated, there are deep implications for the body that feels normal but run counter to individual and collective flourishing. To better recognize their cultural expressions, this chapter will conclude by further exploring the four manifestations of nervous system activation: fight, flight, freeze and fawn.

### **Fight and Flight**

If social engagement fails, fight and flight, perhaps the most well-known instinctual nervous system responses, are always the first line of defence. In addition to intimidation, fight energy “defends” connection by getting bigger or more active, moving closer to the center of activity. On the other hand, flight energy “protects” connection by becoming smaller, more passive and disengaged from the troubling encounter.

Fight or flight are not always viable options.<sup>184</sup> This unavailability can be dictated by the cultural norms, power, and privilege a person has available to them. For example, consider what is “allowed” based on gender in much of Western culture. Women are discouraged *from* or dismissed *for* showing anger (fight), and men *aren’t allowed* to show fear (flight). Fight or flight are also not available to the young or infirm; they are too dependent or inexperienced to self-protect in these ways. When fight or flight are ineffective or unavailable, the body moves into the next level of

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<sup>183</sup> Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 69.

<sup>184</sup> Technically, the body will still move through this state, but it will happen so fast it might not be identifiable. These states are not determined by the prefrontal cortex, or logical centres of the brain, but by the much faster more responsive instinctual or limbic parts of the brain.

nervous system activation. It initiates freeze and fawn responses aimed at suppressing authentic expressions of self.

## Freeze

Freeze is an involuntary and subconscious protective response that allows one to disappear or seem “fine” in an unsafe experience by putting the body’s ability to respond on ice. Freeze makes it possible to survive the overwhelm of a traumatic experience. However, the freeze response doesn’t *actually* prevent harm from being internalized. Instead, it sets up a sophisticated internal system that attempts to suppress, ignore or avoid the pain and overwhelm. Freezing might save your life, but chronically having to play dead on the inside causes harm over time. “A traumatized nervous system never gets to *unfreeze*.”<sup>185</sup> The nervous system may adapt by “feeling” numb, dissociating, or collapsing (internally or externally). The challenge, then, is to create enough safety so the body can feel and process what has previously felt scary and overwhelming.

## Fawn

The fawn response is the fourth and most recent addition to the expanding typology of nervous system responses. Fawn is uniquely adept at avoiding cultural detection. Fawn, the “please and appease” response, “is triggered when a person responds to a threat by trying to be pleasing and helpful in order to please and forestall an attacker.”<sup>186</sup>

The fawn response is just as unconscious as any of the other trauma responses, if not more so because of cultural norms and expectations towards people-pleasing. Fawn, like freeze, is the body’s way of keeping the authentic self numbed and hidden from those who hold the keys to their safety and belonging. As Pete Walker notes, “The implicit code of fawn type is that it is safer to [1] to listen than to talk [2] to agree than to dissent, [3] to offer care than to ask for help, [4] to elicit the other than to express yourself and [5] to leave choices to the other than to express preferences.”<sup>187</sup>

Whether it’s a woman smiling through uneasy discomfort at unwelcome romantic advances or a subordinate constantly appeasing their demanding boss, the fawn response requires the victim to “play along” to maintain safety. Cooperative and nuanced, it is especially tricky to identify. It can appear cooperative in one context. Next, it may be combative or avoidant. It all depends on who the body determines it needs to appease *the most*. Fawn is the suppressed people-pleasing response—while the body says no, the fawn response says, “I’d love to.”

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<sup>185</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 28

<sup>186</sup> Pete Walker, *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving* (Lafayette, CA: Azure Coyote, 2013), 13.

<sup>187</sup> Walker, *Complex PTSD*, 133.

The nervous system responds to threats and can rapidly move through fight, flight, freeze, fawn, or any combination. These subconscious responses happen long before our brain's pre-frontal cortex, or “logical” parts, comes online. This is why bringing somatic responses into our conscious awareness is critical, and offering embodied healing experiences is essential when engaging with traumatic wounding.

## **In Conclusion**

Attachment relationships are how we form embodied connections of relational safety, even in the church. As a young girl, I learned my authentic self was too much *and* not enough for God and my faith community. I had no option but to adapt and survive. As a result, normalized cycles of nervous system activation became my way of staying alive.

To restate, often, we have *no other choice*, especially when we are young, vulnerable, and don't consciously realize our nervous system is activated. Research affirms that the internal suppression and tailoring of the self come at the cost of our mental, physical, and spiritual health. “If a gene or virus were found that caused the same impacts on the population's well-being as disconnection does, news of it would bellow from front-page headlines. Because it transpires on so many levels and so pervasively, we almost take it for granted.”<sup>188</sup> Dysregulation was my normal. Chronic fight, flight, freeze and fawn all served to keep a *type* of relational connection, but that relationship was terribly insecure, and my body and mental health paid the price.

Ultimately, our bodies can only tell the truth about the *impact* of the human experience and how safe or unsafe we have felt. Identifying and healing these wounds is especially difficult when dysregulation isn't merely a byproduct of traumatic aberrations but culturally elevated. The next chapter will show the dire consequences and compounding effects that result when trauma and trauma responses become noble and necessary pursuits within a religious community.

## **PRACTICE 3**

Belonging is essential for secure relational attachments. One of the ways we can begin to build and repair our insecure patterns of relating is to start with the body and restore the way we have disconnected our mind from our body and traded authenticity for attachment. As McBride states: “Embodied experience is undeniably the most effective pathway for change.”<sup>189</sup>

Trauma creates inner fragmentation. A phrase that is synonymous with trauma healing in the world of therapy is integration. It implies that the parts of us that we had to cut off or silence find

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<sup>188</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 287.

<sup>189</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 43.



healing or are *integrated* when those fragmented parts are brought back home and allowed to exist and be expressed, restoring wholeness. “One way to generate integration is to think of your mind and your body as friends.”<sup>190</sup>

To that end, the practice in this chapter will be the simple but profound act of identifying somatic sensations or emotional responses and offering gratitude and self-compassion as a way to connect and begin conversing with parts of you. “Emotional exploration unfolds like layers of an onion. As you peel back one layer, a fresh layer emerges. Gaining understanding of emotions is a lifelong practice.”<sup>191</sup>

This exercise can help build resiliency and responsiveness. *Our nervous system responses are oriented towards protecting and keeping us safe.* Being safe is a great intention and a necessary measure in a moment of relational disconnection. When those experiences get “stuck” or unresolved, the impact of those protective measures and nervous system states can harm us or others.

As we bring patterns of self-abandonment to light, many difficult emotions<sup>192</sup> might arise when we see that we *had* to hurt ourselves and hide our authenticity to stay connected with others. Conversely, it can be a lot to take into consideration the ways our self-protection has led to harming others. Compassion for harmful actions is *intended* to help us increase our capacity for accountability and help us move back to a more grounded and connected state.<sup>193</sup> We can learn to hold two things—that we did our best *and* that our best had an outcome that needs accountability and repair. Intentions often get misplaced in the repair process. They do not excuse impact or the need for accountability, but they are helpful in healing our connection with ourselves. In essence, this practice observes how we have disconnected from our good hearts and good bodies to maintain connection or safety and says, “Forgive me, body. I didn’t know what I was doing.” If we can turn towards any bodily sensation, defence, or emotional reaction and meet it with radical compassion, we are on our way to healing, becoming more integrous, and building the capacity to be more authentic and

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<sup>190</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 44.

<sup>191</sup> Hendel, *It’s Not Always Depression*, 29.

<sup>192</sup> Hendel uses a “Change Triangle” model to help move from distress to clarity. She identifies *defences*, like inflexibility or avoidance, that keep us from being emotionally overwhelmed; then *inhibitory emotions*—“first responder emotions” like shame, anxiety and disgust, that show up to help “keep us in line” so we stay relationally connected. Inhibitory emotions also keep us from being overwhelmed by *core emotions*. Core feelings like anger, sadness and joy, contain the wisdom of what we really need, or what we like and don’t like. This knowledge is hard to access when we are dysregulated. When we are distressed, moving through the change triangle with compassion and care is how we can make our way back to the Authentic Self that is calm, curious, connected, compassionate, confident, courageous and clear. A change triangle diagram is offered in the appendices, though I’d really recommend reading the whole book! The 7 C’s that Hendel references are part of the Internal Family Systems (IFS) modality, developed by Richard Schwartz. Hendel, *It’s Not Always Depression*, 15-25.

<sup>193</sup> It is never the victim’s responsibility to assuage or comfort a perpetrator for how bad they feel about causing harm. The point is to have self-compassion. This can give you the strength to face the music and be accountable. Friere writes about how oppressors and perpetrators dehumanize themselves when they dehumanize and harm others. Friere, *Pedagogy*, 21.

accountable. That is to say, it's very difficult to offer repair to others when we've caused hurt if we haven't experienced repair within ourselves.

### **In Practice: Gratitude and Radical Compassion**

This will be written as a gratitude practice; however, if that feels like too much of a stretch, try adapting the scripts to simply *acknowledge* instead.

- Get yourself in a comfortable position. If it feels helpful, put your hand on your heart and close your eyes as you turn inward.
- Consider the role that fight, flight, freeze and fawn have played in keeping you alive.  
*In my story, I remember feeling frozen when I got called out.*
- If you can, allow any emotions, thoughts, or experiences related to this to show themselves. *I could see how freeze showed up, along with a feeling of shame to try and slow me down and keep me out of trouble. I felt ashamed of so many things in this story: my gender, my personality, my inability to stay small, and my desire to be like Mary.*
- When an emotion, a defence, or a bodily sensation shows up, picture yourself turning towards it. If possible, name it, and thank your body. For example, when I recognized it, I said, “*I see you, shame. Thank you for doing your best to keep me safe.*”
- Next, offer this part of you radical compassion if it feels possible. “*You sweet thing, of course we froze. Of course we felt shame. We didn't know better. We couldn't do better at the time. It was the only way you knew to react.*”
- Notice how your body and your mind respond. Whatever it is, can you allow it?
- Next, if it feels right, try repairing with yourself. Moving to repair may take time and many experiences of compassionate inquiry. I needed to hear that I was good, that my personality wasn't wrong, and that all of me was welcomed and needed in the world. And maybe there were parts of me that were just right to play Mary—because what a fierce woman she was! I offered it to myself. I told myself the truth, *and I felt a wave of calm settle over my body.*
- To close this practice, simply thank your body for what it felt safe to show you. Take a deep breath and open your eyes, reorienting yourself again to the present moment.

## CHAPTER 4 - NORMALIZED IS AS NORMALIZED DOES

*“People are trapped in history  
and history is trapped in them”<sup>194</sup>*

### **In Review**

As previously stated, chronic negative experiences are often normalized and become elements of culture, regardless if they are truly beneficial to human flourishing. It can be especially difficult to name and look at harmful patterns in religious environments because these environments create “safety” by externalizing, minimizing or denying the traumatic impact.<sup>195</sup> Regardless of the fervency towards dissonant beliefs or the normalcy of audacious practices, the impact of acculturated trauma is there. Dana writes, “Persistent experiences like being surrounded by difficult people, living in a place that feels unsafe, or working in an environment that feels toxic can bring an ongoing cortisol response that feels like a swirl of energy and leaves you in an unending and unattainable search for calm.”<sup>196</sup>

This chapter will show that in the Western Church, with its reliance on abstractionism, cultural patterns of traumatic retention are not only the norm but preferred. Many abusive theologies pass the test of orthodoxy, and many spiritual practices in service of those theologies are held in high regard. However, the body shows that many practices perpetuate chronic nervous system dysregulation. What the beliefs and practices produce—the orthokarpos—is normalized trauma and acculturated abuse that demands we collectively wake up and pay attention. It matters how we use our theological paradigms, and when it’s used to avoid confronting abuse, it isn’t grace, it’s theological malpractice.

### **Trauma Meets Theology and Culture**

Resmaa Menakem writes, “Trauma hurts. It can fill us with reflexive fear, anxiety, depression, and shame. It can cause us to fly off the handle; to reflexively retreat and disappear; to do things that don’t make sense, even to ourselves; or, sometimes, to harm others or ourselves.”<sup>197</sup> The impacts of trauma on our bodies, our history and those around us are serious and worthy of attention.

Bessel van der Kolk writes, “Because humans are meaning-making creatures, we have a tendency to create some sort of image or story out of those inkblots... What people make out of these

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<sup>194</sup> James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012), 167.

<sup>195</sup> McBride, “Holy/Hurt Podcast Episode 1,”

<sup>196</sup> Dana, *Anchored*, 21.

<sup>197</sup> Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, 41.

blots can tell us a lot about how their minds work.”<sup>198</sup> In religious communities, we make meaning of the painful inkblots endemic to life through our theological ideologies and traditions. It is problematic if our spiritual meanings and practices actually excuse abuse and reinforce trauma responses.

Responses, even theological responses, to traumatic experiences make sense in context. Bad things happen, and humans are driven to figure out why. Sometimes, in that process, spiritual habits are developed that help us in the short term, but over time, they prove to be detrimental or even absurd. As Maté says, “...many actions and beliefs that look like pure insanity from one perspective make sense from another—and *always made sense at the start.*”<sup>199</sup>

Abstractionist systems pose a challenge because one can easily become identified with the belief when beliefs are the pinnacle of truth required for belonging. This makes taking a step back to assess the impacts of our meaning-making very difficult. Just because traditions are culturally considered true, right and “biblical,” does not mean they accurately reflect God, are healthy or produce mutual goodness. We are permitted, perhaps even required, to move closer and see what kind of fruit those beliefs produce.

## **When Trauma Becomes Where You Live**

The following sections are informed by Maté’s summary of six chronic trauma constraints as outlined in *The Myth of Normal*. In each section, I will show how chronic constraints are communally expressed and how trauma states have become preferred and even needed to maintain connection within Western Christian culture. Obviously, not every example will apply to every Christian community at all times; however, variations of these ideologies are prominent to varying degrees across the Western Church. Additionally, many of these examples could fit into multiple categories. The list is representative of the manifestations of trauma, but it is in no way complete or exhaustive. Regardless, it’s imperative to see the perpetual traumatic impact that sacrosanct ideas and practices in the Western Church can have. Orthokarpos matters.

### **1) Trauma separates us from our bodies.**

When we experience a traumatic event, be it physical, emotional or spiritual, the experience is “too much, too fast, too soon” for the body, and the nervous system is activated to respond. Separation from the body through any combination of nervous system responses will help manage feeling overwhelmed in the moment; however, the body longs to restore safety to process the pain and restore the connection. As McBride points out, this return to

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<sup>198</sup> Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*. 16.

<sup>199</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 260.

safety can be thwarted for various reasons. “Sometimes we don’t receive safe and gentle touch, hear loving words, or have the opportunity to discharge the stress energy.”<sup>200</sup>

This disconnection can be exacerbated when “the constrictions and inhibitions around emotional expression, race or gender scripts...make our innate capacity to heal seem dangerous or untrustworthy.”<sup>201</sup> Haines writes, “We are taught to distance from sensations and the body, rather than living inside them. This distancing from lived experience, from feeling aliveness, also prepares us to be quick to objectify others and other types of life (soil, air, trees, animals).”<sup>202</sup> Trauma impacts our connection to empathy and other sensory information that informs our ability to grow in wisdom and interdependence.

Consider what may happen when a high-control spiritual community has narratives and biblical interpretations in which the body, body sexuality, and body expression are vilified, dismissed, or suppressed.<sup>203</sup>

### **My Stumbling Block**

I remember the internalized horror of finding out that my body was a cause of temptation and sin for the boys in my youth group and grown men in my church. If they struggled or stumbled with lust, I was to blame. Later, as a newly minted wife, I was reminded that my body was meant to be pleasing, always available and beautiful for my husband, lest he give in to adulterous temptation. But also, it had to be unnoticeable by anyone else. Again, if anyone strayed, I was to blame. These beliefs were laminated to the preexisting truth that doing anything wrong resulted in eternal punishment.<sup>204</sup> Hiding my body and numbing body sensations became the norm. Numbing comes at a high cost, as many healing from the effects of purity culture can attest.

### **Sanctified Disconnection**

Some other common scripts that may normalize the separation of our authentic selves from our bodies include:

- The Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

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<sup>200</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 66.

<sup>201</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 66.

<sup>202</sup> Haines, *Politics of Trauma*, 39.

<sup>203</sup> “Many of us have also inherited, whether Christian or not, a deep orientation towards the body as sinful, or as base and shameful. This sets us into a very complex and confusing relationship with the most intimate aspects of life, and the organism we and other humans actually are.” Haines, *Politics of Trauma*, 39.

<sup>204</sup> This is part of what makes complex (religious) trauma complex. There are often layers of beliefs and traumatic experiences interacting with and informing each other at a subconscious level.

- Being in a same-sex relationship is an abomination<sup>205</sup> and evidence of your sinful brokenness.<sup>206</sup>
- You must align with strict cultural gender binaries, or you are sinning against God.<sup>207</sup>
- Moral and spiritual purity is equated to sexual/bodily purity.<sup>208</sup>
- Certain emotions are sinful.<sup>209</sup>
- Purity Culture.<sup>210</sup>

### **But I Never Touched Her**

In this and other acculturated trauma experiences in the Western Church, the body no longer needs an “official” traumatic experience or specific perpetrator to move into a state of activation and chronic dysregulation. The theological beliefs and standards that keep one communally approved, eternally safe *and* connected to God *are so embedded with* chronic trauma constraints that one instigates self-harm and subconsciously self-traumatizes to “keep the faith.” It’s a very effective means of control. As Panchuk points out, one is unable to see the trauma as a negative experience because it is merely a necessary facet of being a “good Christian.”<sup>211</sup> Systems saturated in normalized trauma create a chronic loop of powerlessness, reactivation, and confirmation bias. For example, when individuals are told they are wicked from conception, they feel anxious. This anxiety is then interpreted to be evidence of their sinful state.

By design, the body is an interlocutor and interpreter of interrelational experience. However, it becomes an outsider in Evangelicalism and other forms of Western Christianity. Rather than an honoured truth-teller, a body response is a villain to overcome.<sup>212</sup> The pain of these experiences is summarily dismissed due to the primacy of beliefs that celebrate

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<sup>205</sup> Michelle Lynn Panchuk et al., *Voices from the Edge: Centring Marginalized Perspectives in Analytic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 121.

<sup>206</sup> John Piper, “Homosexuality,” *Desiring God*, March 1, 2024, <https://www.desiringgod.org/topics/homosexuality>.

<sup>207</sup> Ray Ortlund Ortlund and Sam Alberry, “TGC Q&A Podcast: Identity, Sex, and Gender,” The Gospel Coalition, February 12, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/q-a-podcast/identity-sex-and-gender/>.

<sup>208</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 34.

<sup>209</sup> Cheryl Bell, “Emotions: Sinful or Sanctified,” Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, accessed May 3, 2024, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/product/emotions-sinful-or-sanctified/>.

<sup>210</sup> Eric N Benton, “A Mixed Methods Evaluation of the Relationship between Purity Culture and Sexual Shame,” *PhD Diss.*, University of Texas at Austin, April 2022, <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/47294>. For another example of the deleterious effects of purity culture, see Kaelyn R Griffin, “An Examination of the Association of Religiosity, Purity Culture, and Religious Trauma With Symptoms of Depression and Anxiety,” *PhD Diss.*, University of Nevada, 2023.

<sup>211</sup> Panchuk, “Distorting Concepts,” 7.

<sup>212</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 31.

disembodiment—and thus, chronic nervous system activation becomes the norm. When dissociation and body hatred are held as noble pursuits,

...we cannot move through the processes that allow our nervous system to climb the staircase to safety, or when we try to socially engage, and all we get is more judgment and criticism, our systems never get the message that the pain is over. As a result, instead of moving from pain to safety, our systems move from pain to pain.<sup>213</sup>

## 2) Trauma splits us off from gut feelings.

As stated earlier, when fight-or-flight responses are impossible, freeze-and-fawn responses suppress gut-level impulses.<sup>214</sup> This results in “a tamping down of one’s feeling world and often, for extra protection, the hardening of one’s psychic shell.”<sup>215</sup>

With this complex system of nervous system responses in mind, consider how variations of these commonly held beliefs contribute to and normalize the silencing of our internal systems designed to alert us to dangerous people, ideas or situations.

- Doctrines pertaining to original sin and innate depravity declare humanity is inherently wicked and led astray by fleshly desires.<sup>216</sup>
- Purity culture, in its diverse forms and expressions, communicates that bodies are impure and pleasure is scary or sinful.<sup>217</sup>
- Grief and anger must be carefully managed, resolved, and ought not to be directed at God.<sup>218</sup>
- Messages such as, “The heart is deceitful above all things, who can understand it?”<sup>219</sup>
- Emphasis or cultural preferences for external authority and the “spiritual covering” pastors, leadership, and denominations provide.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 67.

<sup>214</sup> In this reel, Gabor Maté explains the difference between a gut-level impulse and an emotional reaction. He points out that gut level impulses are usually accompanied by peace, rather than anxiety or intensity. Gabor Maté, ed. The Embody Lab Instagram, The Embody Lab, April 24, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/theembodilab/reel/C6JIUOAsuva/>.

<sup>215</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 28.

<sup>216</sup> John Piper, “The Nature of Our Depravity,” Desiring God, April 19, 2007, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-nature-of-our-depravity>.

<sup>217</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 34.

<sup>218</sup> R.C. Sproule, “Is It a Sin to Be Angry with God?,” Ligonier Ministries, 2015, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/qas/is-it-a-sin-to-be-angry-with-god>.

<sup>219</sup> Jeremiah 17:9. A much older translation in the Brenton LXX Septuagint reads: “The heart is deep beyond all things, and it is the man, and who can know him?” That lands differently, doesn’t it?

<sup>220</sup> “Apostles and Spiritual Covering,” Peace Apostolic Ministries, accessed May 3, 2024, <https://www.peace.org.au/apostolic/the-apostolic-revelation/apostles-and-spiritual-covering.html>.

- Preconceived (and often ill-founded) assumptions of leaders and systems being a source of safety can lead to compounding layers of trauma.<sup>221</sup>
- Emotions should be ignored and chastened.<sup>222</sup> The last thing one should consider is how they feel or emotionally respond to something.<sup>223</sup> True faith requires you to hold fast to the “inerrant” biblical and community interpretations or risk expulsion.<sup>224</sup>

### 3) Trauma limits response flexibility.

Maté describes response flexibility as “the ability to choose how we address life’s inevitable ups and downs, its disappointments, triumphs and challenges.”<sup>225</sup> Response flexibility is part of the natural maturation process, allowing more space, time and consideration between incident and response. It makes repair possible by increasing the ability to hold the impact of harm without rushing to defend intentions or ignorance.

Rigidity, defensiveness, and emotional immaturity are markers of response *inflexibility*, but their behavioural expressions are frequently lionized within Western Christian culture as unwavering faith, unyielding integrity, and praiseworthy zealotry.

- When harmful practices and doctrines relating to the equality of women and inclusion of 2SLGBTQIA+ members of society come to consciousness, conservative organizations respond with knee-jerk manifestos like the Nashville statement professing their moral imperative to “keep the faith,” regardless of who is harmed.<sup>226</sup>
- In response to increased egalitarian paradigms,<sup>227</sup> the Danvers Statement was released with the pious goal of maintaining hierarchical “biblical roles” for men and women.<sup>228</sup>

<sup>221</sup> Michelle Panchuk, “The Shattered Spiritual Self: A Philosophical Exploration of Religious Trauma,” *Res Philosophica* 95, no. 3 (2018): 505–30, <https://doi.org/10.11612/resphil.1684>. 512.

<sup>222</sup> Stone, *Thou Shalt Not*, 324

<sup>223</sup> James Dobson wrote a book with essentially this as the title. When viewing his books through a trauma-informed lens, it is difficult to overstate the way his teaching primed the pump for high control through chronic and normalized abuse. Dr James Dobson, *Emotions Can You Trust Them?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 2014).

<sup>224</sup> See: the Fact-Faith-Feeling Train. Bill Bright, *Four Spiritual Laws: The Basics Series* (Peach Tree City, GA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 2007), 12.

<sup>225</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 29.

<sup>226</sup> CBMW and The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, “Nashville Statement,” CBMW, July 8, 2022, <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement/>.

<sup>227</sup> Egalitarianism is the belief that all people should have equal rights and opportunities. In the Western Church, this is usually used to describe leadership structures or marriages. Complementarianism is the belief that men and women have distinct roles that “compliment” each other. Men lead, women follow and support them. This usually applies to church leadership and most marriages.

<sup>228</sup> CBMW.org, “The Danvers Statement,” CBMW, November 1988, <https://cbmw.org/about/danvers-statement/>. Other churches commit “sins of omission” by refusing to speak against such harmful statements or taking a more publicly ambiguous, but in practice, just as hardline approach to exclusion.



- Perceiving innocuous pop culture phenomena as threats.<sup>229</sup>
- Social media outrage over the latest trends or cultural moment while ignoring, celebrating or condoning multiple horrors and hellscape unfolding across the earth.

Response inflexibility is endemic in the Western Church. Rather than a steadfast and unyielding response towards injustice and oppression, these systems consistently double down and defend. Instead of honouring the instincts of self-trust and autonomy, people push back and practice “tough love” and rejection, claiming they know best. In lieu of humility and contrition towards in-house harm and abuse, it is common in Western Christian culture to rally the troops to attack and defend against the allegations. Curiosity, questions and doubts are enemies of the state when response flexibility is low.

#### **4) Trauma fosters a shame-based view of the Self.**

“People bearing trauma’s scars almost uniformly develop a shame-based view of themselves at the core, a negative self-perception most of them are all too conscious of. Among the most poisonous consequences of shame is the loss of compassion for oneself. The more severe the trauma, the more the total loss.”<sup>230</sup>

The impacts of shame on us collectively and individually cannot be overstated. Almost every trauma constraint has shame involved in one way or another. However, some have a more direct connection to shame. This includes but isn’t limited to:

- Abusive doctrines rooted in shame, such as total depravity, original sin and hell.<sup>231</sup>
- Valorizing unworthiness—i.e., believing that Jesus “took the punishment that you deserved” or that grace is something you don’t deserve.
- Scapegoating<sup>232</sup>—shaming and blaming others, especially those who are from already marginalized and oppressed groups.
- Perfectionism, hypervigilance, self-hatred and other ways we mitigate shame are seen as pursuits of holiness.
- Shaming normal human development, especially as it relates to children.

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<sup>229</sup> For example, the Satanic Panic of the 1980s, Harry Potter, the Cabbage Patch Kids, the Smurfs, Starbucks, Taylor Swift, etc.

<sup>230</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 30.

<sup>231</sup> Tabitha Sheeder, “When God is an Abuser: Dismantling the Abusive Gospel of Original Sin, Penal Substitutionary Atonement, and Eternal Conscious Torment ” (dissertation, 2023).

<sup>232</sup> See: The woman tempted me...it was someone else’s fault...it’s reverse racism...I was just joking

## The Real Slippery Slope

Ideas, beliefs, and practices are embodied regardless of one's awareness. Learning the somatic conditioned responses of shame imprinted through theology and practice is essential. For example, does conflict cause the body to tense up, numb, or emotionally collapse? How does one establish emotional, physical or relational safety? Is there an inclination to incorporate or resist new information and ideas? Without addressing the underlying shame in institutions, society, and the body itself, we are bound to repeat patterns that have been identified with shame and our dysregulated defensiveness, even if beliefs have been changed.

For example, switching denominations, deconverting or deconstructing theologies of terror is not the same as healing from the trauma either beliefs or practices have caused.<sup>233</sup> Shame may slip in and show up in a different personal and communal expression. It may, for example, move out of one's theology but stay firmly planted in interpersonal relationships. Shame might move from browbeating sermons into board meetings. Haines writes, "Adding new practices on top of older embodied strategy won't work. Given enough pressure, the older embodied habit will emerge unless it has been resolved or processed through somatic opening."<sup>234</sup> Shame often functions like a protective response and can show up anywhere. Healing from shame is more than changing ideas; it's developing a compassionate and conscious relationship with the somatic shame response so different choices can be made.

Shame deeply affects somatic responses to conflict and accountability. Haines writes, "When we have been navigating a deep sense of shame and trauma, often we have not learned or practiced centered accountability. There is often little in our family, community or social contexts that model this for us. Our social norms tend toward polarization, blame, or litigation, rather than the nuanced ability to hold complexity and encourage accountability, mending and justice."<sup>235</sup>

Shame is especially difficult to address when it becomes a part of personal or communal identity. It causes paralysis rather than motivating corrective action. Engaging with the ways shame lives in our bodies is essential. As Idelette McVicker describes, "We must talk...about the shame tied to identity and also move shame to guilt so that we can begin to make things right."<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Crocker, "Persevering Faith", 168.

<sup>234</sup> Haines, *Politics of Trauma*, 30.

<sup>235</sup> Haines, *Politics of Trauma*, 309.

<sup>236</sup> McVicker is addressing recovering racists. I submit that the process is the same for any recovering "ist" be it fundamentalist, supremacist, or anything that builds culture and belonging through normalized domination and coercion. Idelette McVicker, *Recovering Racists: Dismantling White Supremacy and Reclaiming Our Humanity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2022), 79.

## 5) Trauma distorts our worldview.

A sense of safety is lost when a nervous system threat response is activated. The relationship, the community, and even the world feel fraught with danger. And, as Maté points out, “the world we believe in becomes the world we live in.”<sup>237</sup> “Trauma, especially severe trauma, imposes a worldview tinged with pain, fear and suspicion: a lens that both distorts and determines our view of how things are.”<sup>238</sup> Chronic “dangerous world” narratives exist in many ways within the Western Church. Examples include:

- Just war theory<sup>239</sup>
- Doctrine of discovery, colonization, and centuries of proselytization all suggest the non-Christian world is full of spiritually or physically dangerous places that must be conquered and subdued.
- Bad things and bad choices are punishments for unconfessed sin, God testing you, or demonic attacks.
- Good things, enjoying life, and pursuing pleasure or rest are selfish or sinful.

Conversely, this worldview distortion may be expressed through painting unrealistically rosy pictures of difficulties in life. Maté writes, “...it may, through the sheer force of denial, engender a naively rosy perspective that blinds us to the real and present dangers—a veneer concealing fears we dare not acknowledge.”<sup>240</sup> For example,

- Spiritual bypassing—using spiritual practices or beliefs to shut down conversations, fix or deny pain, avoid conflict, etc.<sup>241</sup>
- Discounting evidence demonstrating the cost of ignoring dangers to human flourishing.
- Dismissing the pain of traumatic global events such as war or natural disasters because God is in control<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 31.

<sup>238</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 32.

<sup>239</sup> Don Carson, “Just War: Don Carson,” The Gospel Coalition, March 10, 2004, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/sermon/just-war/>.

<sup>240</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 32

<sup>241</sup> Stone, “Thou Shalt Not”, 326-327.

<sup>242</sup> David Jeremiah, “What Do Devastating Natural Disasters Say about God?,” David Jeremiah Blog, March 13, 2024, <https://davidjeremiah.blog/what-do-devastating-natural-disasters-say-about-god/>; John Piper, “Does God Control All Things All the Time?,” Desiring God, September 15, 2017, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/does-god-control-all-things-all-the-time>.

- Not planning for the future or avoiding difficult conversations and focussing on gratitude or spirituality.<sup>243</sup>

Neither fear-mongering nor bypassing produces integration and healing. These responses, coupled with an abstractionist worldview, are a perfect setup for normalizing traumatic cycles. Despair or ignorance is easier than engaging with the pain.<sup>244</sup> The hypervigilance, sanctified anxiety, and holy avoidance that stem from a chronically dysregulated nervous system cannot produce the goodness and restoration the system promises.

## 6) Trauma alienates us from the present.

“If trauma entails a disconnection from the self, then it makes sense to say that we are being collectively flooded with influences that both exploit and reinforce trauma... We are caught up in pursuits of all kinds that draw us on not because they are necessary or inspiring or uplifting, or because they obliterate the present.”<sup>245</sup>

In the Hebrew Bible, God identifies as “I am.” The Christian Testament declares that the Messiah will be “God with us.” Both convey a present-tense reality: God is experienced in the here and now. The comfort and presence of God are not found in changing or ignoring what has happened, nor can they be controlled by predicting or affecting what will happen in the future. Yet many Christian paradigms are centred around trying to revisit the past.<sup>246</sup> Other paradigms facilitate obsession and anxiety about staying connected to God in the future, in this life or the next. This may look like:

- Obsession with revival (wanting to recapture a previous experience of closeness with the Divine.)
- Longing to return to a bygone era of perceived faithfulness and communal perfection.
- End times theology (the anxiety and terror of waiting to find out if you are among the chosen or the damned.)<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Stone, “Thou Shalt Not”, 327

<sup>244</sup> “The only healthy answer lies in one’s honest recognition of disappointment even as he still clings to hope, one’s acceptance of finite disappointment even while clinging to infinite hope.” King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 47.

<sup>245</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 32.

<sup>246</sup> Trying to reinstate a past experience or recreate in the present is a distinctly different pursuit than the act of revisiting the past and doing inner child work or completing a trauma cycle.

<sup>247</sup> Josiah Hesse, “I Grew up Evangelical. Terrifying Rapture Films Scarred Me for Ever,” *The Guardian*, February 1, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/31/rapture-films-left-behind-evangelical>.

- The poorly hidden joy of believing certain people groups are destined for hell while you are not.<sup>248</sup>
- Mistaking hypervigilance for holiness (never feeling secure enough to really relax, wanting to be just a bit better, holier, more devout—perhaps framed with deep gratitude for all God has done.)

An infatuation with the past and future also allows those with the most privilege and power to ignore the literal hellscape currently happening through political policy, social injustice and willful ignorance toward the most marginalized.

When faced with discomfort, many escape into spiritual practices like prayer and prophecy. This is not to say that practices in and of themselves are inherently wrong. However, *any* practice or belief can become a way to control people and situations, bypass pain of all kinds, or spiritualize anxieties. The way to distinguish between harmful doom-forecasting or bypassing is to examine the orthokarpos.

## Conclusion

Trauma constraints and disembodiment may be common and, in fact, analogous to the function of churches and parachurch organizations. Because of this, there can be hesitancy in naming the harm and dysfunction we are accustomed to. “This is just the way things are” does make sense in terms of nervous system dysregulation and trauma. The body normalizes patterns of dysregulation to stay connected and safe. Therefore, it’s worth asking - *who benefits from nervous system dysregulation and chronic trauma constraints?* Consider that all high-control systems depend on adherents, benefactors and victims staying cooperative and silent. As the next chapter shows, misusing power and accountability avoidance is built into the culture.

From the perspective of stakeholders in an abstractionist community, talking about normalized trauma patterns causes unnecessary discomfort and only makes things worse. However, the outcome of this avoidance—the spiritual violence and religious trauma this causes—is becoming more clear and obvious as psychological and clinical research catches up with what bodies have been saying all along.<sup>249</sup> No matter how much a community elevates tradition as truth, regardless of how they collectively soothe themselves into silence, the effects of chronic trauma are real. Trauma constraints impact mental, physical and spiritual health. And that which does not produce mutual

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<sup>248</sup> David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell and Universal Salvation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 28-29.

<sup>249</sup> Hillary L. McBride, “Holy/Hurt Podcast Episode 1: The House Is Haunted,” Holy/Hurt Podcast, August 2, 2023, <https://holyhurtpodcast.com/ep-01-the-house-is-haunted/>.

goodness, or worse, that which claims to be good but produces the opposite, must be brought into the light and addressed, regardless of the systemic resistance to it.

“Trying to keep awareness of our trauma at bay hobbles our capacity to know ourselves...Facing it directly without either denial or over-identification becomes a doorway to health and balance.”<sup>250</sup> The only pathway to genuine repair within the Western Church is learning to tolerate the discomfort of confrontation and being committed to accountability for the impact of actions. To do this, we must learn to see the normalized power imbalance within the Church.

## PRACTICE 4

*Familiarity* is what the nervous system values the most. This means that if the body is chronically dysregulated, it may initially respond by rationalizing dysfunction or resisting what may ultimately bring healing. Because of this, to avoid retraumatization, sometimes the speed and intensity of integration need to be relaxed.<sup>251</sup> It is understandable that new discoveries can instigate a protective shame spiral, especially if we have spent many years saturated in different shame narratives. Shame often hides in the language and underlying tone of “should.”<sup>252</sup> While healing is about engaging and moving *towards* the self, shame wants to hide and divert attention *from* the self.

Self-compassion and empathy are like kryptonite to shame. Haines writes, “See if you can bring a little compassion to yourself and your strategies. We have taken on these embodied habits both for survival and in trying to adapt for safety, belonging, and dignity.”<sup>253</sup>

### In Practice: Trauma and RAIN

This practice will apply the RAIN method as outlined by Tara Brach. She describes the four elements of RAIN: Recognize, Allow, Investigate, and Nurture.<sup>254</sup>

This practice may be applied to any one of the six chronic trauma constraints from this chapter. Based on the trauma constraint of disconnecting from the body, a framework and examples will be offered. My process and thoughts are shared in italics. Use them if they feel helpful. Then, a starting prompt for the remaining five trauma responses will be given at the end.

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<sup>250</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 35.

<sup>251</sup> This truth should not be used as an excuse to continue harm. Victims concerns are centered first.. Offender upset should be processed separately without the victim.

<sup>252</sup> Schwartz, *The Complex PTSD Workbook*, 132.

<sup>253</sup> Haines is referring to toxic and detrimental embodied habits. Haines, *Politics of Trauma*, 123.

<sup>254</sup> Tara Brach, *True Refuge: Finding Peace and Freedom in Your Own Awakened Heart* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 2016), 62.

## Reconnecting to the Body

When you are in a comfortable position and space, begin by turning the constraint into a question. For example, *Are there messages I have received that caused me to separate from my body?* Or, *in what ways have I detached from my bodiliness?*

- **Recognize what is going on.** What behaviours, thoughts or feelings are you having? What body sensations are happening? Notice any tightening, temperature changes, numbing, or tingling—anything you notice counts. If you can, name what you are noticing for yourself.

*When I think about the body narratives that were handed to me in church, I feel angry. I notice my throat tightening, and everything below my neck just disappears.*

- **Allow the experience to be there, just as it is.** We are not fixing it. We are not trying to understand *why*. We are practicing letting something be the way it is and moving towards it compassionately.

*I notice and allow my anger by saying, “Of course you are angry, you are allowed to feel that way about this.” or, “I see you! What you experienced caused anger in you. That makes sense and is so real.”*

- **Investigate with interest and care.** Leverage curiosity and engage with the parts or sensations that have come forward inside of you. “*What do you wish I knew right now?*” “*Is there anything you need?*” and other questions are welcome here. Ask questions about your experiences as though they are people that you really care about. Or, if caring feels hard, get curious about that instead. You might ask, “*I’m wondering about the resistance?*” Or “*How are you trying to help me?*” Then, listen to what it has to say. This is a time to hear about the *impact*. Resist any urge to contextualize or minimize what you feel because of intentions. This practice brings care to “what is” rather than “what we think should be.”

*When I got curious about my anger, it told me it wanted me to listen, like, really listen, without fear or embarrassment. This part of me was so very, very frustrated. It felt dehumanized and invisible, especially by men who wanted to control it and make it small. The hurt was so deep.*

- **Nurture with self-compassion.** Brach writes, “Self-compassion begins to naturally arise in the moments that you recognize you are suffering. It comes into fullness as you intentionally

nurture your inner life with self-care.”<sup>255</sup> Continue with messages of care and loving kindness towards this part of you. If you can sense the experience of suffering, imagine yourself turning and moving towards that part. What compassionate actions or words come forward for you?

*I pictured myself turning towards my anger and saw she was young, cold, and neglected. I asked if I could care for her. I wrapped her up in a blanket and held her close. I told my younger self that her anger made a lot of sense. "You felt so violated and unseen." I wept as I gave myself the compassionate gift of being angry and cared for simultaneously.*

Nurturance and care look different for everyone. How are you compelled to respond? Sometimes, care looks like apologizing for the impact. Sometimes, care looks like a cookie and a nap. Sometimes, it’s reassuring yourself that the experience was real for that part of you—they did feel afraid, angry, and alone.

- To close, offer gratitude and take a cleansing and grounding breath. If it feels helpful, consider returning to the practice again in the future. You may repeat this exercise with any of the chronic trauma constraint scripts.

#### **Additional Prompts:**

- Are there any ways I have disconnected from my gut feelings? Or, “What parts of me have I learned not to trust?”
- “Is there a way my response flexibility is low?” or “Are there places I protectively overreact?”
- “Where is shame living in my body?” Or “In what ways is shame trying to protect me?”
- “What parts of the world feel dangerous to me?” Or “What parts of me have to pretend everything is ok?”
- “What does it feel like to be here right now? Or “What inner protections keep me from being present right now?”

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<sup>255</sup> Tara Brach, “Blog: The Rain of Self-Compassion,” Tara Brach, December 11, 2023, <https://www.tarabrach.com/selfcompassion1/>.



## CHAPTER 5 - THE POWER PLAYBOOK

*“We did not cause the cancer; we merely exposed it.  
Only through this kind of exposure will the cancer ever be cured.”<sup>256</sup>*

### An Invitation to Lean In

Trauma theory and the testimony of trauma survivors show that time does not heal all wounds. In fact, time tends to make patterns of wounding or being wounded so acculturated that they become the status quo. Acknowledging and addressing the scope of the complex religious trauma patterns alive and well in the body of the Western Christian Church may feel daunting. I am comforted and compelled by poet Andrea Gibson, who writes, “Even when the truth isn’t hopeful, the telling of it is.”<sup>257</sup> Telling the truth, however painful, is an essential part of our liberation.

The Church must develop new internal resources to bear the weight and responsibility for its enmeshed and normalized relationship with abusive power.<sup>258</sup> Those reparative assets must first be individually recovered and somatically embraced before they can be applied systemically. Grabbing onto new ideas, even ideas about embodied living or trauma-informed theology, is not enough to bring about the depth of change that is needed. In order for the “repair to match the wound,” those in the Western Church, collectively and personally, must learn to embody accountability.<sup>259</sup> That accountability must lead to a revolutionary way of relating to itself and those it has excluded, marginalized and harmed.<sup>260</sup> As Paulo Freire writes, “Discovering himself to be an oppressor may cause considerable anguish, but it does not necessarily lead to solidarity...Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary; it is a radical posture.”<sup>261</sup>

In this chapter, I invite us to lean into our collective shadows rather than relieving the tension by turning to solutions or bypassing into a hopeful step-by-step plan toward resolution. *We cannot talk about the repair that victim-survivors of religious trauma and spiritual abuse deserve without addressing the relationship between trauma and power.*

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<sup>256</sup> King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 96.

<sup>257</sup> Andrea Gibson and Sarah J. Coleman, *Take Me with You* (New York, NY: Plume, 2018). 107.

<sup>258</sup> In chapter one, I cautioned that it’s easy to back away from the discomfort of accountability with a “Not my church, not my Jesus!” protective response. Instead, let us ask, “What if it’s true? How then shall we respond?”

<sup>259</sup> Aundi Kolber, *Strong like Water: Finding the Freedom, Safety, & Compassion to Move through Hard Things--& Experience True Flourishing* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Refresh, 2023), 134.

<sup>260</sup> Throughout this chapter, I will be centering the perspectives of those most impacted by power-over paradigms. This is deliberate—I want to dispel any notions that what I’m suggesting is new. The wisdom of the oppressed has historically been silenced, sanitized or scrubbed from the record. The “least of these” have always held the keys to our collective repentance, repair and freedom, though their subversive witness has often been obscured. As Friere said: “Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both.” Freire, *Pedagogy*, 16. Salient voices quoted throughout—such as Freire—speak of the abuses of power (such as racism, sexism, and classism.) Religious abuse is a *type* of abuse of power. While it is not the same as these other “isms,” these justice oriented prophets still have much to teach us about liberation and repair.

<sup>261</sup> Friere, *Pedagogy*, 23.

First, I will highlight the relationship between power, trauma and abuse as it relates to attachment and embodiment. Power-over dynamics are at the center of chronic traumatic experience and abuse. If we fail to bring distortions of power into the light, we are bound to unknowingly use them and bludgeon others with our crimes of omission and ignorance, even if we do not commit abuse through direct action. I will then show the predictive nature and playbook of normalized power misappropriation. Additionally, I will reveal two key ways that power resists detection and transformation and what the implications are for the Church.

## **In Review**

Trauma is the personal, subjective, inner response to events, experiences and memories that overwhelm our senses and connections to belonging, safety or dignity in some way. As Judith Herman writes, “This overwhelm activates core needs for attachment and authenticity. Traumatic effects have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self, but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community.”<sup>262</sup> If those needs are not met, and our bodies cannot return to a sense of connection, a variety of nervous system threat-responses are triggered.<sup>263</sup> Whether it’s fight or flight mobilizing us into action or freeze and fawn immobilizing our awareness, emotions, and expression, these nervous system alerts are attempting to return us in *any way possible* to a feeling of safety.<sup>264</sup> As previously noted, authenticity is exchanged for connection when attachment needs are unmet, even if the result is an insecure relational connection. Insecure is better than none, as far as attachment needs are concerned. These patterns of insecure attachment, nervous system dysregulation and traumatized meaning-making can become acculturated and unnoticed.

Abstractionism may purport that all that is required for positive change is to discover the objectively true beliefs that will save us. However, its counterpoint, relational ontology, shows that objectivity is a myth—our beliefs are informed by and in relationship to many things, including our embodied responses. This relates to the interplay between beliefs, experience, and transformation. Because the body responds to perceived patterns and threats before we have a chance to think, we may change our minds, but our bodies and emotions react in contradiction with our stated beliefs. As stated, “deconstructing” one’s faith does not guarantee one has integrated or unburdened the parts of them that spark protective reactions when feelings of shame are triggered. This incongruence may go

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<sup>262</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 51.

<sup>263</sup> Haines writes, “We have built-in psychobiological (mind/body/evolutionary) ways to protect ourselves when our safety, belonging, and/or dignity are threatened. These are mobilized automatically; we don’t have to think about it. You have likely heard about the instinctive responses of fight, flight, freeze, appease, and dissociate.” Haines, *Politics of Trauma*, 74

<sup>264</sup> It’s important to note that the “feeling of safety” is subjective and can be easily confused with a feeling of familiarity that may or may not indicate what is best at the moment.

undetected because the response feels normal and, therefore, justified. The body will not choose differently until it is somatically convinced it is safe to do so. Still, subconscious and automatic reactions to threats should not be minimized as they are so often what hijack the process of effective change.<sup>265</sup>

To address the abusive systems, theology and culture that cause trauma in the church, we must start with healing the trauma in ourselves. Transformative change won't happen by applying new ideas on top of traumatized bodies. The work starts within, and then, as Menakem writes, "... the ripples of healing can move out"<sup>266</sup> into the bodies of our primary attachment relationships, our communities, and onward.

### Defining Power

Power is related to the level of agency and choice an individual or collective of individuals has. Michelle Kim defines power as "the ability to influence and make decisions that impact others."<sup>267</sup> Martin Luther King Jr wrote,

Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, or economic changes. In this sense power is not only desirable but necessary in order to implement the demands of love and justice... Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.<sup>268</sup>

As Lisa Sharon Harper and Renée August teach in *How to Decolonize the Bible*, there are multiple expressions of power that intersect and interact with one another.<sup>269</sup> This includes but is not limited to social, religious/spiritual, physical, institutional, geographic, and political power. We must learn to see the nature and movement of power to correct and prevent its abuse.

Power is complex and contextual, and the urge to flatten the experiences of harm or abdicate responsibility for repair because "everybody gets hurt" is all too common.<sup>270</sup> The ideal expression of

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<sup>265</sup> This is not saying that everyone who is triggered by shame commits abuse nor are they at fault for their subconscious patterns. Fault and blame are (well-meaning but unhelpful) protective responses. Our patterns are what they are. This is an exercise in consciousness-raising. Learning to see our patterns is an essential part in healing and deepening our embodied engagement which results in increasing relational integrity. Instead of asking, "Who is to blame?" Consider asking, "What can I notice about my pattern? Can I learn to care for myself so that I can grow into greater authenticity and accountability?"

<sup>266</sup> Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 50.

<sup>267</sup> Michelle Mijung Kim, *The Wake up: Closing the Gap between Good Intentions and Real Change* (New York, NY: Hachette Books, 2023), 105.

<sup>268</sup> King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 38

<sup>269</sup> Renee August and Lisa Sharon Harper, "How to Decolonize the Bible," *How to Decolonize the Bible Webinar* (lecture, <https://freedomroad.us/downloads/how-to-decolonize-the-bible-webinar/>, 2020).

<sup>270</sup> Kim, *The Wake Up*, 101.

power is what can be referred to as “power-with”—co-active, shared, mutually beneficial, accountable and cooperative.<sup>271</sup> Unfortunately, coercive power-over paradigms are far more common in our culture, including from and within the church. This must be acknowledged if anything is to change.

### Power, Trauma, and Abuse

The relationship between power and trauma is deeply connected. McBride states, “A stressful event becomes a trauma when we feel overwhelmed and powerless.”<sup>272</sup> Further to that, in her podcast series, *Holy/Hurt*, she states that “in situations where there has been abuse and trauma there has often been an imbalance of power and control.”<sup>273</sup> Haines expounds on this:

As we see, we are shaped by power-over conditions and we come to embody them, both unconsciously (mostly) and consciously (some). Power-over economic, political, and social systems concentrate safety, belonging, dignity, decision making, and resources within a few elite... We can see how power-over systems do harm and cause trauma.<sup>274</sup>

She goes on further to succinctly state, “...most of the root causes of trauma stem from power-over social conditions.”<sup>275</sup>

Power distortions are at the heart of abuse. However, abuse and trauma, while deeply connected, are not the same thing. “Abuse,” Anderson says, “including religious or spiritual abuse, is different from trauma...abuse is what happens to us, trauma is our nervous system’s *response* to what happens to us.”<sup>276</sup> Abuse can be defined as a pattern of behaviour designed to gain and maintain power and control.<sup>277</sup> Abuse is distinct from trauma in that *abuse is abuse regardless of the intentions*

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<sup>271</sup> Kim, *The Wake Up*, 104.

<sup>272</sup> McBride, *Wisdom of Your Body*, 59.

<sup>273</sup> McBride, “Holy/Hurt Podcast Episode 1: The House Is Haunted,”

<sup>274</sup> Haines, *Politics of Trauma*, 55.

<sup>275</sup> Haines, *Politics of Trauma*, 59.

<sup>276</sup> Anderson’s work provides a comprehensive primer on the definitions, problems, and outcomes of normalized abusive patterns in religious environments. She goes on to say, “Many shy away from the term ‘abuse’ to describe their experiences in religion. They fear not being believed or told they are making too big a deal of their experiences.” This fear is well founded. It is all-too-common in abstractionist cultures to value the good intentions (orthodoxy/orthopraxis) far more than the outcomes and experiences (orthokarpos). Too often, victim-survivors of religious abuse are “not allowed” to name the abuse. And if they do speak out, they often experience the secondary trauma of the abusive responses of denial, minimizing, and victim blaming. Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 38.

<sup>277</sup> When talking about the label “racist” Ibram Kendi notes, “‘Racist’ is not—as Richard Spencer argues—a pejorative. It is not the worst word in the English language; it is not the equivalent of a slur. It is descriptive, and the only way to undo racism is to consistently identify and describe it—and then dismantle it. The attempt to turn this usefully descriptive term into an almost unusable slur is, of course, designed to do the opposite: to freeze us into inaction.” Kendi, *How to Be an Anti-Racist*, 9. In a similar manner, it’s easy to reject the word abuse, and everything attached to it. “Abuse” is a useful description of a pattern of power and control which anyone can knowingly or unknowingly participate in. Only in identifying it can we dismantle it and learn new patterns of accountability and repair.

*of the abuser or the “level” of traumatic response someone has to it.* Abuse can include direct acts of harm and manipulation, *and* abuse can happen through deliberate withholding or unconscious neglect. Abuse is similar to trauma in that the personal responses and access to internal and external resources are varied and subjective. This can affect the short and long-term impacts victim-survivors experience as a result of abusive encounters.<sup>278</sup>

Further challenges arise when naming abuse and holding abusers accountable in religious environments. To begin with, religion is generally considered a prosocial construct.<sup>279</sup> Furthermore, religious epithets like “*we are all sinners*” are used to excuse abusers and create a false sense of repair through speedy forgiveness, usually at the victim's expense. Moreover, it is uncomfortable and challenging to identify what might also condemn and include us.

### **Power- Over and Attachment Patterns**

Insecure attachment patterns play into normalized power-over dynamics. Repeatedly adapting authenticity for the sake of attachment essentially normalizes abdicating power—often subconsciously—to maintain connectedness and safety. This is often accomplished through denying needs, minimizing negative impacts, or self-blame. It may start as a familiar internal insecure attachment mechanism and repeat itself in various external contexts, such as family, church, society at large, etc.<sup>280</sup> In a variety of ways, some choose to disconnect from their authenticity and place blame and responsibility on themselves.

Choosing toxic self-blame is not a “choice” in the way that one might choose vanilla ice cream over chocolate. These responses are subconscious survival skills learned in our developmental years.<sup>281</sup> *Those with less power must concede and adapt or perish.*

Generally speaking, faith communities foster attachment relationships within the community and with God. Therefore, those who were highly invested in church life and felt they had no choice but to leave are rarely just “overly sensitive or uncooperative,” as some might claim. It is no small thing to walk away from a faith community. People are leaving relationships that the body

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<sup>278</sup> Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 38-40.

<sup>279</sup> This prosocial perspective seems especially held with little nuance *within* the Church, which makes sense when one considers that it couldn't function if they truly thought they were dangerous or even inessential. However, The Church must move beyond the binary of all-good or all-bad to be accountable for mistakes and harm.

<sup>280</sup> For an example of how this abusive paradigm works, see Jennifer Freyd's work. She coined the acronym, DARVO, which stands for Denial, Attack, Reverse Victim & Offender. Jennifer J. Freyd, “II. Violations of Power, Adaptive Blindness and Betrayal Trauma Theory,” *Feminism & Psychology* 7, no. 1 (February 1997): 22–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353597071004>, 29.

<sup>281</sup> In addition to attachment theory, Object Relations Theory helps explain the developmental survival instincts that result in self-blame. To see more: <https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/types/object-relations>

historically identified as essential for existence.<sup>282</sup> The wounds of theological trauma and religious trauma are embodied, relational and real.

### **The Power-Over Playbook**

This pattern of power abdication was established in my developmental years, as my earlier stories have demonstrated. And then, as attachment patterns do, they played out in my adult life in the church. Like so many victims of religious trauma, I assumed the theological or structural dissonance was unintentional or part of a misunderstanding. I reasoned that if I could just explain the questions people were having, get leadership to see what was happening, or implore with the powerful to understand the impacts of their actions, all could be made well. I soon discovered I was *creating* a problem by talking about the problem. No matter how open and secure those with power claimed to be, no matter the offence, no matter the approach, no matter the overt and covert mechanisms of high control and power-over deployed by the people and the system, the pattern remains the same: whoever dares to challenge the system will be blamed for disrupting the peace.<sup>283</sup> Victims are often accused of a lack of commitment, and though they may not be told directly to leave, they will be required to either take the blame and apologize, or it will become intolerable to stay. This creates a confirmation bias within the system, essentially proving the victim's guilt as a troublemaker and/or demonstrating the victim's moral weakness because the victims are unwilling to work things out.

Chuck deGroat exposes the abusive system: "Loyalty to the... leader and the system's perpetuation is demanded. To question this is to express disloyalty and to experience shame and disconnection from the system."<sup>284</sup> He goes on to show how the system responds severely to those who question, challenge or confront.

Moreover, when the ...leader is under attack, his response is defensiveness and a victim complex. Their persecution complex actually enhances their status among some who view

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<sup>282</sup> Because churches foster high attachment relationships with God and within the community, the internal reality of people staying or leaving a church community is situated far more in the realm of "life or death" rather than, say, having a bad experience at your local grocery store and deciding from then on you want to shop elsewhere. This helps to answer why some may stay in abusive environments when an exit seems like the best idea, and highlights the severe personal cost reckoned with when one feels compelled to leave.

<sup>283</sup> In conflict avoidant environments, "peace and quiet" is what constitutes peace. "Do Not Disturb" is of highest value, and those who disrupt are generally scapegoated and ejected from the system. This phenomenon can be explained through the paradigm of "Family Systems Theory" described by Dr. Murray Bowen. The scapegoat is actually a needed agent for change and transformation, but the system rejects the invitation in the name of familiarity and dismisses the disruptor. For a basic overview see: <https://www.theraplatform.com/blog/677/family-systems-theory> or for a wealth of resources check out <https://www.thebowencenter.org/>

<sup>284</sup> Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse ... 16PT Large Print Edition* (Westmont, IL: IVP, 2022), 22.

them as a hero for standing tall amid the battle. The system comes to the rescue of the leader at the expense of his victims. The lack of feedback, fear of disloyalty, and victim complex make it hard to engage, let alone change, this system.”<sup>285</sup>

### **Protection Through Power Abdication**

Our collective stories of harm, whether they happen through coercive theologies of terror or through direct and indirect experiences with abusive power, have common adaptive elements of power abdication. When power abdication is normalized, it will feel typical or even preferred to the body to suppress needs, wants, authentic emotions, and to ignore or misinterpret body sensations. In spiritually abusive environments, you may not *like* the inner sense of dysphoria abdication creates, but *culturally* this inner discomfort is interpreted as evidence of spiritual lack.<sup>286</sup> This can cue self-shame and blame, followed by reaching outside of oneself *further* through intensified spiritual practices and exclusively trusting the spiritually powerful for external guidance. When power abdication is normalized, it becomes culturally approved to mistrust or override the body's instinctual response that something is wrong.

Power-over paradigms are created when one is continually required to give up their authenticity in exchange for approval in a way that keeps them in perceived safety. As a result, it becomes normal to be cut off from the wisdom of the body, internally and authentically suppressed, functionally dependent, and powerless.

### **Protective Power-Over Measures**

It is equally imperative to name how power abuse is *also* an embodied response to threat that maintains a perception of safety. This neither excuses nor denies the responsibility people have for the harm their behaviour causes. It does, however, explain the Jekyll and Hyde experience many have with powerful people in faith communities. It also makes sense of those who may condone or excuse these dominating behaviours because of the perceived safety/normalcy that proximity to abusive power provides.

The Religious Power and Control Wheel<sup>287</sup> outlines some of the ways that this power-over adaptation might be expressed: *coercion and threats, intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, minimizing, denying and blaming*, and more.<sup>288</sup> This may be done theologically, spiritually,

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<sup>285</sup> DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 22-23. In the context of the chapter, it might be more accurate to say the leader “perceives or claims” they are under attack. The victim complex, as described by DeGroat, is when confronted, the offender “flips the script” and sells themselves as the “victim-martyr-hero” of the situation, invoking sympathy and support from those who depend on the system. This further vilifies and pushes the actual victims out of safety and belonging.

<sup>286</sup> For example, lack of fervour, lack of faith, lack of spiritual discipline, lack of spiritual maturity, etc.

<sup>287</sup> See Appendix 5

<sup>288</sup> Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 213.

relationally or structurally in a religious system. It may be done through overt *or* covert engagement. Coercive power and high control are normalized experiences throughout Western culture. And as victim-survivors of religious trauma can tell you—these coping mechanisms are also alive and well in the Western Church.<sup>289</sup>

### **A Distorted Balance**

This cycle of power abdication and power stealing *does* create a power equilibrium,<sup>290</sup> albeit a wildly imbalanced one. When repair is elusive or “achieved” by reinforcing the power imbalance, the cycle becomes normalized and power-over paradigms become the status quo. The cognitive dissonance required to stay in a system that promises connection, service, and love in the name of God, is exhausting when held in contrast with the normalized experiences of power abuse and abdication. It is, in part, why “many who get close to the epicenter of leadership either forfeit their integrity or resign.”<sup>291</sup>

Michelle Kim offers an orthokarpic question: “How is the power being used?”<sup>292</sup> Should the Western Christian Church respond to her compelling inquiry, it will include confronting its history through the witness of its victims. This may enable the church to see with clear eyes ways power-over (coercive) or power-with (coactive) have been active in its systems, religious beliefs, and practice.<sup>293</sup>

### **Normalization Strikes Again**

When paradigms of abusive power and coercive control become overtly or covertly part of the culture, “the underlying dynamic shifts so that a person, group or system has power and control over another.”<sup>294</sup> This creates patterns of abuse that are expressed systemically or relationally. Anderson says,

Abuse doesn’t require intentional malice or harm. This is important because in many cases religious abuse is an extension of what someone has been taught is normal, acceptable

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<sup>289</sup> It’s important to note that all of this is covered by the veil of normalization. Many Christian parenting and leadership books make it sound so wise, benevolent, and holy. Victim-survivors are not stupid, just deceived! The ideas, beliefs and practices we’ve been given feel right, not because they promote flourishing, but *because they are familiar*. The power of familiarity cannot be overstated! This is why learning to judge their veracity by how it impacts and affects those with the least power is necessary to bring us back into alignment culturally and personally.

<sup>290</sup> By equilibrium I mean a state of balance or stasis of opposing forces. Not balance as in equality.

<sup>291</sup> DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 24.

<sup>292</sup> Kim, *The Wake Up*, 104.

<sup>293</sup> Kim, *The Wake Up*, 105.

<sup>294</sup> Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 40.



treatment and behaviour...first learned as spiritual practices, hierarchies, and disciplines, which were seen in religious systems as essential for living a godly life.<sup>295</sup>

Maladaptive power is endemic to Western Christianity. There is very little Christian history where power-over has not been a key element, interwoven into the very processes that determined what is objectively true and orthodox. And yet, power-over is antithetical to love, justice, and the way of Jesus. The cognitive dissonance and spiritual spin-doctoring required to ignore this is tiring. How can anything rooted in and cooperating with abusive power produce the fruit of love? It will be a mirage at best and an abusive scam at worst. Hoping that we are among the exceptions does not serve anyone, especially those being harmed by collective ignorance.

Power-over does not have to be overt to be effective. It can be expressed in both passive *and* aggressive ways.<sup>296</sup> In the end, abusive power *dominates*. If we do not address and identify our relationship to power all the way back to our bodily selves, we will stay stuck—embedded in power-over paradigms that harm. Conversely, if we only address this within ourselves but avoid addressing the communal bodies and systemic expressions of dysfunctional power-over, we are still complicit in creating or ignoring environments conducive to religious trauma via our silence and inaction.<sup>297</sup>

### **A Proposed Power-Corrective**

The struggle to see and reorient ourselves away from coercive power towards coactive power is extremely difficult. As Anderson states,

Systems built on dynamics of power and control are abusive at their core.”<sup>298</sup> ”Within these systems is a hierarchy typically built on patriarchy. At the top of this hierarchy is the leaders(s) of the group who determine the roles, rules, and consequences and who—in the realm of the high control religion—is believed to be “called by God” This calling implies that followers will demonstrate submission and that leaders' words will not be questioned.”<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 40.

<sup>296</sup> Avoiding conflict and minimizing engagement with problems is a covert and damaging use of power. It's easier to spot a blowhard like Mark Driscoll or Sean Feucht. Far more difficult, is the experience of a publicly demure pastor who is either 1) a tyrant behind closed doors, 2) thinks that you can appease an abusive person without it affecting and impacting someone else, or 3) refuses and dismisses genuine harm through non-engagement or avoidance until a blow-up happens. Avoidance-until-explosion allows passive leadership to see themselves as victimized.

<sup>297</sup> Haines writes, “ Without this, an individual may experience deep healing personally, while continuing to perpetuate oppressive behaviour and uphold harmful systems at the expense of others.” Haines, *Politics of Trauma*, 54.

<sup>298</sup> Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 43.

<sup>299</sup> Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You*, 43.

Accepting that normalized ideas, practices and systems can be abusive and traumatizing is a challenging step, but it's far from the last one. The church must move in closer, with a tenacious compassion, to bring transformation to all that is hidden behind the veil of normal.

It is imperative to acknowledge and be accountable for the roles played in chronic cycles of harm. It is possible to cause harm when seeking safety by using power-over, or to cause harm by abdicating power instead of showing solidarity with victims.<sup>300</sup> If we do not locate ourselves within the normalized power dynamics of a system, we are likely to, knowingly or unknowingly, prop up and participate in abusive cycles.<sup>301</sup>

Judith Herman highlights the complexity and complicity we share when we participate in abusive power dynamics.

It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement and remembering... In order to escape accountability for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting. Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator's first line of defence. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure that no one listens. To this end, he marshals an impressive array of arguments, from the most blatant denial to the most sophisticated and elegant rationalization. After every atrocity, one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened, the victim lies, the victim exaggerates, the victim brought it upon herself, and in any case, it is time to forget the past and move on.<sup>302</sup>

The normalized power-over paradigms in the church are protective responses to conflict, pain and accountability. They are understandable *and yet still inexcusable*. Abuse, even normalized and unrecognized as such, is still abuse. It dehumanizes perpetrators, bystanders and especially victims. We may have compassion for how hard it will be to untangle these interconnected webs of harm. But that compassion must compel us towards disrupting injustice to restore love rather than maintaining the comfort of dysfunctional cycles of abuse and *calling it love*.

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<sup>300</sup> It is possible, in different relational contexts, to play multiple roles. A dominating God or unrelenting church board (power over) breathing down the neck of a church leader (victim). A parishioner (victim) of the system asks the leader for accountability and repair. The leader (now the abuser) blows back with denial, minimizing, blame-shifting and claiming persecution. The punishing God, dominating board, or other community members condone the abuse by their silence and inaction (power abdication). People will (knowingly or unknowingly) take on these roles because pushing back against God, the board, the pastor, the silent crowd, threatens their eternal, financial or communal safety. It's a complicated mess.

<sup>301</sup> It is worth noting that a common element of abusive cycles is experiencing some goodness that makes the victim doubt their experience and remain attached to the abuser. The abuser often leverages the good to distract from their abuse.

<sup>302</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 7-8.

## Power? What Power?

The remainder of this chapter will expose two key factors that impede authentic transformation of power-over paradigms: being power-oblivious<sup>303</sup> and the prioritization of comfort for the powerful. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, “In human relations, the truth is hard to come by because most groups are deceived about themselves. Rationalization and the incessant search for scapegoats are the psychological cataracts that blind us to our individual and collective sins.”<sup>304</sup>

Most would agree that the misuse of power and control is problematic. However, the normalization and subsequent rationalization of dysfunctional power paradigms can inoculate the ability to *sense and see when abusive power and control have run amok*. It's especially difficult when that rationalization seems to come from a higher power and spiritual practice that is deemed “good.”

*Power-ignorance*, or being power-oblivious, allows one to be unaware, overlook, or dismiss normalized abuse. Being power-oblivious perpetuates injustice by hiding, limiting, or removing the tools that *give the ability* to see or name harm and better comprehend ourselves and our context.

Panchuk connects power-ignorance to that which is normalized. For example, “When a community normalizes the elevation of some ideas and some voices over others, it creates an innate power imbalance.”<sup>305</sup> This can result, on the one hand, in the less powerful group lacking the conceptual resources necessary to correctly understand and communicate significant aspects of their experience or, on the other, in the more privileged group willfully refusing to learn or engage with the hermeneutical resources that marginalized communities have already developed.”<sup>306</sup>

Within an imbalanced power equilibrium, abuse can be overlooked if it feels familiar to the body. Our nervous system's alarms have so adapted to dysregulation that it doesn't register as a conscious threat, even if the body exhibits symptoms of chronic harm elsewhere. Until the pain of chronic dysregulation exceeds the comfort of familiarity, seeing the problem is difficult, though not impossible. Panchuk affirms that *normalized is as normalized does* when the experience is perceived to be beneficial.

We should expect that there are areas of the religious lives of marginalized groups where middle-class, cis-gender, straight, Christian, adult, white men have little motivation to

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<sup>303</sup> In the research, Panchuk and others use the term “power blindness.” As understanding evolves, so should our language. “Power blindness” is an abelist term. I maintain that power-oblivious or power-ignorance is a better descriptor and will use either term unless quoting Panchuk directly.

<sup>304</sup> King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 71.

<sup>305</sup> Panchuk, “The Shattered Spiritual Self,” 5.

<sup>306</sup> Panchuk, “The Shattered Spiritual Self,” 6. She further explains, “Within Western Christianity, as in Western society more generally, (at least) racial minorities, women, children, disabled people, and LBTGQ+ individuals have often been subject to systemic identity prejudices. It isn't the case that all of these groups are marginalized in all Western Christian communities at all times, but all of them have been marginalized on religious grounds by some Christian communities at some time.” Panchuk, “The Shattered Spiritual Self,” 8-9.

achieve a proper understanding ... and the continued de jure and de facto exclusion of members of these social groups helps ensure that any skewed resources remain as they are.<sup>307</sup>

Being power-oblivious is a conscious or subconscious unwillingness to acknowledge power dynamics. It should, therefore, be extended to include the tendency to demonize abusers or pretend incidents of religious abuse and trauma are the exception. These exacerbate and increase the bystander effect that keeps large swaths of people from interrupting abuse and standing in solidarity with victims.

Most recoil at the almost predictable stream of high-profile pastors from conservative and progressive churches alike caught using their positional authority to hide and conceal sexual abuse. Consider the recent documentaries that have exposed the sinister and abusive underbelly of some highly influential movements within Western Christianity. *Shiny Happy People*<sup>308</sup> exposed the abusive and coercive practices of Bill Gothard and the IBLP.<sup>309</sup> Responses range from disbelief to disgust—and also, relief. Like watching a theological trainwreck, many expressed things like, “Thank goodness! That’s not my Jesus...not my church...not my beliefs!”<sup>310</sup>

Another revelatory docuseries is *The Secrets of Hillsong*.<sup>311</sup> The *schadenfreude*<sup>312</sup> expressed on social media was palpable as the tall poppy was cut down. Stacy Lee, director and former member, commented on the mirage the church created. “The love of that presentation unfortunately allows one to *overlook systems of accountability and structure*—the kind of safety nets that are required within institutions that wield so much power.”<sup>313</sup> All of these scenarios are examples of terrible abuse that should be addressed with a serious urgency. However, Lee’s comment demonstrates how easy it is to overlook the more *covert* ways abusive power is expressed and ignored when there is a perceived benefit. The abuse follows a consistent pattern, *and so does the collective ignorance that allows it*. Our responses of distancing and shock can easily become self-serving ignorance, bypassing and denial *through scapegoating the offenders in the spotlight and ignoring the system that propped them up*. Overlooking power abuse can happen anywhere—from

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<sup>307</sup> Panchuk, “The Shattered Spiritual Self,” 10-11.

<sup>308</sup> Olivia Crist et al., whole, *Shiny Happy People: Duggar Family Secrets* (Prime Video, 2023), <https://www.primevideo.com/detail/Shiny-Happy-People-Duggar-Family-Secrets/0TRV2VQKIE3NEHOPKZ5G3HION5>.

<sup>309</sup> Institute of Basic Life Principles.

<sup>310</sup> Anecdotally, I lost count of the number of people who were shocked and disturbed to find many of the abhorrent beliefs, teachings and practices of the IBLP had been rebranded and repackaged in so many Christian marriage, family and youth resources from their allegedly non-fundamentalist churches. Many recognized the same kinds of personally damaging impacts through the watered-down/disconnected teachings that are front and center at IBLP.

<sup>311</sup> Scout Productions and Vanity Fair, whole, *The Secrets of Hillsong* (Hulu, 2023), <https://www.hulu.com/series/the-secrets-of-hillsong-41cb2b50-df48-485c-8963-0aafca4a8601>.

<sup>312</sup> A German word transliterated into English vernacular. The literal translation is “harm-joy”. It essentially describes the experience of being delighted in someone else’s pain or misfortune.

<sup>313</sup> Maria Espada, “The True Story Behind the FX Documentary Series The Secrets of Hillsong,” *TIME*, April 19, 2023, <https://time.com/6281339/secrets-of-hillsong-true-story/>.

the conservative mega-churches all the way to the tiniest, most progressive churches out there.<sup>314</sup> It is a type of protective othering that prevents us from seeing the similar themes of harm and abuse that repeat themselves in our *own* systems that *we* benefit from and are inclined to fiercely protect. Abuse has a learnable playbook.

As has been stated before, power abuse from systemic ignorance harms everyone. Additionally, our relationship to power is connected to what we are accountable for and the repair we need. As Panchuk notes,

It is sufficient to say that the spiritual harms are different in the two cases, and the victim of religious trauma is not culpable for the harm they incur whereas the perpetrator is. Furthermore, those who have the greatest social power—those not subject to hermeneutical marginalization—will bear the greatest moral responsibility for perpetuating, or failing to offer epistemic resistance to, identity prejudices within the community.<sup>315</sup>

Seeing and naming the harm will move us towards truth-telling and corrective accountability and repair. As painful as it may be to disrupt the status quo, it is necessary if we want to return to an authenticity that promotes flourishing and freedom for all people. As King succinctly stated: “He who lives with untruth lives in spiritual slavery. Freedom is still the bonus we receive for knowing the truth. ‘Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.’”<sup>316</sup>

## Disrupting Comfort

A second factor in being able to own our part in traumatic patterns of abuse is our ability to tolerate the somatic discomfort of confrontation and conflict. Taking action toward repair both within the system and with those whom the system has harmed begins with reestablishing safety.<sup>317</sup> However, the *context* for whom safety is required or *how* safety is acknowledged or applied is often what makes conversations around repair and change so tricky.

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<sup>314</sup> Othering is a coping mechanism that allows us to overlook the theme and “rhyming scheme” of power-over systems. This protects the detection of abuse and prevents accountability and repair. Sexual and physical violence are abhorrent, especially when they are done in the name of God or by those who claim to be the people of God, but the impacts of emotional, relational, spiritual, theological and psychological abuse are also devastating. Ignoring them makes room for escalating patterns of abuse.

<sup>315</sup> Panchuk, “The Shattered Spiritual Self,” 15-16.

<sup>316</sup> King, *Where Do We Go From Here?* 71.

<sup>317</sup> In many spaces there is debate or difference over how the concept of safety should be used and applied. Some will say that no space can be guaranteed to not ever cause hurt, therefore no spaces can be truly considered safe. This may result in either a “toughen up” approach (less ideal) or implementing measures to increase “best practice” along with accountability, creating “safer spaces” (more ideal). Some prefer to advocate for a “brave space” where people learn how to navigate difficult conversations or have healthy conflict. Some may equate a safe space with being free from triggers of any kind. All of these ideas about safety have elements and ways that express something true about the nature of safety. Additionally, they all, without acknowledging the context and complexity of preexisting power paradigms, have the potential to retraumatize victims and drive deeper the ruts of power-over and power-abdication.

Most often, when victims speak out, it has a disruptive effect on those who have traditionally held too much power. Though the underlying reasons may vary, it is very common for the powerful to wrongly accuse victims of *making things unsafe*,<sup>318</sup> when, really, they are just making things uncomfortable.<sup>319</sup> Michelle Kim states,

In facilitating what most corporate leaders call “difficult conversations,” we often remind people to distinguish between the idea of safety and comfort. When we fight for safety for the marginalized, what we’re talking about is safety from being discriminated against, harassed, assaulted, fired, or killed by the system and supremacist culture, which has historically criminalized, subjugated, exploited, and violated them and continues to do so. This need for safety is not the same thing as cis, heterosexual white men wanting to avoid feeling uncomfortable while having difficult conversations around DEI, feeling “excluded” from initiatives centring marginalized identities, or feeling shame for making a mistake. And yet, the notions of safety and comfort are so often mistaken as the same thing... Without employing principled and informed contextual analysis, concepts like safety can be easily flattened, co-opted, and misunderstood.<sup>320</sup>

J.S. Park has commented that “safety is a dignified right that everyone needs and deserves, but comfort is a way to escape accountability and hide in the status quo. We need to get uncomfortable for the sake of championing our safety.”<sup>321</sup>

In his final book, King describes the problem that comfort and familiarity poses in the struggle to change the power-over system of racism. He also highlights, again, as he did in the *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*<sup>322</sup> that the demands for comfort are more present and problematic in those who identify as moderates—those who think they are *already doing* the work of liberation. “...their most troublesome adversary was not the obvious bigot of the Ku Klux Klan or the John Birch Society, but the white liberal who is more devoted to “order” than to justice, who prefers tranquillity to equality.”<sup>323</sup> Similarly, in the church, the progressive voices are often victims of ambivalence,

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<sup>318</sup> From a nervous system perspective, it is true that those who are accustomed to excess power can and do perceive, feel and experience a threat response when the status quo is disrupted and disturbed. And, understandably, this feels very unsafe and can be disorienting. However, when one is the perpetrator of harm, it is their responsibility to resource themselves, apart from the repair process with the victim, to process this experience. The “Circle of care” diagram in the appendix may be helpful.

<sup>319</sup> In psychology, this is sometimes referred to as exceeding their “window of tolerance.” It’s a helpful concept proposed by Dan Siegel in 1999, related to the function of the nervous system and emotional regulation and hypo/hyperarousal. The window of tolerance is not fixed, but can be expanded through healing and practice. <https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/window-of-tolerance/#:~:text=The%20window%20of%20tolerance%20concept,experience%2C%20process%2C%20and%20integrate>.

<sup>320</sup> Kim, *The Wake Up*, 101.

<sup>321</sup> J.S. Park, January 25, 2024, Personal correspondence

<sup>322</sup> Martin Luther King to Fellow Clergymen, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” *“Letter from a Birmingham Jail [King, Jr.]”* (African Studies Center - University of Pennsylvania, April 16, 1963), [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html).

<sup>323</sup> King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 93.

wanting change for victims of power-over systems but not wanting to adapt or change their proximity to power and the status quo that gives them stability and comfort.<sup>324</sup> Part of the transformation will be embodied through disrupting the normalized power imbalance. Equality cannot be achieved for the oppressed without a perceived cost to those who have benefited from abusive power.<sup>325</sup> The challenge to true progress and transformation lies with those who think they are supporting the cause but refuse to pay the full cost of consciousness-raising, resist emptying themselves of normalized abusive power, and demand patience from those whom the system is actively harming.<sup>326</sup>

Kim illuminates the conundrum of the moderate:

Many of us desire to be good people and to be perceived as being good by others. We are quick to jump in, wanting to know immediately how we can help, what we can do to spread our goodness. Ironically, this desire to identify, and be identified, as a good person can sometimes be the very barrier to our ability to actually create good impacts. These misleading concepts of a “good person” and what it means to “do good” are where we should begin to reorient ourselves and interrogate our impulses so that we can reflect on our larger role within the context of social justice work, while preemptively reconciling the tension that will undoubtedly arise when the way we see ourselves conflicts with our impacts.<sup>327</sup>

Kim goes on to describe the problems when good people are called out in the midst of their well-intentioned allyship.

For example, think of the self-professed feminist cis heterosexual men ... During my... time with these men... I experienced some of the most disorienting forms of misogyny. Their misogyny came in different shapes and sizes, from gaslighting to patronization, and was difficult to detect under the cover of their public persona as “feminists” and “good men.” Though I don’t believe they were intentionally causing harm, without recognizing their complicity in the system they were too quick to denounce publicly, they failed to catch themselves when they ended up perpetrating harm in subtle and insidious ways that hurt the people they claimed to care for.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 5.

<sup>325</sup> This is not to say that those who have settled into ambivalence have never been hurt or had difficulty in the system. This is about those that “tap out” and are unaware or unwilling to grow beyond a certain point.

<sup>326</sup> I cannot count the times over my adult life that the main reason for not implementing change has been because patience was needed for those opposed to change. As Dr King has so clearly stated, the struggle for freedom and righting the wrongs of the past is not achieved through passivity and comfort, but through active engagement and non-violent direct action.

<sup>327</sup> Kim, *The Wake Up*, 26.

<sup>328</sup> Kim further expands this problem: “And many of us are guilty of this. We use all the right words, quoting our favorite social justice writers and boasting our academic understanding of social inequities—and yet in our most intimate relationships, we replicate the very harm we are trying to distance ourselves from without realizing it. White people do this with people of color, cis people do this with trans and nonbinary people, heterosexual people do this with queer people, abled people do this with disabled people. We are quick to declare that we are safe and that we “get it,” but there is nothing safe or trustworthy about the ways we cause harm that multiply into macro-level inequalities, all while we wear our “good person” name tags.” Kim, *The Wake Up*, 26-27.

It is difficult to describe how disorienting it is for victim-survivors of religious abuse when theologians, pastors, and the progressive faithful who claim to be working towards justice pushback so vehemently when they are called out or called in.<sup>329</sup> Too frequently, they rise up in self-righteous indignation and again dismiss, minimize and shift blame onto those who speak up. They often calm themselves and quiet dissent by responding with “patience, patience” or “peace, peace”<sup>330</sup> *when there is no peace for victims*. King warned patience can quickly become a vice of the powerful.<sup>331</sup> Ruttenberg further states, “If you find you are feeling defensive about being invited into accountability for harm you have caused and thus want to blame the person who is asking for your repentance for making you feel uncomfortable—well, there’s some extra work you might need to do.”<sup>332</sup> Waiting for everyone to become comfortable and get on board with justice measures only serves abusive power. Very often, “waiting” is tied to finances, tradition or “very good” people who just need time. This is window-dressing conflict avoidance, and it needs to stop. Rarely is direct action towards consciousness-raising and engagement with traditional or financial stakeholders given any urgency. Justice must be *non-violent, active and deliberate*.<sup>333</sup> The perpetrators of harm must bear the weight and discomfort of change. The violence—physical, spiritual, emotional or otherwise must end.

From an orthokarpic perspective - if addressing normalized abuse would cause the end of a community or institution, so be it. There is a high likelihood the fruit it claimed to be producing was either non-existent or rotten anyway. No good thing is worth continuing the intentional harm and abuse of others. Change must happen at the pace and direction of those “with the knee on their necks.”<sup>334</sup>

People are “uneasy with injustice but unwilling yet to pay the significant price to eradicate it.”<sup>335</sup> The too-powerful must learn to tolerate the discomfort of accountability, of power-emptying, and other-centering. Enacting justice *will cost* them their previous relationship with power. They must learn to walk and adapt alongside their somatic discomfort while engaging with corrective action led by those most impacted by the abusive systems.

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<sup>329</sup> For example, Allowing deconstruction in some ways, but gatekeeping the process in others. Claiming to be LGBTQ+ affirming, racially reconciling, or including women but refusing to decenter traditional cis-gendered, straight, eurocentric male voices and influence.

<sup>330</sup> Jeremiah 6:14.

<sup>331</sup> King, *Where Do We Go From Here*, 93.

<sup>332</sup> Ruttenberg further states that though both parties may be hurt, those who have power in an experience of harm, bear the weight of being accountable to victims. Ruttenberg, *On Repentance*, 18.

<sup>333</sup> An example of this is Kingian Non-Violence as described by The King Center <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>.

<sup>334</sup> This is a deliberate reference to the incident of police abuse that caused the death of George Floyd. Metaphorically, victims of religious trauma are crying out, “I can’t breathe,” and too often their cries are ignored and dismissed. Meanwhile those with too much power get to stay comfortable.

<sup>335</sup> King, *Where Do We Go From Here?* 12.



## Letting Go

The topic of spiritual trauma is having its moment. It's about time. Spiritual, theological and religious trauma is real. It is *not* new, though the language and understanding of it is emerging at a rapid pace. As McBride states, "Spiritual trauma didn't emerge in 1991, nor did it emerge as soon as white evangelicals started talking about it. It has always been here ... spiritual trauma has been with us as long as people use power as a means of getting control... The academic and clinical communities are just catching up."<sup>336</sup>

Power abuse is at the heart of religious trauma in the church. Power abuse is so infused in the culture and theology of the Western Church that it's hard to imagine how it could exist without it. The truth is trauma will wait.<sup>337</sup> It *has waited*—in traumatized bodies across decades and generations, but it will never stop banging its drum. The traumatized body won't stop telling the truth about how ideas, beliefs and experiences have impacted its ability to flourish and thrive. The body is relentless in its commitment to truth, restoration and justice. Our job is to learn to listen to what it is saying. Once we can see and name the wounds, once we can feel the embodied longing for justice and truth, I hope we hear the freedom song and are compelled to sing our part.

Bear in mind that the powerful also recognizes the liberating tune. But abusive power tries to have its cake and eat it, too. It says, "Yes and Amen!" It learns the language of liberation, but then it insists that it must control the pace, the tune, the pitch, the timbre and the tone that liberation is allowed to sing. It wants the fruit of freedom without the toil and cost of repair. As Frederick Douglass said, "Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters."<sup>338</sup>

The church must go deeper, raise consciousness to a new level and fundamentally change its approach to identifying and addressing core elements that cause harm and inhibit healing and repair. New spiritual frameworks, better governance, or firing all the "bad apples" won't do it.<sup>339</sup> We must orient ourselves toward the traumatized, the marginalized, and the oppressed. We must not only listen, but give up our power, every last bit of it that was not ours to begin with, so that we might dismantle all that has grown from its poisoned soil.

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<sup>336</sup> McBride, "Holy/Hurt Podcast Episode 1: The House Is Haunted,"

<sup>337</sup> Trauma may wait, but people being traumatized don't have to. You are allowed to do what you need to heal. You are allowed to leave environments that demonstrate they are not willing to participate in repair or meaningful change. Your healing is worth it.

<sup>338</sup> Frederick Douglass, "If There Is No Struggle, There Is No Progress," (1857) *Frederick Douglass*, "If There Is No Struggle, There Is No Progress" (speech, NY, August 3, 1857), <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1857-frederick-douglass-if-there-no-struggle-there-no-progress/>.

<sup>339</sup> DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 103.

In the end, systems that require, in spoken and unspoken ways, the repeated trauma and abuse of one group or person for the collective safety and comfort of others is, at its heart, dehumanizing. The Church can proclaim the good news all it wants, but if power ignorance and desire for comfort lead to normalizing harm, it has forgotten what love is and what love does. It is nothing but a collective of clanging cymbals and resounding gongs.<sup>340</sup> It is a fig tree that bears no fruit.<sup>341</sup>

I don't believe the Western Christian church can or should be the leaders or healers of spiritual trauma. It is riddled and distorted with the disease of power abuse, and there is little evidence it wants to be made well. Regardless, perpetrators and bystanders do not get to set the pace and direction of liberation and collective well-making. As Freire writes, "...the oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle."<sup>342</sup> The church and the people who benefit from its power *need to be healed and held accountable* for the harm they have caused. They must make room to face themselves, their histories and their roles as perpetrators and bystanders. They must learn to follow the victimized, marginalized, and oppressed. That is to say, they must learn to follow the way of Jesus.

## In Conclusion

Giving up abusive power, coercion, and being accountable for the harm caused will certainly be disruptive. There may be nothing that can save the Western Church and parachurch organizations *as we know them*. Breadcrumbs of reform at the snail's pace of comfort will do nothing to change what the church has functionally ignored. The tree of knowledge and beliefs produces rotten fruit and no amount of modifications can save it or make it produce what only a fully embodied relationship with Life can. My sense echoes what King realized: "For years I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of the South, a little change here, a little change there. Now I feel quite differently. I think you've got to have a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values."<sup>343</sup>

It may take that much. The life and ministry of Jesus showed us that letting go of abusive power, and everything it built is the very thing that saves us in the end. As King said, "I choose to identify with the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry... This is the way I'm going. If it means suffering a little bit, I'm going that way. If it means sacrificing, I'm going that way. If it means dying for them, I'm going that way because I heard a voice say, "Do something for others."<sup>344</sup> If we are resurrection people, if we claim to follow Jesus, it

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<sup>340</sup> I Corinthians 13:1.

<sup>341</sup> Luke 13:6.

<sup>342</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 20.

<sup>343</sup> Daniel S. Lucks, *Selma to Saigon: The Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 202.

<sup>344</sup> In the introduction to *Where Do We Go From Here*, Vincent Harding recollected King's words from a sermon King preached in Atlanta. King, *Where Do We Go From Here?*, xix.

shouldn't be surprising that this will cost us everything that is contrary to embodied flourishing for all people. The way of Jesus is *actually* a way. It's not an abstraction or idea that sits outside of our bodies and above our human experience. If the Church truly wants to be an institution of life and liberation, the way of Jesus shows us that we cannot get there without dying first.

## PRACTICE 5

Maintaining an embodied sense of safety includes increasing the ability to tolerate discomfiting sensations. Conflict and confrontation can be uncomfortable. Admitting that we hurt others or that we can be hurt is vulnerable. Tolerating without bypassing, retraumatizing, or dehumanizing is part of the process.

This practice is designed to gently expand our embodied tolerance for discomfort by “pendulating” between body sensations of discomfort and ease. The term was first coined by psychotherapist Peter Levine. It is a way of titrating overwhelming body memory and making friends with the embodied experience.

In renegotiating trauma via Somatic Experiencing, we utilize ‘pendulation,’ the shifting of body sensations or emotions between those of expansion and those of contraction. This ebb and flow allows the polarities to gradually be integrated. It is the holding together of these polarities that facilitates deep integration and often an ‘alchemical’ transformation.<sup>345</sup>

### In Practice: Embodying Discomfort

*Please note this is not a practice meant to help you be okay with or tolerate being traumatized or abused.* Pendulating may help you “be with” whatever felt sense arises—sadness, anger, fear, shame, disgust.—feelings you may have needed to suppress in the past. Pendulating allows you to offer more compassionate care to yourself by *moving through appropriate*<sup>346</sup> *emotional responses.*<sup>347</sup>

- Once you are in a comfortable position, think of a time or place—real or imagined—that represents comfort, safety and ease to you.<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> Peter A. Levine, *Trauma and Memory: Brain and Body in a Search for the Living Past: A Practical Guide for Understanding and Working with Traumatic Memory* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic, 2015), 72.

<sup>346</sup> For example, sadness, anger, fear, shame, and disgust, are all appropriate responses in the right context. It is appropriate to be angry at abuse or disgusted by an abusers actions.

<sup>347</sup> As previously noted, the goal of nervous system regulation is not to always be calm in every circumstance, but to instead increase the body's ability to express the full range of emotions in response to human experience and move from activation back to regulation.

<sup>348</sup> The imagination can be a helpful tool when healing. It can be effective in bridging the mind-body experience. In this case, it's not creating an escape, but a way of practicing and becoming familiar with safety in the body.

- Take a breath and notice where and how it shows up in your body.
- Allow as many senses as possible to be included. What does it look like, smell like, feel like? etc. Settle into this feeling of expansion and ease. This is the place you will return to over and over again as you pendulate between ease and discomfort. You may practice this as many times as you need till it feels familiar to your mind and body.
- When you are ready to oscillate to the next sensation, take another breath and consider a difficult feeling (*not* specific details of a traumatic event) or sensation. For example, what kinds of bodily sensations are activated when you discover you have caused harm or normalized abuse? What emotions or sensations come up for you? Can you notice what is happening in your body? Even if it is denial, refusal, or shut-down, anything at all—even for one second, can you stay with that feeling and acknowledge it without judgement?
- Alternately, your learning may involve staying with the discomfort that arises in naming that you have *been harmed*. Holding people accountable for their harmful impacts (whether or not they intended them) is the kindest and most loving thing we can do, even if it starts with naming the harm only to ourselves. You deserve care for the parts of you that were genuinely hurt.
- Practice pendulating between these two sensations as many times as you like, all in the context of self-compassion and non-judgement.
- As you are able, increase the amount of time you stay in sensations that have felt uncomfortable.<sup>349</sup>
- Remember, it's perfectly ok if you can hardly stay in the discomfort in the beginning. The systems we've been saturated in have made staying with discomfort *very abnormal*. Noticing a deficit provides really good information! There is no shame in learning we have places that need development, growth, and repair. Allow curiosity to become a great companion in these exercises. We are learning about our orientation towards comfort and discomfort. We don't have to be anywhere but where we are, and though our nervous systems might *prefer* what is familiar, we can make it safe to change and adapt to what is more life-giving.

Pendulating is a way of embodying “two things are true.” You can be a “good person” and have done harmful things that you must be accountable for. You can love someone or something and have been deeply harmed by them.

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<sup>349</sup> How long? That's up to you. It's a little like training for a marathon. You might need to begin with very short intervals of discomfort. Try 30-second cycles to begin with. Adjust the time based on your response. The point is discovering where your tolerance is, without shame, and then gradually and gently expanding capacity.

As you engage, does anything shift? It could be that the physical experience of constriction intensifies, or it may seem to relax and create more openness. Numbness may eventually give way to a more acute felt sense that you can engage directly with. Or, for a very long time, your body may not seem to change much at all. Your soma may need some trust-building before it can share more information. If it feels helpful, you can reassure yourself by saying something like, *“I’m not here to fix you or change you, I see you. You are welcome here.”* This might feel challenging if you are speaking to a part that seems to have caused chronic trouble or pain.

Over time, the goal is to increase our capacity to be with all of our sensations without collapsing or shutting down. This is part of healing so our whole selves are present to life.

To end this practice, notice—what is the experience of moving in and out of ease and tension like for you? If you can, acknowledge that out loud with gratitude. You are your body and your body is a resource. Establishing a connection with the richness of your inner world is important work. Consider free writing or journaling about the experience to take the exercise further. Alternatively, you may want to explore the experience further with a therapist or practitioner who specializes in somatic or experiential therapies. Building safety in our bodies through tolerating discomfort will make us emotionally safer, and more able to authentically engage with transformation, accountability and repair.

## CHAPTER 6 - HOME IS WHERE YOUR BODY IS

*“It is not your responsibility to alleviate anyone else’s guilt.  
As Audre Lorde said, guilt is “the beginning of knowledge.”  
Do not spare them the mirror. Let them learn.”*<sup>350</sup>

### The Way Home

After a final summary of the material covered, I will first address those who are compelled to stay engaged and participate in the Western Church's systems and organizations. I will offer a final caution and imagine what might be needed for the Western Church to create a new normal of repentance and repair. Then, as a final practice, I will turn to those who have experienced religious trauma and offer validation and care.

### A Final Review

This work has stated that trauma, including religious trauma, is the subjective and protective inner response to any experience that disrupts connection and results in bodily dysregulation, overwhelming one's sense of safety, belonging and dignity. Spiritual and religious trauma and abuse are real, and survivors deserve the same care and attention as victims of any other type of traumatic experience. (Re)discovering the wisdom and goodness of your body is a key part of healing trauma and building resiliency.

This writing showed how abstractionism contributes to the normalization of trauma and abuse by elevating positive perceptions of the objective goodness of beliefs and traditions over any negative impacts the beliefs and traditions create. This work maintains that a radical movement towards relationality is required to cultivate collective and embodied flourishing. Relational ontology values experiential truth and knowledge expressed through embodied mutuality. Relationality promotes human flourishing in ways abstractionism can't. Adapting traditions and trusting the process of healthy conflict is part of the ethos of relationality.

Through identifying the relationships between beliefs, practices, and experiences of complex religious trauma, this writing has invited self-location and increased self-and-system awareness of acculturated, abusive, or traumatic constraints. Disrupting normalized traditions and beliefs is challenging. In light of this, a relational assessment lens, *orthokarpos*, a focus on assessing beliefs and practices by their outcomes and impact—looking for the “right fruit”—was proposed. Through paradigms of secure attachment and nervous system regulation, the body shows that traditions that

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<sup>350</sup> Cole Arthur Riley, “Black Liturgies on Instagram,” Black Liturgies, March 18, 2024, [https://www.instagram.com/p/C4qNIqXLxqB/?igsh=MW43aDV4bmt0aXpscQ%3D%3D&img\\_index=2](https://www.instagram.com/p/C4qNIqXLxqB/?igsh=MW43aDV4bmt0aXpscQ%3D%3D&img_index=2), Slide 2.

work against secure attachment, authenticity, embodiment, and repair are inconsistent with human flourishing and the way of Jesus. An orthokarpic lens helps expose normalized beliefs, practices, or interpretations that fall short of expressing God's essential nature and truth.

The final invitation was to see and understand the relationship between power, trauma, and abuse. As power-abuse and misappropriation are at the heart of traumatic experiences, the many forms of being power-oblivious and the prioritization of comfort for the powerful must be directly addressed for any positive transformation within the Western Church to occur. Though better beliefs and practices are beneficial, the church must first learn to walk the path of repentance, accountability, and transformation before it can lay claim to relational systems and practices that repair the many types of trauma that are perpetuated within the religious systems of the Western Christian Church.

## It Happened

I remember when I worked up the courage to share my experiences of harm with another staff member at church. At the outset, I was received with care and concern. I felt believed and supported right up until the end of the meeting when they let out a big sigh and said, "You know, I think this is just a big personality conflict."<sup>351</sup> I was gobsmacked. Devasted. *I had been so hopeful in this theologically open, affirming and increasingly trauma-informed community.* I had hoped it would be different. Confusingly, the ongoing patterns of spiritual bullying, power manipulation and high control seemed to be acknowledged by some. Still, the subconscious self-and-system protective patterns of conflict avoidance and assuaging the powerful emerged when push came to shove.

Though the particular symptoms may have differed from previous faith communities, the same sickness and wounding prevailed. I have experienced, heard, and read more stories than I can count that follow this pattern. I want to clearly say to victims: you did not make it up or imagine it. It happened. It was real. You got caught in a riptide of religious trauma that yanked you from safety and filled your lungs with unimaginable pain. "The grief of every victim is that they are mired in a perpetual current that protects abusers but drowns victims."<sup>352</sup>

No personality type deserves or causes harm and abuse. Further, no personality, position, or system is above or excused from accountability for the impact of their behaviour, beliefs, and actions. Naming the patterns of harm took years for me to realize. However, the path forward was painfully clear once I could see what was and wasn't happening in my context.<sup>353</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> As in, my personality was causing conflict, thought, when pressed, they couldn't name how or what or when or what parts of my personality was the cause.

<sup>352</sup> J. S. Park, *As long as You Need: Permission to Grieve* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2024), 79.

<sup>353</sup> Chuck DeGroat writes, "Systems are powerful. They hide invisible forces that work below the surface. I'm trained to see these things, and when I approach a system from the outside I can often diagnose the dynamics fairly well. But I've operated in systems that have slowly strangled me, only awakening to this dynamic after a personal crisis or after leaving." deGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 103-104. I include this to help name and normalize the

## To Stay or Not to Stay

I've not tried to convince people to stay or leave the Church. My monumental hope was to disrupt patterns of normalized trauma and abuse so bystanders and beneficiaries of the Western Church might question the ways high control and abusive power are hidden in the status quo. My goal was to make room for victim-survivors to have their experiences of religious trauma believed, and to equip them to name the pervasive harm and abuse.

I hope that wherever you find yourself and whatever you decide, you will do so with increased awareness, eyes wide open to the costs and challenges of either decision. As Lundy Bancroft said in the foreword of *When Love Hurts*, "This can't answer whether you should leave or not... but you will be helped to make the decision yourself."<sup>354</sup> The truth is, the problems are as deep as they are wide. An oversimplified fix would be a mistake.<sup>355</sup> Some may find that though they have loved the church with all their heart, because of the unrelenting patterns of abuse, trauma, and the lack of meaningful victim-centred repair—that *love* is no longer enough to keep them there.<sup>356</sup> Others may have awakened to the depth of the problem and feel compelled to speak up or show solidarity where they may have stayed silent in the past. The caution is this: simply leaving is not the same thing as healing, nor is staying the same thing as repentance and renewal.

## Discomforting Disillusions

If I've done my job, this thesis will have caused increased disillusionment and a growing discomfort with how things are in the Western Church. My experience in the therapy room has taught me that these are *not* feelings to resolve but sacred gifts to engage with, and I will make no attempts to relieve them. Discomfort is how change happens; disillusionment is how we begin to see things clearly. As Maté writes, "If we're out to see things as they are, we must be willing—even hungry—to shed our illusions. We have to welcome being disillusioned."<sup>357</sup> He further explains,

Commonly, we speak of disillusionment ruefully as an experience to be avoided, akin to disappointment or a sense of having been betrayed. And it does carry a cost: we may have to let go of something we've come to value or a perspective or attitude we've taken refuge in.

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shame that can come up once a pattern of harm is exposed. "Why didn't I notice/leave earlier?" First of all, abusive power erodes self-trust, is ambiguous, and avoids detection. Additionally, internalized patterns of self-blame and minimization may have shown up to protect us while we hope against hope that a faith community or faith construct might live up to its claims, despite experiential evidence to the contrary. Additionally, patterns take time to establish. Regardless, it makes sense if you have intense feelings for all that was lost while you hoped for a different outcome. Self-compassion will see you through the complex path of naming and noticing abusive harm.

<sup>354</sup> Jill Cory and Karen McAndless-Davis, *When Love Hurts: A Woman's Guide to Understanding Abuse in Relationships* (New York, NY: New American Library, 2016), xiv.

<sup>355</sup> Cory and McAndless-Davis, *When Love Hurts*, vxii.

<sup>356</sup> Cory and McAndless-Davis, *When Love Hurts* xxii.

<sup>357</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 483.



What we see less easily, is the cost of refusing. As I often ask people, “Would you prefer to be illusioned or disillusioned?” Would you rather engage with the world as it really is or only as we wish it were? Which approach brings more suffering in the end?<sup>358</sup>

While no one unequivocally knows what dismantling a system all the way to its foundation looks like, I agree with King that it is what dominating and controlling systems need. The challenge is that though the system has harmed me, and that does matter, the systemic ignorance, desire for comfort, and the impulse to soothe the powerful may still hide in my shadows. This is true for almost anyone swimming in the waters of Western culture. Part of my work is to continue divesting myself *of* and being accountable *for* misappropriated power and control alongside you.

### **A Final Warning**

Over and over, this work has maintained that returning to the body is an essential part of healing. However, the presence of embodied action does *not* necessarily mean that the problem of systemic spiritual trauma and abuse is resolved.

In December 2023, Hillary McBride shared an Instagram post about the increased opportunities she is having to bring conversations about neuroscience, mental health, and embodiment into church spaces.

Each time I ended an event, I felt surprised to be connected to a well of possibility I thought had dried up a long time ago. More than ever I feel hopeful for the church. For the possibility for it to be even more alive, more human, for it to be a space at the forefront of repairing wounds not creating them. That hope came not from any idea I learned or shared, but from watching an octogenarian twerk under stained glass while stomping a walker in time with a rock and roll song, from spaces where embodiment is celebrated as a spiritual practice, and the realization that we can build faith communities where all of who we are in our humanness is shared, and delighted in as sacred.”<sup>359</sup>

Parts of me want to share her optimism. I am wildly hopeful because of the human capacity to change, heal, and grow at any age. However, in light of the material covered in this thesis, I cannot extend this hope to the Church. The problematic relationship between pain and power is deeply embedded in the West's politics, partnerships and pulpits.

While it's true that many streams of faith within Western Christianity have been more stoic, many other Christian denominations have allowed or even *required* high levels of physicality. Charismatic and other physically or emotionally expressive religious spaces within Western

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<sup>358</sup> Maté, *Myth of Normal*, 483.

<sup>359</sup> Hillary L. McBride, “Hillary Lianna McBride on Instagram,” Instagram, December 5, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C0e-XKDSHI0/?igsh=MW5rNTNyem9nZ3Jt>.

Christianity are not exempt from normalizing spiritual harm and religious abuse. Therefore, assessing *health* or *assuming trauma prevention* by the presence of bodily expression is like evaluating the potential for abuse by determining the amount of money in a future partner's bank account. Though they have resources, it tells us nothing of the capacity for harm nor propensity for relational accountability and repair.

Embodiment *is* a resource essential for healing, but disembodiment doesn't *cause* trauma, it is a *result* of it. Addressing the root cause and dismantling abusive power is required to end the patterns of normalized spiritual violence. The inclusion of good and better things doesn't *prevent or heal* trauma. Trauma results from disrupted relational connections, power misappropriation, and poor repair. Without directly addressing the role and root of abusive power—*embodiment and trauma-sensitive frameworks will inevitably become the new face and flavour of religious trauma.*<sup>360</sup>

The language of embodiment and trauma sensitivity are easily fused with spiritual systems that use power and control. In fact, many victim-survivors *already know this to be true* when they hear things like: “You are just projecting your trauma onto leadership,” “Your body (or emotion) is lying to you,” or, “I prayed about it and felt a no in my body, so it wasn't abuse.” I wish these were fictitious examples. Spiritual trauma can be “...insidiously hidden. It's the lie that you deserve your abuse. If someone can persuade you that *God has willed it*, then this becomes a route by which every other abuse can be smuggled into your life.”<sup>361</sup>

There is no amount of embodied goodness that makes abuse and trauma acceptable. Embodiment can be weaponized and used to gain control and avoid accountability. There is no good thing that ultimately prevents relational ruptures and the need for victim-centred accountability and repair. Repentance and repair *are* the good things the church needs to embody.

### **Creating a New Normal**

Martha Crawford noted, “People don't want to lose anything. Mostly what people want is to go back, to put things back the way they were as if they'd never broken anything, which is really different than finding your way forward and allowing a failure to remake you and remodel you and reorganize how you see yourself.”<sup>362</sup> If the church wants to be remade, if it desires to model

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<sup>360</sup> We have a historical witness in the ways that corrective movements: feminism, anti-racism, LGBTQ+ rights, and more have started out with an eye to correcting systemic problems, but have failed to divest themselves of internalized abusive power and high control. If those with more access to privilege and power do not do the work to heal their nervous systems and divest themselves of these oppressive realities, they will end up using the very thing meant for liberation to harm. Anything can become a weapon to ensure power, safety and dignity for some at the expense of those most oppressed and marginalized.

<sup>361</sup> Park, *As Long As You Need*, 78.

<sup>362</sup> Ruttenberg quotes Martha Crawford, *On Repentance*, 49.

repentance, it must be public, intentional and explicit about that which has helped normalize harm, trauma, and abuse.<sup>363</sup>

The Church must publicly name its positional powers and privileges to embody safety, accountability and repair. They should intentionally have external and internal processes and guidelines to protect victims *and* the church's integrity. Integrity is more about how an organization or individual responds when things go wrong rather than having an infallible setup that ensures things always go right. Raising consciousness and collective awareness of the tendencies to defer to or ignore the impact of the powerful would certainly help. Owning the history of harm without sugarcoating would go a long way. Intentions must be measured with an orthokarpic lens—by impact and outcomes. Churches large and small should have fiscal transparency and policies on abuse and harm that are accessible, understandable and explicit. Governance must include clearly articulated roles and responsibilities within church structures and leadership positions.<sup>364</sup> As Brene Brown says, “clear is kind.”<sup>365</sup>

Clarity is kind, and clarity makes it more difficult for abusive dynamics to thrive unnoticed. Imagine a church or parachurch organization publicly stating that it recognizes the positional power and overarching authority that pastors and leaders within the church are socially given. Imagine clearly articulating where their expertise begins and ends. Imagine that, in light of this, they would submit themselves to processes that they could not easily adapt and control *when, not if*, conflict, mistakes and abuse happen. Imagine if they were committed to accountability, repair and rebuilding trust rather than perceived perfection or image preservation.

All of these things can serve a relational paradigm that includes the ability to recover from and repair damage. However, *no silver bullet will eliminate ruptures and the need for repair*. Sometimes, people get it wrong, and that's just part of being human. Finding perfection is impossible, and searching for perfection doesn't prevent us from harming or excuse us from rebuilding trust. Victim-centered accountability and repair do.

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<sup>363</sup> When the United Church of Canada became publicly affirming, they were guided by being Public, Intentional and Explicit (PIE) in their affirmation process. While the moniker is specific to 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion, I believe the principles are generally helpful touchpoints for naming and disrupting power ignorance and demands for comfort. Affirm United/ S'affirmer Ensemble, *National Affirming Pie Day 101*, accessed May 4, 2024, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5bee0cfe8f51303244529d3f/t/659da91dbb378224675454e1/1704831262239/National%2BAffirming%2BPIE%2BDay%2B101%2B%2BFAQ%27s.pdf>.

<sup>364</sup> In response to traditional hierarchical structures, a flat leadership structure may be proposed. However, one must be cautious that “flat” isn't a synonym for ambiguous. No structure or governance model is safe from power-abuse. While hierarchy may be overtly top-down, an ill-defined structure will inevitably function as a covert hierarchy that serves the powerful. Systems reveal themselves not by their structure on paper but by how they function when conflict and crisis arise.

<sup>365</sup> Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work, Tough Conversations, Whole Hearts* (New York, NY: Random House, 2018), 48.

Those who participate in faith communities must remember that unity and calm are not the same as peace, nor do they result in victim-centred repair and justice. Repentance is a fierce commitment to unmasking our illusions and refusing to live in alignment with normalized abuse and harm any longer.

As Ruttenberg says, “We write history with our decisions and our actions, but we also write history with our responses to those actions.”<sup>366</sup>

## PRACTICE 6

### In Practice: A Love Letter to Victims-Survivors

If you have been impacted by religious trauma and abuse, you deserve repair. Full stop. You deserved to have the rupture(s) acknowledged.<sup>367</sup> Nothing hurts quite like sharing a sliver of what happened to you, and after everything, instead of solidarity and action, receiving angry blowback or perhaps worse, thinly veiled ambivalence—“tsk...that’s too bad.”

As a final practice and conclusion, I want to offer an experience of compassionate care that includes things victim-survivors may need to hear or wish they could have heard from those who harmed us. I’m especially mindful of those who have carried theological, cultural, relational and systemic trauma in their bodies because of their gender, sexuality, race, economic status and ability.

### The Repair You Were Made For

To every victim-survivor of religious trauma and abuse,

This never should have happened. The abuse was never ok and the trauma that resulted from it should never have been made normal. To echo J.S. Park, “I’m sorry. They should have been sorry. It was not okay.”<sup>368</sup> You deserved for your difference to be celebrated and welcomed. Your experiences should have been paid with care and concern. You deserved to ask questions or say what was true without fear of retaliation. You deserved the emotional load you carried to be welcomed, witnessed and unburdened. You deserved for the offenders and bystanders to make a conscious effort towards amends and restitution, including doing the inner or systemic work required to ensure they were equipped to make different theological, ecclesial, or relational choices.

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<sup>366</sup> Ruttenberg, *On Repentance*, 45.

<sup>367</sup> “In every situation, minor or major, intimate or public, the work of confession forces the penitent to fully acknowledge the harm that they caused. It forces them to resist the temptation to minimize, to gloss over, to skip reckoning with what actually happened, how it happened, by who and why, and to avoid rushing to fix it, whatever “it” might be.” Ruttenberg, *On Repentance*, 116

<sup>368</sup> Park, *As Long As You Need*, 84.

I want you to know that I know victim-survivors of religious trauma rarely want tit-for-tat retribution. You want the hurt and harm to end. You weren't asking for too much when you asked for your offender to be accountable, to hear them say, "That happened and I regret it because it was harmful," and for your experience to be believed. Your dignity, belonging and safety were worth preserving and protecting rather than preferring and deferring to the status quo. Bringing dysfunction and abuse into the light was *not* what caused the problem—it was a gift that could have brought healing to the whole system.

To survivors who have begun the healing work - you aren't a liability. You are not a broken bird that needs to be caged, prevented and protected from influencing *because of your history of hurt*. Far from it - you are the canary in the coal mine. You are the prophets and truth-tellers who can spot red flags and patterns of abuse from a mile away.<sup>369</sup>

Victim-survivors, the marginalized, the oppressed, and the poor hold the keys to our collective liberation—and the church has shown over and over again it wants the benefits of your embodied wisdom without paying the cost. "The poor tell us who we are, the prophets tell us who we could be. So we hide the poor and kill the prophets."<sup>370</sup>

It was and always will be wrong when your dignity, safety, and belonging are sacrificed on the altar of *this is what's normal*. How dehumanizing. You are allowed to say *no more* when real embodied experiences of repair are withheld or when a false repair is offered while the abusive pattern continues unabated. You're not crazy or difficult for refusing to call repair that bears no fruit "good." You can name it for what it is.

You are allowed to change your mind, to no longer play a part in a system of high control and normalized trauma and abuse. Repentance and repair can begin with you, in you. You can live your one wild and precious life authentically in places and spaces that produce and promote genuine flourishing and bear evidence of relational goodness. You don't have to settle for crumbs.

Sometimes, healing requires that you leave.<sup>371</sup> Almost always, healing requires that you grieve. As Judith Herman says, "Only through mourning everything that has been lost, can the patient discover her indestructible inner life."<sup>372</sup> It's perfectly normal, among the hope and relief of

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<sup>369</sup> Though projection happens, and people may see problems where they don't exist, victim-survivors have frequently shared with me remarkably similar experiences: When bringing a concern or problem to light, when asking for accountability or explanation, it is common for the powerful to bring up the victim-survivor's vulnerable stories of trauma as a way to dismiss the concern. This is, contextually, an inappropriate response from the powerful. If it's projection, a grounded process centered in curiosity and compassion will see it through. Victim-survivors often know what lurks in the shadows. Their wisdom is hard won and worth paying attention to. It should be noted, however, that leveraging a victim's vulnerability is a tactic of high control and manipulation that is often used in abusive relationships.

<sup>370</sup> Attributed to Phillip Berrigan, as quoted in, John Dear, "The School of Prophets," *Ncronline.Org*, November 17, 2009, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/school-prophets>.

<sup>371</sup> Deconstruct, deconvert, dechurch. Whatever you want to call it.

<sup>372</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 188.

rebuilding a life after trauma and abuse, to also feel waves of grief in all its complex expressions.<sup>373</sup> Grief for what you've lost, for a future you had hoped for but no longer have or even want. Grief for how you were harmed without redress. Grief for what you wanted to be true but could not, in the end, carry the weight of truth.

I want you to know that it's normal, in your grief and in your healing, to feel angry. "Anger plays an important role in healing... anger is not the problem. It is a normal, healthy human emotion."<sup>374</sup> Like any emotion, I hope you can welcome it and find ways to honour it as part of your healing. Ultimately, I hope you feel permission to "Name your pain. Validate your wound. Call forth all you need, as long as you need, to grieve angry and pursue repair."<sup>375</sup>

The downside of leaving or demanding better from a high-control or abusive environment is that you don't get to control how others respond or manage themselves. When trauma and abuse are normalized, the patterns of high control rarely end just because you want to stop participating in the harmful dynamics.<sup>376</sup> Leaving is often a painful confirmation of your experiences of the high-control culture and reminds you of all the reasons you had to go in the first place. Heartbreak upon heartbreak. If, how, and when they respond is not in your realm of control, though I wish for your sake that your reasonable request for human decency would have been honoured.

The consolation in this mess is that even if the organization, institution or person that harmed you never acknowledges the harm or abuse - you can heal. You can begin the work to repair within yourself and create a *new normal* for your body and mind. You can experience real, grounded, embodied goodness again. The pain will not always be this intense.<sup>377</sup> You can become reacquainted with your authenticity and develop secure, reparative, and co-regulating relationships with yourself, others, the earth, and the Divine.<sup>378</sup> Maybe it happens in a spiritual community. Or perhaps it doesn't. Either way, you can learn to trust yourself. You can. Your body is a faithful witness to your journey, and you can learn to listen to your body's messages with compassion and care. As you rebuild connection and re-member yourself, you can learn to experience it all: joy, grief, anger, hope, love and the gift and challenge of being alive and fully participating in your humanity. Being fully human is the pathway to being fully connected to the Source of Life.

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<sup>373</sup> Cory and McAndless-Davis, *When Love Hurts*, 162.

<sup>374</sup> Cory and McAndless-Davis, *When Love Hurts*, 167.

<sup>375</sup> Park, *As Long as You Need*, 205.

<sup>376</sup> I acknowledge that endings may have a flurry of activity—one last kick at the can of high control, or, they can end with radio silence, as though you never existed and they have just moved on. Either spectrum of experience is painful.

<sup>377</sup> Cory and Mcandless-David, *When Love Hurts*, 170.

<sup>378</sup> I'm deliberately not using "God" because so often that name/construct/experience has been directly attached to abuse. I invite you to use whatever label works best to describe that immanent and transcendent spiritual experience of eternal Love that is larger than the sum of its parts. Universe, God, Creator, Divine, Source of Life, Ground of Being, or, if it feels best for you—nothing at all. Your healing belongs to you.

Healing from religious trauma isn't only about deconstruction or reconstruction—it is far more than that, far better than that—it is a journey of reclamation and rediscovery. As you heal from trauma and find your way back home to yourself, I hope you will experience this truth, woven into every fibre of your being from the very beginning: you belong—to your body, to the earth, to Love. You belong. You were always good, always whole, and always beloved all along.

With Love, Karina

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: The Basics of Repair<sup>379</sup>

In the book, *On Repentance and Repair*, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg offers a comprehensive resource for understanding a victim-centered process of repair. While I recommend reading the whole book, I thought it might be helpful to have an abbreviated version of the repair process model she shares, as outlined on pages 29-41. Seeing the basic components clearly laid out may be especially helpful as many of us in the Western Christian Church have been raised in “quick forgiveness” cultures that often exacerbate harm to victims. It should also be noted with each part offered below, the implicit subtext is “at the victim’s behest” or “according to the victim.”

A victim-centered repair process includes the following components.

- 1) Before a perpetrator approaches the victim for repair, the offender must be able to name and fully own the harm they have caused. They must understand what they have done and why the person they have hurt is hurt.
- 2) The perpetrator must demonstrate transformation. That is to say - they will need to do the work to understand themselves and why they knowingly or unknowingly responded in a way that was harmful. “Apologies, amends, and reparations don’t truly have the needed effect if the work to become different isn’t underway.” states Ruttenberg. They must without shame or fear, repent. Or, to say it another way, they must show they have returned to their authentic selves. This may take time, soul searching, and even professional help.
- 3) The offender will accept the consequences of their actions and seek restitution for their victim. According to Ruttenberg, this is all part of “taking responsibility in ways that matter.”
- 4) Throughout this process, the focus is on the mental and emotional state of the victim, not the intentions of the offender or the boxes that a perpetrator needs to check “in order to be left off the hook.”
- 5) When these parts are tangibly demonstrated, the victim may be offered an apology.
- 6) The perpetrator must demonstrate that they have actually changed - that is to say, they are able to choose differently when put in similar circumstances as before.

Again, the book gives far more in-depth information on the nuance and contexts that are entailed in a victim-centred repair process, but hopefully this will add a little shape to the concepts in this thesis.

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<sup>379</sup> Adapted and summarized from Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg’s book, *On Repentance and Repair* as cited in the Bibliography

## Appendix 2: Abstractionism and Relationality

It felt important to offer a wide-angle ontological view to help highlight and underscore the deeply embedded patterns of trauma in the Western Christian Church. At the same time, most of us don't spend much time thinking about the implications of the philosophical psychology of *ontology*. In the spirit of accessibility, this chart highlights and compares some of each system's basic outcomes or values. This appendix may be useful to increase self-and-system awareness.

To begin with, a list of abstractionist ideals is simpler to create because abstractionism values objects and ideas that are separated or “abstracted” from their contexts- much like how the laboratory tradition values isolating variables to measure outcomes. Abstractionism was made for lists!

Relationality, on the other hand, is more awkward in a list because, within relationality, all things are understood best through contextual interconnectedness. For example, I do not stop being a sister when I am parenting. For one thing, my parenting exists in relationship to my family of origin and those formative relationships. Relationality holds that the impact of these many relationships is an important influencing factor in who I am in my parenting. In Relationality, even words can get in the way of expressing truth, as the outcomes and experiences of the relationships between things determine what is true. Nonetheless, here is a list of some key distinctions between the two ontological categories.

| <b>Ontological Abstractionism</b> | <b>Relational Ontology</b>               |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Similarity/Sameness               | Difference/ Diversity                    |
| Objectivity                       | Subjectivity                             |
| Word/Intention-Sensitive          | Meaning/Implication-Sensitive            |
| Separability                      | Contextuality                            |
| Individualism                     | Interconnection                          |
| Objective Truth                   | Experiential Truth                       |
| Hierarchy/ Top-Downness           | Mutuality/ Multi-directional             |
| Certainty                         | Openness                                 |
| Conflict avoidant                 | Conflict welcoming                       |
| Pursues Idealization/ Perfection  | Accepts Messiness as Part of the Process |
| Autonomy/ Singularity             | Betweenness/ Many-ness/ Pluralism        |
| Simplicity                        | Complexity                               |

## **Abstractionism and Relationality Continued...**<sup>380</sup>

This list is in no way exhaustive. Rather, it is representative of some main components. In practice, an abstractionist interpretation might see these columns as in direct opposition or contradiction to one another. From a relational perspective, their opposition or their difference all depends on the context and their relationship to each other. Relationality doesn't eschew or avoid either column of traits wholistically, but they are always known, experienced and valued by their relationships to one another and the experiential outcomes they produce. Ie. Relationality doesn't devalue sameness, it just acknowledges that while sameness might be a factor in developing relationships of connection, diversity and difference offer richness to connections as well.. So, much more than a list of dos and don'ts, relationality is a way of being that understands knowledge and wisdom through the multiplicity of relationships and contexts.

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<sup>380</sup> *Adapted and summarized from Brent Slife's works cited in the Bibliography*

### Appendix 3: Overwriting <sup>381</sup>

Step One - Write horizontally across the page.

When I think about xyz I feel lorem ipsum dolor sit amet. Aut tempore error est autem voluptatibus aut sapiente minus. Qui dicta alias non voluptas quidem non consequatur voluptates aut provident modi? Sed accusamus alias id numquam voluptatem et consectetur ducimus in dignissimos pariatur. Et aliquam perspiciatis est voluptatibus illo et temporibus officia et temporibus quos 33 velit maxime aut sunt voluptatem? Non temporibus optio At fuga magni ut accusamus quidem est voluptates voluptatem et commodi minus aut

Step Two - Give the page a quarter turn and write overtop of the previous journaling

When I think about xyz I feel lorem ipsum dolor sit amet. Aut tempore error est autem voluptatibus aut sapiente minus. Qui dicta alias non voluptas quidem non consequatur voluptates aut provident modi? Sed accusamus alias id numquam voluptatem et consectetur ducimus in dignissimos pariatur. Et aliquam perspiciatis est voluptatibus illo et temporibus officia et temporibus quos 33 velit maxime aut sunt voluptatem? Non temporibus optio At fuga magni ut accusamus quidem est voluptates voluptatem et commodi minus aut

Step Three - if needed, write on the diagonal

When I think about xyz I feel lorem ipsum dolor sit amet. Aut tempore error est autem voluptatibus aut sapiente minus. Qui dicta alias non voluptas quidem non consequatur voluptates aut provident modi? Sed accusamus alias id numquam voluptatem et consectetur ducimus in dignissimos pariatur. Et aliquam perspiciatis est voluptatibus illo et temporibus officia et temporibus quos 33 velit maxime aut sunt voluptatem? Non temporibus optio At fuga magni ut accusamus quidem est voluptates voluptatem et commodi minus aut

A completed journal entry.



<sup>381</sup> I want to acknowledge Sarah who first showed me her overwritten morning pages. Thanks!

## Appendix 4: Loving Kindness Meditation

A simple loving kindness meditation can be a helpful way to help regulate and ground yourself into the moment by offering compassion and kindness to yourself. This meditation will offer four phrases. You may choose to add more personalized phrases of compassion or focus on just one. The choice is yours.

For this practice, I suggest to close your eyes and place your hands over your heart. Between each phrase, take deep calming breaths—slowly inhale through the nose and even more slowly exhaling out the mouth. Feel free to adapt the phrases to what feels right for you. Cycle through the phrases as many times as you need.

*May I be safe and free from harm.*

*May I be healthy, peaceful, and strong to whatever degree possible.*

*May I feel an ever increasing sense of belonging to myself, the earth, and to Love.*

*May I feel at peace and at ease.*

If you want to extend and expand the practice you may begin by offering the blessing to the whole of the world, then moving into closer and closer relational circles: your community, your family and friends, even people you find difficult, if you really want to take it to the next level, ending with compassion for yourself. Alternately you may start with yourself and move outwards.

*May the world be safe and free from harm...*

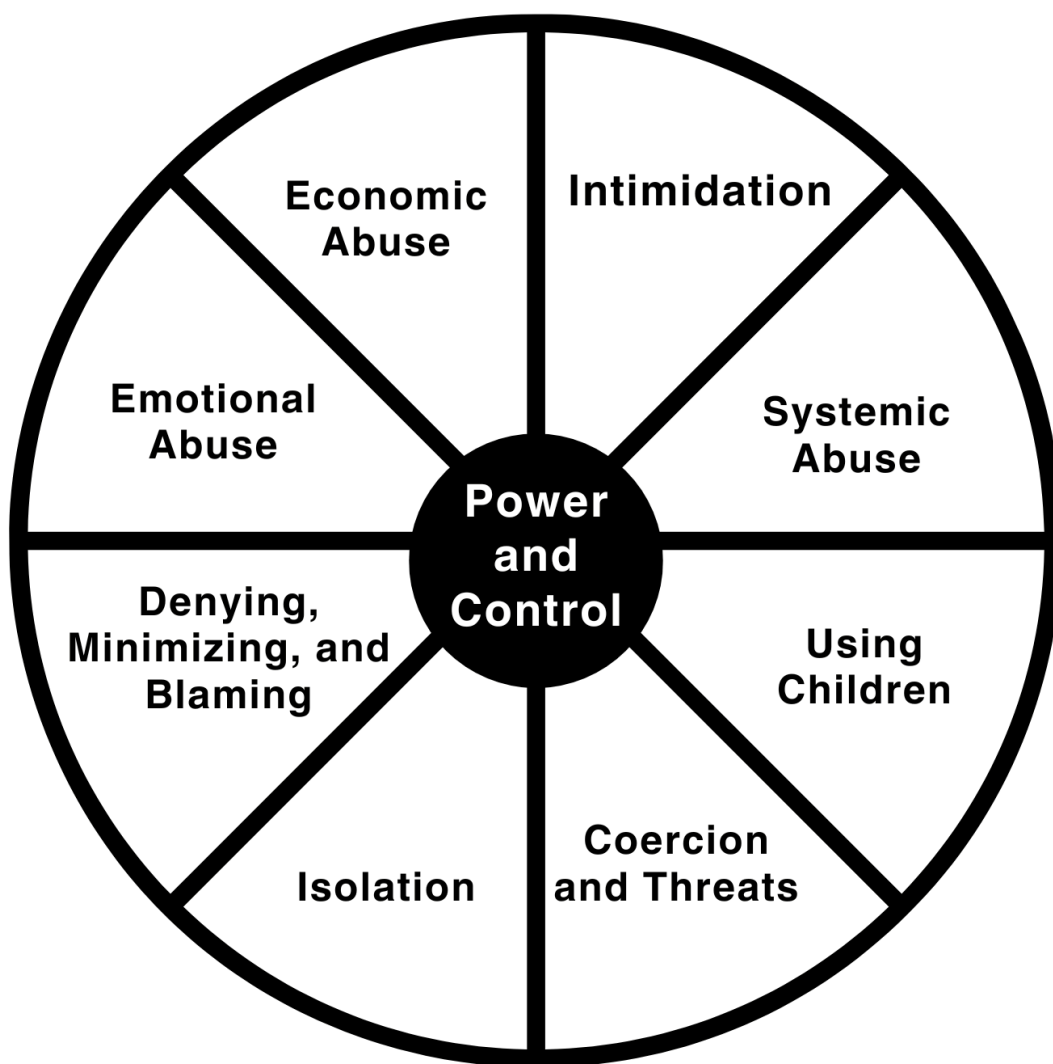
*May my community...*

*May my friends...*

*May this difficult person...*

Through all of it, notice how offering compassion and care feels in your body. Notice how things shift and change with your breath and with repetition. And remember, you can come back to this practice at any time.

## Religious Power and Control Wheel



Adapted and expanded by Tabitha Sheeder from the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, Duluth, Minnesota

<sup>382</sup> Sheeder, "When God Is An Abuser", 8.

## Economic Abuse

- Encouraging excessive unpaid labor under guise of "volunteering"
- Pressuring people to give regardless of their resources
- Encouraging people to not reasonably plan for their future
- Encouraging jobs with low pay as more spiritual
- Pastors/leaders unjustly large salaries while others are in need
- Non-transparent church finances

## Emotional Abuse

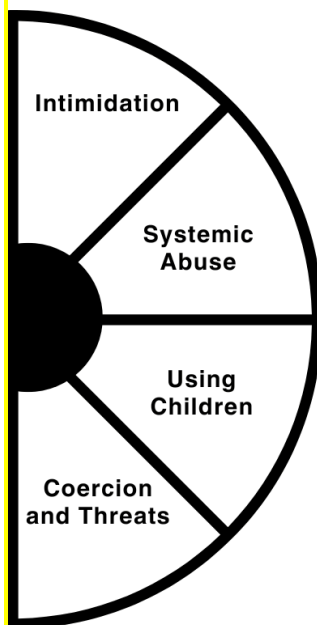
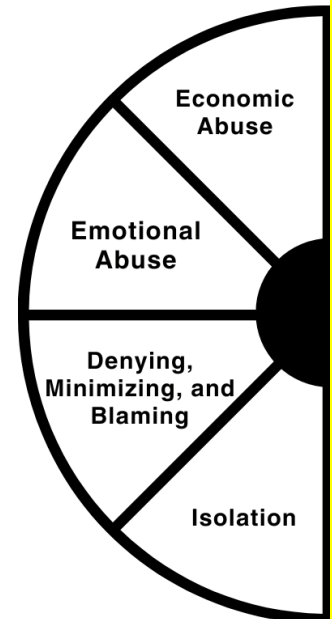
- Shaming beliefs such as: "You are a sinner / You deserve hell / Your best attempts are filthy rags"
- Name calling: sinner / wretch / worm / etc.
- Mind games and gaslighting: "You can't trust yourself"
- Guilt trips
- Love bombing
- Manipulating emotions through music, testimonies, and sermons
- Pressuring people into forced vulnerability via confessions or accountability partners

## Denying, Minimizing, and Blaming

- Spiritual bypassing
- Using spiritual phrases to ignore harm
- Valuing intentions over impact
- Denying or ignoring credible abuse claims
- Blaming and silencing victims
- Valuing institution's reputation more than victims wellbeing
- Blaming the devil or "the world"
- Calling abuse a "sin issue"; sin-levelling
- Claiming those who leave were never "real" believers

## Isolation

- Only approved books, music, and friends encouraged or allowed
- Warnings about people outside the faith
- Excessive involvement in religious activities encouraged
- Shunning or ghosting those who leave the religious community
- Using phrases such as, "God is a jealous God" to keep people from prioritizing other relationships over obedience to God
- Devaluing education or information outside of approved church channels



## Intimidation

- Warnings of being outside God's will
- Making examples of people who resist or stray
- Threats of harm to you or loved ones
- Sacred stories of destruction or harm for those who disobey
- Unaccountable authority
- Public shaming for non-conformity

## Systemic Abuse

- Privileging White or male leaders and masculine / Eurocentric leadership
- Erasure of women and POC in historical narratives
- Exploiting women and POC for unpaid labor
- Purity culture
- The "glass cliff": giving women or POC a chance to lead only when something is already failing, and without adequate support
- Requiring or encouraging strict heteronormative gender roles
- Demonizing LGBTQIA+ community
- Conversion therapy
- Valuing unity over justice and truth
- Prosperity gospel that preys on the poor
- Assigning neutrality or objectivity to White/masculine perspectives

## Using Children

- Teaching harsh, authoritarian or abusive parenting practices
- Exploiting parent's fears about children for money, obedience, or church attendance
- Placing women's value on ability to have and raise obedient children
- Using "family values" to exclude or exploit
- Indoctrinating children

## Coercion and Threats

- Threats of eternal damnation, excommunication, shunning
- Calling questions, doubts, or differing perspectives a "slippery slope"
- Demanding people recant unauthorized beliefs or face church discipline
- Encouraging people recant abuse allegations or drop charges
- Using sacred texts to demand or justify behavior or decisions
- Demanding absolute obedience to authority or the institution
- Discouraging outside help from police, medical, or legal authorities
- Requiring NDA's

Adapted and expanded by Tabitha Sheeder from the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, Duluth, Minnesota