Super-Powered by Grace

An Integrative Theological Engagement with Trauma

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Introduction

Whether through circumstances, deliberate harm or systemic oppression, trauma can irreparably damage individuals and communities, and deeply wound humanity. My dissertation will ask the question, where is God in the midst of trauma?

Definitions of trauma extend beyond 'uncontrollable, terrifying life events' to include how a person responds to these events.[1] Trauma is an embodied reality that impacts the whole person. It cannot be neatly separated into physical, emotional and/or spiritual categories. I will develop a context-specific theological anthropology which seeks to understand what it means to be human before God in a world marred by trauma. The trauma theologians I will engage come to some troubling conclusions about grace and trauma, particularly that trauma can be a barrier to God's grace and that trauma limits free-will. However, instead of trauma being a barrier to God's grace, could trauma responses be powered by God's grace? I will seek to answer this through integrative theology. As an important and unique way of engaging with trauma and theology, this method uses the theological sources of Scripture, tradition, reason, experience and church-in-community.

After reviewing the literature on trauma and theology, I will explain my method, tell my story through autoethnography, and introduce the concept of safenormativity. I will contend that we must dehomogenise trauma by attending to both the traumatic incident and the traumatised person's responses to it, along with delineating between different types of traumatic events. Asserting that trauma responses can be understood as metaphysical and moral good according to Thomas Aquinas, I will argue that these responses are grace-

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[1] Van der Kolk, 'Psychological', 1.

empowered. Contending that this work has significant implications for church-in-community, I will outline how churches can be grace-enacted communities for traumatised people.

I will engage Aquinas' work to explore how grace, and particularly *embodied grace,* relates to trauma. Describing Aquinas' view of grace as 'nothing else than a participation in the divine life', theologian David Farina Turnbloom argues that this participation is *embodied.*[2] Through Christ's incarnation and by the Holy Spirit inhabiting humankind, God has chosen to live with us. Kelly Brown Douglas says this shows 'God is present with us through our very humanity'.[3] Turnbloom argues that as such grace is 'not a mystical union that occurs on some spiritual plane of existence, separate from the finite and messy world of created matter'.[4] This is crucial to my arguments, as many contemporary trauma theologians seem to view grace as disembodied, which impacts their conclusions.

My dissertation engages with contemporary conversations on trauma and grace which often see trauma as a disability, with trauma functioning as a hermeneutical lens.[5] In *God and the Victim* Jennifer Erin Beste uses Karl Rahner's work to suggest that severely traumatised people may lose free-will, becoming unable to choose God's grace. However, philosopher Eleonore Stump argues that for Aquinas, free-will is contextual and 'distinct from something which is good considered unconditionally or abstractly'.[6] Applying this contextual understanding of free-will, I propose that while traumatised people act differently to non-traumatised people, their actions are not pathological, but rather are logical metaphysical and moral goods.[7]

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[2] Turnbloom, *Speaking,* 49.
[3] Brown Douglas, *Sexuality,* 113.
[4] Turnbloom, *Speaking,* 48.
[5] Rambo, *Spirit,* 11.
[6] Stump, 'Freedom', 5.
[7] Floyd, 'Thomas'.

Current theological discourses like Beste's seek to answer how an all-powerful and all-good God can co-exist with suffering and evil by presenting trauma responses as barriers to God's grace. In response, I offer that Aquinas' understanding of embodied grace allows us to see trauma responses as powered by God's grace. If for Aquinas grace is, as articulated by Phillip McCosker, 'like electricity which can achieve many different effects in different contexts: lighting a bulb as well as powering the internet', within my theological anthropology trauma responses become one of the appliances powered by God's grace.[8]

I utilise the British Psychological Society's *Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTM Framework),* asserting with them that trauma is caused by the negative operation of power in someone's life.[9] This is theologically significant because it suggests undermining someone's free-will and autonomy (i.e. power) is deeply damaging.

By understanding trauma responses as grace-empowered, God can be intimately involved in humans surviving evil. My theological anthropology understands that God created humanity with free-will and personal autonomy, and while this God-created autonomy can be undermined by trauma, I understand trauma responses to contain their own logical structure, and do not involve a loss of free-will.[10]

Seeing trauma as a barrier to God's grace elides the grace within traumatised people. We must approach trauma cohesively by attending to both the traumatic incident and traumatised people's responses. Contending that trauma responses are more akin to 'super-powers' which

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[8] McCosker, 'Grace', 208.
[9] Johnstone, *Power*, 9.
[10] Floyd, 'Thomas'.

exceed 'normal' physiological functioning,[11] I offer that this 'Super-power Model' shows trauma responses to be grace-empowered, morally good and logically consistent. Critics could argue that this approach romanticises trauma responses and fails to recognise how harmful trauma is. However, by separating the traumatic incident from the traumatic response, we can speak to the gifts and strengths of traumatised people while acknowledging the brutality of traumatic events.

My method combines trauma and feminist theory, autoethnography and the *PTM Framework*. By using integrative theology to problematise and then resolve critical issues with Beste's approach, I will offer a new model for theologically understanding trauma that can enable further theological reflection and, more importantly, inform greater pastoral sensitivity and care for traumatised people.

Literature Review

The modern understanding of 'trauma' as an area of study at the intersection of several academic disciplines emerged within Freud's early psychoanalytic work in the 1890s. His *Aetiology of Hysteria* acknowledged that many women diagnosed with hysteria had been sexually abused as children.[12] Realising his conclusions meant that child sexual abuse was prevalent across society, he became 'increasingly troubled by the radical social implications of his hypothesis' and repudiated his analysis.[13] In the 1970s feminist consciousness-raising groups enabled women to tell their stories of being sexually abused (usually by men), with the first 'public speakout' on rape organised in 1971 by the New York Radical Feminists.[14]

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[11] These will be defined within my dissertation.
[12] Herman, *Trauma,* 13.
[13] Ibid., 13-14.
[14] Bevacqua, *Rape,* 55.

Research on these previously hidden issues increased, and by the early 1980s, sociologist Diana Russell had established that one in three American women had been sexually abused in childhood and one in four women had been raped.[15] From here, other traumas associated with male violence became areas of study. Feminist author Marilyn French's *The War Against Women* was published in 1990 and identified men's violence towards women as systemic, institutional, cultural and personal. [16]

Trauma

In 1991, psychiatrist Judith Herman's landmark book *Trauma and Recovery* was published. In it she outlined the 'forgotten history' of trauma,[17] including Freud's *Aetiology of Hysteria*, and judgements that traumatised First World War veterans were 'moral invalids'.[18] Rooted in the 'collective feminist project of reinventing the basic concepts of normal development and abnormal psychology',[19] Herman's work spans psychology, sociology and philosophy. Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk founded the US-based *Trauma Center* in 1982 to develop and advance innovative, evidence-based approaches to trauma recovery.[20] In *The Body Keeps the Score* Van der Kolk documents the history of trauma study and his four decades at the forefront of trauma theory.[21] Peter Levine, another notable trauma theorist developed 'Somatic Experiencing' as a therapeutic resource.[22] Levine and Van der Kolk work within the disciplines of psychology and biology, informed by Stephen Porges' 'Polyvagal Theory' which provides a 'sophisticated understanding of the biology of safety and danger'.[23]

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[15] Herman, *Trauma,* 30.
[16] French, *War*.
[17] Herman, *Trauma,* 7.
[18] Ibid*.,* 21.
[19] Ibid*.,* ix.
[20] Trauma Centre, 'About'.
[21] Van der Kolk, *Body.*
[22] Trauma Healing, 'Somatic'.
[23] Van der Kolk, *Body,* loc.1337.

Psychiatrist Bruce Perry's *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog* documents his work with traumatised children, incorporating psychology, biology and sociology. Many therapeutic organisations use Perry's 'neurosequential model' to support traumatised children.[24]

The *British Psychological Society* (BPS) published the *PTM Framework* in 2018 as a response to 'significant conceptual and empirical limitations' of psychiatric diagnosis. The framework offers a trauma-informed approach to mental ill-health and incorporates feminist theory and indigenous psychology.[25] It engages with philosophy through Foucault's work linking 'distress and "deviance" to social control and social injustice',[26] and Derrida's work on social constructionism, to consider how people (including traumatised people) construct meaning.[27] The framework suggests traumatised people use meaning-making processes to understand trauma 'which are developed 'within social and cultural discourses, and primed by evolved and acquired bodily responses'. And that these meaning-making processes impact 'the operation, experience and expression of power, threat, and our responses to threat'.[28]

'Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life,' explains Herman.[29] Trauma is both the 'deeply disturbing' events,[30] and the physiological and emotional impact of these events. There are three types of traumatic events, systemic oppression, circumstance and deliberate harm.[31] Circumstances (e.g. childbirth or natural disasters) are events with no deliberate human cause. Deliberate harm includes incidents where a person chooses to cause harm (e.g.

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[24] Neurosequential Network, 'Our'.
[25] Johnstone, *Power,* 64-66
[26] Ibid., 47.
[27] Ibid., 55–57.
[28] Ibid., 9.
[29] Herman, *Trauma,* 33.
[30] Lexico, 'Trauma'.
[31] Johnstone, *Power*, 62, 200.

rape or terrorism). More than simply individual events, systemic oppression (e.g. racism and sexism) is a broader harm enforced and supported by society and institutions, which impacts those within specific social identity groups. According to theologian Walter Wink systemic oppression is referred to in Scripture as 'powers and principalities' (e.g. Ephesians 6:12, Romans 8:38).[32] People subject to systemic oppression due to their ethnicity, sex, disability, social class, sexual orientation, gender identity or religion are already facing systemic disadvantage *before* being impacted by traumatic circumstance and/or deliberate harm.[33] Therefore systemic oppression increases the likelihood of other types of trauma. These trauma categories are thus not mutually exclusive. They interact or lay foundations for other harms, for instance: a natural disaster may leave women more vulnerable to rapists; deliberate harm can cause a greater propensity to contracting certain health conditions; systemic oppression via environmental irresponsibility leaves majority world countries more at risk of natural disasters.[34]

As embodied beings, our bodies matter to God both in their integrity and when they are harmed.[35] To explore where God is in the midst of trauma, my theological anthropology recognises that sin ruptures human relationships and the relationship between humans and God.[36] Deliberate harm is part of this rupture, with acknowledgement that the impact of deliberate harm is often greater than traumatic circumstance.[37] Ruard Ganzevoort asserts this in differentiating between tragedy and malice (i.e. circumstance and deliberate harm).[38] Theologian Barbara Glasson reflects on this differentiation:

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[32] Wink, *Naming*, 104.
[33] Johnstone, *Power*, 92-151.
[34] Van der Kolk, *Body,* loc.2578-2616.
[35] Turnbloom, *Speaking,* 48.
[36] Suchocki, *Fall,* 13.
[37] Beste, *God,* 38.
[38] Ganzevoort, 'Coping'

> It is necessary to distinguish between the things that simply happen to us and are endured and those things that are deliberate acts of malicious intent. In the former we need strategies of integration, in the latter the language of outrage.[39]

This 'language of outrage' evokes the Biblical genre of lament which remains ambiguously appreciated within Christianity. Chelle Stearns explains that resistance to lament can prevent us from discovering that trauma 'does not define us, but [does] shape us in significant ways'.[40] Reflecting on the need for Christian lament about trauma, Adam Tietje points to Jesus' cry of lament on the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'[41] Walter Bruggeman asserts that 'The absence of lament makes a religion of coercive obedience the only possibility'.[42] For those traumatised through the deliberate harm of coercion or power misuse (for instance when abused by a partner or parent), such coercive religion can compound deliberate harm.

Whether through deliberate harm, circumstance or systemic oppression, to understand trauma we need to clearly define it. For Judith Herman, 'traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning'.[43] Bessel van der Kolk asserts,

> trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain and body... It changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think.[44]

Bruce Perry articulates that trauma shatters human connection, with traumatised people struggling to trust others or themselves.[45] The impact of trauma may include a complete loss

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[39] Glasson, *Spirituality,* 94.
[40] Stearns, 'Theological', 64.
[41] Tietje, *Toward,* 85
[42] Bruggeman, *Psalms,* 104.
[43] Herman, *Trauma,* 33.
[44] Van der Kolk, *Body,* loc.390.
[45] Perry, *Boy,* 231.

of inner safety, leading to 'dissociation, amnesia, self-harm, multiple personalities, overwhelming terrors or some kind of disintegration of self'.[46]

In 1941, psychiatrist Abram Kardiner developed a diagnosis of 'traumatic neuroses' to treat traumatised veterans.[47] Building on this, in 1980 a coalition of Vietnam veterans and psychoanalysts successfully lobbied the American Psychiatric Association to create a new diagnosis of 'Post Traumatic Stress Disorder' (PTSD).[48] No longer limited to veterans, on seeking medical support, all traumatised people should be diagnosed with PTSD, however PTSD remains under-recognised by healthcare practitioners.[49] PTSD 'symptoms' can include excessive vigilance, numbness, emotional or cognitive deadness, intrusive memories, compulsions to repeat traumatic patterns, diminishment of memory and language use, frozen powerlessness, loss of hope, and isolation.[50] However, diagnosis of PTSD is not without contention. The *PTM Framework* argues that traumatised people are not 'disordered', but are instead having a 'normal reaction to abnormal circumstances'.[51] It is understandable for the medical community (and some trauma theologians) to see dissociation, self-harm, amnesia and multiple personalities as pathological,[52] but as the *PTM Framework* explains, this can lead to an obscuring of,

> …the well-evidenced causal role of social and interpersonal factors in distress and make it much more difficult to understand people's problems in the context of their lives and relationships. It can also make it easier to minimise or ignore the harmful psychological impact of social and economic policy.[53]

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[46] Glasson, *Spirituality,* 34.
[47] Kardiner, *Traumatic,* v.
[48] Van der Kolk, *Body,* loc.350.
[49] Grasso, 'Posttraumatic'.
[50] Jones, *Trauma,* 16–18.
[51] Johnstone, *Power,* 18.
[52] Jones, *Trauma,* 152.
[53] Johnstone, *Power,* 28.

Trauma is physiological. My theological anthropology asserts that life is embodied before God, therefore God cares about our bodies and about the traumatic impact of circumstances, systemic oppression or deliberate harm. Theologically, I understand deliberate harm as sin and have argued this is why deliberate harm can be particularly painful. While traumatic events are incredibly difficult to overcome, by utilising the *PTM Framework*, we can understand responses to these events as normal, rather than disordered or dysfunctional.

Trauma and Theology

A theological anthropology must account for how being hurt and/or traumatised impacts humans and our relationship with God. What does it mean to be human, and where is God in the midst of great suffering? Critiquing literature on trauma and theology, I will identify gaps within trauma theology, including the homogenizing of trauma, the negative characterization of traumatised people, and the way some theologians see trauma as a barrier to God's grace. Through integrative theology I will seek to fill these gaps, informed by feminist theory and my own experiences of trauma.

In considering trauma and theology, we must engage with the nature of free-will, choice and redemption. Neuroscience evidences that traumatised people's brains operate differently: time and perspective areas can go blank (making it difficult to feel safe or form a coherent narrative);[54] areas which integrate sounds, images and sensations can go blank;[55] and their brains are less able 'to pay careful attention to what is going on in the present moment'.[56] During a flashback,[57] the brain's Broca region which deals with speech can be shut down (as

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[54] Van der Kolk, *Body,* loc.3923.
[55] Ibid*.,* loc.1582.
[56] Ibid*.,* loc.5654.
[57] A flashback is a vivid remembering where the traumatised person feels the traumatic incident is reoccurring in the present (Mind, 'Flashbacks').

with a stroke),[58] while the area which registers when images first entered the brain is awakened.[59] If a traumatised person's speech is shut down, if they are involuntarily psychologically transported back to a traumatic incident and if they are unable to form a coherent narrative; what does this mean for Christian accounts of redemption?[60]

Christian redemption narratives often privilege a view of God moving us from death to life which mirrors Jesus' death and resurrection. Romans 6:4, explains that Christians are 'buried with [Christ Jesus] through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life'. Evocatively churches have used tomb-shaped baptism fonts to enact this movement from death to life.[61] This Christian metanarrative of a death-to-life redemptive arc is powerful and inspiring, but as Shelly Rambo points out those subscribing to this narrative have generally experienced transformation.[62]

Evangelical doctrines of salvation (i.e. soteriology) understand that Jesus' death and resurrection set Christians free from sin (Romans 6:22). But when considering deliberate harm, does Jesus set traumatised people free from the perpetrator's sin? As many traumatised people can attest, becoming a Christian does not always remove the physiological, emotional or spiritual impact of trauma. My theological anthropology attempts to 'think through the meaning of the human story as lived out before, with, and by God'.[63] To do this I will engage with three trauma theologians; Serene Jones, Shelly Rambo and Jennifer Erin Beste.

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[58] Van der Kolk, *Body,* loc.799.
[59] Ibid*.,* loc.810.
[60] Rambo, *Spirit,* 3.
[61] Kuehn, *Place,* 29.
[62] Rambo, *Spirit,* 147.
[63] Fuller, 'Theological'.

Given Judith Herman's feminist approach to trauma, it is unsurprising that feminism informs contemporary trauma theology.[64] Published in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* evidences that even within early feminist texts, feminism has been committed to liberating women as a class.[65] Critiques of this class-based approach have come from women of colour and working class, lesbian and disabled women, whose experiences have been shaped as much by the intersections of racism, lesbophobia, classism and ableism as by their sex.[66] Feminist intersectionality seeks to centre those on the margins, whose reality does not fit with dominant ideas which are often rooted in power and privilege. Postmodernism's 'incredulity towards metanarratives' has fuelled this intersectionality.[67] Yet, as theologian Robert Beckford points out, 'meta-narratives help to create a thoughtful point of reference rather than immovable and fixed assertions bent on producing totalising theory'.[68] This is the case for some trauma theologians, with Serene Jones citing feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray in asserting 'the subject position of the "feminine" in Western culture as a site of violence, a traumatic self'.[69]

Serene Jones' book *Trauma and Grace* reflects on the impact of trauma and the challenge trauma poses to Christian theology. Considering the implications of trauma theory on understanding sin she suggests,

> …that the viewing of trauma as an experience of brokenness and of banishment from the resources of language, imagination, and creativity enables us to understand sin as neither exclusively social nor individual, but as simultaneously collective and individual – as both structural and personal.[70]

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[64] Rambo, 'Theologians'.
[65] Wollstonecraft, *Vindication,* 6.
[66] Crenshaw, 'Mapping'.
[67] Lyotard, *Postmodern,* xxiv.
[68] Beckford, Documentary, 139.
[69] Jones *Trauma,* xv.
[70] Ibid*.,* 101.

Jones engages with Calvin's work on the Psalms and women's experiences of reproductive

loss.[71] Her approach to trauma remains general; trauma is homogenously both the traumatic

incident and the impact of that incident. Early in *Trauma and Grace*, Jones examines what

constitutes a traumatic incident and the impact of trauma, but she doesn't delineate further

between these and at no point distinguishes between systemic oppression, circumstance and

deliberate harm.[72]

Working with the Catholic theology of Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar,

Shelly Rambo's book *Spirit and Trauma* is not a theology of pastoral care.[73] She uses trauma

as a 'hermeneutical lens through which an alternative theological vision of healing and

redemption emerge'.[74] For Rambo, Balthasar and Speyr's understanding of Easter Saturday

as a space between death and life resonates with traumatised people's experiences.[75] Like

Jones, Rambo has a general approach to trauma.[76] In presuming the text has no fixed

meaning, Rambo's deconstructionist approach seeks to expose 'gaps and fissures in the

texts'. This limits her engagement with the causes of trauma.[77] Rambo's approach troubles

me. Traumatised people are not engaged with on their own terms and are instead objectified

and reduced to a 'hermeneutical lens'. Through theological anthropology, I seek to ensure

traumatised people remain as embodied humans before God.

Differing from Rambo and Jones, Jennifer Erin Beste's *God and the Victim* focusses solely

on women subjected to incestuous childhood sexual abuse.[78] She engages with Jesuit

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[71] Ibid., 43, 127,
[72] Ibid., 12-18.
[73] Rambo, *Spirit,* 17.
[74] Ibid., 11
[75] Ibid., 138.
[76] Ibid., viii.
[77] Ibid., 31.
[78] Beste, *God,* 15.

theologian Karl Rahner,[79] and feminist theorists Judith Butler and Diane Meyers.[80] She critiques the views espoused by many theologians including Augustine, Luther, Calvin and Barth that, 'since Christian faith and salvation stem from God's unmerited grace, no external harms can interfere with the sovereign power of such grace to justify and sanctify an individual and enable him or her to love God and others'.[81] Beste considers whether sexual abusers can harm women so severely that they no longer have access to what Rahner terms the 'fundamental option' to choose God's grace.[82] From her understanding of the embodied impact of trauma, Beste asserts that, 'it is indeed tragic and an ultimate affront to God's purposes for creation if interpersonal harm blocks effective mediation of grace and destroys a person's ability to effect a fundamental option before death'.[83] Creating new pastoral imperatives to recognise traumatised people's limitations, Beste points to the potential eternal consequences of failing to help traumatised people gain access to the fundamental option.[84] Her approach raises significant concerns: do traumatised people have access to God's grace? If so, what does this say about the nature of God's grace?

Various concepts are lacking in Rambo's, Beste's and Jones' theology. In defining traumatic incidents, Rambo includes natural disasters and war,[85] while Jones' includes child sexual abuse, terrorism, witnessing murder, domestic abuse, Jesus' crucifixion, child-loss, genocide, and reproductive loss.[86] By not delineating between types of trauma, Jones and Rambo homogenise and decontextualise trauma.

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[79] Ibid., 13.
[80] Ibid., 16.
[81] Ibid., 9.
[82] The fundamental option is the capacity to decide 'about one's self in one's totality and to choose whether one is good or evil in the very ground of one's being' (Beste, *God,* 24).
[83] Ibid., 106.
[84] Ibid., 127.
[85] Rambo, *Spirit,* 1-2.
[86] Jones, *Trauma,* 5, 23, 44, 76, 89, 108, 127.

These theologians view trauma as a barely delineated combination of cause and effect. Grappling theologically with trauma requires us to distinguish between different types of traumatic incidents and between the incidents themselves and subsequent trauma responses. We must explicitly recognise the specificity of both the traumatic incident (the cause) and the person's traumatic responses (the effect). Without tracing a person's traumatic responses back to the traumatic incident/s we can easily miss the logical basis of most trauma responses (more on this later). I believe this is particularly important in ascertaining how traumatised people can access God's grace.

Method

My method combines integrative theology and autoethnography to provide a holistic theological approach to understanding trauma and grace. Jones, Rambo and Beste all have a similar approach to grace, which theologian Amy Carr describes as 'Ecofeminist Stoic', because it offers 'a more modest sense of human freedom'.[87] Carr suggests that if feminist doctrines of grace,

> … cannot find a way of affirming an ever active, eschatologically efficacious grace then God or divine power is in danger of being reductively identified with the potential or occasional *effect* of creaturely crafted right relations or the inspiring but ineffectual *source of the idea* of flourishing right relations – an idea whose effectiveness depends on human will and capacities.[88]

Jones's Ecofeminist Stoicism is apparent as she explains, '…grace is, in its most radical form: not the reassuring ending of an orderly story, but the incredible insistence on love amid fragmented, unraveled human lives'.[89] Rambo's Ecofeminist Stoicism asserts, 'Traumatic experience, insofar as it reconfigures the relationship between death and life, challenges

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[87] Carr, 'Divine', 140.
[88] Ibid., 147.
[89] Jones, *Trauma,* xiii.

familiar interpretations of redemption'.[90] For Beste, Ecofeminist Stoicism leads to the disturbing assertion that childhood sexual abuse 'can gravely, and perhaps entirely, debilitate the process of realizing the freedom to accept God's grace'.[91] In the devastation of trauma, old redemptive narratives no longer fit and God does not seem all-powerful. God's grace does not seem sufficient for a world in which Jones claims, 'the vast majority of trauma survivors reach the end of their lives still caught in its terrifying grip'.[92] Stoicism is understandable, but is it efficacious?

I am a traumatised person and have spent a decade working with traumatised people. I do not believe these theologians do justice to the complex, multifaceted and heroic lives of traumatised people. Within their stoic approach, traumatised people become one-dimensional. This is unsurprising if, as Rambo asserts, traumatised people's lives function as a hermeneutical lens. While as a traumatised person I can partially identify with Jones, that traumatised people experience 'banishment from the resources of language, imagination, and creativity', this argument may elide the creative ways people navigate trauma.[93] Using both integrative theology and autoethnography, I offer a 'doctrine of grace' that resolves these concerns.

Integrative Theology

To resolve these concerns, I will use integrative theology which is a method developed in response to increased fragmentation within theology. It seeks greater integration within theology and between theology and other disciplines.[94] Enlightenment rationalism caused the

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90 Rambo, *Spirit,* 6.
91 Beste, *God,* 106.
92 Carr, 'Divine', 144.
93 Jones, *Trauma,* 101.
94 Abernathy, 'Integration'.

study of God to be broken into ever smaller pieces of theological enquiry,[95] with further

disintegration occurring through postmodernism.[96] The Wesleyan Quadrilateral can be used

to remedy this disintegration by ensuring that Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience are

all considered in integrated theological enquiry.[97] Church-in-community joins these as a

quintelateral of sources used in theological enquiry. Referring to Scripture throughout, I will

engage tradition through Aquinas' work. I agree with much feminist critique of Aquinas;

both Daly and Van Leeuwen have objected to his derogatory and sexist representation of

women.[98] However in spite of this, Aquinas remains influential within Christian theology and

his systematic engagement with embodied grace is crucial to my thesis. I will incorporate

reason as a source of theology through considering trauma theory and will include my

experiences of trauma. I will then offer suggestions for applying my dissertation within the

context of church-in-community. Trauma theory incorporates psychology, biology, sociology

and philosophy and I will integrate these within my theological approach.

Autoethnography

Historically the academy claimed objectivity, but postmodernism challenged this by pointing

to the subjectivity of knowledge. Recognising that academics' own experiences impact their

work, autoethnography emerged to expand the study of peoples and cultures (ethnography) to

include researchers' study of themselves within their own culture. Sophie Witherstone argues

that autoethnography 'fosters the liberation of vulnerable and silenced voices, such as the

voices of abused bodies'.[99]

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[95] Ott, *Beyond, 3*8.

[96] Postmodernism has offered important correctives to presumptions that the powerful have the monopoly on truth (Beckford, *Documentary,* 139).

[97] Thorsen, *Wesleyan*, 1.

[98] Daly, *Beyond,* 101. Van Leeuwen, *After*, 350.

[99] Witherstone, 'Autoethnography'.

An autoethnographic method allows my 'embedded theological convictions' to become 'primary theology itself',[100] and locates my story within wider cultural, political and social contexts.[101] Beckford asserts, 'Explaining one's position is more than just 'navel-gazing'. It is to locate one's place in relation to matrixes or power relations…' Such engagement must be critical and self-aware. Autoethnographer Elaine Campbell explains, 'autoethnographic research requires robust patience, deep introspection, and the ability to regularly (re)visit and (re)view your own epistemological and ontological position'.[102] Theologically, personal experience has been historically important. St Paul began his journey into Christianity through his experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9) and Augustine's theological masterpiece *Confessions*, is considered to be one of the first autobiographies in Western writing.[103]

James Lindsay, Helen Plumrose and Peter Boghossian argue autoethnography is full of sophistry. Their 2018 hoax made headlines as seven of their 'absurd or deeply unethical' papers were accepted by top academic publications, including a rewrite of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.[104] I will use integrative theology alongside autoethnography to provide needed checks and balances to ensure my work is not simply sophistry,

As a traumatised person, I struggle to see my experiences represented within trauma theology. I believe this is partially due to the writers' psychosocial location to trauma. All three do not identify as traumatised and so are outsiders to trauma. While this should not

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[100] Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic,* 167.
[101] Beckford, *Documentary,* 6.
[102] Campbell, 'Apparently'.
[103] Fredriksen, 'Confessions', 87.
[104] Borschel-Dan, 'Duped'.

prevent them writing about trauma, their subjectivity may be obscured as traumatised people become Other.

Beckford explains that 'The author as the decisive voice or locus is given little attention in cultural studies…'[105] As non-traumatised people, these theologians are the decisive voice in trauma theology. This leads them to conclusions that I, as a traumatised person, find troubling. In Serene Jones' *Trauma and Grace,* her fictional character Rachel seems one-dimensional as Jones describes an imagined meeting between Rachel (whose baby was killed in the slaughter of the innocents) and Jesus' mother:

> In her youth, [Rachel] was widely celebrated…for the intricate designs of her fabrics.
> But since that day, a day she cannot remember, her hands have been unable to touch
> the loom…She has begun to think she is too old to create again, having lost the most
> beautiful creation of her life, her child, to a calculated act of state-sanctioned
> violence, a military sword, in the land we now call the Middle East. She is the
> fractured creative spirit of many; wounded, unable to bear forth the glory of God that
> is in her.[106]

Can any human become 'unable to bear forth the glory of God'? Psalm 19:1 exclaims that, 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands', yet Jones denies Rachel (*made* in the Image of God) any capacity to bear God's glory. Rachel will have found creative resources to survive for thirty-one years, just as many bereaved mothers find glimmers of light to live within, even as the darkness threatens to overcome them.

It is important for trauma theologians to critique presumptions that free-will operates in ways familiar to non-traumatised people, however these critiques should be challenged if they fail to account for traumatised people's creative resources. As a traumatised person, my conclusions differ to Jones' due to my experiences and because my theological anthropology

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[105] Beckford, *Documentary,* 7.
[106] Jones, *Trauma*, 110-11.

maintains that free-will is contextual.[107] The traumatised people in Jones', Rambo's and Beste's work are alienated; forever broken, lacking creativity, and destined to repeat the trauma over and over *ad finitum*, through 'traumatic re-enactments'.[108] Though traumatised people may struggle, trauma theologians seem to give us little credit, with Beste's assertion that trauma limits or denies people access to God's grace of particular concern.

Beste seemingly does not see women subject to sexual abuse as gifted, strong and grace-filled. Instead they seem broken, graceless, and without agency. Conversely, Beste appears unconcerned about perpetrators' access to grace, which I believe is a concerning omission. In Mark 9:42 Jesus explains to his disciples, 'If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea'. The sentiment here seems to be that causing another to 'stumble' incurs severe punishment.[109] Who is most at risk of losing God's grace? The one who stumbles (i.e. the person who has been sexually abused) or the person who causes the stumbling (i.e. the abuser)? My concerns are different to these trauma theologians. Trauma is normative for me, rather than experienced as 'other'. It is not primarily something to examine or use as a 'hermeneutical lens'. I have developed the concept of 'safenormativity' to examine this discordance.

Safenormativity

The term 'heteronormativity' was first used by queer theorist Michael Warner to articulate how lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people experience the world as alienating and

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[107] Stump, 'Freedom', 5.
[108] An example of this would be veterans repeatedly sharing war stories (Van der Kolk, *Body,* loc.68).
[109] Tuckett, 'Mark', 111.

oppressive due to dominant heterosexual relationship ideologies.[110] I propose coining 'safenormativity' as a similar term to make visible the dissonance between traumatised people and those with relatively 'safe' lives. This is particularly useful in discussing unfair expectations of and misunderstandings about traumatised people. Jones states that traumatised people lose all creativity; becoming unable to imagine their actions mattering or their creativity having any future.[111] Although some creative activities may be more difficult for traumatised people, we are not *incapable* of creativity.[112] Behaviours like self-harm are deemed pathological, but for traumatised people these behaviours may be creative survival resources. For someone who has been relatively safe, self-harm seems utterly dysfunctional. But for those without safety, self-harm may be the most logical, coherent, and helpful action they can take. Psychologist E. David Klonsky argues that self-harm can shift someone from depression to euphoria as their body releases pain responsive endorphins.[113] Self-injury makes horrific emotional pain physical and visible, fitting within Van der Kolk's description of 'creative energies that [traumatised people] have mustered to survive'.[114]

Another example of creativity is Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) which occurs when parts of a traumatised person's psyche split.[115] Instead of viewing DID as pathological, Internal Family Systems therapy (IFS) recognises DID as a rational and creative coping strategy. IFS has been successful in enabling people with DID to recover through integrating their different parts.[116] As a child, Jeni Haynes was repeatedly raped and tortured by her father. She created over 2500 distinct personalities (known as alters) to cope with this.[117] One

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[110] Warner, 'Fear', 3.
[111] Jones, *Trauma*, 112.
[112] Van der Kolk, *Body,* loc.312.
[113] Klonsky, 'Functions'.
[114] Van der Kolk, *Body,* loc.2425.
[115] Previously known as multiple personality disorder.
[116] Schwartz, 'Evolution'.
[117] Mao, 'Dissassociative'.

of these alters is called Symphony and she explains, 'I took everything I thought was precious about me, everything important and lovely and hid it from Daddy so that when he abused me he wasn't abusing a thinking human being'.[118] Jeni says DID saved her soul.[119] If this is the case, could we understand Jeni's DID and her alters as teleological good, and as grace to her?

Often traumatised people are expected to have the same psychological, emotional and practical capacities as those whose lives have been relatively safe. The *PTM Framework* seeks:

> A way of constructing a non-diagnostic, non-blaming, de-mystifying story about strength and survival, with the potential to re-integrate many behaviours and experiences which would currently be diagnosed as symptoms of mental disorder back into the range of universal human experience.[120]

The Framework identifies the predominant 'medical model' for understanding traumatised people.[121] When people exhibit depression, anxiety, hearing voices, self-harm and/or suicidal ideation, the medical model views these as 'symptoms' to be categorised. Sufferers are diagnosed and potentially medicated.[122] However, safenormative assumptions may underpin viewing traumatised people as 'abnormal'.[123] Those who reject safenormativity and hold a trauma-informed perspective insist that, 'the way that you respond to trauma is normal, it's natural, and it's rational'.[124] My theological anthropology asserts that traumatised people's so-called 'symptoms' are grace-empowered coping strategies.

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[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Johnstone, *Power*, 17-18.
[121] Ibid., 19.
[122] Ibid., 12.
[123] Ibid., 182
[124] Eaton, 'Caring'.

For Jones, Rambo and Beste, traumatised people seem hopeless and othered; their experiences used as a hermeneutical lens. But traumatised people are not other and we have the same human reality as non-traumatised people. We go shopping, are employed, study, love and are loved. We are not a tiny minority. Theologian Kristine Culp asserts that, 'vulnerability is a basic feature of human existence', and that vulnerability to harm (and to glory) is inherent to humankind. [125] Traumatised people are not aberrant; we are part of the human condition. People are often so invested in believing they are safe that they want to distance themselves from traumatised people, assuming we are other, and not their family members, friends or colleagues. This leads to greater psychological investment in safenormativity and believing everyone they know is (and always has been) safe. Traumatised people's lack of safety is often individualised, othered and/or somaticized. Individualising involves viewing traumatised people as aberrant and in isolation from the systemic oppression which has caused or contributed to their trauma.[126] Othering emerges in believing that traumatised people are from 'those other cultures/communities' and somaticization assumes the problem lies within traumatised people's genes or biology. This is particularly pernicious as it elides the perpetrator's deliberate harm and compromises the agency of traumatised people. As humans before God, we must recognise traumatised people as fully human, honouring their agency and holding perpetrators to account.

The Bible does not view trauma as abnormal. The Christian faith originates in the trauma of Jesus' torture and crucifixion. The first Christians were 'hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed' (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). They were convinced that neither death, life, angels, rulers,

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[125] Culp, *Vulnerability,* 120.
[126] Johnstone, *Power*, 132-133.

present, future, powers, heights, depths nor anything else could separate them from God's

love in Christ (Romans 8:38-39). For them, trauma was an inherent part of life. It is perhaps

only through a season of relative stability in the West that we believe God's job is to keep us

safe.[127] In the majority world; war, absolute poverty, famine, unreliable healthcare,

displacement, persecution, and other widespread suffering means that trauma is dominant

rather than other.[128]

I believe it is contrary to Scripture to hold traumatised people to *safenormative* standards.

Luke 12:41-48 recounts Jesus' parable of the unfaithful manager. After Jesus' parable about

slaves remaining alert for their Master's return, Peter wants clarification about the parable's

audience.[129] Jesus responds with this parable in which a master leaves a manager responsible

for his servants. In one scenario, the manager is obedient and Jesus explains that the manager

will be given responsibility for the master's possessions.[130] In the second scenario, the

manager mistreats the other servants and misuses the master's resources.[131] Jesus explains

that this unfaithful manager will be dismembered and assigned a place with unbelievers.[132]

Jesus declares, 'From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and

from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded'.[133] According

to Du Plessis, this parable is Jesus responding to Peter's question concerning the rewards and

responsibilities for His disciples; Jesus is communicating that 'Others will not be a threat to

[Peter's]…position of privilege, but a lack of responsibility, defined as neglect towards

others, will'.[134] It is according to the disciples increased knowledge and capacity (via Jesus'

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[127] Thanks to Rev Dr. Kate Coleman for this point.
[128] This term infers that in the West we are the minority, even though we often consider ourselves the majority.
[129] Luke 12:41.
[130] Luke 12:44.
[131] Luke 12:45.
[132] Luke 12:46.
[133] Luke 12:48.
[134] Du Plessis, 'Why', 320.

teaching) that they will be judged. Similarly, traumatised people may have less capacity, but we must be careful not to neglect them by denying their agency. Traumatised people's limited capacity does not mean nothing will be required of them or that they are beyond redemption.

As a traumatised person, I do not approach trauma as an outsider. I am what Jones describes as a 'resident expert'.[135] Consequently my approach to trauma theology is not safenormative. I contend that we need to distinguish between traumatic incidents and traumatic responses. Through autoethnography we may discover God's grace emerging in places we do not expect; namely in trauma responses themselves.

I have told my story during hundreds of domestic abuse prevention presentations. Sharing my story in this context is complex. The power dynamics shift as I go from holding the space as the expert and facilitator, to representing the traumatised person. I used to introduce presentations with my story, but realised this could be manipulative. Participants may have felt unable to disagree with me as a facilitator once I had told my story, so I now tell my story at the end of presentations. By including my story, the dynamics change; is it sensitive or compassionate for someone to read my story and then disagree with my analysis? Critics could suggest that my subjectivity compromises my conclusions.

Postmodernism asserts that, to some degree, all knowledge is subjective.[136] As non-traumatised people, Jones', Rambo's and Beste's work *is* subjective. This does not preclude them from writing about trauma; however it is troubling that they seem unaware that

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[135] Jones, *Trauma,* 19.
[136] Lyotard, *Lessons,* 25.

safenormativity shapes their conclusions. Beste's assertion that trauma is a barrier to God's grace seems intended to help Christians more adequately support traumatised people, but her assertion is not representative of my experiences of trauma or God. Perhaps subjectivity prevents me recognising Beste's work is not about *me*, but about other traumatised people? Conversely, it could indicate that Beste's subjectivity restricts her perspective. First, I will tell my story and then develop a theology of grace and trauma rooted in my understanding as a traumatised person.

Discussion

Using autoethnography to recount my story, I will pursue the possibility of grace-empowered trauma responses. After establishing a non-safenormative approach, I will advocate for bifurcating trauma into incident and response. Trauma theory is based on understanding the physiological threat response system. I will argue that this system provides insufficient grounding for theological work. In outlining Aquinas' view of grace, I will contend that we can understand trauma responses as grace-empowered super-powers. I define super-powers as enhanced physiological capacities which enable human flourishing. From this I will assert that trauma responses are good. Going on to suggest that trauma recovery can leave these responses redundant, I will offer some implications of my thesis for church-in-community. Throughout I will remain rooted in theological anthropology, considering what my conclusions tell us about who we are before God.

My Story

I was born on a Sunday into Evangelical Christianity. Racing from the hospital, my dad burst into the gathered congregation, 'The baby's a girl and we've called her Natalie Joy!' It would

be decades before I understood the implications of being born female in a patriarchal culture. Theologian Tim Gorringe defines culture as 'the web of significance we spin for ourselves'.[137] Within evangelical Christianity that web of significance was strung tight! By my teenage years, I was committed to selflessness, restrictive gender roles,[138] and sexual purity. Feminist writer Jessica Valenti argues that demands of sexual purity are rooted in patriarchy and male ownership, with purity culture designed to control women and girls.[139]

By the time I entered college to do a childcare course (my working-class parents insisted I pursue a career that would earn me a living) Evangelical Christianity had dominated my life, with a solely Christian education and mostly Christian friends. I set about trying to convert my college classmates, through my brand of early noughties evangelism which involved proving myself highly countercultural through declaring my virginal status and commitment to abstinence.[140] One classmate introduced me to her friend Craig.[141] He had recently become a Christian, which made him an ideal relationship candidate.[142] We started dating.

I understood that sexual abstinence required saying 'no', but I had not been taught about sexual coercion or sexual abuse perpetrated within dating relationships. After informing Craig of my commitment to abstinence, he manipulated me into sexual activity. Within twelve days he had coerced me into sex and within six months I was pregnant. In our 4.5-year relationship he hurt me in innumerable ways;[143] demeaning me, humiliating and degrading

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[137] Gorringe, cited in Glasson, *Spirituality*, 79.
[138] Modelled by my 'housewife' mum and my dad in full-time paid work.
[139] Valenti, *Purity,* 22.
[140] Walker found that while 70 per cent of Christians believe pre-marital bodily contact over clothes is acceptable prior, 75 per cent do not believe intercourse or oral sex is allowable outside of marriage (Walker, *Relatable*, 177).
[141] Not his real name.
[142] Over two-thirds of Christian women in Walker's research stated their primary non-negotiable was that their partner 'must have' the same faith (Relatable, 127).
[143] I was married to Craig for three years.

me, lying to me, 'gaslighting' me,[144] and reproductively coercing me.[145] He cheated on me and sexually-abused teenage girls. Isolating me from family and friends, he used my Christian faith to manipulate me into accepting his behaviour.[146] Hurting me physically, Craig exhausted me, goaded me into taking an overdose, encouraged my daughter to call me names, and sexually abused me.

When I was 6-months pregnant with my second child Craig raped me, causing my son to be born 3-months premature. My toddler daughter and I lived for 5-months in hospital with my son. Within a year, I separated from Craig, reported his rape to the police, attended court to give evidence and dealt with a not-guilty verdict. I had to resuscitate my son at home, deal with numerous other health crises, moved two hours from our home town, and cared for my traumatised daughter.

Living in hospital, in the midst of loss and destruction, I experienced a God intimately involved in human life. This God began speaking to me, encouraging me to trust and love God regardless of whether my son lived or died. God did not promise that everything would get better, but God did promise to abide with me throughout. Experiencing a God who speaks can be part of Christian faith; with evangelist Frank Buchman announcing to a 10,000 strong crowd in Denmark in 1935, 'Definite, accurate, adequate information can come from the mind of God to the minds of men [sic.]. This is normal prayer'.[147] In his book entitled *Listening to the God Who Speaks*, theologian Klaus Bockmuehl argues that God continues to

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[144] Abusers use gaslighting tactics to make their partner feel like she is going mad. This often allows the abuser to avoid responsibility for their behaviour (Collins, *Control*, 23).

[145] Reproductive coercion involves manipulating, tricking or forcing a woman into pregnancy or abortion (Collins, *Control*, 105).

[146] I believed my forgiveness of Craig nullified the consequences of what he did to me, that divorce was not an option and that I needed to 'submit' to Craig.

[147] Thomas, *Sacred*, 63

speak to Christians today, 'turning each moment into one of grace'. [148] My experience of the

God who speaks deeply informs my theological anthropology.

Eighteen months after my son's birth, God called me to move from northeast to southeast

England and led me to miraculously marry my husband Andrew. Through obeying God's

call, I have developed national resources for women subjected to abuse,[149] and for youth

practitioners working to prevent abuse.[150] I experienced a God who 'delivered my soul from

death, and my feet from falling, so that I may walk before God in the light of life' (Psalm

56:13). However it was not quite a happy-ever-after.

Until remarrying I could not fall apart because I was a single mother to two small children.

My brain remained in survival mode with my energies 'focussed on fighting off unseen

enemies'.[151] Prioritising my children's needs, I compartmentalised the pain and was

prescribed antidepressants. When I was no longer a single parent and my son was healthier,

trauma overwhelmed me. Becoming highly dissociated, I would be unable to move or

speak.[152] I experienced derealisation, feeling like my body didn't belong to me and that my

'self' had been deposited into an alien body.[153] While I was with Craig, dissociation and

derealisation protected me when he raped me; my mind could disappear while my body

endured the pain.[154] Craig's humiliation, degradation, gaslighting and betrayal left me in

severe emotional pain. I would cut my wrists to make the pain visible and physical. When

Craig's behaviour escalated, on occasions I attempted suicide. Counter-intuitively, attempting

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[148] Bockmuehl, *Listening,* 99.
[149] Collins, 'DAY'.
[150] Collins, 'Own'.
[151] Van der Kolk, *Body,* loc.1299.
[152] Mind, 'Dissociative'.
[153] Belle, 'Living'.
[154] Van der Kolk, *Body,* loc.1152.

suicide was a survival strategy to stop the pain. After moving on from Craig, I would feel compelled to self-harm when disassociation and derealisation left me numb. At other times suddenly aware of the horror, I would cry hysterically. Unpredictably sights, sounds, smells, tastes or touch could leave me triggered into dissociation or hypervigilant panic for hours, days or weeks.

Both in and after the relationship with Craig I engaged numerous meaning-making survival processes. Within the *PTM Framework* meaning-making processes are central to understanding trauma.[155] Theologically, this aligns with a creator God who intended for humans to seek understanding about themselves and the world. A common meaning-making device for those subjected to abuse is self-blame.[156] Self-blame can be perpetuated by victim-blaming societal (and Christian) attitudes; for me it helped make sense of Craig's abuse.[157] I blamed myself for what he did to me. This could be seen as pathological or instead as a logical response to powerlessness.[158] Not only physical powerlessness, but also psychological powerlessness and a complete lack of personal autonomy. In our relationship, Craig had all the power and by blaming myself I no longer felt powerless. This need to avoid powerlessness coalesces with a theological anthropology which insists God made humans autonomous and with free-will.

To make sense of Craig's humiliation and degradation I believed myself to be inherently bad. Only through believing I deserved his violation could I make sense of him hurting me so badly.[159] Constructs of salvation and redemptive suffering from my evangelical upbringing

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[155] Johnstone, *Power,* 9.
[156] Women's Health Research Institute, 'Changing'.
[157] Coffey, 'Mediators'.
[158] Pulcu, 'Role'.
[159] Rubin, 'Believes'.

led me to believe the more Craig hurt me, the more God would eventually be glorified

through Craig's redemption.[160] To cope with Craig's sexual abuse, I convinced myself I was

sexually liberated. It was better to feel I had *consented,* than to acknowledge I had no choice.

I subconsciously created a tidy formula where my forgiveness of (and subjection to) Craig

would be counted as blessing. In a world ordered towards Craig's destruction of me, my

meaning-making devices went into overload believing it was *really* ordered towards Craig's

eventual redemption, my healing and God's glory.

Over the past 14-years since my son's premature birth, recovering from Craig's abuse has

been complicated. Within the recovery process I have discovered that we cannot approach

trauma homogeneously. There is ubiquity in the physiology of trauma, but we can only

reflect theologically on trauma as we consider it in its particularity. We must 'dehomogenise'

trauma.

De-Homogenising Trauma

To understand the necessity of dehomogenising trauma requires that we examine trauma

physiology. The human threat response system activates when threatened. The type of threat

is irrelevant to this system; whether crushing poverty (systemic oppression), an earthquake

(circumstance), or a rapist (deliberate harm), this biological system has five impulse

responses; fight, flight, freeze, flop or friend.[161] Fight attacks, flight runs away, freeze causes

the body to become rigid, flop plays dead, friend placates.

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[160] Based on the story of the woman forgiven in Luke 7:36-50; 'Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.'
[161] Lodrick, 'Psychological Trauma'.

Mammal brains have three parts related to threat: (1) the Prefrontal Lobe deals with language, imagination, reasoning and rational thinking;[162] (2) the Limbic System is responsible for emotions, memories, habits and decisions;[163] (3) the Brain Stem manages trauma responses and autopilot.[164] When we are threatened, the Prefrontal Lobe cannot process the threat quickly enough to keep us safe. If Mildred the cavewoman relied on her Prefrontal Lobe when threated by a tiger, it would have already chomped her face off. Instead, the Brain Stem triggers fight, flight, freeze, flop or friend to keep Mildred safe. These responses are reflexive rather than conscious.[165] Both flop and freeze are passive responses that immobilize the threatened mammal. This threat response system could be understood to be part of embodied grace; we have a God-created capacity to respond effectively to threats.

Prior to immobilisation through freeze or flop, the threat response system releases bursts of adrenaline and cortisol for potential fight or flight activation. In wild animals, the threat may get distracted. For instance, Gordon the antelope was lying inert in Vera the lioness' jaws due to his Brain Stem activating the flop response. Vera's cub distracts her, so Gordon leaps up and runs away. The threatened animal (in this case Gordon) will shake and judder as his body discharges the pre-emptively released adrenaline and cortisol. Known as 'self-paced termination', this process returns an animal's threat response system to a healthy baseline.[166]

Humans and domestic animals do not automatically undergo self-paced termination.[167] When Craig raped me, my flop response activated and I became immobilised. After Craig finished and without self-paced termination, my threat response system did not return to baseline and

[162] Arnsten, 'Stress'.
[163] University of Queensland, 'Limbic'.
[164] Bloom, 'Understanding'.
[165] Van der Kolk, *Body,* loc.1055.
[166] Nagoski, *Come,* loc.2038.
[167] Lyons, 'Repair'.

the attack became 'stuck' in my lower brain.[168] His attack remained 'stuck' until it could be moved to the Prefrontal Lobe, processed rationally, and then shifted to the Limbic System as memory. Functionally, PTSD is when threats get stuck in the lower brain. For this reason, trauma theory can generalise about trauma. Fight, flight, flop, friend and freeze activate regardless of whether the threat is systemic oppression, circumstance, or deliberate harm. However, in engaging theologically the focus shifts from the science and physicalism of trauma to what we can learn about God, the Christian faith and who we are as embodied beings. As such, I argue that homogenising trauma is problematic.

Jones and Rambo homogenise trauma, without distinguishing between types of trauma. However, theological reflections on reproductive loss (where there is no deliberate harm) will be very different than those considering sexual violation (where there is deliberate harm). Rambo views trauma as a 'hermeneutical lens through which an alternative vision of healing and redemption emerge',[169] but as a traumatised person I am not a lens, and my experiences cannot be homogenised with all other traumatised people. Mine is an embodied and lived account. The particularity of my experiences, location and context must be attended to. In focussing on the impact of trauma, Jones, Rambo and Beste recognise that trauma fragments,[170] but I would argue that by dislocating traumatic response from traumatic incident, they perpetuate this fragmentation. By not fully accounting for trauma as a whole, I believe this fragmentation undermines the integrity of the traumatised person before God.

Traumatic incident and traumatic response are cause and effect; discussing the effect in isolation from the cause would be like Isaac Newton speaking only of the apple landing on

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[168] Ibid.
[169] Rambo, *Spirit*, 11.
[170] Rambo, *Spirit,* 8.

the ground, without explaining it had been attached to a tree.[171] By only discussing the effects

of trauma it is impossible to understand *why* people act as they do. The *PTM Framework*

separates trauma into incident and response; with power, threat, meaning and threat response

constituting the framework's four elements. The first element (power) refers to the traumatic

incident, with the other elements comprising the traumatic impact; how the person was

threatened, how they made sense of the incident, and how they responded to the threat.

I believe it is crucial when considering trauma and grace for traumatic incident/s to remain

present alongside traumatic responses. Beste concludes that trauma can leave someone

unable to access God's grace;

> Appreciating the crucial role played by interpersonal relations in the realization of
> freedom forces us to confront the possibility that persons who lack supportive
> relations and are subject to repeated violations may be deprived of sufficient
> opportunity for ultimate self-disposal.[172]

I contend this problematic conclusion emerges due to Beste limiting her sources,[173] and

because her safenormative approach separates traumatic incidents from traumatic responses.

Approaching trauma cohesively (holding together incident and response) with a non-

safenormative integrative method will, I believe, lead to different theological conclusions.

Far from trauma responses limiting God's grace, God's prevenient grace powers these

responses. As such, they can be honoured and integrated, rather than alienated and

problematised.

Understanding Grace

I have identified that traumatic incidents and their responses need to be considered together,

and that by contextualising trauma responses we can understand these responses as grace-

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[171] Connor, 'Core'.
[172] Beste, *God,* 104.
[173] To Rahner, Butler and Meyers.

empowered. Before using Scripture, tradition, reason and experience to examine this, I will briefly explore what grace is.

It would seem 2017 was the first year that 'grace' dominated the popular music charts. With Rag N Bone Man's baritone voice booming '…we're all one step from grace'.[174] And Lewis Capaldi soulfully intoning, 'I was only just a breath removed from going to waste, 'Til I found salvation in the form of your grace'.[175] However only Stormzy's 2017 grace song is about God, 'Lord, I've been broken, although I'm not worthy, You fixed me, I'm blinded, by your grace, you came and saved me'.[176] With grace now more ambiguously understood in popular culture, how does Christianity understand grace?

While acknowledging denominational complexities in defining grace, theologian Willis Jenkins asserts that grace, 'generally refers to a divinely initiated relationship of God and creation'.[177] The Gospels only mention grace explicitly 12 times (within Luke and John). Acts refers to grace 17 times and there are 127 mentions of grace across the rest of the New Testament. Romans is the most grace-referenced epistle with 24 mentions.[178] From a plain reading of Romans we discover that grace; is not based on human works (Romans 11:6), helps Christians to obey God (Romans 1:5), enables God's justification of humanity (Romans 3:24), and gives Christians different gifts (Romans 12:6). Yet Paul offers no clear explanation of what grace is or how grace works. Aquinas attempts to remedy this by systematising the concepts of grace within his *Summa Theologiae*, written to instruct theology students.

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[174] Graham, *Grace*.
[175] Capaldi, *Grace*.
[176] Omari, *Blinded*.
[177] Jenkins, *Ecologies,* 20.
[178] Samdahl, 'Grace'.

Philip McCosker explains of Aquinas' approach to grace, 'There is a strong sense in these questions that one needs grace to do anything whatsoever: thinking, knowing, willing, acting, loving'.[179] Charles Raith asserts Aquinas' view of grace as 'the soul's accidental participation in divine nature', suggesting grace is intrinsic to theological anthropology.[180] In rejecting redemptive narratives and by suggesting trauma responses limit grace, Beste, Jones and Rambo embrace an increasingly meagre operation of grace. Yet could we instead understand trauma responses as elements of the soul's 'accidental participation in divine nature'?

Aquinas articulates grace as prevenient and subsequent. Involving an element preceding in time or order, prevenient grace recognises God operating in creation and humanity *before* conversion (i.e. becoming a Christian), whilst subsequent grace operates after conversion.[181] Subsequent grace includes operative and cooperative grace. In operative grace God works to bring people to conversion. While cooperative grace is a post-conversion partnership between God and humans which enables them to grow in holiness.[182] Aquinas uses these categories to divide the effects rather than the essence of grace.[183] Aquinas' five effects of grace are: first to heal the soul (as part of prevenient grace), second to desire good, third to carry into effect the good proposed, fourth to persevere in good, fifth to reach glory.[184] It is possible, in recalling how Jeni Haynes' DID saved her soul, that her DID could be understood as a first effect of grace.[185]

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179 McCosker, 'Grace', 206.
180 Raith, *Aquinas,* 99.
181 McGrath, *Christian,* 356.
182 Ibid.
183 ST, 1a, 2ae, q.111, a.3.
184 Ibid.
185 Mao, 'Dissociative'.

While Jones' definition of grace as a 'healing good' fits with Aquinas' first effect of grace,[186] Beste explains grace as, 'experiences of healing, acquiring a new life-giving identity, and feeling liberated to love freely and be loved…'.[187] Aligning with Aquinas' understanding of subsequent grace, particularly cooperative grace, this definition seems to ignore prevenient grace.

Pointing to John 15:5, Aquinas argue that we can do nothing without grace,[188] for it is only through God's grace that the earth continues to spin and that humanity can think, will, act, love, exist.[189] Suggesting, as trauma theologians do, that trauma limits grace misunderstands God's all-encompassing grace. This is particularly so once we understand the embodied reality of trauma responses and grace. Grace has no universal rules of engagement, with grace emerging in many seemingly odd ways in Scripture including through a talking donkey (Numbers 22:21-29). God breathed into humankind and made us locations of prevenient grace alongside the whole of creation, with grace emerging, most crucially for Christian theology, in Jesus' death and resurrection. Franciscan friar Richard Rohr explains, 'Grace is the Divine Unmerited Generosity that is everywhere available, totally given, usually undetected as such, and often even undesired'.[190] This divine generosity is just available to traumatised people as to anyone else. As we will now consider, perhaps trauma responses are themselves part of God's unmerited generosity?

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[186] Jones, *Trauma*,153.
[187] Beste, *God,* 101.
[188] ST, 1a, 2ae, q.109, a6.
[189] McCosker, 'Grace', 206
[190] Rohr, *Spring* 145.

Grace Powered Trauma Responses

Rather than viewing trauma responses as pathological, we can instead understand them to be grace-empowered. I will utilise McCosker's analogy of grace as electricity to argue this,[191] and will engage the *PTM Framework* to assert that trauma responses are 'super-powers'. By separating traumatic incidents from traumatic responses, we can honour the responses while still maintaining concern for the harm done.

Trauma responses as 'super-powers'

Jones, Rambo and Beste seem to view trauma responses as pathological and as psychological, emotional and physical deficits,[192] which leave traumatised people without creativity or imagination,[193] hopeless,[194] and potentially unable to 'relate lovingly to themselves and others [and] God'.[195] However, after working with people who had been sexually abused Glasson found that, 'apparently negative coping mechanisms such as comfort eating, self-harm and addictions may initially be beneficial to the process [of recovery]'.[196] Can there be grace-empowered ability where some see disability?

Not just ability, but perhaps grace-empowered superhuman ability; with traumatic physiological responses exceeding normal human functioning and agency.[197] Populated with superheroes, Marvel and DC's comic book universes tell the stories of enhanced humans. Hollywood has told Spider-man's story 3-times.[198] Some superheroes choose their super-

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[191] McCosker, 'Grace', 208.
[192] Rambo, *Spirit,* 35.
[193] Jones, *Trauma*, 101.
[194] Ibid., 16-18
[195] Beste, *God,* 104.
[196] Glasson, *Spirituality*, 91.
[197] I have argued this previously (Collins, 'Broken').
[198] Film List, 'Spider-man'.

powers,[199] while some are born super-powered.[200] Spider-man is one of many superheroes who are victims of circumstance or deliberate harm.[201] A radioactive spider bites the teenage Peter Parker and he becomes the super-powered Spider-man, whose hyper-vigilance, agility and web-slinging enables him to fight crime.[202] Spider-man is not another kind of human, but enhanced abilities enable him to do superhuman feats. This is similar to a traumatised person whose DID or hypervigilance enables their survival by taking them beyond 'normal' human capacity. In understanding humans as created by God, these superhuman trauma responses are not separate from God, but are instead created by God.

For me, Craig's abuse caused me to become hyper-vigilant, but instead of being celebrated as a super-power, it proved I was broken. The dissociation I experienced when Craig raped me operated, I believe, as a combination of time-travel and invisibility. Instead of celebrating these superhuman capacities, Rambo sees traumatised people as barely alive 'because trauma shatters so much of what we understand to constitute life, the very definition of life is in question'.[203] We should not romanticise trauma responses, but recognising their purpose enables us to understand them. We could understand self-harm as someone's creative resource which marks their outside with the pain of their inside. Suicide could be understood as rejecting powerlessness, rather than as a death wish.[204] Two decades in suicide prevention led psychologist Paul Joffe to become critical of the 'distress model of suicide':[205]

> while suicidal students might or might not feel distressed about conditions in their lives, they generally don't feel distressed about being suicidal. Many will openly admit that being suicidal is one of the few, if not the only, bright spots in their lives … Many are proud, if not proudly defiant, of their power to control their own fate.[206]

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[199] Including Batman, Catwoman and Iron Man.
[200] Including some of the X-Men, Superman and Wonder Woman.
[201] Along with Captain American, Jessica Jones, Luke Cage and Wolverine.
[202] Raimi, *Spider-man.*
[203] Rambo, *Spirit,* 25.
[204] I.e. 'I can take control of whether I live in a context where I feel utterly powerless'.
[205] Joffe, 'Empirically', 6.
[206] Ibid. 6-7.

After being abused, Xanthe Wells developed DID. Wells uses the *Avengers Assemble* film to make sense of life with DID,

> The Avengers have no obvious connection to each other, apart from the fact that each of them has a specific skill that gives them an advantage in certain situations. In the same way, my collection of parts has drawn itself together to protect me from events beyond my control.[207]

Sarah Reece's blogpost, 'Dissociation is a Super Power', advocates that dissociation enables flourishing, 'Sometimes the first step is to learn how to live with [dissociation] better, how to use it to your advantage, how to stop hating it and feeling destroyed by it. Sometimes we need to become better at being dissociative, rather than less dissociative'.[208] Wells, Reece and myself are traumatised people choosing to reject narratives of 'brokenness' that frame trauma responses as disabilities. If 'one needs grace to do anything whatsoever', then we could understand trauma responses to be grace-empowered.[209] In acknowledging the key to human survival, Glasson remarks, 'mostly it is about a deep, powerful will to live that seems to be implanted at the heart of what it means to be a human being'.[210] Though this could seem to exclude people who die by suicide, understanding suicide as an attempt to end unbearable pain, rather than as a lack of will to live may mitigate for that. Understanding trauma responses as super-powers infers that they are good, as opposed to the implicit assertion by others that trauma responses are bad. Is it possible to understand trauma responses as good?

Trauma responses as good

I will reengage Aquinas to explore the idea of trauma responses as good. In Acts 17:28, Paul quotes a Cretan philosopher in describing the Christian God, 'For in him [sic.] we live and

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[207] Wells, 'Alters'.
[208] Reece, 'Dissociation'.
[209] McCosker, 'Grace', 206.
[210] Glasson, *Spirituality*, 152.

move and have our being'. This understanding of God informs Aquinas' view of goodness.

Something is good if created by God and on a trajectory towards God. This teleological

understanding of goodness presumes that the final end of each human being (our telos) is

God.[211] Arguing that metaphysical goodness involves degrees of goodness, Aquinas

understood that in fulfilling its God-given telos, a thing becomes perfect. Evil is associated

with lack of being; only non-existent things are entirely corrupt.[212] Different to metaphysical

goodness, 'moral goodness' relates to the natural law; 'The natural inclination of humans to

achieve their proper end through reason and free-will is the natural law'.[213] Moral goodness is

about human capacity to act freely and rationally, in accordance with a specific end (their

telos).

Can trauma responses be understood as metaphysically good? Hyper-vigilance, dissociation,

splitting into separate parts and traumatic attachment are involuntary physiological responses

to survive threats. We could argue these trauma responses are created by God within each

human, with the telos of fight, flight, flop, friend and freeze to keep humans safe. By

fulfilling their telos, and in existing (rather than lacking being), trauma responses could be

understood as metaphysical good.

We can also understand non-physiological trauma responses (e.g. self-harm, suicide ideation

and self-blame) as metaphysical good. Their telos is survival and enabling traumatised people

to cope. In addition, non-physiological trauma responses can be understood as moral good,

which considers human action as 'good or bad depending on whether it conforms to

reason'.[214] If we understand trauma responses as rational (e.g. self-harm making internal pain

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[211] Floyd, 'Thomas'.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Magee, 'Distinction'.
[214] Floyd, 'Thomas'

visible), then non-physiological trauma responses could be moral good, if they are also argued to move us closer to God. Can trauma responses do that?

The *telos* of trauma responses is survival. Though often viewed as 'disordered', by contextualising these responses as an effect of a traumatic incident their rational basis becomes apparent. Survival is defined as 'the state or fact of *continuing to live or exist*, typically in spite of an accident, ordeal, or difficult circumstances [italics added]'.[215] Thus we could argue that the telos of trauma responses is *life*. Within Christian theology, God is the Author of life,[216] Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, beginning and end.[217] Therefore, this trajectory towards survival and life could be seen as a telos towards God. From a safenormative perspective, this is a controversial view. Self-harm and suicide ideation may seem life-limiting, but for someone who has been raped or violated these actions prevent disintegration and offer a creative way of continuing to exist in a deeply unsafe world.

Trauma responses as grace

My efforts to establish trauma responses as good are not intended to diminish the very real horror of traumatic incidents. By separating traumatic incident and response we can understand the response as good without denying or ignoring the brutality of the traumatic incident. As we proceed, McCosker's articulation of grace as electricity is important in arguing that God's prevenient grace *powers* trauma responses.[218]

Those advocating that trauma limits grace do accept that traumatised people may be sustained by grace, with Beste asserting that 'the presence of grace has sustained incest victims in ways

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[215] Lexico, 'Survival'.
[216] Genesis 1, John 1.
[217] Revelation 1:8, 22:13.
[218] McCosker, 'Grace', 208.

they are unaware of and has enable them to survive the human cruelty and abuse they have been subjected to'.[219] This coalesces with Aquinas' view that we *cannot* know for certain whether someone has grace, for God (as the one from Whom grace flows) is beyond human knowing.[220] Though Aquinas' paradigm centres reason,[221] Aquinas seems to accept that God can supersede reason.

Alongside Ecofeminist Stoicism, Amy Carr's 'Forthright Feminist Pelagia' offers a doctrine of grace that believes humans overcome trauma by their own strength and capacity.[222] Understanding trauma responses as grace-empowered counters this Pelagian approach by acknowledging that it is only through God's grace that we can survive. Understanding trauma responses as grace-empowered offers a solution to Amy Carr's conundrum. Carr is concerned that feminist grace doctrines reduce God to a 'potential or occasional *effect'* and are unable to affirm an 'ever active, eschatologically efficacious grace'.[223] If trauma and response remain a whole that opposes human flourishing and God, this is perhaps true. However, if the traumatic incident stands alone as the element opposed to God, then the trauma response can become a grace-empowered good, with God actively involved in the lives of traumatised people, enabling their survival.

Trauma specialist Ruth Cureton explains dissociative disorders as

> God-given coping mechanisms available in childhood whereby a combination of physiology, creativity and a child's innate spiritual awareness allows a child to tolerate the intolerable and survive the catastrophic.[224]

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[219] Beste, *God,* 110.
[220] McCosker, 'Grace', 216.
[221] As does mine in understanding trauma responses as reasonable.
[222] Carr, 'Divine', 139.
[223] Carr, 'Divine', 147
[224] Cureton, 'Dissociative'.

Describing the fight or flight response, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, 'I call it one of God's good gifts - our ability to recognise danger and respond to it - only like so many of God's gifts, it has some real subtleties to it'.[225] She is right about the subtleties. We must be careful not to valourise trauma responses.

Just because something is a good gift from God does not mean that everyone should want it. For someone with appendicitis, appendix removal is a lifesaving good gift. This doesn't mean we should all be demanding appendectomies! Good is contextual. While self-harm may bring great relief after brutal emotional pain, for someone in a safenormative context, self-harm would bring only pain. In *Vulnerability and Glory*, Culp argues that 'life before God must "go through" suffering - neither valourising suffering nor denying its reality'.[226] Christianity centres this reality. God's grace for humanity could only be accomplished through Jesus' suffering, but does recognising Jesus' torture and death as a good gift require us to valourise it? No, even though many have done.[227]

Van der Kolk insists that 'being a patient, rather than a participant in one's healing process, separates suffering people from their community and alienates them from an inner sense of self'.[228] Judith Herman's identifies three elements of recovery: (1) establishing safety, (2) reconstructing the trauma story and, (3) restoring the connection between survivors and their community.[229] My approach could enable all three of these.

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[225] Brown Taylor, *Sermons,* 34.
[226] Culp, *Vulnerability*, 111
[227] Brown Taylor, *Sermons,* 100-05.
[228] Van der Kolk, *Body,* loc.727
[229] Herman, *Trauma,* 3.

By understanding trauma responses as good, traumatised people's bodies are not betraying them through dissociation and hyperarousal, their bodies are saving them. In reconstructing the trauma story, they can locate the harm within the traumatic cause (systems, circumstances, people) rather than feeling they are broken or to blame. Traumatised people may feel less alienated from their community; they are not mad, abnormal or disordered. By refusing to problematise trauma responses and instead seeing them as grace-empowered good gifts, this enables traumatised people to identify their responses as strengths which facilitate survival.

Where is God in the midst of suffering? Unlike Rambo's images of the traumatised person 'suspended over the abyss' of hell by love,[230] my theological anthropology insists that God is intimately involved in our suffering, providing the means of survival. The super-powers of dissociation and hyper-vigilance are God's gifts. God cares so much for humanity that God ensured we could survive traumatic incidents. Though we can understand God as present with us through Jesus' incarnation and passion,[231] identifying trauma responses as good means understanding traumatised people as locations of God's prevenient grace. Instead of trauma denying access to God's grace - as Beste suggests - traumatised people's very survival is grace-empowered. God remains present, making life possible, and we are never alone.

The Sermon on the Mount shows God's presence in traumatised people's lives. Jesus addresses His first two beatitudes to the 'poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven', and 'those who mourn, for they will be comforted' (Matthew 5:3-4). Traumatised people are

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[230] Rambo, *Spirit,* 131.
[231] Brown Taylor, *Sermons,* 114.

often those who are poor in spirit and those who mourn. Within God's 'upside down

kingdom' it is not those who have comfortable, safenormative lives who are blessed, but

rather those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, perhaps those who are traumatised?[232]

Enabling Recovery

Although trauma responses can be grace-empowered gifts, I am not suggesting that

dissociation, hypervigilance, self-harm or suicide ideation must always remain present in

traumatised people's lives. Trauma theory insists recovery is possible for traumatised people,

though trauma theologians do not, with Jones asserting 'the vast majority of trauma survivors

reach the end of their lives still caught in its terrifying grip'.[233]

Various trauma therapies can facilitate recovery. Although trauma can become 'stuck' in the

Brain Stem,[234] it can be 'unstuck' through processing the trauma in ways which avoid

retriggering the threat response system.[235] Therapies utilising this theory include the Rewind

Technique, Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing (EMDR) and Tapping. Other

therapeutic interventions like Boyden Pesso System Psychomotor therapy (PBSP), Internal

Family Systems therapy (IFS) and Somatic Experiencing use methods which utilise

traumatised people's imaginative capacities. There are also more general resources that can

aid recovery, including physical exercise,[236] and participation in a safe community.[237]

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[232] Alicea, 'Success'.
[233] Jones, *Trauma,* 155.
[234] Lyons, 'Repair'.
[235] Griffin, 'PTSD'.
[236] Nagoski, *Come,* loc.2142.
[237] Van der Kolk, *Body,* loc.722. Herman, *Trauma,* 70-73.

Through specialist therapies and more general healing resources, traumatised people can journey through Herman's recovery elements.[238] Yet in moving towards recovery, trauma responses may become less useful. The hypervigilance which kept someone alert to threats becomes problematic as they can barely sleep and their startle response is in overdrive. The dissociation that previously floated them away as their body was raped becomes inconvenient when their senses trigger a dissociative episode during a business meeting. Self-harm that made internal pain bearable becomes an insatiable compulsion. 1 Corinthians 6:12b states that, '"All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything'. Theologian Anthony Thiselton translates this as, '"Liberty to do anything" – but I will not let anything take liberties with me'.[239] What begins as liberating (e.g. trauma responses) can progress to taking liberties with us.

Returning to autoethnography, I now consider my experiences of recovery. When married to Craig, dissociation and hypervigilance kept me safe, but once he was no longer a threat they became disabling. The creative resource of self-harm became compulsive. The meaning-making devices which helped me cope left me overwhelmed with self-loathing, self-blame, hyper-sexualised self-perceptions, and struggling to function. Through trauma theory I discovered that I was not dysfunctional. I began identifying dissociation as God raising issues that needed healing and eventually arrived at the conclusions argued here, that trauma responses can be good and grace-empowered.

Trauma informed counsellors and pastors accompanied me through recovery. Seeing me as capable and competent, they believed me and helped me access recovery resources. This is

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[238] Establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, restoring connection. (Herman, *Trauma,* 3).
[239] Thiselton, *First,* 462.

the church-in-community element of integrative theology. 1 Corinthians 12:12-14 describes the church as the Body of Christ. Just as God created human bodies with grace-empowered survival resources, so the Body of Christ is grace-empowered to help traumatised people to survive and, hopefully, recover. It was through participating in a church community who did not see me as fundamentally broken that I was able to move forward. I married Andrew, when my son was 18-months old. He has never treated me as broken. He trusts my judgement and believes in me.

While trauma responses can be grace-empowered goods, they can become redundant as new recovery resources become available. This aligns with Aquinas' contextual free-will;[240] and also with Romans 7:6-7: 'But now we have been released from the law, for we died to it and are no longer captive to its power…am I suggesting that the law of God is sinful? Of course not! In fact, it was the law that showed me my sin'. Through Jesus, the Jewish law becomes redundant but as this passage makes clear, the law is not bad, but rather it is no longer necessary.[241] Jesus' sacrifice supersedes the good gift of the Jewish Law. A grace-empowered good, like trauma responses or the Law, can become redundant.[242]

When we understand trauma responses as good, they can be integrated as strengths that enabled survival. Which may be a more fruitful approach than viewing traumatised people as deficient and lacking creativity. As Ecofeminist Stoics, Jones, Rambo and Beste seem to expect very little from God, with trauma to be accepted rather than recovered from. Traumatised people must be resigned to dangling by a thin thread of love over hell.[243] At first

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[240] Stump, 'Freedom', 5.
[241] Kruse, *Paul's*, 123-24.
[242] Another understanding of this passage is that Jesus *fulfilled* the Law. Therefore, the telos of the Law and of Jesus were the same. Applying this interpretation to trauma responses and recovery resources; both have a telos towards flourishing. Recovery resources *fulfill* the telos of trauma responses (Keener, *Romans*, 89).
[243] Rambo, *Spirit,* 137-141.

glance, we could liken their approach to the Syrophoenician woman in Mark's Gospel asking for only crumbs. She asks Jesus to heal her daughter, but Jesus seems to reject her saying, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs' (Mark 7:27). The woman responds, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs' (Mark 7:28). We could liken the meagre thread over hell of Rambo's theology to this parable's under-table crumbs. Yet, this unnamed woman approached Jesus desperately believing He could heal her daughter. She challenges Jesus not only for the crumbs, but for a place at the table. Her courage was rewarded as Jesus healed her daughter (Mark 7:30). Can we settle for the Ecofeminist Stoic's modest sense of human freedom or do we insist on more?

Through Aquinas' metaphysical and moral goods, could we conclude that trauma therapies are also grace-empowered? The telos of these therapies is healing and wholeness, aligning with metaphysical good, while their rational evidence-based approach could fit within Aquinas' moral good, particularly as their telos is to bring healing.

As a Christian, I have experienced the power of God's operative and cooperative grace. Living in a hospital with my premature son, everything was stripped away from me and I experienced the tangible nature of God, who speaks, guides and transforms. Through grace-empowered trauma responses, therapy, church-in-community and recovery resources, I experienced Aquinas' description of grace, 'man [sic.] cannot be restored by himself; but he requires the light of grace to be poured upon him anew, as if the soul were infused into a dead body for its resurrection'.[244] I now rarely experience dissociation or hyper-vigilance, and the

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[244] ST, 1a, 2ae, q.109, a.7.

meaning-making devices of trauma have been superseded by God's truths that I am loved,

forgiven, cared for, and belong to God.[245]

My experiences resonate with Culp's work on grace, centred on 2 Corinthians 4:7-9:

> But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

Culp focuses on vulnerability rather than trauma per se, defining vulnerability as

susceptibility to change, 'to being shattered and also capable of bearing great treasure, the

grace and glory of God'. Though an abuser will seek to destroy whatever gives strength,[246]

Craig could not fully destroy my soul. This relates to my theological anthropology; God is all

powerful and according to Matthew 10:28 only God has power to destroy the soul.[247] Craig

sought to empty the Christian faith of liberation and used it as a weapon to hurt me, but he

could not destroy the treasure of God's grace within me. As a jar of clay, I was vulnerable to

Craig's harm, but as a container for God's grace, I was also vulnerable to and able to be

transformed.

I am a jar of clay, cracked and broken by Craig. Though I have been hard-pressed and

perplexed, I am not crushed, despairing, abandoned or destroyed. This is, I believe, because

of who I am before God; created with grace-empowered trauma responses. Through the

saving grace of Jesus, through trauma therapies and in grace-enacted church community I

have been healed. Craig's abuse still affects me, the consequences of his harm particularly

prominent as I parent teenagers whose histories and identities will always be deeply shaped

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[245] 1 John 1:9, 3:1.
[246] Collins, *Control,* 19-37.
[247] This passage states, 'Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell'.

by Craig's harm. Leonard Cohen famously sung, 'There is…a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in'.[248] One of the paradoxes of faith is that God meets us in our brokenness and goodness emerges, or as the Apostle Paul wrote, 'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God…' (Romans 8:38).

My theological assertions have significant implications for trauma theologians and the self-understanding of traumatised people. This is also true for church-in-community.

Church-in-community

Through autoethnography, I have identified two different experiences of church-in-community. Evangelical messages about purity, relationships, forgiveness and gender left me vulnerable and affected my understanding of God, myself and my femaleness; as such church-in-community could be seen to have contributed to my trauma. However, upon leaving Craig I joined a church that viewed me as competent and offered me trauma-informed counselling. This was a significant part of my recovery. Therefore, church-in-community is an ambiguous resource, with potential to contribute to trauma and with capacity to be a grace-enacted vehicle for recovery. Alice Yick's qualitative research found that 'domestic violence victims harness religious and spiritual resources to cope and find meaning, yet religion and spirituality can overtly and covertly promote abuse'.[249]

It is crucial that churches become trauma aware, otherwise they risk promoting abuse. Two problematic ways evangelical churches approach traumatised people are to either pathologise or demonise them.[250] We can see both of these in evangelical approaches to mental health.

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[248] Cohen, *Anthem.*
[249] Yick, 'Metasynthesis' 1289.
[250] Collins, 'Broken'.

Matthew Stanford found that prejudicial Christian attitudes towards mental ill-health included 'equating mental illness with the work of demons, and suggesting that the mental disorder was the result of personal sin'.[251]

Christian organisation *Mind and Soul* suggests this demonising approach has softened into an 'informed hybrid' where Christians attribute mental ill-health to a lack of faith, self-indulgence, or spiritual attack.[252] *Mind and Soul* reject this approach, but as I have argued elsewhere, they instead pathologise mental ill-health. [253] Their 'Mental Health Access Pack' informs churches about common mental health diagnoses without mentioning abuse or trauma,[254] and without including specialist trauma therapies.[255] The pack's website articulates people as *experiencing* mental health issues, thereby detaching difficult or traumatic incidents from the *experience* of mental ill-health.[256]

The *PTM Framework* explains the danger of this detachment:

> The medicalization of emotional and psychological distress is deeply entrenched within existing systems…it is impossible to separate out the emergence and experience of mental distress from wider society and culture and associated forms of power. Replacing the diagnostic model with a non-diagnostic understanding of emotional and psychological distress and troubled or troubling behaviour will inevitably force us to face up to some of the complexities that diagnosis has obscured.[257]

Rather than demonising or pathologising, the *PTM Framework* locates distress within the wider context; including systemic oppression, circumstances and deliberate harm. Some may be concerned this prevents biological factors being considered in mental ill-health, and critics

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[251] Stanford, 'Demon'*,* 2.
[252] Mind and Soul, 'Conversations'.
[253] Collins, 'Broken'.
[254] Mental Health Access Pack, 'Download'.
[255] Mental Health Access Pack, 'Forms'.
[256] Mental Health Access Pack, 'Home'.
[257] Johnstone, *Power*, 263-4.

of the framework have argued that it is ideologically driven and lacks cohesion.[258] While

biological factors may be relevant to broader conversations about mental ill-health, this

dissertation limits discussion to trauma specifically. While the broader criticisms have some

value, the framework is designed to shift paradigms and is not a clinical toolkit.

For her third stage of recovery, 'reconciling with oneself', Herman comments,

> The survivor no longer feels possessed by her traumatic past; she is in possession of
> herself. She has some understanding of the person she used to be and of the damage
> done to that person by the traumatic event. Her task now is to become the person she
> wants to be.[259]

This stage is characterised by the agency of self-choosing. Through a grace-empowered

understanding of trauma, churches can become theologically equipped to support traumatised

people towards this stage. Churches can honour traumatised people's coping strategies, rather

than pathologising or demonising them, enabling the traumatised person to 'take possession

of herself', embracing the value of her trauma responses without remaining beholden to them.

By entering a trauma-aware and grace-enacting church, traumatised people may feel safe

enough to examine whether their trauma responses are still needed. If churches frame trauma

responses as God-given good, traumatised people may feel less alienated from themselves

and more able to integrate the trauma into the rest of their lives. This is not about neat

redemptive narratives or expecting traumatised people to simply 'get over' the trauma, but

making space for pain whilst honouring grace-empowered survival.

The Christian community can mourn trauma, as outlined earlier and modelled in the Biblical

text of Lamentations. Catholic organisation *Future Church* developed a 'Liturgy of Lament'

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[258] Salkovskis, 'Power'.
[259] Herman, *Trauma,* 202.

about sexual abuse perpetrated within the Catholic church,[260] while a committee at the Christian Reformed Church prepared 'A Litany Lamenting the Abuse of Power within Faith Communities'.[261] Beyond this, by seeing trauma responses as grace-empowered, the church can honour God's abundant grace made manifest through traumatised people's survival. The church can utilise recovery resources and support traumatised people's new meaning-making as they engage with Christian teaching to know they are loved, valued and precious. Church-in-community could also facilitate what Herman describes as a 'survivor mission' in which traumatised people 'transcend [the trauma], by making it a gift to others.'[262] This could involve campaigning, writing theology on grace-empowered trauma responses, or through pastoral care. Traumatised people's ability to begin their survivor mission will generally be predicated on their community trusting them and seeing them as competent and capable of effecting change, not as broken and incapacitated.

Conclusion

Traumatised people are not broken. We are embodiments of God's prevenient grace. By identifying traumatic incidents as distinct but interrelated categories of systemic oppression, circumstance and deliberate harm, we can begin separating trauma responses from the traumatic incidents that caused them. In doing so we discover that trauma responses are physiological and rational. These physiological responses exceed normal human functioning; and I have articulated them as super-powers.

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[260] Future Church, *Liturgy*.
[261] Network, 'Abuse'.
[262] Herman, *Trauma,* 207.

Trauma responses can be understood as good according to Aquinas' theology, through which I have argued that God's prevenient grace powers trauma responses. This understanding of trauma enables traumatised people's responses to be honoured and integrated into their lives, rather than pathologising and further alienating traumatised people from themselves. While this approach risks valourising trauma responses, it does not have to. Just as we can understand Jesus' death as transformative without it being glorified, my understanding of trauma results from me being a traumatised person. Coining the term 'safenormativity', I articulated the ways non-traumatised people and trauma theologians tend to pathologise and problematize traumatised people.

I have used an autoethnographic, integrative theological method, incorporating Scripture, tradition, reason, experience and church-in-community. Understanding trauma responses as grace-empowered super-powers enables churches to approach trauma differently. Churches can support traumatised people into recovery, where they can integrate their trauma responses as 'good' while pursuing recovery resources which may lead trauma responses to become redundant.

The safenormativity of some trauma theologians may undermine their ability to fully engage with traumatised people's reality. God's grace is not limited for traumatised people, nor for any people. For the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, will be with us all, forevermore.[263] Amen.

Word Count: 14,953

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[263] 2 Corinthians 13:14.

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