CHOOSING SOMETHING NEW: A FEMINIST "ETHIC OF RESPONSE" TO SUFFERING

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I believe I am choosing something new
Not to suffer uselessly yet still to feel.
-Adrienne Rich, "Splittings"

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INTRODUCTION

Confronting suffering is a central problem to every religious tradition and it has turned out to be especially troubling for women in the Christian tradition. This is so because Christianity's previous approaches to theodicy have mostly failed to acknowledge women's experience as data in their search for explanations and meaning. Women's historical work of nurturing and responding to suffering in the private sphere is now widely recognized, but women are still left with little guidance and very few tools with which to confront suffering in the public, global realm. Despite the fact that there are thousands, millions, of women in the world now who have resources at their disposal for productive and positive responses to others' suffering, most of them still do not realize that they can and must make use of these resources.

In light of the particular suffering that women experience disproportionately and the inadequacies of most Christian responses for them, Christians, women, feminists, and persons in general should be searching for a more productive ethic – one that empowers, facilitates the ability to recognize suffering, and engenders action on the behalf of those suffering. The Christian tradition has helpful elements within it already for this work. Feminist theory does as well. When combined, these two streams of theory/theology make an unsure union; there are certainly unresolved (and possibly unresolvable) tensions between the two. However, this union is uniquely powerful in part because these tensions keep it from becoming static and unresponsive, but also because it takes into account the experience of women and other outsiders in a more complete way than what has been done before. In fact, what this union has to offer should be compelling

enough that Christians can no longer be excused for sitting idly by while their fellow human beings are suffering.

CHAPTER 1: CHRISTIAN THEODICIES AND THEIR CRITICS

The problems in confronting suffering from a Christian standpoint are multiplied because so many Christian responses to suffering are either escapist and fail to grasp its full weight or, in grasping its magnitude, leave a paralyzing burden on those who would act to resist. Somewhere between these two extremes, there must be a more productive ethic to guide persons in responding to the suffering of others. It must be an ethic that doesn't just ask persons, but *compels* them to respond to the suffering of others and in so doing, take up the full expression of their agency (women especially). This ethic must also spring from women's authentic experience of the world and their suffering in it in order to make up for previous attempts at theodicy that have failed to take female experience into account.

Feminist theologians have taken up these problems in the last few decades. They have searched for answers that take into account the experience of women and that avoid minimizing or valorizing suffering. Their work has been integral in re-examining long held beliefs about God, humans, and creation. Much has been done in feminist scholarship to critique what has come before and find building blocks for a new kind of theodicy. An example of this is Kristine Rankka, formerly a reference librarian for Oregon State University and the Graduate Union Theological Library, among others. She published a concise summary of previous Christian approaches to suffering, and

contrasting these with more contemporary feminist and womanist approaches, she proposes the framework of a different kind of response to suffering.

Rankka gives a typology of theodicies with seven categories under which most previous attempts to understand the sources of suffering fall.[1] The first is a dualistic model, seen mostly in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writings, that is based on the idea that humans are merely caught in the middle of a battle between good and evil forces and whatever suffering we experience can be attributed to this battle. Evil sometimes wins out over good and hence, we experience suffering. This approach suggests that a benevolent God is not the only powerful force in the cosmos or that God is somehow limited in God's power to eradicate suffering either by self-limitation or external limitation.

Secondly, a model attributed primarily to Augustine claims that suffering is merely the result of human sinfulness; humans, with our God-given free will, sometimes make "wrong" choices which lead to damaging consequences and suffering. A third model, reflected in the work of Karl Barth and John Calvin, similarly claims that suffering can be attributed to human sinfulness, although this model goes a bit further and claims that suffering can be the result of sinfulness that isn't necessarily the result of conscious free choice and extends beyond a personal definition of sin to include communal sinfulness. In other words, God keeps track of individual and group actions, interceding to exact punishment when necessary. In this model, incidents such as natural disasters are often understood to be retribution for human sinfulness without any regard

[1] Kristine M. Rankka, *Women and the Value of Suffering: An Aw(e)ful Rowing Toward God.* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 37-43.

for whether such sinfulness was intentional. In these two models, God's justice is not questioned, but God's love remains mysterious and even potentially absent.

A fourth model has been especially harmful to women. It can be seen in the atonement theologies of Anselm and Abelard and claims that suffering is a means of salvation. Just as redemption is found in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, those who truly wish to be Christians should follow his example and take on suffering not just for the sake of themselves, but for the sake of others. This imitation of Christ, manifested in willingness to suffer obediently, is claimed to lead to a greater good. It is under this model that women's particular sin as identified by Valerie Saiving, i.e. self-abnegation, becomes most apparent.[2] There is no line between constructive and destructive suffering in this model; one is merely commanded to take on any and all suffering obediently for the sake of some mysterious greater good. Again, this model emphasizes God's justice and power, while God's love comes under serious question.

A fifth model, originating with Irenaeus, frames suffering as an integral part of an environment in which God is working to shape human souls in a perfect image of the divine. Suffering can be a moral contrast to the good that God wants us to see or it can be a result of human's misuse of free will and disobedience to God. Suffering in this model is a natural part of the trial and error process by which humans learn to live more fully in the image of the divine. Here, just the opposite of the previous approach is true; God's love is apparent in the intention of shaping souls in the image of perfection, while God's justice and power come under some question in the present because "the good"

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[2] Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *WomanSpirit Rising – A Feminist Reader in Religion,* eds., Christ & Plaskow (New York: Harper Collins, 1992): 37.

that will ultimately come from the painful process of perfecting souls remains difficult to see.

Similar to this model, but with an entirely different concept of God implied, a sixth model frames suffering as pedagogical. In this model, suffering can be seen as "a test imposed by God for the refinement or strengthening of an individual or humanity as a whole."[3] Suffering this test is a catalyst of human growth toward humility, compassion, and a better understanding of oneself and one's relationship to God. It is from this model that many ascetics take their motivation. Self-imposed suffering can have value in heightening one's spiritual understanding and bringing one closer to spiritual perfection. Here again, God's justice and power are emphasized far more than the benevolence and love of God.

Finally, the seventh model that Rankka gives uses Job as a primary example and can be found in the work of Simone Weil and Karl Rahner. In this model, suffering must remain incomprehensible because through it, the sufferer comes face to face with the impenetrable mystery and incomprehensibility of God and then surrenders to it. Failing to find answers or resolutions to the problem of suffering and evil *forces* the sufferer to confront this ultimate mystery. One may protest or respond to God in other ways as Job did, but in the end one must trust in God's ultimate power, justice, and goodness and simply surrender to the mystery in trust and love. In this model, each of the above attributes is part of the conception of God. How intact these attributes remain, however, is debatable. Some might argue that an ultimately just and good God would at least give some explanation for suffering in the world, but this category of theodicies puts that

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[3] Rankka, *Women*, 41.

question aside and simply maintains God's goodness and justice in the face of suffering, asking only for faith on the part of humans.

These models might seem adequate, but upon closer examination each of these approaches reduces possibilities for human agency, engendering an evasion of responsibility to confront the problems of suffering. Often, the real-world manifestation of these approaches are stated as: "There must be a reason for this, just trust in God"; "Something good will come out of this"; "You will have learned so much from this horrible experience"; "What doesn't kill you only makes you stronger"; "Suffering brings us closer to Christ, embrace the experience." In the face of massive suffering, these platitudes sound just like what they are – escapes from the reality of suffering and attempts to make it into something useful and rational, which it may not be at all. As Douglas John Hall points out, certain ideologies and values of North American culture make it "unusually difficult for most persons in our society to accept or articulate their own personal suffering."[4] Wrapped up in triumphalist notions of a life where everything can be overcome, it is hard to admit to and face the suffering we experience. We tend to think of suffering in generalities that can be addressed by all-purpose platitudes like those above, mostly because it is too painful to face its reality. But to truly understand suffering analytically and confront it productively, we need to clarify and consider its particularities; we need to look at each situation of suffering as a particular instance in which a particular person is experiencing something painful that we may or may not be able to address. However, we will never be able to confront this when the methods and language we use to address suffering only reinforce its generalities. Generalities simply

[4] Douglas John Hall, God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 43.

reinforce particular instances of suffering as trivial blips in a greater scheme of amorphous and impersonal suffering that can easily be glossed over.

For women, the problem is a bit different for many reasons. Following from the concept of valorized suffering given by the fourth category of theodicy, they may choose to take on controllable types of suffering in order to avoid the uncontrollable suffering that comes with agency. In other words, many women see being a doormat as safer than being a fully functioning moral agent who must necessarily make choices that require risk and its consequences. Sometimes, women may not be able to see any other option besides putting the other before themselves. This has been called the sin of self-abnegation, which is, as Valerie Saiving argued, a sin more particular to women because historically women have been unable to draw the boundaries between themselves and others. Women are prone to the sins of "dependence on others for one's own self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy…in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self."[5] These sins can all lead women to the temptation to take on suffering that is not their own. When a woman defines herself by another, that other's suffering can seem to be her own or it can simply seem to be more important than her own. This self-denial, to the point of self-erasure, for the sake of others is just one more manifestation of the evasion of agency that becomes problematic with each of the other categories of theodicy.[6]

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[5] Valerie Saiving, "Human Situation," 37.

[6] Saiving does not argue that self-sacrifice is everywhere and always sinful. It is the androcentric, one-dimensional equation of sin with pride and will-to-power that is problematic. She argues that this supposedly universal paradigm of sin has been based solely on male experience. So, the universal definition of sin is actually quite specific and the basic human anxieties most theologians refer to are actually mostly male

In denying agency, one also denies responsibility and therefore cannot adequately respond to the suffering of others. Further, in minimizing or failing to adequately address the suffering of others, one is allowed to ignore her own complicity in producing it and in not acting against it. As Hall points out, "…citizens of our [North American] culture repress the emergence of any deeper feeling when it concerns those whose victimization must be traced in an all-too-direct manner to our own vaunted way of life."[7] It is much easier to look away and ignore that there is real suffering going on than to face the guilt of having a hand in that suffering for someone else. Also, in looking away, one is released from a responsibility for doing anything about the suffering of others and allowed to again evade the responsibility of taking up her own agency. In authentically identifying with and responding to someone in suffering, one assumes and recognizes the status of both oneself and the other as moral agents. When a person puts aside her agency and fails to acknowledge the status of others as moral agents, she leaves herself with few options for entering into compassionate relationship with suffering others or for other courses of action in response.

Without having any adequate preparation or precedent for reacting appropriately to suffering, genuinely acknowledging it can sometimes only serve to further discourage

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anxieties. Saiving argues that a rather different set of anxieties, temptations, and therefore sins arise out of female experience, which is quite different from male experience in most cases. Further, the definition of sin as pride encourages women, already disposed to self-sacrifice, to practice this "virtue" to an extreme "so that nothing remains of her own uniqueness" and she becomes "merely an emptiness, almost a zero, without value to herself, to her fellow men, or, perhaps, even to God" (37). Saiving argues that the concept of sin must encompass both extremes – self-sacrifice and self-aggrandizement – in order to be representative of all persons. Her argument will also be discussed more fully in a later section of this paper.

[7] Hall, *Human Suffering*, 45.

someone who would act against it. Often it is the case that those who do manage to grasp the reality and deep damage of the suffering around them only feel helpless and overwhelmed because they have not been equipped with productive means of dealing with the suffering they see. In this case, a would-be actor against suffering becomes paralyzed with the enormity of the burden presented by the suffering around her. A feminist ethic of responding to suffering must confront this sense of hopeless paralysis. As Beverly Harrison points out, a feminist ethic "must not fail to affirm and generate our power to affect the existing world" and it "must be answerable to what women have learned by struggling to lay hold of the gift of life, to receive it, to pass it on."[8] The issue of confronting hopelessness and suffering is a particularly feminist issue because a feminist ethic is committed to justice and the flourishing of *all* life, but is informed in particular by the experience of women because their own flourishing has been disproportionately ignored. It is my contention that this particularly feminist ethic, combined with what Christian ethics has to offer, can produce a distinctive kind of ethic that is more powerful and more productive not just for women, but for all people. This is by no means an easy union. Even after her excellent review of relevant literature, Rankka admits that combining feminism with Christian doctrine is difficult and complex. It is a process that is never quite done and always full of unresolved tensions.

Given all this, how can people, especially women, be roused to their moral responsibilities for others? A non-feminist approach to suffering offered by John Hick proposes that the first step in truly acknowledging the suffering of another may in fact be

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[8] Beverly Harrison, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics for Women and Other Strangers," *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985): 7,8.

experiencing suffering oneself. This model of suffering as a necessary step in the process of soul-making comes originally from Irenaeus and is briefly explicated by Rankka in her fifth model of theodicy. According to Hick, "…man [sic], created as a personal being in the image of God, is only the raw material for a further and more difficult stage of God's creative work."[9] This second stage must be performed by humans themselves because "personal life is essentially free and self-directing. It cannot be perfected by divine fiat, but only through the uncompelled responses and willing co-operation of human individuals."[10] God's role in all of this is not to make the best of all possible worlds, but to form an environment in which souls may be perfected in the image of a loving, compassionate God. The value of a soul perfected over time through risk, effort, and responsibility justifies "even the long travail of the soul-making process," according to Hick.[11] It is through suffering that we, as humans, may become who we were meant to be. Hall says this process of becoming *is* suffering and further, "suffering thus understood is nevertheless meaningful and good because through it – and *only* through it – our lives are integrated. We become more truly whole, unified and centered persons."[12] In other words, suffering is an integral and necessary part of the process by which we become more perfected, more whole, and more God-like.

Another part of this process of becoming, to which suffering is also essential, is developing empathy for others. Since God is a loving and compassionate God, in order

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[9] John Hick, "The Starting-Point," *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 290.

[10] ibid., 291.

[11] ibid., 292.

[12] Hall, Human Suffering, 65.

to grow toward God's likeness, a person must develop compassion and empathy. To empathize literally means to be "in feeling" with another, something one can only truly do with some experience of the feeling the other is experiencing. So, in order to truly empathize with the suffering of others, we must experience some suffering ourselves. The universal experience of suffering, then, can actually be productive and helpful in that it allows for a particular kind of responsiveness and empathy. "I am because we are. We are because I am," goes an African proverb and the kind of empathy it engenders is a kind that is life-affirming not just for the self, but for the entire community.[13] If another is suffering and "'I am we,' I suffer in any case. I cannot be committed to my life without also being committed to our life, whoever that 'our' may be."[14]

This kind of compassion or communal respect and shared empathy is only possible among people who recognize each other fully as more than mere instruments. It is only possible among people who affirm human dignity and human worthiness of respect, according to their status as autonomous beings. Adapting a Kantian concept of autonomy and respect, Margaret Farley argues that it is autonomy, our capacity to determine the ultimate meaning of our own lives, by which we make claims for respect and which makes persons "valuable in themselves and not only as instruments in the service of the family or community or the human species…."[15] Autonomy provides the

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[13] John Mbiti, quoted in Patricia L. Wismer, "For Women in Pain," *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Anna O'Hara-Graff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 152.

[14] Wismer, "Women," 152-3.

[15] Margaret Farley, "A Feminist Version of Respect for Persons," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9, no. 1 (1993): 186.

"basis for human dignity" and provides us with positive as well as negative duties to other persons, specifically duties of caring and duties of noninterference.[16] In this way, Farley expands Kant's concept of autonomy so that it does not stand in opposition to community or affectivity. "Autonomy is not fulfilled in Hobbesian self-protectiveness, but in a 'kingdom of ends'; human dignity translates into equality, with respect inclusive of the self as well as others…."[17] It is a basic feature of every person and it demands that each person be treated as an end in herself, no less, but it does not mean each person is completely separate and independent from every other person. Farley goes on to say:

> If persons are to be valued as ends in themselves, there must be a way to avoid abstracting from their histories and their present needs. If relationships among persons are to incorporate respect, there must be a way to address otherness without devaluing whoever is the other.[18]

The way to avoid abstracting persons into some kind of ahistorical, non-affective philosophical concept and the way to address otherness in relationships without devaluing the other may indeed be to cultivate empathy. To empathize with another is already to recognize her as a self that is much more than a theoretical construct and acknowledge the value of the other's experience and the other as a self. Theoretical selves require only theory in response to their suffering; real selves require the activity, compassion, and understanding of fellow embodied, relational, and inter-dependent persons in response to their suffering. This kind of response requires a deep understanding of what we are up against as well as productive strategies for confronting it. The next section will address these issues.

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[16] ibid., 187-8.

[17] ibid., 188.

[18] ibid., 195.

CHAPTER 2: ANGER, POWER, AND PROTEST IN THE FACE OF "GENDER SUFFERING"

Despite the steps that feminist theology has made toward an anthropology that includes women fully and toward feminist Christian ways of being in the world that take women into account and work toward the flourishing of all life, the so-called mother of feminist theology, Valerie Saiving, had some troubling things to say about women. Saiving's 1960 article, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View" is foundational to much of feminist theology and is still often cited as a major work in the field and used to support theologies that empower women. Her argument that theologians had been using male experience as universalizable, generic experience in their conceptions of sin and anxiety without any regard to the differences between that experience and that of women was truly groundbreaking. It spurred many other theologians (feminist and otherwise) into finding ways to assert their own experience and knowledge that did not fit in with the "universal" (i.e. male) paradigm. However revolutionary Saiving's naming of women's sin may have been, her view of women themselves is far from novel.[19] In fact, it begins to sound like classic misogynists such as Aristotle who argued that women were merely defective men. She argues that female existence is defined by motherhood and that a woman's sexual and biological role is primarily passive. The defining processes of motherhood (including impregnation, lactation, and pregnancy), for example, "have a

[19] Saiving later admits to some substantial shifts in her thinking about women's nature and experience in a conversation with Mary Gerhart and the senior religious studies majors in her seminar at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. In this 1987 conversation, she says regarding female experience, "It may not be as I have described it here [in her article, "The Human Situation"]. I think some of the things that I say about male and female experience are certainly open to question" ("A Conversation with Valerie Saiving," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4, no. 2, 100). However, the discussion in which she questions her own earlier assertions about female experience is not nearly as widely known or cited as is her article, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View."

certain passivity about them; they are things which *happen* to a woman more than things that she *does*."[20] Further, the process of becoming for a male calls for "a greater degree of self-differentiation and self development than are required by the woman *as* woman."[21] In other words, women are merely being while men are constantly becoming and this distinction can be seen in the way that women are more closely bound to nature than are men.[22]

Valerie Saiving goes on to argue that women skip the steps of suffering necessary to the process of becoming because their natures are already determined biologically. A young girl, according to Saiving, learns "that she will attain womanhood quite naturally – merely by the maturation of her body…..And so the emphasis for the girl is upon the fact that she *is* a female and that all she needs to do to realize her full femininity is to wait."[23] In other words, the hard work is done biologically for women; they merely sit by passively and let nature take its course and then one day they are fully matured, integrated persons. Saiving characterizes the male process of becoming as much more of a struggle, an active process that is less biologically defined and therefore less clearly delineated.

Based on global statistics however, it is clear that young women suffer both because of and in spite of their "biological" destinies. According to a United Nations study on women from 2000, females account for more than half of all HIV/AIDS cases

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[20] Saiving, "Human Condition," 31.

[21] ibid., 32.

[22] ibid.

[23] ibid., 30.

and in countries with high rates of HIV/AIDS, young women were more likely than their male counterparts to contract the virus.[24] In fact, girls between 15 and 24 make up 76% of young people living with HIV.[25] Twenty million young women and girls undergo some form of female genital mutilation (cutting or removal of the clitoris and/or vaginal lips) worldwide each year.[26] Also according to the UN, some four million girls and women are trafficked annually and at least one in three women globally has been beaten or sexually abused in her lifetime.[27] In 2005, there were 191,670 victims of rape or sexual assault in the US alone, most of them women.[28]

Women do not escape suffering while waiting around for biology to take its course. Quite the opposite, actually; many women struggle against their biology in order to be more fully human in a given society. Men still disproportionately enjoy the benefits of health care, education, and employment in most of the world.[29] Globally, nearly 60% of some 130 million primary school-aged children not enrolled in school are girls and in some countries, as many as 50% of girls are married by age 18 and often much

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[24] United Nations Statistics Department, "The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics," United Nations, http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/indwm/wwpub2000.htm.

[25] Nan Cobbey, "Powerful Women: Anglican Delegation to Make Its Presence Felt at UN Commission," *Episcopal Life Online*, March 5, 2007, Features section, http://www.episcopalchurch.org/81834_69817_ENG_HTM.htm.

[26] ibid.

[27] United Nations, "Women."

[28] Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, "Statistics," RAINN, http://www.rainn.org/statistics/index.html.

[29] United Nations, "Women."

younger.[30] Marriage in this early stage of life increases a girl's chance of contracting HIV/AIDS, decreases her access to education, and child-bearing at a young age comes with its own increased chance of complications and even death. In fact, of 500,000 pregnancy-related deaths each year, nearly one quarter are teenage mothers.[31] Women and girls are not offered the same care and benefits because in many societies they are simply not seen to be worth as much. A Chinese woman, Wan Baoqi, interviewed by John Pomfret of the Washington Post in 2001, said having healthy male children was important because "we need someone to fetch water, to guard our orchard, to work in the fields and to care for us when we get old….My girl is going to be married out of the family. So why should we devote resources to her?"[32] In places where women and men receive roughly equal health care, nutrition, and social services, women have lower death rates and generally longer life spans. However, in most of Asia and North Africa, this is not the case. The proportion of women to men is skewed in these places because survival rates for women fall dramatically with the disproportionately inadequate treatment they receive.[33] It is here that women must struggle against biological determinism to prove that they are more than a sum of their biological parts, more than merely a producer of offspring.

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[30] Cobbey, "Powerful Women."

[31] ibid.

[32] John Pomfret, "In China's Countryside, 'It's a Boy!' Too Often," *Washington Post*, May 29, 2001, A1.

[33] Amartya Sen, "More Than 100 Million Women are Missing," *The New York Review of Books* 37, no. 2 (Dec. 1990): 61.

This struggle brings with it particular types of suffering. In his work, *Is God a White Racist?,* William R. Jones outlines criteria by which we can identify the suffering which is particular to certain ethnic groups, which he calls "ethnic suffering." Using these criteria and the suffering that fits it, he makes the claim that black theology cannot operate under the unquestioned assumption that God is good for all humankind. The suffering more particular to women's experience can also fit under the criteria he offers. In parallel with his term "ethnic suffering," it can be called "gender suffering." Four essential features which Jones uses to describe ethnic suffering can also be used to define gender suffering: 1) maldistribution, which is the concentration of suffering in a particular group, namely women in this case; 2) negative quality, which means that this suffering has no integrative value; 3) enormity, which refers to the number of suffering women in relation to the total number of women and the character of the suffering in that it reduces life expectancy or anticipates the immediate death of the individual; and 4) noncatastrophic character, which refers the transgenerational nature of this suffering.[34] Granted, there is no essential women's experience, but given the statistics above, much of women's suffering certainly fits these criteria – it is concentrated in female members of the population, has no integrative value, occurs in large proportions within the female population and is damaging to female life, and it is not historically isolated. Women must then follow Jones' example and look more critically at unexamined theological and anthropological axioms in order to make sense of their experience.

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[34] William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology*, (1973; reprint, Boston: Beacon, 1998), 362-3.

There is the suffering that can be productive and integrative, but there is also suffering that is actually inimical to the process of becoming a more integrated and whole person. Further, from the data above, it is clear that disintegrative suffering falls disproportionately on women and this imbalance has, until recently, been mostly ignored by Christian discussions of suffering. As Methodist theologian Douglas John Hall says, "it is the most rudimentary presupposition of our whole confessional tradition that the magnitude and the ubiquity of the suffering that we actually see about us in the world *should not be*!"[35] Christians must then begin to recognize the disproportionate burden of disintegrative suffering on particular groups as well as the more generalized disintegrative suffering in the world. In this work, the process of becoming a more integrated self can be useful; it can lead to self-knowledge, self-respect and self-love that engender active and compassionate responses to the disintegrative suffering in the world. We must remember that this suffering should not be because "the church is – *we* are – a vital part of God's response to human suffering."[36] God's love is fundamentally about identification and participation and so should ours be. The work of love that humans are called to do in God's name "does not merely resign itself to pain and walk on in silent, lonely nobility; rather, it *seeks out other sufferers*."[37]

Beverly Harrison, a feminist Christian theologian, constructs a three-pronged foundation to an ethic of seeking out other sufferers that centers on empowering sufferers and others to respond productively to the disintegrative suffering that Hall points out.

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[35] Hall, *Human Suffering*, 74.

[36] ibid., 121.

[37] ibid., 119.

The bases of her ethic are: 1) activity as an expression of love; 2) the importance of living as essentially embodied selves; and 3) the centrality of relationship. Harrison's approach to an ethics of response is that "*do-ing* must be as fundamental as *be-ing*…." [38] The story does not end with the process of being made in the image of God, it must continue with an emphasis on doing. Within every person there are vast unrealized resources of power for this work. "We have the power not only to create personal bonds between people but, more basically, to build up and deepen *personhood itself*….we have the power through acts of love or lovelessness literally to create one another."[39] We do not realize the depth of our own powers of co-creation – or our powers to negate life, for that matter – and so we do not realize our capacity to build community, to empathize, to be with others in their suffering and to do something about all this disintegrative suffering.

Anger is an essential component in this work of co-creation. According to Beverly Harrison, it is a necessary and sometimes beneficial feeling because it expresses something about ourselves, namely that we are relational beings. "Anger is a mode of connectedness to others" and when expressed directly, it is "a mode of taking the other seriously, of caring."[40] In empathizing with another person and recognizing a wrong done to her, the most appropriate, most loving response may in fact be anger because "where anger rises, there the energy to act is present."[41] In action empathy becomes more than just a concept and in action a response is made personal instead of theoretical.

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[38] Harrison, "Anger," 10.

[39] ibid., 11.

[40] ibid., 14-5.

[41] ibid., 14.

Anger not only takes the other seriously, it takes the self seriously as well. Feeling anger protests a wrong done and signals that "all is not well in our relation to other persons or groups or to the world around us," which recognizes that the self is worthy of a right relationship with the world and others.[42] Many people, Christians in particular, are afraid of strong feeling, especially negative feeling, because we misunderstand the role of feelings in relationships to others. Instead of embracing strong feeling and working to understand how to best use it, most people shy away from it or repress it.[43] But a truly responsive ethic of suffering must welcome feeling while recognizing that there are no "right" or "wrong" feelings because what matters is what we *do* with what we feel. In this ethic of responsiveness, *do-ing* is far more important than be-ing because do-ing is activity, an expression of the agency of integrated, embodied and empowered persons.

Anger and the energy it produces are not enough, however. A truly responsive ethic must also affirm a kind of power capable of changing current situations of suffering and injustice. Power is also a frightening concept because it has so often been misused and abused. In order for it to be a productive concept in a responsive ethic of suffering, it must be re-examined and better understood. To this end, Joan Chittister outlines five types of power: 1) exploitative power, in which the wielder uses her power against another for personal gain; 2) competitive power, in which power is used for the conquest or defeat of another; 3) manipulative power, in which indirect, subtle control is used to manage another; 4) nurturant power, in which power is used for the sake of developing and enabling the other; and 5) integrative power, characterized by mutual concern and

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[42] ibid.

[43] ibid.

cooperative activity as opposed to exploitative activity.[44] Exploitative, competitive, and manipulative power all have their problems. They can lead to a kind of us-them dichotomy that dehumanizes and devalues the other. Manipulative power in particular can create a distorted reality for the other in which her own powerlessness becomes much more difficult to see and therefore also much more difficult to change. An example of this dynamic is tokenism. In Chittister's words, "tokenism co-opts outsiders into the power structure in small numbers in order to look accepting of the total group, but without actually having to share power with them."[45] In this way, the oppressive reality of a group's powerlessness is disguised, hidden from view and therefore relatively safe from criticism and change. Nurturant power is a healthier kind of power, but still has its pitfalls, especially for women. The work of nurturing has traditionally been women's and if nurturing must include sacrifice of the self for the sake of the other, then women are more in danger of giving up their own needs and desires and/or taking on more suffering for the sake of someone else. This kind of power can become a one way exchange in which one person gives everything and gets little or nothing in return.

Integrative power, however, has more promise. Integrative power can "bring unlike needs into unity" and it can "create a whole new world where relationships are formed out of both need and gift and *no one is expected to lose.*"[46] In its use, no one element ever consumes or controls the other and it encourages all those involved to come

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[44] Joan Chittister, *Job's Daughters: Women and Power*, 1990 Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 12-51.

[45] ibid., 27.

[46] ibid., 41-2, emphasis added.

to know each other on a new level. "As long as we know what is good for the other, there is no reason to really get to know the other, or to listen to the other, or to learn from the other."[47] Integrative power forces us to give up the assumption that we know what is good for the other and asks us instead to learn what gifts and needs the other has and how these might be integrated with our own. It also forces us to work *with* each other as opposed to working *for* each other, as in the case of nurturant power. Similarly, nurturant power encourages persons to think about what can be *done for* someone suffering, but integrative power allows persons to simply *be with* others in compassionate relation. Giving up assumptions and coming to understand others as integrative power enables us to do also leads to a new level of knowing others that produces empathy and makes a compassionate response to their suffering possible. This integrative kind of power affirms our ability to make changes that are not at the expense of the other, but it depends on our ability to see all persons equally. Therefore, the work of knowing and learning to value others as more than theoretical selves must go hand in hand with it.

Finding a concept of power that is productive is essential to constructing an ethic of responsiveness because powerlessness doesn't allow for any change to be made. Kyle A. Pasewark, former professor of theology turned Yale law student, and Garrett E. Paul, professor of religion at Gustavus Adolphus College, explore the implications of assumed powerlessness as well as abusive uses of power in their book, *The Emphatic Christian Center: Reforming Christian Political Practice.* They argue for a kind of middle ground between powerlessness and domination saying, "It is true that mere weakness does not

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[47] ibid., 43-4.

dominate. But it also cannot bestow any life-sustaining and enriching power."[48] Sustaining life and participating in the work of co-creation requires the use of power. However, this power must not work against the goals of integration, nurturing the fullness of life, and engendering compassionate action. Empowerment might in fact be the key to turning empathy and righteous anger into productive and compassionate action. Indeed, Margaret Farley has argued that compassion:

> does not stand outside the suffering in handwringing sympathy. It does not peer down on the victim and demand a stoicism that denies the pain. It begins where the sufferer is, in the grief, the shame, the hopelessness.[49]

In other words, compassion begins with empathy and understanding, but it must also move beyond this into productive action.

Empowering persons to take this action is essential in an ethic of response. The Christian tradition often seems to work against this kind of empowerment. Classical theodicy asserts that God is the one with all the power; humans are merely at the mercy of an Almighty, an omnipotent and incomprehensible being whose mercy is often difficult to see and to whom we must defer. In Hall's words, classical theodicy asked the question, "Why? If 'He' *can*, why doesn't 'He'?" As Hall points out, however, this question might be missing the point. The questions Christians ask about suffering should focus instead on two basic affirmations of the Judeo-Christian tradition: 1) "suffering is real and is the existential lot of 'fallen' humanity;" and 2) "suffering is not the last word

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[48] Kyle A. Pasewark and Garrett E. Paul, "Where Shall We Go? Who Shall We Be?" *The Emphatic Christian Center: Reforming Christian Political Practice* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 149.

[49] Margaret Farley, *Tragic Vision,* 81, quoted in Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 267.

about the human condition."[50] In other words, Christian theodicy is not about protecting God or even understanding God, but about struggling to live in the tensions inherent in the process of becoming and in a tradition that speaks from and to this experience. In affirming the fact that while suffering is undeniably real, it is not the last word in our existence, Hall's approach to theodicy allows space for human agency. In this kind of understanding of God and God's relation to the world, humans are allowed the power to work with God in making changes in the world as opposed to more classical models in which only God held any real power.

The Christian tradition is not without examples of human agency. In fact, there are several examples of persons who use the little power they have to act in compassion and protest against a wrong, who grapple with the affirmation that suffering is not the last word. In Mark 7, for example, a Gentile woman approaches Jesus on his travels of healing and ministering and asks him to cast a demon out of her young daughter. Jesus at first refuses, saying, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (7:27, NRSV). Jesus here sounds not like the compassionate Jesus we know – he compares Gentiles to dogs saying they only deserve the scraps that the children of Israel don't eat. But the woman gets angry; she protests this unfairness and says to Jesus, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (7:28). Jesus then tells her she may go and that her daughter is healed and indeed when she arrives at home, the demon has left her daughter (7:29-30). This woman, an outsider because of her religion and because of her sex, has very little power compared to this worker of miracles, Jesus, but she still knows when a wrong has been

[50] ibid., 19.

done. Compassion for her daughter and righteous anger lead her to protest where others might have remained silent and simply borne the injustice. The same story is repeated in Matt. 15:21-28, but this time the exchange takes place in a public place full of Jesus' followers and Jesus ignores the woman when she first approaches him. However, the end result is the same – the woman protests and Jesus sends her home to her daughter, now healed.

The book of Job can also serve as an example of righteous anger that leads to productive protest in the face of undeserved suffering. Job, an innocent and an outsider because he is also a Gentile, confronts the system from the reality of unimaginable and undeserved pain.[51] Job's friends tell him all the usual things – his suffering is God's will, he deserves it somehow and it will be his salvation so he should be glad for it, his suffering is God's punishment. They tell Job that he should not be questioning his situation or protesting, but Job is angry and will not stand by and accept this suffering because he knows it is undeserved. Job loses everything in the suffering inflicted on him, but he loses even more in protesting because whatever social standing or respect he had with others disappears as well. In Job 12:4 he laments, "I am a laughingstock to my friends; I, who called upon God and he answered me, a just and blameless man, I am a laughingstock" (NRSV). In the end, it is Job's superficially pious friends who are proven guilty. In Job 42:7, God says to one of Job's friends, "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has." Job's own transformation and ultimate salvation lies in distinguishing between evil done falsely in the name of God and God's own work; it lies in using what little

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[51] Chittister, *Job's Daughters*, 2.

power he has to its utmost advantage.[52] In other words, Job's salvation lies in a sense of self-respect and a level of self-knowledge that allow him to protest, to get angry when a wrong has been done. Job's salvation lies in the power of protest and action and in the end, he is rewarded by God. God not only restores his fortunes twice over, but all of Job's friends and family who had forsaken him come back to him, have a meal, and offer him their sympathy and comfort. Job gains back his material fortune as well as a supportive, compassionate community and is blessed by God to the end of his days (Job 42:10-17).

This ability to see and protest a wrong done to oneself is essential to building an ethic of responsiveness; it is also a natural outcome of the process of becoming through integrative suffering or soul-making. To have this ability, to have gone through the process of becoming, might also serve as a kind of training for learning to wield the power necessary to protest wrongs done to others with whom we should be in empathetic relationship. Elizabeth Johnson says, "The violation of human beings is an outrage" and the anger produced by such violation is "not anger with spirit of murder in it, but fury that is creative of life."[53] This kind of anger speaks of connectedness and our great powers in the co-creation of persons and community. To be familiar with creative fury and to utilize it in calling for justice on one's own behalf can in itself be an empowering act. It may be just the kind of act to empower a person to carry out courageous and compassionate action on behalf of another. As Elizabeth Johnson points out, "one of the key ingredients in the maintenance of systems of oppression is inculcating a feeling of

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[52] ibid., 5.

[53] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 257-8.

helplessness in those oppressed" and further, "one of the first steps toward freedom occurs when, usually through the dynamics of a questioning, supportive community, oppressed people awaken to their own dignity and worth and begin to exercise their own power."[54] Empowerment, then, comes not only from the process of integration specific to each individual, but from the experience of understanding and compassionate communal action as well.

CHAPTER 3: FEMINIST-CHRISTIAN SYNTHESIS AND ACTION

To construct an ethic of responsiveness to suffering that addresses the particular kinds of gender suffering to which women are more prone, we can look to feminist theory for productive concepts of anger and power. We can look to the Christian tradition for authentically Christian ways in which these might be implemented. The Christian tradition can also offer some correctives to inadequate positions or analyses proposed by feminist theory. The Christian tradition affirms the good that can come of some kinds of suffering and embraces the struggle toward becoming perfected in the image of God. It affirms the truth that persons are never perfect, that we are never merely being, but always becoming. There is no sense of false innocence or infallibility about people in this tradition. Secular feminist theory reminds us that women, too, are struggling to become and that their experience is more prone to some types of suffering that are actually disintegrative and damaging, that inhibit the process of becoming. The Christian tradition and feminist theory both recognize the importance of being in community and solidarity with others, especially those who are suffering. Feminist theology in particular

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[54] ibid., 253.

affirms our great capacity for nurturing such community. This union between feminism and Christian theology is not always an easy one, but the combination is potent in constructing an ethic of response to the great suffering in the world that remains inadequately addressed by culture in general and by Christians in particular.

This ethic must be unflinching in its confrontation with God, with suffering, and especially with others. Some feminist theology has tried to remedy the problems of the world by attempting to understand the concept of God in a different way. Feminists have constructed all kinds of God-concepts that speak of God as a Goddess, a mother, or a healer. While these may be helpful in some respects and while they are a step away from some other harmful concepts of God, they do not solve the problem. They only perpetuate a different problem. As Catherine Madsen says, merely projecting the "good" or familiar virtues (feminine or otherwise) onto a Goddess figure only reinforces a kind of dependency on God/dess that is actually just "a kind of insurance that one's God will never get out of hand, never appear unbearably different from oneself. It can be a kind of evasion of one's own authority."[55] If an ethic of response to suffering is to be any good, it must not evade taking up authority and agency in any way. It must face head-on the reality that "if we are made in the divine image, *that* is what we are up against: the inseparability of good and evil."[56] The ways in which we talk and think about God must not avoid questions and they must be open to novel possibilities. They must allow us to live in the paradox of a God worthy of respect and a world where there is a great amount of unnecessary pain and suffering.

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[55] Catherine Madsen, "Roundtable Discussion: If God is God She is Not Nice," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, no. 1-2 (1989): 104.

[56] ibid.

The Christian tradition offers a kind of moral realism not just about God, but about ourselves as well. If women and other outsiders are finally empowered and able to take up their agency and protest, will their use of power be any different than the uses of those before them? Not necessarily. There is nothing about women or other outsiders that make them less likely to misuse and abuse power once they have it in their grasp. In fact, many academic (and in particular, white) feminists are criticized for relying on theory to escape the real dirty work of fighting tooth and nail against injustice. Further, as womanist theologian Delores Williams notes, although "this escape into theory has provided some intellectual autonomy through which white women can exert a measure of power and control over 'how things mean' in the discourse of academic circles," it actually "has primarily served to perpetuate white supremacy in the academy."[57] Clearly, women are not immune to misusing the power they are able to acquire. Women in the academy have certainly had a hand in perpetuating certain ideals and epistemologies that devalue the experience of all kinds of other outsiders, including other women. The Christian tradition, however, plays no favorites. It is realistic about the fact that all persons are capable of sin and evil; it does not suggest that women are any more saintly than men. This moral realism can offer a corrective to those who would claim that women's use of power would be somehow better than that of the men who have held it for so long.

Finally, a responsive Christian ethic of suffering must confront suffering itself in a way that makes no allowances for turning away or lowering our eyes. The eight

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[57] Delores S. Williams, "Womanist/Feminist Dialogue: Problems and Possibilities," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9, no. 1-2 (Spring/Fall 1993): 69.

women who in part inspired Patricia Wismer – suffering abuse, alcoholism, cancer, deaths of their children, amnesia, anger, grief, physical disability, and the simple incomprehensibility of pain – along with women all over the world who suffer the deaths of their daughters because they simply cannot afford to raise them, who have HIV/AIDS and little or no access to the medicines that would give them some quality and length of life, and those who are raped or assaulted and whose attackers go free: we must look these women in the eye. We must come face to face with them as fellow humans deserving of dignity, respect, and compassion and we must not allow geographic, social, or ethnic distance to make us forget our fundamental relation to them as persons made in the image of God. Their suffering cannot be ignored or put in a box marked "unclassifiable." It too must be addressed. A responsive ethic of suffering must not fail to address the myriad kinds of suffering that are in the world, especially the kinds that are disintegrative and often systemic.

In response, theory is not enough. Only theoretical selves benefit from even the best theory if it is left as just a theory. Delores Williams resented white academics who came to study the poor black neighborhood where she grew up. The academics came, interviewed people for money, left, and produced a "theory." Then, "since black people could not attend the white university, there was no way to validate or disclaim the researchers' theories…." Williams' resentment went further:

> I resented the theory-makers because they never did anything about the poverty and suffering they witnessed. They merely composed theories. The people whose lives provided the fodder for the theory were made invisible. *Theory took the place of people*.[58]

[58] ibid., 68, emphasis added.

Theory cannot be allowed to take the place of people or of action. Theory is only a beginning; it must lead to praxis if it is to be truly useful. In fact, theory should challenge us, compel us even, to act, to start do-ing. It should challenge us never to minimize suffering and never to accept suffering that should not be, whether it is our own or another's. It should challenge us to take up the power we possess, to get angry, and to use this power productively in co-creating a more just world, in bringing the world closer to its ultimate expression in God's image.

Feminist theology is especially fit for the task of turning away from theory and toward people and action because it is defined in part by its origin on the margins. Those who are usually on the margins of society are those who need, and often fail to get, compassionate action and empathy. They are often simply forgotten about. Feminist theology itself comes from the margins and can therefore meet those who are marginalized where they are, in their pain, anguish, shame, and perceived (and sometimes real) helplessness. It is exactly our experience of the margins that helps us develop "a deep-seated compassion toward others who find themselves as less than full participants in the church and in society," as Claire Bischoff testifies in her essay on living in the tensions of being a Roman Catholic feminist.[59] Feminist theology, rooted strongly in the Christian tradition, also offers a unique ability to live *in* these tensions and those inherent in Christian doctrine and praxis – tensions between anger and hope, suffering and growing, already and not yet, protest and worship, dignity and sinfulness, strength and the scars of humiliation, shame, and pain, a God worthy of respect and a world of

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[59] Claire Bischoff, "The Tensegritous Experience of a Roman Catholic Feminist," *My Red Couch and Other Stories Seeking a Feminist Faith,* edited by Claire Bischoff and Rachel Gaffron (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 170.

unimaginable and often undeserved suffering. Further, living in the margins allows one a unique experience of these kinds of tensions. The seeming contradictions between the concept of a God who is worthy of respect and the simple fact of so much undeserved suffering in this world is an inescapable and daily reality to many of those living on the margins, as are many other paradoxes that theorizers and theologians can forget about in favor of discussing other more "relevant" or "pressing" issues. On the margins, these paradoxes are the relevant, pressing issues and they cannot be forgotten about.

So, a specifically feminist-Christian stance offers a powerful kind of ethic that grows out of experience in the margins and is capable of living in tension. It does not allow itself to be weakened by unresolved tensions, but rather is stronger because it has not constructed an easy solution or ignored reality in favor of false comfort. Tensegrity, a term originally coined by architect Buckminster Fuller, describes this strength perfectly. Tensegrity is literally "the integrity of tension when, ironically, the competing forces of a structure make it stronger."[60] A tensegritous feminist-Christian ethic, then, must also embrace the fact that becoming, or soul-making, involves some suffering and that in fact, this process (not the suffering in particular, but the process that includes it) helps persons grow toward a fuller expression of self and teaches persons how to respond to and deal with their own suffering. This in turn helps persons to grow toward a kind of communal consciousness in which the other becomes less other and more a certain kind of loved one; empathy becomes a bridge to span the distance between the self and other. When we realize that the other's condition is essentially our own as well, and when we realize

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[60] Claire Bischoff and Rachel Gaffron, eds., *My Red Couch and Other Stories on Seeking a Feminist Faith* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press), 164.

that we have the power in our hands not only to survive our own suffering, but to alleviate that of someone else, we reach a turning point.

The second turning point is when these realizations become action, through anger and protest motivated by compassion. Two kinds of action can be manifested: action to eliminate disintegrative suffering and the compassionate action of truly being with another even in the suffering that cannot be eliminated. Action must also go beyond "help." "Help" is rooted in nurturant ideals of power in which persons do things *for* one another instead of working *with* one another and "help" does not alleviate suffering on any more than a superficial level. Action should therefore be motivated by radical compassion that compels us to make use of what resources we have in order to lessen or get rid of what suffering we can and, further, should be predicated on continual analysis of unjust systems. In fact, to protest against such systems and aim our action at dismantling them when and where necessary is part of our Christian duty in this ethic of responsiveness.

The unflinching declaration of our responsibility with and for others in working to alleviate suffering in this world given by this ethic of responsiveness is the bridge between the first turning point of realization and the second, of action. It doesn't allow us to stop with realization; our realization makes action necessary because otherwise we are no more than hypocrites. Just as Jesus was compelled to act upon his knowledge of injustice in Mark 7, any follower of Jesus, any Christian, must do the same. Further, 1 John 4:20 says, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or a sister whom they have seen, cannot love a God whom they have not seen" (NRSV). The Christian tradition demands that we seek out

others and respond to them always with love because a love of God without loving those around us is empty. In Matthew 25:31-46, the Son of Man separates the righteous from the unrighteous at the end of days. He says to the righteous, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you…for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me…" (Matt. 25:34-5, NRSV). Confused, the righteous ask him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?" (Matt. 25:37). In Matt. 25:40, the Lord answers them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Those who did not do these things are sent away to eternal punishment (Matt. 25:46). Love for God is nothing without its expression in the world toward "the least of these" who are, according to Scripture, our brothers and sisters. The practice of love requires that we act upon the realization of others' suffering and the tradition that Christians have inherited demands the practice of love, and therefore, it also demands action.

These actions, however, must be guided by a kind of power that effects change without resulting in domination and exploitation. Integrative power, with its emphasis on mutuality, can be this guide. Its emphasis is on the power of individual agency within a particular kind of community instead of either domination or self-abnegation. Margaret Farley makes the distinction that in a mutually supportive, compassionate community in which all members regard each other as fully human and worthy of respect, we can give up all that we *have* for the sake of the other, but we cannot give up all that we *are*.[61] Otherwise, we risk the sin of self-abnegation that Valerie Saiving, despite her essentialist

[61] Margaret Farley, *Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing.* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986), 106.

view of female nature, rightly named nearly fifty years ago. Empowerment must not be about domination which exploits, abuses, and suppresses personhood. Instead, empowerment must focus on reviving a sense of agency, efficacy, and hope in the face of helpless paralysis, often overwhelming pain, and systemic injustice that is particularly hard to undo. It must also emphasize the power of protest in the tradition of Job and the unnamed woman in the Gospels, as well as the powerful resources a *community* of people can put to use – resources of life-affirming love manifested in actions of anger, solidarity, and empathy. Transformation and the alleviation of suffering comes "not through power, but through participation" and this is by definition a communal response, not merely a theoretical, or even personal, response.[62] Empowerment must affirm the power inherent in our God-given role as stewards of creation. This role necessarily includes responding to suffering and eliminating it where possible. In Hall's words, the community of believers is an essential component of God's response to massive suffering in the world:

> In and through the church, visible and invisible, God provides in this world a representative – a priestly – people, a people learning to suffer the becoming of the creature, learning sufficient freedom from self-concern, that they may assume in concrete ways the concerns of their neighbors, their society, their world.[63]

If actively responding to suffering out of empathy and love is a Christian duty, as 1 John 4 says, then in ignoring the suffering of others, in failing to take action, in being satisfied with theories, and in uncritically accepting the systems that perpetuate disintegrative suffering, we are just as guilty as if we committed any other sin. Possibly even more important, we are hypocrites if we claim to be Christians, but do not endeavor to carry out this duty given to us by the tradition we claim to be a part of.

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[62] Hall, *Human Suffering*, 113.

[63] ibid., 141.

This active, compassionate response can be manifested in many ways. It may be guided, as Wismer's is, by a dialectic maintained between two opposing poles – the protest against suffering that comes from righteous indignation and the quiet acceptance of suffering that comes from understanding its necessary place in the flow of life. The constant dialogue between these two poles keeps the response dynamic; it allows for, and even demands, constant revisitation and revision. At times, silence and the simplicity of presence can be enough. In the words of Melanie May, "presence heals hopelessness."[64] Being with someone in her suffering has great, often unrealized, power in alleviating what may seem to be insurmountable or overwhelming when faced alone. At times, suffering calls for verbal defiance, breaking the silence, and protest. Acts of defiance and protest, motivated by righteous anger, might be the only way for a sufferer to begin to feel powerful instead of powerless in the face of suffering.[65] Acts of defiance and protest on the part of others in solidarity with a sufferer facing insurmountable odds can also give strength and hope to the sufferer that she can rely on others to fight alongside her. Especially in situations where sufferers have been forced into silence, the act of breaking the silence, of expressing anguish and pain, can be an extremely powerful one. "Moreover," as Rankka points out, "when the sufferer herself is unable to communicate or protest, then, the community around her might take over and, in the manner of a Greek chorus, both express her pain and seek meaning with/for her."[66] These acts of empowerment and resistance are essential for the sufferer to move from defining herself

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[64] Melanie May, quoted in Rankka, *Women*, 216.

[65] Rankka, *Women*, 215.

[66] ibid., 214.

as "victim" to regaining a full sense of self as integrated, whole, and powerful. Radical suffering no longer holds the power to debilitate a person once she has taken hold of her self-respect and power and refused to let herself remain defined as merely a "victim."[67] Having survived lends to the sufferer the power to co-create a new, stronger identity for herself with God and her community.

There is also a time for surrender in the face of unmanageable pain, but not surrender in its typical sense. In Rankka's view, a person:

> does not resign, extinguish, or abandon oneself in the face of severe suffering, but more, yields (or sacrifices) to God her suffering as well as her protest. This is more a passing over to God the suffering that seeks to take away one's dignity, freedom, hope, and compassion for self and others.[68]

Further, "this yielding allows one to move from sole dependence on rational approaches to suffering and allows for unexpected, even paradoxical, alternatives to surface…."[69] The sufferer must surrender to the incomprehensibility of pain at times and allow herself to be carried through it with the compassion of her community and of God. According to Rankka, we are not necessarily called to merely endure suffering, "but, more often, are called, in our faith, to allow God to bear us through the suffering by being present with us."[70] To Rankka, I would add that not only are we called to allow God to bear us through suffering through God's presence, but we are called to bear each other through suffering by being present with each other. Not only this, but we are called to allow others to bear us through our own suffering by their presence as well. There is truly

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[67] ibid.

[68] ibid., 218.

[69] ibid., 219-20.

[70] ibid., 224.

strength in numbers when persons stand together in compassionate solidarity with one another.

Christian faith gives us hope that this work is not in vain. John 10:10 says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (NRSV). In other words, the figure of Jesus came to show us how to give and receive abundant life. By example, he showed us how to steward life by standing in solidarity with marginalized sufferers and by taking action on their behalf. The Christian tradition shows us how to live an abundant life, in spite of the suffering we experience. It shows us that there is great hope for triumph over pain, for the possibility that solidarity and compassion will ease at least some suffering, for humans to affect positive change, and for persons to form empathetic communities that cross all kinds of boundaries and leave no one to suffer alone. It manages somehow to hold this hope in tension with the grave reality of suffering and the moral realism that recognizes that the life to which humans are called is "not being but becoming; not rest but training."[71] In this way, it holds the great possibilities for human dignity and triumph in tension with the possibilities for failure and pain. Persons are not yet perfect, but that does not negate the possibilities for powerful and productive action on their part that stewards abundant life for every person. All the while the Christian faith also assures us that in moments where such possibilities seem far away, we are not alone in our failure and pain.

There are examples of people living out an ethic of responsiveness, holding hope and failure in tension successfully, allowing themselves to rely upon compassionate

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[71] Martin Luther, *Weimarer Ausgabe,* vol. 7, trans. E. Furcha, 337, quoted in Hall, *Human Suffering*, 80.

community and God, and simultaneously asserting themselves as powerful agents of love able to affect change. Dorothy Day is one such example. About her work with the Catholic Worker movement she said, "We are sowing the seeds of love, and we are not living in the harvest time."[72] Day accepted the fact that she would probably not see the results of much of her work on a large scale, but for her it was not an excuse from her responsibility to others. She also did not let it diminish her hope that she was in fact affecting positive and lasting change. She took the command to practice love seriously, loving "the least of these" just as if they were her brothers and sisters. Day would not be deterred by the seeming foolishness of loving even those who seemed unlovable or of loving without any tangible success. In fact, she said, "We must love to the point of folly, and we are indeed fools, as Our Lord Himself was who died for such a one as this."[73] She realized that Elizabeth of Hungary, who actually saw the face of the leper she was tending turn to the face of Christ, was a special case. She knew her own experience would be more like that of Peter Claver who "never saw anything with his bodily eyes expect the exhausted black faces of the Negroes" and who nevertheless continued the practice of love as if each face *were* that of Christ or a dearly loved family member.[74]

Day saw her Christian duty as being a witness to the eternal. Quoting Father Henri de Lubac, she said it was not Christianity's duty to be concerned with forming

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[72] Dorothy Day, *By Little and By Little*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 99.

[73] ibid.

[74] ibid., 95.

leaders whose focus was on temporal accomplishments. Instead, "Christianity must generate saints – that is, witnesses to the eternal."[75] Saints are different because, unlike a secular leader, "the saint does not have to bring about great temporal achievements; he is one who succeeds in giving us at least a glimpse of eternity despite the thick opacity of time."[76] The success of Christians then, would not necessarily be seen in temporal, worldly terms. Day firmly believed that we are all called to be saints and therefore our work was measured more by its accordance with the commandments to love even the least of these than by any visible progress in the world. So, she let all her work be guided by the resolution that "while our brothers suffer, we must suffer with them" and continued living with the poor, doing what she could to alleviate their suffering, and suffering right along with them.[77]

Just as Day felt herself called to be a witness to the eternal by loving every person as a brother or sister, all Christians are called to do the same. Living out an ethic of responsiveness that compels us to enter into compassionate relationship with others, despite whatever boundaries there are, and taking action on their behalf when they are suffering is all part of witnessing the eternal. It is our vocation as Christians, as members of the church, and as fellow human beings to seek out sufferers where they are, meet them in their pain, stand with them in solidarity, and offer them whatever we can to carry them through their suffering even if it is only our silent presence.

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[75] Father Henri de Lubac, quoted in Day, *Little*, 102.

[76] ibid.

[77] Day, *Little*, 229.

CONCLUSION

The Christian tradition offers us hope that seeking out other sufferers is not a worthless enterprise, and it assures us that God is doing this work with us. It also affirms the reality of suffering and the reality that humans are capable of failure and mistakes. Neither of these things is reason for evading the confrontation with suffering, however. So why is it that so many previous Christian approaches to suffering have failed to alleviate it or to engender a sense of efficacy and responsibility in people? In most previous Christian approaches to theodicy or suffering, the data of women's experience has been mostly ignored, as has the importance of human agency. Instead, a universal "man" stands as the icon of all persons and no one actually mentions much about human power because God is the only one that exercises any real power in most of these models. What comes out of these models is sorely inadequate in addressing the realities of suffering in the world. There is a failure to recognize and accept that women's suffering is, in some general ways, different than that of men because certain kinds of suffering fall disproportionately on them. When the realities of suffering are ignored, it cannot possibly be adequately addressed. Further, there is a failure to realize that humans can and do have great impact on the world and each other. In the ways we have been given to confront the suffering of others, we are mostly left incapacitated and unable to grasp its enormity or reality. So, some of us can sit idly by on top of great resources of creative power (not to mention time, money, social capital, etc.) and feel relatively unperturbed by the suffering going on all around us. Some others can realize the enormity of suffering that is going on all around, but feel completely incapacitated by helplessness. Somehow the Christian tradition has failed to successfully motivate persons to overcome these

obstacles or to formulate new ways of confronting suffering that affirm the efficacy of human agency and take into account the varying experiences of all people.

These failures may be attributed in part to the fact that tradition has the tendency to become stagnant, to dissolve into theory without the necessary accompaniment of action. When this happens, tradition and the theories it supports become walls between persons and the world. They insulate persons from what is really going on and cut off the possibility for responsiveness because there is little real dialogue between theories and persons. Theories take persons to be philosophical constructs, disconnected from the histories and daily realities that actually make them persons. What happens when the Christian tradition is held in tension with feminist theory? The tensions inherent in the union keep the relationship, the tradition, from becoming static. To hold the tensegrity of this relationship, a continual process of renegotiation and re-examination must take place. This dialogue keeps the Christian tradition from surrendering to stasis and produces an ethic of responsiveness to suffering that takes into account the realities of persons and of suffering. This ethic is more than a suggestion, however; it should compel us to start *do-ing*. Failing to address the suffering of others is not an option because the Christian tradition demands that we do so. In the union of the Christian tradition and feminist theory, the resources we possess to do such work become clear and a sense of human agency and efficacy is revived. We, as Christians and as humans, no longer have any excuse for failing to confront the great amount of suffering in this world that simply should not be.

WORKS CITED

Bischoff, Claire and Rachel Gaffron, eds. *My Red Couch and Other Stories on Seeking a Feminist Faith.* Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005.

This collection of essays from 24 women and one man illustrates the variety of experiences of religious people struggling to reconcile feminism with Christian faith, both of which are manifested in various forms in the narratives. The last section in particular, which deals with "tensegrity," was compelling and helpful. The group of essays in this chapter addresses the struggles of holding the forces of feminism, justice, and faith(s) in tension and coming to a stronger understanding of each because of it.

Chittister, Joan. *Job's Daughters: Women and Power.* 1990 Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality. New York: Paulist Press, 1990.

Chittister's lecture offers a taxonomy of power giving five types: 1) exploitative; 2) competitive; 3) manipulative; 4) nurturant; and 5) integrative. She explores each of these in turn, applying each to the situation of women. She uses Job throughout as an example of an outsider confronting an unjust system from a place of unimaginable pain, calling women to learn from his story.

Cobbey, Nan. "Powerful Women: Anglican Delegation to Make Its Presence Felt at UN Commission." *Episcopal Life Online*, March 5, 2007, Features section, http://www.episcopalchurch.org/81834_69817_ENG_HTM.htm.

Cobbey's article describes how a large delegation of Anglican women from all over the world are planning to converge on the UN commission gathering with its focus on eliminating sex-based discrimination globally. The women plan to come together to share resources and knowledge, make plans, and then return home to advocate for changes in their home governments, empowered and emboldened by the shared knowledge and experience. To illustrate the need for such action, Cobbey also provides a short list of disturbing statistics about the situation of girls and women around the world.

Day, Dorothy. *By Little and By Little.* Edited by Robert Ellsberg. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.

This selection of mostly autobiographical writings from Dorothy Day offers insight into her motivations and joys in her work with the Catholic Worker movement. The writings are dated and show the evolution of the movement and of Day's involvement in it in an intimate way. This collection is especially helpful for understanding Day's frustrations with her work as well as what kept her doing it.

Farley, Margaret. "A Feminist Version of Respect for Persons." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9, no. 1 (1993): 183-98.

Farley's excellent article centers on the project of defining particular features of persons that make them worthy of respect. She uses Kant's concept of respect for

persons as ends in themselves and Sartre's concept of consciousness and relationality to develop two "obligating features" of persons: autonomy and relationality. Autonomy, as she uses it, is not Kant's autonomy, but is based heavily in his thought and relationality, based in Sartre's, is also given a new twist. The two are then combined to call for a more responsible ethic of respect *and* nurture/care from and for feminists.

_____. *Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing.* San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986.

Farley's book explores the ethics of personal commitment using human experience as an important basis for her analysis. She includes literary figures and various case studies to illustrate the experiences of those grappling with personal commitments. She argues that in order to make morally sound decisions, persons must take into account not only their own experience, but must take into account the "concrete reality of persons" other than themselves.

Hall, Douglas John. *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross.* Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986.

This source, critiquing what Hall sees as a North American inability to truly suffer, also offers an interesting approach to theodicy that emphasizes human freedom and divine love. Hall also makes an important distinction between integrative and disintegrative suffering and calls for a more thorough human response to disintegrative suffering in the world.

Harrison, Beverly. "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics for Women and Other Strangers." *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, edited by Carol S. Robb, 2-21. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985.

Harrison's approach to constructing a feminist ethic that includes action, an emphasis on the self as embodied, and on the centrality of relationship, is a very helpful one. Her writing is clear and accessible and her claim that anger can be an essentially loving action is compelling and helpful for readers who are looking for an ethic that inspires activity instead of merely theorizing or looking for understanding.

Hick, John. "The Starting-Point." *Evil and the God of Love,* 279-297. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.

Hick, working from Irenaeus, posits that "the fall" as it is traditionally conceived could not have happened and argues that God's work was not creating perfected beings who then fell, but creating a world in which the beings God created might grow toward perfection. Given his conception of the human-divine relationship and the divine purpose in creating, Hick argues that a more productive theodicy must find meaning in the suffering which is part of the process of perfecting souls, but also look toward the completeness to which it leads.

Johnson, Elizabeth. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse.* New York: Crossroad, 1994.

Johnson's exploration of naming God with female metaphors explores myriad theological issues that come with such naming. In particular, her last chapter "Suffering

God: Compassion Poured Out" explores how some female metaphors for God and some versions of female experience in the world might actually illuminate the role of God (and of humans themselves) in alleviating and responding to suffering.

Jones, William R. *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology.* Boston: Beacon, 1998.

Jones ponders the question of God's potential racism without condemning God as a racist. He outlines categories for identifying the particular kinds of suffering to which certain groups are subject calling them "ethnic suffering." He affirms that black theology in particular, because black people have so consistently been victims of ethnic suffering, cannot operate under the assumption that God is good for all humans; this point must be questioned in order for black theology to make any sense or any progress.

Madsen, Catherine, et al. "Roundtable Discussion: If God is God She is Not Nice." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, no. 1-2 (1989): 103-17.

A lively roundtable discussion about God/dess talk and how to hold on to any kind of concept of the divine in the face of undeserved and unimaginable suffering and injustice, this source offers novel approaches to understanding God. In particular, Madsen's contribution criticizes certain kinds of God-talk that simply avoid the real issues at hand – the inescapability of evil and human responsibility.

Pasewark, Kyle A. and Garrett E. Paul. "Where Shall We Go? Who Shall We Be?" *The Emphatic Christian Center: Reforming Christian Political Practice*, 109-50. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999.

Pasewark and Paul set out to formulate a new Christian politics, one that is not afraid to wield power, but one that also knows how to use power well. They look for a balance between domination and sentimental weakness using the concepts of sin, divine love, and power. The concept of power as a gift and the importance of realizing our interdependence on each other and the divine are especially helpful.

Pomfret, John. "In China's Countryside, 'It's a Boy!' Too Often." *Washington Post*, May 29, 2001, A1.

Pomfret, exploring the disproportionate numbers of male children born in China in recent years, points a finger at China's strictly regulated birth policies and its cultural climate. He blames increased sex-selective abortions, thanks to the advent of ultrasound machines that allow parents to know the sex of their unborn child, for some of this imbalance. He also interviews locals about the social need for a healthy male son to survive, especially in rural areas, where resources are particularly scarce.

Rankka, Kristine M. *Women and the Value of Suffering: An Aw(e)ful Rowing Toward God.* Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998.

Rankka's excellently researched book provides a clear, concise summary of many theological approaches to the problem of evil and suffering. Her method of comparing "traditional" approaches with more contemporary feminist and womanist approaches helps to make clear the priorities of current feminist scholarship in this area. In her own

construction of an approach to suffering, Rankka uses her sources well and makes some helpful steps forward from the previous approaches she cites.

Saiving, Valerie. "The Human Situation: A Feminine View." *WomanSpirit Rising – A Feminist Reader in Religion*, eds., Christ & Plaskow, 25-42. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.

Saiving's article is foundational to feminist theology and is cited in much of the other work used for this project. Saiving's argument that traditional theology has forgotten women's experience in its equation of sin with pride is still salient and the view of her historical moment that is provided by reading the whole article directly instead of in pieces from a secondary source is helpful.

Sen, Amartya. "More Than 100 Million Women are Missing." *The New York Review of Books* 37, no. 2 (Dec. 1990): 61-7.

Sen, an economist, brings together global data on health care, mortality, life span, employment, and male to female ratios to argue that over 100 million women are "missing" worldwide due to injustices in health care, nutrition, employment, and the general devaluation of women's work and contributions. He points out that while women generally enjoy longer life spans and lower death rates if given equal treatment, in some parts of the world there is a mysterious imbalance between men and women that greatly favors men. The problem is not as simple as cultural contrasts or economic development, but is a complex issue involving both of these factors among others.

Williams, Delores S. "Womanist/Feminist Dialogue: Problems and Possibilites." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9, no. 1-2 (Spring/Fall 1993): 67-73.

Williams cites three major obstacles in establishing dialogue between womanists and feminists: theory, argument, and privilege. She criticizes white feminists for escaping into theory, adopting the dominant conception of "argument" too easily and using it to readily, and for not thinking seriously about the realities behind such words as "privilege" that are used almost as euphemisms for something much less academic and less pleasant sounding. She ends with suggestions of possibilities for cooperative work of resistance despite these obstacles.

Wismer, Patricia L. "For Women in Pain." *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, edited by Anna O'Hara-Graff, 138-57. Orbis: Maryknoll, NY, 1995.

Wismer's piece begins with biographical sketches of eight real women. She outlines some traditional responses to suffering from the Christian tradition and why these responses have not been adequate. She then outlines two feminist responses to suffering – the "never again" and the "web of life" responses – and shows why each on its own is still inadequate. In the end, she calls for a more responsive ethic of suffering that asks questions to eliminate whatever suffering possible and honestly confront and process all suffering. Her grounding in real experience with real suffering women makes her piece particularly enlightening.