

**Shattered Faith:  
The Social Epistemology of Deconversion  
by Spiritually Violent Religious Trauma**

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**Introduction**

Many people lose their faith in God, not because of some knock-down argument against it, but rather because they were knocked down themselves, whether literally or figuratively, by the seemingly faithful. Many such people, those knocked-down by the faithful, are survivors of religious trauma and, in some cases, spiritual violence. Adding insult to injury, there's a popular church meme which says: 'If being hurt by the church causes you to lose faith in God, then your faith was in people, not God'. Memes such as this would have us believe that such survivors never really had faith in God in the first place; it just seemed to them that they did. We believe that the meme is wrong. In particular, we think that it's possible for some to have faith in God, and then lose that faith due to the actions of others, particularly church people, who shame the former with religious texts and rituals. Church hurt really can cause deconversion. That's what we aim to argue for in this essay.

Before doing so, we should describe what we take to be the motivation behind the church meme and where we think it goes wrong. The meme seems to assume, rightly in our view, that faith in God is a relational attitude. But, at least on what seems to be the motivation behind the church meme, this relational attitude is different from other relational attitudes we might have. For, the relational attitudes we might have to our friends, colleagues, loved ones, and others all occur in a social context. That is, what third-parties say and do influence the relational attitudes we have to other people. For instance, a third-party might convince you that someone you were previously not well disposed to is a kind and loving person, with the effect that you think better of them and so seek to become closer to them; alternatively, a third-party might convince you that someone you previously regarded as a friend is cruel and untrustworthy, with the effect that you think less of them and so seek to distance yourself from them. So much is common in our relational attitudes to other people. But, on the motivation behind the church meme, faith in God isn't like this. For, on the view described in the meme, no one can influence a person's faith in God: whether you seek to grow closer to, or distance yourself from, God is all to do with you and nothing to do with anyone else. And that's where we think the meme goes wrong. Faith in God, we think, is a relational attitude similar to other relational attitudes we have to other people in that faith in God occurs just as much in a social context as do our other relational attitudes. That is, what third-parties say and do can influence a person's faith in God, just as they can with our relational attitudes to other people.

Think again about how third-parties can influence our relational attitudes to our friends, colleagues, loved ones, and others. The examples we gave above were about how what third-parties say and do can influence our relational attitudes to other people by changing our minds about these other people. But that's not the only way third-parties can influence our relational attitudes. Say that a third-party convinced you that you were

somehow unworthy of another's friendship.<sup>1</sup> You might then withdraw from that friendship, seeking to distance yourself from them. Over time, and if you continued to think of yourself as unworthy of this friendship, you might then lose this friendship completely. All because someone else convinced you that you weren't worthy of it. We think that something like this could happen to a person in their relationship with God. That is, other people can cause a person to lose their faith in God by shaming them with religious texts and rituals such that they come to think of themselves as unworthy of God's love. Upon thinking of themselves in this way, they'll likely stop doing the things that maintain and promote their relationship with God, such as engaging with him, revealing things about themselves, and accurately perceiving what God is revealing of himself to them. If this continues, at some point, they'll lose faith in God because they won't have a relationship with him anymore.

This is the experience of many lesbian and gay Christians in church,<sup>2</sup> and it's a form of spiritual violence, which sometimes rises to the level of religious trauma, where their religious self or world-view is shattered, and they experience deconversion.<sup>3</sup> To give a philosophical explanation of this experience,<sup>4</sup> we begin by outlining the phenomena of

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, those suffering from abusive spouses might be convinced that they are unworthy of friendship and love from others.

<sup>2</sup> To be sure, not all lesbian and gay Christians who experience the kind of spiritual violence and religious trauma we discuss in this essay lose their faith in God. As Andrew Marin (2016) has shown, through an important survey of lesbian and gay Christians in America, while LGBT Christians are twice as likely as those in the general American population to leave their faith community after the age of 18, 36% don't leave their faith community, and so, we assume, don't lose their faith in God. But what may be most interesting, and hopeful, from this survey is that, of those who do leave their faith community, 76% are open to returning.

<sup>3</sup> By 'deconversion', we mean a loss of faith in God, and, for reasons of space, we don't give any further analysis of faith beyond that given below, where we argue that having faith in God means having an attitude of worship to him, which in turn means loving him. Faith may carry with it all sorts of other things, but spelling those out is beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>4</sup> Our use of the term 'philosophical explanation', following Robert Nozick (1981), signals the kind of project we have in mind here, namely, a philosophical, rather than a descriptive or normative, project. The problem we address is a philosophical one having the form: How could P be, given Q?, where it seems that Q excludes P. Other examples of this form include:

- How could God exist if evil exists?
- How could we be free if determinism is true?
- How could we have knowledge of the external world if we could be brains in a vat?

The church meme we quoted takes it to be that a faith lost because of the actions of other people excludes that faith having been in God. In this essay, we try to show that that's not the case. Moreover, just as when a philosopher gives an answer to one of the above questions, they don't typically claim that it's the only possible answer, we don't claim that the answer we give here is the only answer to how faith could have been in God yet caused to be lost by the actions of other people. We claim only that the answer we give is one such answer. Thanks to Jonathan Jacobs for his helpful questions prompting this clarification of the essay's project.

religious trauma and spiritual violence, making use of Michelle Panchuk's and Teresa Tobin's work.

### **Spiritually violent religious trauma**

How long could you live with being called 'an abomination'?<sup>5</sup> This is a question many who were brought up Christian and found themselves to be lesbian or gay have asked themselves, in one way or another. The first section of Mitchell Gold's collection of stories, *Crisis: 40 Stories Revealing the Personal, Social, and Religious Pain and Trauma of Growing Up Gay in America*, details experience after experience of this kind of traumatic spiritual violence. For example, Bruce Bastian writes,

My real torment went on inside my head. In high school, we started hearing things in church that made it clear sex between two boys was an abomination. I got the message that if anyone learned the truth about my sexual attractions, I would lose my family and most, if not all, of my friends. I felt more and more like there was something wrong with me. I believed I was a disappointment to my god and would certainly be a disappointment to my church if anyone found out about the feelings I kept hidden deep inside. I became introverted because it was easier, and, of course, safer. I was convinced that if anyone discovered my secret, my life would be over . . . There were times when I thought seriously about suicide. But I couldn't decide which would be the bigger sin: being homosexual or taking my own life. I think if anyone had found out I was gay then, I would have considered suicide more seriously. But I was able to keep my ugly, dark secret hidden. I even started denying it to myself. I tried to believe I could change and be "normal" if I followed church teachings more closely. (Bastian 2008, 33)

Many try, as Bastian did, to follow church teachings, but most fail and punish themselves for their failure. A particularly graphic example comes from Jared Horsford:

"FAG" ran across my chest in letters eight inches high, their dimensions blurring and elongating as the blood dripped down. I stared at the mirror, bitter irony rolling through my mind about how illegible it was, bloody and backwards, in the bathroom mirror. I wouldn't make the same mistake a few months later when I carved "I HATE YOU"—backwards this time—across the same skin., both relieved and disappointed that my previous message left me unscarred. (Horsford 2008, 76)

Both Bastian and Horsford are survivors of spiritual violence, spiritual violence that has risen to the level of religious trauma.

To explain this kind of experience more generally, we can distinguish religious trauma from other kinds of trauma by its causes and its effects. According to Michelle Panchuk, occasions of religious trauma typically have the following types of causes:<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This question is adapted from Gold with Drucker (eds) 2008, xxiv.

<sup>6</sup> It's notable that religious practices, persons, or reasons are *central* to all the typical causes of religious trauma. If someone, a Christian, for instance, is bullied at work and finds out later that the person who bullies them is also a Christian, their experience, though it may indeed be a case of trauma, isn't *religious* trauma.

1. *They are justified (by some relevant authority) on religious grounds.* A child is told by her parents that she must be beaten because it is the command of their God. They subsequently beat her. (This constitutes religious trauma justified on religious grounds regardless of whether the religious authority cited commands the violence to be inflicted.)
2. *They are inflicted for religious reasons.* A traumatic incident is inflicted for religious reasons, when, for instance, it is purported to be a necessary part of a religious ritual or rite.
3. *They are the results of actions performed by (someone claiming) religious authority.* A priest exploits his position as an authority figure to abuse a young member of his church.
4. *They are in response to [putative] actions of the divine itself.* An earthquake destroys a community. A victim of the earthquake is told by (someone she takes to be) a religious authority that the earthquake is an act of God as punishment for some transgression. (2018, 512)

Typically, occasions of religious trauma have the following kinds of effects:

1. A shattered religious self may cause, for instance, depression, anxiety or hypervigilance, sometimes (but not necessarily) triggered in religious contexts.
2. A shattered religious worldview may lead the victim to believe that (all or a specific) religion is mistaken or misguided, that religious communities or people are dangerous, cruel, or uncaring, or that the divine itself is dangerous, cruel, or uncaring. (2018, 509)

In light of these considerations, Panchuk defines religious trauma in the following way:

Religious trauma is any traumatic experience of the divine being, religious community, religious teaching, religious symbols, or religious practice that transforms the individual, either epistemically or non-cognitively, in such a way that her ability to participate in religious life is significantly diminished. (2018, 513)

She admits that this definition shouldn't be seen as a strictly philosophical definition; rather, she thinks, it groups together a set of 'relatively similar experiences' by means of family resemblance (2018, 513).<sup>7</sup> We turn now to introduce the concept of spiritual violence.

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<sup>7</sup> Panchuk gives the following two admittedly severe case studies as the strongest candidates for providing 'an all-things-considered reason for deconversion' (2018, 514)

Case 1: A young child is repeatedly and brutally beaten by her religious parents. She is told that since God commanded the Israelites to stone their rebellious children, anything they do to her short of that is divinely approved and morally deserved. And she believes them. One night, they lock her out of the house as punishment for some misdeed. Sitting alone, bruised and bleeding, gazing at the stars, the girl has an overwhelming sense of the presence of God—a presence utterly terrifying because she perceives it to be of a being who delights in her suffering. This experience

As Teresa W. Tobin defines it, spiritual violence

does not name the use of physical force to inflict material harm in the name of God, or for religious purposes, as, for example, in a religiously motivated way. Rather, in spiritual violence sacred symbols, texts, and religious teachings themselves become weapons that harm a person in her spiritual formation and relationship with God. (2016, 134)

Tobin's concept of spiritual violence is, thus, both a wider and a narrower concept than Panchuk's concept of religious trauma. For spiritual violence need not rise to the level of trauma (thereby making it a wider category), but it does require the survivor to have internalized the teaching that so harms them (thereby making it a narrower category).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, we assume that the harms caused by spiritual violence cannot be justified by reference to some future good or future prevention of harm, such as in the case of medical intervention to remove a tumour, or plastic surgery to improve one's appearance.<sup>9</sup> In this essay, we deal with cases where spiritual violence does rise to the level of trauma, and so are cases of both spiritual violence and religious trauma, spiritually violent religious trauma, one might say. How is it that such cases of spiritually violent religious trauma can result in deconversion? This is the question that will occupy us for the remainder of this essay. The first step in doing is to think about the nature of faith, particularly as an interpersonal relationship.

### **Faith and love**

If we aim to give a philosophical explanation for how the actions of other people can cause a person to lose their faith in God, we need to specify what we take faith in God to be. This is the task to which we now turn. To do this, we observe that Christians are called to two things (among others): to have faith in God and to worship him. We think that there is an intimate connection between the two, and that this relationship will help explain how it could be that the actions of other people can cause a person to lose their faith in God.

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fundamentally shapes her feelings about the divine. Whatever she may come to believe about her parents' behavior and about God, she cannot shake the deep sense of fear, guilt, shame, and revulsion she has at any attempt to address herself to God. (2018, 514)

Case 2: A young boy is raped by a clergy member in his church and sworn to secrecy in the name of God. The clergy member tells him that disclosing the abuse to anyone will hurt the reputation of the church and undermine the work of God in the world. Whatever this child may come to believe about the church, the sight of a priest or even a church building continues to make him physically ill. (2018, 514)

<sup>8</sup> We are indebted to Panchuk's (n.d., 5) helpful discussion of the relationship between religious trauma and spiritual violence here.

<sup>9</sup> That is, we are not assuming that the Christian life must be devoid of harm—C.S. Lewis's description of Aslan is an apt summary of how God is often presented in Scripture: 'he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you' (2016, 58). However, we assume that the harm suffered by victims of spiritual violence cannot be justified by appealing to the ongoing work of sanctification.

To begin, we take faith in God to be an attitude of allegiance to God, that is, an attitude of loyal commitment to God in recognition of his unsurpassable greatness.<sup>10</sup> Such an attitude is typically expressed in worship, where we acknowledge this commitment by praising God for his greatness, confessing that we have fallen short of our commitment to him, thanking him for all that he has given us, offering gifts to him in grateful response, and praying to him that we might draw closer to him. In so doing, we cultivate an attitude of worship, an attitude that is intended to carry over from participating in acts of worship to our everyday lives.

To explain this attitude more clearly, such an attitude of worship is an attitude toward God that, in Nicholas Wolterstorff's words, is 'awed, reverence, and grateful adoration' (2015, 26). We can see it expressed in the first stanza of the Gloria in Excelsis Deo, something said or sung in many worship services:

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will. We praise You, we bless You, we adore You, we glorify You, we give You thanks for Your great glory.

If this stanza expresses, more or less, what it is to have an attitude of worship to God, then having an attitude of worship to God involves love for him, since adoration is a mode of love. In Wolterstorff's words, adoration is 'a mode of love, specifically love as attraction. To adore something is to be drawn to it on account of its worth, to be gripped by it; we speak of adoring some person, some work of art, some scene in nature' (2015, 25). Thus, if having faith in God is intimately connected to having an attitude of worship toward him, which is a mode of love for him, then having faith in God is intimately connected to loving him: to being drawn to him and gripped by him on account of his worth.

### **Love and union**

Having come to the view that having faith in God (at least the kind of faith in God at issue in this paper) involves loving him, we now need to think about what it is to love someone, for this will help us see how it is that others can cause a person to lose their faith in God through shaming them with religious texts and rituals. Thankfully, Eleonore Stump has given an account of love that makes this possible, where to love another person requires both personal revelation and personal engagement, both of which can be undermined by spiritually violent religious trauma.

Drawing from Aquinas, Stump argues that to love another person is to have two interrelated desires, namely, the desire for the good of the beloved, and the desire for union with the beloved-(2010, 91).<sup>11</sup> For our purposes, the desire for union is the most

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<sup>10</sup> For a detailed exploration of faith as allegiance grounded in the theology of Paul and the Gospels, see Bates 2017. For Bates, faith as allegiance comes to: '*mental affirmation* that the gospel is true, *professed fealty* to Jesus alone as the cosmic Lord, and *enacted loyalty* through obedience to Jesus as the king' (2017, 92; emphasis in the original). For the purposes of this paper, we take no stand on this particular account of faith as allegiance, as working out the consistency of Bates's account of faith as allegiance and the one proposed above is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>11</sup> Importantly, this desire for union is a conditional desire on Stump's account. For example, a person can still love another, and so desire union with them, but only conditional on

crucial of these desires, and so we'll go into some detail into what union with another person consists in. On Stump's account, union with another person requires mutual closeness and significant personal presence. We consider each in turn.

To be close to another person, you have to reveal yourself to them, that is, share important thoughts and emotions with them. Call this 'personal revelation'. Now, in order to reveal such important things about yourself, you have to be wholehearted in your desire for them, that is, you can't be conflicted in your desire for the other person, for that would mean that you would hold back things that are important to you, and thereby limit your personal revelation. Stump explains:

If Jerome wants to reveal his thoughts and feelings to Paula and if Jerome desires Paula in the sense just described, but if Jerome is alienated from his own desires as regards Paula—if he desires to have different desires from those he has regarding Paula because he thinks that his relationship to Paula is detrimental to his flourishing, for example—then Paula is not close to Jerome. ... The relation that results from such an internal conflict on the lover's part undermines the lover's closeness to the beloved. For one person Paula to be close to another person Jerome, it is therefore necessary that Jerome have psychic integration of desires, or whole-heartedness. (2010, 125)

For example, if Jerome is to be united with Paula, he can't on the one hand, desire union with her, but on the other, desire to be separated from her (a first-order desire) or desire to be separated from her (a second-order desire). This is what it is to be wholehearted in his desire for union with her. And this is (part of) what personal revelation requires, and so, in turn, (part of) what union with another person requires.

Having given an analysis of the mutual closeness required for personal union, let's now look at the significant personal presence also required for union. What is it to be present in this way to another person? Say that you sit next to someone on the bus. You're aware of them, and you interact with them directly and immediately, and the person is conscious (it's not a late-night bus), and so you're having a second-personal experience of them, but you don't know them because, even though you're both present, you're not present to one another (as in, 'We had dinner together, but she was not present to me, as she was on her phone all evening'). Such experiences fall short of significant-personal presence, which, for Stump, is necessary for union.

As she explains, significant personal presence requires a kind of second-personal experience in which each person is aware of the other in a direct and immediate way, and they attend to one another, just what is missing in the bus example above – though you may share a second-person experience with the other person, neither of you are attending to the other, only to, for example, how long the bus is taking to get you where you want to go. This kind of mutual attending psychologists call 'joint attention'.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Paula's significant

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certain obstacles to that union being removed, such as behaviour on the beloved's part that makes the lover feel unsafe.

<sup>12</sup> To describe it simply, joint attention is a form of social engagement in which we are aware that another person is 'in engagement with an object or potential object as a process over time' (Reddy, 2012, 137). As Axel Seemann notes in his volume on joint attention, although 'the discussion of joint attention is anything but unified' (2012, 1), there's a common

personal presence to Jerome requires her to have second-personal experiences and to share attention with Jerome, the conjunction of which we'll term 'personal engagement'. So, to sum up: to love another person requires personal revelation and a wholehearted desire for union with them, and, achieving this union, in turn, requires personal engagement.

### **In order to form a more perfect union<sup>13</sup>**

It's important to note at this point that union between persons comes in degrees—the degree of union you have with a friend or colleague is typically less than the degree of union you have with a family member or a partner. Part of the reason for this is that you know your family member or partner better than you know your friend or colleague. Indeed, you might even say that you know a family member, or your partner, well. But what is it to know someone well? Answering this question will help us see what lesbian and gay people lose when they suffer from spiritually violent religious trauma.

According to Bonnie M. Talbert, knowing someone well 'is normally the product of a sequence of interactions' that have, minimally, the following features:

1. We have had a significant number of second-person face-to-face interactions with A, at least some of which have been relatively recent.
2. The contexts of those interactions were such as to permit A to reveal important aspects of her/himself, and A has done so.
3. A has not deceived us about him/herself in important respects.
4. We have succeeded in accurately perceiving what A has revealed – i.e. [our judgement is not impaired] by [our] own biases. (2015, 194)

In addition to these conditions, which constitute a 'breadth requirement' for knowing a person well, that is, having a certain quantity of shared interactions that meet certain conditions, Talbert proposes that there is a 'depth requirement' as well:

5. The history of their shared interactions contains 'at least a "critical mass" of shared experiences that were deeper in cognitive and/or emotive content than we typically have with mere acquaintances – i.e., contexts in which thoughts and feelings we take to be meaningful and important were shared'. (Talbert, 2015, 200)

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position which all discussions of joint-attention share, namely 'that an adequate understanding of the life of the mind has to pay particular attention to its social dimension' (2012, 2). This is often filled out by thinking about the social development of infants. An infant's awareness and engagement with other persons develops over time, and begins with a kind of dyadic-joint-attention, that is, attention which requires only awareness of another person through a kind of mutual gazing. The ability to jointly-attend then develops into a kind of triadic joint-attention, that is, joint-attention in which an infant gains the ability to focus on some independent object whilst remaining aware of the other person (Reddy, 2005, 85-87). To clarify with an example: when a child looks her mother in the eye, then points toward an object, and then looks back to the eyes of the mother, if the mother follows the direction of her child's gaze, then they had a dyadic joint-attention to begin with, followed by a triadic joint-attention focusing on the object (Reddy, 2012, 145).

<sup>13</sup> Taken, of course, from the preamble of the Constitution of the United States of America.

Meeting this depth requirement means that the two people then come to share a world together. And the more they meet both the breadth requirement and the depth requirement, the more of a world they share and so the more they know one another, which then allows for a greater union between them.

Now, to share more of a world with another person requires a kind of know-how, a knowing how to engage that person. As Talbert writes,

[T]o know another is to know how to successfully interact with him/her over time. Knowing how to interact with a particular person starts with the largely ineffable ability to recognize him/her, which recognition comes to be associated with a more complex mental representation of that individual...Our interactive skills are largely intuitive and difficult to express in propositional terms. For example, when I am talking to Shannon, I find that I pace my remarks differently than I do when I am talking to Deme. Without thinking about it I seem to adjust the pace of my conversation to what I somehow perceive is most suitable to the interaction. (2015, 196-197)

What Talbert draws attention to here is that a part of what it is to come to know a person well over time is to develop a certain kind of skill. This will be important when we come to consider the role of worship in coming to know God, to which we now turn. But before doing so, to sum up: the greater union you have with a person, the more you know them, and the more you know them, the better you are at engaging with them.

### **The practice of worship and knowing how to engage God**

So far, our concern has been with thinking about faith and the attitude of worship and how these relate to one another in a desire for a union of love. Now, we are in place to think more carefully about the practices of worship, how they relate to faith and developing this desire for a union of love. So, in this section, we address the relationship between the practice of worship and knowing how to engage God. We argue that the practice of worship is a good way for a person to acquire knowledge of how to engage God, and the greater frequency and variety of practices of worship a person engages in, the greater their knowledge of how to engage God.

As Wolterstorff notes, the practices of worship, specifically liturgy, provide us with actions which express this orientation of love towards God. The actions involved in liturgy, he notes, are not one way, but rather, they are mutual acts (2015, 66-67). That is, not only do we express our adoration to God through the central pattern of thanking, blessing and petitioning, but also, we make space for God to respond by listening and speaking to us (2015, 71). Thus, as Wolterstorff writes, the 'reciprocity of orientation brings into existence an I-thou relationship between God and us. God is a thou for us. (2015, 61). In other words, for Wolterstorff, through the engagement with the practices of the Church, a person is able to orientate herself towards God in a mutual relationship which involves mutual address and adoration.

We've suggested that an important part of loving and desiring union with another a person is that we seek opportunities to engage with that person. The degree of union we have with another is partly dependent on our knowledge of how to engage that person. We'll argue here, that one of the crucial roles of the practice of worship is to provide us with this kind of personal-know-how in relation to God. And thus, there are important

implications for those that are excluded from the practices worship (whether this be through a kind of self-exclusion or because of the community's exclusion).<sup>14</sup>

As Terence Cuneo has argued, the practices involved in liturgical worship can contribute to a person's personal knowledge of God. Indeed, Cuneo seems to have in mind a concern very similar to Talbert's when he talks of 'building a rapport' with a person by gaining a kind of personal know-how (2016, 148). On Cuneo's account,

[L]iturgy makes available act-types of a certain range such as chanting, kissing, prostrating, and eating that count in the context of a liturgical performance as cases of blessing, petitioning, and thanking God...If this is correct, the liturgy provides the materials for not only engaging but also knowing how to engage God. Or more, precisely: the liturgy provides the materials by which a person can acquire such knowledge and a context in which she can exercise or enact it...to the extent that one grasps and sufficiently understands these ways of acting, one knows how to bless, petition, and thank God in their ritualized forms. One has ritual knowledge. (2016, 163)

Thus, it seems that the practice of worship is a good way for a person to acquire knowledge of how to engage God.<sup>15</sup>

What's more, not only can the practices of worship allow a person to acquire knowledge of how to engage God, but also, we think, they can allow a person to gain a

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<sup>14</sup> Moreover, this also appears to fit an account of faith as an orientation towards union or relationship with God. Paulina Silwa (2018) gives a similar account of faith in which faith requires certain dispositions to perform certain 'acts of faith' (2018, 247). The result of which, Silwa goes on to argue is that

[h]aving faith, is in part, a matter of being disposed to perform acts of faith. In fact, we can say something stronger: to the extent that I have faith...I have the ability to perform acts of faith...Faith is, in part, a matter of having the ability to perform acts of faith. Acts of faith require the right kinds of desires along with the relevant know how. And so, this suggests that having faith is, in part, a matter of having the right kinds of desires along with the right kind of know how. It's partly constituted by these desires and the know how in question. (2018, 254)

If Silwa is right, then faith involves or requires a certain kind of know-how. Silwa suggests that the practices of worship are a good example of acts which might count as acts of faith and thereby give us the kind of know-how required for her account of faith (2018, 260).

<sup>15</sup> In 'Common Ritual Knowledge' (2019), Joshua Cockayne argues that these practices of engaging God through liturgy appear to be importantly corporate in nature. He suggests that it's not the individual who knows how to engage God, but the community, and, consequently, it's not the individuals who know how to engage God, but the community. Just as a violin player knows how to play her part in an orchestral symphony, rather than knowing how to perform the symphony, it seems that what an individual comes to know is importantly embedded in a community in certain respects. As we'll return to it shortly, this has important consequences for considering cases in which individuals are isolated from the community of the Church.

deeper and broader personal know-how in relation to God, too. As we've argued elsewhere (Cockayne and Efid, 2018), corporate worship, in particular, can provide a variety of contexts in which to personally engage with God, and thereby, to root out the biases is one's own knowledge and experience of God. We suggest that corporate worship can play the kind of broadening and deepening role in our experience of God, something that will be important at the conclusion of this essay when we come to discuss how lesbian and gay people who have lost their faith might be nurtured back into it. For at least a part of what it is to engage with another in a variety of contexts, depends on our wider social relationships. Not only is our personal knowledge dependent on our shared experiences and shared knowledge, but also, we might think, it depends on our wider relationships. Personal relationships are rarely one-to-one. In knowing a person, we have experienced them in interaction with many other people, in different family situations, in different friendship groups and social environments. All these different environments for experiencing a person make a difference to our knowledge of how to engage that person. C.S. Lewis makes this point in his discussion of friendship in the *Four Loves*:

[I]f, of three friends (A, B, and C), A should die, then B loses not only A but 'A's part in C', while C loses not only A but 'A's part in B', while C loses not only A but 'A's part in B'. In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald's reaction to a specifically Caroline joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him 'to myself' now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald. Hence true Friendship is the least jealous of loves. (1960, 73-74)

Just as your knowledge of how to engage a friend is partly informed by your experience of that friend in interaction with other friends, so our knowledge of how to engage God is informed by our experience of God in interaction with others. Indeed, the presence of other people can not only colour our own experience and engagement with God, but also shape our perception of God by pointing out aspects of God which we wouldn't or couldn't notice alone. By sharing-attention with other members of a congregation, even in a relatively minimal way, we can be drawn to aspects of God's character that we wouldn't have noticed alone. Consider the following examples:

[You are] participating in corporate worship alongside a friend whom you know has been suffering with depression. Suppose you are aware of God's presence and are sharing attention with him throughout the liturgy, whilst also being aware of your friend. After receiving communion, you notice that something has changed in your friend—his shoulders are lifted, his eyes are brighter, and he manages a contented smile to you across the pew. As you become aware of this, you suddenly come to the realisation that God has brought some kind of healing to your friend. In seeing God's interaction with your friend (albeit in an indirect way), corporate worship has allowed you not only to see your friend's perception of God, but in some way, you see more of God as an object. Your knowledge of God as a person has been deepened and broadened by such an experience. (Cockayne and Efid, 2018, 315 fn. 46)

When alone, we might have the tendency to focus on certain aspects of God's character, and thereby build up a biased picture of God, in worship, it is possible to be guided by the focus of another's attention. This change in our focus might simply be by means of the emphasis another person places on certain words, the shape and posture of their body, or even the focus of their gaze (on, say, the altar, or the cross, for example). All these ways might serve as pointers to redirect our own attention and thereby to experience some different aspect of God, thereby removing our biases in important ways. (Cockayne and Efird, 2018, 320)

In these examples, our fellow congregants can play the role of deepening and broadening our knowledge of how to engage God in ways which we couldn't achieve alone. Unlike Lewis's discussion of friendship, a person's relationship to God in this life is imperfect and patchy. This is where one's dependence on the experience of the community of faith is all the more important—whilst one can't know and experience God entirely, one can draw on the other members of the spiritual community for support. Not only this, but if our experience and knowledge of a person changes depending on the company one keeps, then this has implications for our understanding of worship. Engaging with God alone and engaging with God in community allow for different experiences of what God is like and require different kinds of practical knowledge of how to engage God. And thus, they can play a role in providing a person with a greater frequency and variety of practices of worship, and thereby provide a person with greater knowledge of how to engage God.

So, to sum up all that has gone before, a person who has faith in God desires union with God, and the degree of that union depends on the person's self-revelation to God, their wholeheartedness in their desire for union with God, the extent of their personal engagement with God, and their knowledge of how to engage God, knowledge which is often acquired in corporate worship.

### **Shame, spiritual violence, and personal union with God**

We're now in a position to connect the account of faith in God and union with him outlined above with the question of how lesbian and gay Christians who undergo spiritually violent religious trauma can lose their faith in God because of spiritually violent religious trauma. When lesbian and gay Christians are taught that their desire for same sex-relationships is sinful, they often experience a kind of psychic fragmentation whereby, though they desire such relationships, they desire not to desire them. This is a conflict in their first- and second-order desires, and a conflict that goes right to the heart of their identity.

In this regard, the attitude taken towards sexual desires of lesbian and gay individuals is importantly different to the attitude that might be taken to other sexual desires, such as desires for adultery or polygamy. The disapprobation of sexual desire in general is not a spiritual violence. It's that the kind of disapprobation directed at homosexual desire, given the way in which that desire is constitutive of one's identity, that elevates mere disapproval to the status of violence. However, to say that sexual desires are at the heart of one's identity is not to undermine the importance of living out one's identity in Christ. Of course, any individual, regardless of sexual orientation, can define themselves primarily in reference to their sexual desires, rather than primarily in relation to Christ. We assume that there are lesbian and gay individuals who identify themselves primarily in relation to Christ who pursue same-sex relationships in faithful response to who they are in

Christ. For such individuals, experiences of spiritually violent religious trauma often cause the kind of conflict of desires we identify here.

As Jimmy Creech, a former Methodist minister, whose credentials were taken away for conducting a marriage ceremony for two men, writes,

*Sin* is among the most powerful words in the English language. While its biblical meaning is “separation from God,” it is commonly used to refer to behaviour considered objectionable, even hated, by God. No self-respecting person of moral character wants to sin or be known as a sinner. To be labelled a sinner is to be rejected by God and society. . . . To label as sin a person’s sexual orientation is an act of spiritual violence. It defines the personal core, the very essence of a young person’s identity, as sinful. Believing you’re a sinner because you’re lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender creates severe emotional and mental anguish, especially for young people. Not knowing whom to trust or talk with about it, and feeling alone with the struggle to be who you are, creates a deeply personal crisis. Low self-esteem, self-hatred, and fear of exposure often result in ruined lives, broken families, depression, and, much too often, suicide. (2008, 322)

This psychic fragmentation can then cause a person to reveal less of themselves to God. For they then become ashamed of themselves, becoming conflicted in their desire for union with God and for personal engagement with God.

According to Stump (2010, 145, 116, 113), a person feels shame when they believe that it would be appropriate that they be rejected. She writes,

[A] shamed person anticipates warranted rejection and abandonment on the part of real or imagined others, and consequently he is anxious about marginalization or isolation. His anxiety is directed towards a distance, an absence of union, forced on him by others with whom he himself desires some kind of closeness. His worry is therefore that real or imagined others will be warranted in lacking for him the second desire of love, the desire for union with him. (2016, 113)

As she goes on to explain (2016, 113-116), whilst the feeling of shame is often associated with a person who has committed some kind of wrongdoing, there are also other cases of shame, such as when a person feels shame because of the wrongdoing of others, such as survivors of sexual assault, when a person has a disability, such as Joseph Merrick, the so-called Elephant Man, or when a person feels shame because they belong to a certain group, such as children of high-ranking Nazis. The primary effect of this feeling of shame is that it diminishes a person’s capacity for union with the person who is the focus of their shame, as in the case of the wrongdoer, or even anyone at all, as in the other three cases of shame.

This analysis of shame, we think, is helpful in explaining why individuals might desire not to engage personally with God after experiencing spiritually violent religious trauma. Rembert Truluck highlights the following case: ‘A preacher, his face distorted with rage, shouts anti-gay slogans from his pulpit into a television camera’, he writes,

A mother quietly tells her son that he is no longer her son because he has just revealed that he is gay. She adds, “God doesn’t love you, and neither do I.” A

politician declares to a group of GLBT people, "God will destroy you!" A newspaper prints a series of letters to the editor that allows religious fundamentalists to vent their homophobic anger in irresponsible abusive distortions of the Bible. All of this is spiritual violence, and it is wounding and destroying far more lives than most people realize. Spiritual abuse hurts both the abuser and the abused. Hate is a bitter emotional diet. Being hated takes a heavy emotional toll on every victim of spiritual violence. Physical violence against homosexuals is unnecessary. Teach them to hate themselves enough, and they will destroy themselves and each other. (Truluck, n.d.)

In recounting the impact of spiritual violence, Truluck maintains, 'Spiritual violence can hide the face of God' (Truluck, n.d.). Equally importantly, on the analysis we offer, spiritual violence can cause victims to hide their faces from God. This hiding from God is a result of the effects of shame, or so we argue.

The kind of shame that resonates most with the topic of this essay, that of the spiritually violent religious trauma lesbian and gay Christians have often been subject to, is the shame associated with disabilities, as in Joseph Merrick, the so-called Elephant Man. Stump writes,

The dreadful distortions of his frame by his disease left him looking repulsive and fearful to others, who generally turned away from him. On traditional Christian doctrine, the depredations of nature are a consequence, even if an indirect one, of human sinfulness. On this view, there was no natural evil, and consequently no shame over defects of nature, before the sin resulting in the Fall. So, insofar as defects in nature are somehow thought to be a function of the post-Fall condition of the world, which is itself a function of human sin, then this kind of shame is also a consequence of human sin, not of course on the part of sufferers such as Merrick, but on the part of the human race in its origins. (2016, 115)

This is just the sort of shame many lesbian and gay Christians are made to feel, as if their natures were 'defective', not outwardly, as in Joseph Merrick, but inwardly, that is, as if, inwardly, they are the Elephant Man. There could be no better characterisation of the shame that some lesbian and gay people have been made to feel in some churches, labelled as sinners, and so labelled as those rejected, even hated, by God. This then means that they become conflicted in their desire for union with God. In response to believing themselves to be hated by God, they desire separation from him, even if, at the same time, some part of them still desires union with him.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See also Dawne Moon and Theresa W. Tobin's discussion of 'sacramental shame' which

results from conservative Christianity's allegiance to the doctrine of gender complementarity, which elevates heteronormativity to the level of the sacred and renders those who violate it as not persons, but monsters. In dispensing shame as a sacrament, nonaffirming Christians require constant displays of shame as proof that LGBTI church members love God and belong in the community. Part of what makes this shame so harmful is that parents and pastors often dispense it with sincere expressions of care and affection, compounding the sense that one's capacity to give and receive love is damaged. (2018, 451)

Dan Karslake tells a story of an email he received from a gay teenager following a national TV programme he produced on a well-known theologian, who was also a lesbian:

Last week I bought the gun.  
Yesterday I wrote the note.  
Last night I happened to see your show on PBS.  
And just knowing that someday, somewhere,  
I might be able to go back into a church with my head held high,  
I dropped the gun in the river.  
My mom never has to know.

That's the email I received from a gay kid in Iowa in 1998, the morning after a segment I produced about Rev. Irene Monroe aired nationally on PBS's gay news magazine *In the Life*. . . In subsequent emails with that boy from Iowa, I learned that he had felt completely overwhelmed because not only could he lose his biological family by coming out but also his church family, and indeed, God. Until he saw the story, he felt suicide was his only option. Yet there on television was a woman of deep faith who was also openly gay. I remember him asking, "Do you mean that I can be gay and still believe in God?"

My answer was, "Absolutely."

"Doesn't God hate me?"

"Absolutely not." (2008, 4)

Thankfully, this gay teenager had seen Karslake's TV segment, and Karslake was able to help him see that God doesn't hate him. But many lesbian and gay teenagers raised in church wouldn't have been so lucky to have someone like Karslake. They would go on thinking that God hates them.

This can then result in a person stopping engaging with God, and, in particular, in practices of worship. Jarrod Parker tells of his experience in his church, after trying and failing to change his sexual orientation:

I soon found myself even more depressed because I wasn't changing—and even more isolated. My church treated me like I had a disease. People who had been friends stopped speaking to me. I once sat in the second row at church, but I began to feel I had to sit in the very back. (2008, 87)

Needing to sit in the back of church is a symptom of shame, shame because of an apparent 'defect' of their nature, being treated as diseased. As Stump writes,

[A] person who feels shame believes that others would be warranted if they were to "nil" him—that is, to repudiate a desire for him, rather than to desire union with him. That is surely at least part of the reason why a person suffering from shame wants not to be seen. He supposes that, if he were seen, others would be justified in rejecting him. That is why shame is characterized by a desire to avoid the gaze of others, to be invisible. (2010, 145)

For many, this process doesn't stop in the back of church, but leads right out of it, as the person wants to avoid the gaze of other church members, and, at the end of the process, even God himself.<sup>17</sup> Thus, to explain why God may seem hidden from those who experience such trauma, we can appeal to this account of shame. A person who feels that it would be appropriate for others to reject them will often withdraw from God, be reticent to share attention with him, and so will cease desiring personal engagement with God. This might not happen immediately; the way in which shame leads to disengagement with God will be emotionally complex in ways which there is not space to address here. Indeed, it might be that a shamed individual can recover their relationship with God after such an experience. But for many, such recovery of relationship is not possible, and their experience of shame means that they are no longer capable of desiring union with God. The result of this, is that the degree of union they have with God will also decrease the less they desire engagement with God. And it can decrease to the extent that a person loses their faith entirely. For they no longer reveal anything important about themselves to God, they no longer desire union with him, and they no longer engage with him. Because they were made to feel ashamed of themselves. Church hurt really can cause deconversion.<sup>18</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Many take community to be essential to faith—that it's important to nurture the faith of others. But if what we've argued in this essay is right, then the actions of others can have not only a positive effect on a person's faith, but also, a negative effect as well. For there's a dark-side of corporate engagement with God which is rarely discussed by philosophers and theologians. And that's what we've aimed to bring to light in this essay. Specifically, using religious texts and rituals, church members can shame one of their own, particularly a lesbian or gay Christian, to the extent that they come to lose their faith in God. Feeling ashamed, they no longer want the things that make up having faith in God – spending time with him, sharing their thoughts and feelings about important things with him, and wanting to have a relationship with him. They don't want these things because they feel it's not right, or it makes them feel bad about themselves, or they just can't do it anymore. And so

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<sup>17</sup> It's important to note that the shift of a person's perspective that occurs in the experience of shame isn't necessarily directed toward God, but, rather, at themselves. As Panchuk puts this point,

One cannot appropriately engage in a loving relationship with God when one believes that God sees oneself as fundamentally flawed—flawed in a way that is somehow deeper or more fundamental than the normal proclivity to sin. (Panchuk, n.d., 5)

Thus, spiritually violent religious trauma doesn't give a person a reason (an epistemic reason, that is) to reject their faith; rather, it gives them a practical reason to stop doing the things that maintain their faith, that is, sharing attention with God in activities such as worship.

<sup>18</sup> Deconversion, as we characterise it here, is a process which, unless significant intervention occurs, culminates in the complete loss of desire for union with God and faithful trust in God.

church hurt really can cause a person's deconversion. Or so we've argued. To conclude, and to give a survivor the last word, what we've aimed to show in this essay is summed up well by Marie Bacon, blogger and religious trauma survivor:

When someone is hurt by the actions of others there are quips of "That wasn't real Christianity," or, "This just proves that we all fall short and need Jesus." . . . I guess what I'm trying to get at is, if I say part of why I lost my faith is because of the actions of others that hurt/angered/saddened/betrayed me, that's seen as an invalid reason, since it doesn't deal with the truth claims of the religion. But it doesn't feel invalid, it feels very natural and necessary. The painful or abusive actions of others wound and cause people not to want to be part of a group, and while that doesn't disprove the claims of the religion itself, it does cast a dark light on it. If the actions of others didn't influence our ability to find or lose faith, then there'd be no point in our faith communities. Religion is not an entirely intellectual exercise, thank God, but it seems that the only legitimate reasons to lose religion are intellectual only. I can convert because I felt a warm stirring in my soul, but if my soul feels arid and parched and wounded, that's not a reason to leave. . . It's like the religion—it's traditions, doctrines, holy books, leaders—has a knife in your back. And with each word or action they twist it more and more. The reality of the knife doesn't prove or disprove the claims of the religion, but damn it's extremely difficult to keep holding your back against the blade. The pain causes you to doubt why you're part of this group in the first place. I think Christians need to own the fact that their own behavior can be the gust of wind that blows out smoldering wicks and finally snaps the bruised reed in half. People can't be expected to stay in the midst of that. We like to talk about faith as something that should exist in a vacuum and shouldn't be impacted by the behavior of others, but we also say our faith communities are important in the development of someone's spiritual journey. We can't have it both ways. We can't put the hurting and wounded through the bait and switch of, "You need us to have faith, but we aren't to blame when we hurt you so much that you want walk away from it." (Bacon, 2015)<sup>19</sup>

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