

Interreligious Dialogue: The Key to Broad-based Moral Injury/Moral Damage Treatment

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July 19, 2019

Interreligious Dialogue: The Key to Broad-based Moral Injury/Moral Damage Treatment

Interreligious dialogue is not new to Bible scholars. For example, according to tradition, the wise men who visited and worship Jesus within a couple of years of his birth were Zoroastrian wise men. While the wise men were monotheistic, they worshipped the sun as their only god.

Even though they were not Jewish, God worked with them. For example, these wise men consulted their sacred writings to learn about the birth of the Jewish king. Subsequently, they followed a heavenly sign on their way to Jesus. Also, an angel appearing in a dream to warn away from going home by the route they took to arrive.

Another according to tradition, the gold was used to finance the Holy Family's trip into exile and the frankincense symbolized deity. Finally, according to tradition, the myrrh was used to anoint his body when he was buried.,

Furthermore, Fourth Century Christian scholar John Chrysostom took this understanding of the Zoroastrian respect for their understanding of a monotheistic deity by their gift of frankincense further by declaring that the wise men worshipped Jesus. Adding irony to that speculation, is that Chrysostom was an ecumenical teacher. Clearly, these wise men from a religion that was not Judaism presenting significant gifts to the Holy Family and worshipping Jesus as God was the biblical documentation of the first interreligious dialogue.

Why No Interreligious Dialogue Today?

Now, why is it that more than 2000 years later we humans are bent on isolating ourselves from each other by refusing to participate in interreligious dialogues? It does not have to be that way between us, however. Consider the following dialogue that I had with a fellow employee:

Me: "Hi, I'm Joe. You have an accent. Where are you from?"

My new friend: "I'm Ali. I am from Persia."

Me: "I am a Christian. What religion are you?"

Ali: "I am Muslim."

Me: "Really. Do you believe in angels?"

Ali: "Yes. My mother has seen one."

Me (to myself): "That is not what I was taught in Sunday school." (To Ali): "Does your bible have the story of Joseph and Pharaoh?"

Ali: "Yes! My bible is called the Koran and it has that story and others that are similar to your Bible stories."

For several minutes we engage in an enlightening conversation about how Joseph is portrayed in the Old Testament and the Koran. Finally, I ask: "Does your Joseph version have the story of the cupbearer?"

Ali: "Yes."

Thinking I am going to be clever with Ali, I say to him: "You know that when Joseph told the cupbearer to remember him to Pharaoh, it was an example of modern-day networking."

Ali: "Our understanding was that Joseph had to spend five more years in prison because his telling the cupbearer to remember him to Pharaoh was evidence that he was not trusting God. Therefore, God made him stay longer until he learned to trust God better."

Me: "I never thought of that part of the story in that way."

The conversation lasted on and off throughout the day. I never did get around to asking him if he had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as his Savior, or even what he thought about Jesus. I was too curious to ask that critical evangelistic question.

I ended up missing out on my opportunity to proselytize my new Muslim friend. Rather, that opportunity was replaced with a better opportunity to simply meet and enjoy a new friend.

Interreligious dialogue can begin as innocent as mine with Ali. It can turn into respectful friendship if both parties are willing to let it happen.

Fast forward a few years to when I was in Bosnia on a mission trip. My job was to teach management skills to the director of the youth hostel, as well as teach computer skills to the youth who came to the hostel. While interreligious dialogue took place between me and the Muslim manager, it was not our purpose for being on the mission trip. Also, because we were under the sponsorship of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, proselytizing was strictly prohibited. Our job was humanitarian. Any religious conversation had to be originated by the local person.

On the other hand, without knowing the term moral injury, on almost a daily basis I saw actions that indicated moral injury. For example, I saw the youth act out their experiences of war by playing war video games on the computers. There was no stopping them using those computers to release some of the pent-up aggression.

One day a group of us visited a hospital where we saw veterans recovering from the traumatic effects of the war. My observations reminded me of my experiences in Vietnam as a soldier. These men needed help. However, I was not equipped to help them.

The purpose of this paper is finding a way in which interreligious dialogue can be used to learn about how other religions treat or respond to trauma, such as moral injury and moral damage. Gaining this knowledge requires an investment in learning about the other religions' creeds. I will cover this topic below.

Concerning interreligious education, during my time in seminary, I participated in an interreligious education dialogue event with fellow Christian seminarians and a group of Jewish seminarians. Serendipitously, the event included three of Lilijstrand's (2008) four elements for democratic education. Sponsored by what was then known as the National Conference of Christians and Jews—which is now known as the National conference for Community and Justice—the event was by invitation only to select seminarians and professors.

We were guests at an out of the way (nomadic) place owned by a grocery chain used for company and church retreats. We met on the common meeting point of learning more about the others' religion. Regarding Lilijstrand's fourth element, after the retreat, we were encouraged to act out in public what we learned at the retreat.

The experience so changed me that I made it my point to be sensitive to opportunities to do so, as the following story illustrates:

Fast forward 25 years. Interreligious dialogue has taken on more urgent purpose. Post 9/11, our country has become polarized against Muslims. What has happened to acting out the Second Great Commandment of loving our neighbor as we love ourselves?

Interreligious dialogue helps reestablish that biblical responsibility of loving one's neighbor in the hearts of those who purposefully engage it. For example, one day I was in line at Walmart with my bacon and eggs waiting to pay for them.

As I looked at the cashier, I noticed she was wearing a scarf around her head. Almost immediately I thought my bacon might be offensive to her. I thought about getting out of the line and going to another cashier. However, selfishly I also thought I would be delayed further by doing so. So, I stayed in her line.

Then, I thought of another idea: When the cashier was about to scan my items, I held the bacon package toward me and asked her, “Would you prefer I hold this, and you scan it with your wand?”

At first, she did not understand my intention. So I asked again, “Would you prefer I hold this and you scan it with your wand so that you do not have to touch it?”

Very surprised, she responded, “Sure,” and scanned it. I then placed it in a bag.

Then she asked, “Why did you do this?”

I responded, “I respect you,” and added, “Salam.”

Then, she said, “Thank you very much.” Then, to herself and somewhat to me she added, “I really needed this. Thank you.”

Finally, with a big smile, she added, “Happy New Year to you.”

I added, “Thank you and Happy New Year to you also.”

She said something else in Arabic as I started to walk away, the only word I recognized was “Salam.”

I responded by saying, “Salam” and “thank you.”

As I reflected on what happened, I felt internally affirmed that I made this young woman feel valued and appreciated in a way that she knew that I knew would be meaningful and culturally relevant to her.

Returning to my point about not being prepared to help the Bosnian veterans, since 2011 when I began taking clinical pastoral education training at a Veterans Administration hospital, I have been most sensitive about issues my fellow veterans are dealing with, most specifically issues centered on moral injury.

Originally coined by Shay (1994), 25 years later there are at least 18 definitions of the moral injury. Nearly all of them center on the military and their experience associated with the loss of life. Such was Shay's situation when he interviewed Vietnam veterans who had accidentally killed innocent civilians and were told their actions were okay by their superiors. The combination of the accidental killings and the seemingly flippant attitude of the superiors of this innocent loss of life was very troubling for these veterans. Hence, his coining of the term moral injury.

All the world is a nail when the only tool you have is a hammer. Such is the case with moral injury. All the treatments for moral injury have centered on its combat associated definition and have their roots with Litz, Bret T., Stein, Nathan, Delaney, Eileen, Lebowitz, Leslie, Nash, William P., Silva, Caroline, and Maguen, Shira. (2009) proposed treatment.

Only in the past five years has there been any effort to explore the term in relationship to civilian experiences. After Gilligan (2014) read Shay's (1994) book, she decided that the middle school-aged girls she worked with had experienced moral injury when they made choices that violated their consciences. While these choices did not constitute loss of life—as was the case with Shay's Vietnam veterans—in her estimation, the trauma these girls experienced was on par with the trauma the veterans experienced.

In my research, I have come across others who self-identify as having experienced moral injury that is not associated with the loss of life. For example, a fellow student related to me that when she talked with her husband about my work on moral injury, he told her he experienced moral injury as an attorney when he successfully argued for the eviction of an 80-year old destitute woman from her apartment because she failed to pay the rent.

Another example is a Catholic gynecologist who told me that he had experienced moral injury when giving medical advice to his patients that went against his Catholic beliefs. Finally, when I mentioned my work to my primary care physician, he told me about his plans to build a retreat center for his fellow physicians who have experienced burnout, which he identified as moral injury. Clearly, these three examples fall outside the combat definition of moral injury. I am beginning to identify these examples as moral damage. Nevertheless, they need recovery treatments that are applicable to their situations.

One should not be limited to the above three examples, however. For example, when one thinks about the definition of civilian moral injury (or moral damage), any of the following traumatic events would qualify. Some examples of traumatic events are the following: A child being sexually abused by a relative. A young daughter being repeatedly told by her father that she is no good, that he had wanted a boy instead. A young man being bullied because he appears thin and vulnerable. A congregation feeling abandoned because their senior pastor decided to have sex with a married woman who had come to him for counseling.

Another example: A boy who sells papers on the street corners was approached by a friendly stranger. The boy being lonely, liked the attention the man was showing him. He invited the boy to his home, which began the grooming process. Before long, the man was making attempts to inappropriately touch the boy. The boy had enough savvy to rapidly leave and never return to the man's home. However, the shame of what happened to him enveloped his heart for decades to come.

Concerning clergy-child abuse, there is the innocent child who is the victim of sexual abuse by a member of the clergy. Not only is the child a victim, but also are the child's parents and their community of faith.

We must not forget throwaway children. Children who end up in foster homes or homes of adoptive parents often have damaged self-esteem that include the self-talk statements such as, “I’m no good.” or, “It’s my fault nobody wants me.” Sometimes, the foster and adoptive parents and their respective families have no idea what they are receiving in their newly acquired children. Trauma in the children and secondary trauma in the parents and families of these children can also include moral and/or spiritual injury because of self-blame.

These histories of trauma often survive in one’s mind well into adulthood, as Eden (2016) states: “Often in trauma survivors (and this holds regardless of whether the trauma was the result of sexual abuse or military combat) the brain attempts to protect itself by consigning painful swaths of the past to areas where memory’s tendrils cannot reach them. Yet the memories of traumatic events, whether present to us or not, remain part of us” (p. 3).

I have done research work on interreligious dialogues pertaining to different faith groups responses to moral injury/moral damage. Examples of these responses appear in a PowerPoint presentation that is condensed and located in Appendix 1. What I have determined from my research in both moral injury/moral damage and faith groups’ responses to it is there is a need for interreligious dialogues pertaining to how each religion responds to a variety of traumas that could fall into a broader definition of the term moral injury/moral damage.

How does one go about establishing an education program—or a religious education program or teaching event that deals with moral injury or moral damage? Kujawa-Holbrook (2015) asks the question: “Where within the life of our faith communities do we intentionally create space to form meaningful alliances with our neighbors from other religions?” (p. 484). She suggests the answer lies with our younger generations because even though,

“Clearly, the younger generations are registering their discomfort with inwardly focused institutional religion, but healthy numbers are still interested in God. Our challenge is to recapture and revitalize those characteristics of our faith communities that attracted past generations, while interpreting those truths relevantly for today” (pp. 485-486).

Referencing Lonergan (1985), Gunn (2018) writes about the convergence of the two mutually dependent processes of human development: “from above downward” (the “way of heritage”) and “from below upward” (the “way of achievement”). He comments: “These two vectors of human development operate together in a dynamic interplay that allows the individual to constitute his or her world as a world of meaning and value.” (p. 28).

Speaking of the downward movement as “self-transcended” and the upward movement as “self-transcending”, he comments: “It is this creative tension between the subject as self-transcended and self-transcending that invites the growth and development of human persons toward authentic subjectivity” (p. 28).

Citing the Fourth Century B.C.E. reference to the cosmopolitan classroom, Gunn builds the case for “the religious education classroom as a cosmopolitan space” (p. 35). He concludes: “A cosmopolitan classroom ... is a space for fostering genuine dialogue, where the praxis of hospitality toward the other is made real and where students are invited to find their own voice as authentic subjects in relation to the other” (p. 35).

Writing about the Vienna Dialogue Initiative and the Vienna Christian-Islamic Summer University (VICISU) as examples for successful interreligious encounters, Gabriel (2017) states: “We therefore need to give future opinion makers and multipliers a chance to take the path conducive toward peace by creating spaces and encounters where this peace is both possible and

experienced” She adds: “[These education spaces] can give young people such opportunities and enable them to engage in discernment processes through existential experience that can best be gained in personal encounters” (p. 322).

Could it be that such a venue and opportunity already exist? Maybe. If it does, it might be hiding under the label of Nuns and Nones.

Or, it might not.

It was late November 2016 that a group of women religious and millennials gathered at Harvard Divinity School for an organizational meeting of sorts. It was “of sorts” because none of the participants had a clear vision of what would result from their meeting.

They were curious, however. Across from each other at the table sat the group representing the “way of heritage” (nuns) and the “way of achievement” (nones). Quickly, they realized that the two vectors of human development were, according one of the sisters, “more alike than we are different.”

The meeting was organized by Rev. Wayne Muller, an ordained United Church of Christ minister and Adam Horowitz, who claims to be atheist but was raised by a secular Jewish family. Regarding the above qualifications, their partnership unofficially checks the interreligious box—sort of. For this research, I used the following three websites:

<https://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/trends/nuns-and-nones-unlikely-partners-tackle-big-questions-55827>; <https://www.nunsandnones.org/about/>; and

<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/09/04/what-can-nuns-and-nones-learn-one-another>

While I detected an interreligious presence in the movement, one secular Jewish atheist organizer does not represent an interreligious movement. In my research of the three nuns and nones websites mentioned above, I found many references to social justice issues that the two

groups share—or have in common. However, I found no mention of the moral education issues underlying these several social justice issues. Therefore, I propose creating my own idea of a teaching community.

I propose using the grand round medical instruction format often used for medical personnel as a basis for the interreligious community researching treatment of civilian moral injury/moral damage. I will propose it to the chief chaplain of a Veterans Administration hospital to be the organizer of the grand round. Included in the invitation of the meeting would be the chaplains, hospital doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other medical personnel. I would include these personnel to learn from them what they consider to be morally injurious or morally damaging in their work or workplace.

Also, I propose inviting the clergy and other religious leaders of under-represented faith groups that are called upon to minister to the veterans who are under the care of the local VA hospital. These would include, but not limited to, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Native American faith groups. Additionally, I propose inviting the clergy and laity of congregations who previously attended VA-sponsored clergy events. I would use the above cited educational and religious educational guidelines gleaned from the four articles represented above as the organizational guidance for the meetings.

There would be much sales work to be done to sell the idea of such a grand round. Even so, with nothing like it to fill the void, something must start somewhere.

Finally, regarding my critique of the nuns and nones as lacking any coverage of moral injury or moral damage issues and lacking a clearly defined interreligious population is not to say that this fledgling movement will never be able to address my concerns about moral

injury/moral damage as part of an interreligious dialog. There is such a palpable drive of the Holy Spirit underneath the movement that at this time only God really knows where it is headed.

References

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Appendix 1

The following pages contain the PowerPoint file referenced in the text.

For the purpose of emailing the documents, the PowerPoint file is being sent separately.

Moral Injury and Faith Groups

Information to Assist Members of Local Churches

1

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1

Goal

- A review of faith groups' responses to moral injury

2

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2

Objectives

- At the end of this instruction, the student will be able to:
 - Discuss moral injury and how faith groups respond to it.
 - Bible study
 - Catholic Sacraments and ritual
 - Sacrament of Reconciliation
 - Sacrament of the Eucharist
 - Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick
 - Jewish Response
 - Islamic Response
 - Self-forgiveness
 - The Role of the Chaplain

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Moral Injury

- Moral injury is the damage done to one's conscience or moral compass when that person perpetrates, witnesses, or fails to prevent acts that transgress their own moral and ethical values or codes of conduct (Source: Syracuse University: The Moral Injury Project).

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Moral Injury

- A moral injury can occur when:
 - A person does something that goes against his or her moral code.
 - A person fails to do something that is in line with his or her moral code.

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - Christianity
 - Two Greatest Commandments
 - Love God with all our heart, soul and mind
 - Love our neighbor as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:38-39).
 - Moral injury involves a violation of both Commandments.
 - Reconciliation with God and our neighbor is necessary to be made whole
 - Reconciliation with our self is also necessary.

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - Christianity (Catholic)
 - God's forgiveness: the Sacrament of Reconciliation
 - The person who approaches the sacrament obtains pardon through God's mercy
 - It is a sacrament of conversion—returning to God the Father after having strayed in sin.
 - It is a sacrament of confession of one's sins to a priest is an essential element
 - It is a sacrament of forgiveness because the priest grants absolution and God grants pardon and peace
 - It is a sacrament of reconciliation because the sinner is first reconciled to God and then is charged with the responsibility to be reconciled to one's brother.

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - Christianity (Catholic)
 - God's forgiveness: the Sacrament of Reconciliation
 - Penance: The priest can encourage the penitent to be reconciled with one's brother by doing so directly.
 - If the person offended is not available (by death or distance), then the penitent can do acts of mercy for others.
 - Acts of mercy can be anything that reaches out to others in love.
 - Social Entrepreneurship is one example of doing works of mercy.

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - Christianity (Catholic)
 - God's forgiveness: the Sacrament of the Eucharist
 - The person receiving the Communion elements experiences receiving the body and blood of Jesus Christ.
 - The image of Jesus Christ dying for our sins is an integral part of the understanding of the ritual.
 - In the Sacrament the person receiving it unites him/herself to Christ.

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - Christianity (Catholic)
 - God's forgiveness: the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick
 - Moral injury is an injury to one's heart and soul
 - The person receiving the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick experiences Christ as the physician
 - James 5:14-15 declares: "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the presbyters of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven"

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - Christianity
 - New Testament biblical example of Christ's Reconciliation
 - Jesus asking Peter if he loves him (John 21:15-17)
 - Jesus asks Peter three times, mirroring the three times Peter denied Jesus.
 - Jesus did not speak judgmentally to Peter. He simply asked him if he loved him.
 - Peter heard himself say three times that he loved Jesus.

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - Judaism
 - Moral Injury occurs when one has missed the mark (the Hebrew meaning of sin)
 - In the Midrash, Judaism teaches that human future is not predestined and that God only judges one in the moment. To remedy moral injury, Judaism prescribes returning to one's mission of imitating God, effectively unshackling one's self from one's morally injurious past. This is done by entering a mode of creating goodness, whether it be self-care, supporting those around us, giving back to the community, or in any number of other ways which bring light to the lives of others.

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - Judaism
 - The Holy Day of Rosh Hashanah begins a ten day period of repentance, which culminate on the fast day of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.
 - Significant in the liturgy are three prayers: Three unique sets of prayers are added to the morning service during Rosh Hashanah. These are known as Malkhuyot, which address the sovereignty of God, Zikhronot, which present God as the one who remembers past deeds, and Shofarot, in which we stand in nervous anticipation of the future.
 - After each prayer the Shofar (ram's horn) is blown.

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - Judaism
 - This is the time of year during which Jews are to atone for both their individual — and on Yom Kippur, their communal — sins committed over the course of the previous year, before God literally closes the books on them and inscribes their fates for the coming year. God's rule over humanity and their need to serve God are stressed time and again over the course of the holiday.

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - Islam
 - Islam believes that to defend one's country and fight for the sake of one's nation can be considered a holy mission and not a sin. In such contexts, Islam recognizes that wartime situations may give way to actions which could be considered malicious in times of peace. Islam further recognizes that such situations are unavoidable in times of war, especially as related to matters of life and death, and may give way to moral injury.

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - Islam
 - Islam approaches moral injury using a language of benevolence intended to purify and free one from the burden of one's experiences. The intention is to trust in the Lord Almighty to alleviate any feelings of responsibility for one's actions.

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - Islam
 - Next, one is never to stop hoping for the forgiveness of God as the one and only perfect creature who can rescue a person from the burden of their actions. Islam suggests that a person can ask the forgiveness of God and pray for mercy and compassion, leaning on God as a source of hope and forgiveness in times of distress and crisis.

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - Islam
 - Islam prescribes three forms of meditations intended to purify and facilitate healing (i.e., letting go of the morally injurious event and overcoming any complex emotions) from moral injury.
 - These include Salaat, or the five-times daily prayer
 - Tafakkur, or contemplation of the mysteries and beauties of existence, and
 - Dhikr, described as "remembrance" or "remembering."

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - Forgiveness and Self-forgiveness
 - The five Rs of Forgiveness
 - Redemption
 - Recognition
 - Repentance
 - Reconciliation
 - Restitution

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - Forgiveness and Self-forgiveness
 - Everett Worthington's Five steps of Self-forgiveness
 - Step One: Receive God's Forgiveness
 - Step Two: Repair Relationships
 - Step Three: Rethink Ruminations
 - Step Four REACH emotional self-forgiveness

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - Forgiveness and Self-forgiveness
 - Everett Worthington's Five steps of Self-forgiveness
 - REACH is an acronym for the following:
 - Recall the hurt
 - Empathize with yourself by considering the reasons you disappointed yourself
 - Give yourself the same altruistic gift you would give other people: understanding and forgiving
 - Commit to the emotional self-forgiveness that you experience in order to...
 - Hold onto self-forgiveness if you ever doubt that you have forgiven yourself.

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - Forgiveness and Self-forgiveness
 - Everett Worthington's Five steps of Self-forgiveness
 - Step Five: Rebuild Self-acceptance
 - Step Six: Resolve to live virtuously
 - (Source: Moving Forward: Six Steps to Forgiving Yourself and Breaking Free From the Past by Everett Worthington (2013, Waterbrook Press)).

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - Overall clinical response
 - Moral injury is recognized for breaching "social moral contracts and damaging belief systems".
 - Consequently, clinical service providers should be mindful that, in facing existential questions of purpose and meaning, Service Members and Veterans affected by moral injury might look to their faith tradition for comfort and solace, or look for new explanations, values, and beliefs.

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - The role of the Chaplain
 - The Chaplain is perceived to be the spiritual leader by all faith groups. As such, he or she is the person who has the responsibility to lead the morally injured person to the appropriate faith group's process of recovery.
 - Furthermore, developing interdisciplinary collaboration with chaplains, established service providers in most health care settings, could serve to effectively respond to such needs.
 - (Source: Towards a faith-based understanding of moral injury by Marek S. Kopacz, Courtney Ducharme, David Ani, and Albert M. Lig...

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Moral Injury

- Faith Groups' Perception
 - The role of the Chaplain
 - (Source: Towards a faith-based understanding of moral injury by Marek S. Kopacz, Courtney Ducharme, David Ani, and Ahmet Atlig. In the Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling, 2017, Vol 71(4) pp. 217-219.)

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Questions?

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