

Introduction: Bystanders as a Critical Locus for Theological Reflection

In the fall of 2010, the country witnessed a string of teen suicides. Pictures of fifteen-year-old Billy Lucas, thirteen-year-old Seth Walsh, and eighteen-year-old Tyler Clementi flashed across every news media outlet in the United States.¹ While there can be many causes of teen suicide, a common thread held all of these deaths together: LGBTQ bullying. Billy Lucas, Seth Walsh, and Tyler Clementi took their own lives after enduring daily harassment and torment by their peers because of their sexual orientation. Several years later, the deaths of these young men remain little more than a distant memory to most.

The next winter, we watched intoxicated members of The Big Reds, a football team in Steubenville, Ohio, boast about the rape of an unconscious sixteen-year-old girl at a party. When the district attorney finally decided to press charges, instead of rallying around the young woman, the town rushed to the defense of her attackers, “who were athletes for the town’s pride and glory, the high school

1. Cody J. Sanders cites many of these examples in *Queer Lessons for Churches on the Straight and Narrow: What All Christians Can Learn from LGBTQ Lives* (Macon, GA: Faithlab, 2013), 117.

football team.”² This story is hardly an isolated incident. In January 2012, two high school freshmen were invited to a house party by a senior star of the football team in Maryville, Missouri. Once there, they were encouraged to drink by popular students. As reported by the *Kansas City Star*, the next morning one teen’s mother found her daughter, alone on the front lawn of the house in tears.³ While helping her daughter clean up, she discovered red marks on her daughter’s genital area. A medical examination along with the video recording of the event (taken by a friend of the perpetrator) verified that Daisy Coleman had been raped.⁴ Within days, the students involved were taken in for questioning and arrested. Yet, similar to the Steubenville case, the town itself turned on the family of the young woman. Daisy not only received threats at school, but “her mother, a veterinarian, was fired from her job two weeks after the incident without so much as an explanation, only later learning that her boss feared that her presence ‘was putting stress’ on her other employees.”⁵ The family moved out of the area. Later that spring, “their old house burned down mysteriously.”⁶ Since then, the charges against the perpetrators have been dropped.

In July 2013, an all-female and mostly white jury acquitted George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer who fatally shot unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin, of second-degree murder and manslaughter. The confrontation between Zimmerman and Martin, which took place in residential community in Sanford,

2. Adam Peck, “Victim’s House Burned Down after She Accuses Football Star of Rape,” *Think Progress*, <http://thinkprogress.org/health/2013/10/14/2777431/maryville-missouri-rape/>.

3. Dugan, Arnett, “Nightmare in Maryville: Teens’ Sexual Encounter Ignites a Firestorm Against Family,” *The Kansas City Star*, October 12, 2014, <http://www.kansascity.com/news/special-reports/maryville/article329412/Nightmare-in-Maryville-Teens'-sexual-encounter-ignites-a-firestorm-against-family.html>.

4. *Ibid.* Names of victims of sexual violence are usually not released to the public. In this, case Coleman’s family made the exception because they wanted her story to get out.

5. Peck, “Victim’s House Burned.”

6. *Ibid.*

Florida, “began with Zimmerman’s non-emergency dispatch call, a call that was racially assaultive in its discourse, one that used the tropes of anti-black racism.”⁷ The socio-cultural link between blackness and criminality contributed to Zimmerman’s assumption that a seventeen-year-old black teenager wearing a hoodie and carrying a pack of Skittles and an Arizona Iced Tea, was “up to no good or he’s on drugs or something.”⁸ Abuse of Florida’s Stand Your Ground law and racially marked police missteps in the case led to Zimmerman’s acquittal.⁹

Rarely do we engage in serious conversation about violence in the United States. We have a propensity to avoid so-called hot button issues: sexual and domestic violence, the denigration and violation of LGBTQ persons, and white racism. When we do attempt to speak about the “unspeakable,” our focus tends to be on the victim and the perpetrator. “Why did he do that to her?” “How could the jury acquit him?” Such responses not only do little to resolve the issue at hand, but they also obscure the way in which violence touches us all. In the events involving Tyler Clementi, Trayvon Martin, and Daisy Coleman, responsibility did not lie solely in the hands of their accused perpetrators. In each case, the violence experienced (racial, sexual, or homophobic and heterosexist) was tied to the tacit (and sometimes overt) acceptance of cultural norms that allow for the denigration of entire groups of people.¹⁰ The idea that women’s bodies are objects for male sexual consumption participates in the normalization of

7. George Yancy, “Walking While Black in the ‘White Gaze,’” September 1, 2013, *The New York Times*, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/01/walking-while-black-in-the-white-gaze/?ref=trayvonmartin>.

8. Ibid. Yancy is quoting George Zimmerman.

9. And as I review the final draft of this manuscript, Michael Brown has just been laid to rest in Ferguson, Missouri. Brown, an unarmed eighteen-year-old black young man, was fatally shot in broad daylight by a white police officer in August 2014. Trayvon Martin’s death was neither the first nor last of its kind.

10. Traci C. West, *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 1.

violence against women. Stereotypes about the criminality of black men undergird racial inequality and racial bias within the criminal justice system in the United States. Religious and cultural ideation that regards same-sex unions and gender-variant behavior as sick, distorted, and unnatural can compound depression and psychological distress. Violence does not always have visible wounds and complicity does not always entail wielding a weapon or physical assault. Violence impacts everyone and leaves very few spaces of innocence. Until Christians privileged by virtue of race, gender, class, or sexual orientation begin to see the anguish and suffering of those who are marginalized as something for which we are responsible, the *basileia* of God (reign of God) lies beyond our grasp.¹¹

My own theological journey with questions about violence began when I was working as a youth minister in a very wealthy parish in a suburb outside of Chicago. I had just completed a master's degree in pastoral ministry and, at the age of twenty-three, was idealistically enthusiastic about the power of the gospel to transform young hearts and minds. Yet my idealism quickly came to a halt when the parish I worked for decided to convert its gym into an overnight shelter for homeless families once a week. In response, homeowners across the street threatened to sue, fearing the site and the regular appearance of its nonwhite guests would lower their property values. When the shelter was finally cleared to open, I was faced with another conflict: the guests at the shelter would meet in the same building at the same time as teen confirmation classes that I ran. Parents, who were once willing to serve and volunteer at the shelter, now refused to allow their children to be in the building at the same time. As

11. According to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, the central symbol of the movement named after Jesus is the *basileia*, the kingdom or commonwealth, of God. This term expresses a Jewish religious-political vision that signifies freedom from domination and is marked by a "praxis of inclusive wholeness." See *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 118–30.

registration fell and catechists dropped out, my job became incredibly stressful. Under pressure from parents, the church installed locking gates within the building that separated our homeless guests from the “rest of the church.” One evening, while I was walking the halls during class, it all became clear to me. Not only did the members of this parish not “get it,” I did not either. I had isolated myself in a world where I did not have to see anything that I did not want to see or do anything that I really did not want to do. I was able to hide from the realities of economic and racial injustice. I did not have to see poverty, much less deal with it. As much as I yearned to cry out that year, I was too afraid of those who had money and power.

At times, we have all witnessed injustice and felt powerless to help. There are also times in which we have seen injustice and remained silent, missing opportunities for connection. My situation in Chicago provided an occasion for reflecting about power from the vantage point of a privileged bystander. On the one hand, as an employee of the parish staff, I had access to a public platform in which I could voice concern over the gates and what they symbolized. Looking back, I wish I could say that I organized an educational campaign examining poverty and its effects on families. But I did not. Instead, I left the position. This would be an example of unethical passivity, wherein I relinquished my own power unnecessarily. Yet, passivity in this case must also be contextualized in view of the gender stratification and clericalism that continue to function within Roman Catholicism. As violence is a collective phenomenon, so is social change. Efforts to resist social injustice are never the result of a single individual’s actions. They require the support of a community. As a young female working in large parish, my voice was often muted. To some degree, I was powerless to effect change.

Human violation can span a range of intensity, from social exclusion to war. Yet, when violence is institutionalized and coded

in cultural mores and prejudices, the abuse of power can become so subtle that it is difficult to detect our own complicity. One of the most unsettling aspects of violence, as manifest within a twenty-first-century Western context, is the persistent failure of elites (a term used by Mary Hobgood) to reckon with their participation in violence.¹² Elites (or privileged people) work pretty hard to protect our innocence, to maintain a sense of ourselves as morally good people. As I will discuss in chapter 2, one of the ways in which privileged people maintain a sense of moral innocence is through systemic unknowing. Systemic unknowing is a form of selective attention, wherein entire groups of people fail “to extend to a minority the same recognition of humanity, and hence the same sympathy and care, given as a matter of course to one’s own group.”¹³ Selective attention has appeared in various modalities throughout history: whites have ignored the plight of nonwhites; members of the upper and middle classes have relegated the concerns of poor to the margins; men have dismissed the credibility of women’s experiences of domestic and sexual abuse; heterosexuals have shunned LGBTQ persons. The problem with ignorance is that it breeds arrogance and indifference.

The issue isn’t that people aren’t aware of human suffering. Rather, the issue, as articulated by Jon Sobrino, is that “people do not want to acknowledge or face up to the reality of a crucified world, and even less do we want to ask ourselves what is our share of responsibility for such a world.”¹⁴ Ignorance is a form of the entitlement of abuse. It is that which suggests one is entitled to economic, social, cultural,

12. Mary Elizabeth Hobgood, *Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability*, rev. and updated ed. (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2009), 17. Elites benefit more from social privilege than they suffer social oppression.

13. Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 32. Massingale is quoting Charles R. Lawrence III, “The Id, the Ego, and Equal Protection: Reckoning with Unconscious Racism,” *Stanford Law Review* 39 (January 1987): 317–88 at n. 135.

racial, or gender advantage even when these advantages come at great cost to others.¹⁵ From a theological perspective, ignorance actively denies the heart of the Christian religion: that we are persons created to be in relation. Ignorance encourages isolation and, ultimately, escapism from our very humanity. When privileged people protect our innocence, we bypass possibilities for participating in God's redeeming work in the world, and, as such, resurrection is stymied. This soteriological conviction holds special relevance for bystanders to violence.

As the term is used in this book, *bystanders* are those who aid and abet perpetrators (oppressors) through acts of "omission and commission."¹⁶ While bystanders can occupy a range of social locations from margin to center, many occupy social sites of privilege to some degree. It is important to note that I write this book as a privileged person and am primarily concerned about bystanders who "enjoy more dominance than [they] suffer subordination" by virtue of their race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender.¹⁷ In other words, implicated in my use of the term *bystander* are assumptions about social privilege.¹⁸ Occupying a social location marked by privilege creates conflict, internal and external. Many who occupy sites of privilege are uneasy with the injustice it causes, and some even feel guilt about their own complicity in it. Yet, few are willing to relinquish the unearned entitlements and advantages that come with it. Those who are willing to work to eradicate the system may be intimidated by the social cost that comes with doing so.

14. Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 5.

15. Hobgood makes this point in *Dismantling Privilege*, 20.

16. This definition of *bystander* is found in Barbara Coloroso, *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 62.

17. Hobgood, *Dismantling Privilege*, 17

18. It is possible to be a bystander and to occupy a nondominant social site. This has happened throughout history. However, this would be the subject matter for a different book.

We live in a world where success is predicated upon the use of power as domination, creating a situation of divide and conquer in which no one dares to get singled out. As the dynamics of power take hold and social boundaries are created, many feel the need to distance themselves from subordinated groups in order to maintain social acceptance. Consider, for example, the increased scapegoating of those who hold a lower socioeconomic status by the religious and political right wing during the economic downturn at the beginning of the twenty-first century in the United States.¹⁹

The contested space that bystanders inhabit is an important locus for theological reflection since in many instances it is the space that many in the Western world occupy in relation to violence. The majority of human beings are not the ones to initiate harm, nor do they intend to do so. Rather, we are born into a world where patterns of human violation—racism, violence against women, heterosexism, imperialism, and classism—are already set in motion. Yet, regardless of intent, we are responsible. Injustice that is overlooked or ignored is dangerous. It can become “a contagion that infects even those who thought they could turn away.”²⁰ The habit of ignoring suffering bodies is difficult to break. Our humanity is defined by our relationships with others. In the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “‘My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.’ We belong in a bundle of life.”²¹ Violence rends the very fabric of our common humanity, dehumanizing us all. This capacity to objectify fellow human beings is a part of the human condition. I don’t say this in order to excuse the behavior of those who benefit from systems of privilege. Rather, I mention it in order to

19. Hobgood first made this point in *Dismantling Privilege*, 22. It remains relevant, as evidenced by the political rhetoric surrounding fiscal reform in the 2012 presidential election, wherein critics of welfare reform chanted “no free hand-outs.”

20. Coloroso, *The Bully*, 63.

21. Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 31.

acknowledge that evil is both chosen and imposed.²² Evil “can and does take on a life of its own and accrue a power that rivals God and the good.”²³ We are pressured into participating in forces that do tremendous harm, even when we are aware of this harm. Yet, at the same time, we are responsible for our actions. One of the questions that drives the research behind this book is how can a group of well-intentioned, and sometimes, socially aware individuals repeatedly bypass opportunities for resisting violence? In part, this is a question about the dynamics of groupthink or group behavior. But it is also a question about the nature of Christian discipleship.

Like Jesus, Christians are called to contest “that which thwarts the power of human personal and communal becoming, that which twists relationship, which denies human well-being, community, and human solidarity to so many in our world.”²⁴ For privileged persons, embodying this call will mean “break[ing] through the ‘lies, secrets, and silences’ that mask the prevailing distortions and manipulations in relationship and the power or relations.”²⁵ Christians, therefore, need to not only recognize the damage done by violence in its various forms, but they also must contend with their own complicity in violence. Too often, Christians, especially those who occupy social sites of privilege, have been bystanders to violence, conforming to racial and gendered mores of our society. This is not to suggest that Christians actively seek out the role of bystander. Nor is it my presumption that bystanders are intrinsically bad people. Doing so would imply that bystanders (and perpetrators) are “monsters and demons,” instead of “moral agents to be held responsible” for their

22. Darby Kathleen Ray, “Tracking the Tragic: Augustine, Global Capitalism, and a Theology of Struggle,” in *Constructive Theology: Classical Themes in Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 141.

23. *Ibid.*, 137.

24. Beverly Wildung Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love,” in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 18–19.

25. *Ibid.*, 19.

action and inaction.²⁶ More importantly, such a perspective renders bystanders incapable of conversion, personal and communal.

Disrupting indifference requires the transformation of individuals and social structures. Apathy must be interrogated in view of patterns of social conditioning that support and even reward indifference to suffering. While the concept of apathy will be further developed in a later chapter, it suffices to note that the term comes from the Greek word *apatheia*, meaning “nonsuffering, freedom from suffering, or a creature’s inability to suffer.”²⁷ For Dorothee Sölle, apathy “is a social condition in which people are so dominated by the goal of avoiding suffering that it becomes a goal to avoid human relationships and contacts altogether.”²⁸ To be apathetic is to lack compassion.

Theology has played a role in the social conditioning of privileged apathy. In particular, I will argue that models of redemption wherein divine justice is accomplished by means of penal substitution affirm patterns of relationality undergirding white supremacy and heteropatriarchy in the United States today, erasing them from the consciousness of dominant elites.²⁹ When paired within individualized notions of sin-talk, such theological language works to further privileged apathy. As such, new ways of speaking about sin and redeeming grace are sorely needed.

Intended Audience

This book is written for an academic audience: students, professors, and those who wish to further engage questions of Christian tradition

26. Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 83.

27. Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 36.

28. *Ibid.*

29. My reflection on these two issues is not apart from consideration of the role of economic injustice and Western imperialism. Given the limited scope of this project and the large-scale effect of these two issues, theological reflection on passive bystanding in the purview of economic injustice and Western imperialism merits their own projects.

and violence. Yet I write with the recognition that academic audiences are not monolithic and extend beyond those who sit in the proverbial “ivory tower.” Consonant with the principles and practices of feminist, womanist, and liberation theologies, I believe that theology, as a discipline, has a responsibility to engage as broad of an audience as possible, including members of churches and the general public. Therefore, whenever possible, I have tried to use terminology accessible to the nonspecialist. In particular, I write this book to and for Christians who, like me, have struggled with the ways in which our own participation in systems of power and privilege renders us complicit in violence.³⁰ As a woman, I have experienced the ill effects of sexism firsthand. Yet, my race, socioeconomic background, geographical location as an American citizen, and heterosexual orientation have given me access to significant social advantage, an advantage that precipitates violence against those who are not white, middle-class, Western, or straight. While my own experiences of gender discrimination have informed my view of injustice, as a member of a number of privileged social groups, I also must acknowledge that my own awareness of the subjugation others experience is limited in view.³¹ In the context of white racism, Karen Teel articulates this well: “As a member of the oppressor group, I need to listen to black women in order to recognize the part I have played in their suffering, to repent that role, and to be transformed.”³² This is because of the blinding nature of social privilege itself. Social privilege works to normalize patterns of

30. Throughout this book, the intermittent use of the first person plural is to indicate my own complicity in the structural injustices of which I speak, as well as the need for the collective whole to work toward justice. While roles and responsibilities may differ in relation to violence, the project of justice is one that involves work of all parties: victim-survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders.

31. Karen Teel, *Racism and the Image of God* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 11.

32. *Ibid.*

social dominance and entitlement, such that those who benefit most often miss its power.

As members of dominant cultural and social groups, the goal for privileged bystanders is to become allies or advocates in the struggle for justice, in the work of bringing about the kin-dom of God.³³ Ada María Isasi-Díaz says it best when she states, “To become aware that one is an oppressor does not stop with individual illumination but requires the oppressor to establish dialogue and mutuality with the oppressed. The first word in the dialogue that can bring awareness to the oppressor is uttered by the oppressed.”³⁴ In the work of justice, allies do not set the agenda for reform. Rather, allies listen “to what priorities and needs are expressed by those who know the experience of injustice from the inside out. To be an ally is challenging work: taking risks, making mistakes and admitting them, staying open to dialogue even though it sometimes hurts.”³⁵

To be an ally is to have your subjectivity marked by what feminist philosopher Kelly Oliver terms *address-ability* and *response-ability*.³⁶ To be address-able is to listen; it is to be open to the voice of another. To be response-able is to respond to the world around you: ethically, politically and morally. In this context, it is to hear the cries of those who are suffering. Both characteristics in tandem bear the marks of compassionate witnessing. Compassionate witnessing is a hopeful behavior that allows for remembering. “Life circumstances, troubling interactions, oppressive conditions, common shock, negative relationships—our reactions to any of these—can produce

33. Ada María Isasi-Díaz uses the phrase *kin-dom* to avoid the sexist and elitist connotations of the word *kingdom* and to denote the communal aspects of God’s vision for the world. See *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 65n14.

34. *Ibid.*, 95–96.

35. Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence against Women and the Church’s Response*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 50.

36. Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

disconnectedness from our feelings, beliefs, values and commitments and then disconnection from others and our communities. When we are witnessed, or when we witness ourselves, we are remembered.”³⁷ That which has been “scattered, shattered, or forgotten” by violence is brought back together.³⁸ This is not to suggest that the shards of broken glass can be put back together in the same form or that the glass will ever serve the same purpose again. Rather, the process of remembering, of witnessing, is more like creating a mosaic from the broken glass. It creates a new possibility through which light can be refracted.

Why Bystanders?

Scholars in a cross section of disciplines have recognized that addressing community health and social justice issues requires the engagement of bystanders.³⁹ To date, bystander intervention programs have been developed and studied in relation to bullying, sexual violence, and racial violence, the rationale being that relationship violence will only be eliminated when social norms are challenged and a wide range of audiences reached.⁴⁰ In particular,

37. Kaethe Weingarten, *Common Shock: Witnessing Violence Everyday* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 196.

38. *Ibid.*

39. As first documented by the research of Latané Bibb and John Darley, the bystander effect refers to the phenomenon that an individual’s likelihood of helping decreases when passive bystanders are present in a critical situation. In examining why this is the case, psychologists have identified three facets of human behavior that increase bystander inhibition: 1) diffusion of responsibility, 2) evaluation apprehension, and 3) pluralistic ignorance. See *The Unresponsive Bystander: Why Doesn’t He Help?* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 121–28.

40. All major bullying prevention programs are targeted at changing the behavior and value systems of bystanders. For a summary of the research, see Dan Olweus, “Bullying at School: Basic Facts and Effects of a School Based Intervention Program,” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 35, no. 7 (1994): 1171–90. Bystander intervention programs are also being studied and implemented in relation to sexual violence and racial violence. For example, see Jacqueline K. Nelson, Kevin M. Dunn, and Yin Paradies, “Bystander Anti-Racism: A Review of the Literature” *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 11 (2011): 263–84 and Victoria L. Banyard, Elizabeth G. Plante, and Mary M. Moynihan, “Bystander Education: Bringing a Broader

bystander approaches seek to transform harmful social norms that silence marginalized members of the community and render violence invisible.⁴¹

From a theological vantage point, focusing on bystanders is a helpful heuristic tool for naming sin and redeeming grace within violent contexts. First and foremost, the category of *bystander* works to disrupt victim-perpetrator and oppressor-oppressed binaries and the hierarchal dualisms often accompanying it: good/evil, innocence/guilt, men/women, white/nonwhites, God/creation, mind/body—to name a few. Hierarchical dualisms have played a pivotal role in theological justification of hegemony.⁴² (*Hegemony* is a term that refers to “the social, cultural, ideological, or economic influence exerted by a dominant group.”⁴³ This influence works to silence or discredit other forms of knowing.) Moreover, the perpetrator-victim split shuts down conversation through an ill-balanced propensity to place blame. As psychologist Sharon Lamb illustrates, this propensity to place blame, to seek out the guilty party, often reinforces victim-blaming.⁴⁴ Most potential perpetrators do not see themselves as perpetrators and often deny their own participation in violence. In contrast, victim-survivors of sexual abuse tend to take too much

Community Perspective to Sexual Violence Prevention,” *Journal of Community Psychology* 32 (2004): 61–79.

41. For more on the bystander approach in relation to sexual violence prevention, see http://www.ncdsv.org/publications_bystander.html. In particular, see the three-part series by Jackson Katz, *The Bystander Approach* (Enola, PA: National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2011), starting with “Penn State: The Mother of All Teachable Moments,” accessed at http://www.ncdsv.org/images/NSVRC_PennStateTheMotherOfAllTeachableMomentsForTheBystanderApproach_12-1-2011.pdf.
42. This point is central to theses of Ivone Gebara, *Out of Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, trans. Anne Patrick Ware (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002) and Kelly Brown Douglas's *What's Faith Got to Do With it? Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005).
43. Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “Hegemony,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hegemony>.
44. Sharon Lamb, *The Trouble with Blame: Victims, Perpetrators, and Responsibility* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), chapter 1.

responsibility for what has been done, engaging in self-blame.⁴⁵ The category of *bystander* is helpful to the degree that it shifts the locus of responsibility, suggesting that to some degree we are all involved in the violation that has happened. Culpability may differ according to the role one takes and the context, but all parties—bystanders, victim-survivors, and perpetrators—are touched by violence. Attention shifts from the individual to the collective. The question is no longer, “Why did you let this happen to you,” or, “Why did you do this to him,” but, “Why did we let this happen in our community?”⁴⁶ This is not to deny the individual responsibility of perpetrators, but it is to situate human violation within a structural and social context. Therefore, the starting point is a relational and communal anthropology that explicitly acknowledges all are impacted by violence.⁴⁷

Such a statement can be risky, especially when one considers the fluid and sometimes overlapping nature of the categories of bystander, victim-survivor, and perpetrator. For example, research in the area of relational aggression suggests that many bullies have been bullied themselves.⁴⁸ Moreover, when the analysis of violence is

45. In contexts marked by individual trauma such as sexual violence or bullying, I follow Traci C. West and use the term *victim-survivor* to refer to those “who have been both victimized by violent assault and have survived it.” See *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 5. As West suggests, the language of *victim-survivor* acknowledges the harm done as well as the resilience and agency of those harmed (*ibid.*). When speaking of community trauma or collective violence, I use terminology that describes the practice or group being discussed (for example, white supremacy, white people, and so on). Where appropriate, I will use the terms *oppressor* and *oppressed* in order to delineate the roles of those involved in collective acts of violation. The category of bystander will be applied to both collective and individual contexts.

46. Joan Tabachnick, “Engaging Bystanders in Sexual Violence Prevention,” *National Sexual Violence Resource Center* (Enola, PA: NSVRC, 2008), 5.

47. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki speaks about violence and the human person in this manner in *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

48. For example, see David Schwartz, Laura J. Proctor, and Deborah H. Chien, “The Aggressive Victim of Bullying: Emotional and Behavioral Dysregulation as a Pathway to Victimization by Peers,” in *Peer Harassment in School: The Plight of the Vulnerable and Victimized*, ed. Jaana Juvonen and Sandra Graham (New York: Guilford, 2001), 147–74. Some studies also indicate

expanded to include the category of the bystander, the lines between perpetrator, bystander, and victim-survivor become blurred. This is particularly true when we examine the problem of normative or structural violence. To the degree that social institutions, sacred and secular, have “decisively allied themselves through acts of omission and commission” with cultural forms of domination such as racism and heterosexism, all who participate in these institutions without questioning violence are complicit in violence.⁴⁹ In this sense, to be a bystander (individual or institutional) is to be a perpetrator of violence insofar as one “promotes, defends, and partakes—however, unwittingly—of the culture of dominance.”⁵⁰ To some degree, regardless of intent, to be a bystander is to align oneself with cultural structures of domination. Bystanders do not occupy neutral moral states. Bystanders participate in perpetrating social evils.

Assertions about the complicity of an entire group of people in violence have been critiqued primarily on two grounds: “the disappearing problem” and “the equalizing problem.”⁵¹ As educational philosopher Barbara Applebaum explains, the former objection reasons that when responsibility is “shared by so many people,” not only is it difficult to place blame on a particular individual, but “it loses its potency and effectiveness.”⁵² The statement that all are complicit “could function to excuse those who are personally guilty.”⁵³ The second critique is related to the first. If all

a similar phenomenon in the context of domestic partner violence. See Charles L. Whitfield, Robert F. Anda, Shanta R. Dube, and Vincent J. Felitti, “Violent Childhood Experiences and the Risk of Intimate Partner Violence in Adults: Assessment in a Large Health Maintenance Organization,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 18, no. 2 (2003): 166–85.

49. Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 80. He makes this statement in reference to the Roman Catholic Church’s participation in white racial domination in the United States. Yet I would argue that the principle has much broader application.

50. *Ibid.*

51. Barbara Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good: White Complicity, White Moral Responsibility, and Social Justice Pedagogy* (New York: Lexington Books, 2010), 140. Applebaum is summarizing the work of Hannah Arendt.

52. *Ibid.*, 143.

are guilty, does this lead to the conclusion “that everyone is *equally* responsible?”⁵⁴ The problem with this assertion is that “accessories will be judged too harshly” and those who initiated violence “get off too easily.”⁵⁵ While these objections must be considered carefully, both critiques assume a backward looking (also termed a liability) model of responsibility whose goal is the identification of blame. As will be further discussed in chapter 2, juridical notions of responsibility are consonant with classical Christian ideas about atonement. Taking a cue from Applebaum’s work, I will argue that theological claims about the nature of bystander complicity in systemic violence require a different model of redemption, one rooted in an understanding of responsibility that is derived from our collective interdependence. Here “responsibility is not primarily about blame or punishment” (backward looking), but focuses on the future, on changing “institutions and processes so that their outcomes will be less unjust.”⁵⁶ The idea is that collective change is an ongoing practice that does not happen overnight, requiring a future orientation. In Christian terminology, this model resonates with eschatological notions of the present–future, the “already–not–yet” reign of God (chapter 5).

Adopting the category of *bystander* offers the community the chance to change social norms. Social norms—practices and ideas that govern what constitutes acceptable behavior within a given setting—play a key role in violence prevention.⁵⁷ Bystanders have the capacity to effect lasting social change for the good, to alter what

53. *Ibid.*, 142.

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*, 143.

56. *Ibid.*, 160. Applebaum is quoting Iris Marion Young’s “Responsibility, Social Connection, and Global Labor Justice,” in her *Global Challenges: War, Self-Determination, and Responsibility for Justice* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2008), 159–86, at 179.

57. Mary M. Moynihan and Victoria L. Banyard, “Educating Bystanders Helps Prevent Sexual Violence and Reduce Backlash” *Sexual Assault Report* 12 (2009): 49–50, 52, 57, 60–62, 64.

practices and attitudes are considered acceptable. In a theological framework, attending to the locus of the bystander means that responsibility for redemption, for bringing about the reign of God as justice for all, is located within us all.

Some may object that the term *bystander* instead of *perpetrator*, especially in view of racism and heterosexism, functions to ease the discomfort of those who benefit from white privilege and heterosexual privilege. My use of the term *bystander* is not appropriated without critical analysis of structural violence and the historical context in which hegemonic norms have been and continue to be adopted in US culture, a process that continues to generate great affective anxiety in white straight bodies.⁵⁸ Affective dis-ease, apart from an acknowledgment of the human person's capacity for growth and change, can leave people frozen, unable to hear anything other than their own shame and guilt. Lamb explains, "You point the finger, and usually the accused points back. The more you blame a person, the more ashamed he feels and the greater his tendency will be to hide his head, deny his wrongdoing, or look outward for causality."⁵⁹ The trouble with blame is that it very rarely encourages perpetrators, and those who are complicit with perpetrators, to take responsibility for their actions.⁶⁰ As I will argue in chapter 2, guilt is not a particularly effective tool for engendering social responsibility.

Book Overview

Theologians from a wide range of social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds have challenged the ways in which classical christological constructions of dominant elites have contributed to

58. Applebaum makes a similar point in *Being White*, 161.

59. Lamb, *Trouble with Blame*, 11

60. *Ibid.*

violence.⁶¹ This project builds upon this scholarship and expands it to include an examination of Christian soteriology that brings to the fore the gray moral terrain marking bystander participation in violence.

As Elizabeth Johnson illustrates, the classical Western Christian tradition has “[drawn] imagery and concepts for God almost exclusively from the world of ruling men.”⁶² Such speech legitimates “structures and theories that grant a theomorphic character to men who rule” and relegates all others to the margins.⁶³ The exclusive and literal use of kyriarchical (master-centered) language not only justifies the dominance of elites by identifying patterns of “patriarchal headship” and whiteness as divine, but it also diminishes the dignity of women and nonwhites, psychologically and socially distancing them from “from their own goodness and power.”⁶⁴ In the context of privileged apathy, this vision of Jesus does more harm than help. Such a framework purports holiness as submission and obedience to power

61. Examples include Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved the World?,” in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim, 1989), 1–30; Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys By Heart: Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1989); Patrick S. Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace: Discovering the Queer Christ* (New York: Seabury Press, 2012); James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997) and *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012); Robert E. Goss, *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2002); Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, American Academy of Religion Series, no. 64 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation* (Washington DC: University Press of America, 1982) and *Saving Jesus from Those Who Are Right: Rethinking What It Means to Be Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999); Wonhee Anne Joh, *The Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology* (Louisville: WJK, 2006); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1978) and *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); Emilie M. Townes, ed., *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil & Suffering* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); and Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).

62. Johnson, *She Who Is*, 18. The term *kyriarchical* is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*, 38.

as domination, leaving little room for lament and ownership of one's own role in the work of social transformation.

As questions about the significance of racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and imperialism increasingly shape the landscape of contemporary theological discourse on the meaning of Christ and redemption, elites must contend with the social reality of privilege. At stake is not only the premise of intellectual and spiritual honesty within the praxis of theological naming, but also, as Hobgood explains, "there is no subordination without a complementary exercise of domination."⁶⁵ Those who occupy a privileged place by virtue of race, economic standing, gender, or ability have a responsibility to question how their privilege advantages them at the expense of others *and* contributes to human violation. George Yancy, editor of *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?*, argues that this interrogation cannot be viewed as an "extraneous and vague problem that exists outside" the church.⁶⁶ Rather, the interrogation of white privilege must be located "within the walls of the church itself . . . [as it is] something rooted there and all too often invisible."⁶⁷

Elites have had a great deal to say about pain and suffering; yet relatively little has been done to challenge the theo-ethical imagination with respect to social privilege.⁶⁸ In part, this is a

65. Mary Elizabeth Hobgood, "White Economic and Erotic Disempowerment: A Theological Exploration in the Struggle against Racism," in *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence*, ed. Laurie M. Cassidy and Alex Mikulich (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007), 40.

66. George Yancy, "Introduction: Framing the Problem," in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 4.

67. *Ibid.*

68. Notable exceptions include Barbara Hillert Andolsen, *Daughters of Jefferson, Daughters of Bootblacks: Racism and American Feminism* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986); Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Sex, Race, and God: Feminism in Black and White* (New York: Crossroad, 1989); James N. Poling, *Deliver Us from Evil: Resisting Racial and Gender Oppression* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); Cassidy and Mikulich, *Interrupting White Privilege*; Jon Nilson, *Hearing Past the Pain: Why White Catholic Theologians Need Black Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2007); Hobgood, *Dismantling Privilege*; James W. Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing White Supremacy in Modernity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004); Teel, *Racism and*

reflection of the social status of the majority of those who comprise the academy. This is not to deny the pain experienced by many who occupy social sites of dominance. Rather, it suggests that elites must learn to pay attention to both pain and privilege. This is a difficult task given the high premium placed on innocence within contemporary Western culture. As James Cone once remarked, “America likes to think of itself as innocent. And we are not. No human being is innocent.”⁶⁹ While Cone is referring to the ways in which white Christians continue to obscure the pain of the US racial history, his claim rings true for Christian participation in hegemony more broadly construed. The separation of Christian identity from violence committed against those on the margins has allowed the dominant elite to claim a Christian identity without opposing the horrors of history and the present.⁷⁰

The purpose of this book is to further challenge Christian interpretations of pain and power, and the corollary between sin and redeeming grace, through an investigation of bystander complicity in patterns of human violation. Drawing upon insights from Christian theologians who occupy marginal and privileged sites, I construct a Christian soteriology for bystanders to violence that foregrounds the significance of compassionate witnessing in the work of redemption. Given the pervasiveness of inaction (whether in the form of willful ignorance, denial, or silent complicity), theological reflection on violence from the vantage point of the bystander is long overdue. This is a complicated task, given the ways in which the dynamics of power and privilege are operative in shaping our own desires, as well as our interpretation of love of God and neighbor.

the Image of God; and Jennifer Harvey, *Whiteness and Morality: Pursing Racial Justice through Reparations and Sovereignty* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

69. “James Cone,” *Bill Moyers Journal*, <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/11232007/watch.html>.

70. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 159.

The next chapter takes a deeper look at the ways in which violence and hiddenness mark central aspects of the human condition within a twenty-first-century Western context. The normalization of social relations of dominance and subjection (via gender, race, and class) renders violence invisible and silences the voices of its victims and survivors. Yet this is only one part of the equation. The other piece has to do with the ways in which hiding in the forms of isolation, individualism, and segregation is generative of violence. Economic and racial privilege plays a pivotal role in segregating entire groups of people from one another. Isolation is exacerbated by social media. This dynamism of hiddenness and violence will be illustrated through an analysis of bullying violence.

Drawing upon the narratives of young people and sociological research, I examine the ways in which bullying violence is a microcosm of patterns of intimidation, coercion, and human degradation operative in society at large. In particular, bullying points to the role of bystanders in supporting the use of power as domination. This is especially evident in view of gay bashing and slut shaming, two of the most common forms of bullying violence. Given the privileging of hegemonic masculinity and “flamboyant heterosexuality”⁷¹ within a Western context, passive bystanders participate in and support heteropatriarchy.

In chapter 2, I argue that unethical passivity, or apathy, manifest by bystanders is learned behavior that must be contextualized in view of the valuation of innocence purported through systems of social privilege and religious ideation surrounding divine perfection and divine suffering within classical Christian atonement tradition. Such narratives reinforce the bystander phenomenon, submitting that

71. Sociologist Jessie Klein argues that in a hypermasculine culture, the word *flamboyant* better encapsulates the pressure to conform to heteronormativity than it does the public expression of gender-variant and same-sex behavior. See *The Bully Society: School Shootings and the Crisis of Bullying in American Schools* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 53.

someone else will take care of the problem. This is a crucial concept for bystanders to violence that must be explicitly examined in view of the ways in which unethical passivity is compounded by social privilege. In order to do so, I take a closer look at the ways in which Christian apathy is manifest in forms of white privilege and white racism. Particular attention is given to the ways in which systemic ignorance, permission to escape, and ineffective guilt inform patterns of white unethical passivity in the United States.

Drawing insight from the work of womanist, black liberation, and feminist theologians, I argue that the divinization of scapegoating (or victim-blaming tactics) within classical Christian atonement tradition functions to erase nonwhite suffering from white consciousness. This is because victim-blaming tactics create confusion about who is responsible for violence and are often used by perpetrators and bystanders in order to minimize the consequences of their actions and to “preserve their sense of themselves as good.”⁷²

Chapter 3 turns to the question of sin-talk and begins the work of critical reconstruction. Within the history of Western Christian thought, sin has been predominantly defined as an individual offense against God, typically taking the form of pride or disobedience. Such formulations not only obscure the ways in which cultural forms of socialization shape self-understanding (i.e., gender, race, class, nationality), but they also marginalize the structural aspects of sin (sometimes referred to as evil). This is especially pertinent given the ways in which myths of moral innocence allow those who stand out of harm’s way by virtue of social privilege—racial, gender, economic, or national—to deny responsibility within violent contexts.

Drawing insight from the work of Bryan Massingale and Denise Ackermann, I maintain sin-talk is best filtered through the language

72. Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, 18.

of lament instead of guilt or disobedience.⁷³ Lament is “a cry of utter anguish and passionate protest at the state of this world and its brokenness.”⁷⁴ It is a form of honest reckoning that “holds together both loss and hope” in a way that recenters the plight of those who have suffered injustice as revelatory of divine and social truths.⁷⁵ Listening to the critical and constructive lament of feminist, womanist, liberation, black liberation, and queer theologians, I identify four critical markers of sin-talk for bystanders to violence: 1) starting with the relational self; 2) sin as hiding; 3) structural dimensions of sin; and 4) ambiguity in naming sin and grace.

Chapter 4 turns to the story of Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24–30) as a resource for articulating a theology of redemption for privileged bystanders to violence. Drawing insight from postcolonial and feminist biblical scholarship on the passage, I argue that the narrative speaks to a Christology of “dis-ease” and “dis-comfort,”⁷⁶ challenging privileged Christians to take a closer look at the ways in which the body of Christ is complicit in hegemonic violence. In the narrative it is not Jesus who speaks a good word about salvation. Rather, speech about God’s *basileia* comes forth from the mouth of a woman who occupies a marginal location in the community by virtue of her gender, religious, and ethnic identity.⁷⁷ Her speech becomes a catalyst for healing, as it calls the Christian church to conversion in light of its own complicity in structural

73. Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 104–20.

74. *Ibid.*, 105.

75. *Ibid.*, 107.

76. Karen Teel makes this point in “What Jesus Wouldn’t Do,” in *Christology and Whiteness*, 30. Her phrasing of *dis-ease* and *dis-comfort* are drawn from the writings of M. Shawn Copeland. For one example of Copeland’s use of these terms, see “Toward a Critical Christian Feminist Theology of Solidarity,” in *Women and Theology*, ed. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis Kaminski, Annual Publication of the College Theology Society, vol. 40, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 30.

77. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza makes this point in the introduction of *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 12–13.

injustice. As I will argue, the text, when read through a postcolonial and feminist lens, authorizes a heterogeneous reading of salvation that is otherwise submerged by monolithic christological politics of privileged indifference.

In view of the violence that “surrounds us” and operates within us,⁷⁸ privileged Christians and privileged Christologies need a redemptive praxis that moves us beyond apathy and into compassionate witnessing. Such a process will involve a critical examination of the ways that structural sin is operative in the world and inscribed within us. Drawing insight from the interpretative reading of Mark 7:24–30, Christian liberation theologies, and George Yancy’s work “theorizing whiteness as ambush,” chapter 5 constructs a soteriological praxis for bystanders wherein grace bears the mark of “dis-ease.”⁷⁹ Within such a theological framework, salvation is best understood as a continuous project rooted in history that is connected to the concrete liberation of those who suffer injustice. Privileged participation in the work of liberation must be rooted in a praxis that 1) is marked by vigilance and uncertainty, 2) embraces vulnerability and demystifies perfection in an effort to 3) cultivate collective and personal maturity within the body of Christ.

This project is a limited endeavor not intended to supplant or replace other models of sin and redeeming grace. While I maintain that the roles of bystander, victim-survivor, and perpetrator are more fluid than static, critical differences must be acknowledged. In the context of domestic violence, it would be inadequate and inappropriate to name hiding as sinful. For victim-survivors of trauma and violence, hiding can be an important survival strategy. Bystanders play only one role within the drama of violence.

78. George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 238.

79. *Ibid.*, 227–50.

Therefore, the theological constructions offered here are designed to sit alongside those written from the vantage point of others.

Conclusion

To struggle honestly with one's own participation in the dynamics of power and privilege is not an easy task. It is to reckon with the ways in which the very systems that we struggle against are embedded in our psyche: in our interpretation of the world, of what is right and good and just. This is a long journey that is all the more difficult given Christianity's own participation in imperial hegemony. As Hobgood holds, Christian narratives have functioned to honor those who occupy sites of privilege by virtue of race, sex, and socioeconomic status.⁸⁰ We see this in a system of hierarchy and dualism, which marks much of the intellectual history of Western Christian thought, as well as the present-day exclusion of LGBTQ persons, women, criminals, and disabled persons in contemporary ecclesial settings.

To be a Christian is to take sides with those who are marginalized, dehumanized, and subject to violence. Whether we like it or not, neutrality isn't an option. In the face of violent activity, to hide behind the mirror of ignorance is to take a side with the powers that be. Yet the troubling of pain and privilege is also a task that is filled with much hope. As the first thaw always brings signs of early spring, we, too, can note a few cracks in the hegemonic ice. For example, the "It Gets Better Project" has signaled national attention to the problem of violence against LGBTQ youth.⁸¹ The Health Care Reform Act, while far from perfect, has brought about unprecedented reforms in our healthcare system. In the summer of 2013, the Supreme Court declared the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) unconstitutional.

80. Hobgood, *Dismantling Privilege*, 37.

81. For more information, visit <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/>.

These changes are just the beginning, as much work remains ahead of us.

To be a Christian is to hope against hope. It is this narrative that forms the backdrop of the resurrection story. The first disciples, many of whom were bystanders to the violent execution of Jesus, found a way to witness to hope. Yet, this witnessing cannot happen without marked accountability. It means rewriting what has been erroneously deemed the grace of privilege into a new reality that breaks open boundaries.

The brokenness caused by violence calls us to take a long hard look in the mirror and to ask what Christian communities are really doing to create a culture that resists violence and welcomes difference. Dorothee Sölle once remarked, perhaps, the greatest danger in the face of violence lies in “becoming tired and giving up . . . becoming depoliticized because we submit ourselves to the idol of oppression, who whispers to us with a soft voice: ‘Nothing can be done about it.’”⁸²

82. Dorothee Sölle, *Stations of the Cross: A Latin American Pilgrimage*, trans. Joyce Irwin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 94.