

AAR Psychology, Culture, and Religion Pre-session
Theme: *Psychological and Religious Perspectives on Moral Injury*
Storm Swain, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Presiding
Friday, Nov. 20, 2015 1:30 - 2:45 PM in the Hilton-213 room (Level 2)

Spiritual integration of moral injury for future military chaplains: Using spiritual practices and theological reflexivity within a seminary context

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The concept of moral injury emerged from research with military service members in the aftermath of combat. It has been defined as the "psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioral, and social impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held more beliefs and expectations" (Litz, et al., 2009, p. 700); see also (Drescher et al., 2011; Vargas, Hanson, Kraus, Drescher, & Foy, 2013). In this paper discussion, we build on seminal ways of working with the spiritual dimensions of moral injury (Brock & Lettini, 2012; Lettini, 2013) by focusing on how moral injury functions as a physiological and emotional response to overwhelming stress (Porges, 2007, 2011). The associated moral emotions—shame, guilt and/or disgust—have spiritual dimensions because these emotions are interpreted through spiritual orienting systems (values, beliefs, and ways of coping) and serve a spiritually significant social-relational function that seeks reconciliation, interpersonal healing, and relational justice (Herman, 2011; Kim & Thibodeau, 2011; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014). Given these physiological, emotional, and spiritual dynamics, spiritual practices offer unique resources for reflection and spiritual integration. Such practices can create a physiological and emotional sense of safety, which then allows for an embodied and relational space for remembering morally injurious experiences. Spiritual practices can connect people with the goodness of self, humanity, and God (for those in theistic traditions). When people experience the goodness of life in their bodies, they can shift out of the physiological stress of fear, shame, guilt, or self-disgust into compassion. Spiritual practices can also help people respond to the suffering of others with compassion that counteracts automatic withdrawal triggered by empathic distress (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008).

The physiological and emotional experience of compassion creates a relational space that holds morally injurious experiences and lovingly reveals the role of shame, guilt, or fear in a life-limiting lived theology (Doehring, 2015) or spiritual orienting system (Pargament, et al., 2006). Exploring one's lived theology—a matrix of values, beliefs, and ways of coping—in the encounter with a morally injurious experience can inform one's response and meaning-making. Certain responses, driven by the so-called negative moral emotions fear and shame, can cut people off from social support (Haidt, 2003). Lived theologies are internalized within matrices of families of origin, communities of faith, and social systems, which might foster resilience or exacerbate moral injury through internalized social oppression (for example, sexism, racism, and classism that intersect, intensifying shame associated with aspects of one's social identity [Ramsay, 2013]). Certain elements of these embodied lived theologies when put into crisis by moral injury may generate feelings of perceived moral judgment and/or shunning by others and God. These feelings may enforce internalized social oppression and enact conditioned coping strategies such as privatizing the emotional aftermath of moral injury, and/or by seeking relief through addictive substances. Morally injurious events can generate spiritual/religious struggles,

which often are privatized and chronic, as emerging research has demonstrated (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014).

The embodied and relational experience of compassion—a moral emotion that connects people to relational webs of life—fostered by spiritual practices opens a space for co-creating more life-giving intentional theologies or spiritual orienting systems. Ongoing use of spiritual practices can help people

- identify when fear or shame triggers ‘old’ embedded beliefs, values and ways of coping with moral stress and injury;
- compassionately embrace the shamed or fearful self;
- recognize the pro-social function of guilt, shame, disgust and seek out opportunities to demonstrate such reconciling actions
- put into practice intentional life-giving values, beliefs, and ways of coping that connect them with goodness in their bodies, in others, and in God or a transcendent dimension of life; and
- resist internalized social oppression that exacerbates moral injury and stress.

In courses on religious/spiritual struggles and post-traumatic stress we invite students to work self-reflexively on their own experience of moral injury in spiritually integrative ways. First, they are invited to use spiritual practices that foster self-compassion, and then to use these spiritual practices in responding to the physiological and emotional stress of being in this course, writing their assignments, and sharing them with faculty and a small group of their peers. They begin their assignments with a short carefully crafted description of a personal experience of moral injury, and then reflect theologically on

- their spiritual practices that facilitated self-compassion during the process of remembering,
- shame and or/fear-based lived theologies/spiritual orienting systems of moral injury
- the ways that intersecting systems of social oppression fostered internalized shame, fear or guilt about aspects of their social identity (for example, their gender, race, social class, physical abilities or disabilities, sexual orientation or religion) (Ramsay, 2013)
- their emergent intentional theologies of compassion and reconciliation.

This pedagogy helps students spiritually integrate and co-construct contextual theologies of suffering out of their experience of moral injury, like the following:

- A military chaplain in a military trauma hospital flooded with injured military service members, who has to provide emergency trauma care that inflicted physical pain
- A veteran becoming a military chaplain who is haunted by an experience in which this veteran avoided a dangerous assignment in basic training that subsequently killed a friend who ended up doing the assignment
- A military chaplain in a marital counseling session in which one spouse makes a suicide attempt
- A female veteran becoming a chaplain who has traumatic memories of being deployed after 9/11 in non-military housing that came under terrorist threat.

Writing, reflecting, and having spiritual care conversations about such experiences helped students relationally experience compassion from peers and the teaching team (a professor and a

military chaplain), and co-create intentional theologies grounded in compassion. They experienced first-hand the unique ways that spiritual care conversations, as distinct from therapeutic conversations, helped them integrate moral injuries through spiritual practices and theological reflexivity in one-on-one and group conversations. The goal of this pedagogy was to facilitate spiritual integration, a more realistic goal than healing or full recovery.

These prospective chaplains experienced ways to spiritually integrate ongoing moral stress or the kinds of moral injury they were likely to experience in military service both personally and professionally (Levy, Conoscenti, Tillery, Dickstein, & Litz, 2011; Todd, 2013). These seminary courses met important learning needs of future military chaplains by spiritually forming them “to be self-reflexive, critical thinkers, with compassion for all” (Waggoner, 2014).

We propose this pedagogy of spiritual integration and theological reflexivity as a way to help students co-construct contextual theologies of the suffering experienced in moral injury. By experiencing first-hand and communally spiritual integration and co-creative contextual theology these students become formed as military chaplains able to help military service members, families, veterans, and leaders in their units engage in a process of spiritual integration and contextual meaning making in personal, familial, and organizational experiences of moral injury. These students also learn to practice self-care routines that can surrender the emotional and spiritual burdens incurred through this work and can replenish their energies.

Questions for discussion

Is this pedagogy of spiritual integration and theological reflexivity meaningful for students pursuing military ministry in other ATS schools? Iliff School of Theology is offering a course provider program that uses this pedagogy in some of its online courses, making such courses available to students in ATS schools. This course provider program on military ministry is one way of responding to an initiative for more theologically progressive education for military chaplains (<http://www.iliff.edu/degrees-certificates/military-ministry-course-provider>).

Is this pedagogy of spiritual integration and theological reflexivity meaningful beyond seminaries and traditional venues of theological education? We are testing its relevance through work with

- The Soul Repair Center
- The Department of Defense (workshops for military chaplains)
- The Volunteers of America (VOA)
- Communities of faith (Moon, 2015)
- Popular media outlets providing opportunities for engaged discourse in public forums (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/zachary-moon/american-sniper-and-the-war-story-we-cannot-tell_b_6614320.html)

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