



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Recovering from Moral Injury
(*Patterns of Violence*, pp. 35-42)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Recovering from Moral Injury

When combat veterans and others affected by violence suffer moral injury, they can experience personal shame and estrangement from fellow human beings and God. The challenging task of making integrated peace requires faithful, patient, loving participation by communities of faith.

Prayer

Loving God, we thank you for entering into this violent world with the gift of love, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

We thank you for those people who seek to counter hatred with love, who protect others in gentle and caring ways, who teach others to settle differences peacefully, and who bring hope to your hurting world.

We pray for all who are suffering because of violence in their communities. We pray especially for those whose spirits and bodies have been broken by violence.

May we, your church, bring your peace into a hurting world.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading: John 18:15-27

Reflection

Though the term “moral injury” is of recent vintage, the trauma it identifies has long haunted those who participate in grave violence. Psychologist Brett Litz has described it as the “psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioral, and social impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.” We know moral injury is one of the most lasting effects of warfare, but it is also a hazard wherever transgressive violence occurs. Its symptoms include “personal shame, feelings of estrangement from fellow human beings, and a sense of alienation from God or a spiritual sense of grounding,” Keith Meador, Bill Cantrell, and Jason Nieuwsma observe. Individuals may experience moral culpability for the violence when it occurs, or later as they reinterpret the extreme nature of the violence or their role in it.

An adequate response to moral injury requires more than “a standard mental health paradigm of diagnosis and medicalized treatment,” Meador and his colleagues explain. The injured need “the faithful, patient, loving” welcome of a community that embodies their moral commitments and practices. “Such a community forms the interpretive lens through which sufferers can challenge moral and cognitive dissonance as they examine the story that is now theirs with which to live responsibly. The task of making integrated peace with one’s story, without denial, and without excessive indulgence of the chaos precipitating the moral injury, is challenging.”

Meador, Cantrell, and Nieuwsma outline a church’s faithful welcoming stance toward the morally injured. The congregation

- ▶ *welcomes the wounded with eucharistically formed practices of hospitality.* “In gratitude for the great gift of the Eucharist, we can do no other than to invite the wounded and suffering neighbor into a community of redemption and healing,” they explain. “Such practices will nurture the ultimate renarration of a story of reconciliation with one’s self and finding a place of belonging with integrity.”



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- ▶ *doesn't rush to "fix" the sufferers*, for it could "do great damage and show a lack of regard for [their] ongoing journey." Moral injury is more like a chronic illness. We must abide "with brothers and sisters working through their Holy Saturdays – who are beset with an uncertain sense of loss and fear, while sustained by a yearning hope of finding their way home."
- ▶ *grapples with how to welcome the injured*, for "reentry to a faith community can be a particular challenge as it may serve as a keen reminder of how they have been changed by their experiences while the community looks the same." We must discern when to "emphasize patience, when forgiveness, when truth, when kindness." Being present to the injured "is about finding a way to stand alongside them as they take the time needed to wrestle with difficult existential questions."

"Our redemptive Creator God has abided with us at a great cost, with a love that allows unfathomable forgiveness and mercy, as well as the space and time for the working out of our faith to grow in love and friendship with both God and our neighbors," Meador and his colleagues observe. That is why congregations can and should become "communities of hospitality and care who are not afraid of the pain of our neighbors, and who can welcome the wounded and suffering among us because of our shared hope in this redemption that sustains us in the midst of our common frailties and human creatureliness."

Study Questions

1. What types of experience cause of moral injury? Why should the sufferer's faith community be part of the response?
2. What significant resources in your congregation would help you respond to moral injury? What are some barriers?
3. Discuss Meador, Cantrell, and Nieuwsma's observation: "As fellow pilgrims who appreciate the challenge of living with the past and looking to the future with a holy hope, we can help those paralyzed by moral injury to be less fearful of being fully present in the moment, integral to our communities, and in relationship to us, their neighbors."

Departing Hymn: "God, Whose Love Is Always Stronger"

God, whose love is always stronger than our weakness, pride and fear,
in your world, we pray and wonder how to be more faithful here.
Hate too often grows inside us; fear rules what the nations do.

So we pray, when wars divide us: Give us love, Lord! Make us new!

Love is patient, kind and caring, never arrogant or rude,
never boastful, all things bearing; love rejoices in the truth.

When we're caught up in believing war will make the terror cease,
show us Jesus' way of living; may our strength be in your peace.

May our faith in you be nourished; may your churches hear your call.
May our lives be filled with courage as we speak your love for all.
Now emboldened by your Spirit who has given us new birth,
give us love, that we may share it till your love renews the earth!

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2003)[†]

Suggested Tunes: BEACH SPRING, ABBOT'S LEIGH, or HYFRYDOL

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Recovering from Moral Injury

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1 and 2 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the nature of moral injury.
2. To consider why recovery from moral injury requires the faithful, loving welcome of the injured back into a community with their moral commitments and practices.
3. To outline the resources within congregations to address moral injury.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Patterns of Violence (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “God, Whose Love Is Always Stronger” locate one of the familiar tunes BEACH SPRING, ABBOT’S LEIGH, or HYFRYDOL in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/) or Hymnary.org (www.hymnary.org).

Begin with a Story

Psychiatrists Keith Meador and Jason Nieuwsma, and chaplain Bill Cantrell, who direct the Mental Health and Chaplaincy Program of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, give us this glimpse of the personal experience of moral injury through the words of a young veteran:

I cannot quite clearly distinguish the war as something ‘out there’ or in the past—it is like something I own personally. It lives in me. Sometimes I feel condemned not only by my own actions, but by the war as a whole. I do not mean condemned by some cosmic force or condemned by society. I mean that I condemn myself. This is a paradox. Of course the war is a part of me. I cannot avoid it. I cannot escape my experience. And yet who I am rejects what war is—and what I was in the war.

Meador and his colleagues wonder if we know the men and women in our communities who are suffering such pain, and whether we are prepared to welcome them into our congregations. “The determinative factor for veterans’ healing,” they observe, “may well be the capacities for hospitality embodied within faith communities to welcome those struggling to conduct soul searching, to belong again, and to find integrity for themselves.” (*Patterns of Violence*, 37)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read John 18:15-27 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study and the next two—“Consuming Violence” and “Responding to Violence”—focus on practical ways that individuals and congregations can respond to salient patterns of violence in our culture. The story of Peter’s denial of Jesus (John 18:15-27) shows the moral injury Peter suffered as he witnessed and refused to interfere in the violent scapegoating of Jesus. Peter’s restoration by Jesus through the Church, begun at the breakfast by the sea served by the risen Christ (John 21:15-19), could be a model for the patient, ongoing welcome for the morally injured that Keith Meador, Bill Cantrell, and Jason Nieuwsma commend to congregations. For more information about the Mental Health and Chaplaincy Program of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs that Meador and his colleagues direct, see www.mirecc.va.gov/mentalhealthandchaplaincy/.

Study Questions

1. Meador, Cantrell, and Nieuwsma explain that moral injury may be experienced by either “perpetrators or bystanders of violence,” and note that the “distinction between victims, perpetrators, and bystanders can tragically blur over time, as cycles of violence often lead to individuals inhabiting each of these roles in different capacities.” Sufferers are injured because they bear some responsibility for causing, failing to stop, or witnessing violent acts that seriously violate their moral commitments. Moral injury has been diagnosed in those who participate in war or police work, and in others who may have to use, or witness and respond to, grave violence. If it is appropriate, invite members to share experiences of moral injury in the lives of people they know. Discuss how the story of Peter in the scripture reading is a case of moral injury.

The morally injured feel cut off from their moral identity and from the commitments and practices that shaped their identity. This view may occur at the time of the violence, or over time as they reinterpret the violence or their participation in it. To restore this identity and make moral sense of their lives, the morally injured need the welcome, forgiveness, correction, and restoring guidance of a community that shares those commitments and practices.

2. Meador and his colleagues refer to the “eucharistically formed practices of hospitality” in the Church. These practices (of the Lord’s Supper, prayer, confession, humble gratitude and praise, and mutual correction) shape a welcome that invites “the wounded and suffering neighbor into a community of redemption and healing” and helps them integrate their experience into the story of God’s reconciliation with sinners. It does this “while acknowledging the dissonance of violent and injurious experiences” and “avoiding presumptuous denials of the depths of suffering, confusion, and struggle experienced.”

Some barriers to our offering such hospitality might be impatience with ourselves when we cannot “cure” others’ problems; exasperation with those who are slow to understand and seek forgiveness for their moral failure; naïveté regarding the experiences of the morally injured; or fear or disdain that distances us from them. Barriers to the injured seeking such hospitality might be reluctance to be reminded of their fractured moral identity; fear of rejection by those they most admire; or the belief they must be “healed” before they can rejoin the community. Ask members if they can think of other barriers. Consider how the Christian gospel addresses each barrier.

3. Meador, Cantrell, and Nieuwsma realize that most people, both the morally injured and their companions in community, would prefer “to avoid difficult thoughts, memories, and experiences.” This may lead them to ignore or minimize the injury, and try to “cure” it very quickly. They identify this as a sort of pride that undermines trust between the injured and others in the community who would help them. A more humble stance would acknowledge “the true difficulty posed by certain morally injurious challenges” and realize that the community must live with hope *and* the continuing injury. Following the Christian tradition, they call this the “pilgrim way” of life.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.