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CROSSING OVER
CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST THEOLOGIAN ON THE THEOLOGY
OF THE CROSS

Promotor

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FOREWORD

I feel blessed because I could count on the help of a number of people to write this research paper. Just thanking them does not seem to be enough, but that is what I am going to do anyway. I hope they realise that I keep them in my heart. I owe a sincere thank you to professor doctor De Mey, who once again was prepared to devote time to read my research paper during his yearly holiday. I valued his suggestions greatly. I thank Philip Drury who, also during his holiday, graciously agreed to correct my writing and change it to proper English. Your humorous remarks gave me energy when it was at its lowest, thank you, Philip. Any mistakes remaining are definitely mine. I am indebted to my husband without whose lasting support and encouragement I couldn't have applied myself to the task of writing this research paper. Thank you, Luc, for giving me the opportunity to do what I like best! My children are quite used to seeing their mum sitting behind her computer for weeks on end during school holidays, but still, thank you boys, for taking an interest in feminist theology. Your belief in me carried me through rain and sunshine. I especially want to thank my mother, who never gives up on me, although she sometimes thinks I should do other things beside reading and writing. And finally, I want to thank all my friends who were considerate enough not to mind my thoughts wandering off this last year, because I was thinking of the theology of the cross.

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps you would agree with me when I say that the cross is the most important symbol in Christianity¹. To me anyway it has always played a prominent role in my life. I grew up in a catholic family in a small village in Flanders, in the northern part of Belgium². Everywhere I looked I saw crosses: in the convent close to our house where I went to school, on the walls of our home and in the homes of the people we visited, in the churches and chapels that abound in Flanders, on the graves of the family members in our cemetery. The women and children I encountered wore crosses as jewellery around their neck and giving a golden cross as a present at first communion was a usual custom. It was normal to make the sign of the cross before starting a meal or when entering a church. And to me it was a blessing to receive the sign of the cross from my mother on my forehead each evening before going to bed while she said: “God bless and keep you.” It was still a secure and safe place to grow up as a catholic child. It robs you of course also of the critical thinking you need when you want to become a believer by choice and not by habit! However, moving to a large city and to a state school soon sharpened my critical thinking and I found out that if I wanted to defend my beliefs to my contemporaries who seemed to think I was a retard because I called myself a Christian, I had to start thinking about faith, and what it meant to me.

My grandmother, a very pious woman, came to live with her husband and his parents as a young bride. She had eleven children but lost three of them. My father’s twin died during the last operation to correct his hare lip, a three year old brother drowned in the pond in the garden and my father’s younger brother died at boarding school after a very short but fatal illness. My grandmother had to live through two wars; she suffered from several chronic illnesses and was frequently struck by bad luck. Life was a constant struggle and comforts were few and far between. But she found comfort in the cross, saw Jesus as one who knew what suffering meant. She never rebelled and bore her cross with patience and in silence. I remember her silently crying, it still breaks my heart...

The cross, thus, for me, meant indeed comfort. It was only later, during history lessons that I began to see the atrocities that were committed in the wake of the cross: the crusades, the eradication of the Cathars and the Waldensians in southern France and northern Italy. Or the conquering of the New World where the Indians were forced to give up their own religion or die, to name just a few examples! I tried to find excuses for such behaviour by saying that perhaps these people did not know any better, or that they were ignorant, or that they thought they were doing the right thing. It is quite possible this was true, but that does not excuse their use of ruthless power, the domination or their blind use of violence. Anyway, the cross never aroused me to revolt or made me act on behalf of other people who were being excluded on account of who they were. Of course, thinking people were ignorant in the past says much about our self-confidence today! Modern people believe they are ore advanced. We think we have evolved a lot, know more, and have a better understanding of the world and the people living in it than our forefathers (and

¹ I should perhaps explain that I do not make a distinction between the cross (without Jesus hanging from it), and the crucifixion (with Jesus hanging from it).

² Mary Solberg is adamant that it is important that theologians name the dimensions of their own location: “To name the significant dimensions of my own location may be a partial antidote to such participation (in the traditional epistemology, the dominant meaning system). Explicitly , it entails acknowledging my limitations (that I have them)...is to acknowledge that there is much I do not know, that I need to hear from other sources, to hear other voices. Implicitly, it identifies me in relation to others like me, pulls at me to identify myself in relation to those who are like me and in some way to articulate the accountability I have to whom I have it. Doing so also distinguishes me from those who do not share significantly in my location, and in some way makes it incumbent on me to account for myself to them”. I think this is a valid observation and that is why I begin my paper by outlining my situation. Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling knowledge: A Feminist Proposal for an Epistemology of the Cross* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 33.

mothers). But what should we say then about president Bush Jr. proclaiming war on terrorism as the new crusade?

I later came to understand that the cross was for some people a hateful symbol. They saw in it something I had never perceived! But their vehemence has made me wonder what it was in Christianity that made supposedly true believers act this way. How can a religion based on the life and death of a poor Jew on a cross lead to such atrocities? In fact, when I was writing my thesis on sin and grace in contemporary feminist theology, I had the idea to incorporate a chapter about the theology of the cross. Because for me, the cross seemed to be the place where sin, be it the sin of the individual believer or the sin of the world, meets with the grace of God. Unfortunately, time and the number of pages allowed made me reconsider. However, the subject remained foremost in my mind and so I decided to write this research paper on it.

I am now a mature woman, well educated and happy with my life, but at the same time, being a woman always was and remains a struggle for me...

I learned very early on that because I was a woman or a girl at that time, a number of things and actions were forbidden to me. I could not really rebel against these restrictions because they were thought to be normal; women were not allowed certain things just because of their sex. To give but a few examples: my brother was encouraged to become an altar boy, as my father had been before him. It was something to be very proud of and it was a bond between them. Since I could not participate I felt excluded. Neither could I attend my brother's school which seemed to me much more free and exciting than the nun's school where I was a pupil and where discipline and strict obedience were highly valued. Sadly but perhaps not very surprisingly, I had trouble with both... When the time came to choose a profession, I was not allowed into the military because the army's officer's school was at that time still reserved for men only. Neither could I become a deck officer in the merchant navy. I entertained for a while the idea to enter the foreign services but had to envision the fact of not finding any man willing to move with me every four years. The boys in my class at secondary school started a course in civil engineering, though greatly tempted, I did not because I was sure that my career would not take off before I was forty or so since all my male colleagues would take precedence! I ended up choosing a career in electronics, a mostly male environment which only recently had opened up to women. It was hard and I had to prove myself over and over again, but I loved it. When I had been married for a short time, my husband lost his job. This made him feel diminished as a person. Eventually he found new employment with an international firm and after a while I was put in the same situation I thought no man would ever be prepared to do for me, which was: leaving my employment in Belgium to follow my husband abroad for an uncertain period of time! It meant putting my career on hold in order to be with him and becoming what I had never envisaged to be: a housewife!

The reason I want to recount this, is to illustrate that to me, being a woman has meant in many an instance clearly that I was not a man! It implied that, although I could make certain choices, there were always restrictions and boundaries that could never be crossed, because I was a woman and no amount of knowledge or academic degrees, and no professional achievement can change that fact. I encountered these limitations at home, at school, in my professional life and in my religion. Still, I learned that I also was very fortunate, my parents started out in their married life with nothing but capable working hands and yet, I was never hungry, never wanted for clothes or medical help. I was never sexually abused, never assaulted and my husband loves and respects me. It is a fact that women in Belgium still earn less than their male colleagues, even when they do the same job, but, I have never been exploited. I see the young girls in my classes at school even today (in 2008) making choices that bear witness to the same limitations I was subjected to. They do not rebel against the restrictions. On the contrary, they voluntarily adopt them and are astounded when I point them out to them. Some injustices are so ingrained in our society that no one recognises them anymore as injustices. They are thought of as the normal order of things, something that can or even should never be changed. It is these experiences that made me choose feminist theology as my outlook on Christianity...

How did I proceed with my research paper? I posed myself a number of questions concerning the cross and tried to answer them as well as I could from a feminist point of view. In the first chapter I provide the framework the feminist theologians work in, the second chapter reproduces

the criticisms these theologians have on some interpretations of the cross event, while the third chapter voices their proposals for new interpretations of the crucifixion. I end this research paper with my conclusions on the criticisms and the new proposals.

Since feminist theologians do not have a problem with the atonement theories as they were originally presented but rather with their interpretation in the tradition, I feel a systematic revision or reinterpretation of the original theories is not required in this paper³. What feminist theologians do is either propose different interpretations of the cross or broaden the locus of salvation, in order to shield women and all vulnerable people from any interpretation that might harm them.

My goal was not to give an exhaustive summary of all contemporary feminist theologians that have published on this subject during the last ten years. I tried however to bring together material from a number of theologians that I found attempted a positive answer on the question of the meaning of the cross today. Since for me Christianity is still the correct way to learn to know and worship God, I limited myself to feminist theologians that think along this line⁴. These feminist theologians want to bring something extra to Christianity by their critical thinking on, in this instance, the theories on the theology of the cross. Through their work they want to convert Christianity to become a more just and right religion where all people are, as they should be, true children of God. I would like to insist on the fact that feminist theologians should be read by everyone interested in theology. What they have to say should be considered a valid contribution to the discussion on the subject of theology. It can never just be intended for a select and restricted group of feminists only busy with their own problems. This would be a return to the very situation they are trying to amend for it would mean an exclusion of the theological dialogue of everyone not sharing their views! A real encounter that carries in it the possibility of enrichment can only take place between people that think differently! It would also defy the very purpose of theology: trying to clarify, interpret and understand the revelation of God in the bible, in tradition and in our own lives! Since feminist theologians insist on the partiality and contextuality of their proposals, I too tried to evaluate their thinking from my situation in life. Their aim is to get the discussion going, and I hope I will prove to be a worthy participant to their cause.

³ The main theories of atonement are: the patristic theory which was popular from the 2nd to the 6th century, to be systematised in the 20th century by Gustav Aulén as the *Christus Victor* theory, Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: A Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the idea of Atonement*, trans. A.G. Herbert (1931; reprint London: SPCK, 1960). The satisfaction theory developed by Anselm of Canterbury in the 11th century, the moral influence model stemming from Abelard in the 11th-12th century, the penal substitution model found as early as Athanasius but popular in Reformation thinking, and the “happy exchange” model associated with Luther. Kathryn Tanner, “Incarnation, Cross and Sacrifice: A Feminist-Inspired Reappraisal,” *Anglican Theological Review* 861’1 (winter 2004), 35-36. Lothar Ullrich finds Luther’s exchange model as *admirabile commercium* already in the *Letter of Diognetus*, in Irenaeus, Ciprian, Athanasius. Lothar Ullrich, “Reconciliation,” *Handbook of Catholic Theology*, eds. Wolfgang Beinert and Francis Schüssler –Fiorenza (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995; reprint 2000). Marion Grau locates the *admirabile commercium* in the texts of Irenaeus, Cyprian, Origen, Tertullian and Gregory of Nyssa. She sees a connection with Luther of course, but also finds this motive in contemporary Catholic theology: in that of Erich Przywara, Hns Urs von Balthasar, and Raymund Schwager. Marion Grau, *Of Divine Economy: Refinancing Redemption* (New York, NY: T&T Clark International, 2004), 139. I explained each model summarily in my thesis on sin and grace in contemporary feminist theology, p. 59-63.

⁴ Although post-Christian feminist theologians certainly offer challenging viewpoints they are not included in this research paper since my preoccupation is with ameliorating Christian theology from within. I found sufficient Christian feminist theologians with different ideas to provide food for thought.

CHAPTER 1. A FEMINIST FRAMEWORK

The frame the feminist theologians I have considered work in, which is also the one I wish to adopt, deserves some attention. First I want to delineate what I researched and thus what this paper is about. A theology of the cross should be concerned with what God communicates through the historical event of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. I am therefore interested in what the cross means, what it tells us about God, but also what it tells us about Jesus. Jesus is called our saviour, but when did He save us? What consequences does this have for our vision of ourselves and the world and how should we live if we want to live faithfully? What does the crucifixion mean for the church as an institution?

Feminist theologians have come to the conclusion that some traditional thinking starts off on the wrong foot because they make errors about what and how we think⁵. They make “faulty generalisations”, in order to construct a single true story. These generalisations are exclusive and are based on a hierarchical model. Then they use “circular reasoning” to prove their point, exempting everything from their reasoning that might contradict or question it and cataloguing it as irrelevant! Another fault they make is the use of ‘mystified concepts’. Their meaning is never specified, but their use stops all critical thought. Because no one knows exactly what they mean they easily become platitudes that can be used to eliminate criticism. The last fault has to do with taking partial knowledge and considering it as *pars pro toto*. Thus silencing all dissident voices because they are considered unimportant. According to feminist theologians our knowledge is often a result of who has the power to decide what is worth knowing, and of deciding who has access to what is considered true knowledge. Many of these rules that decide what is knowledge and who is considered a knower are implicit, but not arbitrary, because there is power in knowledge and whoever holds this power is able to decide!

Closely connected to this knowledge, we have to bear in mind the fact that we cannot fully understand God, nor can we manipulate, predict or control God. This is what is meant by the transcendence. But neither are we completely ignorant about God, because God revealed Him/Herself to His/Her chosen people and this was written down in the Bible⁶. The general stand feminist theologians take on the interpretation of a biblical verse, and which I agree with, is that it should be read against the horizon of the bible and that it has to be framed in the general image of a God who wants hail for all people. The image any theology provides of God should always be compared with the biblical images of God. If it fails the test, then theology should be seen as idolatrous!

However feminist theologians believe that God continues to reveal Him/Herself in the tradition of the Church and in the experience of people in the two thousand years of Christianity and up to today. They see God first in the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized. Those, who are called the widows, the strangers and the orphans in the Bible. God is found in the relations between human beings, this is where He/She becomes present. Feminist theologians notice and sometimes even feel in their bodies a discrepancy between what the church teaches on the cross, what they experience in their own lives and what they read in the bible and thereby think the cross event should be about.

The cross stands for Christians first and foremost for the passion and the death of Jesus Christ who bore this, as it is written in the gospels, without protest albeit with considerable fear of what was to come. Originally though, and perhaps important to bear in mind, the cross was an instrument of torture! It points to an ignominious death, to a public execution, it is a tool indicating who has power and who is subject to this power, and it indicates the fear and the intolerance of the powerful against anyone standing in their way.

⁵ Elizabeth Kanmarck Minnich, *Transforming Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 160 as referred to in Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 28- 31.

⁶ Since I absolutely want to overcome the usual images of an all-male God, I will deliberately refer to God by using He/She.

It seems this death on the cross saved us once and for all and through it the relationship between God and humanity was restored. But does this mean that what believers do does not count? Through Christ's sacrifice and by taking part in the Body of the Christ, believers can participate in the Godly love, with Christ, through Christ and in Christ we become sons and daughters of God⁷. Deanne Thompson states that the question of atonement is "how humanity is reconciled and redeemed by God and how the cross of Christ relates to salvation and redemption⁸." Christ's death made this salvation possible, but was He then destined to die? Or was His death the almost inevitable outcome of a life devoted to the poor, the marginalized, and the outcast? Was His death wanted or even demanded by God? However, to feminist theologians, Good Friday cannot be sarcasm! Looking at the totality of the Bible one cannot say other than that our God is just and loving. Such a God cannot have wished Christ to die, not even for the benefit of all is the death of one to be allowed, or can He/She? Torture and death cannot be considered good, whatever the aim! The end never justifies the means, God is not a cynic!

Still, many people today find comfort in the death of Christ on the cross because they can connect their own suffering with Christ. A suffering God understands true human suffering because he has experienced it in the flesh! Theologians have tried to come to terms with the meaning of the cross and they thereby have connected suffering with love and salvation. Being a Christian means continuing Christ's mission in our own life. It involves becoming a servant and giving our life for our neighbour out of love for Christ. It involves even loving to death. It signifies believing that the seed has to die in order to be fertile. But does it imply that suffering is the only or best or guaranteed way to salvation?

The cross is also sadly a symbol for oppression and intolerance: with the cross as a banner whole populations were brought to their knees and violently forced to adhere to a new religion.

The cross also points to the resurrection. Christ experienced this already, but for us it is still a promise to come at the end of times. The cross then has also an eschatological meaning. For us, ordinary people, this joyous event is delayed. The here and now involves the daily reality of living with pain and anxiety, like Christ had to during his historical life. Since Christ was innocent and we are not, some Christians think that no burden can compare to Christ's, that no humiliation was as total as his! But what does this imply about human suffering?

Feminist theologians are of the impression that

Those in relatively more privileged positions (by virtue of the preponderance of "advantage" among their multiple identities) have much to learn from "outsides within"; they may learn something about the perspective from the margins, but they may also learn to see themselves with greater clarity⁹.

This is the position they wish to adopt to come to a theology of the cross that is beneficial for all people. A theological vision from the underside of society, of history, from the bottom of the cross can teach us more about God but also about ourselves.

In recent years a number of feminist theologians have critically re-examined the theories of the great reformers of the 16th century, Luther and Calvin, to see if their theologies could be put into dialogue with feminist thinking today in order to come to an enrichment of both¹⁰. One of Luther's expressions: "to call a thing what it is" has become a method for these theologians to unmask the unjust mechanisms of power that lie behind certain epistemologies or theories¹¹. I find the same

⁷ Be it adoptive sons and daughters as Saint Paul wrote!

⁸ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide: Luther, Feminism and the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 127.

⁹ Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know: Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 307-308, as referred to in Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 43.

¹⁰ Amongst them are Deanne Thompson, Mary Solberg and Serene Jones.

¹¹ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 142; Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 44, 104. The expression is derived from these 21 of the Heidelberg disputation, which took place in 1518. It goes as follows: 21. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is (*quod res est*). *Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman (St Louis:

method in the writings of the Catholic feminist theologians I read, when they adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion: they examine who benefits from a certain way of thinking and who is in charge, who decides what is relevant and what is superfluous and should be forgotten or ignored¹².

Feminist theologians attach great importance to the personal “lived experience”. They believe that people’s beliefs should always be examined in the light of their contextuality¹³! One of the criticisms feminist theologians have concerns exactly the fact that some theories in the past have been too abstract, constructing a beautiful interpretation that proved to be very harmful faced with reality and real peoples’ lives and concerns. Experience with life and with God is what we read in the Bible; human beings struggle to understand who God is and what ‘belonging to God’s chosen people’ implies for their daily existence. Experience is clearly thoroughly biblical! Since we know that all human beings are different, our experience is too, that is why

Feminist thinkers argue that “objectivity” must cease to name the epistemological outcomes of a driving ambition to control or master the objects of knowledge. Instead, it must be associated with the provisional, partial, and ongoing search for fidelity in and about a world, . . . , in which “we’ are permanently mortal, that is, not in ‘final’ control...” Attentive humility and answerability are two of the qualities most in demand for this sort of search¹⁴.

Feminist theologians should be concerned about objectivity. However, they recognize that no one can ever be totally objective in the sense that no one is free of preconceptions or an interpretative frame. Objectivity would then imply a “view from nowhere”, where the position of the observer is of no account! Of course this is impossible. Recognizing this should fill every theologian and indeed every researcher with humility and should make us seek discussion so as to appreciate the limitations and gaps in our own thinking.

Following this reasoning, Solberg thinks that feminist epistemologies should comply with two criteria. First, they have to “include the knowing of whom (like women), have been excluded.” And then, secondly,

Any theory should be accountable for the damage, physical, psychological, economic, spiritual and other that exclusionary frameworks foster, and their commitment to changing such frameworks¹⁵.

To feminist theologians theology can never be just an abstract affair. As a result, they are imminently concerned with the implications of believing in God in the everyday life of the believer, and so am I. My wish is to live with God, even though He/She sometimes appears to us a difficult companion!

This criticism of the theology of the cross may be perceived as one-sided, and indeed it is, but the theories of Christus Victor, of the vicarious satisfaction, of moral influence, of penal substitution and of the “happy exchange”, have been seriously defended in the past¹⁶. Indeed, they

Concordia – Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955), 40.

¹² Among them are Rosemary Carbine, Cynthia Crysdale, Ivone Gebara, Mary Grey, Marina Herrera, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Elizabeth Johnson, Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether.

¹³ Rita Nakashima Brock, “Losing Your Innocence but Not Your Hope,” in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed., Maryanne Stevens (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993; reprint Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 31.

¹⁴ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The reinvention of Nature* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 201 as referred to in Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 50.

¹⁵ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 51.

¹⁶ Most of them were popular only during a certain time in the history of the church. However, Anselm’s satisfaction theory has proved to be more enduring than other theories, judging from the amount of literature that it has generated. This has been corroborated by my reading where the criticism centred mostly around interpretations of the satisfaction theory of Anselm. Even though Darby Ray sees an “atonement orthodoxy” based on the theories of atonement of Anselm and Abelard. This then combines the necessity of the cross, the freely chosen death of Jesus to give satisfaction to God for our wrongs with the salvific meaning of Jesus’ life and death through his love for humanity and obedience to God. Darby Kathleen Ray, *Deceiving the*

reigned and influenced peoples' lives for centuries¹⁷. I write this research paper for people that are well acquainted with the traditional theologies of the cross. My goal is not to recount these theories once more; this has been done many times in the past. But I want to give voice to the lesser known feminist criticisms and proposals concerning these theologies (for of course, during the last two thousand years there have been several). Feminist theologians have exposed the fact that they have serious drawbacks. In being true to the *adagium* of calling a thing what it is, they name the negative consequences that some of the interpretations of the cross can have. As a symbol that has been ambiguous for two thousand years and remains so today, the cross demands further research!

It is clear that feminist theologians are not the only ones that have seen the need for a revision of the usual interpretations of the cross! Also liberation theologians and other theologians concerned with those that suffer from oppression or dehumanisation have done so¹⁸! Feminist theologians can add an extra dimension to the discussion, because women, be they poor, black, white or coloured, educated or illiterate, all have been socialised to a certain expected role in the family and in society. They adopt mostly a serving role, and take on the bulk of the housework and the education of the children. Women are considered responsible for the sexual wellbeing of men whatever their other achievements. This gives women a vision on God, Jesus, the human being and the world that is different to that of men. Interpretations of the cross have up till recently been a male affair. Since a theologians' aim should be to come to the broadest view of how God reveals Him/Herself to the world and all the people in it, a feminist theologian's viewpoint on this should be beneficial to theology as a whole.

CHAPTER 2. CRITICISM OF FEMALE THEOLOGIANS ON THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

2.1. General

What has baffled theologians and average believers alike about the cross event, has been the fact that God seemingly abandoned Jesus of Nazareth by not saving him from his passion and the cross. Especially when it looked as if God could not or would not intervene to spare him whom his followers thought to be the Son of God, the Messiah! This shook the believers and they felt that if their faith was reasonable there had to be a rational solution to this problem. Because if God could not save Jesus, this would imply that God was not all powerful and this was contrary to their image of God. But if He/She would not interfere with events this had to mean there had to be a good explanation behind God's refusal. By extrapolation the theodicy question came to be: how can belief in a good God be reconciled with the existence of evil and suffering? A general criticism feminist theologians voice concerning the theology of the cross is that in the course of history theologians have been much more occupied with this theodicy question instead of trying to understand what the cross meant for Jesus and for all victims of abuse and injustice¹⁹. The focus has thus always been on the 'stronger' pole of the relation. The cry of the unbeliever in Mt 27, 42-43: "He saved others, he cannot save himself. So he is the King of Israel. Let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusted in God, let him deliver him now, if he

Devil: Atonement, Abuse and Ransom (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press), 17-18.

¹⁷ For an overview of how these theories of atonement influenced the lives of women, see Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, "The Execution of Jesus and the Theology of the Cross," in *Jesus, Myriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1995), 97-128. How they worked in the lives of black slaves can be read in JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood: The Cross in African American Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books; reprint Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), 10-31.

¹⁸ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, trans. WARE A.P (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 89.

¹⁹ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail: Retrieving the Cross Today* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2001), 31.

wants him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God'" requesting a sign of a powerful God has been more influential than the belief in a God who would overcome evil with love and mercy.

The models of atonement in history have in the line of this thinking been trying to find what reason could have had for not saving Jesus from the cross (and by extension, the passion)²⁰. The usual players are God, the devil (as the source of evil), Jesus and the human beings. The first two are portrayed as very powerful while the last two are seen as powerless victims. Kathryn Tanner has examined a number of atonement theories by posing four questions that have to do with the distribution of power and the changes that take place. She asks who is responsible for the crucifixion, who or what is changed by the crucifixion, who is responsible for the change and finally, what the meaning of the cross is. If for example Jesus himself is thought to be responsible for the crucifixion, then the whole cross event takes the character of a charade, a big show production where the main star does not really suffer²¹! If however he really suffers this implies that he wants to suffer, portraying thus a masochistic Jesus! If the human beings are responsible for the crucifixion they receive great power because they can bring a God to death! If God (or the devil) is responsible this would mean that human beings are not personally responsible for their deeds, they are the will-less playthings of a stronger power! If God is the one changed by the cross, then God is a wrathful God beforehand and becomes a merciful God. Again the one responsible for the cross bears great responsibility! If the human beings are changed they go from hate to love and from fear of to trust in God. If it is however the situation that is changed, then this affects both God and humanity because the relationship between both becomes reciprocal. If Christ brings about this change by his obedience, this becomes a very important Christian virtue. If, however, it is Christ's godliness that made the change possible, it is the fight with the devil that humans cannot win by themselves that takes the spotlight. One can interpret the crucifixion as an interruption, a change of direction or a continuation of God's love for us. All these interpretations have come up in theology. And although perhaps worthwhile in their efforts of exonerating God of any blame for a shameful historic event, they also have caused quite some damage in the lives of ordinary people. It is precisely these consequences that feminist theologians want to demonstrate.

It might be disconcerting to read that feminist theologians seem to criticise the fact that there is too much theology of the cross at one time and too much theology of glory at another time. However, there is no inconsistency involved; it all depends on the group they are looking at. If for example, they have the victims in mind, they might lament the fact that these people identify themselves too much with the suffering Jesus, and accept their own misery obediently thinking that this is the way to salvation. If, on the contrary, they look at the perpetrators of oppression, they might accuse them of living according to too little theology of the cross, because they exonerate themselves from their sins, and are throwing the responsibility for their actions on their victims. In my mind, this has to do with the ambivalence of the cross, and with the interpretations of the theories, it seems that depending on who is at the receiving end, different elements of the cross event, be it the suffering or the resurrection, are highlighted.

Feminist theologians want to stress the fact that the different interpretations of the cross event are contextual and that some thus no longer have any meaning for us today because our understanding of the world, human beings and God has changed too much. They plead for an appreciation of this contextuality. This would imply that any understanding of God is always temporal and that none of the explanations has a timeless quality. By extrapolation this would mean that conciliary texts also should be changed and amended in order to be able to remain understandable!

Another fact has been that what was once a metaphorical way of speaking of God and the experience of salvation, always stressing the difference as much as the likeness has been read in a literal way later on.

²⁰ A very comprehensive overview of typologies of the essential differences between the models of atonement is to be found in Kathryn Tanner, "Incarnation, Cross and Sacrifice," 35-56.

²¹ The recently much commented Judas Gospel also supports this motif!

...Christians' experience of being saved, of the power of God's resurrection, was expressed in the first millennium in a wide variety of images, metaphors, analogies, and narratives. Not all of them focused on the cross or even on sin and judgment. After Anselm the variety dissipated and narrowed down to variations on the theme of penal substitution...most of the early attempts to explain salvation were put forward in narrative and symbolic forms...This "as if" dimension was implicit and presumed by audiences everywhere, allowing them to make up better analogies if they could find them. Anselm tried to systematize a theory of salvation, yet his explanation was, in fact, just as metaphorical as the others...Anselm's approach became codified of reality...This literal reading of an analogous situation led much of Anselm's cultural baggage to be handed down as if it were the core of the gospel message...Anselm's original intent, to show that "God's mercy is incomparably greater than anything that can be conceived, was lost as his metaphor perdured as literal truth"²².

This has had two consequences, first the richness of the images concerning the relationship of God with His/Her people have been reduced to a few contestable interpretations, and secondly, what was once 'as if' has solidified into one single truth, becoming idolatry!

Cynthia Crysdale speaks of the "bad news" of the cross when it leads to women being told that suffering is deserved or meritorious, when the theology of the cross is used to denigrate women and minorities and when injustice has been perpetuated in the name of the cross because it links suffering to salvation²³. Women are cast as victims or choose this role themselves because they are convinced that suffering makes them better persons, more perfect Christians. This leads inevitably to oppression and injustice, sorrow and abuse. One of the problems Mary Solberg, in accord with Luther, sees is that the theology of the cross has mostly been a theology of glory. And a theology from glory always starts from human reasoning:

It was human reason that wanted to create a theology of glory, one that reflected humans' "reasonable" inferences about God and humankind and their relationship to one another, inferences that ran exactly contrary to what Luther had in mind in the theology of the cross. Reason begins with itself, and orients everything to itself. It begins with humans' approach to God, rather than with God's initiative vis-à-vis humankind. Reason seeks to understand God based on what can be discovered about God from the world and the powers of human speculation, bypassing God's incarnated revelation: Jesus in the manger and on the cross. Perhaps, most poignantly, the legalistic religion reason generates cannot comprehend the Gospel's message of free forgiveness by grace alone. It holds that a just and holy God can be approached only by just and holy people. Such legalism is "based upon a false inference"²⁴.

People and thus also theologians want to be able to control, themselves, others, their lives, God and their own salvation. They want to make sure that their plans will prevail. Their image of God is of course idolatrous for they want to grasp God, they do not recognise the full implication of the transcendence of God.

I found that feminist theologians criticise the theology of the cross on a number of points which I am going to consider separately: the cross as such, the human being, the world, the church, Jesus and God. My method has to do with the way feminist theologians understand how human beings acquire knowledge: by reflecting on their lived experience. That is why I start with what is at the bottom of the experience: the cross event, then moving on to what is first experienced: the human being itself, proceeding to the world and the institution proclaiming the cross event in the world: the church. Next comes the interpretations of the theology of the cross about Jesus, the true image of God in the world. Finally I arrive at the images of God these interpretations distribute. Feminist theologians find these visions contradictory to the message of the Gospel for they are inhibiting the contribution of believers to the Reign of God²⁵.

²² Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 111-112. See also note 3 and note 16 on the variety before Anselm and the prevalence of one (combined and modified) theory afterwards.

²³ *Ibid.*, xi.

²⁴ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 77-78.

A last note I want to make is that symbols are very powerful; they evoke a number of images and emotions that are almost never expressed but that are nevertheless very present. Marion Grau asks us “to be aware of the history and potential abuse of symbols such as the cross for the purpose of keeping people, and especially women, silenced under oppression²⁶.” I would now like to move on to the feminist criticism of the interpretations of the cross.

2.2. The Cross

The fact that a human being was crucified and suffered a slow, humiliating and painful public execution is indeed seen as an indication of the cruelty of humanity. As Jesus was perceived by his followers as the one to save the ‘people of God’ and to lead this people out of oppression and servitude, the scandal was complete. No wonder that the men abandoned Jesus upon his arrest in Gethsemane! They were disillusioned because their leader had let them down. The one they thought to be all-powerful proved to be as helpless as themselves. They saw a bleeding man who was afraid of what was to come and who underwent his humiliation without any retaliation! The power they were so eagerly seeking simply was not there. This man could not even save himself, how could he ever save them? Even God seemed to abandon him (and them), because as opposed to what had happened in the history of Israel, He/She did not interfere directly in the life of Jesus.

The resurrection changed the disciples’ perspective on the cross. They interpreted it as a sign of the power of God. What they experienced was expressed in a number of metaphors, redemption and atonement being but a few of them. Feminist theologians regret the fact that these metaphors have after a while centred around the cross, focussing thus on the salvation the cross supposedly brought while forgetting the shame and destitution, the pain of the one hanging there and the helplessness and sorrow of the bystanders. The fear also, of the onlookers who shared Jesus’ beliefs.

What feminist theologians argue against is that the cross became the only site of redemption! For them the cross is just a demonstration of human violence and does not have anything to do with atonement “It shows the face of human violence in all its ugliness and power²⁷,” because human beings are responsible for the death of Jesus. The cross has nothing to do with a price demanded by God for the evil that humanity did, nor is it a ransom demanded by the devil. To Flora Keshgegian, the cross does not redeem because the victims remain lost.

Jesus’ crucifixion and death witness to the persistence and power of violence and degradation in this world...The cross is a site of abuse – the abuse of power against the undeserving. The cross is also the result of human evil...Jesus died in ignomy and alone. So have millions of human beings whose only “crime” was that they were children, or dark skinned or Jewish or Armenian or female. God knows their pain, but does not redeem it. The cross is not redeemable. It is not redemptive. It must be mourned and remembered. The loss endured must be acknowledged and accepted. There is no going back before the cross. In that way – and only in that way – it changed history...because the forces that killed Jesus continue to find victims in the world, there will always be the danger of distortion and manipulation of the cross²⁸.

She states clearly that victims do not feel saved after a crucifying type experience. People having survived the Holocaust or genocide more often feel guilty and disempowered. They struggle with the

²⁵ I think that perhaps it would be better if we were to use the expression the ‘Promised Land’ instead of the ‘Reign of God’. First of all, because it illustrates better the eschatological ‘not yet’ and secondly because it inhibits any thought of hierarchy which is still present in the word ‘reign’. I think that in view of the problems in the Middle East between Israel and Palestine it would be better if the ‘Promised Land’ were not seen as a specific place, but rather as a state of mind one gains when doing the will of God.

²⁶ Marion Grau, *Of Divine Economy*, 160.

²⁷ Darby Kathleen Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 107 interprets Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1988), 93-94.

²⁸ Flora Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories: A Theology of Healing and Transformation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 196-197.

question of why they have been saved as compared to the ones who have died. They ask themselves what they have to make of their lives now that their beloved ones have died. They feel alone and lost. The loss they suffered can never be redeemed. Lots of victims of the Holocaust only started talking about their experiences forty years after they were liberated from the camps. Just thinking about what they had lived through was too painful, they did not bear talking about it. They felt the best way to cope would be to get on with their lives as if they had stopped the day of their deportation and were put on hold the whole time they were in the camps. Joanne Carlson Brown, Rebecca Parker, and Rita Nakashima Brock are “wary of assigning any redemptive value to Jesus’ death” because of the problem of linking redemption with suffering and blood²⁹. Perpetrators of child abuse and domestic violence seem to think that they are doing a good thing, sometimes even teaching their victim something, by administering violence. If their suffering is not redemptive, then Jesus’ suffering cannot be either. I understand from this that they do not choose to differentiate between the ordinary human being and the God-man that Jesus was according to the Christian tradition³⁰. It is, of course, also true that the men using this argument to discipline women and children equate themselves with the godly nature of Jesus! This might have something to do with the emphasis that the church has put on the maleness of Jesus, but I will return to this further on in this chapter.

Ivone Gebara, who lives in one of the poorest regions of Brazil and is confronted daily with the evil consequences of drug abuse, poverty and violence, is very much aware of the fact that stating that the death of Jesus on the cross wiped away the stain of our sins once and for all and brought salvation for all, means “exonerating at the same time all the perpetrators of their sins” and thus maintains oppression of women and the poor³¹. Because the perpetrators focus solely on the mercy of Christ, the eschatological ‘already’ is for them more important than the ‘not yet’. Since the price for their sins already has been paid by Christ, they can sin all they want without being afraid of an end of times verdict! The mercy displayed by Jesus becomes the sign of a weak God, who will not punish no matter what. This God seems to be a God for the strong only, abandoning the weak to their misery, as Jesus was seemingly abandoned! All that is left for the victims is to endure in silence, as did Christ! She denounces also “the male-centred universalism of the cross”, which has been “imposed on different cultures as if this event must be the ultimate model”, because it takes the attention away from “the scandal of all the crosses represented by the many forms of violence throughout society³².” By always repeating how terribly one man suffered on the cross and how innocent he was, other kinds of suffering are denigrated and have not been getting the attention they deserve! What the fact that it was a man suffering has done for the suffering of women will come later in this chapter.

A last point Ivone Gebara makes concerning the cross is that it is a very ambiguous symbol. It can provide comfort and also be an exhortation to renewal and healing, but simultaneously, it is used to dominate and oppress! It is ambiguous in the personal life but has been used in both ways by institutions and even states!

Commonly understood, the cross is always something negative in life, something to get rid of or to have help in carrying. But...the cross as an object or symbol of worship, a reminder of the cross of Jesus, means also a call to restored life, a call to redemption and salvation... Ever since the marriage of the cross and the sword in the great Christian empires and in the colonial period, the cross has been associated with ruling power³³.

She denounces the role the Catholic Church has played on the many occasions when she chose to take the sides of the military regimes, often because the opponents were of communists! Another interesting remark she makes is that the evil Jesus was confronted with only likens a small part of the evil people have to confront today. The interpretations of the cross event as such cannot provide

²⁹ Flora Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories*, 170.

³⁰ I will explore the feminist theologians’ view of Christ further down in the next chapter.

³¹ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 112.

³² *Ibid.*, 118.

³³ *Ibid.*, 112.

an adequate theological resource for understanding and confronting the myriad of evils that crowd their daily lives³⁴.

2.3. The Human Being

Feminist theologians see a lot of problems concerning the vision of the human being that is portrayed in some interpretations of the cross event. They object most strongly to the violence, abuse, and the resulting suffering that seems to be part of the human character due to a certain view of the crucifixion and its meaning. Ivone Gebara mentions that the idea of substitutionary atonement (Christ's death on the cross atones for human sin because he substitutes for the sinner) has the consequence of undermining human efforts to combat injustice and oppression by encouraging ethical passivity since human beings are given the impression that the evil is so powerful that they are unable to tackle it or that they do not have to worry about the evil because God, as in the past, has a plan and will solve it Him/Herself! It also seems that violence and abuse are permitted and even encouraged because lead to salvation³⁵!

As I already mentioned, feminist theologians think that theology is always contextual and this means that some interpretations have a dated view of humanity which makes the interpretation as such obsolete today. Flora Keshgegian mentions Anselm's satisfaction theory in this respect because in his world people needed to be obedient and remain in the position they were born in, moreover, one person could substitute for another³⁶! Today however, the human being is seen as relational and dynamic by feminist theologians, and all of us are thought to be responsible for our own deeds, it is practically unthinkable that an innocent person could do penance for a guilty one! This could moreover and paradoxically be seen as an overrating of the power of the human being, since the underlying thought seems to be that they are able to disrupt the creative order by the Fall³⁷! If they are so powerful in this respect, why cannot they be equally powerful regarding the repair of the order of creation?

Feminist theologians are concerned with the way knowledge is gained because they are aware of the fact that women were never regarded as "knowers", since they did not have access to schools or universities. Experience is another way of gaining knowledge, but it should be lived experience which has been reflected on. Mary Solberg stresses the point that it is not one's knowledge which makes one a good believer, neither does our salvation depend on our knowledge³⁸!

2.3.1 Power

Sally Purvis is of the impression that the church only understands power as domination. The church interprets the whole Bible accordingly and holds an image of God that is accordingly controlling³⁹. This of course lies also at the bottom of the theodicy problem, as I wrote earlier. If one has an image of God as being omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, it is unthinkable that God would not be responsible for evil, since nothing in this world happens without God willing it so! Most of the atonement theories are based on such an image of God. Cynthia Crysdale sees the same problem and states that the patriarchal interpretation of a number of biblical verses has influenced the way the church treats women.

The point is the way in which these passages (Eph 5, 21-32; 1 Cor 11, 3-5a, 7-10; 1 Tim 2, 8-15) have influenced centuries of Christian practice. Though Jesus may have promoted an egalitarian, person-centred, holistic approach to both men and women, the Christian church often reverted to its patriarchal cultural context. It clung to passages such as these to justify the hierarchical ordering of family and society and to endorse the extra burden of suffering required for women's salvation

³⁴ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 89.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁶ Flora Keshgegian, "The Scandal of the Cross: Revisiting Anselm and his Feminist Critics," *Anglican Theological Review* 3 (2000), 492.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 484.

³⁸ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 99.

³⁹ Sally Purvis, *The power of the Cross: Foundations for a Christian Feminist Ethic of Community* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 68.

(salvation by motherhood see 1 Tim 2, 8-15). A hierarchy of authority, the lesser status of women as human persons, and the special need of women to be redeemed are themes still evident...⁴⁰

Flora Keshgegian, looks at the satisfaction theory of Anselm from this point of view and finds that the relationships he describes centre around “obedience, hierarchy, stability⁴¹.” In his society change meant instability, chaos, and was therefore undesired. Human beings had to pay penalties to their masters if they offended them in the feudal system, but wrongs could be repaired. Today of course, we think differently, for we know that hierarchical systems that induce inequality result in division of power that makes people suffer. Feminist theology is of the idea that good relationships are interactive, mutual and dynamic. Anselm thinks power is necessary to uphold order and hierarchy. Feminist theologians, however, think that power is necessary to bring about change. While Anselm is primarily concerned with personal salvation, feminist theologians find that though personal change is necessary, society also should be changed. Redemption is not a kind of restoration, it is rather a transformation.

What was important then and remains so today is that power and responsibility should be tightly bound together. And here lies the problem; it seems that most of those who can wield power as domination do not choose to take up the burden of responsibility. They leave this to the victims, the oppressed and abused, who are powerless anyway, increasing at the same time their guilt because they are to be blamed if anything goes wrong!

...most theologies of the cross are about justifying God, I see them also struggling with human empowerment...Jesus had to die on the cross to save humankind. Human beings are the responsible for the death...holding humanity,..., responsible for Jesus’ death is a way to give human beings a kind of control and power...It allows the dominators to ascribe to others the need for sacrifice and obedience for the sake of salvation...⁴²

As Pilate who washed his hands in innocence the powerful claim a kind of innocence and nonculpability. Because of this interpretation God, the almighty, is perceived not to be guilty, while humanity is to blame for the crucifixion of Jesus.

Another aspect of wielding power is the fact that the powerful can name the burdens that are called crosses and should thus be borne! This is important when a connection is made between salvation and pain. Whoever has the power to name the pain one has to go through to reach salvation?

If the solution to the problem of evil involves (in some way) embracing pain, going *through* the cross with Jesus, we need to be clear about just who has the authority to name that pain. Who is it that can and should designate the cross that we are to bear⁴³?

I quite agree with Cynthia Crysdale that ‘naming’ is definitely wielding power, whatever is named is noticed and the name one gives designates also how it is perceived. It makes a difference to the support one gets and the sympathy that is generated on the international forum when one is called a freedom fighter, a rebel or a terrorist! Keshgegian also sees this “naming problem”, when she draws a parallel between the way the cross became the symbol for “God conquering sin and the colonizers conquering “sinners⁴⁴.” This way the colonizers could commit whatever atrocities they did, because they were doing God’s will! Mary Solberg remarks that whether suffering is glorified or not depends on where and on what side one stands when speaking about it. When one is not in pain it is easy to talk about suffering in a detached manner. However, one can also choose to enter the pain of the victim, risking pain and humiliation in the process, one can then speak from within

⁴⁰Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 101.

⁴¹Flora Keshgegian, “The Scandal of the Cross,” 490-492.

⁴²Id., *Redeeming Memories*, 171.

⁴³Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 70.

⁴⁴Flora Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories*, 169.

it, a much more authentic but at the same time vulnerable place to speak from⁴⁵! She sees this as a way for the privileged to stand with the oppressed and gain real knowledge.

Rebecca Parker is vehement in her denunciation of the sacredness that is attributed to violent behaviour. She says that whenever “the crucifixion serves as a metaphor for spiritual processes of transformation, or a mystical illumination of God’s abiding presence, violence is justified as sacred⁴⁶.” It is true that whenever one can justify the infliction of pain as something that is beneficial to the recipient of the punishment, violence is condoned. It can then gain respectability as a pedagogic tool! In addition, the perpetrator can hide behind the excuse that he or she does not want to hurt the other but that they have no choice and that it is for the benefit of the victim. Thereby making themselves a victim and putting the blame for the punishment, which hurts them even more, so they say, on the punished one. A perverse situation, indeed!

Another problem Rebecca Parker notices concerning responsibility is the fact that what, most probably, was an act of state violence: the Roman Empire executing someone seen as a threat to the state security, is reduced to “a private transaction between God the Father and God the Son⁴⁷.” Making it thus an act of domestic violence that moreover saves lives! This way, state violence is allowed to disappear behind the salvific mask of domestic violence⁴⁸! And violence is coated with holiness. We see the same reduction taking place even today when only the individual soldiers inflicting humiliation and torture are punished while the army and the state that made these soldiers what they are tend not to be punished.

2.3.2 Sacrifice

Feminist theologians see serious problems with the interpretation of the crucifixion as a sacrifice that either God made (sacrificing his beloved Son) or that Jesus willingly made out of love, either for his Father or for humanity. They object to it because it suggests that sacrifice is the highest form of love. This could mean that any relationship one enters into should entail pain and that if there is no suffering involved the relationship is not really a loving one! This could lead to the voluntary seeking of pain, a new martyrdom! Already some women think that relationships where their partner beats them are the only kind possible. They have never seen anything else; no one told them any different. Or they slowly rolled into this pattern of behaviour and do not know how to get out of it. Usually, their partner puts the blame for the punishment on them. They are convinced that the partner is right and always seek excuses for his/her behaviour. Thinking that undergoing this punishment will eventually make the partner repent and change his/her ways and thereby becoming a better person. Rebecca Parker sees the origin of this thinking in the interpretation of the cross as a sacrifice that leads to redemption. She however does not think it is that at all, she sees only pain, diminishment of life, humiliation, shame and abasement. She asks:

What if the severing of life is merely destructive of life and is not the path of love, courage, trust, and faith? What if the performance of sacrifice is a ritual in which some human beings bear loss and others are protected from accountability and moral expectations⁴⁹?

A sacrifice, any sacrifice would then be pointless!

However this is not what the majority of us think. Many a time we see sacrifice as a way to obtain something, Ivone Gebara calls it a means to obtain something of God and notices this also in our economic systems⁵⁰. There seems to be a linear connection between the amount of suffering and the price that is to be gained. This can also be traced back to the theory that only the death of a

⁴⁵ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 155-156.

⁴⁶ Rebecca Parker, in Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering and the Search for what Saves Us* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001), 44.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁸ Kathryn Tanner also draws attention to the importance of the religious and political reasons behind the crucifixion. Kathryn Tanner, “Incarnation, Cross, and Sacrifice,” 45.

⁴⁹ Rebecca Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 25.

God-man could satisfy God! I see ascetic living and fasting as two expressions of this way of thinking. Sacrifices that have been greatly valued in the past! The idea that sacrifice is good is integrated in our society. Simone Weil, for one, values sacrifice as something belonging to the order of things. She draws a parallel between the creating love of God, who draws back so that the world can come into being, and the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross⁵¹. She suggests thereby that sacrifice is godly and should be followed!

But these sacrifices are only imposed on a reduced number of people, mostly the poor and the women, only they need to make them, it seems! Society promotes the model of “being a woman”, implying that one can only be a true woman if one has a beautiful body and a perfect face. The ideal is almost unattainable but women all over the world make great sacrifices to try and come as close to it as possible.

Sacrifice is the key to the happiness of living in accordance with the norms established by a new global culture...The ideology of sacrifice induces fear...of not being accepted by men and recognized by other women. Fear of others leads inevitably to alienation of oneself. One does not become one's own person but what others expect. One loses a sense of self, often without even knowing it, and one conforms to the established models as if there were only one way of following our unique life and way to salvation⁵².

Salvation, being liberated and accepted, is only possible if one sacrifices one's unicity, one's otherness. Ivone Gebara also sees this problem. She points out that there is a hierarchy in sacrifice! Women perceive themselves as inferior and therefore have to make greater sacrifices to obtain salvation. They have developed “a training in renunciation. They must give up their pleasure, thoughts, dreams, and desires in order to put themselves at the service of others or to live as others think they should⁵³.” Salvation means being a valued member of the community and this can only become true when one conforms to set standards. The question I posed concerning the cross arises here once again: who sets these standards and who induces the resulting sacrifices? When men make sacrifices they seem heroic, and are rewarded accordingly. Can this have something to do with the fact that the “ultimate” sacrifice, leading to the salvation of all was that of a man on the cross? Is there an unconscious identification between the *kenosis* of a God and the male sacrifice?

Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker want to make us aware of the fact that we are in fact acculturated to abuse and that sacrifice is normal⁵⁴. They say that we are used to feeling powerless, we are bombarded with this rhetoric! Our power is continuously repressed and we are not even aware of it anymore. Our rights and our lives are taken away from us and this happens all over the world. I think in this respect about the ongoing globalisation. It seems that the centres of power are continuously moving away from where we are. International trade deals are made on such an abstract level that no one anymore has any idea of the scope of the consequences these are going to have. Since patents can be taken on individual genes one can be robbed of one's own biological assets! Those that suffer the most from these decisions do not have any say in the matter. The poor, the uneducated, the women are not represented in the international fora, they remain voiceless.

⁵⁰ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 86. For criticism on our economic systems compared to the way God distributes grace to human beings see Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001).

⁵¹ Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition* (London, SPCK, 1989, reprinted, Anand, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 2000), 146 quotes Simone Weil, “Some Reflections on the Love of God,” in *Gateway to God*, Simone Weil and David Raper (London: Collins Fontana, 1974; reprint New York, NY: Crossroad, 1982), 80.

⁵² Ivone Gebara, *Out of the depths*, 89.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 87-88.

⁵⁴ Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, “For God so Loved the World?” in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse. A Feminist Critique*, eds. Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), 1.

Another problem regarding the “sacrifice of the Son” is that it breeds paternalistic dependence⁵⁵. The Father either allows his Son to die or inflicts death himself. This is a classic illustration of what a Roman *pater* could do: his children were his possessions, and he could do with them what he liked, even kill them! The father gets an aura of goodness and almightiness while the children are considered useless and powerless! Once again the weak are sacrificed and this is perceived as just and good!

2.3.3 Suffering

What angers feminist theologians is that the passive “suffering with” is valued more than any action that seeks to stop evil. Since Jesus suffered in silence this seems to be the only way to overcome evil. Oppression and injustice can thus be held in place since any rebellion is deemed unjust! Suffering is either seen as a true imitation, a reflection of the holy one, “because God suffers and God is Good, we are good if we suffer⁵⁶.” Or suffering can have the status of an offering to God, buying credit, as it were⁵⁷. Since being good is seen as a condition for salvation, we can only be saved if we suffer! This indicates the idea that God can be manipulated for He/She has to reward our suffering.

Sometimes suffering is perceived as a worthy punishment for our sins, godly retribution as it were, because we were bad we have to suffer. This way punishment is an instrument God uses to bring or keep us on the right path. Of course, this opens up all kinds of possibilities for abuse, since again the question is: who determines what behaviour is deemed correct? Flora Keshgegian wants to credit Anselm’s satisfaction theory in that it is about right relation, but the relation envisioned by Anselm is not right today (if it ever was!). Anselm’s theory does not help anyone suffering innocently or being a victim, for Anselm’s justice is based on distributive justice and the idea that everything can be solved. We know this is not the case, some things can never be recovered, are lost for ever. “Soteriology should consider this loss” she says⁵⁸. The fact that some losses cannot be redeemed is a recurring complaint made by victims, one which no amount of promises of future happiness seems to be able to disperse.

Sometimes suffering is seen as a test sent from God to make sure we are worthy of salvation! Cynthia Crysdale points out that Christian children and especially female children are socialized into behaviour that is in fact a form of suffering⁵⁹. She names obedience to authority, the value that is put on sexual purity, the virtue of forgiveness, the need for redemption. We are continuously told we are unworthy, soiled, sinners through and through. To those people who have low self esteem this is truly damaging! We have to forgive our perpetrators and love our enemies; to women in a position of helplessness this can be potentially dangerous. They are in fact asked to put their life at stake if they have to love their abuser! Sexual purity is reduced to genital purity and the burden and responsibility to uphold it is put on the women even though they are not in a position to fight off an attacker due to their limited force. They have to live not only with the physical but also with psychological suffering. And if they become pregnant due to molestation the Christian tradition denies them an abortion and so they and possibly their children also have to live with this shame and sorrow for the rest of their lives.

It is not just the emphasis that is put on suffering that is potentially dangerous, but especially the fact that it is the suffering that comes from injustice that will lead to victory over our enemies and redemption!

For women, the path to take us there is to contemplate the sufferings of this man on the cross and to accept our own crosses. The promises of the resurrection call us to bear our sorrows and even to renounce our basic human rights. Through experience we can say...this theology

⁵⁵ Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 50; Flora Keshgegian, “The Scandal of the Cross,” 476-477.

⁵⁶ Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, “For God so Loved the World,” 19.

⁵⁷ Flora Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories*, 167.

⁵⁸ *Id.*, “The Scandal of the Cross,” 488-489

⁵⁹ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 103.

accentuates the victimization of women and encourages them in domestic and familial martyrdom⁶⁰.

It is sad to learn that the “good message” of the Gospel can lead to people forsaking their human rights and thinking that becoming a willing scapegoat will help save the world from evil!

Ivone Gebara notices that measuring and classifying suffering according to how bad it is compared to other suffering is useless. She reports the suffering of a prostitute being stoned, of a mother whose child was taken away, of revolutionary freedom fighters, of the victims of the mass murders on the native population, on Africans, on Jews and Arabs and finally, the suffering of the children dying of hunger that mothers have to watch and that is caused by the greed of the economically powerful. Not one of these sufferings can be thought of as less awful than the suffering of a man on a cross, two thousand years ago! However, the death of this one person is remembered and sanctified, while other suffering retains our attention for the length of time it is documented on our television and is then quickly forgotten! One suffering is not more valuable than another! “The cross of Jesus of Nazareth is neither larger nor smaller than other crosses⁶¹.”

Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza finds an explanation for this “supervaluation” of the crucifixion in the visionary appearance tradition: because the death of Jesus stands there for “the revelation of a higher reality which is larger and more valuable than the lives of those that are being crucified daily⁶².” In this appreciation, Jesus is not really present in the suffering and death of ordinary people! The focus of course lies here on the godliness of Jesus and the atrocity of dying on the cross gets lost in the blinding light of the glory of redemption. Mary Solberg therefore wants to preserve the shocking quality of the cross so as to deny all value to suffering. It cannot be called a “joyous exchange” as Luther does, she says, for then the suffering of Jesus on the cross and with him of all victims, receives intrinsic value, while it is in fact an abomination⁶³!

An interesting but astonishing point is made by Cynthia Crysdale when she remarks that suffering in fact perpetuates evil⁶⁴! This goes against the grain of the traditional ideas that we find mirrored in our liturgy of the Eucharist and which greatly value suffering. She sees suffering not as an antidote to domination, but distinguishes the two of them in a symbiosis that makes evil possible over and over again⁶⁵. Because one party is willing to suffer the other can oppress and abuse and once the abused or oppressed party gains power it will again avenge itself by perpetrating the same crimes it suffered! This is of course a process often observed in the behaviour of child molesters; when their history shows they themselves were molested in their youth.

Cynthia Crysdale analyses the history of Christianity and finds reasons for the seeming reversion of pleasure and pain which has given such great worth to suffering. She sees three events which have been instrumental to this move. First there was the move from a marginal cult to a state religion in the 4th century AD. When the emperor Constantine decided to lift the ban on Christianity so that it later could become the religion of the whole Roman Empire, but which led, according to her, to a hierarchy between genders and among social classes for structures of authority resembling those of the empire were put in place. As a second factor she sees the success of Islam which “forced Christian powers to entrench within the confines of Western Europe,” thus making it a white European religion⁶⁶. But most importantly, it was the impact of the platonic view, dividing

⁶⁰ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 107.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 116-117.

⁶² Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* (London, SCM Press, 1995), 124-127.

⁶³ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 77-78. For references as to where the exchange model was found before Luther, see note 3.

⁶⁴ These observations are not exclusive to feminist theologians, of course. They have also been made for example by René Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972), and Id., *Le bouc émissaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1982) and by Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York, NY: Paulist press, 1998).

⁶⁵ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 46.

⁶⁶ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 113.

and ordering the world hierarchically between the higher (spiritual) and the lower (material) matters that led to the overrating of suffering.

It is this latter control over the lower passions that led eventually to the inversion of pleasure and pain. One needed to control oneself with regard to bodily appetites in order to ascend to spiritual heights. Pain came to be seen as an important element in attaining the joy of salvation, suffering and pain become the *necessary means* to union with God⁶⁷.

Because this reversal of pleasure and pain is such an essential part of our cultural heritage, we no longer see it as something strange or harmful. We are imbued by the thought that whenever we want something exceptional it should cost us, indeed, we should suffer for it, otherwise it is worthless. The image of the joyful Jesus sitting around a table eating and drinking wine with friends has been replaced in our collective minds by the vision of an emaciated man on the cross. From a pastoral point of view it would help to remember this joyfulness more, because it makes us understand why the Eucharist service is still called a “celebration” in Dutch! The complementary view of this hierarchical World included the idea that the higher was also morally better. Since women were considered closer to nature, they ranked morally lower than men⁶⁸.

Mary Solberg remarks that the “glorification of suffering” only seems to be intended for the poor and powerless, the privileged can usually avoid suffering themselves. Moreover, they can deny or ignore suffering from others. When faced with their own complicity in the suffering of others they exonerate themselves and put the blame on the victim, God or human nature.

..to champion the “value” of suffering is to protect both God and those who cause, benefit from, and /or manage to escape suffering, one way or another. It also ignores the sufferer, from whose perspective and on whose behalf this objection arises⁶⁹.

The glorification of suffering is a strategy that seems to be of benefit to the powerful; perhaps it is perversely used just for this reason? Oppression and injustice are never challenged because of the fact that suffering is thought to be redemptive and the more it is borne in silence, the better it is for the believer, because no suffering can equal the suffering of Jesus! The glorification of suffering thus is a tool in the hands of those holding the strings in society and in any institution, be it marriage or the church, for it never endangers the status quo.

The patterns of redemption found in the Passion are also perversely replayed in society. Marion Grau gives an example of the mimicking of the Christian suffering/giving redemption by the traffic of women. Girls and women pay with their bodies “a redemptive ransom for the economical survival of their families⁷⁰.” Suffering in the flesh in order to liberate their family from the burden of poverty! Those who profit most from the sexual exploitation of these women are all-powerful and are even considered saviours because they provide the means for redemption.

2.3.4 *Victimhood*

In this section I want to voice the criticism of feminist theologians have about the fact that some interpretations of the cross make people into victims. Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker remark that women mostly are given a “suffering servant” role in society but also in the church. One of the characteristics of a good servant is obedience, not to question the requests or the actions of the master. Servants are not considered to be able to give advice; their opinion is of no consequence. Sometimes they are not even seen, they should always be discreet and not call attention to themselves. Women internalize the role of Christ, forgive and seek excuses for their abusers. They even set themselves the impossible goal of trying to convert their abuser, and feel guilty when they cannot break the pattern of violence and suffering. Since they feel responsible for

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁶⁹ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 153.

⁷⁰ Marion Grau, *Of Divine Economy*, 222-223.

the salvation of their abuser they are trapped in their situation. That is why “atonement theology feeds victimhood and martyrdom⁷¹.”

Cynthia Crysdale is convinced that Christianity itself lies at the root of the fact that the victim usually gets the blame in our society⁷². She finds the reason for this in a number of biblical passages.

The first is the creation story from Genesis 2 and its sequel, the story of the origin of sin, in Genesis 3...This story has had the effect of supporting two intertwined beliefs throughout Christian history. There is the assumption that God established an order in creation in which man is closer to God (*imago Dei*) while woman is derivative of man, and therefore subordinate to him. Further, a woman was responsible for the entrance of sin into the world, having seduces her husband and caused him to sin⁷³.

These two beliefs implicate that women are, by nature, temptresses and need to be controlled and ruled over by men. A hierarchy is established in which women are not men and therefore less human, or at least, further away from God than men are. The natural order: man preceding woman and women’s “natural” vulnerability to sin justify the authority that men have over women’s lives! Of course, this is just one interpretation of the second creation story, but the fact that there are two and that the first one tells a different story of the coming to be of the human being, is ignored by many ordinary people! This story and this interpretation are the ones that are remembered and portrayed on cathedral stained glass windows and on paintings, as is the story of the fall. Even the logo of one of the main personal computer firms today refers to it! One has to wonder if it is just so that the juicier story is the one to titillate the imagination or if a more cynical and perverse strategy is behind it! Crysdale of course does not suggest we get rid of these passages, she wants to illustrate that the church has often clung to such passages to “justify the hierarchical ordering of family and society and to endorse the extra burden required for women’s salvation⁷⁴.”

According to Rebecca Parker, the idea of peaceful resistance which is so praised in Christianity, values the remorse of the perpetrators higher than the suffering of the victims⁷⁵. What really counts is the conversion and salvation of the perpetrators, the blood and suffering of the victims is just instrumental in obtaining this result. Their suffering is not taken seriously. Victimhood should not be glorified, she says, because it could also be explained as a manifestation of arrogance when the victim feels he/she has a higher moral value than the perpetrator. The lives of the victim and the perpetrator are both holy and both are being soiled, that is why we should feel sadness and anger on both accounts! She feels that every action should be taken to “restore the ethical relationship as well as the inflicted evil.” But as we remarked earlier some losses cannot be redeemed, despite our best efforts they remain lost and their loss has to be mourned and remembered.

2.4. The World

Feminist theologians see the suffering of Jesus on the cross mirrored in the suffering of the earth today. The power and submission that is displayed in the cross event motivates our handling of the resources of our earth. The greed and power-lust which brought Jesus to his dead, brings us to “rape” the earth⁷⁶. The patriarchal ideas that come across the interpretation of the cross as of a father who wants, requires even, the death of his son, motivate us to see the earth hierarchically, as

⁷¹ Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, “For God so Loved the World,” 3.

⁷² The fact that the victim gets the blame is also perceived by James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 291, who is inspired by René Girard.

⁷³ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 99.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁷⁵ Rebecca Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 41-42.

⁷⁶ Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 40-41.

something to be controlled by force. Nature is subordinate; it is there for our benefit. We can do what we like with it. The earth is seen as powerless and mindless, and we know what is best for it.

The cross is a reminder of how humans have tried throughout history to destroy visions of righting relationships that involve transformation of tradition and transformation of social relations and arrangements sanctioned by the status quo⁷⁷.

We have the same attitude towards those that are weaker, we think that the winner gets it all, and the winner is always the strongest! Perhaps this has to do with the fact that we interpret salvation largely as an individual affair, condoning our “each wo/man for her/himself” attitude. Today, a minority of human beings controls the majority of the wealth on earth, be it material, economical, intellectual, genetical, or biological, while the majority does not have enough to survive and gets no chances to better their lives. Native Americans and African Americans accuse us rightly of defiling their culture⁷⁸. As middle class Western Europeans we are users and abusers⁷⁹. Along with our misuse of the earth and of our neighbour, comes the fact that we, as the victors, do not take our responsibility, we close our eyes for the misery in the world.

What feminist theologians want to argue against concerning the wrong vision of the world which is propagated by faulty interpretations of the cross is the fact that reality is beautified. They see it as a ploy to maintain the status quo! Beauty is very important for it gives peace of mind and pleasure. But it also gives the illusion that all is well! Mary Solberg remarks that it is very difficult for human beings to come to terms with injustice and oppression. It is very hard to look the victims in the eyes, whenever we are in a position to ignore it, we will. Even the victims have trouble working through their trauma, as I wrote earlier concerning Holocaust and genocide victims. The sight of illness fills us with fear and apprehension, and we wish to keep decay and death as far away from our everyday life as possible.

Individuals and societies deny, repress, paper over, and rewrite unbearable realities... Trauma in the form of domestic and sexual violence, combat in wartime, and political terror becomes unspeakable. Death is denied, not only by the family that “loses” a loved one unexpectedly... but also by a multi-million-dollar medical industry determined to discover what technology can do to thwart the weariness of a diseased heart or a comatose brain⁸⁰.

We are so used to seeing Jesus on a cross that we do not remark the horror of it anymore. The suffering and death of Jesus are glorified, they are seen from the other side, from the side of the resurrection, where Jesus Christ resides sitting next to the father! The pain is gone. It seems as if that horrific episode never took place. Instead of looking the reality of the passion in the face we paper it over and go straight to the next chapter. The words of comfort we speak to victims that everything will work out and be all right, may help, but they should never lead to us denying the depth of the loss, of the pain, of the suffering. The same goes with the world, we should never turn our heads away from reality, however awful it might be. The passion precedes the resurrection and is just as real!

2.5. The Church

The church has up till now not structurally contributed to the wellbeing of women. I must admit though, that she professes to greatly value women, and indeed there are women saints but they are vastly outnumbered by the number of male saints, mostly bishops! There have been

⁷⁷ Delores S. Williams, “Black Women’s Surrogacy experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption,” in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 31-32.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

⁷⁹ We are of course not the only ones to do this.

⁸⁰ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 127.

women mystics, but the church has always been wary of mystics, be they men or women. Could this perhaps have to do with control? Although the church has provided pastoral support, she has mainly pulled the eschatological card by telling women to suffer in silence, while all would be rewarded at the end of times. She has perpetuated and in actual fact allowed intimate violence and abuse to continue.

The power structures, meaning power as control, which led to Jesus' death, are operative in the church today. My own church, the Catholic Church, still fears diversity, be it in opinion or in sexual orientation. By stressing the maleness of Jesus, she confines her leadership to celibate men, excluding women from any say in decisions the church might make. Her leadership is still very much hierarchical, the steps she took following Vatican II to bestow more authority on the local churches have recently almost all been taken back. By perhaps wanting to preserve the divinity of Jesus, she is blind to the truly embodied life Jesus led and the implications of this on for instance sexuality and its meaning in a person's life. Our church seems afraid of radical change, which is strange, because it was a life-changing event which brought her into being.

JoAnne Marie Terrell remarks on the fact that churches are used to disperse sexist, homophobic and racist thoughts, which makes them "guilty of inflicting and perpetuating abuse, allying with the oppressors and imposing the hermeneutics of sacrifice on subjugated peoples in order to justify the abusive policies of the state and of its own ministerium⁸¹."

Sally Purvis gives another example of the nefarious working of ideas; she states that a Christian marriage is in fact inherently abusive when it is imaged on Ephesians 5, for the male is supposed to be dominant and the female submissive. "When the relationship is structured by and is a part of the church, then the institutionalization is understood to be, and is embodied as though it is, a reflection of the nature of the God/human relationship and a faithful representation of God's desire for human community⁸²."

I have the impression that our church likes to be the victor, to stand on the winner's side and that she perhaps is in danger, then, of forgetting her roots. While she might appreciate the effort of the individual believer trying to follow in Jesus' footsteps and dying for it as a result of his/her commitment, she herself is wary of suffering.

The same commitment Christ displayed towards the outcast during his lifetime might be expected of the church on a worldwide basis. Are not women children of God? And is not our God called such because He/She lead his/her people away from injustice to a new place? Our God wants radical change and the church should follow!

2.6. Jesus

According to the tradition Jesus is the image of God in the world. Feminist theologians denounce the fact that some interpretations of Jesus are abusive for women for a number of reasons. They protest the fact that the focus of the tradition always has been on the death of Jesus, not on his life. They see this as the reason for the sanctification of violence and the glorification of suffering. Jesus is portrayed as a willing victim, which induces believers to be victims and to accept their crosses, as Jesus did. Feminist theologians are convinced that Jesus' life and work is as redemptive as his death. Focussing on his death "addresses the restoration of "vertical" right relations with God, not "horizontal" right relations with humanity⁸³." Although one could argue that due to restoring one's relationship with God the healing of interhuman relations will follow, the risk remains that this could lead to a private faith.

Atonement theories tend to advance the fact that Jesus stands in for humanity, making penance for the sins of humanity. Surrogacy usually has a negative sound to it⁸⁴. It is understood as "making

⁸¹ JoAnn Marie Terrell, "Our Mother's Gardens: Rethinking Sacrifice," in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 40.

⁸² Sally Purvis, *The power of the Cross*, 35-36.

⁸³ Rosemary P. Carbine, "Contextualizing the Cross for the Sake of Subjectivity," in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 93.

⁸⁴ See JoAnn Marie Terrell, "Our Mother's Gardens," 37.

do” with what is available. In this instance it means Jesus’ suffering because the human being cannot perform what is necessary, but still. Surrogacy in the story of Hagar and Sara suggests that the original (Sara) is still better than the surrogate (Hagar). And a child conceived of a slave-girl by the master never had the same rights as a child conceived of the mistress! It also suggests that people are interchangeable and thus reduces their individual worth and dignity. I find this a paradox in our images of Jesus, on the one side he is a God-man, a kind of hero saving humanity but on the other side he is just a surrogate, something not quite up to par taking the place of the original because the original cannot or will not. But Rosemary Carbine says, “In addition, substitutionary sacrifice theologies of atonement sacralise rather than stand against women’s experiences of social, sexual, and other kinds of surrogacy⁸⁵.” Thereby coating the status of surrogacy, which as said, is not an enviable state to be in, with a holy aura, keeping victims once more in their place by linking their state with Jesus.

Jesus is usually portrayed as a white male, “subtly linking whiteness with goodness and saving power” as a result⁸⁶. But this has also made him into the image of the oppressor for black people and has given rise to racism, says Jacquelyn Grant.

Essentially, Christ has been white. This is evidenced not only in the theological imagery, but also in the physical imagery of Jesus himself. In a society in which “white is right and black stays back,” and white symbolizes good and black, evil, certainly there would be socio-political ramifications of colour with respect to Jesus⁸⁷.

While this fact has also been suggested by black theologians, she claims that “African American women as women and as black persons are thus twice removed from the image of God”, once by being black and once more by being a woman⁸⁸. Moreover, the image of Christ as a servant has contributed to keep black women in “servant bondage.”

For a long time Christianity claimed Jesus as an a-historical figure. The fact that Jesus was a Jew was conveniently forgotten, for the idea was that Christianity superseded all religions that preceded it. Jesus was portrayed as a victim of the religious ruling classes of the Jews and this has instigated anti-Jewish feelings and even racism and discrimination for two thousand years⁸⁹!

Cynthia Crysdale specifically rejects the interpretations of the cross event that lead to the image of Jesus as a “sacrificial scapegoat”, she situates these interpretations in a worldview that favours control and domination, where violence is the way to obtain, secure and uphold both⁹⁰! Any theology that explains the cross event as a substitution and a retribution makes the suffering of Jesus the turnpin of salvation: he had to suffer greatly to expiate for the magnitude of our sins, to satisfy God for the extent of the humiliation caused. This “ascribes to Jesus a victim identity, which reinscribes rather than resists a victim identity for already oppressed men and women⁹¹.”

Although, for the victims of abuse, genocide, cultural, social or economic oppression, contemplating Jesus on the cross can bring comfort through the feeling that they are not alone in their suffering. The contemplation does not take away this suffering. It is in no way redeemed, the

⁸⁵ Rosemary P. Carbine, “Contextualizing the Cross,” 93.

⁸⁶ Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, “A Theology of the Cross for the “Uncreators,”” in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 181.

⁸⁷ Jacquelyn Grant, “Come to my Help, Lord, for I’m in Trouble: Womanist Jesus and the Mutual Struggle for Liberation,” in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed. Maryanne Stevens (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993; reprint Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 61-63.

⁸⁸ I discuss the problems with the maleness of Jesus in section 6.2.

⁸⁹ A scandalous example of how widespread this hatred against the Jews was can still be seen in the cathedral of St Michaël and St Gudulla in Brussels, in a 16th century stained glass window in the chapel of the sacrament and in a number of 19th century stained glass windows in both side aisles, see Luc Dequeker, *Het Sacrament van Mirakel: Jodenhaat in de middeleeuwen* (Leuven, Davidsfonds, 2000).

⁹⁰ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 53. René Girard also rejects this image in René Girard, *Le bouc émissaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1982).

⁹¹ Rosemary P. Carbine, “Contextualizing the Cross,” 93.

pain remains real and present. In that way the crucifixion in itself only has a limited scope and Jesus' suffering has a limited impact⁹².

Thinking about the nature of the relationship between God and the human beings after the crucifixion influences the way we perceive Jesus. If this relationship is seen as a reparation, this suggests that the coming of Jesus was a result of the evil of humanity, making humanity the cause for divine action. Jesus then does not do anything new; he is but the repair man, fixing what was broken. If however the relationship with God is completely different after Jesus' death, something that never was before, then the initiative for the incarnation lies with God and Jesus is indeed instigating something new.

Another interpretation of the death of Jesus that has occurred and that is rejected by feminist theologians is the vision of the death of Jesus as being a hidden suicide for a higher cause! This would exonerate those responsible for bringing him to the cross, and more importantly perhaps, it would change the meaning of the life of Jesus! Was it so worthless to him that he would abandon it willingly? It implies as well that he did not care about the despair and utter confusion of his disciples after his death, making him egoistic and cruel.

Flora Keshgegian makes an interesting point when she says that in the tradition of Christianity the focus of salvation has always been on the crucifixion, while in fact it is the community of followers that has made the message of the resurrection known. Without them there probably would not have been a Church today and Jesus would only have been an obscure Jew, just one of who knows how many so-called rebels executed in the Roman Empire.

...Western Christianity has focused its soteriological attention primarily on the cross. It has asserted that we are saved through Jesus' suffering and death, vindicated in the resurrection... This is not adequate. A theology of redemption that focuses on Jesus' death as the saving event is not able to incorporate the multiple memorative practice necessary to speak fully of salvation, especially to those who struggle with suffering, trauma and loss...To tell of Gods redeeming love, it is necessary to narrate a story of the fullness of divine presence, imaged and encountered in Jesus, who lived among us, as one of us, to the point of abandonment, torture and death...Jesus' life did not end with the suffering he underwent. He lives on in the community of resurrection, making life possible again and again. The "event" of Jesus Christ – his birth and life, death and resurrection – is made real through our own salvific activity ... incarnation... is... an ongoing process and experience of divine presence⁹³.

It is the "resurrection community" that has made the revelation of God in history known. They did God's work, by starting us of on our journey toward the Promised Land. They made the incarnation a continuing fact. Focussing on one person could give the impression that salvation is a personal affair, thereby also facilitating the reduction of Christianity to the personal life. When however the "community of remembrance" receives its due importance, this reduction is no longer possible!

What feminist theologians have most objected to concerning Jesus is the importance that has been attributed in the Christian tradition to the uniqueness and the maleness of Jesus. Therefore these need special attention.

2.6.1 *The Uniqueness of Jesus*

Since our religion is called Christianity, Jesus Christ is very important to us. In the Nicene creed we call him "the Son of God who for us and for our salvation came down and was incarnate and was made man. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate and suffered and was buried and the third day He rose again⁹⁴." It has been understood that it was only the death of Jesus that made our salvation possible. Precisely because He was both God and man he could save us.

If Jesus is not fully divine, then he cannot save. If Jesus is not fully human, then he cannot save human beings, especially if we take seriously an early Christian principle that "what has not

⁹² Flora Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories*, 173.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 164-165.

⁹⁴ This is an extract from the Nicene Creed.

been assumed has not been healed” (Gregory of Nazianzus). If a fully divine Jesus did not become fully human, then human beings are not truly or totally saved⁹⁵.

Who Jesus is and what he does are clearly intimately connected. Jesus is a superior being, whom no one can equal, and this in my opinion introduces a kind of hopelessness into Christianity. It puts all other human beings down by rendering us powerless and suggesting that the evil we can commit is larger than the good we could ever hope to accomplish!

Confessing to Jesus as the only incarnated revelation of God in history poses a problem for feminist theologians involved in the interreligious dialogue because this claim gives Christianity the status of being superior to all other religions. Eleanor McLaughlin sees a Christology “from below” as a way to overcome this problem.

Such Christology “from below” has the advantage of taking seriously the New Testament narratives, full of Jesus as healer, liberator, friend of sinners, outcasts and women. Combined with the history of religions, this preference for the historical Jesus can question the claims of Christianity to a unique revelation of God in Jesus Christ and thus enable mutually enriching conversations with other religious communities⁹⁶.

A “human” Jesus makes us more like him, and empowers us to work towards the realisation of the Promised Land. It induces Christians also to approach other religions with humility for God has revealed Him/Herself there too!

Another problem connected to the unicity of Christ has to do with the fact that if Jesus was the ultimate revelation of Christ then we, Christians living today, have nothing more to expect! There never will be more than what our forefathers/mothers experienced. It gives rise to the idea that eschatology is accomplished!

2.6.2 *The Maleness of Jesus*

Eleanor McLaughlin complains that it is almost impossible to discuss the gender of Jesus because we generally are not aware of the fact that “generic humanity” has since Aristotle been “constructed normatively male.” We cannot imagine Jesus of Nazareth anything else than male! This is obvious in the way we react with discomfort and sometimes even hostility, to “any modification of the male imaging of Jesus⁹⁷.” Women in priesthood in the Episcopal and Anglican churches testify to this while the Catholic and Orthodox churches still reject female priests outright.

In the patriarchal culture of the first centuries “divinity, sovereign power, rationality, and normative humanity were all assumed ... to be male...” It was thought that God possessed the ultimate power and rationality; therefore it was assumed that God was male. And so the human Christ could only be male in order to reveal the male God⁹⁸. Woman, in fact was thought to be derivative from man. She was a reflection of the “bodily, creaturely reality”, and thus the opposite of the divine. Due to a faulty idea of biology it was thought that a woman was the result of a “defect in gestation...the female is defined as a defective human, lacking in full humanity, inferior in bodily strength, adequate rationality, and moral self-control⁹⁹.” Since women were in a patriarchal mindset included “under” the men, their redemption through Christ was assured. But, says Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Today a Christology which elevates Jesus’ human maleness to ontologically necessary significance makes the Christ symbol non-inclusive of women¹⁰⁰.” And

⁹⁵ Rosemary P. Carbine, “Contextualizing the Cross,” 91.

⁹⁶ Eleanor McLaughlin, “Feminist Christologies: Re-dressing the Tradition,” in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed. Maryanne Stevens (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993; reprint Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 125-126.

⁹⁷ Eleanor McLaughlin, “Feminist Christologies,” 120-121.

⁹⁸ Rosemary Ruether, “Can Christology Be Liberated from Patriarchy?,” in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed. Maryanne Stevens (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993; reprint Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 9.

⁹⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Can Christology Be Liberated,” 11.

¹⁰⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Can Christology Be Liberated,” 12.

indeed, the fact that Jesus is male is seen as a “necessary symbol of the very essence of the Christian God and Gospel¹⁰¹.”

This has serious implications, because women are then excluded from direct access to the divine, they cannot image God, they can never represent Christ and they, worst of all, cannot be saved!

Patriarchal Christology relegates women to second-class citizens in terms of the image, imitation, and work of Christ. When the maleness of Jesus figures too prominently in theological claims about the salvific work of Christ, women must presume that their redeemed humanity is “covered,” “included,” or “subsumed” under the male humanity of Jesus¹⁰².

Since women have been denied “humanity, personhood, leadership and equality in the church and in society” as a consequence of the importance the church has attached to the maleness of Jesus, this leads Jacquelyn Grant to say that this maleness has become “idolatrous”. Due to the centrality of the maleness, the personhood and the interpretations of the salvific work of Jesus have become distorted. “Jesus has been imprisoned by patriarchy’s obsession with the supremacy of maleness”, she states¹⁰³.

Ivone Gebara finds in the fact that it is a male who is the saviour the reason for the exhortation that women should be obedient to men¹⁰⁴. The male worth and power have been inflated because of the connection between manhood and salvation. The man acquired salvific potential and has made women dependent of man for their salvation! This has resulted in the fact that women see their sex as an extra cross they have to bear! For poor women this has added to their burden. For the obedience to a man gains the equivalent of the obedience to a deity!

Sometimes an explanation for the maleness of Jesus is given in that it is secondary to his humanity. It should then not matter so much theologically or soteriologically what sex Jesus is. Eleanor McLaughlin however, contradicts this,

This liberal argument is unacceptable because it is dishonest. In fact, the cultural symbols of the maleness and “generic” humanity have never included women without qualification, and certainly do not do so in our contemporary United States culture¹⁰⁵.

It would be more correct and certainly more honest to admit that the maleness of Jesus has indeed been crucial in the tradition up till today.

Because it is a male Jesus who is suffering on the cross, and because this suffering is seen as normative for all suffering, this suggests that male suffering and male martyrdom offers the only possibility for salvation. This is unjust towards the suffering of women. It renders our suffering worthless and in actual fact useless¹⁰⁶!

As seen already, feminist theologians react to the fact that one single human being is thought to be “universally paradigmatic”. Rosemary Radford Ruether advances that focussing on the maleness of Jesus reduces him as a person; it suggests that the other elements of his historical particularity are unimportant¹⁰⁷. She calls the fact that he was a Jew and that he lived during the first century as only two of these aspects of his setting. We could also name his illegitimacy, the fact that he was the son of a carpenter and that he lived in Judea as other possibly significant aspects. Being a male person has perhaps been thought of as being a static personal characteristic, while all other characteristics were probably thought of to have changed over time, but we now know this is not true.

¹⁰¹ Eleanor McLaughlin, “Feminist Christologies,” 119.

¹⁰² Rosemary P. Carbine, “Contextualizing the Cross,” 95.

¹⁰³ Jacquelyn Grant, “Come To My Help,” 58.

¹⁰⁴ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 113.

¹⁰⁵ Eleanor McLaughlin, “Feminist Christologies,” 121.

¹⁰⁶ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 118.

¹⁰⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Can Christology Be Liberated,” 23.

Christians are called such because they are followers of Jesus, the Christ. This means that the virtues Christ has shown to be important should be adopted and imitated by his followers. Feminist theologians have criticized these values as being dangerous to women, that is why I think they need our attention.

2.6.3 Christian Virtues

Feminist theologians accuse the church of promoting virtues and attitudes that make it possible especially for women to be oppressed, humiliated, abused and discriminated¹⁰⁸. They perhaps unwittingly allow injustice to continue. The categories of people that would need extra care because of their vulnerability are put down, their fragility ignored, it is therefore legitimate to ask whether Christianity has become a religion for the strong? Does it proclaim a theology of glory that voluntarily closes its eyes to the suffering in the world¹⁰⁹?

From their childhood onwards Christians are taught to be obedient and respect authority. They are told that adults are always right and have the right to punish them when they are disobedient. They are taught that to love is the utmost virtue, and that even those who do them wrong and hurt them physically and psychologically have to be forgiven. They do not learn to value the integrity of their own bodies. They mistrust their own feelings because these are often contradictory with what they are told they should be feeling. They are so much caught up with the fact that they are imperfect that they do not even imagine they can be loved and valued as they are. Rita Nakashima Brock finds the reason in the traditional interpretation of the cross.

Theologically, we are told that the Father God, who can do no wrong, sent his own Son to be killed and the good, obedient Son went willingly, without complaint. If cosmic child abuse, to save humanity, is acceptable, and human parents are to obey the example set by the Father God, then the violation of children can be justified on the same grounds. Protection from such abuse – a false protection – comes from being obedient and innocent¹¹⁰.

The innocence which in Christianity is so valued - hence the images of Jesus as the “lamb of God” - is then easily soiled¹¹¹. This induces guilt in the victim, who was not able to protect him/herself in the first place because he/she was never taught to stand up for him/herself or to question authority.

According to Rosemary Carbine, any theology that stresses humiliation, a “kenotic Christology”, cannot be a source for developing a strong and resisting personality, precisely because imitating Christ is mainly understood in terms of obedience, suffering and self-sacrifice¹¹². For women who have been socialized in a patriarchal system or in the remnants of it, the role patterns of servanthood and silence are still firmly ingrained, and Christian virtues just seem to confirm this way of behaviour! They even connect it with salvation, which enhances the worth of these virtues. Women are told they are the help of man, and this often means they support the ambitions of other people while curtailing their own. It entails “dedicating all one’s energy to the supporting of the lives of other people while not getting any support for one’s own life,” and sometimes even leads to the suffering of sexual abuse, of denigrating behaviour from the partner, and of domestic violence. Since men are more like the image of God, they have power and women are expected to be silent, to pay careful attention and to obey without questions. If however they do not comply with these patterns of behaviour and if they moreover are successful in their undertakings, which results in having less time to take care of the people in their lives, they feel

¹⁰⁸ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 102.

¹⁰⁹ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling knowledge*, 73. Feminist theologians take suffering very seriously, a theology of glory ignores suffering, renders it worthless. Suffering as such can never be seen as instrumental to salvation, but its reality in the lives of people needs to be faced.

¹¹⁰ Rita Nakashima Brock, “Losing Your Innocence,” 12.

¹¹¹ Since these images, which belong to the oldest form of biblical Christology have had such a strong impact on Christian iconography, it would be interesting to research what other messages besides that of the weak victim they could convey.

¹¹² Rosemary P. Carbine, “Contextualizing the Cross,” 98.

guilty, and often punish themselves or make exorbitant compensations. They attempt the impossible to try and satisfy everyone but themselves and are as a result in a state of constant unhappiness. “The reason for this is Christianity, where the suffering of Christ on the cross liberates, lending thereby great worth to self-denial and obedience¹¹³.”

As early as 1973, Mary Daly already stressed the fact that the qualities valued most in Christianity, such as self-sacrificing love, the passive acceptance of suffering, humility and docility, are precisely the characteristics of a victim¹¹⁴! They induce women to lend themselves to the role of sacrificial scapegoat. Mary Grey considers we should focus on the wrath of God instead of modelling our lives on the seeming endurance of the cross.

If we are furious about rape and wife battering and senseless loss of life in war we are more likely to protest and act effectively against it, we are more likely to seek for ways to end crucifixions, than if we assume we are meant to endure all and end up on the cross with Christ¹¹⁵.

What has impressed Christians most about the crucifixion is the fact that Jesus suffered willingly and in silence. Consequently anger and disobedience were considered sinful characteristics. But this makes for the fact that any “expression of dissatisfaction, any resistance toward injustice can be dismissed as sinful¹¹⁶.” A woman should be obedient to her husband and practice the virtues of repentance and humility. Women are thus effectively rendered subordinate. Women not only will not rebel against injustice and violence in their domestic life, they also will not contest injustice, oppression, disempowerment and violence in society. They moreover socialize their children into these same virtues which makes them complicit in the perpetuation of these abuses. Theologies of the cross thus do not seem to be able to help women¹¹⁷!

What is most surprising perhaps to discover is that these Christian virtues which render powerless and victimize people are never required of the privileged and powerful! This leads Mary Solberg to remark that:

Self-sacrifice, humility, obedience, and suffering – especially when they are required of those who are in positions to have things required of them, do not threaten privilege; idealizing these attributes (especially for women and others who “serve”), and associating them with Jesus, have never “cost” much. At all events, these are not and have never been qualities valued by captains of industry or political movers and shakers¹¹⁸.

The privileged always act as if they already are resurrected, the eschatological “already” is for them larger than the “not yet”! They seem to forego the crucifixion to directly jump ahead to the resurrection; this of course leads to the cultivation of a theology of glory which conveniently forgets the suffering that befalls others. Any suffering in the present can then also be ignored.

2.6.4 *Living as a Christian*

What we have seen so far is that feminist theologians react to certain interpretations of the cross because they exhort Christians to endure violence, to be obedient to authority, to suffer, be abused and be humiliated. Being passive when faced with evil is highly valued. As is not complaining and bearing your burden with dignity and silence. Not naming the abusive situation or the fact that you are a victim grants the perpetrators a kind of immunity. The pastoral care that has been extended to victims has been mainly to advice them to practice the Christian virtues named above because eventually these would lead to salvation and anyway, we should bear our suffering as Jesus did. He would be close to us in our suffering. The perpetrators, however, are only asked to

¹¹³ Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, “For God so Loved the World,” 2.

¹¹⁴ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon press, 1973), 77.

¹¹⁵ Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 72.

¹¹⁶ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 102-103.

¹¹⁷ Flora Keshgegian, “The Scandal of the Cross,” 476.

¹¹⁸ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 149-150.

mend their ways. In fact, they can go about their wicked business because they seem to have been redeemed by Jesus once and for all. This way, the strong are allowed to keep oppressing and committing injustices, they are secure in their believe that they are allowed to dominate those that are more vulnerable. Sometimes victims even believe that because of their suffering they will induce the perpetrator to convert. Therefore they are ethically better (martyrdom)! Sometimes they even take a perverse pride in the suffering they are willing to endure because it then more resembles Jesus' suffering!

2.7. God

Interpretations of the cross seek to explain God's working in the world through the cross. It seems to me that the biblical image of God, a God who continuously chooses the side of the weak, widows, orphans, strangers, a God who is there for the poor, for those suffering from injustice, has for a long time been forgotten in favour of the God portrayed by the interpretations of the cross that glorify suffering and violence¹¹⁹. I would first like to address what feminist theologians have to say about the relation internally between the divine persons and the issue of the power attributed to God and then move on to the images of God that result from different interpretations of the cross event.

Rosemary Radford Ruether remarks that Trinitarian theology itself already sets the stage for the interpretation of the relationship between Jesus and God concerning the crucifixion. She says that:

...to term the...Second Person of the Trinity as the Son is odd and misleading, since it suggests a subordinate and derivative status...these metaphors reinforce the maleness of God in both aspects, and set up a patriarchal relationship between the two "persons" of God¹²⁰.

The internal relationship between the two first divine persons is already hierarchal and thus unequal. This effectively attributes more power and more importance to the first person and fits within a patriarchal view of relationships. Marit Trelstad denounces the fact that a relationship that calls itself loving but that at the same time "demands the subservient self-destruction of one member is a highly questionable form of love¹²¹." This same inequality is found both in the relationship of the Father with the Son and between God and humanity because Jesus as well as humanity are seemingly powerless. Since the victim is seen to be completely dependent, the saviour becomes a hero, indebting the victim to Him/Her at the same time! Indeed, to be passive "in the face of denigration" seems to be a requirement to receive grace¹²²! Concerning the relationship between God and human beings, I think that, a love between partners that are that unequal cannot be pure, there always is the possibility that the weaker partner only loves, or makes the moves of loving, in order to gain salvation, as the legalistic tendencies of Christianity in the past have demonstrated! The Christian tradition of course sees the relationship between the two persons of the Trinity quite differently. Father and Son have a perichoretic relationship. There is no question of a hierarchic structure. However, the image of father and son, when viewed through a patriarchic lens is distinctly hierarchical. Even today, sons, as long as they are under age, have to

¹¹⁹ Of course, since the 1960's, liberation theologians and political theologians have worked to make this image of God reappear. My phrasing does not want do minimize their work. However, the powerful God, who is found on the side of the victor is still very appealing.

¹²⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Can Christology Be Liberated," 9-10. I am not a specialist concerning the different meanings of the expression "son of," in the First Testament, which was Jesus' context. It would be interesting to research what kind of a relationship this term described and how it came to be applied to Jesus as the second person of the Trinity.

¹²¹ Marit Trelstad, "Introduction: The cross in Context," in *Cross Examinations. Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 7; Rosemary P. Carbine, "Contextualizing the Cross" 92.

¹²² Marit Trelstad, "Lavish Love: A Covenantal Ontology," in *Cross Examinations. Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 98.

obey their fathers, assuming they make reasonable requests. The sense of inequality in the Father-Son image of the Trinity, though not intended is however present.

The power that God shows through the cross event is the absolute power of a sovereign God and salvation is dependent on this kind of power. Flora Keshgegian suggests that as long as suffering, salvation and power are connected in Christian thinking, suffering will be redemptive. A change can only come about when one is ready "not only to challenge the notion of absolute dependency on God's power, but to question the redemptive value of the cross¹²³."

2.7.1 Images of God

Feminist theologians find some of the images of God which result from the traditional interpretations of the cross deceitful. They mostly think of God in terms of a sovereign tyrant. The idea of God who is the sole origin of everything that happens in the world is troublesome. It implicates that God also governs the evil happening to us. After the Holocaust, this is a way of thinking which cannot be pursued! From Calvin's horrific double predestination one can deduce that whatever wickedness befalls us was at least permitted by God and at worst sent by Him/Her! This makes of God a cruel and perhaps even sadistic God who derives pleasure from suffering and death¹²⁴. Cynthia Crysdale remarks that by linking rescue to violence: God saves humanity by willing his own Son's death, this makes God a "bloodthirsty deity" while at the same time "it perpetuates the myth of redemptive violence on God's part¹²⁵." The image of God portrayed here clearly likens those of the gods of the religions of the neighbouring countries of Israel, which had to be appeased with sacrifices in order to leave humanity alone and not cause calamities to happen! Moreover, in the satisfaction theory of Anselm, for example, God is only concerned with punishment, there is no mention of any rectification of the wrong done, this leads to the image of a self-seeking God who is only concerned with His/Her honour and not with the suffering in the world. It would suggest also that God has evil plans for the whole of creation¹²⁶! Catherine Keller argues that this is not the God portrayed in the "prophetic traditions of the three Abrahamisms." And that far from having to justify God's injustice the faithful are called to "enact God's justice¹²⁷."

Completely contradictory to all the images of God as a sovereign ruler is the image of God which results from the interpretation of the crucifixion as a ransom that has to be paid to the devil. There God has to obey a cosmic law, the universal law of satisfaction. He/She becomes subject to it and this makes this law in fact rule over God¹²⁸! God can not afford to be merciful; this would in fact disrupt the natural order of thing! This order is seemingly more important than the power of God¹²⁹!

The moral influence theory of Abelard can paint a picture of a God who does not take the horrific consequences of sin seriously. The best way to convince sinners to mend their ways seems to be the suffering of their victims. God wants salvation for all, but clearly the salvation of the strong is more important than the suffering of the victims. God acquires thus Machiavellian traits, in that the result is more important than the means to obtain these results. "This opens the gate for hate/love relationships because threatening someone with death (terror and coercion) should lead to good behaviour and salvation¹³⁰." God is clearly unfeeling and unjust and even dangerous for women and for everyone who does not occupy a position of hierarchic power in society!

¹²³ Flora Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories*, 173.

¹²⁴ Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God so Loved the World," 4.

¹²⁵ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 53.

¹²⁶ Marit Trelstad, "Lavish Love," 110.

¹²⁷ Catherine Keller, *God and Power. Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 26-27.

¹²⁸ Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God so Loved the World," 4-17.

¹²⁹ Flora Keshgegian, "The Scandal of the Cross," 484-485.

¹³⁰ Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God so Loved the World," 4-17.

2.8. Conclusion

Feminist theologians clearly state that the usual interpretations of the cross are harmful because they signal that violence leads to salvation, thus effectively condoning oppression, humiliation, abuse and injustice. They moreover keep perpetrators safe by linking their position and actions to that of God the Father who saves by allowing his Son to die!

They object to the cross as the only site of redemption while this links salvation to suffering and violence. Victims also testify to the fact that their suffering and pain has not been redeemed. The claim that salvation has been obtained once and for all favours the perpetrators who are then allowed to continue their injustice. Moreover, picturing the cross as the *pars pro toto* of all suffering does not take into account the myriad of suffering that takes place today!

These interpretations attach great importance to a hierarchical patriarchal power where the sovereign ruler dominates. Power and responsibility are separated, allowing the victims to bear the burden of responsibility while absolving the powerful. Violence, suffering, a sacrificial identity and victimhood are understood to be part of the human character. Human beings are thought to be exchangeable. Violent behaviour is condoned for that part of humanity which has power, while making sacrifices and suffering is deemed to be salvific for the oppressed and the vulnerable. Their suffering is even necessary for the redemption of the oppressor, because only thus will he/she come to conversion! Dying for the salvation of the other is seen as the highest expression of love, allowing a new martyrdom to come about. In fact, passive suffering is required for this likens the suffering of Jesus the most. Suffering is thought to be either a punishment for sins or a test from God. Women are deemed natural victims, they take on or are attributed the role of suffering servants, a role which is glorified by once again linking it to the suffering Jesus on the cross. It seems to me that the dual nature is split between oppressors and oppressed, awarding the divine nature of Jesus to the oppressors while the oppressed is allocated the human nature of Jesus. All this frames in a hierarchic, patriarchal view of the relationship between God and humanity of course!

Focussing on the resurrection makes for a negation of suffering, oppression, abuse, decay and death. The victims are ignored and their suffering glossed over. The church as an institution has often sided with the powerful and has thereby passively and sometimes actively contributed to the perpetuation of abuse and injustice in society and in the church itself.

The life of Jesus is seen as just a preliminary to his dying, Jesus is most importantly a willing victim, a surrogate sacrificing his life for the sake of the sinful humanity. Since Jesus usually is portrayed as a white male, this has led to racism and the fact that the majority of the world population (not being white or male) cannot identify with Jesus. Focussing on Jesus as a unique God-man, the ultimate revelation of God in history is a stumbling stone with regard to the interreligious dialogue which feminist theologians favour. But the maleness of Jesus, seen as an essential quality with regard to his revelation and salvation potential has despaired feminist theologians mostly. This has led to questions about the possibility of women to be saved. It also has led to the idea that women cannot imitate Christ and have no direct access to the divine, rendering them second-class human beings in church and in society. The virtues derived from the cross event exhort the vulnerable to become or remain victims that suffer in silence and bear their burden with dignity. It teaches them to respect authority unquestionably and to exercise self-sacrifice and denial. This effectively makes active resistance, either in situations of domestic violence or abuse and concerning injustice in society, unthinkable. It also induces guilt into women whenever they want to pursue their own dreams. The strong and powerful however, seem to be exempt from the practice of these virtues. Here also, the vulnerable will expiate the sins of the powerful! The relationship within the divine Trinity is seen to be an unequal patriarchal relationship where the crux of the power lies with the Father who dominates His/Her Son. God is thus a sovereign tyrant, cruel and bloodthirsty but perhaps also subject to the cosmic law of satisfaction.

Due to a number of harmful interpretations of the crucifixion, this has given rise to a certain pattern of relationship. The same kind of relationships and the same kind of power are to be found in interpersonal relations, in society, between Jesus and God and between the human beings and God. Even though feminist theologians, examining the existing theories of the cross and the

biblical paragraphs that are considered to be the reason for certain unjust practices are convinced that the writers of these texts had good intentions, it remains a fact that certain interpretations are more influential than others¹³¹. Some interpretations, though known for being wrong, do not seem to be able to be eradicated, they feed the imagination or they are used to keep the powerful and the privileged in place. That is why feminist theologians make attempts to change the general thinking when it is harmful to women or other groups that are voiceless or vulnerable. The cross is clearly an “ambivalent symbol” which needs to be re-examined and redeemed, so that it regains its salvific potential¹³².

CHAPTER 3. FEMINIST PROPOSALS FOR A THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

3.1. General

Feminist theologians are concerned with the method they employ to reconstruct a theology of the cross that is not harmful to those who live at the margins of life, sanity, dignity and power¹³³. They are aware of the fact that in the past the “epistemology-as-usual” has not taken into account the knowledge of these people based on their experience and not on rational deduction or induction as is the usual practice in the power centres of knowledge. Thus the experience of “interlocked oppression”, people suffering from poverty but also from gender, race, religious and sexual discrimination, has not been included in the traditional theologies of the cross¹³⁴. However, lived experience should be recognized as a valuable way of knowing, since all knowing is embodied, it “occurs in, with and under the material realities of the knower’s everyday life¹³⁵.”

As feminist theology gained recognition, it got contested by women from African, Latino and Asian Background and by women who were sexually oriented towards other women because their experiences as well as women with disabilities were seemingly included in the conclusions of the white, Euro-American, middle-class and heterosexual women who first started feminist theology as such. In the meantime, feminist theology has acknowledged that all knowledge is limited and that all experience is particular. Its claims regarding women and women’s experience, as well as its practices had to be rethought and revised to include the experiences of as many different women as possible¹³⁶. Feminist theologians refuse a hierarchic difference between the observer and the object under observation. Each has value and both influence each other. True objectivity understood as being removed and impartial does not exist. What is important is that one realises one’s own hidden agendas and acts so that epistemological practices that contribute to injustice are reversed. There is moral virtue in this, but there is also scientific virtue in “gathering more and richer evidence about how it is with the world, ourselves included¹³⁷.”

Feminist theology has pledged her allegiance to this kind of objectivity but in order to reach it, a number of requirements need to be taken seriously. First of all, the best place to start looking for this “relatively undistorted and ethically defensible knowing”, is that of the marginalised, “at the foot of the cross¹³⁸.” However, being in the margins is of itself no guarantee that one will, by oneself, overcome racist, classist, sexual or religious stereotypes. Therefore experience should be constantly and carefully reflected upon to “retain its epistemological authority.” Being truly objective should mean that one seeks “to be with the victims¹³⁹.” A second requirement is that one

¹³¹ Flora Keshgegian examines Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* in “The Scandal of the Cross.”

¹³² Id., “The Scandal of the Cross,” 477-478.

¹³³ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 115.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 113-114.

¹³⁶ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 98; Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 23.

¹³⁷ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 132.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 114-116.

is willing to be “accountable to others for one’s own agenda/s¹⁴⁰.” We should ask ourselves who has power in our proposal and what kind of power it stands for. We have to make sure no experiences are excluded, underrated or ignored. The impact of our goals and proposals on the victims should be examined, to make sure that their situation is at the very least not worsened and preferably improved by them. Therefore we have to practice discernment, for it springs from spirituality, as well as critical thought¹⁴¹.

Marit Trelstad and Mary Solberg, who both try to reconstruct Luther’s theology of the cross, propose that we should see it as an epistemology of the cross¹⁴². Feminist epistemologies are different in that they “do not argue whether knowledge is possible or not”, which is arguably what traditional epistemology is concerned with, but that “they question the terms of the enterprise itself”, meaning they ask who wants to know and what they want to accomplish with this knowledge¹⁴³. If an epistemology of the cross sees the crucifixion as the point of origin for trying to understand God and if a theology of the cross understands that “all categories of theology coordinate and originate in the cross”, then I agree with Marit Trelstad that we should indeed be speaking about an epistemology of the cross instead of a theology of the cross¹⁴⁴. It is obvious that Jesus’ life was revelation, not just his death! The words he spoke and the actions he performed were of themselves so alien to anything a human being could come up with by him/herself, that they clearly point to someone outside our world. Another good reason to speak about an epistemology of the cross is because it can help us distinguish what should govern our quest for truth in order to be able to live “morally responsible lives¹⁴⁵.” An epistemology should reveal where exclusion and injustice takes place, so that one can become aware of one’s involvement in these exclusions and injustices which should lead to an engagement to rectify the wrongs and to prevent these things from happening in the future¹⁴⁶.

Feminist theologians do not stop their efforts at the criticism of theologies of the cross that are harmful to the vulnerable. Indeed, this is only their starting point! They “recover alternative sources in Scripture, tradition, women’s experience and critical theories, to reconstruct” claims and to reinterpret texts and symbols in accordance with these sources “for the well-being of women, men and earth¹⁴⁷.” The retrieval of sources are not excluding traditions that have been introduced by men, seeing the history of the church this would of course be almost impossible, if and when these traditions could indeed also be liberative to women¹⁴⁸. Feminism is for none of these theologians equal to man hating! In my feminist framework, I mentioned that feminist theologians employ a hermeneutic of suspicion, and this is in fact a valuable tool because it helps to uncover knots of power and responsibility. However, in order to be able to reconstruct a claim, they equally need a hermeneutic of trust¹⁴⁹! This is important, since Christians are people of hope; they believe that God is present and that the Holy Spirit will guide their thinking and acting if they use discernment. But they have to trust their discernment. Once they have examined their proposals against the Gospel message, they have to be able to trust their judgement. They are however also aware of the fact they are not able to see some of the injustices they are complicit in, precisely

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁴¹ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 126.

¹⁴² “...a growing number of women scholars are claiming a dialectical allegiance to both feminism and Luther’s theological vision...the politics of a feminist theology of the cross...aims at a mutual transformation of both Lutheran and feminist theological visions.” Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 100.

¹⁴³ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 24.

¹⁴⁴ Marit Trelstad, “Lavish Love,” 113. Marit Trelstad as well as Mary Solberg advocate an epistemology of the cross. Their point is hermeneutical and ethical, they are convinced that an epistemology of the cross, based on Luther’s theology on the cross in a dialectic process with feminist concerns concerning this theology, can bring people to an understanding of what faithful living should be.

¹⁴⁵ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 97.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 123-124.

¹⁴⁷ Rosemary P. Carbine, “Contextualizing the Cross,” 95.

¹⁴⁸ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 100.

¹⁴⁹ Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, “A Theology of the Cross,” 181.

because they are so implicated that they cannot see the bigger picture. That is why, rather than advancing that their theories are the ultimate theories, their aim is to invite discussion, hoping it will not be an outraged rejection but that it might instead advance the process of coming to just and good theology that will be capable of helping believers to lead ethical and spiritual lives. This then would mean they have creatively contributed to the realisation of the Promised Land. It also implies that they are conscious they have to abandon control understood as domination; instead, they choose risk as a key feature of their thinking¹⁵⁰. Risking that what is sure to lead to success in the world: domination, survival only of the fittest and control, is not what makes us ultimately happy and should thus be abandoned. It is a consequence of recognizing that our God is a hidden God, of whom we only see the back, and whom we never can grasp¹⁵¹. It means becoming humble and critical to our own ideas of who God should be and what God should do. If the bible has one message it surely is that God “confounds all human expectations,” that He/She writes right on crooked ways¹⁵².

Because feminist theologians start out from the experiences in their own lives and the lives of other women and reflect upon these to arrive at new insights, I will once again in this chapter about reconstruction begin with the cross, through this cross they see God, and from there on they interpret Jesus, as a person and as the Messiah. The crucifixion is a powerful symbol in Christianity, symbols are important because they illustrate how theology works in concrete situations¹⁵³. I will therefore also pay attention to feminist reconstructions of Christ. The virtues which were so dangerous, especially to women, in the previous chapter are being revised as well as the implications for living as a Christian. A different image of God implicates for the believer another kind of anthropology, which I will discuss and then move on to the world and the church. I end this chapter with a conclusion about the feminist proposals concerning the theology of the cross. As you will notice, the order in this chapter is not quite the same as in the previous one. I reversed the sequence human being - Jesus - God of the previous chapter to God - Jesus - human being, because I think this really is how it works with me. In the Gospel, Jesus is not making himself the focus of attention, all the time he is talking about God, revealing God through the telling of parables, the healings and exorcisms which were signs for the coming of the Reign of God. Jesus was all about God. That is why I put God first here, because I really think the cross should be about God and then, just as important for our lives as Christians, about Jesus and the human being. The fact that the communal factor of the cross is last discussed is by no means to be understood as a depreciation of the community. On the contrary, Christianity is a communal faith, without the community of believers the church today would not exist and will not remain alive in the future!

A last point I want to make here is that different groups within or without feminist theology have seen the necessity of revising the cross event¹⁵⁴. Among them are the victims of child abuse to whom the vulnerability of Jesus as the child to the God-Father is important. The “crucified people” as Sobrino calls them, because they see themselves hanging on the cross. The North-American African slaves (womanist theology), who see in Jesus a surrogate sinner. The African and South American Christians, who are concerned with the use of the cross in the colonial conquest of their land, the pillaging of their natural richness and the eradication of their culture. The Hispanic American women (Mujerista), who are stressing the servanthood of Jesus. The Asian Christians who are working in a non-Christian context and take exception to the unicity of Jesus and the white Eurocentric feminists, who advance new angles on pain, suffering and the working of the cross on the unconscious mind. As in the previous chapter I chose to start here with the cross, unconsciously following the idea that the best place to look at theology and the world is the cross. I am of course aware of the fact that we never can look at the cross “au nu,” our preconceptions and suppositions about God and Jesus always accompany us. However, I believe that by changing our vision of the

¹⁵⁰ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 45.

¹⁵¹ Exodus 33,23.

¹⁵² Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 91-92.

¹⁵³ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 134.

¹⁵⁴ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 123.

cross, we change our image of God and Jesus¹⁵⁵. Let us now move on to the feminist theologians' reconstruction of the cross.

3.2. The Cross

While envisaging the meaning of the cross, feminist theologians want to undo the connection between violence, suffering and salvation that is usually made and which, as seen, is especially harmful to women, but not only to them. Can the cross be anything else than a symbol for death¹⁵⁶? And what would be the point of trying to reclaim it? Are there perhaps other symbols which would be more meaningful? What we should realize, says Deanna Thompson is that the cross can only be seen as hopeful from the perspective of the resurrection. Only then do violence, suffering, pain, humiliation and death not have the last word¹⁵⁷.

In our reclaiming of the cross we may never forget the wrong that has been done in the name of the cross, therefore, the cross should be appropriated with repentance¹⁵⁸. Feminist theologians can only see the cross in the whole context of Jesus' life, his healing interactions with the impure and the outcast, his acceptance of repentant sinners in the community and his inclusive table community¹⁵⁹. It should also be taken into consideration that the cross, "in its original sense, embodied a *scandal*, that something, anything good could come out of such an event¹⁶⁰." The horror of the crucifixion should not be hidden under sweet images. The work of Christ did not stop with his death, but on the contrary, it continued through the community of his followers. But through this community the cross has done serious damage. It calls "to mind the forgotten stories... of all women and young girls who continue to be abused and battered under oppressive systems, ...¹⁶¹" That is why the question of in what kind of community the cross could function differently has to be addressed¹⁶². But also individually, the cross reminds us of the fact that we are sometimes incapable to love, it reminds us also of the fact that we are continually tempted to betray, it reminds us of how deserted we can feel. At the same time, however, it affirms that we can always be restored to life, to love, to joy¹⁶³. It is also "a call to us to take up our responsibility to be co-sufferers, co-redeemers and co-creators – to stand in solidarity to prevent further crucifixions¹⁶⁴." However, it should be realised that if we take up this "love that drove Jesus to lay down his life," we must be prepared for danger¹⁶⁵. And most importantly perhaps is the fact that it are "innocent, the marginalized and excluded, and those who fight for justice and human rights, who often bear the heaviest crosses¹⁶⁶." The next question must surely be why we should keep a symbol as tainted as the cross?

Mary Solberg is convinced that we know nothing of a faithful living except through the cross¹⁶⁷. And while I do not agree completely with her, as to the absoluteness of her remark, I must concede that indeed, the cross can, if interpreted cautiously, provide pointers for worthy individual

¹⁵⁵ I do not believe there is an exact chronology, since this is a hermeneutical process. Deepening our understanding of one part will lead to deepening our understanding of the other, which will in turn lead to deepening understanding of the first.

¹⁵⁶ Sally B. Purvis, *The Power of the Cross*, 85.

¹⁵⁷ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 148.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁵⁹ Kathryn Tanner uses the incarnation to revise traditional interpretations of the cross in Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001).

¹⁶⁰ JoAnne Marie Terrell, "Our Mother's Gardens," 37.

¹⁶¹ Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 151-152.

¹⁶² As I will do at the end of this chapter. Sally B. Purvis, *The Power of the Cross*, 85.

¹⁶³ Sally B. Purvis, *The Power of the Cross*, 94.

¹⁶⁴ Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 151-152.

¹⁶⁵ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 138.

¹⁶⁶ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 119-120.

¹⁶⁷ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 100.

and communal living. The cross shows God's involvement with the pain of humanity, and that He/She is concerned with the historical struggles for liberation¹⁶⁸.

[political, liberation, global, and black theologies and ... most feminist and womanist theologies] tend to reinterpret the cross as an action of solidarity and saving love, and connect Jesus' death more closely with his life praxis. Emphasizing the political nature of Jesus' death, they view Jesus' death as a result of the challenges he posed to the reigning powers... The cross is central to God's redeeming (and suffering) power and presence with the poor and oppressed. It represents God standing with them in compassion and empowerment¹⁶⁹.

God is faithful to the covenant and does not abandon His/Her people, not even in their deepest despair when they feel desperately alone and forsaken.

The cross has a strong history of bringing comfort to the suffering, since they can identify with Jesus on the cross. God is present in suffering and may thereby alleviate the burden of bearing the suffering all alone, but of course the suffering itself is not taken away, the pain is still just as real. The cross has never contested the situation of suffering itself; the empowering of God in the cross has to do with being able to endure suffering and in enduring grow strong enough to survive¹⁷⁰.

One last reason to keep the cross as a valuable symbol is given by Sally Purvis, who states that the cross sets boundaries on the claims and practices of the community; it thus shapes the contours of the Christian community. When one takes inspiration from the cross, the community can be no other than inclusive; no one should be excluded, be it on account of class, race, economic status, ethnicity, colour, gender or sexual orientation. There should be no use of violence, whatever the reason. The community should be dedicated to trust in the power of love, while power as control should be forgotten¹⁷¹.

What other interpretations of the cross do feminist theologians give that is more life-giving than those of a suffering victim and a sacrificed scapegoat?

Mary Grey wondered whether the cross/resurrection event could be seen to have anything to do with "right relation", so that human beings then could be active co-agents in their own redemption. She understands Jesus' life practice as salvific because this is in fact also the basic pattern of the world, through the resurrection event then; this relational energy was released into the world. She proposes the view of seeing the cross as leading to empowerment and mutuality. The "symbol of the Christ of mutuality and relationality" enables people to name the human brokenness and the disintegration of the wounded earth, while the cross brings together and empowers this unity between people and between human beings and God. It is thus a "life-affirming protest against the injustice of all torture and crucifixions." As an ambiguous symbol, through the cross one remembers the "estranged relational scene of the present" and one is able to imagine and work towards "the transformed future" for all¹⁷².

A similar idea about the cross is offered by Rosemary Carbine, who sees the cross as a symbol that helps to make meaning of life and humanity because it teaches us resistance through suffering. We should "resist and not support suffering," she says¹⁷³. This resistance could of course in itself lead to suffering, which is how she views the cross event. JoAnne Marie Terrell gives an interesting interpretation of how sacrifice could be redemptive. She calls it "sacramental sacrifice," and proposes that what Jesus did in his life was to show that a "life in love and honor" was indeed feasible¹⁷⁴. She further states that God does not require sacrifices and that Jesus' once-and-for-allness should be thus explained. What the cross signifies is that sufferers can be redeemed, and it tells us what it means "to witness sacramentally to the character of God: loving one's own, not

¹⁶⁸ Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 16.

¹⁶⁹ Flora Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories*, 169.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁷¹ Sally B. Purvis, *The Power of the Cross*, 92-93.

¹⁷² Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 151-152.

¹⁷³ Rosemary P. Carbine, "Contextualizing the Cross," 102.

¹⁷⁴ JoAnne Marie Terrell, "Our Mother's Gardens," 45.

loving others uncritically, and, most important, not being defined by one's victimization but by one's commitments¹⁷⁵." According to JoAnne Terrell, the saving power in anyone's death lies in the fact that we, the survivors, learn all the time from the "life that preceded" the dying¹⁷⁶.

The cross as a site where God's life-giving power is revealed is an interpretation of the cross which two of the feminist theologians I read favour: M. Shawn Copeland, and Sally B. Purvis¹⁷⁷. They act against the vision of control that is seemingly expected from God in the traditional interpretations. Sally Purvis even says that the vision of God's life-giving power, which is hinted at by Saint Paul in 1Cor 13, but which is never made explicit, is to be followed over the visions which link the cross to pain and suffering instead of to life¹⁷⁸. She sees in the cross an image of a God who plays another game, who does not participate in the human struggles for domination reached through violence.

...the cross shows God's power standing silently by while violence does its worst, while rage is unleashed in the world in paroxysms of attempts to control the religious, ethical, and social structures of life."...it shows God quietly, deeply, almost imperceptibly, changing the terms of the conflict", the power of god is the "generative power of life in *all* situations." It shows us a God who will not let violence win because God does not engage that particular contest. Rather, in the midst of the worst that violence can do, love creates life. We need to reclaim the cross because it symbolizes the power as life and love¹⁷⁹.

The cross shows us that aggression is not the way of the people of God and it makes us believe that there is another kind of power stronger than anything we have known. It is the power of life. Human beings are naturally wary of this power, since it has not been able "to protect us against violence and abuse through the centuries." The cross is seemingly untouched by the suffering of mankind: it does not say suffering is all right and yet it does not say it is not there, either. Sally Purvis concludes that suffering is "a by-product of loving", because when we open up to each other we are touched by the pain and grief of the other, we share in it. Violence, pain and suffering "can be lived, but they cannot be explained¹⁸⁰." The abuse taking place on the cross is the relatedness of people that is broken. As the Gospel story advances, Jesus becomes more and more isolated, accumulating in Gethsemane when his disciples sleep instead of staying awake with him and comforting him, and later even betray and abandon him. A stranger has to be called upon to help carry his cross. What Jesus experiences is the "multidimensional enactment of the apparent breakdown of love." Then, on the cross, "the exuberance of life as it breaks free from the control and violence it had confronted and moved through," is represented¹⁸¹.

Cynthia Crysdale proposes the "law of the cross", what she sees happening on the cross as an indication of how to live a faithful life¹⁸². She sees on the cross Jesus, breaking the cycle of sin and revenge by his choice not to retaliate to violence but to suffer instead. One has to wonder if she thus does not even the path for all kinds of martyrial behaviour, which proved to be so harmful to women. Her solution to evil is indeed equal to that of the two previous theologians in that evil is not taken away by an exercise of power, interpreted by her as God taking away the freedom of the human being, but she interprets the cross as an invitation to let love "make of evil the occasion of

¹⁷⁵ JoAnne Marie Terrell, "Our Mother's Gardens," 47.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁷⁷ M. Shawn Copeland, "To Live at the Disposal of the Cross: Mystical-Political Discipleship as Christological Locus," in Ann Clifford & Anthony Godzieba, eds., *Christology, Memory, Inquiry, Practice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 180; Sally B. Purvis, *The Power of the Cross*, 88.

¹⁷⁸ Sally B. Purvis, *The Power of the Cross*, p. 86-87.

¹⁷⁹ Sally B. Purvis, *The Power of the Cross*, 88. Sally Purvis bases her book on a reinterpretation of Saint Paul's letters to the Romans, I Corinthians, II Corinthians and Galatians. She refers to J.P.M. Walsh, S.J., *The Mighty from Their Thrones: Power in the Biblical Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) as supporting her ideas concerning the nature and function of the cross in relationship to violence.

¹⁸⁰ Sally B. Purvis, *The Power of the Cross*, 89.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

¹⁸² Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 144-150.

goodness¹⁸³.” She appeals in fact to the human will to choose the good over the bad, in imitation of Christ. In my opinion, she reverts thus to the “moral influence” theory, which, as I mentioned in chapter 2, does not take into account the seriousness of the suffering of the victims!

Yet another interpretation of the cross is given by Deanne Thompson, who advances the metaphor of friendship to explain God’s atoning work on the cross¹⁸⁴. She bases her assumption on John, 15, 13 to come to this conclusion¹⁸⁵. She likes the image of friendship to describe the relationship of Christ with his church because it focuses more on the freedom which is involved in the act of giving. Friendship moreover links Jesus’ life with his suffering and atonement. This image also makes the atoning work on the cross future-oriented, since it gives an indication of the way Jesus’ work should be continued. I have some problems with this metaphor for I think that it is a very asymmetric relationship which is depicted here. The friendship seems to be terribly one-sided. It removes Jesus from ordinary human beings, for I think it focuses on the divinity of Jesus.

Some theologians see salvation in other places than the cross. They thus try to forego the connection there always is between suffering, death and salvation, which they think is too dangerous concerning the victimhood of the weak and vulnerable.

Mary Grey and Mary Streufert see a viable alternative in the birth. Mary Grey starts with death and imagines it as a birth, “a kind of disintegration leading to a new and different kind of life¹⁸⁶.” Death confirms connectedness because the more we love, the more we suffer from the separation. She sees death as something positive, a kind of laying-in-waiting for the beauty that surely is to come. While I think this is a thoroughly comforting vision for anyone being confronted with the death of a loved one, it does not undo the link between suffering and salvation. Mary Streufert has in my opinion an interesting idea concerning suffering, which she calls “maternal sacrifice”¹⁸⁷. She proposes to forget the cross as a site of salvation and concentrate on our experiences of suffering which do not lead to death but instead have life at the outcome. Being pregnant, giving birth and raising children are to her good examples of such suffering. Through the “life-for-life model of the mother-child relationship”, Jesus’ death is “no longer seen as an exclusive necessity for new life,” now Jesus’ life can clearly be perceived as a “locus of salvation.” She does bring the soteriological focus “from death to life ... and God’s love as lived through Jesus.” Through the “hermeneutic of maternal sacrifice”,

...we are released from the dangers of a sacrifice of glory, which springs from a misapplication of violent atonement. If Jesus is no longer the sacrifice necessary as a sin offering, then we are released from religious metaphors of violence. Therefore, modes and metaphors of cultural violence, including those of sacrificial abuse and war, are deemed illegitimate. ...Jesus’ death is no longer exclusively expiation but is also the embodiment of the risk to love¹⁸⁸.

If in everyday life, we would practice a “returning to each other,” we would “embody the life-for-life model of sacrifice inherent to motherhood”, we would be “ultimately transformed,” and this new relationship would save us¹⁸⁹! Though the cross, as the place where Jesus dies can still figure in Mary Grey’s reinterpretation along with many other deaths and definitive losses, Mary Streufert’s maternal sacrifice is a bit more problematic. However, because she states that Jesus’ death is no longer an *exclusive* necessity for new life, we have to presume she does not completely abandon the cross. Her image of life springing from the sacrifice of a life, a sacrifice which is not mortal, grants worth to the commitments of people everywhere who devote their lives to the poor and the oppressed as well as to those who care for the sick and elderly in our society.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁸⁴ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 135-137.

¹⁸⁵ John 15,13: No greater love than he who gives his life for his friends.

¹⁸⁶ Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 148-150.

¹⁸⁷ Mary J. Streufert, “Maternal Sacrifice as a Hermeneutics of the Cross,” in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 73-74.

¹⁸⁸ Mary J. Streufert, “Maternal Sacrifice,” 74-75.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

Delores Williams was probably the first to discover a site of salvation which did not have anything to do with the cross¹⁹⁰¹⁹¹. She found in the story of Hagar, a woman, “who was not liberated by God, but rather received strength to survive in the context of slavery and a forced marriage that resulted in pregnancy and then abandonment¹⁹².” This is a story in which the “victimization of the gendered and economic other” is not sanctified! Salvation here means receiving strength to be able to bear the burden and survive. For me, this is a strong image of salvation, because it stresses the fact that God does the unexpected, in fact, as Deanne Thompson points out, Hagar is the only woman in the bible to receive of God the promise “that she, through her son, will become a great nation¹⁹³.”

Another interpretation of salvation is provided by Manuela Kalsky who recounts Carter Heyward. Carter Heyward sees the erotic godly power in just relationships between people as the love of God which gives life and leads out of oppressive structures and thus saves¹⁹⁴. The same erotic power is developed by Rita Nakashima Brock, but she goes on to say that Jesus does not instigate this erotic power. He is “brought into being through it and participates in the cocreation of its power¹⁹⁵.” It is the community that generates this erotic power¹⁹⁶. Though a worthy idea, I wonder if it is not too vague, the erotic power these theologians see as the ground of our world, in which this erotic power operates might be correct, but since it has no direct model might prove to be difficult to follow.

A last interpretation of a site of salvation that is not cross-bound is the “covenantal ontology” of Marit Trelstad: “that human relationship with God is restored and reconciled simply because God chooses to create, love and redeem creation¹⁹⁷.” Of course this model is concerned with the vertical relation between God and the human beings instead of between human beings as such. She approaches the reconciliation from an ontological viewpoint, because, she says, “who we are, in all avenues of our lives, is created in and by relationships.” Prior to any human action, God has elected us to be saved. “Salvation through covenant” signifies that the partners are equal and that both have something to offer to the relationship. God initiates the relationship, but human beings are active partners because they respond to the initiative, be it by taking part and shaping or foregoing the relationship. Marit Trelstad describes the covenantal relationship as “one of cooperative creativity¹⁹⁸.” The cross still has an important meaning, for it stands for “broken relationships and alienation, God’s suffering alongside humanity, the response of the world to the covenant, and what we have left to overcome, along with Christ, to realize the vision of the promised reign of God¹⁹⁹.” This means that the cross fits in a larger picture of covenantal salvation, where ultimately the aim is for the whole of creation to live fully in this relationship. I think this is an important vision of salvation, because it leaves human hope intact and accords value to both God and human beings. It also deflects the focus from suffering towards creative participation in the coming to be of the Promised Land.

¹⁹⁰ Delores Williams found in this story a salvation to which black women, suffering from a surrogate status and struggling to survive could relate. It does not mean she abandons the cross as such, only that she found proof of God’s salvific activity also in another place and situation in the Bible.

¹⁹¹ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 161-167.

¹⁹² Marion Grau, *Of Divine Economy*, 163-164.

¹⁹³ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 142-147.

¹⁹⁴ Sally Purvis gives a very good explanation of the erotic power of God in Sally Purvis, *The Power of the Cross*, 39-44; Manuela Kalsky, “Hunkerend naar heil: Christologische ontwerpen in oecumenisch feministisch perspectief,” in *Mara* 10/1 (1996), 3-7, 5.

¹⁹⁵ Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 52.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁹⁷ Marit Trelstad, “Lavish Love,” 111.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 121-122.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

3.3. God

The relations between God and the human beings that were depicted in the traditional interpretations of the cross seemed to be mostly patriarchal and hierarchical. God was omnipotent and a rigid judge who insisted on getting his pound of flesh from humanity. Feminist theologians found this God to be an idol. They needed a clear indication that God is not indifferent and that He/She neither wants nor causes human suffering²⁰⁰. Mary Solberg found it in the cross which signifies that God is indeed present in “transformative solidarity” with this broken world²⁰¹. This indicates that suffering is contrary to God’s will, because God is intimately present in the midst of suffering, not as the one who causes it but as the one who wants to heal, to create life out of oppression, humiliation and death²⁰². God is then not only present but actively present in the suffering which is more hopeful and empowers victims at the same time to resist and transform their oppressive suffering.

According to Cynthia Crysdale, God works transformations by providing insight and the strength to overcome fear of action. It surprises the human being for this makes him/her speak, think and act in unexpected ways, although all of this takes place in the world²⁰³. The focus perhaps should be more on what this God is perceived to do, and thus should be imitated, more than who this God is²⁰⁴. The images of God that feminist theologians provide through their interpretations of the cross event, should be viewed this way.

What theologians are very concerned with is the kind of power that is attributed to God. In the past the Godly omnipotence has legitimated sovereign power, patriarchal structures and supremacy of the strong. Working with the principle of reversal, feminist theologians try to gain knowledge of power by examining the powerless, and how they perceive their dominators in order to come to another understanding of the power of God²⁰⁵.

God must be omnipotent in a way that is diametrically opposed to the “potence” that domination thinks it has. This divine power is a power to transform the cycles of evil within which we live and, in doing so, negate and conquer evil...He is a God who is omnipotent yet overcomes evil not by domination but by transformation²⁰⁶.”

This transformation means that one pole does not have to be eliminated in favour of the other, which is the usual way we think change will come about, mostly by deploying superior violence, but that the transformation is like a synthesis, changing both into something better.

It could in fact be the kind of power Rita Nakashima Brock describes as an erotic power in which the community participates²⁰⁷. She defines it as the “fundamental power of life, born into us, [which] heals, makes whole, empowers, and liberates.” It is the power of our “primal interrelatedness,” and it “involves the whole person in relationships of self-awareness, vulnerability, openness, and caring.” This power is equal to all who want to participate in it. It can never be for the benefit of one individual, since it favours the community. She sees God as profoundly relational, although the word power hints at something abstract, not concerned with human beings individually. I find in it also traces of a primal power to ensure the survival of the species, as such!

In the same vein, Catherine Keller recodes the power of God as the “the lure to a self-organizing complexity, creating out of the chaos – the tohuwabohu of which Genesis 1 speaks²⁰⁸.” She proposes that we let the hierarchical universe of unilateral and omnipotent sovereignty fade

²⁰⁰ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 128-129.

²⁰¹ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 137-138.

²⁰² Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 129-131.

²⁰³ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 131-132.

²⁰⁴ Rita Nakashima Brock, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 149.

²⁰⁵ Id., *Journeys by Heart*, 26.

²⁰⁶ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 61.

²⁰⁷ Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 25-26.

²⁰⁸ Catherine Keller, *God and Power*, 30-31.

into a more wildly democratic cosmos of unpredictable and uncontrollable – but never unordered – interrelations.” The principle of order would be God’s love understood as a desire for our fullest becoming “as individuals, as peoples, as religions, as nations, as creatures inextricably embedded within the interdependence of creation.” Such a power seems indeed powerful, while it keeps its creativity. But to me, it signifies also a rather unilateral relationship. While giving a plausible alternative for the omnipotence of God, it does not allow for a God who is touched by the laments of His/Her people.

A completely different vision on the power of God is provided by Darby Kathleen Ray. She values the powers of evil so high that God, who clearly is not all powerful, can only defeat them by “creatively and cunningly” subverting them²⁰⁹. God successfully deceives the devil in the life and death of Jesus and thus is able to repair the damaged relationship with humanity. It is true that in this proposal there is no glorifying of passivity or suffering, but that is because the deceit implies that the suffering was an illusion. Something which does not help the victims whose suffering is terribly real. Now they are left with a God who does not understand their suffering for He/She has never experienced it and who therefore can offer no consolation in their darkest despair.

Let us now move on to the images of God which feminist theologians propose.

3.3.1 Images of God

Feminist theologians clearly take to heart the transcendence of God, for they present a myriad of different images of God. The most shocking image I read about, was not proposed by a woman, but is frequently quoted by feminist theologians who seem to like it because of its shocking quality. It is the image of God as a pimp, who demands of Christ the prostitute, to exchange her body for the salvation of the perverted²¹⁰. The idea is of course to reveal the shocking quality of the transaction. But of course the problem with such images is that one rejects them precisely because they seem so incongruous, instead of digging deeper into the meaning that is conveyed by this image. I think the image, though amusing, perhaps, is also wrong. Prostitution is an economic transaction which is from both sides based on a kind of hopelessness. It has a definite despairing quality, and it illustrates on the side of the prostitute her low self-esteem, she has to sell her body because she does not have anything else. On the side of the client it shows his/her egoism, for he/she is not concerned with the integrity or dignity of the other, the only thing that counts is one’s own instant gratification. The other person is just a tool to obtain this. The image of God as a pimp would imply that God is exploitative, that Jesus and thus also human beings are only instrumental to God in the process of securing his existence. It shows a relationship between the divine and human beings not unlike that depicted in the *Enuma Elish*, where human beings were created to work for the gods.

Quite contrary to the previous is the vision of Deanne Thompson, who sees in the crucifixion not a pimp peddling his merchandise, but a God who comes to meet humanity fully. Agreeing with Luther, she sees in the cross event something quite different than the traditional theories of atonement. God does not want payment; He/She expects nothing from the human beings because they are “incapable of moving toward God²¹¹.” Atonement means that God comes to humanity. Although this image certainly makes clear the love God has for humanity, it is once more a unilateral relation that is described. God is all-powerful and humanity is powerless. The horror of the double predestination this led to is certainly to be avoided. She objects moreover to the image of a solely merciful God and is of the opinion that God should also be a judge, in order to be able to condemn “acts and institutions that dehumanize women and others²¹².” It is true, of course, that we cannot imagine a God who would let the perpetrators of the mass rapes in Eastern Congo, for example, go unpunished. We would be abhorred if they would meet with the same afterlife as anyone else. However, is this not an illustration of our kind of justice rationalisation conferred on

²⁰⁹ Darby Kathleen Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, vii.

²¹⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1993), 65 as referred to in Marion Grau, *Of Divine Economy*, 222.

²¹¹ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 131-133.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 133-134.

God? The images of the reign of God that Jesus gives in the parables are quite shocking to us sometimes. Often we try to circumvent them, or we explain them as a utopia, never to be reached, but what if? Perhaps we need the image of a wrathful God to keep us on the straight and narrow? It would then be so that this image has nothing to do with God, as such, but everything with humankind!

Cynthia Crysdale presents a quite different image of God. She sees in the incarnation and the crucifixion a God who is willing to let go of control, to take risks, and to get hurt. A God, who wagers on humanity and who is willing to lose. A God, who with Jesus sets up “a matrix of new meanings that are *potentially*, not *necessarily*, transformative²¹³.” A God, who “wants love and communion with (w)holy human persons” and who therefore has to let go of justice in favour of mercy²¹⁴. God is in that sense not wrathful, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God reveals that in life and in death the relationship He/She has with humans perdures²¹⁵. God is a God of life and of the living, be it not reduced to the kind of living we know. Though thoroughly comforting, this image of God should not lead human beings to suffer passively and endure denigrating and oppressive situations because of a misplaced eschatological vision. God does not want sacrifices; we should contribute to the promotion of the Promised Land here and now!

JoAnne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker complete this picture by saying that in the cross “God’s grief is revealed”, and thus “every tragedy eternally remains and is eternally mourned²¹⁶.” Though this could paint a sad picture of God, it has the quality of another kind of justice, if the wrongs cannot be rectified and if the perpetrators are not punished in the way we see punishment (as exclusion, mostly), then at least, the suffering of the victims is taken seriously because it is not once, but eternally mourned. If we think further along those lines, this means that the perpetrators in fact have to mourn the suffering of their victims. Perhaps this is divine justice?

Sally Purvis then, has an image that could convene to the mix of pleasure and pain that is so often present in our life, but that is reversed in some traditional interpretations of the cross event, leading to the glorification of suffering! She sees God as being totally “out of control. God is powerful. God takes our breath away. God is passion, in passion, passionate, not primarily in spasms of suffering as classical theory would have it but in spasms of loving²¹⁷.” However, a power that is unpredictable and playful could be dangerous and even deadly to human beings. That is why she states that God is trustworthy. This way, we should no longer have to cling to an image of a God who is controlling to feel secure in the power of God. God’s power though not controlling, is not impotent²¹⁸!

3.4. Jesus

Christology has been a true stumbling block for feminist theologians, although they value the Jesus who is described in the Gospels greatly, they have difficulties with the Christocentrism that has been part of our tradition. Most of them also make exception to the fact that the tradition has seemingly reduced salvation to Jesus’ death, and they deplore the fact that suffering is seen as a means to realise union with the divine. They all refuse to see the crucifixion as the just payment of a debt or the ransom owed to either God or the devil. The fact that victims can identify with the crucified Jesus as someone who was unjustly accused, tortured and executed is extremely important to feminist theologians²¹⁹. But the cross is situated within the broader theological and historical context of Jesus’ life and work for the Promised Land. Jesus thus is seen as a multifaceted person, who grows and changes in his faith and understanding of the will of God. The

²¹³ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 57.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

²¹⁶ Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, “For God so Loved the World,” 27.

²¹⁷ Sally Purvis, *The Power of the Cross*, 91.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

²¹⁹ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 123.

cross is one of the many aspects of Jesus' life and is framed in the "multidimensional struggle" for human flourishing²²⁰.

When Feminist theologians call Jesus a saviour, they usually mean by it that he worked in his life, with words and actions towards the nonviolent transformation of his reality, towards the realisation of what I call the Promised Land. He did this by incarnating God in his own body, by resisting oppressive power in various ways, and by giving the commandment of love to his followers. The path to salvation that Jesus showed is the practice of love because it restores in us an awareness of God²²¹.

This means effectively that the life and message of Jesus are the place of salvation. It is the living Jesus, as we know him from the Gospels, who is important to us. Mary Grey finds in the life of Jesus the true meaning of sacrifice: it "is a total response in mutuality to justice-making in a particular situation²²²." Once an engagement towards justice is made, it should be followed through, no matter what the consequences are, without however courting danger. Suffering is not constitutive of Jesus' identity, and neither should it be of women or anyone else for that matter²²³. Cynthia Crysdale finds the reason for the crucifixion in the life of Jesus, a life that was truly liberating. "Through his preaching, his concern for the marginalized, his treatment of women, his breaking of ritual practices, his insistence on love of enemies, culminating in his death on a Roman cross, Jesus embodied an alternative to domination²²⁴." He found the strength for his resistance in his identity as a "child of God," who, whatever happened, still felt himself "within God's embrace²²⁵." But, at the same time, Jesus saw himself as a human being with all the limitations this entails. Cynthia Crysdale sees him engaging in "strategic risk-taking," which means that he was aware of not bringing final solutions but was "setting up ... the conditions of possibility for transformation²²⁶." I think that perhaps she is indulging in high Christology here, seeing a plan where none existed. The death of Jesus is seen as a by-product of his union with God, not something he wanted and not something he sought²²⁷. Neither was it inevitable, although the Gospel stories almost seem to make it that way.

Mary Grey makes a point for the importance of the message of Christ as it is an "invitation to growth and self-affirmation, rooted in a healthy recognition of physical createdness – a call to end crucifixions, not prolong them²²⁸."

Even though the life of Jesus should be taken into account as the site of salvation, some feminist theologians are pointing to a number of problems if we were to forget the crucifixion completely. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel is worried that the "decrucifixion of Jesus" would diminish the seriousness of violence and suffering and ergo of suffering and despair in human life and thus become a theology of glory, blind to "the visible and often horribly unattractive realities of life²²⁹." She further states that backing away from the cross would lessen the importance of the resurrection, because Jesus would then be reduced to his humanity. When sin is taken seriously, "a savior - not just a moral example - is needed²³⁰." Mary Grey argues that the death of Jesus was necessary because it released "a flood of creative and transformative power into history." This is the "empowering force" for all wanting to live in "mutuality-in-relation²³¹." However, if the death

²²⁰ Rosemary P. Carbine, "Contextualizing the Cross," 94-95.

²²¹ Mary J. Streufert, "Maternal Sacrifice," 73-74.

²²² Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 105.

²²³ Rosemary P. Carbine, "Contextualizing the Cross," 94.

²²⁴ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 45.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

²²⁶ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 57.

²²⁷ Mary J. Streufert, *Maternal Sacrifice*, 73.

²²⁸ Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 18.

²²⁹ Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendell, "Is There a Feminist Theology of the Cross?" in *The Scandal of a Crucified World: Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering*, ed. Yacob Tesfai (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 87-98 as referred to in Deanna Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 122.

²³⁰ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 122.

²³¹ Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 172.

of Christ was necessary then we are back at the dangerous linkage between violence and salvation! Also, since she talks about this power being released in the world, I wonder if the death of an old man on his sickbed would have released the same “creative and transformative power” as that of a man in the full force of his life, on the cross? If not, then the violence was a necessary fact, which brings us back to the images of God and Christ we have been so adamant to deconstruct!

A number of feminist theologians look for salvation in the resurrection, instead of exclusively on the life or the death of Jesus. Flora Keshgegian says that people are empowered by an encounter with the risen Christ, which enables them “to live in hope beyond fear, to be empowered beyond all that seeks to oppress and kill²³².” To Cynthia Crysdale the resurrection is extremely important, since it means that “there is no evil on earth that we might *suffer* which is beyond the scope of God’s healing and there is no evil on earth that we might *commit* that is beyond the range of God’s forgiveness²³³.” Though a hopeful message, it also conveys the idea that the scope of the wrongs suffered or committed is not that important, one is a victim and a sinner, that is enough. She also sees the cross as being intrinsic to transformation, just as Mary Grey does.

Womanist theologians have started to portray Jesus as a black Christ, a black woman, and a black community, to expose the hegemony of the “white Christ,” which has in fact reinforced “racist, sexist, classist ideologies,” and to make clear that “black women, men and communities” were in fact “equal creation[s] in the image of God.” But it served also to make these people aware of their own accountability, while highlighting that God was truly present in their struggles against oppression from the outside and from the inside and for personal and communal wholeness²³⁴.

Marina Herrera has never pictured Christ as a white European male, to her he is always “Emmanuel or “God-with-us,” she wants to make clear that this title “stresses the way he was present to everything – water and rocks, flowers and birds, sinners and saints, poor and rich, young and old, males and females, the sick and the well²³⁵.” Jesus was different in the way he was present in the community within which he lived: he was non-possessive, forgiving and non-paternalistic. He connected leadership with love and not with power and he was above all a linker!

The images of Christ as a slave and a prostitute, advanced by Marion Grau, are examples of the way God works, they demonstrate “the reality and perversity” of the patriarchal structures²³⁶. But these images transform the structures “by “inhabiting” them and by incarnating them as a Messiah who is not a Messiah in the sense of a typical patriarch.” The image of Christ as prostitute means that Christ gives his life knowing this is not just but he accepts it because the gain is enormous, the whole world is saved! This may seem perverse to us because we do not associate Jesus with the work of a prostitute - but that is precisely the point. They want to show that the interpretation of the crucifixion where Jesus is pictured as a willing victim, is based on wrong assumptions. I think they attain their aim because the image instantly shocks and makes us reflect on its implications!

Darby Ray offers an image of Jesus as a trickster/deceiver of evil forces! Christ hides his divine essence under a “fleshy exterior” and thus is able to free humanity from slavery because he offers himself as a ransom. However, the devil is deceived because after the deal is made Christ shows his true colours and returns to his place “sitting next to the Father²³⁷.” Tricks and creativity are to Darby Ray valuable nonviolent weapons in the fight against injustice and oppression. However, this reveals a Machiavellian streak, it gives the impression that if the aim is worthy, any measures can be taken to reach it. And although it is clearly effective, it is also unethical. It is a kind of surrender to evil, because one uses the same tools²³⁸. One stays within the system and

²³² Flora Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories*, 176.

²³³ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 30.

²³⁴ Rosemary P. Carbine, “Contextualizing the Cross,” 100.

²³⁵ Marina Herrera, “Who Do You Say Jesus Is: Christological reflections from a Hispanic Woman’s perspective,” in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol. Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed. Maryanne Stevens (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993; reprint Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 89-91.

²³⁶ Marion Grau, *Of Divine Economy*, 223.

²³⁷ Darby Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 138-139.

²³⁸ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 46-47.

employs the values of this system. It is true that the aim is to corrupt it from the inside, but one gets tainted in the process.

Let us now move on to see what feminist theologians make of the uniqueness of Jesus, in order to adhere to it, they have to give it a different content from the tradition.

3.4.1 *The Uniqueness of Jesus*

Quite a number of feminist theologians have found a way to preserve the uniqueness of Jesus but give it a content which is less difficult for the interreligious dialogue. To Cynthia Crysdale, Jesus is unique because he was the only Self, a complete human being²³⁹. While all of us are called to become true selves, we are not because of our participation in evil. Jesus however, is both a historical figure and an archetype. It seems to me that this explanation is just a renaming of the same traditional Christological idea that Christ is the one true image of God. I do not think this true Self will cause less contention!

Eleanor McLaughlin insists on the fact that Jesus is both God and man but for an unexpected reason. Although Jesus is a historic figure, she finds the symbol reality just as interesting, for there is little we can say with certainty concerning the historical Jesus, but the religious experience of the holy is contained in the symbol. In the God-ness of Jesus Christ, she wants to uncover “the lost Woman-God.” She needs to peel the God-ness off to “uncover the maleness so that the woman-ness of the God/Jesus can be seen and shared²⁴⁰.” She wants to find in Jesus Christ a person who can be perceived as either man or woman, in order to keep the shocking quality of Jesus. Since this pertains to the maleness of Jesus, I will return to it in the next section.

By turning to the Wisdom tradition, Elizabeth Johnson is able to come up with a Jesus who both has divine qualities and is human but will not pose problems to the interreligious dialogue. Because:

Jesus-Sophia personally incarnates Wisdom’s gracious care in one particular history, for the benefit of all, while she lays down a multitude of paths in diverse cultures by which all people may seek, and seeking find her. There is then continuity in divine action and inspiration between the Christian religion and the multitude of world religious traditions²⁴¹.

Other theologians have given up on the uniqueness of Jesus and propose corresponding visions of Jesus. Although Jesus to Rosemary Radford Ruether is still “the foundational representative” of “[the] way of the cross and liberation,” there might be other possibilities to live and become “other Christs to one another²⁴².” She mentions the church as a “redemptive community” when she embodies “this path of liberation” and thereby transforms people and structures. Cynthia Crysdale also challenges the uniqueness of Jesus because she sees the transformation of sin and suffering as a transformation of meaning and value, which has occurred in history and continues to take place in people today²⁴³. Rosemary Carbine, sees the “work of Christ,” not as something which is contained in the life and death of Jesus, but which continues in contemporary Christian communities that “configure persons and communities into love and justice that characterize the reign of God²⁴⁴.” I must say that I am quite sympathetic to these ideas, for I think that insisting on the uniqueness of Jesus only induces hopelessness and powerlessness into human beings. As God proved in the crucifixion, it is up to the followers of Christ to take action in the world. God as a constant

²³⁹ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 28.

²⁴⁰ Eleanor McLaughlin, “Feminist Christologies,” 126-127.

²⁴¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Wisdom Was Made Flesh and Pitched Her Tent Among Us,” in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol. Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed. Maryanne Stevens (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993; reprint Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 112.

²⁴² Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Can Christology Be Liberated from Patriarchy?,” in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol. Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed. Maryanne Stevens (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993; reprint Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 24.

²⁴³ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 37.

²⁴⁴ Rosemary P. Carbine, “Contextualizing the Cross,” 105.

presence strengthens us and helps us bear our burdens, but we have to actively and creatively participate in the work Jesus started.

3.4.2 *The Maleness of Jesus*

It is of course not the maleness of Jesus as a historical fact that feminist theologians object to. We saw in chapter two what suffering this has caused in the lives of women especially. Some feminist theologians have formulated apologetic answers to the significance of the maleness of Jesus. They do not agree with the importance attached to this maleness however but seek to place it in the social and cultural context Jesus lived in. Mostly these apologies circle around the idea that Jesus was not a patriarchal man. By showing compassionate love and healing, by taking women seriously, by washing the feet of his disciples, and by showing his vulnerability he shocked his male contemporaries as no woman could have done since it is “expected” of her. At the same time he “challenged the “natural rightness of dominating rule,”” because he acted so unlike a man²⁴⁵. Deanne Thompson agrees with Häring and Johnson that God specifically became male “to break the fetters of sexism by his absolute humility and liberty for others²⁴⁶.” God thus acted in a subversive manner, while Jesus could be called a deceiver, who wore a disguise to expose the injustice perpetrated by men against women. I think this is a rather reduced view of the work of Jesus! If his aim really was to expose the patriarchal system and abolish it, he failed miserably because two thousand years later this system still remains dominating in peoples minds, even though its nefarious consequences have been well documented. Rosemary Radford Ruether remarks that suggesting that Jesus was a sensitive, open, healing and vulnerable person, who paid attention to the weak and the outcast, just makes him an “androgynous male²⁴⁷.” I think this is in fact a subscription to the patriarchal idea that woman is included in man, if Jesus is a man doing womanly things, this does not retract anything from his male privilege, but it makes women even more invisible and unimportant! I think trying to find an answer to the significance of the maleness of Jesus is like trying to look into the Godhead to figure out the motives God could have for such a decision. We are of course operating here within a rigid traditional framework where God controls everything happening in the world, making deliberate decisions that change the course of the world. The assumption is that God intervenes directly in our lives and that He/She does not need human beings to do His/Her work! My point is that such questions are superfluous, for they can never be answered!

Most feminist theologians agree that, although central in the tradition, the maleness of Jesus is in fact not important at all with reference to his work as the Christ. They advise that the Christ one sees on the cross must be detached from the man in the sense that Christ saves, not as a man but as the child/son of God, a human being, the new Adam. When the focus shifts from the death on the cross to the life of Jesus, this means that Jesus, as the messiah, saves humanity in his life. God’s reign then is promoted by the “life-transforming, human activities of Jesus²⁴⁸.” Since these activities concern human actions that took place in the normal everyday life, the fact that Jesus was a male is unimportant since they can be performed by both men and women, as indeed they are! Even Luther, though a man of his time concerning his view on women, saw the unity between Christ and the believer being accomplished through the experience of faith and not by any physiological likeness²⁴⁹. It is because the minister speaks the Word of God that he/she resembles Jesus. Perhaps the real scandal lies in the fact that human beings can participate in the work of God, and that human beings are welcome in the sphere of divinity. They can do this by participating in the work of Christ, a work, which can be done by men and women, as Jesus’

²⁴⁵ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1993), 160-161 as referred to in Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 123.

²⁴⁶ Bernard Häring, *Free and faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Clergy and Laity*, vol.2 (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1984), 139 as referred to in Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*, 161, as quoted in Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 124.

²⁴⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Can Christology Be Liberated,” 23.

²⁴⁸ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 120-121.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 121-124.

activities in the Gospel illustrate. Every individual, male or female, and every group, can be experienced to be “another Christ²⁵⁰.” Through this participation in the work of Christ, for the reign of God, humanity is redeemed. I also think that to make the maleness of Jesus so central, the Christian tradition has favoured the idea of personal salvation. Replacing this with the work of Christ would reinstate the importance of the communal effort, while retaining the personal responsibility of every Christian. I think this would make us more aware of the consequences of our living in a global world.

Usually, the maleness of Jesus refers to the historical Jesus and the Christ of the tradition, but Rosemary Radford Ruether has an interesting vision concerning the second coming of Christ. If indeed, the work of Christ is carried out by the community engaged in the redemptive task of promoting the Promised Land, then the “coming Christ is not the historical Jesus returned but the fullness of all this human diversity gathered together in redemptive community²⁵¹.”

Elizabeth Johnson proposes the incarnation of the female divine Wisdom in Jesus, Jesus-Sophia, as a way to break through the connection maleness-God. Women can thus share equally in the redemptive mission. They are also able to represent Jesus-Sophia, since Jesus thus is no longer exclusively male.

The fluidity of gender symbolism in Jesus-Sophia breaks the stranglehold of androcentric thinking which fixates on the maleness of Jesus, the male metaphors of Logos and Son, and the relationship between Father and Son. This leads to the situation where gender is decentred, where it is not constitutive for the Christian doctrine of incarnation or for speech about Christ²⁵².

I think the Wisdom tradition works well to enrich our thinking of God and the way God works in the world. “Sophia represents creative transcendence, primordial passion for justice, and knowledge of truth while Jesus expresses these divine characteristics in an immanent way relative to bodyliness and the earth.” However, I think that adding Sophia to Jesus, though rendering his gender fluid, will not change the way most people think about Jesus. We simply are not used to thinking in fluid sexual categories yet. Once we let go of the rigid dichotomy male/female, this image might have a better chance. It would also make us more understanding towards the many different sexualities there are to be found in our world, since sexuality is in fact a continuum between male and female at the two extremities.

The Gospel stories tell us about Jesus, a Jewish man, living in a backward province in the Middle-East, during the first century of our calendar. There is no mention of his marital status or possible children, which is really strange, for a Jew of his age. His interactions are mostly with strange women and children. I wonder what our vision of Jesus and his actions would be if we knew stories of Jesus as a family man, with a wife and children. Men tend to measure their maleness in their sexual prowess and number of children. Since nothing of this sort is mentioned concerning Jesus, might this not be another indication of the utter superficiality of his maleness?

Women struggle with the fact that they cannot image themselves in a male Jesus and have been searching for ways to be able to do so. One possibility has been offered by Mary Grey, Marion Grau and Eleanor McLaughlin who found in our Christian tradition a number of women that have been recognized in their suffering as portraying Christ²⁵³. They name in this regard two martyrs of the first centuries of Christianity, Blandina and Perpetua, who witnessed to the presence of Christ in their suffering and inspired their fellow Christians.

Another avenue has been that in the tradition Christ has, from the first centuries and up until the late middle ages, been imagined as a woman²⁵⁴. Clement of Alexandria talks about the breast of God and Jesus and the milk of love flowing from this breast, to combat the spiritualism of the

²⁵⁰ Rosemary P. Carbine, “Contextualizing the Cross,” 97; Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Can Christology Be Liberated,” 24.

²⁵¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Can Christology Be Liberated,” 24.

²⁵² Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Wisdom Was Made Flesh*, 108.

²⁵³ Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 135; Marion Grau, *Of Divine Economy*, 114-117; Eleanor McLaughlin, “Feminist Christologies,” 136-137.

²⁵⁴ Eleanor McLaughlin, “Feminist Christologies,” 132-135.

Gnostics of his time. In the 12th century, Cistercian abbots used female namings for God, Jesus and themselves because they wanted to hold on to charity against the rigid order of the legal structures they had to work with. Also Anselm of Canterbury employed mother/man language for Jesus and St Paul, while the best known person to name Jesus as mother, is probably Dame Julian of Norwich. Eleanor McLaughlin quotes Carolyn Bynum who wrote on the Eucharistic devotion of late medieval women. She suggests that the images of a nurturing Jesus gave these women a sense of identity with the humanity of the Son of God, which to men, who signified divinity, was not accessible²⁵⁵. Of course, these images were frequently constructed by men to serve their male needs. Eleanor McLaughlin asks in this regard: “[I]s dame Julian’s Mother Jesus but one more instance of the male construction of a male god with breasts, another way for the male to “have it all²⁵⁶?” Finding nothing in the tradition to really satisfy their need to identify themselves with Christ, feminist theologians and Christian feminist artists have moved towards a female image of the crucified Christ, the Christa²⁵⁷. These sculptures have met with outrage and have made it obvious that in people’s minds “maleness and “Godness” are intrinsically related²⁵⁸.” And while people, men and women, were shocked and scandalised, and thought the “Christa” was blasphemy,

the female imagery opened up for other women new avenues of experiencing the cross and its meaning... The biblical affirmation that all human beings are created in the image of God comes through to this woman in a way that the symbolically heavy image of the male Jesus hanging on the cross had prohibited²⁵⁹.

Unfortunately, our culture finds violence against women with eroticism and glamour and since Christa is naked she is perceived as a sexual object. However, the impact of the “Christa” is not just visual; she exposes the emotional and spiritual effects of the maleness of Jesus on women. Through her, women could feel emotionally and spiritually closer not only to the cross but also to the passion of the Christ. “Christa” could shake us awake to the true scandal of the incarnation: God becoming human, which through familiarity has lost its shocking quality in the crucified Jesus²⁶⁰. A female crucifixion can expose the forgotten or silenced suffering of biblical and contemporary women, while evoking resistance to such suffering in women and men²⁶¹. Deanne Thompson proposes that, in the spirit of Luther, feminists should resist idolizing Jesus’ male identity by reasserting the image of the crucified woman as the *location* of Christ today. This however does not mean eclipsing the narrative depiction of Jesus as the Christ. Deanne Thompson holds the view that “even though the theologian of the cross honors his or her own existential experience of the cross of Christ, that personal experience is nevertheless correlated with the concrete, particular narrative depictions of Jesus, the Jewish man, who is also God...²⁶².” What is important is that the resurrection offers hope to the crucified woman and to all suffering people, that evil will not have the last word²⁶³.

An image of Christ I would expect from a man but which was advanced in my reading by a woman, Eleanor McLaughlin, is Christ as a transvestite. She sees this in an analogical way, and finds her statement on the actions of Jesus who did not fit in any category.

²⁵⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, “...and Women his Humanity: *Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages, Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, NY: Urzone, 1991) as referred to in Eleanor McLaughlin, “Feminist Christologies,” 133-136.

²⁵⁶ Eleanor McLaughlin, “Feminist Christologies,” 140.

²⁵⁷ To name only a few feminist artists: Edwina Sandys gave the name “Christa” to her sculpture of a female crucifix for the cathedral of St John the Divine in New York City, Almuth Luttenhaus-Lackey made a sculpture of a crucified woman which stands in Toronto.

²⁵⁸ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 119.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 120-121.

²⁶⁰ Eleanor McLaughlin, “Feminist Christologies,” 127.

²⁶¹ Rosemary P. Carbine, “Contextualizing the Cross,” 92-93.

²⁶² Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*. 125.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 126-127.

He is a rabbi, who drinks and eats with the unclean; he is a preacher of the coming kingdom to Israel who proposes that the uninvited stranger will sit at the feast. He acknowledges his mother and brothers but unravels their family claims and acknowledges brothers and sisters without biological, ethnic or religious boundaries. Even death was, according to the narrative, rent open like the temple veil, not by a ghost, but by the one who, embodied ate and drank and walked through closed doors²⁶⁴.

Jesus is a “destroyer of dualities,” and while the paradigm of crisis in his time was the dichotomy divine/human, today it is male/female. By re-visioning Jesus as a cross-dresser, she hopes to come to new depths of “humanity, divinity, femaleness, maleness²⁶⁵.” I find this a very difficult image; because to me a cross-dresser seems desperate to be something he is not. He is a man wanting to look like a woman while remaining a man. To me, it seems like a tragic figure, wanting it all, and not being content whatever. In my experience, most people do not fit in one category; human beings are complex and multifaceted. There is therefore no reason to imagine Jesus as a transvestite just because he is a complicated human being. I moreover do not see what this image could add to answer the problems of the maleness of Jesus, for a transvestite Jesus remains a male Jesus!

3.4.3 Christian Virtues

I agree with Cynthia Crysdale who advances that becoming a Christian and the continuous moral conversion that is part of it, in fact means that the criterion to make choices changes²⁶⁶. Instead of wanting instant satisfaction one chooses values. The Christian values that can be deduced from a feminist interpretation of the cross event, are not suffering and silence. On the contrary, it is imperative that people gain a voice, learn to speak up and name the suffering they are experiencing and the perpetrators who subject them to it²⁶⁷. Suffering is not glorified; at the very least it has to be endured, as Hagar had to do, if this offers the best opportunity for survival²⁶⁸. Better still, it has to be met with a mix of resistance and surrender, resistance to the evil done to us but also to the wrongdoings we commit or are implicated in, and surrender to the “grief of broken hopes and expectations²⁶⁹.”

But it also means that we have to be attentive to existing suffering and act with discernment concerning our own possibilities, in order not to cause more pain or contribute to oppression, discrimination and injustice. We should cultivate hope, “despite the presence of death and all that diminishes life²⁷⁰.” Even when hopelessness, frustration and discouragement are rampant, we should not give up²⁷¹. Although it is safer and less painful to close our eyes to the ugliness of our world, we should be willing to see it, to let go of our illusions and contribute to the work of Christ by acting for turning the ugliness to real beauty²⁷².

Christians should accept accountability for their knowledge, “it means acting as if one is answerable, both individually and as a member of the larger human collectivity, for one’s approach to knowing²⁷³.” For our knowledge conforms to the way we perceive God, Jesus, the human being and the world. It can support or aggravate injustice by hiding or beautifying reality, it can exclude persons from participating in a just and good life and it can lead to ethical blindness. We should be suspicious of our knowledge but also trust it to accomplish spiritual and physical healing if we use it with discernment and act upon it with courage.

²⁶⁴ Eleanor McLaughlin, “Feminist Christologies,” 141.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁶⁶ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 137.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁶⁸ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 146.

²⁶⁹ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 138.

²⁷⁰ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 139.

²⁷¹ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 152.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 128, 131.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 53.

3.4.4 Living as a Christian

What does the feminist theologian's vision on the cross say about the everyday life of a Christian? First and foremost, perhaps, it means that life is precious and should be cherished. The Promised Land and Christ's mission for it should be the motor for our actions within this world. It is through healing, through empowering the powerless and giving voice to the voiceless, through righting what is wrong that we become Christ for one another. Our commitment should not be reduced to our personal life, but should also comprise political action in order to change social structures, secular and religious, that discriminate, oppress or dehumanise people²⁷⁴.

...following the way of the cross does not mean passively resigning to suffering and/or internalizing a victim identity; rather, it means becoming human in community, in fleshing out our redeemed humanity in Christ through individual and collective struggles against injustice and for a more liberative church and world²⁷⁵.

Active commitment for the benefit of the world will entail suffering, however, this is not what constitutes a redeemed human being, and it is a possible by-product of "becoming more fully human in Christ." It is risked, not sought and should be resisted²⁷⁶. In order to be able to let go of power as control Christians should learn to trust in the power of love, this will give us the strength to let go if this is the only option left, be it with grief, regret and sorrow because we cannot accomplish what we so badly want to do²⁷⁷.

Our actions should mirror our awareness that although we might be victims, we are never innocent! As victims, we should recognise that God is present in our suffering, but we should own up to the fact that we also cause, tolerate and sometimes ignore the oppressive consequences of systems and ideologies of which we benefit²⁷⁸. The pain of owning up to our complicity should make us sensitive to the suffering of others and "be a catalyst for solidarity and healthy resistance... *grief*, rather than *guilt* is the route to solidarity²⁷⁹."

However, this has nothing to do with emotionalism, it involves being attentive to what goes on in our own life and in the life of those around us and paying attention to what could happen in the lives of those to come in the future. It means looking for information in our experiences and those of believers that have preceded us and reflecting on this information. It also involves taking responsible action built on what we know, to reduce injustice and the pain and suffering that this causes²⁸⁰. In our world today this is not confined to our personal, interpersonal and social relations, but it should include also the world at large, the whole of the creation, which already grunts from the efforts we require of it on a daily basis.

Being a disciple, and contributing to the work of Christ involves knowing but is not confined to it, responding to a God we believe is "knowing and loving" as Jesus has revealed to us during his life, death and resurrection includes taking up accountability and acting accordingly²⁸¹. It means a continuous process of internal conversion and praxis in the world, realising that God is with us, with His/Her creative, life-giving power of love. It means one has to discover oneself in Jesus but in order to do this one has to imitate Jesus, to become a co-creator of salvation, which again leads to further understanding²⁸²! It implies that sometimes we have to be patient and abide in what's happening to us²⁸³. It implies taking responsible action while realising that we cannot be certain our goals shall be reached or even that there will be decisive changes in the future. This action should

²⁷⁴ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divided*, 140.

²⁷⁵ Rosemary P. Carbine, "Contextualizing the Cross," 99.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁷⁷ Sally Purvis, *The Power of the Cross*, 94.

²⁷⁸ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 150; Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 107.

²⁷⁹ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 65-66.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

²⁸¹ Rosemary P. Carbine, "Contextualizing the Cross," 100.

²⁸² Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 154.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 27.

be grounded in the community and should boost the courage and the imagination of this community.

The dignity of the individual mirroring the face of Christ should be paramount in all our undertakings²⁸⁴. Feminist theologians have looked at the cross and perceived a God who wants to be a partner to humanity and who is moved by humanity's pain. A God who never lets go, but who respects humanity's freedom, who transforms instead of overpowering. They have found salvation in the life and message of Jesus, who heals, restitutes community and crosses boundaries that were put in place to exclude and dehumanise. It goes without saying that this influences the way the human being is perceived.

3.5. The Human Being

Contrary to the view of a human being as a subordinate, powerless victim, the feminist theologians' view of the cross event paints a different human being. Every human being, how weak and ignorant he/she might seem has integral dignity and integrity. Each is therefore a true self. Everyone, whatever their age, health, physical capabilities, colour, economic status, intellectual capacities, sexual orientation, gender, religion or ideology, is a valid human person deserving respect²⁸⁵. This implicates that men and women are equals, there is no subordination or complementarity between them²⁸⁶. Their competences depend not on their gender but on their interest and intellect, concern, social situation and economic possibilities, as well as on their motivation and character.

The cross teaches us that we are not destroyed by evil. We are transcendent and permanent, in the sense that we remain within God's embrace. Once we realise this, we are empowered to resist the lure of power. To resort to violence would mean we do not trust in eternal life, it would mean forsaking our true identity²⁸⁷. We have seen though, that non-violent resistance often means one's life will be threatened because it is perceived as even more dangerous than violent retaliation. It should not implicate that a human being is expendable and exchangeable. Each human being is valuable and should not be sacrificed for the sake of others!

We have to recognise our limitations. Women especially should be conscious of the fact that it is not up to us to fix everything and secure the happiness of those we live with. Failure is a fact of our lives because we are limited human beings and this should not cause us to feel guilty²⁸⁸. The limits and ambiguities we are confronted with in our own lives should not be seen as humiliations²⁸⁹. Once we start thinking that we can solve everything ourselves and obtain whatever we want, once we believe we are invincible, we are being idolatrous, because we ignore our historicity and contingency. The fact that we doubt is only the normal consequence of this contextuality and should be embraced as a result of our discernment. One of the limits we have to take into account is the fact that human beings can only obtain partial knowledge, we cannot know everything²⁹⁰! But this is all right; for this only illustrates that we need each other to enrich each other's knowledge and signifies that diversity is positive.

²⁸⁴ Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990), 19-25 as referred to in Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 42-43.

²⁸⁵ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 10; Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 64-67.

²⁸⁶ Men and women are not complementary human beings. To say so would in my vision reduce them to their reproductive function. I believe men and women have the same capacities, but individual human beings have of course different capacities. It might be that we look in our partners for complementarity, but this in my opinion is an entirely different matter.

²⁸⁷ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 55.

²⁸⁸ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 111.

²⁸⁹ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 110.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

As human beings we are oriented towards reason, knowing truth, choosing value and towards love. The problem is that we are unable to realise this potential due to our own choices and to the unjust structures we live in. The discrepancy between what we should be and what we are causes alienation²⁹¹. However, we can obtain forgiveness for the wrongs we do and we can be healed from the wounds we suffer at the hands of other human beings or institutions. We have to realise though, that these transformations always happen with the help of God. He/She reveals to us a future where before there was none, light where there was only darkness, love and connectedness where there was only desolate loneliness. Then, the criteria of our acting and deciding change and we get insight into our past behaviour and future possibilities²⁹².

Feminist theologians in particular see human beings as dynamic and multidimensional²⁹³. Our identities are multiple, for each of the characteristics we possess, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, economic situation, education and religion, to name some, posit us on either side of what is culturally dominant at that time and in that place that situates our position in history²⁹⁴. These multiple identities either implicate us in causing, tolerating, ignoring or suffering injustice. A human being is not static, we no longer are human beings once and for all, we become human beings²⁹⁵. This is an eschatological view on our identity: by our participation in the work of Christ we become more fully human. It is a process that is never ending in our lifetime. It paints a hopeful view of the human being, who can forever chance for the better, but it can also lead to a kind of sad discontentment with oneself!

Our status in life is that of both a victim and a perpetrator, good and bad²⁹⁶. It is clear though, that not everyone bears the same responsibility. As I mentioned earlier, some people have more possibilities to evade committing evil or to correct the wrongs done. Some wrongdoings weigh heavier than others, some cause more suffering and some affect more people. They always take place in and out of our relationships.

3.5.1 Relationality

Feminist theologians are convinced that human beings are fundamentally relational because of the ground of our being; God is relation in the Godself. The theology of the cross also teaches us that God is always present in the life of the human being, even in the moments of utter desperation and dehumanisation. Deanne Thompson sees in the concept of humility a state of being, where the human being allows him/herself to be defined by God thereby acknowledging at the same time the primacy of God in the relationship²⁹⁷.

Human beings also always live with (or against) each other and the world, “our living is never solely a private matter²⁹⁸.” Human beings acquire their identity and their living skills in the community they are born into. We are called to be free people, free from idols that turn us away from God so that we are free for “self-acceptance, self-determination, self-love in community, solidarity, healing, bodily and psychic integrity²⁹⁹.” Living in the world entails responding to other human beings and being accountable for the way we respond.

Since we are Christians, the way Jesus lived in the world is our beacon to live faithful lives. He exhorted us to love one another, following his example. It implies living fully within the limits of this world³⁰⁰. Because we are relational everything we do in our world affects the other, we wound and hurt, consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally, as part of our existence in

²⁹¹ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 128-135.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁹³ Rosemary P. Carbine, “Contextualizing the Cross,” 106-107.

²⁹⁴ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 40.

²⁹⁵ Rosemary P. Carbine, “Contextualizing the Cross,” 94.

²⁹⁶ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 20; Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 140.

²⁹⁷ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 111.

²⁹⁸ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 122.

²⁹⁹ Rosemary P. Carbine, “Contextualizing the Cross,” 103.

³⁰⁰ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 155.

a diminished world. A helpful way to review our relationships in an ethical manner is to see them as friendships. An added bonus is that friendship “presents the possibility for relationships that transcend the structural barriers of class, race, sexual orientation, age, religion, or nationality³⁰¹.” This metaphor also helps us understand that our partner is our equal, and whenever we are in a position to help “the reciprocal character of friendship works against the temptation to understand the benefits of serving others in a unidirectional way³⁰².”

Human interrelatedness is “as terrible as it is lovable³⁰³.” Our relationality can be greatly beneficial, when we live it in loving mutuality, however, there is a powerful tendency in our world to annihilate whatever is different. However our diversity is a necessary factor for our living together in view of our limitations, this diversity is sometimes perceived as a threat. We should be forever wary of these tendencies and practice discernment to expose and resist them! Our relationality presents plenty of occasions in which we can “become both oppressor and victim³⁰⁴.”

3.5.3 *Victimhood*

Feminist theologians have done their best to provide ways and means for victims of sexism, oppression, discrimination, racism, classism, dehumanisation and exploitation to be empowered in order to gain a self-consciousness and agency that could not only sustain them but help them towards the realisation of a better life for themselves as well as for those who depended on them. The glorification of suffering is a problem pertaining to some interpretations of the cross which feminist theologians have been trying to avoid. However, there is no denying of the fact that there is a lot of suffering going on in our world. Cynthia Crysdale sees it as an unavoidable consequence of a believers’ life³⁰⁵. This would imply that the work for the Promised Land is alien to the world!

Feminist theologians have been trying to find whether suffering could have a meaning. And if the answer to this question were affirmative what kind of suffering this could be. If one were to say that suffering is completely meaningless and worthless, the lives of so many people in the world who suffer a myriad of oppressions and humiliations would become meaningless and worthless! Without falling into the trap of glorifying suffering, feminist theologians are convinced that it should signify something. Deanna Thompson points out, quite rightly, that suffering can only have a meaning when addressed from the side of resurrection³⁰⁶!

Cynthia Crysdale is inspired by the Gospel which conveys the message that good can come from suffering. The story of the death and resurrection of Jesus tells us to examine our suffering and look for the resurrection in it³⁰⁷. A resurrection one has been the co-creator of. Because there is such a tight connection between being a victim and keeping silent, to tell of suffering, “claiming a voice,” is in itself already redemptive³⁰⁸. By speaking up we profile ourselves as “knowers and creators of meaning and value³⁰⁹.” We “embrace travail”, as she puts it: while we tell our story we face ourselves, and discover that we in truth are both victims and perpetrators. We step into “a dialectic of resistance and surrender ... through the travail of confessing sins and embracing wounds³¹⁰.” She insists that only through our own pain of discovering and recognising that we are perpetrators as well as victims, can we be truly compassionate and can solidarity and resistance

³⁰¹ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 156.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 157.

³⁰³ Catherine Keller, *God and Power*, 133.

³⁰⁴ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 147.

³⁰⁵ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 147.

³⁰⁶ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 115.

³⁰⁷ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 152-155.

³⁰⁸ Flora Keshgegian calls it “witnessing” and describes the workings of it in the same way as Cynthia Crysdale does, although her interpretation favours the victims. Flora Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories*, 234-235.

³⁰⁹ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 87.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

come about³¹¹. The resurrection teaches us that wounds can be healed and that wrongdoings can be forgiven, and the naming of our suffering thus also includes a “making sense.” We have lived through suffering, the answers to the how’s and why’s take time to reveal themselves to us but the insight and the empowerment that come with it are in themselves “vehicles for healing and forgiveness³¹².” This telling does not aim to eradicate the evil or to solve problems but wants to trigger in other victims the imaging of the possibility for transformation. The commitment to transformation is a choice for love, communication and relationship, but it is not safe and might cause sorrow and suffering making our effort perpetual.

Ivone Gebara views voluntary self-sacrifice for another’s benefit as something positive, but she also stresses the fact that this might be seen as a kind of surrender to those in power, reinforcing their might³¹³. At the same time there is of course always the possibility that one is seen as a martyr, and we know that the energizing that goes out from such a symbol is enormously invigorating!

Flora Keshgegian follows Cynthia Crysdale in her interpretation of suffering, but she adds that it ought to be mourned and honoured³¹⁴. Of course she only considers the pain of victims, it is quite clear that any suffering resulting from our owning up to being a perpetrator should not be mourned and should certainly never be honoured! I agree though, that remembering our suffering and especially the resurrection we effected and experienced in it, as agents and recipients of salvation is extremely important, not only for ourselves, but for anyone who is being victimised.

Mary Streufert looks away from the cross and towards “maternal sacrifice,” to try and find meaning in suffering. She enumerates the losses a woman suffers when she becomes a mother, there is the physical sacrifice: the stretch marks and morning sickness, the illnesses that once contracted during the pregnancy remain risk factors such as hemorrhoids, varicose veins, high blood pressure and diabetes, but there is also the loss of solitary selfhood, and of carefree identity and loss of status as a professional³¹⁵. She then draws a parallel between the characteristics of salvation in the Gospel of John and maternal sacrifice. Both involve continued life, transformation and nonviolence. She agrees with Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Power who state that salvation is experiencing that God is present in suffering, for it is by means of the love we experience that we are restored³¹⁶. And through the practice of love, communication, and relationship we co-create salvation. Giving birth proves, according to Mary Streufert, that “physical death no longer is an exclusive necessity for new life.” Christians can now look towards God’s love as lived through Jesus as a “locus of salvation.” This releases us from the dangers of a “sacrifice of glory,” and “modes and metaphors of cultural violence, including those of sacrificial abuse and war, are deemed illegitimate. “ Mary Streufert agrees with the previous theologians about what saves and recognizes that

a practical effect of refocusing sacrificial hermeneutics is that in returning to each other, we embody the life-for-life model of sacrifice inherent to motherhood and are ultimately transformed...to touch each other in the wake of the resurrection is to find the glorified Jesus Christ...Relationship, as the heart of life, indeed, as the heart of the gospel itself, saves³¹⁷.

I find this idea of sacrifice very interesting because it effectively breaks the connection between death and new life and all the metaphors of the seed dying to give new life. It even gives a positive content to sacrifice, it is clear that the outcome of maternal sacrifice is usually happy, even the

³¹¹ Mary Solberg also stresses the pain that noticing suffering brings, as I mentioned earlier, we often close our eyes for the suffering of other people, we ignore or minimise it, cultivating awareness, being open to the suffering surrounding us, is a step along the path of conversion. Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 156.

³¹² Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 88.

³¹³ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 86.

³¹⁴ Flora Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories*, 174.

³¹⁵ Mary J. Streufert, “Maternal Sacrifice,” 71-72.

³¹⁶ Rita Nakashima Brock & Rebecca Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 115-116; 250.

³¹⁷ Mary J. Streufert, “Maternal Sacrifice,” 74-75.

“scars for life,” are trivial compared to the gift of the new life one holds in one’s hands. Another advantage is the responsibility one has for this new life, because it frames in the feminist theologians pledge to the hermeneutics of suspicion and trust and the accountability one bears for one’s actions. Maternal sacrifice as a metaphor to try and understand how the divine salvation works reveals also the fact that human beings do not operate salvation by themselves. As every metaphor, this one of course also has its shortcomings; the expected child might be the result of a rape or unwanted for whatever reason; some women die giving birth or are handicapped for life. The baby might die or have a severely reduced life quality due to physical malfunctioning. Not every baby is the result of a caring relationship, and not every baby is the result of a sexual act within a relationship. And finally, I think the idea of maternal sacrifice will probably appeal more to women than to men, although some women cannot or will not have children.

Feminist theologians never consider a human being as standing alone, always there is the community where we are born into, which gives us our identity and which helps us discern what is redemptive and what is not. Since feminist theologians are concerned with embodied theology, for the world, in the world and through the world, let’s now see how their interpretation of the cross influences their thinking of the world.

3.6. The World

A first point to make is perhaps that the world is not synonymous with creation. Not to Catherine Keller, anyway, she sees the world as a “corrupt and polluted imperial space,” parasiting within creation³¹⁸. The earth of course, is creation. She thus reduces our world to the relations and institutions operating in our world, and makes a dichotomy between the good earth and the bad world. I would argue that there is a lot of suffering due to “natural evil,” volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, landslides, tsunamis, draughts and floods, diseases and illnesses. I would like to keep the holistic idea which most feminist theologians adhere to. A world, not completely bad or good, but a mixture of both, as indeed we ourselves are, where human beings and the earth are interrelated³¹⁹.

By viewing Jesus as the incarnation of the divine Wisdom, as Elizabeth Johnson does, this would imply that since Sophia is the creator, imitating Jesus would mean loving the earth, “sharing in its fruitfulness, respecting its limits, restoring what has been damaged, and guarding it from destruction.” The community of Jesus-Sophia should stand by the earth and take the lead in ecological care³²⁰.

Feminist theologians appreciate the riches, the abundance, the diversity and beauty of the earth and stress the fact that the earth needs our care and justice while we need the earth to sustain us spiritually and physically³²¹. “Christ fills Earth’s creatures and elements,” and is now being crucified by “human ignorance, greed and arrogance³²².” The earth is very valuable but also very fragile, its natural resilience and generative power are being tested by our way of living. There are too many of us and we deplete its resources with our excessive consumption. According to Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, “we have become the “uncreators³²³.” This is due to the fact that we do not recognise ourselves as perpetrators, and that we do not understand or accept our empowerment to be co-creators, that we think we are powerless versus the magnitude of the problems facing us and last but not least because we think God is only indwelling in human beings³²⁴. She formulates an

³¹⁸ Catherine Keller, *God and Power*, 133.

³¹⁹ Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 40.

³²⁰ Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Wisdom Was Made Flesh,” 113.

³²¹ Mary Solberg, “All that Matters: What an Epistemology of the Cross Is Good For,” in Marit Trelstad, ed., *Cross Examinations. Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 139-153, 146.

³²² Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, “A Theology of the Cross For the “Uncreators”,” 194.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 183.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

interesting idea which is that if we were to see God “as boundless, justice-seeking love, living and loving not only in human beings, but also in the rest of creation,” this would imply that:

other-than-human creatures and elements embody divine agency toward creation's flourishing. Earth embodies God, that is, not only as creative and revelatory presence, but also as teaching, saving, sustaining, empowering presence- as agency to serve the widespread good. How might moral agency - power to resist social and ecological destruction and to move toward just, sustainable life-ways - be fed and watered in human beings by this God-presence and God-power coursing through “all created things”^{325?}

If we were to look at earth in this manner would not we be more careful about the way we treat her? The question Cynthia Moe-Lobeda poses is certainly challenging, but is perhaps also a bit one-sided. After all, we can perceive a lot of violence in nature. The manner however, in which earth's regenerative capacities try to restore life in the bleakest of circumstances, and thus create viable possibilities for human life, can spark hope in human beings suffering from oppression. The diversity which is present on our earth should reveal to us that difference matters and has revelatory power. The creativeness with which nature tackles its problems can inspire humans to think outside our boundaries in order to find solutions to our multiple problems. I think especially about the way some animals and plants live together in a mutually beneficial way which has nothing to do with the controlling hierarchical manner in which our societies are organised, if this is an indication of Gods presence we should observe nature more closely and more respectfully so as to learn from it.

Feminist theologians are convinced that the earth belongs equally to all people, every human being should be able to be sustained by her in a dignified way and all should be involved in safeguarding her diversity and abundance for the next generations. Not just for our own benefit, we cannot live without this earth, but also because the earth has intrinsic value as a vessel for God's creative and healing power³²⁶.

Seeing the earth as the crucified body of Christ while at the same time God's saving power and indwelling is active in her, may provide us with the will and the power to begin and sustain the struggle for “a world in which humankind is not toxic to our planetary home and in which none amass wealth at the cost of others' impoverishment³²⁷.” It implies seeing all human beings and the earth as proper partners, equally important and equally dignified. The church, as the community of followers of Jesus Christ, could play an important part in realising this.

3.7. The Church

Feminist theologians have committed themselves to their respective churches, but since paradigms are the frameworks that shape our thinking and acting, they also lie at the bottom of the structures of our institutions. The way the tradition has interpreted the cross and the image of God and Christ that result from it have influenced the structure of our church. If these paradigms change, our institutions also have to go through some kind of revision. But can the church, as an institution bearing a number of privileges of moral authority, of access to the power centres of our world, of far reaching geographic influence, of solid structures and prestige, become a church

³²⁵ Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, “A Theology of the Cross For the “Uncreators”, 194. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda quotes Luther, “Confession Concerning Christ's Supper,” in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Works*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press, 1989), 397. She develops her argument from Luther, “That These Words of Christ,” in *Luther's Works, Vol. 37: Word and Sacrament III*, ed. E. Theodore Bachman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 57-58; Luther, the *Weimar Ausgabe* 23.134.34, as cited by Rasmussen, “Luther and a Gospel of Earth,”²², citing Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*(Philadelphia,: Fortress Press, 1985), 129, 386, 387; and Luther, “Confession Concerning Christ's Supper,” 321. She refers also to Douglas John Hall, *Confessing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context*(Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996).

³²⁶ Ivone Gebara on ecotheology during a meeting session at Kuleuven, on October 16th, 2006.

³²⁷ Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, “A Theology of the Cross For the “Uncreators”,” 194.

moulded by the cross³²⁸? The question remains open, but we can be hopeful, since the church states quite often that they need renewal. I should specify that the feminist theologians I read all work within different church structures, they do not then propose a specific structure for a specific church, but deduce characteristics a church should have, based on their reading of the cross event and the salvific meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Since redemption through the cross means the cross “makes relationship where relationship has been lost³²⁹.” This signifies that a church and the people constituting this church have to care for the oppressed as well as for the oppressors, for the rich and the poor, for the healthy and the sick, in order to become a redeemed humanity. The cross must signify crossing over, not dividing but uniting in mutual openness and support! Catherine Keller would like Christianity to make an “eco-social commitment,” and calls for ecumenical cooperation to make it³³⁰.

Marina Herrera states that we should envision relational, communitarian, integrative, tentative, artistic, spontaneous structures of reality to base our church on³³¹. Such a reality bases its power on love and life; it should also be the kind of power our revised church works with. If we want to resocialise people into this kind of power, it has to be experienced in our communities³³². People have to discover that the unifying factor in our community is the “common love of God,” and that being connected is the core of our existence and identity. Our community is thus united in connection, and is directed towards each other. “On the personal level the norms of diversity, unity and other-directed mutuality can be characterized by our practice of loving each other into being. On the institutional level, they are manifested as responsiveness; on the cultural level, they exist as hospitality³³³.” This responsiveness would entail that while the church in the past when confronted with internal scandals and injustices has sought to protect the stability and reputation of the institution, it would now choose to protect the victims. It has been observed, that the Church lavishly administers pastoral care, but is very wary of devoting herself to structural changes. “Systemic injustice, political or social reordering” are not high on the church’s priority list³³⁴. This has made the church passively complicit with regimes that thrive on oppression, humiliation and violence. A hermeneutic of the cross should make the church feel accountable for the consequences of her actions or omissions. She should also be responsible for the frameworks she employs to shape and motivate her advice and explanations³³⁵.

The interpretation of power as love influences as well the required characteristics of leadership. If our power is the power of love, leadership in our church should be based on love, says Marina Herrera³³⁶. Our church should link, not rank. This brings us to the form our community should have. Since “the cross is inclusive, and the power of God is universally available, cannot be contained, therefore Christian community should be open to men, women, persons of all ages, races, ethnicities and sexual orientation³³⁷.” Deanna Thompson has observed that some feminist theologians have proposed that the church understands itself as a community of friends. I think this is quite a fluid metaphor for the church since there are all kinds of “communities of friends.” But still, it offers some interesting ideas. It means that such a community requires repentance because your friends tell you off when they think you are doing the wrong thing. And it means of course that the church internally should manifest openness to transformation, because you commit with your friends to the same cause³³⁸. The unity and the inclusiveness of this new church community should not mean uniformity. The diversity within a community is valuable and should not be

³²⁸ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 144.

³²⁹ Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, “For God so Loved the World,” 17.

³³⁰ Catherine Keller, *God and Power*, 131.

³³¹ Marina Herrera, “Who Do You Say Jesus Is,” 92.

³³² Sally B. Purvis, *The Power of the Cross*, 97.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 99.

³³⁴ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 156.

³³⁵ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 52.

³³⁶ Marina Herrera, “Who Do You Say Jesus Is,” 91.

³³⁷ Sally B. Purvis, *The Power of the Cross*, 92.

³³⁸ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 158-159.

experienced as a threat, for love is a commodity never in shortage of supply³³⁹. The change that diversity brings should be seen as a normal “part of the process of life.”

Serene Jones firmly places herself within this feminist framework when agreeing that indeed, the church should be an open community, to her, however, it does not just mean being open to the world but it means also being open to God:

This church’s boundaries are continually being undone by the word of God that breaks in upon it. This community, therefore, does not possess itself but always receives itself from God. This community does not own the terms by which it is collected, name, and defined; these too it receives³⁴⁰.

She adds another interesting characteristic, though, when she also sees the church as a bounded community. This boundedness is expressed in the specific practices and disciplines that distinguish the community. It is a place where the broken are healed and the weary find a haven to rest. It creates an environment where its members receive formation, there is no competing each other in this church for each is the enhancement of the other. It is concerned about the language it uses for it recognises the performative power of words. “It cares about real harm to bodies and real forms of healing.” It protects by creating borders to keep those inside safe so that they can be nurtured and grow³⁴¹. But the boundedness also extends to those outside of its boundaries, it is involved with practices that benefit all people: “[h]ealth-care reform, adequate state aid for children, excellent public child care, liveable workplace regulations,” the church should commit itself to the realisation of these in society. It will moreover expose and resist institutions and practices that “fracture and diminish, such as exploitative economic structures, hazardous ecological practices, and degrading cultural representations³⁴².” This church is present in the world as a critical but creative agent.

Its openness transgresses its boundaries in order to encounter what is different; it makes the church hospitable and open to God and the world. However, this openness makes the church vulnerable to sin. Its context bears an influence on her institution. It makes her “a stained church,” constantly in need of renewal³⁴³. Cynthia Crysdale sees this renewal taking place as a dialectic process between the long existing “dynamic processes” in the church: the prophetic and the institutional³⁴⁴. She understands that the change has to come from within the church, the strange thing is however, that one has “to be socialised into faith in order to open up the possibility of renewal and rebirth, but such socialization, by itself, simply perpetuates the status quo and curtails transformation³⁴⁵.” That this tension works towards renewal has been proven on a number of occasions in the history of the church, there have been the reforms of monastic life by the abbey of Cluny and by the Cistercians, to name but two. The Catholic Church has been reformed by the criticism of the Protestant Reformers and by the ensuing Counter Reformation. Cynthia Crysdale points to the similarity between the “complementary opposition,” that she distinguishes in the tension and Godself, who is both transcendent and immanent³⁴⁶. The renewal will be a result of the

ambiguity of the search and the conviction that we hold the truth...means abiding in the struggle of discernment, patiently working yet waiting for the relevant insights to emerge. The conviction of truth, like faith in resurrection healing and forgiveness, means asserting that what we do know to be authentic even while we are open to further revisions of our grasp of these affairs³⁴⁷.

³³⁹ Sally B. Purvis, *The Power of the Cross*, 95; Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory*, 174.

³⁴⁰ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory*, 172.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 171-173.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 173.

³⁴³ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory*, 174; Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 134.

³⁴⁴ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 116 ; 119.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁴⁶ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 119.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

In view of the fact that the church is historical, and has to work in the world, the answers she looks for, whether about knowledge or praxis, will necessarily be partial and contingent. The community can cloth the individual believer with a cloak of “shared meaning and value,” but the distortion which is ever present, will “demand the risk of ambiguity and the work of constant discernment³⁴⁸.”

3.8. Conclusion

What answers can feminist theologians give to redeem the cross? Have they been able to preserve the ambivalence of the cross as a symbol of suffering that allows the suffering to identify with Jesus on the cross, and which on the other hand provides hope that God is present in their pain and humiliation and that death can be transformed to life? The viewpoint for the feminist theologians, from where to look at the cross is Jesus’ life. In this life of healing, inclusive table community and the restoration of interrelatedness, Jesus revealed what God wanted for human beings: the reign of God. Only from the life preceding it can death receive saving power. His saving work began in his life but did not die with him on the cross; on the contrary, the community of followers experienced an empowerment to continue this work of Christ. Their mission being: to become redeemed human beings by witnessing and praxis in the service of the reign of God.

Feminist theologians value the suffering they observe on the cross; it is a great comfort to know that God is able to experience suffering and is not indifferent to the agony of His/Her people. Therefore this suffering should be recognized, mourned and remembered. The cross is thus a sacramental witness to the character of God. However, it teaches also resistance to suffering, but paradoxically this can of course lead to more suffering! As was clear in the reason for the crucifixion, which feminist theologians position in the way Jesus lived. We, as followers of Christ, should live out of the love that was revealed in all of Jesus’ teachings and praxis. This love did not die with him on the cross but was passed on to us, to sow its seeds in the world. The cross teaches us also that our undertakings for the reign of God are risky and that success is not guaranteed. But it means that we are obliged to take up our commitment, even if it entails suffering.

Feminist theologians have proposed a number of metaphors which still take into account suffering but which do not have the negative connotations of suffering that leads to annihilation. They propose the maternal sacrifice, where new life is a result from pain and demands sacrifice, and they advance salvation through Gods erotic power which works toward right relationships. Finally, there is also covenantal salvation, meaning that we are Gods partners, created out of sustaining and life-giving love and empowered to do the same.

The cross reveals that God’s power is not domination through violence, but is life-giving in the way that it transforms despair to joy, isolation to connection and mutual relations that propagate the flourishing of creation. God is actively present in His/Her transformative solidarity with victims of oppression and injustice. He/She wants to heal and create life by providing insight and strength that can result in unexpected action. God does not want evil to take place, but admits it as a risky by-product of the freedom human beings have as partners of God in creation and redemption. God is vulnerable through His/Her offer of love and communion to creation. However, God’s love is so abundant that it cannot be manipulated or boxed in by human beings. Feminist theologians very much want to preserve the mystery that is God while stressing that God works outside of human categories of justice and power, and His/Her salvific activity is forever surprising!

To feminist theologians Jesus’ life is inspiring because his resistance to domination seems to spring from his knowledge of living in the embrace of God. They believe he operated within the limits of his humanity, as does God. His death therefore was not necessary or inevitable, precisely because of the freedom of the human being. The message Jesus brought: our invitation to growth and to self-affirmation in community, the importance he attached to our physical createdness, is viewed as salvific. Feminist theologians are convinced of the importance of the image we have of Christ. Since Christ has primarily been portrayed as a white, Caucasian, blue eyed man; this has led to a legitimation of the sovereignty of the white male over the rest of the human population. To

³⁴⁸ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, 59.

counteract the ill effects of the dominant picture, theologians have proposed a black Jesus. To fight the traditional interpretations of God's salvific work on the cross, feminist theologians have interpreted Jesus' role in this matter as being that of a prostitute or a trickster. While helpful to expose the nefarious effects of the traditional interpretations, these images in my view pose more problems than they solve. The best interpretation of God's life and death I find to be the image of Emmanuel, God-with-us, who reveals possibilities for transformation, and who stands for a leadership of love.

If Jesus is unique, it is as the foundational representative of the way of the cross, meaning loving and being true to one's commitment to the reign of God even at the risk of one's life. What is important is the flourishing of creation, which is God's will, not Christ as such! Jesus showed the way but everyone following Jesus can participate in this mission.

While feminist theologians appreciate the historical maleness of Jesus, they deny that this maleness has anything to do with salvation. The reasons for this have been enumerated in the previous chapter. To solve these problems they have proposed a number of solutions. Salvation is not seen as something accomplished once and for all by one saviour, but as a continuous process. By attributing redemption to Jesus' salvific activities during his life; this implies that men and women can equally participate in this process.

The androgynic figure of the cross-dresser as our saviour is to me not helpful to solve the problem of the maleness of Jesus, since the maleness is precisely the point in being a cross-dresser! Envisaging Jesus as the incarnation of the divine Sophia is another avenue to relinquish the link between maleness and salvation. Since Wisdom was present before Jesus and is equally present in other cultures, this image of Christ is less threatening to other religions. It also involves the entire population of the world in the work of Christ. In the Christian tradition a number of women have been recognized by their contemporaries as bearing the image of Christ. They can be inspirational to other women by indicating that they are indeed valuable partners in God's redeeming work.

Some feminist theologians advance that since the real scandal of the incarnation is the fact that a human being can participate in the work of the divinity and is welcome in the sphere of the divine; the unusual image of a crucified woman can restore this scandal. It also helps women identify with the passion and death of Christ. It exposes moreover the forgotten and silenced suffering of women and it exposes where Christ is to be found today: in the biblical categories of the widow, the orphan, the stranger. People that are outcasts and therefore extremely vulnerable; and who suffer first from the domination of others be it in the political, economic, social, or religious domain.

Feminist theologians attach importance to the virtues that make people participate in the resistance to evil. It is important to be attentive to suffering and to the causes of suffering; our discernment should be developed by working on our suspicion and on our trust. We should cultivate hope that even the bleakest situation is not lost. Faithful living means working for the reign of God in the world. This entails conversion in the personal life as well as in the communal life. Suffering is a risk that can follow this commitment for the flourishing of creation, which is a continuous process. And finally, we should grieve the fact that we are victims and perpetrators and cultivate the power of love!

Each human being has dignity and their integrity as a person should be preserved in all circumstances. Everyone deserves respect, and should be seen as a valuable member of the human community. It is important to realise our historicity and contingency. We have to realise that our viewpoints always will reflect our situation in life; that is why our diversity is also an enrichment. We are transcendent and permanent in God, who wills communion with His/Her creation. Our identity is dynamic and multidimensional, this entails that we are forever becoming human. The transformation of ourselves and of creation takes place with the help of God. This means we are partners in the creating and redeeming work of God. We are fundamentally relational because we are defined by a God who is relation. This relationality is a gift and a curse; it is the site where we can realise our calling to become more human but it is also in our relationships that we turn away from God. From a feminist theologian's view of the cross, human beings should renounce violence. We should actively resist suffering, even when this leads to suffering. Our action should be geared to spring hope and invigorate the imagination. The cross signifies that human beings are not

defined by the victimisation they experience but by the commitments they make. Human beings are moulded to experience and propagate love, for themselves, for the community, and for creation, but we perpetually have to choose love!

Our world is holistic, interrelated, rich, abundant, diverse and beautiful. The earth belongs equally to all people, but we should care for it since God is also dwelling in it! It contributes with humanity to the flourishing of all creation, human and non-human. It should thus be appreciated for its intrinsic value. The earth sustains us and we should sustain the earth as equal partners in God's salvific work.

The cross provides the contours for the community of the people of God. This community should be committed to the promotion of the reign of God, while at the same time abstaining from the use of violence. It should care for the victims as well as for the perpetrators, since Jesus' preoccupation during his life, which led to his death, was with both. Her power and so also her leadership should be based on love. She should take accountability for her actions and omissions, and should be in constant renewal. She should be open and inclusive, attentive to the riches of diversity, and humble towards her knowledge, which is always contextual. The church cannot reduce its salvific actions to its own members; she should be actively committed to political, economical and social action in the world. The ambiguity that is present in the world should be recognised as a positive element also in the church itself, because it is typical of the limits of our creation. The relationality that is the fundament of our creation should be acutely present in the church, the interrelatedness of all human beings and of the earth should be recognised, promoted and celebrated, the idea that if a victim benefits from our action, we all benefit should be uppermost in our mind as church members. Our church would then be an inviting community, both critical and creative in the world for the world!

While I was writing this research paper, a number of questions occurred in my mind and I also have some reflections on the proposals of the feminist theologians' revision of the theology of the cross which I think might help to direct further research into the matter.

CHAPTER 4. CROSSING OVER. REFLECTIONS

What I wanted to accomplish with my research and the writing of this paper was to note the main criticisms voiced by contemporary feminist theologians concerning the theology of the cross and the proposals they advance to redeem the cross. In this reflection I want to focus on the pathways feminist theologians point out. In my reading, I saw feminist theologians crossing over from interpretations of the cross that were especially harmful to women to interpretations that were potentially beneficial to all human beings. It was scary but also exciting to realise that there were no clear-cut answers available. From the viewpoint of the feminist theologian this is in fact to be expected, for there is no denying the complexity of our world! Feminist theologians are always attempting to see things from all sides. However, the side of the marginalized, the voiceless, the unseen and unheard of has precedence. They seek to avoid any dichotomy, and are forever composing as complete a picture as possible, realising at the same time that there always will remain gaps in their theories because of the human contingency! I find the questions feminist theologians formulate and their criticism of tradition very interesting. They open my eyes to injustices I was not aware of! They presume that tradition should evolve, is not static and should therefore be critically and continuously evaluated. The ambiguity they perceive in our world is likewise to be found in Christianity: God is transcendent and immanent at the same time, Christ is both human and God, and salvation began in the life of Jesus but is not complete and will not be till the end of time, is already and not yet!

I especially liked the insight that in order to overcome evil, evil should not be destroyed, annihilated by force, but that both good and evil should be converted, since we, creation, carry both. The transformation takes place through healing and through forgiveness³⁴⁹. I discovered this same dialectic in the new interpretations of the cross. Feminist theologians were taking inspiration

³⁴⁹ Cynthia S. W. Crysdale, *Embracing Travail*, p. 60.

from tradition and contemporary feminist interpretations, jettisoning those interpretations that were no longer relevant or that were detrimental, retaining the elements that are still valuable, examining their own experiences and crossing over through the cross to a knowledge which is compelling us, as believers, to contribute in “the way of the cross” to creation’s redemption³⁵⁰.

What feminist theologians are very conscious of is that we are responsible for the consequences of our knowledge and actions. Although asking forgiveness for what happened in the past is important because it recognises the suffering that was caused, we should equally scrutinize the probable consequences of our future activities on the earth and the generations to come. We must be willing to evaluate our actions and thoughts, our knowledge and our opinions from the viewpoint of the cross, whether we are the ones being crucified or the ones standing under the cross, standing by and “suffering with” the crucified people.

The idea that suffering should be mourned is very valuable. People that have been hurt are in pain, and this should never be ignored. Their hurtfulness has to be taken seriously. They have to be heard. Perhaps we need a ritual in our church for such losses, we have beautiful funerary services, and our confession deserves a revaluation for the true healing experience it conveys, but I think there is also need for a ritual when people get divorced. There is so much unrecognised suffering going on in this process that it should get significance in connection with the divine.

Another important realisation was the reality of the losses that can never be recovered, and the insight that human beings must be allowed to mourn their losses. The emptiness following the loss should not however induce despair since the cross is about transformation. Our life changes through suffering and we can never return to the previous situation. In this respect, suffering and the cross are always life-changing experiences but the thing is that they can potentially be life-giving if one finds, or better perhaps, is given, the strength and creativity to resist this suffering in whatever way possible. From this viewpoint the cross empowers victims and perpetrators alike to become co-sufferers, co-redeemers and co-creators. Other human beings can be inspirational because of their approach to suffering.

The most confronting result of recent feminist interpretations of the cross for me has been that violence can never be the manner in which Christians respond to suffering. This however is mainly how we see empowerment! That endurance can signify strength usually escapes our attention! And here of course, the ambiguity of the cross and more generally speaking, of suffering, rears its head. If one responds to suffering with the power of love, meaning that we try for transformation by not giving in to suffering and by not retaliating violently either, we make ourselves vulnerable to more suffering! I found the exhortation to let our action-taking be strategic and aimed at boosting the hope and imagination of the community very helpful in this regard!

The thought that it is in fact the erotic power of God that is lifegiving and that is realised in interrelated relationships between people and creation alike is still very exciting³⁵¹. To me, this power can however never be seen as abstract, this power can never become an indifferent life force! It is clear that the mutuality between humans, creation and the divine is paramount. Our experience tells us that the survival of the strongest is not the message conveyed by the Gospel. On the contrary, God’s lifegiving force seems to be aimed first and foremost towards the marginalised, the oppressed, and the ones suffering injustice.

I equally liked the idea that the mission of Christ fits into the covenantal salvation. It conveys the image that salvation is a process, that making right relationships, becoming human, is a work all of us should and could be involved in. It downplays perhaps the importance of Christ as our unique saviour, but on the other hand, we are empowered in his Spirit, that is also the Spirit of God, to continue his work. The Whitsun experience and Paul’s Damascus encounter, so colourfully expressed in the Gospels, show us the magnitude of the followers’ experience of empowerment to continue the work for the reign of God.

The metaphor of the maternal sacrifice appeals to me as a mother. The fact that indeed new life does not require dying is a hopeful message. However, I feel it glorifies the suffering of the mother while it downplays the sacrifices men make when they become true fathers to their children,

³⁵⁰ Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, p. 138-139.

³⁵¹ Although it was voiced already 20 years ago by Rita Nakashima Brock in *Journeys by Heart*.

committing themselves to their education and caring for their welfare. Another holdback I experience with this metaphor is the fact that the church has traditionally conferred value on two kinds of women: the mothers, because they were saved through motherhood, and celibate women whose virginity granted them special worth. The metaphor of maternal sacrifice fits into these categories and is perhaps in concordance with patriarchal thinking because it secures a woman in her role as mother. Any woman who cannot have children is of course exempt from this experience and runs the risk of being perceived of less than a woman! This metaphor, though I like it a lot, should therefore be handled with care and can only serve as an additional image.

A God who is vulnerable, who loves always more and who's wrath reveals the fact that He/She cannot remain indifferent to what human beings do in the world, is perhaps not the God that human beings want, but in my view it is the God human beings need. As a fundamentally relational God He/She appeals to all human beings to allow ourselves to be filled with and invigorated by the erotic life-giving power always available to us. God lures us towards creation's flourishing, while safeguarding human freedom. The image of God which appeared most in my reading and which also appeals a lot to me, is that of a God who is actively present in transformative solidarity with human beings. It accentuates the partnership that is a gift but also an exhortation. Believing in such a God demands courage, because it leads us into uncharted waters. Everything human and well known to us has to be critically questioned, and the answers this points to us to should be trusted. The image of transformation of evil is not without danger, though. Since there is no conquest there is also no victory which confounds us for there is no final moment, the transformation is never ending! But worse perhaps is that evil can be confused for good, as indeed is done frequently. Or that human beings think that the end justifies the means and use whatever they think is necessary to make the transformation happen, thus effectively corrupting the process! What was clear to me from my reading is that feminist theologians are firmly committed to preserving the mysterious quality of God. God should be allowed to surprise us³⁵²!

The trouble with Jesus is the fact that he is both God and human being. To keep these two together yet separate is no mean feat. The danger always lurks to have either the divinity or the humanity figure more prominently in any theory. Concerning salvation I find that usually the divinity of Jesus is stressed, I was therefore happily surprised to find in my reading the insight that Jesus operates within the boundaries of his human limitations. It seems to me that this is also God's way of interacting with the world: creating possibilities but letting the freedom of the human being decide what the outcome is going to be, with respect for the partnership. This implies that Jesus' death was not inevitable; precisely because of this human freedom it could perhaps have had a completely different outcome!

Concerning our need for the crucifixion in order to understand and value the seriousness of suffering and the importance of the resurrection, I would like to remark that if we need death and resurrection to convince us of the power of God and His/Her loving embrace of creation, does not this signify that we are still looking for the spectacular "signs" that the Pharisees demanded of Jesus³⁵³? Jesus' answer is well known but should perhaps be taken to heart: we are not getting the signs we are expecting! Are not we indeed attaching too much importance to the extraordinary while life-giving words and actions - which is God's embrace - are in fact always present even in the bleakest of circumstances?

I also wonder whether it is only death and resurrection which make Jesus divine. One would seem to think so, viewing the importance that has been attached to it in the Christian tradition. Is there then no indwelling of the divine in Jesus' life? If we reduce the significance of Jesus to these events, we ignore our vocation as human beings to be co-creators and co-redeemers in the embrace of God during our lifetime. I think the eastern Christian idea of *theosis* could be helpful to clarify this. In my reading I encountered the theory that the cross is intrinsic to salvation. This would in my opinion signify that there could be no salvation without the cross. I find this thinking very arrogant. Was God not concerned with humanity long before the incarnation? The only way I could

³⁵² Marcella Althaus-Reid during a seminar on indecent theology, Faculty of theology, K.U.Leuven, March 13th 2007.

³⁵³ Mk 8,11-12.

agree to this proposition would be if it were understood as signifying that the cross is the site from which salvation can be understood most clearly. It would express that salvation is about restoring relationships, healing connections and returning human beings into community.

I would like for us to cultivate the image of Jesus as God-with-us that Marina Herrera so liked. A God forever present to everything and to the community. The relationality expressed in this image signifies that it is the reign of God that is important, not Jesus as such. It implies also the continuity between the work of Jesus during his lifetime and the work of Jesus being continued by the community of followers after his death.

Concerning the uniqueness of Jesus, I wonder whether the reason why tradition clings to it is not arrogance, the idea that we, Christians, are the only ones that can “grasp” God; we are the ones that “have” the truth. It might also have something to do with the necessity to preserve the status quo concerning the importance of male leadership. It portrays a certain “exclusiveness.” The fact that the importance of the establishment should be protected can also be a motivating factor; there is the eminence of the pope, attached to being the sole vicar of Christ (a God-man!) on earth. It purports to the power of the church and the moral authority attached to this vicarious position. The church is a power to be reckoned with, as her influence stretches over institutions such as hospitals, schools and universities and reaches to the far corners of the earth.

There are also the privileges the church can count on. Her representatives get access to places and people shut off to ordinary people. For its members there is the almost certainty of salvation and then there is the vanity of being part of the chosen people! It seems to me that the “uniqueness” of Jesus is mostly beneficiary to the church as an institution, for she can claim authority over all other religions. This leads to large problems concerning how Christians view the members of other religions! Should they be seen as victims that have been misled, are they being deceived, or is this the work of the devil? Perhaps it would be better if Christians were to think of their religion as being the right way for them to encounter God! It would thus involve them personally, which seems to me to be very important!

I think leaving this uniqueness would be beneficial for Christians and for the church as an institution. It would be a recognition of the transcendence of God and induce some humility in the believer and the community. It would also mean an admission that we are contingent human beings and that the church is also a human institution: we cannot know everything, neither about God and nor about the world! Moreover the work of Christ would be seen as the result of the Holy Spirit working in all human beings for the advance of the reign of God in the world, revaluing the importance of the Holy Spirit at the same time. It would also mean a restoration of the importance of creation theology.

It could be that empowering human beings, according importance and responsibility to their work for the reign of God might be more redemptive than all the prohibitions coming from a dominating church today that are put in place to control the human being on his/her way towards salvation. It would point to the importance of agency: the freedom and the responsibility that are in fact the expressions of the love and trust of God. This divine love heals people by connecting them into a web of creative interrelatedness. It speaks of the unique possibilities and importance of every human being, discovering that their agency can make people happy. But not only the individual is healed in the process, the community also benefits, which is important especially in a globalised world where more and more people find that their power has been taken away from them to the advantage of large, indifferent universal economic or financial multinationals.

Feminist theologians see Jesus’ saving work as life-transforming activities in life! Salvation is then the restoration of relationships for the flourishing of the whole creation. Since this has nothing to do with the fact that Jesus was a man, women can participate freely in this redeeming work.

Especially meaningful to me was the insight that the real scandal of the cross lays in humans participating in the work of God and being thus welcome into the Divine union. I wonder whether in the traditional interpretations of the cross the idea of taboo does not still have a strong influence. This would imply that humans must keep their distance from God, that they cannot reach God and that they cannot do anything to save themselves. However, from creation theology we learn that God Him/Herself bridged that gap. And ever since, human beings and God have been connected. The covenant and the possible union with the divine are two expressions of this. This connection

signifies sheer bliss for both partners. Transcendence here does not translate as a hierarchical dominating and controlling. It means on the contrary, that God is unimaginable, uncontainable, uncontrollable, and at the same time so loving toward creation that a covenantal partnership is initiated or should I say risked!

Concerning the truly challenging notion of the coming Christ as the community of Christ, I wonder if the idea of the community of saints could find a place in this concept. After all, they were recognised as the true people of God, Christoform in their manner. This certainly would be interesting to examine, for it could take our responsibility as a community to another level.

I am a strong defender of the image of a crucified woman and I really would like it to find a place in at least one of our cathedrals. Duly explained, it could again awaken us to the implications of a God becoming human. I really believe in the power of symbols, and it is true that they work in insidious ways. Often we do not realise the scope of the influence a symbol has on us. It conveys unspoken meaning. Since Christa caused such uproar this must alert us to the fact that even when officially negated, people make a connection between maleness and salvation. A Christa explicitly communicates the message that women too are suffering and that they are victims of oppression and injustice. It shouts out that women can bear the divine and are truly co-redeemers. As long as the image of a crucified woman remains a taboo, the idea that women are included into the male category will in my opinion stand! Women will still be considered less capable of representing salvation and of being equal religious subjects.

The importance feminist theologians attach to communal salvation seems to me to be especially important in view of the problems of globalisation today. Not only is the whole of humanity implicated in the call to redemption, even so is the earth. This bears a strong ethical exhortation. We should be aware of our possibilities and of the good and bad consequences that can spring from our technical and scientific knowhow. Eschatological thinking could help here. We should be concerned about the fact that our actions have long ranging consequences that perhaps will never be a problem to us but could impede life for the human, animal and vegetal populations of the future. Our personal accountability for the common good is something feminist theologians take very seriously; however, it cannot be used as an excuse to oppress people or to ignore their possibly opposing interests. Feminist theologians believe in communitarian solutions, where all parties should have an equal say in the matter.

Cynthia Crysdale stated that grief instead of guilt leads to solidarity. I wonder if this thinking is not detrimental to women. Since men are still socialised into less emotional behaviour, it could be that their empathy is not as well developed. For them legality and the resulting guilt will often be the only way to induce them to solidarity. I think Crysdale describes the way women come to solidarity, not men. As long as parents do not raise boys and girls in the same way feelingwise, this argument might be very worthy in a theoretical way but will not change anything in daily reality.

I appreciated that feminist theologians attach such importance to the knowledge of Jesus which leads to being involved in the work of Christ which again increases knowledge, and so on. In my experience, only the dialectic knowledge/action makes love endure. This dialectic, of course, has to take place for, in and with the community where it will increase hope and fire the imagination. A community where one is known, accepted and loved is invaluable to each of us. However, belonging to such a community on a permanent basis demands the effort of commitment. Even when we do not feel like it, we have to honour our promises. This in my view is the sacrifice required of the human being today who is so used to doing what he/she wants when he/she wants it. However, taking our responsibilities seriously is ensuring connectedness and is very rewarding in the long term. In view of the reducing number of priests in Belgium, we might have to travel further to be able to attend mass and we will have to make the extra effort to belong to a larger community since the parish structure we know now might become encompassed in larger entities. As a mother and a teacher of religion I am concerned about how I can best convey my religious experience, so that young people might want to start their religious "exploration" themselves. A living, creative and enthusiast community is a great help in this endeavour.

One of the most revealing but also most confronting insights of my reading was the warning that women should not feel responsible for their efforts to make everyone happy: their children, their husbands, their mothers and fathers etcetera, failed. Many women I know feel are indeed very

concerned with the wellbeing of others. Our plans and hopes do not always reach the desired goals. Here the bible can offer some help, for in it there are numerous stories of people setting out to realise a certain aim and failing to accomplish it. Moses never reached the Promised Land, his followers did, though. We women have to acknowledge our limits, we have to trust God more, if He/She could relinquish control in favour of risk and trust, then so should we. We have to believe that the seeds we have sown will become tall trees. Here again the importance of the community is revealed, it continues the work we devoted ourselves to. It illustrates also that living with ambiguity is simply part of our life, and that trust in ourselves, the community and God is important to keep our hope and willingness for action alive!

This same trust is mirrored in us when we recognise that we are defined by God. This outlook changes our outlook on the world, on other human beings and on ourselves. It awakens us to self-love in community and to solidarity. It teaches us humility. I find that this is a big help in our attitude towards helping people, it shields us from paternalistic actions and promotes respect for the person needing our help. They are not just victims, but sincerely have something to offer to us too. I object however to the thought that suffering would be an unavoidable consequence of a believer's life. It would mean that the whole world was alien to God's work. Of course this is not true, a lot of good takes place without suffering. It could, moreover, give rise to the idea of segregation, if doing "the right thing," causes pain and suffering people might be tempted to limit their efforts to those already of the same mind! This of course in itself would be a form of sinning. Ambiguity, indeed!

An idea we are not really used to, is that God dwells in all of creation. Our religious thinking still is pretty anthropocentric. If we really would take this thought to heart we would, I think, be less urged to let our economic interests prevail on the preservation or flourishing of the earth.

I discern a crossing over also in the vision these feminist theologians have of the church. A redeemed humanity is the result of a dialectical process, we have to leave our positions as victims and oppressors and relate to each other. We then deploy our newly discovered potential: we are both transcendent and immanent. We know ourselves to be different, act upon this and come to greater understanding and so forth. It is not a question of a competition between human beings and the Divine, where one has to defeat the other in order to come to completion. On the contrary, it is only by working together, by becoming real partners, with the freedom to be able to accomplish something and with the responsibility going together with this, that creation becomes redeemed.

The characteristics feminist theologians propose for a redeeming church are in my opinion posing difficulties to the Roman Catholic Church today. Our church still favours a strong structure and interprets power mostly as control. Although she professes to be dynamic, I perceive that many times she just wants to preserve the status quo at all costs. I get the impression that she would like to see her answers as being eternally lasting. It is true that the Catholic Church still grows; this could give the impression that she is doing fine and should continue on the chosen path. In Belgium, however, her membership has been declining for many decades, now. Perhaps Rome could envision a more diversified structure that would be better adjusted to the needs of the believers. This would mean taking the diversity of the believers and of the local churches seriously. It would imply that unity does not mean uniformity. Of course, the working of our church would be more difficult, for local churches could decide something to which other local churches are opposed. However, in this world today, I think this is an option that deserves attention.

I also find a paradox in the fact that the symbols and sacraments in the church are very much embodied; they are expressed in gestures of touching, in eating and drinking, in phrases of soothing, while the church itself is experienced as an institution still favouring spirit over body, wary of erotic life-giving power. How this could be remedied certainly needs to be looked further into.

The cross remains an ambiguous symbol, so rich, powerful and important to Christianity that we cannot afford to drop it. However, it should never be taken out of its context, meaning the life and resurrection of Jesus. Just as suffering can never be separated from the life of the victim or the actions he/she took to be resurrected. It shall always stand for isolation, suffering and pain, but also for relatedness, joy and healing. We should be adamant to convey that there is no salvation in the cross, but that it is found in the life of Jesus and in the work of Christ that is also the work of the community of followers yesterday and today. Resurrection is experienced daily through the life-

giving actions of the Christ community. Becoming a redeemed human being means crossing over, leaving behind what is nefarious to our relationship with ourselves, the community and the earth, thus deepening our union with the Divine. It means living with suspicion and trust, the already and not yet. It implies relinquishing control for the sake of love and freedom. Are we brave enough to join into this crossing over into the embrace of God, who was and is and will be Emmanuel? I hope and pray we are!