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Suffering and the Search for Wholeness: Beauty and the Cross in Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Contemporary Feminist Theologies

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SUFFERING AND THE SEARCH FOR WHOLENESS:
BEAUTY AND THE CROSS IN HANS URS VON BALTHASAR AND
CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST THEOLOGIES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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BY

ELISABETH T. VASKO

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Dedicated to the Women of Success

in Kenya
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ABSTRACT

The tension between the beauty of the cross and the violence of the crucifixion creates a dissonance within Christian theology. In terms of atonement theologies, this dissonance has been interpreted through the development of a converted sense of beauty in which the ugliness of the crucifixion of Christ, as perceived and interpreted by the believer in the context of faith, expands Christian aesthetics. One of the more prominent examples of this construction can be found in the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, wherein divine beauty culminates in Christ’s kenotic self-surrender at the cross. In a feminist hermeneutic, the identification of divine beauty with crucified love is dangerous, as it runs the risk of glorifying suffering and self-sacrifice.

This dissertation brings a feminist hermeneutic to bear upon the way in which the beauty of the cross patterns right relations and the praxis of faith in Balthasar’s theological aesthetics and dramatics. I argue that this construction of aesthetics, when paired with the gender symbolism and violence implicit in Balthasar’s dramatic narrative of redemption, mutes the embodied subjectivity of women by sanctifying the wounds of violence and eclipsing human possibilities for wholeness. Drawing upon the soteriological contributions of feminist and womanist theologians, I argue that beauty must stake a claim in human flourishing, in particular the spiritual and material well-being of women. The project concludes by offering a critical reconstruction of aesthetics and atonement rooted in embodied original grace.
CHAPTER ONE

BEAUTY, GOD-TALK, AND THE SYMBOL OF THE CROSS

In the Christian tradition, to speak of God’s presence in the world is to ask about the meaning of the incarnation. It is to ask, what does it mean for the Christian community to confess that God is God-with-us? This task becomes particularly difficult in the face of human suffering and pain. As Gustavo Gutiérrez writes, “there is no greater challenge to our language about God than the suffering of the innocent.”¹ He puts the question, “How can we understand a God of love in a world that bears the stamp of poverty, genocide, terrorist violence, [and] disregard for the most elemental human rights?”² How can we speak of God’s graced presence in the face of immense human tragedy? Today, this remains an inescapable question for all “logos about theos.” This, I believe, is the crisis of faith that theology must address.³ Theology must speak “aloud


² Ibid.

³ The phrase “crisis of faith” is Johann Baptist Metz’s, as found in Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1980). As reported in a 2007 progress report of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, over 980 million people in the two-thirds world live in dire poverty (i.e. live on less than $1 per day). The consequences of this are wide-ranging and include: a lack of access to education, basic health care, sanitation, and work. This struggle hits women and children the hardest due to structural gender inequalities. See “The United Nations Millennium Development Goals Report 2007,”
about the right of all to be happy” and to have fullness of life; otherwise, it “betrays the
very nature of God of whom we speak.” In the context of Christian theology, this
demands taking a radical posture of responsibility in the face of violence, including the
patriarchal ways in which Christian tradition has been used to sanctify this violence. If
theology is about “the good and the beautiful in the work of God, in human life,” then we
cannot overlook “that which breaks the beauty of this world and strangles the expression
of human joy and happiness.” Theology cannot ignore suffering bodies.

Christian theology must find new ways of speaking about God’s presence that
take suffering seriously. This conversation cannot happen only at the level of intellectual
abstraction because life, in its fullness and in its pain, is both physical and spiritual. As
Emilie Townes argues, conversations about human flourishing and human suffering must
be rooted in “concrete existence (lived life).” In other words, theology must be
developed in conversation with the concrete context and knowledge of particular
communities. As Townes contends, theological discourses that remain at the “thinking

this context, to engage in rhetoric that articulates the problem of faith in terms of secular
unbelief is to trivialize the suffering of millions and to distance the responsibility of the
Church in seeking the dignity of all persons.


5. Ibid.

6. Emilie M. Townes, In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social

7. Ibid., 49. Townes argues that theory should never be divorced from praxis. It
must arise in conversation with concrete human existence.
stage” risk committing the same “death-dealing errors found in modernist assumptions of rationality, objectivity, and value-free established knowledge.” Theology needs more than theory in order to reckon with the concrete and thorny ways in which “the radical nature of oppression and devaluation of the self and the community” are structurally embedded and embodied. Theology also needs more than theory to witness to the unexpected and unprecedented ways in which God’s grace is encountered in the world.

The Return of Beauty to Theology: The Rise of Theological Aesthetic Discourse

By and large, the turn to aesthetics within the discipline of theology at the end of the twentieth century was prompted by a desire to extend theology beyond theory, with the work of Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar leading the way. Disillusioned by the “aridity” of the manualist tradition that dominated Catholic theology for much of the century, the discipline sought new ways to engage with the complexities of human experience.

8. In particular, I am referring to the contributions of radical orthodoxy and its appropriation of the categories of “excess” and “infinity” in theological aesthetics. As Marcella Althaus-Reid points out, the extreme concern for protecting divine transcendence, which marks the literature of radical orthodoxy, often leads to a trivialization and rationalization of all human experience. In other words, models that exclusively emphasize the radical otherness of God can only afford to do so by marking out human action that contradicts this paradigm as sinful or unintelligible. For example, consider the recent work of David Bentley Hart. In the Beauty of the Infinite, excess is appropriated in order to emphasize the gratuitous and incomprehensibility of the divine nature. In Hart’s narrative, any model that constrains divine “excess” (i.e., the overabundance of God’s grace) cannot be truly beautiful. The question one must ask of someone like Hart is how does this category translate in a meaningful way to human experience? For the women in Buenos Aires’ zona roja, of whom Althaus-Reid speaks, “excess,” as a marker of divine transcendence, holds little meaning. See Marcella Althaus-Reid’s essay, “Indecent Exposures: Excessive Sex and the Crisis of Theological Representation,” in The Good News of the Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism, ed. Lisa Isherwood (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 205-222. David Bentley Hart, The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003).

twentieth century, Balthasar calls for a return to beauty: “In a world without beauty . . . in a world which is perhaps not wholly without beauty, but which can no longer see it or reckon with it: in such a world the good also loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out.”

According to Balthasar, the witness of divine revelation is lost on the one who can no longer read the language of beauty.

The relation between theology and aesthetics has not always been an easy one within the Christian West. As Edward Farley explains in *Faith and Beauty*, “beauty has never held a very firm position in the Christian movement.”

More often than not, Christian theology has tended to treat beauty with suspicion, naming it as idolatrous, seductive, amoral, or elitist. Yet, Christianity has always had an aesthetic theology, as found in its liturgy and worship, its architecture, and the narratives and imagery of the scriptures. Art and music express meaning that not only operates as a complement to words and concepts (i.e., expressing and illustrating ideas), but also orients the affective and moral lives of individuals and communities. Aesthetic expressions of the Christian tradition shape our perception of the meaning and value of God, the self, and creation.


11. Ibid.


This is especially pertinent when we consider the symbol of the cross. Not only is the image of Christ crucified one of the most frequently depicted symbols in history of Christian visual art, but the primary encounters Christians have with the cross are aesthetic—as found in the dramatic form of the gospel narratives, Church art, and liturgical music. Consequently, the association of the cross with aesthetics has become a part of the collective consciousness of the Christian liturgical community. Moreover, in the wake of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theology, the aesthetics—or beauty—of the cross has become a prominent theme within contemporary theological aesthetic discourses.

What is Theological Aesthetics?

Most broadly defined, theological aesthetics encompasses a body of literature that is concerned with “God, religion, and theology in relation to sensible knowledge (sensation, imagination, and feeling), the beautiful, and the arts.” More precisely, theological aesthetics asks the question: what moves the human heart in a religious dimension? In the context of Christian theologies, this question must engage the biblical narrative of “creation and redemption, of paradise lost and regained, of incarnation, death and resurrection, of the gift of the Spirit and the hope of a ‘new heaven

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and earth.” In its essence, theological aesthetics is a way of reflecting upon the revelation of God’s presence in the world by seeking the divine within all creation.

**Beauty and Aesthetics**

We use the word beauty frequently. But what exactly do we mean by it? What is beauty? Is it the symmetry and measure of which ancient writers spoke? Is beauty an attribute or is it an entity in and of itself? This is a question that has created much difficulty in theological aesthetic discourses. Early Christian writers like Pseudo-Dionysius located beauty in the realm of Being along with the Good, the True, and the One. Thomas Aquinas discussed beauty in the context of the attributes of God. Contemporary theologians like Richard Harries and Han Urs von Balthasar continue this trajectory in their emphasis on the transcendental objectivity of beauty. For Balthasar,


19. Thomas Aquinas, “Existence and the Nature of God” vol. 2 of *Summa Theologica*, trans. and ed. Timothy McDermott, OP (London: Blackfriars, 1964), (Ia. 39. 8). “For beauty includes three conditions, ‘integrity’ or ‘perfection,’ since those things which are impaired are by the very fact ugly; due ‘proportion’ or ‘harmony’; and lastly, ‘brightness’ or ‘clarity,’ whence things are called beautiful which have a bright color.”

beauty belongs in the realm of ontology and reveals itself definitively in history. In this context, perception of divine beauty—more specifically, accurate perception—demands intellectual, moral, and spiritual illumination. Similarly, in the literature of radical orthodoxy, the excessive and objective qualities of beauty are brought to the fore. John Milbank describes the experience of the beautiful as being marked by a not-quite arriving character: “beauty arises where the attraction exercised by a formed reality is ineffable and escapes analysis.” For Milbank, while the experience of beauty is pleasurable and satisfying, it is a “frustrated” sort of satisfaction in that we always desire more. This human experience of excess in terms of longing and desire is a manifestation of the “inexhaustible depths” of the object itself; “our longing for the beautiful form seems to shine from it.” Yet, as Elaine Scarry points out, we are far from an ontological or excessive understanding of beauty in ordinary language. We speak of a beautiful flower, a lovely person, or a beautiful work of art, but to what exactly are we referring? Scarry suggests that beauty is always attached, meaning it always “takes place in the particular,"

Hereafter cited as GL 4. This is emphasized in all seven volumes of The Glory of the Lord. I do not mean to suggest that Balthasar’s construction of divine beauty excludes divine immanence. Rather, I am referring to his insistence on the self-authenticating character of divine beauty.


23. Ibid.
and if there are no particulars, the chances of seeing it go down.”24 This raises a critical question about the starting point for theological reflections on beauty, namely, what is the role of human experience in naming divine beauty? This question is often obscured by theological aesthetics’ focus on beauty’s transcendence.

The focus of attention on beauty’s transcendental objectivity within contemporary theological aesthetic discourses is, by and large, a response to philosophical developments within the eighteenth century that sought to relocate beauty in and as a human sensibility.25 Immanuel Kant’s “Copernican” turn radically shifted the relationship between the subject and the object. Instead of the subject receiving ideas and changing in order to know them, objects are altered in the process of knowing. Thus, that which is constant and universal is located in the human subject, in our faculties of sensation. In terms of aesthetics, this means that instead of being transformed by beauty, the perception of beauty becomes a human sensibility. While these developments gave rise to the problem of taste,26 they also opened the door to the engagement of the senses


25. Farley, Faith and Beauty, 32-34. By contemporary theological aesthetics, I am referring to a body of literature arising in the late twentieth century. Much of this appears after the publication and translation of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Glory of the Lord.

26. The category of aesthetic taste arose during the Enlightenment and was critically developed by Immanuel Kant in The Critique of Judgment. For Kant, the judgment of taste is subjective and universal. Taste is based upon a feeling of pleasure or displeasure. Yet, this is a specific kind of pleasure—one that does not involve desire. Aesthetic judgment derives from experience—from the sheer joy of employing our imagination. As the faculty of judgment is always tied to the free use of reason, one’s
and imagination in the aesthetic studies. Although beauty’s disappearance from theology is often attributed to the association of aesthetics with sentimentality and affect, the larger issue at stake was one of the sources and methods of theology. For example, if the perception of beauty is relegated to the subjective perception of taste, then beauty could no longer be attributed to the transcendental realm of Being, for divine revelation would then be subject to human perception. Thus, the central problem became one of particularity and universality. The work of Balthasar has been central in the return of beauty to theological discourse, as it allowed for a reconfiguration of particularity and universality in aesthetic terms. Yet, the problem is that theological constructions of beauty “from above,” like the one set forth by Balthasar, are rarely developed in experience of beauty cannot be externally coerced or manipulated. This is especially important in the context of the sublime, which signifies a terrible beauty and can evoke terror, astonishment, or horror. The human experience of the sublime, akin to our experience of God, should never be coerced or externally imposed. It is for this reason that perception of beauty—and the sublime—must be disinterested. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 121-123. The relevance of Kant’s aesthetics for Christian theological aesthetics is still debated. In *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), Frank Burch Brown retrieves the Kantian notion of taste for contemporary theology and argues that because “aesthetic excellence is generative of human community, it is a moral good in itself” (146). Moreover, aesthetic discernment, while socially contextualized, is a critical part of the religious community akin to moral discernment. Richard Harries, however, argues that beauty is not in the eye of beholder in the sense of subjective taste. In *Art and the Beauty of God*, Harries argues that there are certain definite features of beauty that can be recognized and discussed.

conversation with the concrete context and knowledge of particular communities. Moreover, when these constructions are elevated above all others, they can function to denigrate the lived experience of those on the margins.  

**Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetics: Form and Splendor**

Since the translation and publication of his theological trilogy in recent years, new attention is being given to Balthasar’s aesthetics within Roman Catholic and Anglican theological discourse. With his critique of neo-scholasticism and his call to return to patristic sources, Balthasar is being hailed as the “Catholic postmodern theologian par excellence.” Graham Ward compares Balthasar’s theological poetics to “Dante composing a *divina commedia* for the late twentieth century. . . . He leads us out of the arid deserts and catacombs of modernity into a new theological vision.” In this description, Ward points to Balthasar’s deep dissatisfaction with the elevation of rational

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28. In the context of aesthetics, this trend is evidenced in the work of David Bentley Hart. In his text on aesthetics, Hart develops a construction in which suffering has no theological meaning, as it is outside the being of God (onto-theology). See Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 318-394. At stake is the relation of God’s graced presence and the human experience of tragedy. Moreover, this account of beauty does not hold up in light of the “living-breathing” spiritualities of many communities. For example, consider the Latin American traditional celebrations of *Viernes Santo*, in which theologies of suffering play a central aesthetic role.

29. See essays in *Balthasar at the End of Modernity*, eds. Lucy Gardner et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999).


scientific method in modern theology, especially with the way in which modern methods of historical criticism have eclipsed our capacity for reckoning with beauty.\textsuperscript{32}

Central in defining the task of theology, for Balthasar, is the appearance of God’s glory.\textsuperscript{33} God’s glory appears in history through the person of Jesus Christ and, presently, in the life of the Church. Moreover, the manifestation of the divine revelation is beautiful; it is attractive and transformative. In Balthasar’s eyes, this has important consequences for the practice and development of theological methodology. Theology, as a “reflection of the glory of God,” cannot forget “its roots, from which all its nourishment is drawn: adoration, in which we see, in faith, the heavens opened; and obedience in living, which frees us to understand the truth.”\textsuperscript{34} Theology is subject to the Word of God and must arise out of a posture of prayerful obedience—not rational inquiry.\textsuperscript{35} The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} GL 1, 25. Balthasar describes this phenomenon as follows: “our eyes have lost their acumen for form and we have become accustomed to read things by starting from the bottom and working our way up, rather than by working from the whole to the parts.”
\item \textsuperscript{33} Christopher Steck summarizes Balthasar’s theological project as “God’s glory appears.” This phrase encapsulates two claims: 1) “God’s own being, and not just some new fact about the divine nature, manifests itself to human perceptions” and 2) the manifestation of divine revelation is glorious and beautiful. See Christopher Steck, \textit{The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar} (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 1.
\end{itemize}
methods of modern scientific rationalism, in particular historical criticism, in their search for “exactness,” distort the form of revelation, rendering humanity blind to its beauty.

In Balthasar’s theology, “beauty is part of the nature of God; it is the essence of God’s glory.” Beauty shines forth from the divine onto the beautiful. This beauty, however, can only be known in and through revelation. Theological aesthetics, for Balthasar, is about the self-disclosure of God in the historical form in which divine splendor is revealed and received. In this sense, Balthasar’s theological aesthetics is a theology of revelation as it concerns the appearance and perception of the divine form in history. This form must be perceived in history and in its wholeness.

Form, or Gestalt, as both “sign and an appearing of a depth and a fulness [sic], in themselves and in an abstract sense, remain beyond our reach and vision.” For Balthasar, form is material and particular as well as universally transcendent. In its particularity, form signifies a fullness of depth and is an appearance of “the real presence of the depths.” This relationship is developed through a dynamic analogy of being in which all creation, made in the image of God, reveals something about God. As Alejandro García-Rivera explains, “our very finitude becomes the means to contemplate the infinite only to realize the infinite breaking through any form, any concept, any

36. de Gruchy, Christianity, Art and Transformation, 103. Also see GL 1, 124-127.

37. GL 1, 109.

38. Ibid., 118.

39. Ibid. The fullness of the divine form in revelation is Christ.
symbol our finitude provides.”\textsuperscript{40} In this model, not only is creation analogically related to God, but through our contemplation of creation we are drawn into participation with God: we are “lifted up into a grand vision of God.”\textsuperscript{41} Perception of the form is a dynamic movement.

Beauty is also splendor, or radiance from within, which shines forth from the form on to the subject transforming it into “a love worthy thing.”\textsuperscript{42} Beauty as splendor is not only an object to be perceived, but an active movement within history that transforms all those who come into contact with it. Beauty, for Balthasar, is manifest in the world as “an outpouring, self utterance” of the divine.\textsuperscript{43} Moreover, the encounter of form and splendor is “characterized by two moments of beholding and of being enraptured.”\textsuperscript{44} The subjective experience of the beautiful form is marked by a beholding—as connoting an intimate apperception—and being enraptured, or caught up in the grace of God. As Balthasar indicates, the two corollaries of beholding (perception) and being enraptured (glory) are faith and grace.\textsuperscript{45} It is through the eyes of faith that one perceives the form

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{40} García-Rivera, \textit{Community of the Beautiful}, 82.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 81.
\item \textsuperscript{42} GL 1, 120.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Ibid., foreword.
\item \textsuperscript{45} It is important to note that Balthasar’s use of the categories of form and splendor is taken from Thomas Aquinas’ notion of \textit{species} and splendor. See Angelo Scola, \textit{Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Theological Style} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 1-2.
\end{itemize}
and it is God’s grace that draws us out of ourselves and into the life of the divine. In Balthasar’s theology, “seeing the form” does not simply consist of passive observation. Seeing is akin to being grasped by the mystery of divine revelation. It is “the movement of man’s whole being away from himself and towards God through Christ, a movement founded on the divine light of grace in the mystery of Christ.”46 Theological aesthetics draws us into God’s redemptive work in the world.

This relation between form and content becomes the basis for expounding Balthasar’s understanding of contemplation and action in the Christian life. The theory of perception outlined in theological aesthetics cannot be understood apart from a doctrine of conversion and sanctification.47 To “see the form” is to be drawn into divine eros; it is to fall in love.48 This falling in love is marked by the kenotic outpouring of God on the cross. Thus, the center of Balthasar’s theological aesthetics revolves around “a nuptial relationship centered in the cross.”49 It is on the cross that the “form of Jesus Christ is most apparent” and most glorious.

46. GL 1, 121.

47. Hans Urs von Balthasar, Prolegomena, vol. 1 of Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 17. Hereafter cited as TD 1. Drama “transforms the event into a picture that can be seen and thus expands aesthetics into something new (and yet continuous with itself), while at the same time it is already translating the picture into speech.” That is, the dramatics expands the form of revelation and draws us into this action in the theater of the world.


The Beauty of the Cross: Historical Trajectories and Contemporary Trends

Balthasar is not alone in proclaiming the cross’s beauty. Historically, Christian thinkers have interpreted divine beauty in light of the cross through two primary trajectories: spiritual beauty and moral beauty. Explorations of the spiritual and moral dimensions of beauty not only aided patristic and medieval writers in distinguishing divine beauty from created and material beauties, but they created a forum for broadening the notion of the beautiful itself.50 These claims have soteriological significance in that they relate objective beauty, its meaning and making, to interpretations of sin and evil as well as the means and effects of redemption. Here, beauty is a moral beauty associated with the spiritual life. Augustine’s interpretation of beauty highlights the origins of this trajectory in relation to the cross.

The Cross, Spiritual Beauty, and Moral Beauty: Augustine

The question of the beauty of the cross appears in Augustine’s corpus as he reflects upon the text of Psalm 45:

Wherefore then He had no form nor comeliness? Because Christ crucified is both to the Jews a stumbling-block; and to the Greeks foolishness. But wherefore had He comeliness even upon the Cross? Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. To us, however, now that we are believers, let the Bridegroom, wheresoever He is, appear beautiful.51


51. Augustine, Expositions on the Book of Psalms, vol. 2, trans. John Henry Parker (London: Oxford, 1848), 229-230. Here, the beauty of the cross is correlated with the paradox of the cross as presented in the 1 Corinthians: “But we preach Christ crucified: the Jews, a stumbling block, and to the Gentiles, foolishness; but to those called Jews and Greeks, Christ is God’s power and God’s wisdom; for God’s foolishness is wiser than humans, and God’s weakness is stronger than humans” (1 Corinthians 1:
In this passage, Augustine speaks of the incarnate beauty of the bridegroom of Christ.\textsuperscript{52} He argues that God’s beauty, like God’s wisdom and God’s strength, can only be perceived through the eyes of an intimately passionate faith. Augustine goes on to describe Christ as “everywhere beautiful: beautiful in the hands of his parents, beautiful in his miracles, beautiful in his flagellation, beautiful giving up his spirit, beautiful carrying the cross, beautiful on the cross, beautiful in heaven.”\textsuperscript{53} Yet, all of this is qualified as a righteous beauty.\textsuperscript{54} It is Christ’s perfect righteousness that allows the believer to interpret the whole of his life as beautiful. Thus, perception of the beauty of Christ is a spiritual perception.

This interpretation of divine beauty also has implications for the life of the believer. The spiritual beauty of God is not a distanced perception. As we contemplate the beauty of Christ, we too become beautiful. For Augustine, Christ’s suffering and death on the cross is a revelation of love. This love not only inspires a confession of sin, but also a confession of the believer’s love for God and praise (doxology). As such, Christ’s beauty is revelatory and redemptive and cannot be perceived apart from the believer’s own moral and spiritual purification. As Carol Harrison illustrates, for

\textsuperscript{23} This passage is theologically expounded upon in tandem with Isaiah 52:13-53:12, the Song of the Suffering Servant, which states “there was no beauty in him to make us look at him, nor appearance that would attract us to him.”

\textsuperscript{52} The nuptial terms bride and bridegroom are central to Balthasar’s theological aesthetics. This will be discussed further in chapters 2 and 3.

\textsuperscript{53} Augustine, \textit{Expositions on Psalms}, 230.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
Augustine, the soul is ugly because of sin. It is by loving God that we are made lovely—we receive our form.55 “The more love grows in you, the more beauty grows: for love is the beauty of the soul.”56 By imitating Christ in faith and love, we too, become beautiful and participate in the beauty of God. In this context, Christ’s beauty is the source of all human beauty and redeems all ugliness by transforming humanity.57 As we form our lives according to the law of charity not only do we delight in God, but we come to reflect this beauty.

The attending to the spiritual and moral dimensions of aesthetics provided a way of attributing beauty to God in an immaterial sense.58 This was particularly important for theological reflections on the beauty of Christ. Emphasizing Christ’s moral and spiritual beauty not only gave writers a way of interpreting the paradox of the cross, but it also led to the association of beauty with redemption in the Christian tradition. As such, the cross

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55. Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 232. According to Harrison’s analysis, Augustine’s understanding of beauty is tied to the notion of form. This parallels the way in which he interprets evil. Evil is nothingness, it has no form, no being. We receive form from God and our loveliness. For an excellent review of the ways in which these concepts function in Augustine’s corpus, see Hohyun Sohn’s “The Beauty of Hell? Augustine’s Aesthetic Theodicy and Its Critics,” *Theology Today* 64 (2007): 47-57.


58. Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 36. As Sherry notes, this was not unique to the Christian tradition. Plato and Aristotle also linked beauty to virtue.
was not only included in a description of divine beauty, but it becomes the pinnacle form of beauty: both revelatory and redemptive.

The Attractiveness of Divine Glory: Karl Barth

While Augustine’s approach to the beauty of the cross emphasized the revelatory and redemptive character of divine beauty through an intimacy marked by nuptial relations, Karl Barth’s consideration of divine beauty and the cross foregrounds the distance between God and creation. As we will see, Barth’s insistence upon the self-authenticating nature of divine revelation plays a prominent role in shaping Balthasar’s theological aesthetics and dramatics.

While beauty does not take a central role in his *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth finds it necessary to broach the subject in his discussion of divine glory. According to Barth, there is something about the nature of divine glory—in particular, the human response and receptivity to divine glory—that is best explained by beauty. God’s revelation in Christ is attractive in that it elicits a response that is marked not only by obedience and love, but also joy. Divine glory received incites something in us that is

59. In no way do I mean to polarize the theological perspectives of Barth and Augustine. Rather, I wish to highlight two different points of emphasis in the tradition that influence Balthasar’s theological aesthetics. Balthasar was deeply influenced by the work of Karl Barth, in particular, his approach to revelation. As Aidan Nichols points out, Balthasar describes Barth’s work as beautiful “on the grounds that it combines ‘passion’ and ‘objectivity.’” See Aidan Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide through Balthasar’s Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), xvi. For more on the relationship between Barth and Balthasar, see the essay by John Webster, “Balthasar and Karl Barth,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, eds. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 241-255.

60. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God*, 2/1, trans. T.H.L. Parker et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 647. “God’s glory is the indwelling joy of
more than mere obedience or duty. God’s glory received “awakens joy, and is itself joyful.” Moreover, this beauty is revealed “to a supreme degree” in Christ. The pinnacle of this form is the form of the cross:

In this self-declaration, however, God’s beauty embraces death as well as life, fear as well as joy, what we might call the ugly as well as what we might call the beautiful. It reveals itself and wills to be known on the road from one to the other, in turning from the self-humiliation of God for the benefit of man to the exaltation of man by God to God.

In this context, spiritual and moral beauty take on a new dimension, that of emphasizing the difference between God and creation.

In Barth’s dialectical theology, God stands as wholly Other and infinitely different from creation. This gulf between God and creation can only be bridged by God. Thus, all revelation, including divine glory, is known to us through the Word of God. Barth aimed to lead theology away from its “erroneous” synthesis of theology and culture. Theology was to be based on the Word of God as it is communicated in the Bible and to stand over and against human philosophies. Therefore, not only is all revelation given to us by God through God’s Word (and not human words), but the content and form of all theology is self-authenticating. Divine beauty, including the beauty of the cross, cannot be evaluated by human standards.

his divine being which as such shines out from Him, which overflows in its richness, which in its super-abundance is not satisfied with itself but communicates itself.”

61. Ibid., 655.

62. Ibid., 661.

63. Ibid., 665.
The inclusion of the cross in conversations of divine beauty takes on a different tenor in the late twentieth century. In contemporary theological aesthetics discourse, the beauty of the cross is developed in response to two primary concerns: secularism and solidarity. This appears in both Catholic and Protestant theological discourses arising at the end of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In both contexts, the cross functions as a hermeneutical clue to interpreting the difference between authentic and deceptive types of beauties.

**The Beauty of the Cross as a Response to Secularism**

A critical issue for contemporary theological aesthetic discourses is that of marking out the difference between divine beauty in its transcendent excess and social constructions of aesthetics. In other words, the driving question for many twentieth-century theologies of beauty has been: what makes theological aesthetics theological? A number of theologians base their claims for this distinction in the self-authenticating character of divine revelation. In these theologies, not only is our perception of divine beauty a gift from God, but God becomes the standard (criterion) by which we measure beauty. Consonant with the theological methodology of Karl Barth, revelation sets the criteria and form for all other perceptions of beauty.\(^6\) The cross’ paradoxical nature

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64. This trend appears in the Catholic tradition in the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who is indebted to Barth on this matter. While Balthasar understands the relationship between grace and nature differently than Barth, his theology of revelation is one in which beauty is self-authenticating. The turn to the self-authenticating nature of beauty when faced with the paradox of the cross is not uncommon in theological aesthetic discourses, even for those theologians who radically critique this methodology. For example, in his *Theological Aesthetics*, Richard Viladesau critiques Balthasar’s insistence upon the self-authenticating quality of God’s self-
distinguishes true beauty from a false beauty. Perhaps the writings of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, provide the clearest expression of this formulation in the Roman Catholic tradition.65

Benedict XVI returns to Augustine’s narration on Psalm 45 in his essay, “Wounded by the Arrow of the Beautiful: the Cross and the New ‘Esthetic’ of Faith.” 66 This treatise not only reflects the influence of Hans Urs von Balthasar in shaping the theological method on Benedict XVI, but it also illuminates the way in which the cross functions hermeneutically within theology in order to respond to concerns of secularism. Moreover, this essay represents a new trend within theological aesthetic discourse: conversations that begin by aligning aesthetics and faith. This shift in emphasis is largely

communication. According to Viladesau, not only is “there a certain subjectivity in aesthetic judgments,” but basing claims about beauty in the self-authenticating nature of divine revelation forecloses possibilities for ecumenical dialogue. The main problem is the lack of criteria for theological-aesthetic judgments and their warrants in the face of conflicting claims. In response to these concerns, Viladesau develops a model for theological aesthetics based upon Rahner’s and Longeran’s interpretations of transcendence. However, he returns to a Balthasarian paradigm when discussing the paradox of the beauty of cross. In this construction, the revelation of the cross authenticates its own beauty, as a “moment in God’s poiesis, an element in the theodrama of salvation” (197).


representative of the influence and acceptance of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s work within contemporary theological discourse. Aesthetics are no longer presumed to be in dialectical opposition to faith, but become the basis for marking out the values of a genuine faith response in the modern world.\textsuperscript{67} The paradoxical form of the cross is used to justify these truth claims. Here, the cross encompasses intellectual beauty as the beauty of Christian truth. In the cross,

\begin{quote}
[T]he experience of the beautiful has received a new depth and a new realism. The One who is beauty itself let himself be struck in the face, spat upon, crowned with thorns—the Shroud of Turin can help us realize this in a moving way. Yet, precisely in this Face that is so disfigured, there appears the genuine, the ultimate beauty: the beauty of love that goes ‘to the very end’ and thus proves to be mightier than falsehood and violence. Whoever has perceived this beauty knows that truth after all, and not falsehood, is the ultimate authority of the world. \textsuperscript{68}
\end{quote}

Here, the beauty of the cross becomes a way of responding to the challenges of modern aestheticism and violence, both of which are associated with a false beauty as they fail to

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{67} This is a very recent trend arising at the turn of the century. While many contemporary authors begin by addressing the ambivalent history of aesthetics and theology, implicit in these texts is an assumption about the alignment of aesthetics and faith. A shift in perception regarding value of aesthetics for theology is largely due to the recent research on the historical trajectories of beauty and faith. See for example, John Dillenberger, \textit{A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities: The Visual Arts and the Church} (London: SCM, 1987) and Margaret Miles’ \textit{Image as Insight}. This research has significance for the constructions arising out of these theologies. First, a number of authors who do not specialize in theological aesthetics are integrating the arts and aesthetics into their writing. Benedict XVI is one such example. Second, the aforementioned historical work in religious aesthetics allows for a greater diversity of constructions within literature that directly addresses aesthetics. For example, the work of Alejandro García-Rivera brings a cultural perspective to this conversation. Frank Burch Brown’s \textit{Good Taste, Bad Taste and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life} (London/New York: Oxford, 2003) explores the possibilities for ecumenical dialogue. Jeremy Begbie’s \textit{Theology, Music, and Time} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) brings to the fore a different artistic medium.

\textsuperscript{68} Ratzinger, “Wounded by the Arrow,” 39.
\end{quote}
put the believer in contact with reality. Not only does the beauty of the cross free us “from the prison-house of believing the lie which would make the denial of beauty’s ultimacy the last word” in the face of the horrors of history, but it also frees us from “that other lie offered us by an aesthetic of hedonistic passion.”

According to Benedict XVI, a harmonious concept of beauty fails to “do justice to the seriousness with which God, truth, and beauty are questioned” in the modern world. The beauty of the cross becomes the criterion for distinguishing true gnosis from false gnosis. Moreover, failure to make this distinction has serious moral consequences, as false beauty not only fails to awaken in the Christian believer a desire for God, “a willingness to sacrifice” and do good for the other, but it also incites a desire for will to power.

We see a similar approach within Protestant discussions of theological aesthetics. In this context, the language of sentimentality comes to the fore. In a recent collection of essays entitled *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, the editors argue that within

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71. For a detailed analysis of the way in which true and false gnosis function thematically through Balthasar’s corpus, see Kevin Mongrain, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Crossroad, 2002).

72. Ratzinger, “Wounded by the Arrow,” 41. It is important to note here that the origins of false beauty and aestheticism are linked to the Fall story in Genesis. According to Ratzinger, it is a false beauty that arouses in Eve a “desire for possession” and causes her to “turn in on herself.” Eve’s delight in and temptation by false beauties, as distinguished from the true beauty of the icon of the crucified Christ, is what has led to the sinful fall of humanity. Thus, the true beauty of the cross is distinguished from the false beauty of mere asceticism and violence. True beauty incites humanity outward movement toward God and one another.
contemporary Protestant aesthetics, emphasis on the sacramental and incarnational dimensions of beauty has become disproportionately removed from the doctrine of redemption. In his essay, “Beauty, Sentimentality, and the Arts,” Jeremy Begbie argues that “sentimentality is neither a superficial nor an inconsequential matter but a deep, pernicious stand in contemporary culture and the church.”73 In the context of Protestant evangelical worship, Begbie is concerned with the way in which sentimentality in music produces “feel good” experiences which bypass the reality of the cross. Sentimentality, as an emotional pathology, functions in three primary ways: 1) in the “misrepresent[ation] of reality through evading or trivializing evil,” 2) through “emotional self-indulgence” in which persons are moved beyond themselves but are “primarily concerned with the satisfaction gained in exercising their emotion,” and 3) in refusing “to take appropriate costly action.”74 In other words, the sentimentalist is someone whose affective engagement is radically disassociated with action in the face of pain and suffering caused by sin and evil. The sentimentalist’s affective response in the face of human tragedy never moves the range of sympathy. While he or she may acknowledge the reality of evil in the world, he or she resists taking appropriate responsible action in the face of the suffering evil causes.

In response, Begbie constructs a countersentimentality narrated by the cross and resurrection. Begbie, indebted to Barth and Balthasar in this construction, argues that


74. Ibid., 47-53.
“there can be nothing sentimental about God’s beauty, because it has engaged with the worst and shows itself most vigorously as it engages with the worst.”75 Divine beauty as illumined through the narrative of the paschal mystery is radically distinct from the beauty associated with affective aestheticism. While Begbie carefully hedges this construction in relation to issues of social injustice, the cross remains the criterion for marking out the distinction between the “true” beauty of the Christian gospel and the “false” beauty of aestheticism. Moreover, the beauty of the cross safeguards God’s transcendence in theologies that sentimentalize suffering. According to Begbie, process and political theologies, in their “zeal to affirm divine solidarity with the victims of suffering veer toward imprisoning God in the world’s history and . . . eternalizing evil in God.”76 The beauty of the cross, as a marker of God’s radical otherness, refuses to allow for this type of sentimentality and serves as an evaluative criterion for academic theological aesthetic discourses.77

The Beauty of the Cross and Human Suffering: A Way of Solidarity

In recent years, a new paradigm for exploring the intersection between beauty and theology has arisen within the context of theologies of liberation. Within the work of these theologians, the beauty of the cross takes a new form: “lifting up the lowly.”78 The

75. Ibid., 63-64.

76. Ibid., 66.

77. Ibid. Begbie suggests that these theologies are sentimental in that they are “emotionally indulgent responses to the human need for a suffering God.”

78. García-Rivera, Community of the Beautiful, 37.
work of Alejandro García-Rivera has been instrumental in recontextualizing aesthetics in relation to just praxis.⁷⁹

In *The Community of the Beautiful*, the cross is beautiful within the construct of “lifting up the lowly.” For García-Rivera, lifting up is what moves the human heart; it is the central aesthetic act of the Christian community. To lift up the lowly is to participate in the work of social justice; it is to integrate the two central aspects of Christian praxis: prayer and social action. Not only does “lifting up” refer to the liturgical act of “lifting up the host” or “raising our arms in prayer,” but it is at the heart of the paschal mystery.⁸⁰ Lifting up the lowly “does not avoid either the tragedy of suffering or the joy of resurrection. As such, it provides an aesthetics that does not harmonize away suffering or lead to despair.”⁸¹ It is in this context that the beauty of the cross takes center stage as a sign of solidarity with those who are suffering and as a call to participation in the community in and through its liturgical acts.

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⁷⁹. Also see Roberto Goizueta’s *Caminemos con Jesus: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 84. For Goizueta, liberating socio-political action takes the form of a unitive aesthetic praxis. This aesthetic praxis, as distinct from *poiesis*, is in and of itself a celebration of the inherent value of human life and is fully manifested in the liturgy. John de Gruchy’s *Christianity, Art, and Transformation* also makes a vital contribution to this discussion. De Gruchy discusses the healing and liberating power of aesthetics in the context of South African apartheid.


⁸¹. Ibid.

⁸². Virgilio Elizondo, *God of Incredible Surprises: Jesus of Galilee* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 102. The cross is beautiful because it reveals to us God’s triumph over violence and injustice. It is the hour of glory because it
The call to interpret difference is elicited through the foregrounding of God’s particular love in the world through the person of Christ.\textsuperscript{83} God’s love lifts up the lowly, the wounded body of Christ and the wounded bodies of those who are unjustly crucified, calling us to interpret the difference between the divine aesthetics and a human aesthetic. In the interpretation of this difference we are formed for and invited into God’s redeeming work in the world, into a preferential love for the poor. Divine beauty cannot be that which is associated with the aesthetics of the rich and powerful. The beauty of the cross effected through the life of the community legitimates this claim.

**Statement of the Problem**

Certainly, Balthasar’s critique of the exclusion of aesthetics from theological discourse deserves attention. The notion upon which Balthasar’s theological project rests—“in a world without beauty . . . the good also loses its attractiveness”—has important consequences for the development and praxis of moral theology.\textsuperscript{84} Yet, in light of the contributions of feminist theologians to Christology and theological anthropology, Balthasar’s aesthetics, especially the way in which his construction of the beauty of the cross acts to define the praxis of faith, necessitates careful consideration.\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 158.
\textsuperscript{84} GL 1, 19.
\textsuperscript{85} This is particularly the case for theologians in conversation with the writing of Hans Urs von Balthasar. See for instance John Saward, *The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty: Art, Sanctity, and the Truth of Catholicism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994); Raymond Gawronski, “The Beauty of the Cross: The Theological
In a feminist hermeneutic, adopting a framework in which divine beauty is identified with crucified love is potentially dangerous. As feminist theologians have pointed out, the valorization of suffering and self-sacrificial love, when appropriated in a patriarchal context, has contributed to the theological sanctioning of sexual and domestic violence. In the context of sexual violence, defining true beauty as a wounded love “that goes to the very end” not only glorifies suffering, but it also presents us with a model for human praxis in which suffering is named as attractive and desirable. It lifts up as most beautiful a sacrificial love in which the bodily wounds are an unintended, but necessary result. In a feminist perspective, this model can be highly dangerous as it reinforces practices of self-deprecation and self-abnegation, re-inscribing the very notions


of aestheticism that it seeks to critique upon the bodies of those who are most vulnerable.⁸⁷

The return of theological aesthetics to academic discourse in recent years, and the prominence of Balthasar’s work in this area, demands a critical reflection on the nature of divine beauty for Christian feminist theology, particularly in light of the symbol of the cross.⁸⁸ To assert the beauty of the cross is to make profound statements about the meaning of the passion of Christ and human redemption, as well as the nature of divine beauty. These assertions need to be unpacked in light of their theological, spiritual, and ethical implications. We must ask: how do claims surrounding the beauty of the cross inform the praxis of Christian faith, particularly for women? This is a critical task for feminist theologies, as both aesthetics and the cross have been used to legitimate and sanctify the silencing and oppression of women.⁸⁹

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⁸⁷. The aestheticization of self-sacrifice in the face of violence is problematic for women across the globe. In the context of socio-economic inequality, this can easily lend toward a romanticization of those who do not have access to basic resources in order to survive.


⁸⁹. In the Christian tradition, women’s beauty has been linked to “wickedness and decadence,” and signifies that which leads one away from God. This was also a common theme among the writings of the early Church Fathers. Tertullian, for example, argues that “modesty in apparel is becoming to women, in memory of the introduction of
The symbol of the cross plays a significant role in shaping our desires, loves, and affects. For many women, these desires intermingle with feelings of self-hatred and shame. Attending to the aesthetic dimensions of the cross foregrounds the complex ways in which suffering informs desire and violence merges with beauty. Understanding the ways in which these patterns inform interpretations of Christian action and identity in the world is a necessary step in articulating a theology of the cross that supports the flourishing of all creation. This dissertation explores these issues and seeks to re-imagine the beauty and the cross in light of women’s interpreted experiences of redemption by drawing upon the soteriological contributions of womanist and feminist theologians.

**Dissertation Methodology: Feminist Hermeneutics**

This dissertation approaches recent developments within theological aesthetics, namely, the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, in light of a feminist hermeneutic. Feminist theology is “both critical reflection on the effects of androcentric bias on theology, and also a reconstruction of theology so that women are fully included and affirmed as full and equal human beings in the symbolic content of theology, as well as in the teaching and pastoral ministries of the church.” Rosemary Radford Ruether, points to the critical and constructive

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movements of feminist theological methodologies. Christian feminist theologies arise out of a critical consciousness of the ways in which the texts, traditions, and symbols of the Christian tradition are the products of elite male experience and have been used to legitimate patriarchal worldviews in the church and in larger society.⁹¹ Out of this context of critical consciousness, feminist theologies engage in a hermeneutic of suspicion with the purpose of deconstructing and exposing the androcentric biases within the texts and symbols of the Christian tradition and patriarchal ways in which they have been appropriated.⁹²

Yet, as Elizabeth Johnson highlights, “negatives alone do not flourish.” Feminist theological methodologies also engage in a hermeneutic of remembrance that seeks to bring to the fore dimensions of the tradition that have been ignored or suppressed. Drawing upon the tools of suspicion and remembrance, feminist theological discourses move toward a re-visioning of the symbols and practices of the Christian tradition which lends toward the flourishing of all creation. Thus, the evaluative criterion that feminist theological discourses adopt is an ethical criterion: “Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity” of all creation cannot be claimed as redemptive.⁹³ Conversely, that which promotes the full humanity of all people “is of the Holy, it does reflect true relation to the divine, it is the true nature of things, the authentic

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⁹¹. Ibid.


⁹³. Ruether, Sexism and God Talk, 18-19.
message of redemption and the mission of the redemptive community.” In other words, all Christian practice and doctrine must support the dignity and life of all of God’s creation.

Moreover, feminist theological discourses emphasize the relationship between praxis and theory. Responsible theology is accountable to the lived experiences of marginalized communities and orients human action toward liberation. Therefore, theology cannot be divorced from the social situation of oppression in the world. Feminist theological discourses begin by listening to women’s interpreted experiences of marginalization and of celebration. While feminist theologies can never speak of “the woman’s experience,” they can speak of a “great diversity of critical experiences that must arise from many communities of women in different contexts finding their critical and liberating voices.” It is through listening across differences that new opportunities

94. Ibid.

95. The term “women’s interpreted experience” has its own difficulties. I want to be clear at the outset of this dissertation that the use of this terminology in no way seeks to overlook the tremendous diversity among women’s perspectives. “Women’s interpreted experiences” indicates that “the diversity, cultural, interracial, and ecumenical, is consciously prized as a condition for connectedness, for women have the insight born in pain that a monolithic position inevitably works to the disadvantage of somebody, usually the most powerless.” See Elizabeth Johnson, She Who Is, 10. For a detailed analysis of various approaches to the category of ‘women’s experience within contemporary feminist theological discourses, see Serene Jones, “‘Women's Experience’ Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Feminist, Womanist and Mujerista Theologies in North America,” in Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition and Norms, eds. Rebecca Chopp and Shelia Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 33-53. Also see, Margaret Kamitsuka, Feminist Theology and the Challenge of Difference (New York: Oxford, 2007).

for solidarity arise and the religious imagination expands. This, I believe, is particularly difficult when it comes to women’s interpreted experiences of the cross.

The cross is a contentious symbol within feminist theological discourse. There is little consensus on its significance for women. Some question whether a feminist retrieval of the symbol is even possible. In their famous essay, “For God So Loved the World,” Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker reject the notion of the cross as salvific, arguing that “the glorification of anyone’s suffering allows the glorification of all suffering.” Similarly, womanist theologian Delores Williams finds the cross to be too dangerous in light of African American women’s experiences of surrogacy. Williams argues that any doctrine of atonement that supports a substitutionary model of redemption is not helpful. “Jesus represents the ultimate surrogate figure; he stands in the place of someone else: sinful humankind. Surrogacy, attached to this divine personage, thus takes on an aura of the sacred.” Others, like Elizabeth Johnson and Marie Fortune, make a distinction between the suffering of God and the suffering of humanity and argue that the cross, historically and symbolically, is the “locus of divine involvement in the pain of the world.” In this context, the cross is retrieved through a feminist reading of redemption


wherein the crucifixion is understood as a site of both violence and of loving resistance to violence. U.S. Latina feminist Alicia Vargas agrees with Johnson and Fortune on the importance of the cross for feminist theologies. Vargas highlights its importance as source of liberation and empowerment within Latina/Hispanic spiritualities. As the discussion continues, we need to find new ways to engage in meaningful conversation about the cross—ways that engage in the practices of listening across differences. To dismiss the symbol of the cross is to close ourselves off to levels of meaning about human sin and liberation in a world in which millions of women’s lives are marked by suffering and oppression.

**Christian Feminist Theological Discourse: On the Non-Neutrality of God-Talk**

In *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, Johnson highlights the finite character of all human language for God through the maxim, “the symbol of God functions.” As she writes, “neither abstract in content nor neutral in its effect, speaking about God sums up, unifies, and expresses a faith community’s sense of ultimate mystery, the world view and expectation of order devolving from this, and the

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101. Elizabeth Johnson also makes this point. See *She Who Is*, 254.

102. Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*, 5. This is an intentional play on Paul Ricoeur’s maxim, the symbol gives rise to thought.
The symbol of God functions in the human community in that it represents what it “takes to be the highest good, the profoundest truth, the most appealing beauty.” Symbols of God do more than point toward the reality that is God, they actually shape the ways in which we understand ourselves in relation to God and the world.

As God is infinite mystery beyond all imagining, we can never “exhaust the divine reality in worlds of concepts.” God’s incomprehensibility, however, also serves as a powerful reminder that all speech about God is limited and should not be used literally or exclusively. This does not mean that all symbols for God are equal in value. Rather, it necessitates a careful consideration of the ways in which symbols

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103. Ibid., 4.

104. Ibid.

105. Ibid., 40. Johnson illustrates this through a discussion of the ways in which the exclusive, literal, and patriarchal use of male terms for God have had a profound impact on women’s religious identity, denigrating their sense of dignity, power, and self-esteem. Male symbols for God, when appropriated in this way, function “to justify social structures of dominance/subordination and an androcentric world view inimical to the genuine and equal dignity of women, while simultaneously restricting the mystery of God.”

106. Ibid., 7.

107. Even Pseudo-Dionysius acknowledges this in his treatise *Mystical Theology*, although the criteria for evaluation are radically different. He writes, “Is it not more accurate to deny that drunkenness and rage can be attributed to him than to deny that we can apply to [God] the terms of speech and thought?” This is also evident in the structure of the *Divine Names*, as affirmations are arranged in a descending order that begins with the loftier and more congruous comparisons and proceeds down to the less appropriate ones. This follows the neoplatonic pattern of beginning with the One and moving out to the multiplicity of the created world (i.e. the process from the One and down into the
function to shape what we value and desire. The question becomes what are the criteria for “right speech about God”? In other words, by what standards do we evaluate theological constructions?


108. While interpretations of the death of Jesus have varied throughout the history of Western Christianity, most cluster around three motifs in the doctrine of atonement: *Christus Victor*, satisfaction, and moral influence. See Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A.G. Herbert (New York: Macmillan, 1969). The *Christus Victor* motif, predominant in the early Christian community, employs the imagery of a cosmic battle between good and evil in which Christ’s death is the ransom price paid to the devil in exchange for the freedom of sinful humanity. In the Middle Ages, two models developed in response to this: Anselm’s satisfaction theory and Abelard’s theory of moral influence, both which reject the idea of Christ’s death as ransom paid to the devil. Abelard lifts up Christ’s death as a powerful example of God’s love, one that could effect a subjective change in the conscious life of the believer. See Peter Abelard, “Exposition to the Epistle to the Romans,” in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, trans. and ed. Eugene R. Fairweather (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 276-287. In *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm presents a theory in which Christ freely and obediently stands in for humanity. In his death, Christ atones for humanity’s sin by paying a debt to God that restores God’s honor and merits a surplus of grace for humanity. This model paints a picture in which God demands a punishment for sin payable only by the death of Christ. See *Cur Deus Homo*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 260-356. A number of theologians have challenged this interpretation of Anselm’s satisfaction theory by arguing that the central issue is the restoration of the harmony and beauty of the universe—not divine honor. In either case, Anselm’s satisfactory theory presents a model in which divine justice demands compensation. As J. Denny Weaver illustrates, the influence of Anselm’s satisfaction atonement has been unparalleled in Christian history. See J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001). For a discussion of
singular emphasis on Christ’s suffering and death has led to the glorification of suffering and self-sacrifice. This, when appropriated in a patriarchal framework, has dangerous physical and psycho-social consequences for women.\textsuperscript{109} The symbolic character of religious language serves as a powerful reminder that Christian faith statements “do not adequately represent their object, but lead the mind from things readily known in this world into something transcendentally other.”\textsuperscript{110} As a symbol, the cross gives rise to multiple interpretations; interpretations that must arise in conversation with the lived experiences of the community.

\textbf{Edwina Sandys’ \textit{Christa}}

Feminist and womanist theologies have given attention to the inclusion of aesthetic sources as a way of expanding the historical memory of the community, engaging the moral wisdom and experiences of those on the margins, and re-imagining alternative interpretations of Anselm’s satisfaction theory, see R.W. Southern, \textit{Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Colin Gunton, \textit{The Actuality of Atonement} (Grand Rapid, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

\textsuperscript{109} When Jesus’ death on the cross is understood as the defining event of God’s reconciling work, it not only divorces the death of Christ from his life and resurrection, but it also suggests that suffering in and of itself is redemptive in nature. Tragically, this has been used as a tool to encourage people to emulate Christ as the Divine Victim, further supporting self-effacement of women and children. Moreover, the model of Christ as Divine Victim suggests that the greatest sign of love is found in a willingness to undergo suffering.

\textsuperscript{110} Roger Haight, \textit{The Future of Christology} (New York/London: Continuum, 2005), 85.
One such symbol is the female crucified Christ. Since the 1970s, a number of female representations of Christ crucified have arisen within contemporary art. One of the first female representations of Christ crucified was created by Edwina Sandys in 1974 for the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace. The statue, cast in bronze and approximately four feet in length, displays the battered body of a naked crucified woman. A crown of thorns adorns her head, and the


112. Other examples, as described by Julie Clague, include German-born Canadian sculptor Almuth Lutkenhaus-Lackey’s Crucified Woman (1976); Australian artist Arthur Boyd’s oil painting Crucifixion, Shoalhaven (1978-1980); Margaret Argyle’s Bosnian Christa (1993); Kiki Smith’s Fallen Woman, (1994); James Murphy’s Christine on the Cross (1984). At the same time Sandys’ sculpture was displayed at St. John the Divine, James Murphy’s Christine on the Cross was exhibited in the James Memorial Chapel at Union Theological Seminary. Murphy’s sculpture is the most graphic and disturbing image of ‘christa’ figures. It displays a naked woman, nailed to a cross, whose legs are spread and hands are nailed together above her head. These artistic developments in contemporary art are distinct from the tradition of artistic representations of female martyrs crucified and medieval imagery that expressed the notion of the motherhood of Christ. As Caroline Walker Bynum illustrates, these phenomena are complex and must be carefully distinguished from trends within modern art as significant developments have occurred in the post-enlightenment period in relation to the meaning of art and gender. See Caroline Walker Bynum, “... And Woman His Humanity: Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages,” in Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion (New York: Zone Books, 1992). In this project, I use the phrase “images of the female crucified Christ” to refer to a specific trend in twentieth-century modern art. For more detail, see essay by Julie Clague, “The Christa: Symbolizing My Humanity and My Pain,” Feminist Theology 14 (2005): 83-108.

113. This is reported in Julie Clague’s “Symbolism and the Power of Art: Female Representations of Christ Crucified,” in Bodies in Question: Gender, Religion, Text, eds. Darlene Bird and Yvonne Sherwood (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 32.
positioning of her arms and legs mirror those of more traditional images of the crucified Jesus. The statue did not gain much attention until 1984, when it was unveiled at the Holy Thursday services of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. At the time of its unveiling, as reported by the New York Times, the statue touched deep emotional and theological feelings. Those in support argued that a “woman on the cross emphasizes the teaching that God acted through Jesus to save all humanity, regardless of race, ethnic background, or sex.”¹¹⁴ Detractors saw the statue as a “travesty against historical and doctrinal truth.”¹¹⁵ Sandys’ Christa generated a storm of controversy and was removed from the cathedral eleven days later. Questions about the appropriateness of visual representation of the figure of Jesus Christ are highly contested. As Julie Clague illustrates, artistic depictions of images of the female body crucified are particularly controversial because they upset “theological orthodoxies concerning gender symbolism.”¹¹⁶ At the heart of this debate is an interpretation of a central theological claim in the Christian tradition: the incarnation of Christ.¹¹⁷

Sandys’ Christa raises a new set of questions in relation to the symbol of the beauty of the cross by placing a naked female body on the cross. Christa visually calls into question the ways in which the female body has been eroticized, suffering and self-


¹¹⁵. Ibid.


¹¹⁷. Ibid.
sacrificial love valorized, and the maleness of Christ idolatrized within the history of the Christian tradition. As an aesthetic and theological source, Christa visually challenges the appropriateness of Balthasar’s aesthetic appropriation of the symbol of the cross by bringing to the fore questions about Christianity’s role in the cultural practice of sexual violence against women.

**Conclusion**

All around the world, women are more vulnerable than men to poverty, disease, violence and discrimination. 118 In the context of theological discussions of beauty, this suffering cannot be ignored. Beauty must stake a claim in human flourishing, especially in the flourishing of women. To mark the brokenness of the cross in a “converted” sense of beauty, as Balthasar does, is to demand an understanding of divine beauty that stands in marked contrast to the social realities of women across the globe. It places women in a double-bind, sanctifying the scars of violence while eclipsing human possibilities for wholeness. It is to demand that beauty, in its most profound and most sacred sense, is always broken and can only be gathered and made whole by God. This sort of beauty passes too quickly over the human possibilities for transformation and lends toward a model of the God-world relationship in which the distance is simply too great to encompass the particularities of women’s interpreted experiences of suffering and

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salvation. In the face of such human suffering, theological aesthetics needs to empower
the community to think constructively and creatively about visions and strategies that
promote the full flourishing of all peoples.

In a world in which people can no longer “see” or “reckon” with beauty, we lose
our capacity for love.\textsuperscript{119} The imagination falters and we lose “the ability to imagine
strategies of resistance and ways of sustaining each other in the long struggle for
justice.”\textsuperscript{120} We need aesthetics because our hope cannot rely on perfect beginnings and
endings. Hope embodied is found in the collective space of mourning violence,
developing strategies of resistance in the face of oppression, and celebrating life’s
goodness and grace.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{119} Paraphrase of Hans Urs von Balthasar. See GL 1, 19.

\textsuperscript{120} Welch, \textit{A Feminist Ethic of Risk}, 46.
\end{flushright}
It is in the true, bloody Cross, which presupposes a true Incarnation and thus true human sexuality, that we have the touchstone of what is Christian. . . . What was predetermined does not become a real church until the Agapētos, the beloved Son, has shed his blood as a human being and as a man for his bride—which is undeniably a human, feminine bride—in order to give her from himself the form that is to be hers forever. Since human sexuality serves this mystery, it is sanctified sacramentally; but at the same time, it is as a whole transposed above itself. It lends to the nuptiality between God and the world the red hue of life—the colour of sex and of flowing blood—but only to pass away, in itself, and to enter the greater sphere of which it is the ‘mystery.’ (Hans Urs von Balthasar, The Glory of the Lord, volume 7)

At the center of Balthasar’s theology is “a nuptial relationship centered in the cross.”¹ In his aesthetics and dramatics, nuptiality and the cross mutually inform one another so as to define Christian love, human and divine. Here, sexuality and the cross intermingle in the new covenant between God and creation.² While Balthasar’s theology retrieves the erotic and relational dimensions of Christian redemption, it is deeply

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embedded in a gender symbolism that lends toward a pattern of relations marked by 
subordination and domination.

The next two chapters will proceed by way of a double reading of Balthasar’s 
appropriation of the imagery of a nuptial relationship centered in the cross. This chapter 
will examine the ways in which the nuptial and erotic dimensions of this metaphor give 
shape to Balthasar’s theological anthropology. Special attention will be given to the 
motifs of gender and embodiment in Balthasar’s construction of a theology of grace. 
The next chapter will explore the ways in which nuptiality informs Balthasar’s 
soteriology.

In Truth is Symphonic, Balthasar employs the analogy of a symphony in order to 
describe the revelation of God as an orchestra of creation attuned to the harmony of 
God’s promise.\(^3\) This analogy points to a central motif in Balthasar’s aesthetics: to see 
the whole in its parts. A symphony tells a story through a range of themes and musical 
melodies. The melodies are played out individually and collectively to form a whole, a 
harmony. In order to understand each part, one must perceive the whole. Only at the 
concert’s end can one fully appreciate the intricacy of each particular movement. One of 
the central melodies within Balthasar’s trilogy is the nuptial metaphor. The bride and 
bridegroom relationship not only signifies the God-world relationship, but it also is

\(^3\) Thomas Norris makes this point in “The Symphonic Unity of His Theology: 
An Overview,” in The Beauty of Christ: An Introduction to the Theology of Hans Urs von 
This imagery also appears in Hans Urs von Balthasar, Seeing the Form, vol. 1 of The 
Fessio and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 247-252. Hereafter cited 
as GL 1.
prominent in defining social and ecclesial relations. For Balthasar, Christian attunement to the “rhythm of God” is mediated through the cultivation of spousal relations with Christ and the Church. As we will see in this chapter, to defy one’s gendered role within this dramatic love-relationship is to disrupt the entire harmony of the cosmos; it is to reject the offer of divine grace.

**Aesthetics and the Need for New Perception**

In *The Heart of the World*, Balthasar taps into the profound sense of alienation that marks the human condition. He writes of the pain of loneliness and isolation that accompanies superficial relationships:

> How far it is from one being to its closest neighbor! And even if they love each other and wave to one another from island to island, even if they attempt to exchange solitudes and pretend they have unity, how much more painfully does disappointment then fall upon them when they touch the invisible bars—the cold glass pane against which they hurl themselves like captive birds. No one can tear down his own dungeon; no one knows who inhabits the next cell.

Balthasar describes the human condition as grasping at relationships but never really knowing those who stand beside us. We seek to be in genuine relationship but only end up thwarting our efforts as we reach for others. Included in the pain of alienation is also the painful realization of our own limitations in “soul, body, thought, intuition, [and]

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endeavor.”⁶ The paradox of human existence is that the more we grasp after knowledge, possession, or status, the more we are imprisoned by our own desires. We long to be noticed, to be accepted, and to be loved. We want our lives to make a difference in the world. We are beings who constantly strive after something more. And, most of the time, we do not get what we expect.

While the drama of human existence may begin with a tragic note, it cannot end there. According to Balthasar, the truth of the matter rests in the fact that “we may be what we vainly long after.”⁷ This is because “we can realize simply in our existence what we so painfully fail to achieve in our knowing and our willing. We would like to give ourselves away, and we have already been given away. We look for one to whom we could abandon ourselves, and already we have long been accepted.”⁸ Yet, our inability to see the truth of our own being, of our own possibilities, cannot be the result of a cruel trick played by God, as God is infinite love and compassion. Rather, the essence of the problem lies with our perception, in our inability to see the world as it is in its essence: to see that all existence is a work of love. It is for this reason that theology needs to be illumined by aesthetics. We need a new way of seeing existence, of encountering God. This call for a new perception is articulated at the onset of Herrlichkeit as follows: “one must possess a spiritual eye capable of perceiving (wahnnehmen) the forms of existence

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8. Ibid.
with awe.”9 According to Balthasar, in the modern world “our eyes lose their acumen for form and we have become accustomed to read things by starting from the bottom and working our way up, rather than by working from the whole to the parts. . . . [we] no longer have a vision for wholeness.”10 Thus, the issue is not so much one of finding or discovering the truth of existence as it is one of “unveiling” what has been there all along and is the “one thing which lends value to whatever we might be by allowing us to participate in its own intrinsic worth”: the incarnation of the Word of God.11 For Balthasar, the ek-stasis of the divine life into the world through the incarnation and the cross is the “fountainhead of all aesthetics.”12 Perception of—more accurately, participation in—this form gives meaning to human existence.

**Participation as Rapture and Beholding**

Balthasar’s aesthetics are concerned with the self-disclosure of God in the historical form in which divine splendor is revealed and received.13 Specifically, all beauty is “objectively located at the intersection of two moments which Thomas Aquinas calls *species* and *lumen* (‘form’ and ‘splendor’).”14 Form, or Gestalt, is what gives an object its shape, its uniqueness: “[a]s form, the beautiful can be materially grasped and

9. GL 1, 24.
10. Ibid., 25.
11. Ibid., 27.
12. Ibid., 29.
13. Ibid., 109.
even subjected to numerical calculation.”

Yet, this does not mean all forms are beautiful. Rather, “the form as it appears to us is beautiful only because of the delight that it arouses in us is founded upon the fact that, in it, the truth and goodness of the depths of reality are manifested and bestowed.” In other words, the beauty of the form lies in our perception of it as “the splendour, as the glory of Being.” It is in this sense that Balthasar reclaims a place for beauty in the realm of ontology alongside goodness and truth.

This relationship between form and radiance, or particularity and universality, rests upon three foundational claims in Balthasar’s aesthetics. First, the form appears to us. Already it becomes clear that Balthasar’s appropriation of the aesthetic category of Gestalt extends beyond its traditional use. Form is a manifestation of God’s grace in and through the particularities of the material world. It is God’s self-gift to us in creation. Thus, the incarnation of the Word is the pinnacle form, or Gestalt. Second, and related to the first claim, the content of the form “does not lie behind” the form, but resides within it. That is, the beautiful form not only manifests a splendor, but its radiance also comes

15. Ibid., 118.

16. Ibid. Emphasis added.

17. Ibid., 119.

18. As Aidan Nichols points out, the categories of form and splendor are recurring elements in almost “every major aesthetic theory received from the past.” However, in Balthasar’s aesthetics they cannot be separated from one another. See Aidan Nichols, The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide through Balthasar’s Aesthetics (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 23.
from within. Beauty “brings with it a self-evidence that en-lightens without mediation.”\textsuperscript{19} Beauty, as the self-manifestation of God’s grace, illuminates the “eyes” of all who “see the form.” Finally, beauty is attractive; it arouses in us a sense of joy and delight. The beautiful taps into a “real presence of depths” and draws us out of ourselves into something more. This happens at the level of ontological transformation and personal decision. As Balthasar describes it, “we are ‘enraptured’ by our contemplation of these depths and are ‘transported’ to them.”\textsuperscript{20} The attractive quality of beauty is akin to the passionate enrapture that arises out of erotic love.\textsuperscript{21}

In sum, beauty as revelation is the self-manifestation of God. This manifestation is given to us in the context of the world and its particular forms. Creation, as the outpouring of the divine life, is expressive of this beauty. Yet, the expression of beauty is such that it “requires an engaged relation between the knower and the object.”\textsuperscript{22} The splendor of divine beauty “penetrates the beholder’s heart” in such a way that it elicits a response. Beauty’s address to us is a personal address, akin to the desirous call of a lover who calls to his beloved: “Come!”\textsuperscript{23} Creation’s encounter with the objective dimensions of beauty (form and splendor) is “characterized by the two moments of

\begin{enumerate}
\item GL 1, 37.
\item Ibid., 119.
\item Ibid., 122.
\item Christopher Steck, \textit{The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar} (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 17.
\item GL 7, 476. The reference is to Revelation 22.17. The choice of language is intentional. The one who calls is always masculine for Balthasar.
\end{enumerate}
beholding and of being enraptured.24 The movements of beholding and being enraptured mutually inform one another. To behold is the movement of perception. It is a “‘coming to see’ the form in which God’s Word comes to us, gives itself to us and loves us.”25 It is important to note that for Balthasar, the act of perception is an act of receptivity where the “accent always falls on what is being shown.”26 As Edward T. Oakes suggests, “hearing is the central theological act of perception.”27 As Balthasar describes it, “that which is heard comes upon us without our being informed in advance. And it lays hold of us without our being asked.”28 Thus, paradoxically, to behold is to be taken up; it is to be grasped by God’s grace. It is in this sense that perception presupposes being enraptured, for “in this act of seeing, there already lies the ‘rapture’: a breaking out from ourselves in the power of our being called and affected, in the power of the divine love which draws near to us and enables us to receive itself.”29 This

24. GL 1, foreword.
25. GL 7, 389.
26. GL 1, 313.
27. Edward T. Oakes, The Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar (New York: Continuum, 1997), 137. In Balthasar’s theology, seeing is much more akin to hearing than visual perception. Placing emphasis on hearing stresses the quality of being taken by surprise that marks Balthasar’s aesthetics and, consequently, his understanding of the human encounter with divine revelation. Unlike the act of seeing, wherein one can close one’s eyes and choose not to encounter an object of beauty, it is harder to close one’s ears to sound. While this distinction may not hold the same meaning in the age of the iPod, it certainly was true at the time these texts were written. Balthasar’s emphasis on hearing also reflects a life-long engagement with music.
29. GL 7, 389.
relationship of beholding and being enraptured shapes Balthasar’s interpretation of faith and grace.

**Receptivity and Grace**

During his time as a Jesuit novice, Balthasar studied under Henri de Lubac. Through de Lubac, Balthasar was introduced to the *ressourcement* movement of the early twentieth century, which sought ecclesial reform through a retrieval of patristic sources.

As Kevin Mongrain suggests, in the eyes of de Lubac a return to the “symbolic theology of the Fathers” opened the door to a new vision of theology that was fundamentally distinct from the prevailing dialectical methods of scholasticism and neo-scholasticism. This was attractive to Balthasar, as he considered neo-scholastic theology—in its reliance on methods of theoretical abstraction—to bypass the glory of God. As such, the work of de Lubac had a profound influence on Balthasar’s approach to theological method as well as his interpretation of the relation of grace and nature. The central idea articulated in de Lubac’s *Surnaturel* is that human nature, created in the image of God, has an


31. Ibid.

32. This sentiment arises out of his frustration with his theological education as a Jesuit novice. He is often quoted as describing his theological studies as “a grim struggle with the dreariness of theology.” Balthasar’s well-documented frustration with neo-scholasticism should not be interpreted as an outright rejection of Thomism. Rather, he takes issue with interpreters of Thomas’s theology. In fact, one of the fundamental differences between Karl Rahner and Balthasar arises out of their approach to Thomas. Balthasar reads the *Summa* through its reliance on patristic sources, whereas Rahner reads Thomas in conjunction with Kant.
intrinsic desire “to surpass itself and find its ultimate fulfillment” in God. Moreover, human nature can attain “likeness to God if it respond[s] to the vision of God’s glory presented to it in God’s gracious actions of revelation in history.” Contemplation of God’s glorious vision ignites a passionate desire for God in the human heart, leading us into a more intimate union with the divine. It is in this sense that grace in-forms nature. As noted earlier, perception of the beautiful form—in the case of Balthasar’s aesthetics—draws us into participation with the divine and transforms our nature. We perceive the beauty of God by “‘transposing our eye’ to God’s point of view.” This is not to suggest that we can literally see the world through God’s eyes. Rather, the notion that our vision can be transposed carries undertones of the patristic concept of divinization, whereby redemption in Christ is effected through a restoration of the image of God in the human person. Grace is not external to human nature; it becomes embedded in human nature through our participation in the divine life.

For example, consider the imagery of the seal and wax from Pseudo-Dionysius’ treatise The Divine Names. In order to illustrate the relation of image and likeness as analogous participation, Pseudo-Dionysius gives the following example:

33. Mongrain, Systematic Thought, 8.
34. Ibid.
35. GL1, 107. The entire quote is as follows: “By ‘transposing our eye’ to God’s point of view, however, we can now begin to see it, and, in eternity, we will behold this beauty openly with God.”
36. Pseudo-Dionysius is a central source informing Balthasar’s construction of grace and eros. See “The Divine Names” in Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works,
There are numerous impressions of the seal and these all have a share in the original prototype; it is the same whole seal in each of the impressions and none participates in only a part. . . . Maybe someone will say that the seal is not totally identical in all the reproductions of it. My answer is that this is not because of the seal itself, which gives itself completely and identically to each. The substances which receive a share of the seal are different. Hence the impressions of the one entire identical archetype are different. If the substances are soft, easily shaped, and smooth, if no impressions have been made on them already, if they are not hard and resistant, if they are not excessively soft and melting, the imprint on them will be clear, plain, and long-lasting. But if the material is lacking in this receptivity, this would be the cause of its mistaken or unclear imprint or of whatever else results from the unreceptivity of its participation.  

This passage illuminates a central aspect of Balthasar’s theology of grace: the importance of receptivity for participation. In this analogy, the degree to which the image of the seal is impressed on the wax is a direct result of the receptivity of the wax. If the wax is too hard or too soft, the impress of the image will be distorted. In a similar sense, we can understand the relation between grace and nature and between image and likeness. The degree to which the image of God is impressed upon our souls is proportionately related to our openness and receptivity. The category of receptivity in Balthasar’s theology is linked to a disposition of the will that is made possible through Christ and is cultivated through Christian virtue and a life of prayer.  

Thus, the human capacity to image God, and to reflect divine beauty, is fundamentally linked to a particular use of human

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37. Ibid., 62-63.

38. GL 1, 374ff. This is no way suggests that our receptivity is the solely dependent upon the human will. Human receptivity, after the Fall, becomes possible through Christ’s perfect receptivity.
freedom: that which is marked by a posture of obedience and *indiferencia*. Through receptivity, grace in-forms nature.

Yet, there is another aspect of Balthasar’s interpretation of grace and nature that is not represented here: the role of the nuptial relationship. While it certainly can be said that Balthasar *ressources* the relation of grace and nature by drawing upon the contributions of the Greek Fathers, grace also in-forms nature through a “divine ‘begetting’ in the ‘womb’ of nature.” Balthasar highlights the contributions of nineteenth-century mystical writer Matthias Scheeben in order to illustrate the nuptial relation of grace and nature.

In Balthasar’s trilogy, textual placement often functions to reinforce theological and methodological claims. For example, the very structure of the trilogy reflects the principal foundation of Balthasar’s theological methodology, which insists that all speech

39. Balthasar entered the Jesuits, a community whose existence is informed by the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius. The central event of the *Spiritual Exercises* is found in “self-abandonment to God’s call in choosing God’s choice.” Yet, in order to “choose God’s choice,” one must first cultivate a disposition of total availability. When we are confronted with God’s call and freely choose to follow Christ, our *indiferencia* is transformed into obedience. Thus, the human response to Beauty’s address is couched in terms of obedience. Yet, this obedience is not a passive obedience, it is a discerning receptivity. See Werner Loser, S.J., “The Ignatian Exercises in the Work of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” in *Hans Urs Von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, ed. David L. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 103-120.

40. While Kevin Mongrain presents a compelling argument, his patristic retrieval of Balthasar’s theology bypasses this aspect. Mongrain describes the relation between grace and nature as “grace perfects nature.” While this is certainly true, using the language of perfection removes the erotic undertones accompanying Balthasar’s construction of “grace in-forms” nature. Throughout the text, Balthasar employs the language of penetration, overshadowing, womb, and begetting.

41. GL 1, 111.
about God not only begins with God’s Word, but participates in the Word.\textsuperscript{42} In the text, Scheeben signals the movement from an aesthetic theology to a theological aesthetics, as he “replaces the aesthetic theology of Romanticism with the outlines of a methodologically founded ‘theological aesthetics.’”\textsuperscript{43} Here, Balthasar is referring to the way in which Scheeben develops a theory of beauty “from the data of revelation itself” as opposed to beginning with the categories of a worldly philosophical aesthetic.\textsuperscript{44}

Specifically, Balthasar admires the way in which Scheeben’s \textit{Nature and Grace} incorporates the concept of marriage “in every aspect of dogmatic theology,” making it “one great doctrine of \textit{eros.”}\textsuperscript{45} The central concept, as described by Balthasar, is that grace in-forms through a divine “begetting” in the “womb” of nature:

Matter-and-form, a philosophical pair of concepts, is deepened and ‘transfigured’ by Scheeben into the bride/bridegroom relationship. Such a relationship is already found in the natural relationship of spirit and body and in their fusing together to form \textit{one} being. As opposed to ‘pure creation,’ the engendering and shaping power from above needs the ‘womb of matter’ which is to be elevated and spiritualized; and the spirit itself needs this ‘womb’ in order to reveal its engendering life-force. . . . [F]or him it is important that Paul uses this analogy not to establish the autonomy of two human hypostases, but in the sense of the sexual difference between that which engenders from above and that which conceives, bears, and gives birth from below. Such an understanding of the

\textsuperscript{42} Balthasar’s trilogy is tightly structured in a hermeneutical circle that begins with aesthetics \textit{[theophany]} and progresses through dramatics \textit{[theopraxis]} to logic \textit{[theology]}. The revelation of divine glory \textit{[theophany]} in the world is attractive and draws one powerfully into the action of God. God’s action \textit{[theopraxis]} in the world, as poured forth on the cross, reconciles the world. Speech about God \textit{[theologic]} arises out our participation in God’s action in the world.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 105.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 117.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 109.
analogy is presupposed in order that the creaturely ‘likeness’ (*Abbild*) might correspond to the supernatural archetype (*Urbild*) Christ/Mary, Christ/Church, and, in Christ himself, the relation between his two natures.  

The nuptial relationship not only binds together God and creation, but it also sets forth parameters for the use of human freedom. Grace in this model is more “than just a (moral) ‘invitation and encouragement;’” it is a dynamic influence that binds the lover to Love itself, which shapes the interior disposition of the will toward “conception.”  

Notably, this requires a “feminine” (receptive) attitude toward grace. In Balthasar’s assessment, the metaphor of marriage, when appropriated through the lens of faith, “allows him [Scheeben] to grasp certain *fundamental laws of Being* in such a vital manner that he is then able to illumine faith’s mystery from the standpoint of ontology.”  

Here, in the sexual union of the bride and bridegroom, God enters the “creature’s ‘womb’ in order to fructify it.”  

In this sense, creation is drawn into the divine life through a nuptial embrace, wherein “[b]efore the beautiful—no, not really *before* but *within* the beautiful—the whole person quivers.”  

In the graced encounter of the nuptial relationship, the whole person is “taken up” into the beautiful, and is “now fully

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46. Ibid., 111. Italics original.

47. Ibid., 112.

48. Ibid., 110. Emphasis added. As we will see, this is an important concept in Balthasar’s interpretation of sexual difference. Marriage is a metaphysical concept for Balthasar. Balthasar—like Scheeben—does not attempt to articulate an understanding of marriage by drawing upon experience.

49. Ibid., 116.

50. Ibid., 247. Italics original.
subordinate to it, determined by it, animated by it."\textsuperscript{51} Thus, grace is a two-fold movement involving a pattern of divine activity and human receptivity. In the encounter with grace, the Christian must cultivate a disposition of total availability that is attuned to Christ and to the Church.

I highlight this in order to draw attention to the ways in which nuptiality thoroughly informs Balthasar’s construction of nature, grace, and freedom. The spousal metaphor not only articulates the essence or “whatness” of creation, but it also articulates the relation of finite and infinite freedom in erotic terms. To be “in-formed” is to allow God to “penetrate” the “womb” of one’s life. The point I wish to make is that not only is Balthasar’s theology a gendered theology, but it is also an erotically charged theology.\textsuperscript{52} Moreover, as we shall see in greater detail in the following chapter, the gendered aspects of Balthasar’s theology of grace and, consequently, his ontology are important in understanding the nature of redemption. Specifically, his appropriation of the Irenaean motif of recapitulation is a gendered concept in which all “feminine creatures” are oriented toward a male headship. We can find an articulation of this in the final volume of \textit{The Glory of the Lord}. Here, Balthasar suggests that “man is ‘the image and glory of God’ and has ‘Christ as his Head,’ while woman is ‘the glory of man’ and has the man as her ‘head.’”\textsuperscript{53} While a number of authors have argued that “gender permeates every

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{53} GL 7, 478. This is a clear reference to 1 Corinthians 11: 3.
aspect of Balthasar’s theology,” few have engaged in a reading that explores the implications of this for his aesthetics. 54

One of the central premises of Balthasar’s theology is that aesthetics draws us into God’s redemptive work in the world. To “see the form” is to be drawn into divine eros; it is to fall in love. 55 Ultimately, for Balthasar, eros is at the center of the Christian life and theology. Erotic love grounds a radically relational understanding of the human person and the divine. It is through a divine eros that beauty is revealed. Yet, in Balthasar’s theology, eros is also an ekstatic movement that rests upon a construction of theological and sexual difference.

**Revelation, Metaphysics, and the Analogy of Being**

As Larry Chapp notes, Balthasar’s theology of revelation arises in response to the two-fold movement that began in nineteenth-century liberal theologies, which sought to get around the problem of historical contingency by making a turn toward religious interiority as the locus of revelation. 56 Balthasar rejects this perspective on the grounds

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56. Larry Chapp, “Revelation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, eds. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 12. As Chapp notes, Balthasar sees Lessing as the paradigmatic example of this approach to theology. Lessing, like many philosophers of the 18th century, was deeply critical of argumentation that based proof for God’s existence upon “miraculous”
that it “functionaliz[es]’ Christ as an exemplary means to an end of moral goodness and social betterment.”57 Furthermore, in Balthasar’s perspective, any account of revelation must be able to address the particular and the universal nature of divine self-manifestation in the world, of the “ever-changing relationship between promise and fulfillment.”58 Like Karl Barth, Balthasar argues for the self-authenticating nature of all revelation. In revelation, it is God who speaks to us. Our affective contemplation of divine glory incites joy in our hearts and elicits a free response to God’s love. As Balthasar explains, revelation “is the foundation of a dialectic, of ever increasing range and intensity, between event and vision, in which the element of the tremendous, inherent in the event itself, nevertheless overwhelms the person contemplating it and then to such historical events or ecclesial authority. Lessing argues that the contingent truths of history cannot ground—with certainty—the necessary and universal truths of reason. For Lessing, historical testimony can only be accepted on the basis of the reliability of that testimony. One cannot give unqualified certainty to testimony unless it can be verified by one’s own firsthand experience. In this model, the basis of belief is found within the subject, as evidenced by our moral actions in the world. Thus, revelation serves the purpose of aiding human reason to inform moral action. God reveals to humanity, through the scriptures and the person of Christ, knowledge that is “perfectly adapted to the knowledge, capacities, inclinations of the then existing people.” Yet, as times change and knowledge accumulates from generation to generation, the people of God acquire new skills [reasoning advances] and “out-grow” the forms of divine revelation communicated in the past. Ultimately, Lessing believes that the time will come when we are no longer dependent upon divine revelation to inform our moral actions. Human history is not only a unified history, but it is moving on a continuum toward fulfillment and moral perfection. See Gotthold Lessing, “The Education of the Human Race,” in Lessing’s Theological Writings, ed. Henry Chadwick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1956), 82-98.


a degree that he is left with no alternative except to return to simple discipleship.”

As we recall, the experience of revelation is such that it demands a response from the very “depths of our being.”

This notion situates Balthasar’s theology of revelation within the realm of metaphysics. For Balthasar, all theological reflection upon Being arises out of the fundamental human experience of being loved into existence by another. Drawing upon Martin Buber’s construction of the “I-Thou” relationship, our own subjectivity is awakened in “the experience of a Thou.” Through its mother's smile, a young child learns “that it is contained, affirmed and loved in a relationship which is incomprehensively encompassing, already actual, sheltering and nourishing.”

We are awakened to consciousness and awareness of our self within loving relationship. This relationship grounds our capacity for response and our connection to others. As we mature, we experience ourselves as free and contingent beings. We have the freedom to make choices, but these choices are limited by the particular and historical situation into which we are born. Our experience is marked by a “fullness” and “poverty” of freedom.

We realize that we are not our own. We are embraced by a love infinitely beyond what we can even imagine. This poverty and fullness of freedom is analogically

59. Ibid., 115.
62. GL 5, 625-627.
related to the fullness and poverty of divine freedom. God’s nature is defined by “free reciprocal relations” in which “self-donation [kenosis] is perfectly coincident with an infinite self-possession.”63 In this sense, God’s “poverty,” also termed God’s self-gift, is infinite.64 In Balthasar’s view, the only place where self-emptying perfectly coincides with self-possession, in metaphysical terms, is within the Trinitarian Godhead. Another way of saying this is that the ground of Being, for Balthasar, is never singular. The ground of all being is an interpersonal communion marked by a reciprocity that encompasses infinite distance and infinite presence. This not only defines Christian love, but also becomes the prototype for the God-world relationship. Balthasar’s ontology is one in which Being is characterized by a love relation that bears the mark of identity-in-difference. Therefore, the primary construction of the God-world relationship is that of analogical relation, of identity-in-difference.

In volume five of his theological aesthetics, Balthasar substantiates this claim through a detailed description of the history of metaphysics and argues that pantheistic and theistic descriptions of the God-world relationship fail because they end up favoring one pole over the other, resulting in a static understanding of the human person and

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63. Chapp, “Revelation,”18. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, The Dramatis Personae: Man in God, vol. 2 of Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 256. Here Balthasar articulates this as: “[t]he fact that the absolute freedom of self-possession can understand itself, according to its absolute nature, as limitless self-giving—this is not the result of anything external to itself; yet it is the result of its own nature, so much so that, apart from this self-giving, it would not be itself.” Hereafter cited as TD 2.

64. GL 5, 627.
God.⁶⁵ According to Balthasar, neither pantheistic nor theistic constructions have held enough space for the free movement of God and the human person. When the difference between God and creation is erased, not only is the extravagance of God’s love minimized, but humanity cannot be “lifted up” into the divine life.⁶⁶ Revelation is “to be viewed as the dynamic transformation” of our existence into the “the very heart of Trinitarian relations.”⁶⁷

Yet, there is another dimension of the “I-Thou” relationship that cannot be overlooked: its nuptial and erotic undertones. According to Balthasar, the content of divine revelation is God’s “self-gift to us of agape flowing out in the nuptial love between Christ and the Church, a love which can certainly be called eros in its highest and most original sense.”⁶⁸ In other words, the self-donation and self-possession of God is an intimacy akin to the intimacy shared in a marital relationship. It is the passionate, sensuous love described in the Song of Solomon between bride and bridegroom.⁶⁹ While


⁶⁸. Balthasar, Word Made Flesh, 123.

⁶⁹. Nuptial imagery has long had a place in the Christian tradition. It can be traced back to the erotic dialogue between a lover and his beloved in the Hebrew Scripture’s Songs of Songs. The first Christian interpretations of the Song of Songs are the commentaries of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. As Richard Kearney notes, both these texts are marked by a strong “determination” to remove any physical sense of eros
nuptial imagery has been used to describe the relationship of Christ and the Church, the way in which Balthasar extends this metaphor into the life of God is unique. As Rowan Williams explains, in Balthasar’s theology, “every created difference has its analogical foundation in God [and] this must apply to sexual differentiation as well.” Therefore, we can speak analogically of a sexual difference within the Godhead wherein the Son’s activity is marked by a feminine receptivity and the Father’s activity is characterized by masculine activity. In this way, the interpersonal communion that characterizes the ground of all being is a nuptial encounter.


71. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ*, vol. 3 of *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 283. Hereafter cited as TD 3. Balthasar describes this as follows: “For if the Logos proceeds eternally from the eternal Father, is he not at least quasi-feminine vis-à-vis the latter? And if he is the ‘Second Adam’, surely he is incomplete until God has formed the woman from his side?” In part, this justification is
Identity-in-Difference and Sexual Difference

Freedom, for Balthasar, is actualized in relation. Through our encounters with others, we acquire—or awaken to—our sense of subjectivity.\textsuperscript{72} We become aware that our freedom is not unlimited through our encounters with others in the world.\textsuperscript{73} That is, we have the capacity to choose, but the actualization of these choices is not always within the realm of our control. Moreover, as actors in the drama of finite and infinite freedom, there is no stepping off the stage. Finite freedom is “‘set loose’ in the realm of infinite freedom and so finds itself, right from the start, in a realm of meaning, governed by the infinite ‘idea’ of the Son, which, as the prototype of creation, uniformly permeates it.”\textsuperscript{74}

Our freedom, like our being, exists within the freedom of God. We discern the appropriate human response through an active engagement with the scriptures and the doctrine of the cross. In Christ, the exercise of freedom takes the form of a kenotic “letting be.” Christ’s kenosis not only models for us the Christian response to God’s Word, but it also makes possible our response.\textsuperscript{75} Therefore, the appropriate activity of human freedom always takes the form of a response, by “giving an answering word [\textit{Ant-}\

\begin{itemize}
\item based upon the notion that the principle that comes forth from God is depicted in female terms in the Hebrew Scriptures (i.e. \textit{Shekinah, ruach, memra}).
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{72} TD 2, 203.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 207.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 276.
\textsuperscript{75} Christ makes possible a human response to God through the \textit{admirable commercium}. This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.
Wort].”76 This claim grounds the dramatic aspects of Balthasar’s theological anthropology in two very distinct ways. First, the human person cannot be defined outside of his or her dramatic performance.77 We are “actors in a play without having been asked” and cannot “step outside of the dramatic action” in order to reflect upon which part we will play.78 Second, our action—the whole of our identity—is articulated in response to God’s initiative. We can respond affirmatively or negatively, but wort [humanity] is always an Ant-Wort.79 As beings made in the image and likeness of the one who is “ever-greater,” we are “more than what can be included in a conceptually clear definition.”80 Not only does an aspect of the divine mystery always remain within us; it defines our very personhood.

While this dramatic anthropology is highly relational, it is also deeply embedded in a gender symbolism in which women are subordinate to men. Balthasar describes the

76. TD 2, 291. It is worth quoting the passage in full as it highlights the link between finite and infinite freedom: “We render thanks for our selves, therefore, by responding, giving an answering word [Ant-Wort], to the fact that we have been called a ‘thou.’ We do this by progressively incarnating the word of thanks in our lives. This, in turn, is the progressive self-realization of finite freedom within the context of infinite freedom. More precisely, it is the realization, by finite ‘copy’ [Abbild] of the definitive model [Vorbild] exhibited by the infinite prototype [Urbild]; in this way finite freedom can truly participate in infinite freedom.” It is important to note that Balthasar also uses Abbild to describe “likeness” to God and Urbild refers to the image of God in Christ. Thus, it is through Christ we participate in infinite freedom.

77. TD 2, 245.

78. Ibid., 341.

79. In German, wort has a double reference and means man and word. Ant-Wort translates to answer as well as over and against Word.

80. TD 2, 345.
human condition as marked by three central anthropological polarities: spirit/body, man/woman, and individual/community. The polarity between man/woman is of primary significance in Balthasar’s theology, as sexual difference not only permeates the human condition in body and spirit, but it also “stand[s] as a paradigm of that community dimension which characterizes [our] entire nature.”

As human beings, our finitude is marked by inescapable otherness. As we will never completely know what it is to be divine, in a parallel fashion, we will never know what it is to be another individual or another gender. At the heart of this configuration is the notion that we cannot, by our own doing, exist in unity. As human beings, we are always seeking fulfillment, but this fulfillment cannot be attained apart from male-female and individual-community reciprocity.

The only person in whom these differences are overcome is the person of Christ. Yet, this reconciliation of differences is not a mutual coming together in unity; it is a dramatic encounter that involves a movement from one polarity to the other. It is not the case that Christ is both male and female, although the actions of Jesus are both feminine and masculine. Instead,

wherever human existence includes an either/or, Jesus Christ can only enter the human sphere at one pole, in order from that vantage point, to go on to fulfill the other pole. This becomes concrete in the man/woman relationship: because of the nature, relative priority of man (given an equality of both persons), the Word of God, on account of its absolute priority, can only enter the world of the human in the form of a man, ‘assimilating’ the woman to itself (Eph. 5:27) in such a way that she, who comes from him and is at the same time ‘brought to him by God, is

81. TD 2, 364. Lucy Gardner and David Moss make this point in “Something Like Time, Something Like the Sexes—an Essay in Reception,” in Balthasar at the End of Modernity, eds. Lucy Gardner et al. (Edinburgh: T &T Clark, 1999).
equal to him, ‘flesh of his flesh’. This shows us that even in the first tension, that [sic] between spirit and body, a new rhythm has been established.\footnote{TD 2, 411. Emphasis added.}

Thus, the incarnation, as God’s new creation, not only reaffirms the pattern of creation found in Genesis 2 in which Woman is second, but it also orders the pattern of redemption within a nuptial framework as indicated by the reference to Ephesians 5:27. God enters the world as the bridegroom and brings the Bride-Church into a new being that is “spotless” without the stain of sin.

The underlying assumption is that the polarities marking the human condition (body/spirit, individual/community, and man/woman) exist in a dissonance, which is irreconcilable apart from Christ. We become aware of the distance within each polarity as we look at Christ—who is a model of the perfect integration. The incarnation, as it is ordered to the passion, reorients this pattern toward new life in Christ.\footnote{This is a central motif in \textit{Mysterium Paschale}. God’s grace does not destroy nature in order to redeem it. God’s grace redeems by “in-forming” nature. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{Mysterium Paschale}, trans. Aidan Nichols, OP (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990). Yet, this reorienting denotes a hierarchical pattern in which the masculine redeems and redefines the feminine; the spirit redeems and redefines the body; and the individual is redeemed and redefined through community, thereby associating one dimension of the polarity more closely to the divine than the other. In terms of the first polarity, God as spirit descends into the world so as to “lift up” the body, bringing it into union with the spirit: “[t]he Platonic Eros, striving upward from the bodily to the spiritual divine, is overtaken in the event of Agape and brought to share in a fulfillment that goes far beyond its own

\footnote{TD 2, 411. Emphasis added.}
upward thrust, but this cannot take place unless it, too, is con-crucified together with the
love of Christ." In a parallel fashion, the full meaning of the individual person is only
realized in the Church. God enters the world as a unique individual and “integrates
individual persons into a living organism of Christ.” In the man/woman polarity, whose
division is as much a result of biological difference as it is a longing for partnership,
Christ enters the world as a perfect partner and thus draws both man and woman into a
suprasexual fulfillment. The reciprocal “fruitfulness of man and woman,” tainted by guilt
and death (as narrated by Augustine), is “surpassed by the ultimate priority of the
‘Second Adam,’ who, in suprasexual fruitfulness, brings a ‘companion,’ the Church, into
being.” Christ as the bridegroom comes into the world, gives birth to a feminine
counterpart, and redeems sex itself. This use of the nuptial metaphor spiritualizes
sexual activity and fruitfulness:

The sexual man/woman fruitfulness need be no longer the exclusive model of
human fruitfulness. On the contrary, this form of fruitfulness is seen to be the
purely worldly metaphor of a unique fruitfulness that bursts through the cycle of
successive generations and . . . is signed with the sign of Agape-death, which is
the ultimate bodily form adopted by the spiritual Word of God.

84. TD 2, 413. Note the erotic language used to describe this process. The body
is “overtaken” and “overwhelmed” with the love of Christ. Moreover, the body must be
con-crucified in order to be redeemed, to be elevated to the level of the “spiritual” divine.
85. Ibid., 414.
86. Ibid., 413.
87. We see a similar motif in Pope John Paul II’s theology of the body. The
practical implications this will be discussed in detail in chapter five. See Pope John Paul
II, Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body, trans. Michael Waldstein,
(Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2006).
88. TD 2, 413-414.
Yet, if sex and fruitfulness are the elements redeemed, then why insist that God entered the world as Man in order to fulfill Woman? The answer to this question has to do with the way in which Balthasar links sexual difference to activity in volume three of the *Theo-drama*. This structure not only functions to define the God-world relationship, but it also works to define social and ecclesial roles. Moreover, because sexual difference informs theological difference in Balthasar’s interpretation of the analogy of being, subversion of one’s gender identity—in any capacity—is also simultaneously a subversion of one’s theological identity.

**Sexual Difference and Theological Personhood**

Balthasar returns to the theme of sexual difference in volume three of the *Theo-drama* in order to construct his Mariology and ecclesiology. This time sexual difference is situated immediately after a description of election, vocation, and mission signaling its importance in defining these terms. 89 On the dramatic stage, personhood, or identity, is revealed through our encounter with others and through the decisions we make. 90 As Christ’s identity is revealed most fully in the *enactment* of redemption, so it is with our own identity. Personhood is a dynamic category that is realized through our free response to God’s call, or our mission. We only acquire our theological personhood through “the free acceptance of vocation and mission.”91 In living out this mission

89. These are Christological categories as well. More will be said on this in Chapter 3.

90. TD 2, 11.

91. TD 3, 266.
offered to us, we fulfill our “election,” becoming in God’s sight what we “are” and what we have always been. In this sense, Balthasar’s theological anthropology rests upon the actualization of our mission in the world. Yet, this actualization is tied to a very specific understanding of sexual difference.

In Balthasar’s theology, sexual difference does not always correspond to biological difference. Rather, the operative construct is gender complementarity marked by a relation of receptivity to activity. One’s gender identity is not just a function of one’s biological sex; it is also defined in terms of a posture of receptivity or activity. The feminine is “always characterized by receptivity, obedience, disposability, and willing consent to the action of another, or letting be (Gelassenheit),” and the masculine is always marked by leadership and creativity.

Balthasar’s definition of sexual difference arises out of a typological interpretation of two texts: Genesis 2:23 and 1 Corinthians 11:7. In Genesis 2:23, Woman answers Man’s need for companionship and is created as his helpmate: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was essentially taken out of Man.” Woman, according to Balthasar, is essentially an Answer (Antwort). Drawing upon 1 Corinthians 11:7, wherein Woman is described as the reflection of Man, Balthasar constructs a parallel metaphor for the “visual realm” in

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92. Ibid., 270.


94. TD 3, 284.
which Woman is Antlitz. As Antlitz, Woman returns [reflects] Man’s gaze. It is important to note that in each construction, Wort-Antwort or Litz-Antlitz, Man is incomplete without Woman. Woman, as Answer and Face, is a “vessel of fulfillment specially designed for him.” Woman responds to Man, as mother and bride, through reproduction. While Woman has her own fruitfulness, it is never a primary fruitfulness. It is always an “answering fruitfulness, designed to receive man’s fruitfulness (which, in itself, is helpless).” It is in this sense that Woman and Man are inescapably related and ordered to one another.

Moreover, to be the feminine counterpart of a pair is not a function of one’s biology; rather, it is a function of one’s activity and vocation. The Church, as the Bride of Christ, is feminine because of her activity. The activity of “every conscious creature” has a mission “to be ready and open to receive the seed of the divine Word, to bear it and give its fully developed form.” Thus, all creatures—as individuals and as a collective in the Church—are feminine “vis-à-vis God.” Consequentially, sexual difference reinforces theological difference, as all of creation is feminine in relation to God. Implicit in this construction is the notion that any subversion of one’s gender identity is simultaneously a subversion of one’s theological identity. Specifically, “feminine”

95. Crammer, “One Sex or Two,” 98.
96. TD 3, 285.
97. Ibid.
98. Ibid.
99. Ibid., 287-88.
creatures who engage in masculine activities (i.e. leadership, initiative) in relation to God are overreaching their place within the cosmos. This notion also applies to social and ecclesial roles.

The idea of the Church as the maternal body of Christ is not a new symbol within the history of Roman Catholicism. As Rosemary Radford Ruether illustrates, the origins of this symbol can be traced back to the Old Testament theme in which Israel is God’s wife.\textsuperscript{100} The imagery of the Church as the bride of Christ originates in the Song of Songs and was taken up by the early Christian community as a symbol to express the mystical union between Christ and the Church. Yet, for Balthasar, this symbolism is interpreted through a Marian lens.

In the creaturely and divine realm, Mary is the archetype of womanhood.\textsuperscript{101} She stands as the helpmate of God, representing the individual Christian and the Church community. Through her perfect obedience, marked by complete and total receptivity to the Word, she brings forth life into the world. Thus, it is a Marian principle that defines


\textsuperscript{101} This model also appears in Pope John Paul II’s apostolic letter on the dignity and vocation of women, \textit{Mulieris Dignitatem}. Mary is the also the archetype of the dignity and vocation of woman: “In Mary, Eve discovers the nature of the true dignity of woman, of feminine humanity. This discovery must continually reach the heart of every woman and shape her vocation and her life.” Pope John Paul II, \textit{Mulieris Dignitatem}, 15 August 1988, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/, (accessed 26 November 2008). Hereafter cited as MD. The influence of Balthasar’s theology on John Paul II is well documented. David Schindler has published on this topic extensively in the journal \textit{Communio}. As it relates to the topic of this dissertation, see David Schindler, “Christological Aesthetics and \textit{Evangelium Vitae}: Toward a Definition of Liberalism,” \textit{Communio} 22 (1995): 193-224.
discipleship and is paradigmatic of Christian holiness. Mary, as Mother and Companion-Bride, stands as the “individual, real and comprehensive model for all believers.” She also holds significance within Balthasar’s Christology, as theologically she is the female complement of Jesus’ male humanity. Mary, as the Bride of Christ, represents the female human counterpart of the human center in the person of Christ. Her self-surrendering faith is not confined to the Annunciation. Rather, it pervades her entire life, culminating at the foot of the Cross, giving birth to the Church.

Mary’s holiness—her mission and her vocation—is symbolized through her fiat. Her Yes to God begins with a Yes to God in the annunciation and culminates with a Yes to Christ at the foot of the Cross. At the Cross, “Mary’s Yes consents to her being totally stripped of power (Mary can do nothing to help her Son); and what is more, she is sent away into utter uselessness: Mary cannot even remind her Son of the mystery of his coming forth from her, for she is handed over to another son.”

102. While a Petrine model for discipleship is developed in the Theo-drama, it is a model that only applies to men and, moreover, to those who are priests. It is not the primary model for Christian discipleship in the text.

103. TD 3, 338.

104. This serves to highlight the importance of gender complementarity in Balthasar’s theological anthropology. To be fully human is to be a gendered and sexual being. This means that even Christ needs a sexual counterpart. Mary fulfills this role for Balthasar.


becomes the foundation of the world’s fruitfulness, is a Yes to God’s will that is simultaneously a Yes to being “put to one side.”\footnote{107} While sexual difference gains its theological significance within the bridal relationship of Christ-Mary and, consequently, Christ-Church in a way that defines the vocation of all Christians, this paradigm also has a special significance defining ecclesial and social relations. This is clearly illustrated in Balthasar’s infamous essay, “Women Priests? A Marian Church in a Fatherless and Motherless Culture.”\footnote{108} In this essay, Balthasar critiques women’s ordination to the priesthood on the grounds that it would “totally destroy the disturbed balance, leveling all fructifying differences between the sexes in favor of an asexuality.”\footnote{109} The issue he takes with women’s ordination in particular and feminism in general is that it seeks the masculinization of women, thereby rendering both men and women barren. In other words, Balthasar’s primary argument

\footnote{107} Ibid., 395.

\footnote{108} Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Women Priests?: A Marian Church in a Fatherless and Motherless Culture,” \textit{Communio} 22 (1996): 164-170. I specifically want to highlight the connection between the theological constructions in Balthasar’s \textit{Theo-drama} and their practical application in his pastoral writings. A number of authors dismiss the significance of these “polemical pieces” and imply that Balthasar’s writings on aesthetics and dramatics should be judged independently of them. See for example, Edward T. Oakes, \textit{Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar} (New York/London: Continuum, 1994); Aidan Nichols, \textit{No Bloodless Myth: A Guide through Balthasar’s Dramatics}; and Angelo Scola, \textit{Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Theological Style} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995). However, this premise is radically inconsistent with Balthasar’s own methodological claims regarding the unity of holiness and theology. See “Theology and Sanctity” in \textit{The Word Made Flesh}. The connection between the aesthetics and dramatics and Balthasar’s more polemical pieces comes to light when one includes a gendered analysis of his theology. This is because Balthasar’s polemical pieces largely engage issues relating to sexuality and gender identity.

against the ordination of women is not grounded in claims regarding the biological sex of the historical Jesus. Rather, the central issue is that love, as given and received, rests upon difference. Here, it is helpful to recall Balthasar’s interpretation of the analogy of being, wherein ontology is grounded in love. Love, for Balthasar, is a dynamic event marked by an outpouring or a calling forth, which elicits a response. This is evidenced in the structure of the Trinity. “In the dogma of the Trinity, the Persons must be equal in dignity in order to safeguard the distinction that makes the triune God subsistent love.”\textsuperscript{110} To collapse this difference is to collapse the very possibility of God. In a parallel fashion, the difference in activity between men and women, as enacted in all dimensions of society, must be preserved in order to “guarantee the physical and spiritual fruitfulness of human nature.”\textsuperscript{111} Moreover,

\begin{quote}
[e]very encroachment of one sex into the role of the other narrows the range and dynamics of humanly possible love, even when this range transcends the sphere of sexuality, birth and death and achieves the level of the virginal relationship between Christ and his Church, a relationship expressed not in isolated individual acts of specific organs, but in the total surrender of one’s own being.\textsuperscript{112}
\end{quote}

Thus, the fundamental claim is that unless women, who are essentially different than men, physically and at the level of “empirical experience and ego-consciousness,” embody receptivity in all aspects of life, “the female element also vanishes from the attitude of man,” thereby rendering null and void humanity’s connection with God. As articulated in the \textit{Theo-drama}, male fruitfulness is dependent upon female receptivity and

\begin{itemize}
\item 110. Ibid., 169.
\item 111. Ibid.
\item 112. Ibid. Emphasis added.
\end{itemize}
female fruitfulness rests upon receptivity. Therefore, if women are masculinized by adopting a posture of leadership and activity, their receptivity is lost, rendering all of creation infertile. In this case, Christian discipleship is no longer possible.\textsuperscript{113}

The allusion here is to the biblical story of the fall in Genesis 3, wherein Eve overreaches her position in relation to God. Balthasar reminds us that the source of all overreaching is an inordinate grasping at power, which is “connected subterraneously with humanity’s original sin and concupiscence.”\textsuperscript{114} At the root of sin is a disordered desire for that which is not God. In his typology of sexual difference, Balthasar equates this with a will-to-power in which the human person steps outside one’s divinely ordained and gendered role in the drama. As all of creation is feminine vis-à-vis God, sin is a refusal to understand oneself as receptive in relation to God. Yet, since sexual difference can never be erased in the created world, this means that women have the double responsibility of adopting a posture of receptivity in relation to God and to men in all aspects of life. Without the woman’s receptivity, “[t]he man is hardly aware of the extent of his self-surrender; it becomes clear to him only through woman’s pregnancy, the birth of the child and his own responsibility for bringing up the child.”\textsuperscript{115} In other words,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{113} For Balthasar, fruitfulness is discipleship. See GL 7, 403-408.
  \item \textsuperscript{114} Balthasar, “Women Priests,”169.
  \item \textsuperscript{115} Hans Urs von Balthasar, \textit{The Last Act}, vol. 5 of \textit{Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory}, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 485. Hereafter cited as TD 5. This notion also appears in \textit{Mulieris Dignitatem}, wherein Pope John Paul II suggests that men need to “learn [their] own ‘fatherhood’ from the mother.” See MD, 18. I highlight this in order to illustrate the significance of Balthasar’s theology for Roman Catholic sexual teaching.
\end{itemize}
men need women in order to adopt a feminine posture in relation to God. In adopting leadership roles in society and the church women lose their essential femininity, putting both themselves and men at risk. Therefore, the priesthood must remain inaccessible to women. It is important to note that this has nothing to do with women’s capacity to lead the community. It is a result of a structure in which the holiness of the entire community rests upon feminine receptivity. In this theological construction, to subvert one’s gendered role is to close the entire community off to the possibility of life in God. Women who assume masculine functions in the community are not only sinning against God, but they are held responsible for the sins of the entire community, as it loses its aptitude for relationship with God. “Not only is the *eros* between human beings the basis that permits God to impress his own *agape* on the human person; the encounter face to face between man and woman is also the basis that permits the possibility of such a face to face encounter between God and humanity.”116 Without a face-to-face encounter between men and women, marked by receptivity and activity, there is no encounter with God.

Supporting this paradigm are assumptions about the nature of human sexuality. Since 1968, when Pope Paul VI issued *Humane Vitae*, the Roman Catholic Church has consistently taught that the “ontological and moral meaning of human sexuality” is based upon an “inseparable” connection between the unitive and procreative meanings of the

116. GL 7, 484.
conjugal act. Balthasar’s theology of sexual difference supports this position in which human sexual duality [male-female complementarity] is not only an essential constituent of human nature, but it is also ordered to procreation. Therefore, “moral” and “natural” sexual acts are restricted to the context of heterosexual marriage and must remain open to procreation. Within this framework, all other sex acts are judged to be objectively immoral and unnatural. For Balthasar, this has implications for sexual desire in relation to God. As we recall, the human encounter with God is an erotically charged nuptial encounter that encompasses the entire person, including his or her sexuality. As sexual beings, we are drawn into relationship with God. Yet, since female sexuality is ordered to receptivity and masculine sexuality is ordered to activity, a unique set of problems are created for men. As Tina Beattie explains, for Balthasar, to “experience the desire that draws ‘man’ to God, he must become what he is not—he must become ‘her.’” In Balthasar’s eyes, sexual desire can only be equated with desire for God if it is a fecundity marked by openness and receptivity. This is contrasted with a divine fecundity in which God “is the sower who scatters what is his own over the field with a


119. This is Balthasar’s claim and not mine.

great gesture of careless lavishness, and watches to see what will come from the union of the divine vital power in the Word that is scattered abroad and the creaturely power in the world that receives it.”\textsuperscript{121} Two important points must be made here. First, in this paradigm, female sexuality is not only defined in terms of “receptivity,” but also in terms of what it is not. Female sexuality is not male and, consequently, not divine. Second, male sexual expression can only be redeemed through nuptial relations that serve a higher good of procreation. In Balthasar’s terminology, this is expressed in terms of fruitfulness: 

In genuine sexual love, the man’s part, which seems to be pure action, is really self-surrender only if the loss of its own substance is seen as a gain and possibility of further development in the other (woman). . . .The man is hardly aware of the extent of his self-surrender; it becomes clear to him only through the woman’s pregnancy, the birth of the child and his own responsibility for bringing up the child.\textsuperscript{122}

Balthasar’s conclusions about human sexuality not only parallel those set forth by Augustine, they extend his conclusions into a mystical realm.\textsuperscript{123} Human sexual expression is redeemed in the context of nuptial relations with Christ. Through Christ’s death on the cross a new marriage covenant is sealed “with a fruitfulness directed toward

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{121} GL 7, 432.
\item \textsuperscript{122} TD 5, 475.
\end{itemize}
God." It is through mystical union with Christ in the Church that human sexuality is “sanctified” sacramentally.

This paradigm leaves us with a somewhat ambiguous understanding of the value of female and male sexuality. Female sexuality carries a definition that is marked by Otherness and is described in relation to the male sexual activity of penetration—as either a mystical “overshadowing” by God or in relation to male penetration in sexual intercourse. Apart from receptivity and pregnancy, female sexuality does not appear to have an intrinsic value of its own. Here, the act of sexual intercourse is elevated above all other aspects of human sexuality (i.e. caresses, fantasy, menstruation, ovulation, body image, etc.) and is a thoroughly metaphysical affair. In other words, Balthasar has little to say when it comes to “the realities of living as bodily, sexual and social beings in a muddled and complex world.” This is not to suggest that Balthasar has nothing to say about human experience. Rather, the issue is that concrete human experiences only enter into his theology after universal norms have been established. This raises a number of

124. GL 7, 477.
125. Beattie, New Catholic Feminism, 182.
126. This is most clearly illustrated in Balthasar’s treatise on “Theology and Sanctity.” In this essay, he lifts up the saints as a model for integrating experience and Christian doctrine as they are able to find “straightaway the appropriate dogmatic clothing for their very personal experience.” See ET 1, 190. In other words, personal experience is to aid in one’s understanding and appreciation of Christian doctrine and not the reverse. For a good discussion of this, see Mark McIntosh, Christology from Within: Spirituality and the Incarnation in Hans Urs von Balthasar (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 13-21.
difficulties for those whose personal experiences do not fit into the framework that has been laid out.\textsuperscript{127}

While he articulates the vocation of women in terms of reproduction in the creaturely realm, nuptial relations as modeled by the celibate virginity of the Christ/Mary relation are of a higher order:

The natural process whereby a man ‘leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife (Gen 2:24; Eph 5:3), which adds a new member to the sequence of generations, is changed; now a man steps out of the cycle of generation itself (Mk 10:29f) in order to enter into the unique, supratemporal, sexual relationship between the New Adam and his Spouse (Rev. 21:9). Thus man is enabled to \textit{transcend the sexual—as a function specific to earthly existence—in favor of a form of existence in which God’s Agape, which also reveals its nuptial aspect (sealed in the death on the Cross) becomes the all-inclusive meaning of life.}\textsuperscript{128}

Here, human sexuality is recapitulated within Christ’s headship. Women and men are now able to enter into a sexual relationship with Christ that is modeled upon Marian virginity. In this suprasexual encounter, the primary significance of Mary’s sexuality is its spiritual significance. The significance of Mary’s hymen, womb, and breasts are removed from the locus of the female body and reinterpreted in spiritual terms. In this way, Mary, as the Bride of Christ and Mother of the Church, “realizes in bodily terms

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{127} For example, consider the experiences of gay and lesbian couples. In Balthasar’s paradigm of sexual difference, there is no place for homoerotic union or any other forms of sexual and gender diversity. See Bishop Thomas Gumbleton’s “A Call to Listen: The Church’s Pastoral and Theological Response to Gays and Lesbians” and Cristina L.H. Traina’s, “Papal Ideals, Martial Realities: One View from the Ground, in \textit{Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology}, eds. Patricia Beattie Jung with Joseph Andrew Coray (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001) for an excellent discussion of some of the practical issues at stake.

\textsuperscript{128} TD 2, 413-414. Emphasis added.
\end{flushleft}
what the Church realizes spirituality.” While Balthasar affirms the value of human sexuality in general terms, only the virginal and maternal body of Mary has significance in the drama of redemption.

Balthasar goes to great lengths in order to emphasize the theological significance of Mary’s perpetual virginity and celibacy. The virgin birth is a bloodless and painless one. As the New Eve, Mary experiences only joy during the birthing experience. Her pain does not come until later, when she stands at the foot of the cross. The implication is that Mary only bleeds at the foot of the cross. The nuptial relationship is consummated...

129. TD 3, 333.

130. While all of creation has a role to play in the Theo-drama, the characters are modeled on the scriptures. Mary, Eve, and Mary Magdalene are the only female characters named in the drama treated with any historical specificity. However, the bodies of Eve and Mary of Magdalene are given meaning only in relation to Mary’s virginity and motherhood. This construction parallels the construction in MD, wherein it is through Mary that Eve discovers her feminine humanity. It is also important to note that Balthasar’s treatment of the figure of Mary parallels his claims about the historical significance of Christ. Universality and particularity come together in a unique and singular way in the historical person of Jesus Christ. The same is true for Mary, the mother of God.

131. See TD 3, 331-333. In this section, Balthasar draws inspiration from Tertullian, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa.

132. The goes back to patristic discussions about Mary’s perpetual virginity. The idea, of course, is that her hymen does not break during the birthing process, rendering it painless and bloodless. While Balthasar states that often historical questions about the virginity of Mary are given undue importance, the symbolic significance of virginity in Mary’s life is of utmost importance in Balthasar’s theology. Mary, as the Mother of Christ, must be a virgin in partu because of her dual role as Mother and Bride. She not only gives birth to Christ, but she is “perpetually” being “overshadowed,” or penetrated, by God in order to give birth to the Church. In other words, Mary must stand in the physically impossible place of perpetually being a virgin, while constantly engaging in sexual relations. This is the model for female embodiment that Balthasar exalts. Clearly,
on the cross, giving birth to a new body: the Church. Alluding to the imagery in Genesis, the Church, as the body of Christ, not only originates in “Christ’s deep sleep of death on the cross,” but also “in the corporal union between Christ and Mary.” The nuptial relations between the Second Adam (Christ) and the New Eve (Mary) on the cross “recapitulate” and redeem the sexual relations in the garden. In this way, Mary’s participation in the drama of redemption, as the New Eve, redeems the female body and reorients its fruitfulness to Christ.

Analysis

One of the first essays to explore the role of sexual difference within Balthasar’s theology was written by John O’Donnell. In his essay, “Man and Woman as Imago Dei in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” O’Donnell addresses the question of whether the sexual metaphors present in Balthasar’s writing are deliberately intended.

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133. TD 4, 398.
135. Recall that Balthasar associates sex with guilt and death. “Thus, the view, widespread in the early Church, that original sin was connected with the sexual act, with sexuality altogether or still more generally with concupiscence (lust) is justified. It is a valid viewpoint in as much as sexuality is experienced and practiced not on the truly human level of selfless loving devotion, but on a lower level at which the objective element of self-surrender is turned into a subjective, egoistic, perverse exploitation of pleasure.” See Das Ganze Im Fragment, trans. not named (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 89. Also see TD 2, 365-382.
In the secondary literature, one finds two predominant approaches to Balthasar’s interpretation of sexual difference: there are those who ignore it and those who try to retrieve it as a resource for gender equality. For example, Kevin Mongrain minimizes its importance, offering only a brief mention in discussing Balthasar’s theological anthropology. Others, like John O’Donnell, conclude that “Balthasar’s understanding of sexuality is central to his vision and sheds light on every facet of his theology.” O’Donnell seeks to retrieve it as a resource that affirms the value of human sexuality.

O’Donnell is not alone in this perspective. In a recent essay on Balthasar’s understanding of the Trinity, Rowan Williams argues that “Balthasar unwittingly provides some of the tools for rethinking gender differentiation in a theological context precisely by complicating in the divine subjects the roles of agency and patient in a way that should warn us against fixing and isolating action and passivity as belonging on different sides of any embodied human polarity, gender included.” In a similar fashion, Breándan Leahy suggests that this construction, which allows for the feminine within the Trinity,

137. See Mongrain’s *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar*. Other examples include, Christopher Steck’s *The Ethical Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Crossroad, 2001); Mark McIntosh’s *Christology from Within*; and Edward T. Oakes’ *Pattern of Redemption*. Steck favors the language of covenant over nuptiality in order to describe the “I-Thou” paradigm. McIntosh favors the language of spirituality and does not make reference to the gendered implications of Balthasar’s theology.


“precludes any predominance of one sex over another.” Finally, in the writings of “new Catholic feminists,” Balthasar’s sexual theology features prominently in articulating gender roles. While I agree with O’Donnell’s claim regarding the centrality of sexual difference within Balthasar’s theological constructions, it is highly problematic for Christian feminist theology on a number of planes, especially with regard to the gender complementarity that informs the spousal imagery in the text. Balthasar maintains that nuptial imagery presents a model in which each gender is equal but different. However, as it is appropriated, the relationship between bride and bridegroom is far from egalitarian. This is because the category of difference, for Balthasar, not only denotes otherness, but also a hierarchy in which femininity can never be primary.

This is illustrated through the metaphors that Balthasar employs to describe sexual difference: *Wort-Antwort* and *Litz-Antlitz*. In each metaphor, woman’s identity is secondary and responsive and, therefore, incompatible with gender equality as it stresses


141. New Catholic Feminism is a movement arising in association with the CDF’s document titled “The Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church,” which was published in 2004 over the signature of Cardinal Ratzinger and approved by Pope John Paul II. The so-called “new” Catholic feminists have two purposes: 1) to affirm the Vatican’s understanding of sex and gender and 2) critique secular feminist theories. The work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, John Paul II, and Edith Stein feature prominently in the writing of New Catholic Feminists.

the ontological priority of the male. The identification of Man with Wort not only stresses his primacy, but also associates maleness with divinity as Wort is often used to describe Christ. As Corrine Crammer suggests, the gender essentialism implicit within this doctrine (in which man is normative) “too easily lends toward male-female relationships marked by dominance and subordination,” especially within communities of faith. Not only is Woman ontologically second, but female identity, in all aspects (sexual, theological and social), exists solely in response to masculine activity. As Answer, Woman has no agency or fruitfulness outside of a nuptial relationship. Her vocation is to receive man's fruitfulness into her own fruitfulness, thus “uniting in herself the fruitfulness of both.” This is to such an extent that even Mary’s fruitfulness does not hold significance apart from Christ or Peter.

What renders the “bridal” and “maternal” Church fruitful in this way? The answer lies in the creation of the Church as an “institution”. Far from being the antithesis of the nuptial “event,” the institution actually makes it possible for this event to be a here-and-now reality at every point through history. The institution guarantees the perpetual presence of Christ the Bridegroom for the Church, his Bride. So it is entrusted to men who, though they belong to the overall feminine modality of the Church, are selected from her and remain in her to exercise their office; their function is to embody Christ who comes to the Church to make her fruitful.

143. Crammer, “One Sex or Two,” 106. As Answer, Woman can only react to male initiative. Moreover, the metaphor of Antlitz is even more disturbing, as “a mirror image simply reflects another and has no independent reality or true existence.”

144. Ibid., 105.

145. Ibid., 107.

146. TD 3, 286.

147. Ibid., 354.
While Balthasar states that the primacy of Marian faith, as Mary, the "*(ecclesia)* immaculata,*’ is on the scene prior to the Apostles,” Mary “has to stand back, until the ‘hour’ (Jn. 2:4) has come when she, having become Ecclesia, can be entrusted to the Beloved Disciple.”

It is important to note that unlike his interpretation of Genesis 2, wherein the rationale for women’s secondary position is linked to the order in which she arrived on the scene, masculinity trumps over temporal positioning. In this case, even before the male office makes its entrance in the Church, woman as helpmate is already on the scene. Yet, the bride is always the one who receives love in order to love in return. She is never the one who initiates the activity of love in relationship.

In response to feminist critiques of the spousal model, Michele Schumacher argues that “while priority in loving is necessarily granted to the divine Bridegroom vis-à-vis the church, his bride, the same is not necessarily true of the human bridegroom vis-à-vis his bride.”

Certainly, it is the case that human and divine relations are analogous in Balthasar’s theology. However, given his claims about sexual difference and his writings on women’s ordination, Schumacher’s claim is a difficult one to sustain. In Balthasar’s anthropology, there is no such thing as asexuality, for “the male body is male throughout, right down to each cell of which it consists, and the female body is utterly female; and this is also true of their whole empirical experience and ego-

148. Ibid.

149. Ibid.

consciousness.” Not only are men and women essentially different, but there is no place for mutual understanding. This, as we have illustrated, informs social and ecclesial relations. Balthasar’s theology rests upon the fundamental principle of identity-in-difference, which is informed by both theological and sexual difference.

Moreover, as Mary Aquin O’Neill argues, anthropologies based upon models of gender complementarity often lend to a “bipolar understanding of their respective places, namely, in the world and at home.” That is, they are accompanied by static structures in which social roles are polarized. Indeed, this is what Balthasar must maintain in order to preserve a dramatic structure between God and the world. As we will see in the next chapter, Balthasar’s dramatic theory is centered on the development of specific paradoxical tensions that “must not be slackened, let alone dissolved, in the interests of an illusory synthesis; rather [they] must be endured.”

151. TD 2 364.

152. According to Balthasar, the human person exists in perpetual condition marked by otherness. Women are not only biologically different than men, but gender difference pervades every “cell” of the body including ego-consciousness and empirical experience.


154. TD 4, 244. According to Balthasar, it is the slackening of dramatic tension that has rendered the soteriological developments of antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modern times (including liberation theologies) problematic. The tension, or distance, between God and the world, as depicted through the imagery of a “stretching apart” of Jesus and the Father, cannot be slackened for two reasons. First, it would imply a reduction in the transcendence of God. This is why Balthasar finds the work of Moltmann and liberation theologians to be problematic. Secondly, it is precisely this
dramatic tension within the human person and the life of the world that orients us toward
transcendence and “form[s] a unity to make humans the image and likeness of God.”

In sum, in emphasizing the difference between God and the world, Balthasar constructs a
model that collapses the wide range of differences among members of the human
community, including race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

While motherhood and spousal relations have intrinsic value and are important
aspects of society, the problem becomes when they are lifted up as the single model for
women’s activity in the church and in larger society. Sexuality is an important part of
human life and personal identity. The embodiment of human sexuality is also deeply
influenced by social and cultural norms. Sexuality extends into the public sphere through
these constructions. All human societies, the church included, have established personal
and social norms that define the meaning of sexuality. The issue, as María Pilar Aquino
notes, is that “these meanings and norms have been constructed in the interests of men”
and have resulted in patriarchal culture. Historically, sexual norms have been used to
legitimize the silencing of women and to justify their exclusion from decision making
and leadership roles in public life.

Models of gender complementarity fail to account for the social, historical, and
biological factors that shape sex and gender. They, like essentialist perspectives on

155. Crammer, “One Sex or Two,” 94.

156. María Pilar Aquino, Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin
embodiment, make universal claims about the body and gender “without attending to the concrete contexts in which they are to be lived.”\footnote{Ross, \textit{Extravagant Affections}, 101.} Balthasar’s approach to the female body, as well as his approach to aesthetics, is thoroughly metaphysical. The primary significance of the female body is its spiritual significance as the \textit{ecclesia immaculata}. Mary does not have a body of her own. In the Annunciation, her womb is given over to God. At the foot of the cross, she is handed over to John. Within the community of the Church, her body is dispersed among nations.

Balthasar’s approach to beauty and revelation is one that begins from above. In this paradigm, creation’s beauty rests in its response to divine beauty. The aesthetic value of a person, the body, or the material begins with an affirmation of the transcendent instead of an affirmation of the particular.\footnote{For example, human sexuality is sanctified sacramentally because it serves the nuptial mystery between Christ and the Church. See GL 7, 389. The full quote can be found at the outset of this chapter.} As María Pilar Aquino reminds us, there is no subjectivity without agency or particularity. While we are more than our actions, the ability to act, instead of being acted upon, is a central dimension for reclaiming women’s full subjectivity in history.\footnote{Aquino, \textit{Our Cry for Life}. See especially chapter 5.} Moreover, it is only when “intersubjective action is lived out as an end in itself, as something to be affirmed and celebrated, regardless of the ‘outcome;’” can relationships be sources of individual empowerment and human liberation.\footnote{Roberto Goizueta, \textit{Caminenos Con Jesus: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 111.} In defining the vocation of women in terms of “receiving man’s
fruitfulness into her own fruitfulness,” Balthasar comes dangerously close to instrumentalizing and, moreover, objectifying female sexual bodies. Even though he states that “woman does not merely give back to man what she has received, she gives him something new,” this something new is always the result of her integration of his gift. While this suggests that Balthasar’s Woman might have some agency of her own, it is a latent agency that only comes to life through a response to Man’s activity. More problematic are Balthasar’s claims about the role of female sexuality in aiding men to understand their own receptivity. Here, female receptivity is the object of male desire and must be “mystically” appropriated in order for men to enter into nuptial relations with God. Given the ways in which Western visual tradition has eroticized the female body, portraying it as “weak, passive, and available for men’s sexual needs,” attentiveness to subjectivity becomes particularly important in any aesthetic theory that seeks to claim the full dignity of the female embodiment.\footnote{161. Wioleta Polinska, “Dangerous Bodies: Women’s Nakedness and Theology,” \textit{Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion} 16 (2001): 46. Originally illustrated by John Berger, \textit{Ways of Seeing} (London: Penguin/BBC, 1972). Berger makes this point in chapter 3.} Aesthetics without agency runs the risk of objectifying the female body. In other words, any model in which woman “becomes the glory of man” because she sits “below the man” in a position of service can hardly be said to reflect the full dignity of the human person, male or female.\footnote{162. GL 7, 479. This central text here is Ephesians 5:27.}

**Conclusion**

One of the most lauded aspects of Balthasar’s theology is the connection between beauty and ethics. At the outset of his theological aesthetics, Balthasar describes beauty...
as rendering the good attractive. Beauty is attractive; it arouses in us a sense of joy and delight. The beautiful taps into a “real presence of depths” and draws us out of ourselves into relation with an Other. As Balthasar describes it, “we are ‘enraptured’ by our contemplation of these depths and are ‘transported’ to them.” To “see the form” is to be drawn into the divine eros; it is to fall in love. Ultimately, for Balthasar, eros is at the center of the Christian life and theology. Erotic love grounds a radically relational understanding of the human person and the divine. Yet, in Balthasar’s theology eros is also wedded to gender complementarity through nuptial imagery.

Indeed, beauty is attractive, drawing us out of ourselves in relation. Yet, we must ask about the character of the relationship into which we are drawn. For Balthasar, this relationship is a nuptial relationship oriented toward male headship, as articulated in 1 Corinthians 11:7. For better or worse, nuptial relations define the whole of Christian action. For the better, Balthasar’s aesthetics challenge us to see in terms of relationship—to see “on the whole.” To see on the whole is also an eschatological term that challenges us to see the human person as a part of a whole—as a being in relation. To see on the whole is to see the world in its radiant potential. Yet, wholeness as an aesthetic premise tied to nuptiality, can be deeply problematic in that the details of the particular, no matter how hard we try, can get lost in the wide view. As Lucy Gardner

163. GL 1, 19.

164. Ibid., 119.

describes it, Balthasar’s theology is “able to encompass and account for literally everything it might encounter, and yet is so tightly woven in ever greater intensities that one minor fault or imbalance might seem to threaten the whole edifice.”¹⁶⁶ To paraphrase Nelle Morton, wholeness cannot come out of one group or person speaking for the whole.¹⁶⁷ Wholeness “is possible only when all the oppressed peoples of the world can speak freely out of their own experiences, be heard and touch one another to heal and be healed.”¹⁶⁸


¹⁶⁸. Ibid., 68-69.
CHAPTER THREE

THE DRAMA OF REDEMPTION: THE POWER OF LOVE AND VIOLENCE

In order to put a seal on my victory and exploit my triumph, I have engraved a mark upon you, O my flesh: on your carnal weakness I have engraved the mark of my own carnal weakness, and on your sin the mark of my love. Never again will your sinful battle against me be anything other than the long wrestling of love. . . . Precisely because you, O wretched one, knowingly sin against love, precisely for that reason is your sin enfolded by my love. And because I, who am at once Spirit and Love, am myself the battlefield between God and the world, the battle is and already and eternally won in me. Our wrecked covenant—our blood-wedding, the red wedding of the Lamb—is already, here and now, the white bridal bed of divine love. (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Heart of the World*)

In Balthasar’s aesthetic and dramatic theological constructions, sexuality and the cross intermingle in the new covenant between God and creation. The cross in tandem with nuptial relations articulates the God-world relationship, shaping the contours of Christian discipleship and love. In the previous chapter, attention was given to the ways in which the nuptial and erotic dimensions of this metaphor inform Balthasar’s construction of nature, grace, and freedom. I argued that while Balthasar retrieves the erotic and relational dimensions of Christian redemption, his aesthetics and dramatics are deeply embedded in a gender symbolism that lends toward a pattern of relations marked by subordination and domination. In this chapter, we return to the metaphor of a nuptial

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relationship centered in the cross, this time foregrounding the ways in which Christian
attunement to the rhythm of God is mediated through the cross.

On the cross God draws the world together into a divine embrace. The cross is
the place where heaven and earth meet. Here, the distance between the Creator and the
Crucified infiltrates the distance created by sin, transforming it into a new intimacy. In
the meeting of human and divine love, the world is gathered together and brought into the
very life of God. This is the drama of redemption. Yet, within this divine embrace, the
language of glory is inextricably tied to the language of battle. On the cross passionate
desire intermingles with suffering, inscribing divine and human love in a framework that
also bears the mark of a violent and, at times, sexual conquest. Ultimately, Balthasar’s
narration of the drama of the redemption is a heavenly drama of both love and war.

**Divine Glory and the Drama of Redemption: Transitioning from Aesthetics to
Dramatics**

“The world will be redeemed by beauty,” utters Prince Myshkin in
Dostoyevsky’s epic tale *The Idiot.* This phrase is often used to underscore the
redemptive power of aesthetics, as well as its connection to ethics. Indeed, it can be said
that Balthasar begins his theological aesthetics with an eye to the good. At the outset of
the *Herrlichkeit*, Balthasar articulates the relation between Beauty and the Goodness as
follows: “in a world without beauty . . . the good also loses its attractiveness, the self-

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evidence of why it must be carried out.”

Ultimately, for Balthasar, those who can no longer reckon with beauty lose the capacity for love. In this framework aesthetics flows into a dramatics, as the human person, enraptured and beholden, is drawn into God’s redemptive work in the world. To “see the form” is to be drawn into the divine eros; it is to fall in love.

The theory of perception outlined in Balthasar’s theological aesthetics cannot be understood apart from the doctrine of election and sanctification. Beauty’s address to us is a personal address. The splendor of divine beauty “penetrates the beholder’s heart” in such a way that elicits a response: “the form and the word within it awaken and summon us; they awaken our freedom and bid us attend to the call that comes from the form.”

Beauty summons us, calling us to decision and response. Central, here, is the notion that when a person is “struck by something truly significant,” the neutrality of an outside observer is no longer possible. There is no turning back once one has encountered the divine form. We bear the brand-mark of this encounter and must “henceforth live in


4. Hans Urs von Balthasar, Prolegomena, vol. 1 of Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 17. Hereafter cited as TD 1. Drama “transforms the event into a picture that can be seen and thus expands aesthetics into something new (and yet continuous with itself), while at the same time it is already translating the picture into speech.” That is, the dramatics expands the form of revelation and draws us into this action in the theater of the world.

response to this unique and genuine revelation.”

In the encounter with beauty, the human person is touched with the grace of election. We are enraptured in order to be commissioned. Therefore, it is through the christological categories of election, mission, and personhood that Balthasar works out the movement between aesthetics and dramatics. The fundamental assumption is that in a world in which we have lost the capacity to reckon with beauty, we also lose the capacity to hear and respond to God’s personal summons.

According to Balthasar, the divine summons is constitutive of our vocation, or personal mission in life. The beauty of divine revelation, manifest through self-giving, issues forth a challenge to us. Yet, ours is a world that has lost the capacity to “reckon” with this kind of beauty. As such, we “blindly pass by the most magnificent work of art,” leaving the divine summons to echo throughout history without a response. Thus, the impasse between God’s call, or Yes, and humanity’s failure to respond, or No, sets the stage for Balthasar’s dramatic soteriology. As human beings we exist in a condition that is marked by profound alienation. The human person becomes “so hardened and stubbornly silent” that he or she can no longer respond to God’s call. So, what is the solution to this riddle? God becomes a Word that is addressed to us in a way that we simply cannot avoid hearing.

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6. Ibid., 30-31. For Balthasar, no one “is enraptured without returning from this encounter, with a personal mission.”


8. Ibid., 29.

9. Ibid., 73.
Just as the alabaster jar must be broken in order that the scent of ointment may fill the whole house, so the chosen one may have to be shattered so that the universality which was contained in concentrated form in his mission may be manifested... [and] everyone is obliged to breathe in something of the spirit of his having-been-chosen for the Good.\textsuperscript{10}

It is in the brokenness of the anointed one that Trinitarian love becomes visible, manifest to all of creation in such a way that “no one who witnesses it can remain unmoved (or moved) on his spectator’s seat.”\textsuperscript{11} Hearing Christ’s cry of dereliction on the cross, one is “provoked to step onto the stage,” making the cross the lynchpin that holds together the aesthetics and dramatics.

Theology’s real object is, then, “utterly and completely an event” that reveals “both the living God’s mode of being and . . . acting.”\textsuperscript{12} Revelation manifests divine beauty. Revelation is not an object at which we look. It is “God’s action in and upon the world, and the world can only respond, and hence ‘understand,’ through action on its part.”\textsuperscript{13} Therefore, theology as a reflection on God’s on-going action in the history of the world calls for dramatic categories. Similar to the New Testament parables, where we

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 32-33. Italics original.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 26. Balthasar ties the term Gestalt with the Word of God. The cross is the UnGestalt of God; it is the silence of God’s Word. Therefore, the central paradox of Balthasar’s theology is that beauty is manifest most fully in the ungestalt, or non-form of God. To perceive beauty is to perceive the non-form of God.

\textsuperscript{12} TD 1, 26.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 15.
“cannot guess from the question what Christ’s answer will be,” so too must the form of theology allow for the answers to rise up before us.\textsuperscript{14}

The dramatic not only illuminates the event-character of divine revelation, but it also reveals the nature of human existence and responds to our need “to surrender ourselves to something that transcends and gives meaning to the limited horizon of everyday life.”\textsuperscript{15} As actors and spectators in the drama of existence, we become aware of our own finitude. In our search for self-realization, we are faced with our own limitation and, ultimately, our own death.\textsuperscript{16} In light of our own self-limitation, we search for something that gives meaning to our existence. This search for meaning influences our actions and the decisions we make. It in this sense, that Balthasar argues that “death stands, unuttered behind every play.”\textsuperscript{17} Death (or awareness of one’s finitude) is the central leitmotif of the dramatic because of its significance in forming a character’s actions and decisions in any play.

In a parallel fashion, death remains the apex of all activity in the theodramatics, the drama of divine activity. However, this time it is the death of Christ that interprets life—Christ’s own as well as the life of the community of believers.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 128. Balthasar applies the metaphors of playwright, director, and action to the problem of divine and human freedom. For more on this, see Edward T. Oakes, \textit{The Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar} (New York/London: Continuum, 1994), 217.

\textsuperscript{15} TD 1, 308.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 413.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 369.
The center of the acting area, the locus of the dramatic peripetia, of dramatic
decision, is shifted to death; or more precisely, what is now central, if the play is
to take place, is God’s overcoming and revaluation of man’s dying, as a result of
the kenosis of the incarnate Word of God.\textsuperscript{18}

It is the “Son’s annihilation of death” that manifests the ultimate horizon of the meaning
of our lives, “which is God’s all embracing Trinitarian love.”\textsuperscript{19} In this way, Christ’s death
gives shape to our own identity and mission.\textsuperscript{20} In sum, the very nature of Christian
existence expresses itself dramatically: “[i]t is the history of a struggle between God and
the creature over the latter’s meaning and salvation.”\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{Revelation as a Battlefield}

Balthasar’s dramatic rendering of salvation is most fully developed in the fourth
and fifth volumes of his \textit{Theo-drama}.\textsuperscript{22} The plot begins with the book of Revelation.
The stage is set “under the sign of the apocalypse” and the “seer is lifted up, above the

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of \textit{Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory}, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco:

Hereafter cited as TD 5.

20. TD 1, 370. Balthasar suggests that “[i]n drama it is generally only the last act
that rids the preceding one of its fluid and provisional character and confirms the entire
action.” The final act of a play sheds light onto the rest of it.

21. Ibid., 125.

22. The central themes can also be found in Hans Urs von Balthasar’s \textit{Mysterium
Paschale: The Mystery of Easter}, trans. Aidan Nichols OP (Edinburgh: T & T Clark,
1990). Hereafter cited as MP. While the text was originally written as an encyclopedia
article for reference work on dogmatics, many of the themes are repeated and elaborated
upon in the final three volumes of the \textit{Theo-drama}. See Edward T Oakes, \textit{Pattern of
Redemption}, 237 n. 15.
entire sphere of historical revelation in both Old and New Testaments, into a God-given vision that is separate from empirical history.”

Situating his soteriology “under the sign of the apocalypse” gives Balthasar a framework for connecting the prophetic and apocalyptic elements of the Old Testament with the salvific events of the Gospels. This also reinforces one of the central motifs in Balthasar’s theology: all of history is summed up and given meaning in the Cross-event. As Aidan Nichols explains, “the images of the Apocalypse constitute a kind of dogmatics in themselves—an overall, and authoritative, interpretation of the gospel in its illumination of human history from beginning to end—and as such stand over against the particular events, processes, trends which typify the Church’s life.”

In other words, Balthasar interprets the book of Revelation as illuminating the central challenge facing the individual Christian and the Church as a whole: “the godless politico-culture world power” that claims to be equal to God, epitomized and symbolized by Babylon.

After establishing the vantage point of the audience as Revelation, Balthasar moves on to describe the dramatic set and its characters. The acting area, or stage, is

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25. TD 4, 37.

26. This, of course, is a play on words and functions to remind the reader that all theology must begin with the word of God (revelation).
the created world, which is heaven and earth.\textsuperscript{27} Here, at the apex of time—the Day of Judgment—the reader sits with a view to his or her own death. We enter the story of redemption in the midst of a battle between heaven and earth, faced with the real possibility of our own self-destruction.\textsuperscript{28} The stage is set for chaos. In the abyss between heaven and earth created by sin, the world is governed by “the attributes of the fall.”\textsuperscript{29} Here, under the sign of the apocalypse, world history is characterized by an “increasing polarization” between God and creation.\textsuperscript{30} Not only is every aspect of divine love veiled, but in “the black-and-white style of the Book of Revelation, this earth lacks the transforming dimensions of faith and love and is portrayed as impervious to repentance and conversion.”\textsuperscript{31} All of this sets the stage for a cosmic battle between good and evil in which God “is both victor and vanquished.”\textsuperscript{32} In this apocalyptic framework, divine glory is filtered through the language of war. Redemption takes place within the battlefield of the Revelation in order to restore and renew the bridal union between heaven and earth. Thus, the drama of redemption is not only a tale of love lost and found; it is also a drama of death and conquest.

\textsuperscript{27} TD 4, 22. This is because the world is in God. See final section of TD 5, 373ff.

\textsuperscript{28} TD 4, 201.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 21.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 25.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 12.
In Balthasar’s dramatic rendering of the narrative of salvation, there is no middle ground. Its tensions and motifs are marked by what he calls the theological law of proportionate polarization.33 The greater the divine intervention in the world, the more opposition it elicits. Consequently, the plot does not gain its momentum from a chronological sequencing of events wherein the audience waits to see what happens at the end. This is because God’s victory has “already been achieved.”34 Instead, the true drama lies in the fact that the “No that echoes through the world is a result of God’s Yes.”35 It is only in light of the tragedy of the cross that we become fully aware of the extent of our own sinfulness. In this sense the “yawning abyss” between God and creation is inevitable and necessary, particularly if “in Jesus God wishes to provoke his freed creature to the highest degree of responsibility.”36 The central premise is one in which the process of conversion is instigated by hitting rock bottom. The apocalyptic framework highlights the severity of sin in the world and sits in stark contrast to the overabundance of God’s fidelity and grace described in his theological aesthetics.

**Humanity’s No: The Apocalyptic Rhythm of Sin**

On the cross, the whole sin of humankind is unveiled as “an excuse, a lie.”37 Sin is an intentional misuse of human freedom. It is a failure to acknowledge one’s

33. Ibid., 51.
34. Ibid., 51.
35. Ibid., 56.
36. Ibid., 435.
37. Ibid., 179.
rightful place in the cosmos. More specifically, it is a refusal to acknowledge one’s existence, especially one’s freedom, as being directed by and indebted to God.\textsuperscript{38} In Balthasar’s perspective, humanity is “forever trying to translate what is absolute into terms that are relative and transitory.”\textsuperscript{39} In doing so, we become our own origin and goal instead of acknowledging our divine origins and \textit{telos}. We lie to ourselves and one another about our rightful place in creation. This lie has perpetuated itself throughout history, beginning with the story in Genesis in which:

The spiritual craving “to be like God” is transferred to the physical craving for the apple (man as spirit and body). Then the sexual relationship is perverted by the overpowering dominance of the man over the woman (man as male and female). Brotherhood is destroyed (in the Cain and Abel episode) and revenge (Lamech) is elevated to the level of law. The Promethean “One World” (in the building of the Tower of Babel) is exploded by the intrinsic lie (the desire to reach up as high as God).\textsuperscript{40}

The pattern of lies and deception that began in the Garden of Eden continues throughout all salvation history, leading up to the crucifixion where Pilate symbolically washes his hands as a token of his innocence.

To suggest that sin, and in an analogous sense, evil is rooted in lies and deception is to imply two things. First, it is to make a claim about the role of willful intent in sinful activity. For Balthasar, this means that there must be “a primary consciousness of what is fundamentally true, of what should be the case; and there must be a constant attempt to

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 164.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 94.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 164-165. Recall here that all of creation is to be feminine vis-à-vis God. Therefore, the dominance of man refers to the dominance of adopting a masculine posture in relation to God. See discussion of this in Chapter 2.
reassure oneself that it is not true and is not the case.” In other words, to sin is to willingly and knowingly participate in an act of self-deception. Sin is a deliberate rejection of the truth. Second, lies are self-perpetuating. Once one tells a lie it becomes much harder to confess the truth. One lie, as we all know, can easily lead to another lie, and so on. Pretty soon, we have constructed an entirely new system in which to exist and have completely lost sight of the truth. We end up convincing ourselves that the lie is now the truth. It is in this sense that humanity becomes overwhelmed by its “attempts to seize absolute power.” We are “bent in upon” ourselves and caught up in the undertow of evil. “In this way, the sinner builds kind of a ‘bulwark’ against the real truth,” and hides behind the illusion of his or her lies.

In the condition of sinful deceit, we can no longer hear or respond to the summons of divine freedom. This explains the apocalyptic dynamic at the heart of Balthasar’s theodramatics. As one lie piles upon another, humanity’s collective No increases. As the “truth” of God’s love for us is increasingly revealed in history, the more effort it takes to deny it. Thus, the dynamic between Yes and No exists in an “ever-intensifying rhythm,” with both poles reaching an apocalyptic extreme at the crucifixion. Balthasar also uses the “snowballing” effect of lying and deception to explain the doctrine of original sin.

Sin enters the world through Adam’s self-deception and plunges the entire family of

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41. Ibid., 164. Italics original.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid., 167.
humanity “not into personal sin, but into a lack of grace.”

The consequences of original sin result in a broken marital covenant between God and humanity.

Balthasar traces the origins of the covenantal marriage between God and humanity back to the very act of the creation, as articulated in Genesis 2. He describes this process as follows:

At this point [Gen 2:23ff], moreover, we see that the existence-for-one-another of the man and the woman, which is hierarchical and yet co-equal, is what constitutes the human subject; and with this motif of partnership between God and man [sic] . . . comes to full force as the interior depth of man’s [sic] relation to God as his image.45

To be created in the image and likeness of God is to be created with the capacity to respond to another being. Specifically, the covenant established between God and creation is marked by creation’s capacity to receive the offer of divine grace. Humanity is the one who answers (AntWort) and God (Wort) is the one who speaks.46 Thus, a breach of the covenant occurs when humanity fails to uphold its side of the relationship in refusing to respond to God’s Word.

In this allegorical interpretation of the Fall, Adam no longer answers God, “or if he does, it is only as one turned away from God or as one who feels to the need to hide

44. Ibid., 183.


46. GL 6, 99.
himself.”

In refusing to respond to God’s word, Adam attempts to become his own Wort. This creates a breach in the communion between God and humanity because it obscures the dialectic of AntWort-Wort, which is the “context and the relationship” in which to “exercise the act of love.”

In and through the subversion of the rightful ordering of the gender roles that have been laid out by divine design, sin distorts the nuptial relationship between God and creation. Therefore, sinful activity is not only an attempt to become like God; it also involves a gendered rebellion against one’s place in the cosmos. Sin distorts theological and sexual difference.

Recall that, for Balthasar, the covenant between God and creation is not merely a contractual relationship. It is a marriage covenant between bride and bridegroom. Therefore, within the bounds of the nuptial covenant, sin is much more than disobedience in the common sense of the word. To sin against the bridegroom is a betrayal of love. Balthasar states that “a retrospective look at the history of the covenant, right to its beginnings, show that God’s commandments were never kept and that God had never really been ‘known’ and loved.”

Here, God is depicted as an abandoned and forlorn

47. Ibid., 102. Balthasar interprets Genesis 3:10 allegorically to mean “Adam, as we know, hides himself after sinning, but he can clearly hear God’s call and he answers from his hiding-place (Gen. 3:10).”

48. Ibid., 184.

49. Ibid., 215. “In the perspective of the ‘covenant,’ sin appears essentially and formally as infidelity, whatever the precise contents of the trespass may be.”

50. TD 4, 213. The double entendre refers to the biblical sense of knowledge as likened to sexual intimacy.
lover. The driving question behind Balthasar’s theology of redemption is how can God be faithful to the nuptial covenant when God’s beloved partner is unfaithful? For Balthasar, the new covenant established by Christ’s death on the cross is the “fulfillment of the nuptiality between God and humanity which was foreshadowed in the old covenant.” At a fundamental level, redemption involves the restoration of theological and sexual difference in divine-human relations.

**Going to the Cross: Balthasar’s Soteriology**

Balthasar outlines five principles that every soteriology must maintain if it is to be truly “ecclesial.” They are as follows: 1) Christ freely and obediently gives himself up for us.” Christ’s *pro nobis* encompasses representation. Christ stands in our place and receives divine judgment. Through this process, we are 3) liberated from sin 4) for participation in the divine life. In other words, the loosing of the bonds of sin not only frees us from the captivity of sin, but it also transforms us so that we can participate in

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51. Ibid. Also see TD 4, 201, “Indeed, even what is hostile to God, in all its profound abysses, is not abandoned; God does not turn his back on it: it is taken over and reworked.” Articulating the question of the theodramatics in terms of the relation between infinite and finite freedom tends to obscure the gendered and erotic aspects of Balthasar’s soteriological construction. See for example, Kevin Mongrain, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar: An Irenaean Retrieval* (New York: Crossroad, 2003).

52. GL 7, 472.

53. TD 4, 317. The term ecclesial refers to the ways in which Balthasar’s theology of redemption opens out into the life of the Church. It also operates to distinguish his soteriological constructions from those which he deems to be heretical. Balthasar’s construction of heresy will be discussed later in this chapter.
the divine life. 5) This entire process flows out of God’s gracious love. In the sections that follow, I will discuss the ways in which these themes are developed in Balthasar’s theology of the cross.

Abandonment, Representation, and Obedience: Christ’s Pro nobis

In the Theo-drama, Balthasar’s reflection on the cross begins with Jesus’ anticipation of the “hour.” The hour signifies several things. First, and foremost, it refers to divinely appointed time or kairos. In the moment of the cross, God acts “decisively,” restoring the covenant and unifying all of history. The hour also refers to “the Passion that John sees simultaneously as the glorification.” Christ’s entire life is running toward the hour wherein “he is lifted up” on the cross. In other words, Christ’s personhood is oriented to and defined by the Cross-event.

On the cross, Christ is “given up” by “Christians, Jews and Gentiles, and finally by the Father.” He is alienated and abandoned on all sides, forsaken by God and humanity. Humanity, in its stubborn refusal to take accountability for its actions, “casts all its guilt onto God, making him the sole accused, the scapegoat.” At the same time, God allows Christ to be thoroughly “affected” by the hour.

54. Ibid., 243.

55. Ibid., 236. Balthasar is referring to John 12:23; “the hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified.”

56. Ibid., 237.

57. Ibid., 335.

58. Ibid.
the cross, allowing him to freely bear the consequences of our sin. Christ freely chooses to take responsibility for the sins of humanity out of obedience to the will of the Father. Christ’s *pro nobis* cannot be coerced, nor can it be imposed upon him by God.\(^59\)

Not only does Christ’s *pro nobis* arise out of free obedience, but it also should be interpreted in light of the *admirabile commercium* (wondrous exchange). For Balthasar, reconciliation is accomplished only in so far as the *admirabile commercium* speaks of a “real exchange of places.”\(^60\) It is incorrect to state that Christ’s death on the cross is “for our benefit” or “in solidarity with us” as neither description adequately captures the extent of this representation.\(^61\) Christ’s atoning work is the work of vicarious substitution.\(^62\) Christ stands in our place and receives divine judgment in our stead:

“God’s anger strikes him instead of the countless sinners, shattering him as by lightening and distributing him among them; thus God the Father, in the Holy Spirit, creates the


\(^60\). TD 3, 239.

\(^61\). Aidan Nichols makes this point in *Divine Fruitfulness: A Guide through Balthasar’s Theology Beyond the Trilogy* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 177.

\(^62\). It is worth noting that Balthasar’s interpretation of vicarious substitution is further nuanced by his theology of creation. All of humanity exists *en Christoī* as the world cannot have any other locus but within the distinction between the Hypostases. Therefore, even creation’s *No* resounds within the Hypostases of the Godhead. For more detail on this subject, see TD 4, 333-335.
Son’s Eucharist.” Christ’s body, broken and shattered, frees us from the bonds of sin and rises again in the Eucharist.

Cross, Eucharist, and Ecclesia

In the Cross-event, humanity is liberated from the bonds of sin for participation in the divine life. But what exactly does this mean? How do we participate in the divine life, given that all of creation already exists “en Christōi”? Moreover, does God simply redeem us without our consent? This is where the role of Mary comes into the drama. Mary, in her fiat, utters Yes [Jawort] in the “name of the whole human race,” including those who refuse to respond. It is through Mary’s Yes that the Church comes into being.

God, from the lonely heights of his almighty power, can take the “nothingness” of unfruitful virginity (to which, in the Old Covenant, the odor of shame was attached) and make of it the fruitful motherhood of the Virgin, with a fruitfulness that extends to the whole world. He does this through his divine-human Son who, by means of his Eucharist, embodies the miracle of divine omnipotence and universal fruitfulness and makes it a reality in the Father’s entire creation. Here, finally falling silent, the Word is empowered to make his whole body into God’s seed; thus the Word finally and definitively becomes flesh in the Virgin Mother, Mary-Ecclesia.64

As the Passion involves two deaths, the death on the cross and the descent into hell, so the incarnation involves two births, the birth of Jesus and the birth of the Church. It is through participation in the life of the Church that we experience the fullness of redemption and become members of the Body of the Christ. In the Eucharist, the Church participates in the ongoing sacrifice of Christ.

63. Ibid., 348. The Eucharistic self-giving is a “superabundant atonement.” Also see TD 4, 499ff.

64. TD 4, 361.
Salvation as a Work of Love

The final theme in Balthasar’s soteriology, and arguably the most important, is that the entire process—from cross to Eucharist—is “the result of an initiative on the part of divine love.” Balthasar’s central claim is that the saving activity of God through Christ is a work of love. On the cross, the nuptial covenant between bride and bridegroom is restored and fulfilled through the bilateral movements of Christ’s self-surrender, as love outpoured, and Mary’s fiat. These two movements coordinate to define the character of Christian discipleship and love in terms of obedient self-surrender. Moreover, the activity of love, whether in the form of divine kenosis or a Marian fiat, always takes place within the context of a nuptial relationship. The movement of love involves the complementary motions of activity and receptivity, even on the cross.

Love as Kenosis: Self-Emptying and Receptivity

Through the history of Christian thought there have been a number of approaches to the doctrine of kenosis. As Sarah Coakley illustrates, historical debates about the meaning of self-emptying go back to a single appearance of the verb kenoō (translated as I empty”) in Philippians 2: 7. The whole passage (Philippians 2. 5-11) reads as follows:

65. Ibid., 317.

66. MP, 132-133. “It comes to its fulfillment bilaterally . . . which the Church must in both of its aspects simultaneously be: namely, as the body of Jesus Christ himself (through his Eucharist, I Corinthians 10, 16, as participating in the flesh and blood he bestowed in his dying: I Corinthians 11, 26; John 6) and, precisely in this being body, in addition, his virginal bride (II Corinthians 11, 2).”

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.\textsuperscript{68}

Early Christian writers like Cyril of Alexandria, interpreted this hymn in order to dogmatically explicate the union of Christ’s two natures. In this context, \textit{kenosis} signifies a doctrine of divine representation.\textsuperscript{69} Balthasar’s engagement with the text picks up on these themes and elaborates upon them in light of the work of Russian sophiologist Sergei Bulgakov.

According to Balthasar, the ground of all being is an interpersonal communion marked by reciprocity that encompasses infinite distance and infinite presence. Eternal self-emptying (giving) and receiving characterize the life of the immanent Trinity: “the divine hypostases proceed from one another” and are perfectly open to one another for all eternity.\textsuperscript{70} Yet, as Balthasar notes, this pattern of giving and receiving requires that “the distinction between persons is maintained” for one cannot be in fellowship with oneself.\textsuperscript{71} In this way, \textit{kenosis} gives shape to the Trinitarian hypostases. Love within the context of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{68} All biblical quotes, unless specified otherwise, are taken from \textit{The New Oxford Annotated Bible}, new revised standard version, eds. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
  \item \textsuperscript{69} For an excellent summary of the history of this term see, Coakley’s essay, “\textit{Kenōsis} and Subversion.”
  \item \textsuperscript{70} TD 2, 258f.
  \item \textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 257.
\end{itemize}
the Godhead is marked by a mutual self-surrender to the other. It is this eternal self-emptying of the immanent Trinity that makes possible the self-emptying of the divine persons in salvation history. As John O’Donnell notes, “Balthasar sees the unfolding of this story of salvation as progressive levels of self-emptying: from creation, to incarnation, and finally to the cross.” Thus, the drama of salvation is a drama of kenotic love.

While *kenosis* signifies the metaphysical relations within the life of the immanent Trinity, it also defines the character of Jesus’ self-abasement on the cross. On the cross, divine love exhibits a double character as “the love of God the Father, who allows God the Son to go into the absolute obedience of poverty and self abandonment where he can be nothing else than the total object that receives the divine ‘wrath’.” This “self-surrender” of the Father parallels the self-abandonment of the Son, who “identifies himself out of love” with sinful humanity. Divine love is a kenotic “letting be.” It is a freely willed and obedient self-surrender, even to the point of death on the cross. Christ surrenders the “form of God,” which is the “decisive act of love of the Son.”

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73. Ibid.

74. See GL7, 143ff.

75. Ibid., 207.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid., 214.
kenotic act of Christ is not a painless, metaphysical surrender. The Passion is an event that involves real suffering and forsakenness. To suggest anything less, in Balthasar’s eyes, would be to eliminate the dramatic element of the Paschal mystery.

On the cross, Christ truly experiences the darkness of the sinful state. However, it cannot be said that he suffers in the same way that the human person suffers. Christ’s agony is a deeper and darker experience than any human experience because of its duration and because of the level of intimacy he shares with the one who abandons him. The agony that begins at the Mount of Olives lasts until the end of the world and takes place within “the profound depths of the relations between the divine Hypostases.” It is important to note that the pain of the cross, for Balthasar, is the pain of alienation. As he describes it, “[o]nly the one who has known the genuine intimacy of love, can be genuinely abandoned (not merely lonely).” In this description, Balthasar presents a highly spiritualized interpretation of the sufferings of the cross. Christ’s pain is not the pain of hunger, battery, or physical violence. It is the pain of being forsaken, or rejected, by the ones you love. Moreover, Christ experiences this forsakenness “primarily as God’s wrath.” It is in this sense that the cross stands as judgment.

78. Balthasar takes issue with Anselm on this matter. While Anselm is an important dialogue partner for Balthasar, he finds his satisfaction theory to be lacking in that it fails to fully identity Christ with sin. See TD 4, 260f.

79. TD 4, 336.

80. GL 7, 216.

On biblical and Barthian grounds, Balthasar contends that God’s wrath is God’s judgment over the sinful No of humanity. Yet, divine anger is not an “irrational” emotion; it is the other side of divine love. On the cross, “[t]he love in God’s heart is laid bare in all its radicality, showing absolute opposition to anything that would injure it.” God’s wrath, Balthasar insists, cannot be separated from God’s holiness and love. In the face of sin, divine love manifests itself as a righteous anger. In Christ there is a “willing and loving concentration” of all sinful opposition to God. In the face of divine anger, Christ’s response remains one of loving surrender. Christ’s loving obedience, which persists even in the face of rejection and anger, breaks the cycle of violence and “disarms” divine anger by “depriving it of its object.” In sum, the pattern of love is one of unfailing self-giving, even to the point of death.

**Kenosis, Impassibility, and Suffering**

In adopting a dramatic framework, Balthasar seeks to maintain the “event” quality of revelation. Therefore, *kenosis* as interpreted through a dramatic lens is not a static quality. *Kenosis* is an eternal event of divine self-giving. Balthasar’s insistence on the dramatic movement of revelation has given rise to questions about the role of

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82. *TD* 4, 340. Balthasar argues that “anger is an essential and ineradicable feature” of the New and Old Testament picture of God. He asks, “Can we seriously say that God unloaded his wrath upon the Man who wrestled with his destiny on the Mount of Olives and was subsequently crucified? Indeed we must. Even in life, Jesus has been the revealer of the whole pathos of God—of his love and his indignation at man’s scorning of this love—and now he has to bear the ultimate consequence of his more-than-prophetic mediation.” See *TD* 4, 345-346.

83. Ibid., 341.

84. Ibid., 349-350. The reference in the text is to Rene Girard’s scapegoat theory.
immutability and impassibility in his theology. Does kenosis signify an emptying of divine attributes and, consequently, a change in God? Moreover, given the link between the incarnation and the Passion in Balthasar’s theology, does kenosis involve divine suffering? Balthasar’s approach to the immutability and impassibility of God is considered to be one of the most controversial aspects of his theology. Simply put, Balthasar wants to hang onto the notion of divine pathos without compromising divine immutability. He rejects all interpretations of the incarnation as an emptying of divine attributes or potency. Drawing upon the work of Hilary of Poitiers, he interprets divine potency as being ordered so that “it can make room for a possible self-exteriorisation.”

In the incarnation, divine potency takes the form of kenosis, or self-emptying. While this addresses the issue of divine immutability in the incarnation, questions remain about divine impassibility in light of Christ’s kenosis on the cross.

In the Theo-drama, God is not an “unmoved mover” who stands “over and against” humanity. God is “moved and affected’ by events in the world.” Not only is this evidenced in the scriptures wherein Jesus reveals the whole pathos of God, ranging from love to indignation, but God’s passionate involvement in the world also reflects an aspect of “divine care and concern” for creation. More important in this conversation is the matter of Christ’s suffering on the cross. Jesus truly suffers on the cross. Balthasar


86. MP, 29.

87. TD 4, 344.
takes this claim very seriously. At the outset of the final volume of the *Theo-drama*, he writes:

[T]he formula “One of the Trinity has suffered” . . . was held to be orthodox (DS 401, 432); I cannot see how the *pro nobis* of Christ’s Cross and Resurrection can avail for us if the one who was crucified and risen is not “one of the Trinity.” Otherwise people might be quite right to say, “God (or Jesus) may be having a hard time, but so what? That doesn’t help me when I’m having a hard time.”

God’s passionate love for the world includes an affective dimension. And this has genuine consequences for our salvation. Within his dramatic soteriology, something happens on the cross that changes our relationship with God in a fundamental way. The issue, according to Balthasar commentators, is whether or not the cross changes something in God. Balthasar emphatically maintains that the divine *pathos* does not contradict divine impassibility, which “persists in all aspects of the economy of

88. TD 5, 13.

89. Balthasar’s entire dramatic soteriology takes place within the “Pathos of God.” This is a subtitle in volume 4 of the *Theo-drama*.

90. The interpretation of the cross is one of the central places of disagreement between the theologies of Karl Rahner and Balthasar. For Rahner, the locus of redemption is the incarnation. To clarify, it is not the case that Rahner finds the cross event to be insignificant in salvation history. The central issue has more to do with the application of the terminology of “expiatory sacrifice” to the death of Jesus. In a word, Rahner argues that the cross should never be interpreted as “‘changing the mind’ of an angry God.” In the incarnation, God has already decided to be God with us. The cross, for Rahner, sets out a creative pattern for our own death. In this way, Jesus dies in solidarity with us. The death-resurrection of Jesus is significant for our salvation insofar as they categorically reveal God’s saving will for all humanity. See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York, Seabury, 1978), 255. For a balanced summary of the major points of disagreement between Balthasar and Rahner, see Karen Kibby’s essay “Balthasar and Rahner,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, eds. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 256-268.
salvation.”

Why insist, then, on using the language of impassibility when, as Gerard O’Hanlon suggests, “the reality signified is so much more complex?”

In the text, there is no clear cut answer to this question. O’Hanlon posits that this apparent contradiction can be attributed to Balthasar’s “poetic” and “paradoxical” use of theological language. The paradox of divine suffering and immutability is a function of the aesthetic character of Balthasar’s logic. In making this argument, O’Hanlon draws attention to the influence of Balthasar’s literary training on his interpretation of theological texts. Others point to the distinction Balthasar makes between the economic and immanent Trinity and argue that God’s pathos is enacted only in the sphere of the economic Trinity. While both of these positions point to important aspects of Balthasar’s theology, a third dimension of the divine pathos arises when we remember that the center of Balthasar’s theology is a nuptial relationship centered at the cross.

91. TD 5, 13.
93. Ibid., 136. O’Hanlon argues that divine incomprehensibility in Balthasar’s logic takes the particular form of paradox, thus, allowing him to posit the coincident reality of divine suffering and impassibility.
94. Balthasar’s formal education was in the area of literary criticism. He received some theological training through his Jesuit formation.
95. TD 4, 362. Balthasar describes this as follows: “This dramatic aspect does not entangle the immanent Trinity in the world’s fate, as occurs in mythology, but it does lift the latter’s fate to the level of the economic Trinity, which always presupposes the immanent.” Examples include Antoine Birot, “God in Christ, Reconciled the World to Himself”: Redemption in Balthasar,” trans. David Schindler, Communio 24 (1997): 259-285 and Steffen Lösel, “Unapocalyptic Theology: History and Eschatology in Balthasar’s Theo-drama,” Modern Theology 17 (2001): 201-225.
Earlier, we spoke of the bilateral movement of Christ’s *kenosis* and Mary’s *fiat* in the restoration and fulfillment of the nuptial covenant. This model of gender complementarity within the movement of redemption can be traced back to dimensions of Balthasar’s theological anthropology. According to Balthasar, the fullness of humanity, as created in the image and likeness of God, is expressed through participation in a nuptial (male-female) relationship.\(^{96}\) On the divine side of things, Mary fulfills this role as the bride of Christ. Yet, the Marian *fiat* also serves another purpose. Wishing to distinguish himself from Martin Luther’s *sola gratia*, Balthasar rejects the notion of justification by divine attribution and argues that humanity must subjectively appropriate its own salvation. Mary, representing the faith of humanity, offers a Yes to the incarnation and the crucifixion. She stands in solidarity with humanity and responds obediently in our place.\(^{97}\) Similar to Christ’s *kenosis*, her solidarity takes the form of complete poverty and humiliation, culminating “in her rejection by her Son during his ministry and on the cross, where mother and son are completely separated from one another.”\(^{98}\) At the foot of the cross, Mary also experiences the pain of familial forsakenness. As Christ is forsaken by the Father on the cross, Mary is forsaken by the Son. In this way, her presence establishes a context for Christ’s masculine activity in

\(^{96}\) The implication is that participation in any other relationship makes one less than whole. As we saw in Balthasar’s description of sin, there is no grace in a *Wort-Wort* relationship. It is important to name that this framework is not only androcentric, it is also heterocentric.

\(^{97}\) Mary’s obedience is analogous to but not identical with Christ’s *stellvertretung*.

\(^{98}\) Lösel, “A Plain Account of Christian Salvation,” 158.
relation to a feminine receptivity. Therefore, Mary holds the title of co-redeemer in a secondary sense. Her Yes parallels Christ’s Yes, but it is also distinct. Mary’s fiat is an answering Yes that echoes in response to Christ’s Yes. This is illustrated more clearly in the original German text. Christ’s all embracing Yes is termed Ja, Mary’s all embracing Yes is Jawort. As Answer, she echoes Christ’s loving obedience through her own fiat.

In the context of the nuptial relationship, Mary’s fiat and Christ’s kenosis replicate the pattern of gender complementary present throughout the Theo-drama. “Just as the man gives his seed in sexual intercourse, so Christ sows the seed of the Word and is a total outpouring of himself for his bride, the Church.” In response to Christ’s kenosis, the Marian Church “opens her womb” to accept this offer of the divine self. In relation to the Marian Church, Christ’s kenosis is an emptying out into the other. In this context, kenosis is a definitively masculine activity to which there is no feminine corollary (human corollary) apart from receptivity, thereby maintaining the dramatic structure of theological and sexual difference. Here, the pathos of God as kenosis is the movement of “dispersing one’s seed” within the context of a vowed life. In contrast, Marian obedience is a purely feminine receptivity, which gives birth to the Church.


100. O’Donnell, Hans Urs von Balthasar, 120. It is interesting to note that on the cross, Christ actively suffers. In other words, his surrender is marked by an active passivity. It is only in the isolation of hell that Christ experiences complete passivity—or a “being” with the dead. Steffen Lösel makes this point in his essay, “A Plain Account of Christian Salvation,” 150.

101. Tina Beattie also makes this point in New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory (New York: Routledge, 2006), 224.
This example serves to highlight the gendered dimensions of *kenosis*. *Kenosis*, for Balthasar, presupposes sexual and theological difference. As Graham Ward states, “[t]here cannot be true *kenosis* without hiatus, without true difference.”\(^{102}\) This is because hiatus, in Balthasar’s theology, “fosters desire by opening the space for creativity, the stage for action, and the yearning for unity.”\(^{103}\) Kenotic love, like erotic love, rests upon difference, taking place within nuptial relations. Moreover, *kenosis* within the divine economy is a movement of “descent, not ascent,” reflecting a hierarchal ordering in the expression of love.\(^ {104}\) Feminine *kenosis* presupposes submission to Lordship, while masculine *kenosis* does not.\(^ {105}\)

The gendered aspects of *kenosis* account for its varying definitions within the text. In relation to the Father, Christ assumes a quasi-feminine role and experiences *kenosis* as an obedient and responsive self-surrender that encompasses the poverty of suffering on the cross. In the face of divine judgment, Balthasar describes Christ’s *kenosis* on the cross as “enduring dereliction,” “drinking deeply of the darkness of the world’s guilt,” and “suffering at the Father’s hand.”\(^ {106}\) Here, in the face of the world’s sin, Christ’s *kenosis* is an experience marked by anguish. In relation to Mary and the feminine

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103. Ibid.

104. MP, 25.

105. Of course, all *kenosis*, whether masculine or feminine, takes place within a divinely pre-ordained framework.

106. TD 4, 348.
Church, Christ’s *kenosis* is likened to male ejaculation. The only context in which *kenosis* is defined as mutual giving and receiving is within the life of the immanent Trinity.

In returning to our original question about the apparent contradiction between divine immutability and Christ’s suffering, *kenosis* signifies poverty and self-abnegation insofar as these attributes arise as a part of an obedient response to the divine initiative. On the cross, Christ’s *kenosis* is a responsive *kenosis* that “receives, makes fruitful, and returns the gift of masculine initiative.” In an analogous fashion, this *kenosis* is also the *kenosis* of motherhood, of human discipleship, and of the Marian *fiat*. In contrast, the *kenosis* of God in the creation of the world and the incarnation is an originating self-

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107. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches (London: SPCK, 1975), 349. Consider for example, Balthasar’s question, “What else is his eucharist, but at a higher level, an endless act of fruitful outpouring of his whole flesh, such as a man can only achieve for a moment with a limited organ of his body?” Perhaps this is why Balthasar claims that “transcendence is seen most clearly in the sexual area.” See TD 5, 473. Tina Beattie goes so far to argue that Balthasar’s understanding of *kenosis* is “the willingness of the masculine God to be seduced by the female flesh and lured to his death.” See Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 161. While I concur with her claim that Balthasar’s *kenosis* is not defined by a mutually kenotic desire of the sexes, I have a hard time supporting the second part of her conclusions. To argue this is to conclude that Balthasar sees all of creation, which is feminine vis-à-vis God, as seductive. As I will argue in a moment, there are only certain aspects of creation that Balthasar depicts using the language of temptress.

108. Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 159. Also see TD 5, 254. Balthasar describes the painful aspects of the Passion as womanly: “The Passion is therefore the highest act of the Lord’s love, just as the birth pangs are for a woman giving birth. ‘Pain always belongs to woman.’” Balthasar concludes in this passage that, “it follows quite naturally from this that the Lord thereupon ‘sends his Church, his Bride, fully conscious into suffering.’”

109. However, this *kenosis* is secondary, or responsive, to Christ’s *kenosis*, completing the hierarchy.
emptying. In relation to Mary-Ecclesia, Christ’s *kenosis* takes on the character of an originating self-emptying in the Eucharistic life of the Church. In this way, Christ stands as both feminine and masculine. Christ is feminine in relation to God and masculine in relation to all of creation.

In sum, while it can be said that a mutual outpouring gives shape to the kenotic life of the immanent Trinity, this clearly is not the case in the marriage covenant between God and creation. The Son’s surrender is not to humanity, or even to Mary. It is to God, the Father. In contrast, Mary’s surrender is to God in the incarnation and to Christ on the cross. As bride and bridegroom, Christ and Mary do *not* exhibit a pattern of relationality in which they surrender to each other. Here, the pattern of kenotic love is a pattern of gendered submission in which the bride “takes her rise from” the bridegroom. It is only through an obedient surrender of oneself to that which is higher one is brought into the divine embrace—or, to use Balthasar’s language, God and humanity exist in a deep interpenetration. Moreover, while Mary’s *fiat* is “given freely,” it is also not her own initiative.  

Mary’s Yes is always a responsive Yes. It comes at a price—she must give up her own body. The challenge in retrieving Balthasar’s *kenosis* rests not only with its gendered dimensions, but it also lies in the ways that loving obedience is paired with violence.

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110 While Balthasar makes it very clear that while the Incarnation would not have been possible apart from the Marian *fiat*, it is God’s grace that allows for her consenting response.
Through Mary’s consent, the battle is won. The bride (as covenant partner), who once was a wanton courtesan, is now “the captive of love.” Echoing the medieval notion of *casta meretrix*, Balthasar likens the process of redemption to the “Conquest of the Bride.” What began as the battle of the Logos is now transformed into a battle of love. The Spirit “overpowers” the “unruly” and “recalcitrant flesh” of the body. Christ marks the conquest of the bride with a seal of his victory:

In order to put a seal on my victory and exploit my triumph, I have engraved a mark upon you, O my flesh: on your carnal weakness, and on your sin the mark of my love. Never again will your sinful battle against me be anything other than the long wrestling of love. This is the meaning I confer upon it, and now it can have no other meaning.

In the throes of battle with God, the unfaithful bride, or the Church of sinners, is conquered through Mary’s consent. God’s victory is accomplished through death on the cross. Not only does this passage metaphorically identify the female body as the locus of sinful activity, but the body of the bride is objectified and exploited in the process. In this context, kenotic and erotic love meld into a vision of violent sexual conquest. Christ’s *kenosis* on the cross is no longer a veiled form of love; it becomes a veiled form of...

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112. “Conquest of the Bride” is the title of a chapter of *Heart of the World*. Balthasar develops the theme of *casta meretrix* extensively in *Spouse of the Word*, vol. 2 of *Explorations in Theology*, trans. A.V. Littledale with Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991): 193-289. He argues that Martin Luther was not the first to equate the Roman Church with the whore of Babylon. Instead, this theme has been present throughout all of history. Balthasar traces its development beginning with the Hebrew Scriptures through medieval theology.

conquest. In *The Heart of the World*, discipleship takes the form of forced sexual submission: “Never has woman made more desperate resistance!” As Tina Beattie suggests, Balthasar’s use of theological language in this passage no longer remains at the level of erotic mysticism. It crosses over into the realm of the pornographic due to the link between violence and sexuality. 

There have been a number of efforts to retrieve Balthasar’s notion of *kenosis* as a resource for contemporary theology. Yet, these efforts overlook the ties between love and violence present in Balthasar’s construction of *kenosis*. For example, in a recent essay in *Modern Theology*, Aristotle Papanikolaou argues that “far from being meaningless in situations of abuse, Balthasar’s understanding of *kenotic* personhood is the most adequate way to account for the healing of abused victims.” He substantiates this claim by arguing that “the difference between Coakley and Balthasar in terms of the content of *kenosis* is negligible.” According to Papanikolaou, both see “*kenosis* as a fundamental stance before God in which vulnerability means opening a space for God’s

114. Ibid.


117. Papanikolaou, “Person, Kenosis, and Abuse,” 42.

118. Ibid., 46. Sarah Coakley argues that in the context of prayer, *kenosis* can be interpreted as power-in-vulnerability. However, she is very clear that this does not entail a “straightforward identification between all forms of vulnerability” and the vulnerability that arises in the “silent waiting on the divine in prayer.” See Coakley, “*Kenōsis* and Subversion,” 106-107.
love to be present as a self-constituting empowerment.” Yet, given the gendered aspects of Balthasar’s kenosis, this is a difficult argument to sustain. To suggest that Balthasar’s kenosis bears the mark of power-in-vulnerability, or even mutuality, is to ignore the violence implicit in the text. While Christ may be vulnerable on the cross, in relation to all that is feminine (creation, Mary, and Ecclesia) his posture is one in which power is exercised in the form of domination. Moreover, to claim that Balthasar’s kenosis provides us with an adequate model for survivors of abuse reflects a serious lack of sensitivity to the devastating effects of sexual violence. Papanikolaou is clearly more concerned with upholding the relevance of Balthasar’s theology in the face of feminist criticism instead of seriously engaging the problem of domestic violence.

**Heresy and Harlotry: The Battle of the Logos**

While one might be tempted to dismiss the “Conquest of the Bride” passage within *The Heart of the World* as an “obscure” or “isolated” instance of violence within Balthasar’s corpus, the symbolism of the conquest of the female body can be found throughout Balthasar’s dramatic rendering of salvation. In the drama of divine action, Christ is not only cast in the role of divine victim, but he also is a warrior hero who goes to battle under the “sign of the apocalypse.” This, as Balthasar explains, can be attributed to the “phenomenon of existence itself, which, in the face of the Absolute, can be

119. Ibid.

120. Tina Beattie comes to a similar conclusion in chapter 8 of *New Catholic Feminism*. However, her approach is more focused on sacramentality than soteriology. She also does not address the relationship between erotic and kenotic love present in Balthasar’s theology of the cross.
simultaneously a liturgy of worship and a battlefield.”¹²¹ In the battlefield of revelation there is no “hiatus” between “the powerlessness of being slain and the power of conquest—the latter comes by virtue of the former.”¹²² In Christ, the power of conquest arises as a consequence of death on the cross. After his death on the cross, Christ rises again as a warrior hero armed for battle. The question becomes: if victory has already been won on the cross, with whom does Christ go to battle?

While the cross is the apex of the Theo-drama, the action is far from being over after its occurrence. After his death on the cross, Christ passes through “hell on Holy Saturday.”¹²³ Among the dead, he experiences the utmost forsakenness. Yet, in spite of his subjective experience of forsakenness, Christ’s descent to the underworld is to be objectively interpreted as the journey of a victor. “Like a triumphant field marshal, he musters the defeated troops and the spoils of victory: the fettered powers of evil and conquered sin.”¹²⁴ In Balthasar’s apocalyptic framework, the battle is with the trinity of hell, manifested in the form of a woman, the Archwhore of Babylon. Babylon is not merely a symbolic figure. As “Jewish-Gentile Gnosticism,” she is the “arch-enemy of the Christian faith and love in the Church.”¹²⁵ The Church’s nemesis is found in each stage of history. In the Old Testament, she is the wicked Jerusalem, who is regarded as the

¹²¹ TD 2, 33. Italics original.
¹²² Ibid., 35.
¹²³ TD 5, 267.
¹²⁴ Ibid., 315.
¹²⁵ TD 4, 446.
“supreme Harlot.” In the present day, she lives in the arrogance of secularism and liberal theologies. While her ultimate destruction will be one of self-destruction, the Church, armed with Christ, must go to battle or else risk the dangers of “being diverted from her full surrender to Christ.”

Confronted with the infidelity and harlotry of secularism, Christ takes on a new role—the warrior hero who goes to battle in order to destroy that which will entice his Bride away from “the chaste love of the covenant.” And this is no mere battle of words or ideas; it is a full out theodramatic war in which human beings are drawn into the battle between God’s Logos and hell’s anti-logos. Faced with the temptress of secularism embodied in feminine form, the Logos-Warrior “parries the open attack from the front and the covert attack from behind . . . rul[ing] by dividing and exposing, until ‘all are open and laid bare.’” This is a violent defeat in which God is depicted as a zealous warrior who goes to battle with a wanton whore in order to rescue his Bride. The licentious activity of Babylon is provoked by Christ’s appearance in the world. This functions rhetorically not only to highlight God’s chaste fidelity by juxtaposing it against

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126. Ibid., 464.

127. Ibid., 463.

128. Ibid.

129. Ibid. As members of the body of Christ, believers are called to either “destroy” or convert those who interfere with the martial chastity between bride and bridegroom.

130. Ibid., 462.

131. Ibid., 57.
the willful infidelity of all that is signified by Babylon, but it also acts to justify a violent response. Babylon is intentionally disobedient and needs to be kept inline or the chastity of the marriage bond between the Church and Christ will be defiled. Thus, a pattern is established in which male control is a necessary and even desirable response to female wanton sexuality.

The personification of sin and evil in the feminine form of a wanton whore or harlot is far from being Balthasar’s invention. As Cheryl Exum illustrates, this paradigm can be traced back to the Hebrew Scriptures. Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah all employ the imagery of harlotry to describe Israel’s unfaithfulness. Within these texts, sin is identified with “uncontrolled or unrestrained female sexuality.” Israel’s infidelity cannot be tolerated. God’s punitive response is justified by her guilt. Reconciliation is accomplished, but not without recompense. The problem, as described by Exum, is that these texts not only justify sexual violence against women by identifying it with divine behavior, but they also reinforce a pattern of gender relations in which “men are taught to exert their authority and women are taught to submit.”

While the imagery in the Theo-drama is nowhere near as graphic as the imagery in the prophetic literature mentioned above, it does repeat the pattern of “power and


134. Ibid., 113.
punishment” articulated by Cheryl Exum and Renita Weems. As discussed earlier, Balthasar’s God is not a distant and cold deity. God is a victim who suffers because of his bride’s sinful and willful infidelity. Through the language of “rejection” and “forsaken love” in describing the nature of Christ’s sufferings on the cross, Balthasar paints a picture of a broken-hearted deity. In doing so, he invites the reader to sympathize with the bridegroom. By locating divine retribution and divine wrath within the context of divine “broken-heartedness,” Balthasar puts forth a framework that justifies an angry and punitive response. The undergirding assumption is that God “has been driven to extreme measures by a wife who has again and again dishonored him and has disregarded the norms governing marriage relations.” Yet, in reconciling the world, God’s anger is not immediately taken out on creation. Instead, God’s anger strikes his only Son.

**Suffering, Punishment, and the Aesthetics of Atonement**

In the *Theo-drama*, Balthasar’s interpretation of divine filial (and also Christian) love is constructed in terms of self-surrender and obedience. Christ’s death on the cross

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135. It is worth noting that Balthasar makes a number of references to the passages discussed by Weems and Exum in the *Theo-drama*. While the Archwhore of Babylon is taken from the book of Revelation 17:5, she is likened to Ezekiel 16, see TD 4, 445. In discussing the nature of sin, Balthasar also links Isaiah’s Suffering Servant passage with Hosea, arguing that God is consigned to the humiliation of atonement because of Israel’s infidelity. He states “Hosea’s physical, sexual union with the harlot points in the same direction.” See TD 4, 176 ff.

136. For example, TD 4, 501; TD 4, 213. This also appears in the language of risk. God “risks” the total gift of Godself. See TD 4, 327.

signifies the depths of God’s love for humanity. In obedience to the will of the Father, “the Son accepts the way of the cross and dies the sinner’s death of godforsakenness.”

In this way, Balthasar lifts up Christ’s sufferings as salvific.

A number of feminist and womanist theologians have criticized models of atonement theology that lift up Christ’s suffering and death as the locus of redemption on the grounds that they domesticate death and innocent suffering, rendering it as acceptable—and even praise-worthy—behavior. In models of atonement theology wherein Christ assumes the role of Divine Victim, Christian discipleship is signified in and through suffering itself instead of active resistance to suffering. Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker explain this phenomenon as follows:

The central image of Christ on the cross as savior of the world communicates the message that suffering is redemptive. If the best person who ever lived gave his life for others, then to be of value we should likewise sacrifice ourselves. . . . The message is complicated further by the theology that says Christ suffered in obedience to his father’s will. Divine child abuse is paraded as salvific and the child who suffers ‘without even raising a voice’ is lauded as the hope of the world.

At issue is the equation of Christian discipleship with the virtues of self-sacrifice and suffering obedience without attending to the particularities of social context. Certainly, there are times in which self-sacrifice is an important virtue. However, self-sacrifice is


not always a good thing. Suffering does not always lead to a greater good. This is particularly true of situations marked by radical inequality. For example, in the context of abusive social and sexual relationships, assertions about the salvific character of suffering act to reinforce cycles of violence. Drawing upon her work with battered women, Sarah Bentley points out that many women “will persist in returning to increasingly dangerous relationships citing this very model of Christian love as ‘turning the other cheek’ or ‘following Jesus’ example.’” Furthermore, claims that Christ’s suffering and death is the outgrowth of Jesus’ obedience to the Father’s will does not make the situation any better. As Delores Williams argues, the notion that Jesus willingly stands in and accepts a punishment that is meant for others promotes the idea that surrogacy/scapegoating is not only a normal process in life, but that it is also redemptive. Given the historical ways in which African Americans have been blamed for welfare, illiteracy, and the breakdown of the nuclear family, models of redemption in which justice is accomplished by penal substitution affirms patterns of relationality that undergird racism in the United States today.

Furthermore, Balthasar’s theological dramatics presents us with a model of redemption that not only valorizes suffering, self-sacrifice, and obedient love, but it also inscribes these virtues within an aesthetic framework. This becomes particularly clear


when we look at Balthasar’s appropriation of Anselm’s satisfaction theory. Anselm is a significant dialogue partner in Balthasar’s dramatic and aesthetic approach to the cross.

In The Glory of the Lord, Balthasar praises Anselm’s work as “radiant and perfectly balanced, realizing in the purest form the concerns of theological aesthetics.” In the Theo-drama, he credits Anselm with being the first to develop a systematic soteriology. In so doing, “the dramatic dimension of the world’s redemption in Christ came out in his theology as never before, in terms not only of content but also form.”

In Balthasar’s reading of Cur Deus Homo, necessity is closely aligned with proportion, harmony, and order. The “must be so” of Anselm’s satisfaction theory

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144. TD 4, 257.

145. In Cur Deus Homo, Anselm seeks the “necessary reasons” for what Scripture has revealed to us about the will of God regarding our salvation. These necessary reasons are not a priori ideas, but the inner intelligibility of what God has done for us in Christ. Anselm rejects the patristic notion that Jesus’ death was a ransom paid to the devil and employs feudal categories in order to describe the process of atonement and satisfaction for sin. The central premise is that the sins of humanity offended the honor of God by disrupting the order and harmony of the universe. A debt of payment is required and fitting in order to restore God’s honor. However, humanity, already owing its entire life to God, could not pay it. Therefore, Christ pays the debt by offering restitution in our place. Christ’s death, offered out of freedom and obedience, merits a superabundant grace. Feminists, such as Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, have critiqued this model on the grounds that it not only identifies love with suffering, but it also suggests that God’s acceptance and love of the whole human family is “contingent upon the abuse of the one perfect child.” Human sin not only merits punishment, but it cannot be atoned for apart from it. Rita Nakashima Brock, “And a Little Child Will Lead Us: Christology and Child Abuse,” in Christianity, Patriarchy, and...
arises out of a reflection on the inner logic and proportions of free love. In making this argument, Balthasar distinguishes between external necessity (necessitas antecedens) and the internal necessity that is a function of the order of relations set out by God (necessitas sequens). It is in this second sense that Balthasar interprets Anselm’s satisfaction theory.

Necessity is not a category externally imposed upon God by humanity. We cannot say that God had “no other choice” but to redeem humanity through the cross. Rather, the necessity of the cross is a function of the inner harmony of God’s work of salvation. In Anselm’s Cur Deus Homo, sin destroys the “the order and beauty of the universe” set out by God in creation. This harmony, in Balthasar’s interpretation, is a function of the covenantal relations established by God and creation. On creation’s part, the obligations of the covenant are to voluntarily subordinate oneself to God’s will and to maintain one’s station in life. On God’s end, this means regulating and maintaining this order so that humanity can participate in the divine life. Yet, because the very goal of all creation is union with God, purification is necessary. In this sense, recompense is necessary, or rather, fitting. Balthasar concludes that in Cur Deus Homo, Christ’s


146. GL 2, 246.

147. Ibid., 236.


149. Ibid.

150. Ibid., 302. Anselm uses the imagery of the pearl that has been sullied in the mud. This pearl must be cleansed before it is brought back into Paradise.
death is not necessary in the sense of necessitas antecedans. Christ’s death is fitting and plays a fundamental role in upholding the harmony of the universe, which is also God’s glory. In this way, Anselm’s theology “brings out the aesthetic dimension” of divine freedom, which is “preserved and nurtured by the dramatic.”\textsuperscript{151}

While there are some important differences between Anselm’s satisfaction theory and Balthasar’s approach to the cross, Balthasar maintains Anselm’s paradigm of the “inner necessity” of the cross in atoning for sin. Unlike Anselm, he places the accent on Jesus’ acceptance of suffering in the form of kenosis instead of on his death.\textsuperscript{152} God does not delight in the “blood of the innocent.”\textsuperscript{153} God delights in the vow of obedience, which leads Christ to the cross.\textsuperscript{154} In other words, God delights in Christ’s free acceptance of suffering. Moreover, in Balthasar’s interpretation of the activity of redemption, Christ’s sufferings are considered to be genuinely meritorious as they proceed out of his mission and give birth to the life of the Church through the Marian fiat.\textsuperscript{155} Theodramatics, as an ecclesial soteriology, is modeled after Anselm’s notion of

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\textsuperscript{151} TD 4, 258.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 260, n.17.
\textsuperscript{153} GL 2, 249.
\textsuperscript{154} As John O’Donnell notes, for Balthasar, the essence of vocation is “the call to love” and “every genuine love takes the form of a vow.” O’Donnell, Hans Urs von Balthasar, 135.
\textsuperscript{155} Recall here that Christ’s life leads up toward the hour. His entire mission is directed toward the final kenosis on the cross.
the superabundant grace resulting from Christ’s free obedience. This grace takes the form of Eucharistic participation.

In sum, the cross is “necessary” (or fitting) in order to preserve nuptial chastity in the face of humanity’s sinful betrayal. Humanity, created in the image and likeness of God, is designed for marital bliss with God. The nuptial embrace between God and creation rests upon a model of gender complementarity marked by masculine activity and feminine receptivity. Humanity, engaged in a life of willful deception, refuses to adopt a posture of feminine receptivity. Since there are no homoerotic unions in the blessed life, Christ, and analogously Mary, must respond in our place. Yet, as I have shown above, this feminine kenosis is one that is tied to suffering and the poverty of humiliation. It is a painful process likened to that of a woman giving birth: “The Passion is therefore the highest act of the Lord’s love, just as the birth pangs are for a woman giving birth. ‘Pain always belongs to woman.’”

While Balthasar’s reading of Anselm emphasizes the covenantal context of his satisfaction theory, as opposed to a purely juridical model, it is a far cry from addressing the concerns raised by Delores Williams, Rebecca Parker and Joanne Carlson Brown. Rather, Balthasar inscribes suffering love and obedience within a gendered and aesthetic


157. TD 5, 254. In a way, divine punishment is likened to the curse set upon Eve in the book of Genesis 3:16. “To the woman he said: I will intensify the pangs of your childbearing; in pain shall you bring forth children. Yet, your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall be your master.”
framework. Christ’s *pro nobis*, which includes his suffering and representation, is interpreted through the lens of aesthetic proportionality.

For the Son, following the truth to the end means making a *fitting* response to the Father’s total gift of himself by freely and thankfully allowing himself to be poured forth by the Father, a response that is made in absolute spontaneity and in absolute obedience . . . Both take places in a generous eucharistic availability [*Gelöstheit*] that matches the *limitless proportions* of the divine nature.\(^{158}\)

The *pro nobis* of the cross is beautiful because it is a fitting, harmonious, and proportional response to the masculine divine self-gift. In other words, Christ’s obedient response is a beautiful and proportionate response to divine love *because* it is a feminine response. This model not only glorifies suffering (literally and figuratively), implying that there is something desirable and even attractive about the free acceptance of innocent suffering on behalf of the guilty, but it also identifies freely obedient suffering with feminine receptivity.\(^{159}\) Ultimately, divine glory lies in a divinely ordained harmony marked by nuptial purity and kenotic love.

Furthermore, the link between glory and suffering in Christ’s life gives us insight into our own sufferings: “[t]hose who mourn will one day learn that they had always been comforted in eternal life, even while they were mourning in the life that is transitory.”\(^{160}\)

\(^{158}\) TD 4, 329-330. Emphasis added.

\(^{159}\) Abstracting divine *kenosis* from the historical particularities of the Cross-event has allowed some authors to locate the attractive quality of the *pro nobis* as a “being-for-others.” However, the particular form in which God’s being-for-others is manifest in salvation history is the form of the cross. The content of divine glory assumes the form of Christ’s *kenosis* on the cross. See for example, Mark McIntosh, *Christology from Within: Spirituality and the Incarnation in Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 125-134.

\(^{160}\) TD 5, 500-501.
While the reality of human suffering is not denied, the model presented is one of endurance. According to Balthasar, the only thing we can say for certain about human suffering is that it prepares us “for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comprehension.”¹⁶¹ Suffering, in this sense, is a feature of transcendence. It is a way of training us for the “great act of self-surrender that concludes our temporal life.”¹⁶² The dark night tells us something about a life of eternal blessedness. While “it is not to be denied that in eternal life all tears are wiped away and the sea of tears has ceased to be (Rev 21:1),” it also “cannot it be denied that, in the wisdom of God, the depths of our pain have helped to prepare the realm in which the soul can be the recipient of eternal joy.”¹⁶³ In the end, there is no glory without suffering.

For Balthasar, the locus of redemption is the Cross-event. The world cannot be reconciled with God apart from the cross. Balthasar’s claim is that in the Cross-event, which includes Christ’s suffering at the hand of the Father, something happens that fundamentally changes our relationship with God and one another. In the face of sexual and social injustice, this is a model that fails to account for the suffering of the innocent. As Thomas Dalzell argues, there is a lack of social drama in Balthasar’s theology, particularly with regard to issues of social justice.¹⁶⁴ Dalzell contends that while

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¹⁶¹. TD 4, 199. The biblical reference is to 2 Corinthians 4:17.

¹⁶². TD 5, 499.

¹⁶³. Ibid., 502.

Balthasar takes the “temporal and historical dimensions of human existence seriously,”
the accent is placed on the freedom of individuals in Christ as opposed to liberation from
systemic inequalities. Yet, given the way in which Balthasar’s model of redemption re-
inscribes patterns of sexual inequality and violence, it can hardly be said that he takes the
historical dimensions of human existence seriously.

In fixing his gaze upward to Christ’s pain on the cross, Balthasar’s theological
rendering of the narrative of salvation misses the pain of those who stand below.

Nowhere is this illustrated more clearly than in his reflections on the Way of the Cross:

Is God ultimately revealed?
If yes,
it must be God’s love
which makes him cry out with us to the One who has vanished,
“But why?”
“Why have you forsaken me?”
Let that be God’s question to you.166

Conclusion

Balthasar begins with the assertion that the cross, as God’s self-manifestation, is
beautiful. In doing so, he seeks to reconcile the ugliness of the crucifixion with the
beauty of divine splendor. There is no glory apart from the darkness of the cross. God’s
glory is the purity of the nuptial covenant. In this context, disobedience comes in the

in “A Plain Account of Christian Salvation,” 166. Moreover, Balthasar describes
“political and economic liberation,” as urgent but “relative” to the liberation one
experiences in Christ. See TD 4, 484.


166. The excerpt is from Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Way of the Cross as it is
reprinted in Theologians Today: Hans Urs von Balthasar, ed. Martin Redfern
form of harlotry and can only be restored by a love whose faithfulness goes to the extent of death on the cross. Yet, the language of glory is also tied to the language of war. The preservation of divine chastity takes the form of a cosmic duel between good and evil with the female body submerged somewhere in between violence and a loving embrace. Woman is never the protagonist in the drama; she is only a pawn in a duel between two men: Christ and Adam. As they battle out the meaning of death and life, she must quietly acquiesce or be destroyed.

Ultimately, Balthasar’s narration of the drama of redemption is a cosmic tale of love and war where passionate desire intermingles with suffering love and, at times, bears the mark of a violent sexual conquest. Not only does this model of atonement eclipse the social and historical dimensions of sin and grace, but when paired with the gender symbolism that is present throughout the text it lifts up as most beautiful and most holy a nuptial love that bears the wounds of violence. In light of the pervasiveness of sexual violence within the family and society, it is theologically and socially irresponsible to appropriate this model of Christian discipleship without seriously attending to the ways in which it glorifies violence and the subjugation of women.

In other words, gender complementarity is not the only issue present in Balthasar’s theological constructions. Balthasar’s theology presents us with a model for Christian discipleship that confuses the meaning of love and violence. On the cross,

167. Recent research indicates that one in six American women have been the victims of an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime. Even more striking is the fact that in most cases of sexual assault, the victims know their attackers. For more information visit, Rape, Abuse, Incest, National Network, http://www.rainn.org, (accessed 26 February 2009).
kenotic love and erotic love intertwine in violent manner. While the language of the
Theo-drama is metaphorical, this does not insulate it from theological scrutiny.
Language influences our thinking about what is true, real, or possible. As Elizabeth
Johnson has argued, language for God is far from value neutral. Metaphors for God send
a powerful message about what we perceive to be “the highest good, the profoundest
truth, [and] the most appealing beauty.”168 Defining Christian discipleship, even in
metaphorical terms, as a love that bears suffering to the point of death in the context of a
familial relationship has the potential to reinforce the tacit acceptance of violence against
women that is pervasive within our culture. Regardless of its original intent, the
theological imagination reflected in the Theo-drama is a patriarchal imagination. Not
only does Balthasar ask women to sympathize with their own silence for the sake of
preserving a divinely ordained harmony, but the imagery in the text entices all readers to
inhabit a world in which violence is theologically justifiable for the sake of salvation.

In his dramatic and aesthetic rendering of the story of salvation, Balthasar focuses
his gaze on the cross of Christ and asks the reader to do so as well. The question
becomes what would the drama of redemption look like if we turn our gaze to those
standing at the foot of the cross? The final two chapters of this dissertation will turn to
this query as narrated through the eyes of womanist and feminist theologians in an effort
to reconstruct the relationship between aesthetics and the theology of the cross.

168. Elizabeth Johnson, She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological
CHAPTER FOUR

CHRISTA: CONTEXTUALIZING BEAUTY AND THE CROSS FOR THE SAKE OF SUBJECTIVITY

In the last chapter, Balthasar left us standing at the foot of the cross with our gaze pointed upward toward the sufferings of Christ. As illustrated in his reflections in the Way of the Cross, the believer’s engagement in the story of redemption is marked by a penitential posture in which she is called to reflect on her own infidelity to God. Not only does this model of atonement eclipse the social and historical dimensions of sin and redemption, but, when paired with the gender symbolism and violence implicit in Balthasar’s aesthetic and dramatic rendering of the Paschal mystery, it mutes the embodied subjectivity of women.

Ultimately, for Balthasar, beauty lies in a divinely ordained harmony marked by nuptial purity that rests upon an obedient self-surrender. Theologically naming beauty in this manner not only glorifies suffering, but it also presents us with a model for Christian discipleship in which suffering is named as attractive and desirable. Balthasar lifts up as most beautiful and most holy a self-sacrificial love that bears the wounds of violence.


This is something that needs to be spoken aloud. Given the significance of his theology in shaping contemporary Roman Catholic sexual and liturgical theology, it is becoming increasingly important to attend to the particular ways in which Balthasar’s corpus patterns right relations. As feminist theologians have argued, God-talk is far from neutral. Speech about God “molds the corporate identity of the community and directs its praxis.” The ways in which we name God aesthetically—whether in the form of theological aesthetic discourse, liturgy, art, or music—sends a powerful message about the types of relationships and behaviors we see as desirable, attractive, and good. This holds a special kind of significance for the symbol of the cross.

The symbol of the cross within the life of the Christian community has come to signify much more than the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. While the cross stands as a historical witness to the death of Jesus, it also points toward the resurrection life of the Christian community. In this way, the symbol of the cross remains a central marker of Christian identity. Historically, the symbol of the cross has been named theologically

3. As noted in the first two chapters of this dissertation, Balthasar’s work is highly influential in forming Pope John Paul II’s theology of the body. For a recent analysis of the influence of Balthasar on John Paul II, see James Voiss, “Understanding John Paul II’s Vision of the Church,” and Susan Rakoczy, “Mixed Messages: John Paul II’s Writings on Women,” in The Vision of John Paul II: Assessing His Thought and Influence, ed. Gerard Mannion (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008). Pope Benedict XVI also dialogues significantly with Balthasar’s theology and was a founding member of Communio. For a discussion of the influence of Balthasar’s theology on Benedict XVI, see John L. Allen’s biography, Pope Benedict XVI (New York: Continuum, 2005).

from a kyriarchical point of view.⁵ In recent decades, theologians from a wide range of social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds have challenged the ways in which the kyriarchical naming of the cross has participated in the violence of imperialism.⁶ Among these critical perspectives, feminist theologians have been the most hesitant to offer a retrieval of the symbol of the cross. Citing the ways in which the classical theological tradition has valorized suffering and self-sacrificial love and idolatrized the maleness of Christ, a number of scholars have argued that the symbol of the cross is no longer viable for feminist theology.⁷

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⁵ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza defines kyriarchy as “the rule of the father/lord/master/husband.” Kyriarchy is “a social-cultural, religious, and political system of elite male power, which does not just perpetuate the dehumanization of sexism, heterosexism, and gender stereotypes, but also engenders other structures of women’s oppression such as racism, poverty, colonialism, and religious exclusivism.” Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Introduction: Feminist Liberation Theology as Critical Sophiology,” in The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberationist Theology, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), xx-xxi.


⁷ Elizabeth Johnson defines classical theology as “the body of thought that arose in early Christian centuries in partnership with the Greek philosophical tradition and continued through the medieval period, molding the discourse of the churches at the beginning of the modern era.” See She Who Is, 9. In terms of atonement, the classical theological tradition has supported the notion that through the voluntary obedience and self-sacrifice of Jesus the Christ, perfectly exhibited in his life and especially in his death, human sin is overcome once and for all and, as a result, right relationship between the Divine and humanity is restored. Elisabeth Motlmann-Wendel raises questions about the viability of the cross within feminist theology in “Is There a Feminist Theology of the Cross?,” in The Scandal of a Crucified World, ed. Yacob Tesfai (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 87-98.
Yet, there is a new voice arising within feminist theological discourse—one that passionately argues for a critical retrieval of the cross in defining the nature of Christian discipleship. Within this body of literature, a number of theologians look toward female images of the divine 1) to expose the ways in which classical theological interpretations of the cross have muted the voices of women and 2) as resources for critical reconstruction. One such symbol is the artistic representation of a female crucified Christ-figure, commonly referred to as Christa. As an aesthetic and theological source, Christa challenges kyriarchical interpretations of the cross by bringing to the fore the reality of sexual violence against women. Visually the sculpture calls into question the ways in which female bodies have been eroticized, suffering and self-sacrificial love valorized, and the maleness of Christ idolatrized within the history of the Christian

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9. One of the first female representations of Christ crucified was created by Edwina Sandys in 1974 for the *United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace*. The statue, cast in bronze and approximately four feet in length, displays the battered body of a naked crucified woman. A crown of thorns adorns her head, and the positioning of her arms and legs mirror those of more traditional images of the crucified Jesus. For more detail, see chapter 1. It is important to note that the voices of womanist theologians have been notably absent in conversations surrounding Christa. This absence raises some important questions for feminist christologies, which will be discussed later on in the chapter.
tradition. As such, the sculpture will serve as a hermeneutical lens through which to explore the places of silences and speech arising in God-talk about beauty and the cross.

The point of using *Christa* as a hermeneutical tool through which to explore the link between aesthetics and the cross is not to contradict the maleness of Jesus’ humanity, nor is it to reverse masculine imagery for God. The point is to reorient the theological imagination so as to expose new dimensions of the interplay between aesthetics and redemption. *Christa* raises a new set of questions for theological aesthetics and, in doing so, brings to light aspects of conversation that have been overlooked. In a discipline whose concerns have centered on the dangers of idolatry (i.e. the idolatry of the graven image and the idolatry of subjectivity), *Christa* raises the question of gender idolatry for theological aesthetics. In light of conversations that emphasize the objectivity of revelation in order to safeguard divine glory from the ills of subjectivity and secularity, *Christa* calls attention to the ways in which both Christianity and the larger society have muted the subjectivity of women by objectifying their bodies. Perhaps, most important, is the way in which *Christa*’s broken body gives voice to ways in which the bodies of women have been abandoned and alienated from the Body of Christ. As one woman wrote after viewing the sculpture:

> When many of us see the Christa we see all the women we have known and loved, and the women we have not known and yet love, shamed and cursed, tortured, raped, made the object of lust, and in sadomasochistic pornography hung on crosses; we see teenaged girls afraid to grow breasts, afraid to be beautiful, or refusing to be beautiful, refusing to be fully who they are because they do not
want to become statistics among those millions and millions who throughout history have been crucified.\textsuperscript{10}

*Christa’s* broken and battered body, naked upon the cross, has the “power to bring women’s experiences of violent abuse out of silence and into speech.”\textsuperscript{11} *Christa*, as an aesthetic and theological source, challenges us to encounter a new set of questions and answers about beauty and the cross: ones arising out women’s interpreted experiences of suffering and salvation.

This chapter sets the stage for a feminist re-imaging of beauty and the cross by exploring the problems of gender idolatry and redemptive suffering as articulated by feminist and womanist christologies. The critical reconstructions of Elizabeth Johnson, Jacquelyn Grant, and Rita Nakashima Brock emphasize the importance of attending to a particularity cognizant of multiple oppressions and an interdependence marked by mutuality and vulnerability when approaching the symbol of the cross. The next chapter will foreground bodiliness as a site of suffering and grace and move toward a critical reconstruction of aesthetics and healing for feminist theology.

**Feminist Theological Methodology Revisited: The Power of Naming**

Feminist theological methodologies engage both a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of remembrance in the hopes of transforming “unjust structures and distorted symbol systems [so] that a new community in church and society becomes


possible, a liberating community of all women and men characterized by mutuality with one another and harmony with the earth.” The goal of feminist liberation theologies is transformation. This sort of transformation requires a paradigm shift from a kyriocentric world-view to one that is rooted in a vision of wholeness that is marked by the flourishing of all of creation. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explains, as long as “women suffer the injustice and dehumanization of societal and religious” kyriarchy, feminist theologies must remain “critical theologies.” Feminist theology must

[t]heologically name the alienation, anger, pain, and dehumanization of women engendered by patriarchal religion. At the same time, it must articulate a vision of wholeness by exploring women’s experience of survival and salvation as well as by assessing Christian texts, doctrinal traditions, moral injunctions, ecclesial pronouncements, and ecclesial structures in terms of women’s liberation from patriarchal exploitation and oppression.

Therefore, central to the task of feminist theologies is reclaiming a voice for women as full theological subjects in the construction of “religious-theological meanings.” This is a task that requires attending to the “politics” of exclusion present within theological discourses and their sociopolitical context. Today, this involves a multi-lateral movement in which attention is given not only to the silences kept by patriarchy, but also to the ways in which feminist theologies have perpetuated these silences through their own


14. Ibid.

participation in racist, heterosexist, and imperial ideologies. In the words of Rachel Muers, “[s]ilence can be a shield to protect the powerful from public scrutiny; a condition imposed from above on the powerless; or a mask for conflicts never permitted to emerge.”  

**The Silence/s Patriarchy Keeps and Feminist Speech about the Cross**

Early in the history of feminist thought a great deal of attention was given to the ways in which Christian texts and doctrines have been shaped by androcentric and patriarchal world-views. Through the construction of the universal subject as male within theological discourses, the specific concerns of women have been excluded from public consideration. “Women’s basic human experience of uniqueness becomes an experience of otherness, of being alien and not fitting in, of being out of place and of little consequence.”  The experience of otherness created by androcentric bias not only objectifies women (by placing them outside the center), but, when internalized, does psychological damage “inculcating low self-esteem, passivity, and an assessment of


17. My use of the term patriarchy as opposed to kyriarchy in articulating the androcentric and sexist patterns within the theological discourse is deliberate. While patriarchy, imperialism, racism, classism, etc., are related phenomena, they are also distinct problems impacting the lives of women. While kyriarchy is a very helpful theoretical term, it risks obscuring some the different ways in which women experience oppression in their lived experience. For this project, it is important to name these differences so as to be clear about the context in which one is speaking.

oneself as inadequate even where that is patently untrue.”¹⁹ Androcentric bias silences by diminishing women’s “sense of themselves as active agents in history.”²⁰ Patriarchy suggests that the natural order of the universe and society is based upon male headship. Patriarchy and androcentric bias often function together in order to legitimate the subordination of women to men on the grounds that women’s secondary status is “natural” or “normative.” This becomes particularly evident when we look at the ways in which sexist ideology combines with Christian doctrines of creation and redemption.

A number of feminist theorists have illustrated the ways in which women have historically been identified with the body and nature. One of the earliest essays on this topic is Sherry Ortner’s “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?”²¹ In this essay, Ortner contends that women’s devaluation and subjugation arose out of a set of cultural assumptions based upon a hierarchy of culture over nature. Ortner’s premise is that the physiological processes of reproduction were extended into social roles marked by child-bearing and domestic labor. This, along with taboos about female physiological processes such as menstruation and lactation, relegated women to the “natural” and “lower” sphere. While Ortner’s essay has been critiqued on a number of levels, her insight into the link between women, body, and nature and their subsequent devaluation has been important in feminist discussions of sin and grace.

¹⁹. Ibid.

²⁰. Ibid., 26.

The Western Christian tradition arose within a Greco-Roman culture that was heavily influenced by Hellenistic philosophy. The writings of Christian thinkers like Augustine, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, and even the apostle Paul evidence a neo-platonic cosmology. One of the hallmarks of Platonism is a hierarchal separation between the world of forms and the world of matter. For Plato, the world of ideas represents the location of genuine beauty, truth and goodness, whereas the sensible or material world carries only an intimation of these ideals. In order to attain true knowledge one has to break free from the constraints of the sensible (material) world, including the body. This, when combined with the Stoic ideal of apatheia, contributed to a worldview that “exalts transcendent/divine reality and disparages mundane/human reality.”

While the Christian tradition rejected Platonic and Stoic positions formally at Chalcedon and Nicaea, the cosmological world-view represented in Neo-Platonism heavily influenced the ways in which the early Christian Fathers articulated their own religious experience as a tension between opposites. For example, many of the early Church Fathers preached that Christians were only able to attain spiritual heights “insofar as the higher was in control of the lower—and as the lower accepted its place as weaker reality, both naturally and morally subordinate in relation to the higher.”

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23. This model is also prominent in Balthasar’s own articulation of the dynamic of grace and beauty as it pertains to the cross. See chapter 1 for a discussion of this.

that the experience of salvation (grace) required the control of one’s own “lower” self: “flesh, body, passions and eroticism.”

Elements of this dualistic approach to understanding the relationship between body and soul can also be found in early Christian piety. As Margaret Miles illustrates, preparation for baptism in the early Christian community involved rigorous “ascetic practices by which the body became the locus of the conscious choice to become Christian.” The body, believed to be the site through which “evil spirits” could enter, needed to be cleansed through fasting and exorcism for Christian initiation. These practices not only reinforced the identification of sin with the body, but, when read alongside of Pauline interpretations of the narrative of Adam and Eve in Genesis, allowed for the identification of women with sin and evil.

Through the motif of Eve, the female body has been linked to sin and temptation, thereby providing grounds for the exclusion of women from religious leadership and the rationale for their violent suppression. In the writings of the early Church Fathers, “Eve, more than any other scriptural woman, was represented as the prototypical woman; her personality traits and behaviors were understood to be characteristic of all women and to


25. Ibid., 152.


27. While Miles criticizes the identification of women with sin and evil, she does not see the asceticism of the early Christian community as entirely negative. Miles offers a critical retrieval of asceticism in Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1981). This theme will be developed in more detail in chapter 5.
be instructive about how men should regard and treat women.”²⁸ In Augustine, Ambrose, and Tertullian, Eve was held responsible for succumbing to temptation and, thereby, culpable for the entry of sin and evil into the world. Sin was the result of woman’s temptation and fragility, necessitating her subordination and control. The danger with this theological construction, as Cynthia Crysdale explains, is that “in the context of the power differentials permeating Christian culture and society . . . when the lower realities [embodiment, passion, appetite] are intimately associated with female, slaves, non-whites, non-Christians, then the justification of their control, denigration, and even punishment, for their own good, becomes evident.”²⁹

This way of thinking about redemption is far from being a thing of the past. While most theologians and ministers insist that the gospel does not support domestic violence, too few are willing to actively speak out against it. Therefore, when theologians like Rebecca Parker and Joanne Carlson Brown challenge the significance of the symbol of the cross for feminist theology, they are responding to an abuse of power and authority that has been perpetuated in theological circles—from doctrine to pulpit. In sum, the patriarchal naming of sin and redemption has contributed to the suppression of women’s full subjectivity and, at times, has been used to legitimate violence against women. Sexism is a serious theological problem.

Yet, sexism is not the only silence that patriarchy keeps. Womanist theologians have called out the ways in which undue attention to sexism—at the expense of a

²⁸ Miles, Carnal Knowing, 86.

consideration of the ways in which race and class are operative in theological constructions—reinforce patterns of silence and exclusion.\(^{30}\) In other words, patriarchy, as it is used to define women’s oppression by men, has been “silent about class-privileged women oppressing women without class privilege. It is silent about white men and white women working together to maintain white supremacy and white privilege.”\(^{31}\) As Delores Williams explains, “in its institutional manifestations, [patriarchy] affords many white female children and white female adults (as groups) the care, protection, and resources necessary for intellectual development and physical well-being.”\(^{32}\) Williams is pointing to the ways in which patriarchal society is organized around white institutional power in America, giving white women and their families’ better access to educational, medical, and social resources. Few women have turned down the privileges they have received based upon their racial identity as white. The feminist analysis of patriarchy needs to give “full and serious attention to women’s oppression of women.”\(^{33}\)

\(^{30}\) Womanist theology “begins with the experiences of Black women as its point of departure. This experience includes not only Black women’s activities in the larger society but also in the churches and reveals that Black women have often rejected the oppressive structure in the church as well.” This definition is offered by Jacquelyn Grant in *White Women’s Christ, Black Woman’s Jesus* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 205. The term womanist comes from Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego/New York/London: HBJ, 1967).


\(^{32}\) Ibid.

The silence of theologians, ministers, and preachers on the problem of white supremacy continues to perpetuate the heretical ways in which the Christian theological tradition has been used to legitimate violence against Black women and men. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the ways in which the gospel was used to legitimate the enslavement of Africans in the American colonies. Through the promulgation of stereotypes by white culture, the enslavement and Christianization of Africans was tied to a belief system that linked intellectual inferiority, sexual promiscuity, and violent behavior with dark skin. This, as Delores Williams explains, was supported by an aesthetic value system in which “white and black ‘connoted purity and filthiness, virginity and sin, virtue and baseness, beauty and beneficence and evil, God and the devil.’” A similar logic that was used to legitimate violence against women was also used to support the enslavement and dehumanization of Black people. Both white men and white women have benefited (and continue to benefit) from a distorted theological anthropology that hyper-sexualized and identified blackness with sin. Moreover, the

34. Kelly Brown Douglas defines white culture as “that culture—with its language, values, beliefs, and artifacts—that serves to secure white supremacy. It is a culture built upon a specious belief in white people’s superiority and the inferiority of those who are not white.” See Douglas, What’s Faith Got to Do With It, 110.

35. Williams, Sisters in the Wilderness, 90.

36. Kelly Brown Douglas gives the example of the ways in which the Jezebel imagery legitimated the sexual exploitation of Black women, but it also created the “perfect foil to the White, middle-class woman who was pure, chaste and innocent.” Black women were identified as morally inferior beings and held responsible for their own sexual exploitation, which in turn benefited both white women and men. Drawing upon this Jezebel imagery, white male owners could justify the rape of Black female slaves by claiming that the women asked for it. Moreover, white women and men were
identification of sin/evil with blackness is hardly a thing of the past.\textsuperscript{37} This pattern of naming the dynamic of sin and grace needs to be disrupted in order to restore full subjectivity to all human beings. Racism, like sexism, is a serious theological problem because it is a contradiction of the Christian faith, which proclaims fullness of life for all persons.\textsuperscript{38}

In sum, the challenge of the cross resides not only with the ways in which its theology has been appropriated to legitimate violence, but it also rests with the ways in which academic and ministerial communities have consistently excluded the voices of those on the margins of communities in theologically naming sin and grace. Throughout the history of Christian thought, sin, woundedness, and grace have been defined by the dominant elite. Today, this pattern continues as the contributions of womanist, feminist, liberationist, and queer theologies are still not taken seriously by the academy and the church. Those in positions of leadership continue to dismiss their relevance through the incapacity to profit from the rape of Black women because the children born out of these encounters increased the economic capital of white families. See Kelly Brown Douglas, \textit{Sexuality and the Black Church} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 39.

\textsuperscript{37} For example, consider the ways in which “good” neighborhoods are equated with whiteness and Black neighborhoods are equated with joblessness, crime, and violence. See Emilie Townes, \textit{Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil}, Black Religion/Womanist Thought/Social Justice Series (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), chapter 4.

labels of “ideology” and “heresy.” More subtle is a failure to read and teach these materials. Women and men on the margins of the community are speaking, but they often find few who are interested in listening. Therefore, the meaning of the cross must include the power of naming. In the words of Crysdale, “[t]hose who are the crucified must have the power to discover for themselves the nature of their victimization and their healing. Those who are the crucifiers must discover the myths by which they have been enabled to live deceitfully.”

There is a power in bearing witness to the cross. The cross, as a symbol of our brokenness, helps us to name the ways in which we have been sinned against. It also helps us to name our own participation in sinful structures that have muted the voices of those around the world. It is for this reason that feminist theology must actively participate in naming the cross, especially in ways that witness to the holiness of the body.

**Idolatry, Representation, and the imago Christi**

In the wake of the rise of feminist consciousness in the 1960s, a number of women theologians began to ask about the significance of male language for God and its

39. Consider for example the CDF’s recent condemnation of the work of Jon Sobrino. See Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, “Notification on the Work of Father Jon Sobrino, SJ” <13 October 2006>, www.vatican.va, (accessed on 28 March 2009). The basis of the CDF’s criticism centers on Sobrino’s construction of the divinity of Jesus, as well as his theological methodology. According to the authors of the document, “he fails to affirm Jesus’ divinity with sufficient clarity. This reticence gives credence to the suspicion that the historical development of dogma, which Sobrino describes as ambiguous, has arrived at the formulation of Jesus’ divinity without a clear continuity with the New Testament.” While the document critiques Sobrino’s christological constructions on a number of points, the biggest issue seems to be his theological methodology, which begins with the experiences and questions of the poor in Latin America.

implications for women’s leadership within the Christian community. Theologians like Rosemary Radford Ruether, Letty Russell, and Carol Christ were among the first to ask: “who is God for women, and how does Jesus redeem us?”41 In a narrative in which Eve is the bearer of sin and God is consistently imaged as male, “there is little room for women to play a part in the divine drama, except a negative one.”42 The singular emphasis on God’s maleness in the narrative of salvation reinforced the Platonic dualism that identified women with that which is lower and men with that which is higher. The questions surrounding male imagery for God and the identification of the female body with sin through interpretations of the Eve motif were intensified by the Vatican’s 1976 pronouncement against the ordination of women to the priesthood on the grounds that “there must be a physical resemblance between the priest and Christ.”43 Feminist christologies, in their critique of gender idolatry, call for a radically new way of imagining divine and human participation in the redemption of the world.

Concerns surrounding the appropriateness of imagery for the divine are far from being a new issue in Christian theology. As early as the fourth century, debates ensued over the power of images.44 As historical analysis reveals, lurking in the background of


42. Ibid.


44. After Constantine’s military success, the bishops of Rome ordered the destruction of the cultic statues of ancient Rome. See John de Gruchy, Christianity, Art,
such debates, one finds competing claims to power and authority. In other words, claims of idolatry usually have more to do with the politics of representation than the actual image in question. The critical question here revolves around who has the authority to name God and on what grounds. As we saw in chapter one, contemporary theological aesthetic discourses, especially those influenced by the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, name the turn to the subject as the source of idolatry in theology. In these discourses, the central issue at stake is whether theology, in its methods and sources, understands beauty as subject to the Word of God. Yet, as feminist theologians have argued, the Word of God, as interpreted by the classical theological tradition, is not a neutral word. Androcentric bias and patriarchal world-views are deeply embedded in our traditions and texts.

**Female Symbols for God**

In *She Who Is*, Elizabeth Johnson explores the importance of female images and symbols for God in “empowering women in their struggle to make their own humanity as *imago Dei* historically tangible, and thereby to secure a foothold for the glory of God in

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46. Dillenberger gives the example of iconoclasm in the Reformation. Undergirding the responses of Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli lay the issue of the abuse of power by the Papacy.

47. The work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has been foundational in this area. For a brief introduction to feminist biblical hermeneutics, see *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984).
At the heart of Johnson’s theology is a claim that divine glory has a stake in human flourishing. If the glory of God is really the human person fully alive, then “wherever women are violated, diminished, have their life drained away, God’s glory is dimmed and put at historical risk.” Sexism, whether consciously intended or not, violates the fundamental dignity of women, thereby dimming the light of divine glory and muting the revelation of divine beauty in the world.

Within the history of the Christian tradition, speech about God has been appropriated in oppressive and idolatrous ways, and is, therefore, complicit in human oppression. As Johnson explains, traditional speech about God is oppressive in that it draws its language and imagery for God “almost exclusively from the world of ruling men.” In so doing, the classical tradition legitimates “structures and theories that grant a theomorphic character to men who rule” and relegates all others to the margins. For example, Johnson points to the identification of God as a ruling man within a patriarchal symbol system through the imagery of King of Kings, Lord of Lords, and monarch. In this symbol system, God is identified as the one “to whom total and unquestioning obedience is owed.” The exclusive and literal use of patriarchal language for God not only justifies the dominance of men by identifying patterns of “patriarchal headship” as God-like, but it also diminishes the dignity of women psychologically and socially by


49. Ibid.

50. Ibid., 18.

51. Ibid., 34.
setting up an “unconscious dynamic that alienates women from their own goodness and power.” When male imagery for God is used exclusively and literally, women have to abstract themselves from their “concrete, bodily identity as women” in order to see themselves as *imago Dei* and *imago Christi*.

Johnson also names the literal, exclusive, and patriarchal use of male symbols for God as idolatrous. She writes, “Whenever one image or concept of God expands to the horizon thus shutting out others, and whenever this exclusive symbol becomes literalized so that the distance between it and divine reality is collapsed, there an idol comes into being.” While the Christian tradition insists that God is neither male nor female, its language, metaphors, and imagery do not reflect this reality. For all practical intents and purposes, female God-talk does not have a home within Christian theology or worship. This is nowhere more apparent than in the strong resistance elicited when female God-language and imagery are invoked within liturgical spaces and liturgical practice.

Furthermore, as Johnson contends, developments within dogmatic christology have intensified the problem of literal and exclusive God-talk. “As a visible image of the

52. Ibid., 38.
53. Ibid., 39.
54. For example, consider the resistance that arose when Christa was displayed during the Holy Week services at St. John the Divine in New York in 1984. The statue had been displayed in public spaces for 10 years prior to this event and elicited little response. One can also consider the hostile reactions that arose when the *Inclusive Language Lectionary: Readings for Year A* was published in October 1983. For a summary of some of the arguments underlying this response, see Burton H. Throckmorton, Jr., “Why the Inclusive Language Lectionary” *Christian Century* 101 (1984): 742-744. Also see Throckmorton’s “Language and the Bible,” *Religious Education* 80 (1985): 523-528.
invisible God, the human man Jesus is used to tie the knot between maleness and divinity very tightly.”\textsuperscript{55} The early Christian church, as it was inculturated into Greco-Roman society, adopted models of patriarchal and imperial rule. This had consequences for the way in which the early Church described the \textit{imago Christi}. The image of Christ “assumed the contours of the male head of household or the imperial ruler.”\textsuperscript{56} Claims about Christ’s lordship and headship were assimilated in a way that elevated Jesus’ maleness as an essential aspect of his \textit{christic} identity. In other words, the maleness of the historical person Jesus of Nazareth has been interpreted as intrinsic to Christ’s redemptive work in the world. This not only reaffirms a dualistic anthropology in which men are seen as being more christomorphic than women, but it also acts to reinforce the maleness of God. If Christ is the image of God, and his maleness is lifted up as a central aspect of his identity, then it is not difficult to move to the conclusion that “maleness must be an essential characteristic of the divine being itself.”\textsuperscript{57} To clarify, the problem is that Jesus’ maleness has been lifted up in a way that other aspects of his identity are not—i.e., racial or ethnic identity—in defining the \textit{imago Christi}. Certainly, Jesus’ sexual identity is an important aspect of his humanity. However, the classical Christian tradition has emphasized his sexual embodiment over all other aspects of his historical identity, making it a normative category in articulating the \textit{imago Christi}.

\textsuperscript{55} Johnson, \textit{She Who Is}, 35.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 151.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
In search of alternative sources of wisdom, Johnson turns attention to the biblical tradition of Wisdom-Sophia as a “focus and filter” for Christ’s significance and identity. Jesus “is Sophia incarnate, the Wisdom of God.” In doing so, she shifts attention away from Jesus’ maleness and foregrounds Sophia’s “gracious goodness, life-giving creativity, and passion for justice” as characteristic of Jesus’ christic identity. In his preaching and ministry, Jesus celebrates life’s goodness and walks the path of justice and peace, calling others to join him along the way. Here, Johnson follows the lead of a number of other feminist theologians, highlighting Jesus’ table fellowship, solidarity with the poor and marginalized, and prophetic actions in speaking about the mission and christic identity of Jesus. Jesus as the prophet and child of wisdom was sent into the world in order to proclaim the all-inclusive love of God, especially God’s love for the poor and outcast. Jesus’ mission and ministry “unleashes” a new vision for relating to one another in the world—one that is marked by compassion and mutual respect. This vision was threatening to the religious and civil rulers of his day, and ultimately, led to the crucifixion. In Johnson’s reading, even the cross is linked to the path of forging justice and a new creation. “Christ crucified and risen, the Wisdom of God, manifests the truth

58. Ibid., 156.
59. Ibid., 157.
60. For example, Rosemary Radford Ruether turns her attention to the message and praxis of the Jesus of the Gospels as the starting point for christological reflection. Jesus’ “ability to speak as liberator does not reside in his maleness but in the face that he has renounced this system of domination and seeks to embody in his person the new humanity of service and mutual empowerment.” For Ruether, the imago Christi resides within the prophetic character of Jesus’ personhood. See Sexism and God-Talk, 2nd rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1992), 137.
that divine justice and renewing power leavens the world in a way different from the
techniques of dominating patriarchy.”  

The cross stands as a symbol of the *kenosis* of
patriarchy, as the “self-emptying of male dominating power in favor of a new
humanity.”

Jesus-Sophia, the wisdom of God made flesh, “pitches her tent in the midst of the
world; the Shekinah dwells among the suffering people in a new way.”

In its ongoing commitment to the work of justice and peace, the Christian community embodies the *imago Christi.* In focusing on the resurrection community that stands beneath the cross, Johnson shifts attention away from maleness as a defining feature of *christic* identity and mission. Instead, the *imago Christi* is reflected in the ways in which the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth embodied a commitment to just and mutual relations as well as all those who participate in the ongoing work of creating a new heaven and earth. According to Johnson, to speak rightly of Christ is to speak of the whole Christ. It is to speak of the resurrection community that forms the body of Christ, as this is where God-Sophia dwells in our midst.

Idolatrous and oppressive language for God obscures divine glory. In “uttering
female symbols into speech about divine mystery,” we open up the possibility of
recovering the dignity of women and rediscovering the beauty of the divine mystery.

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61. Johnson, *She Who Is*, 159. More attention will be given to Johnson’s construction of the symbol of the cross in the next section.

62. Ibid., 161.

63. Ibid., 150.

64. Ibid., 45.
This is not to suggest that female imagery for God should replace or complement male imagery for divine. Rather, naming God as SHE in our prayer, religious practice, and theology opens up new possibilities for thinking about God that may not have been apparent to us before. Female metaphors for God illuminate the depths of divine glory and, concomitantly, human flourishing. Given the ways in which the maleness of Jesus has been lifted up as normative for christic identity, uttering female metaphors for the divine becomes a critical task in reshaping the vision of Christian discipleship.

**Womanism and the *imago Christi***

The issue of idolatry in imaging Christ takes on a new tenor in light of the contributions of womanist theology. A number of womanist theologians have called out the ways in which feminist christological constructions fail to transcend their own criticisms of patriarchy by “presuming the universality of women’s experience.”\(^6\) That is, in using a single lens of sexism to critique women’s oppression, racism, classism, and heterosexism become tangentially important in explorations of the problem of theological symbolism. As Jacquelyn Grant and Kelly Brown Douglas have argued, God-talk in light of Black women’s experience requires a serious consideration of sexism, racism, and classism. This points to a larger problem within feminist theological methodologies: the use of women’s experience as a theological source. While Grant and Douglas do not contest the use of experience as a basis for theological reflection, they challenge feminist theological constructions on the grounds that they often fail to consider the differences among Black women’s experience and white women’s experience. In the words of Grant,

\[^6\] Grant, *White Women’s Christ, Black Women’s Jesus*, 5.
while it can be said that all experiences are “unique to some degree . . . in this case the
difference is so radical that it may be said that White women and Black women are in
completely different realms.”66 A failure to consider these differences in naming feminist
theology is racist. As Grant explains,

White women have defined the movement and presumed to do so not only for
themselves but also for non-White women. They have misnamed themselves by
calling themselves feminists when in fact they are White feminists, and by
appealing to women’s experience when in fact they appeal almost exclusively to
their own experience. To misname themselves as ‘feminists’ who appeal to
‘women’s experience’ is to do what oppressors always do; it is to define the rules
and then solicit others to play the game.67

While Elizabeth Johnson attends to racism and poverty alongside sexism, she
foregrounds the issue of gender in speaking about God. Certainly, Grant and Douglas
would affirm the ways in which Johnson’s christology centers around the liberative
aspects of Jesus’ mission and ministry, yet, they would also ask whether the construct of
Jesus-Sophia, in its abstractness, runs the risk of eclipsing the ways in which Christian
theology has idolatrized whiteness.68 To paraphrase Kelly Brown Douglas, in naming
Christ as Jesus-Sophia, is it readily apparent that Christ stands in opposition to racism?

66. Ibid., 195.

67. Ibid., 200.

68. Johnson’s christology is unique in that it seeks to reconstruct a high (logos)
christology for feminist theology. In her attempt to develop symbols for Christ that are
all-inclusive, Johnson runs the risk of eclipsing particularity. Mary McClintock
Fulkerson makes this point in a review of “She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist
the issue of whether Johnson’s re-visioning of God-talk is able to account some of the
complexities that have arisen in gender studies, (i.e., is She Who Is an adequate metaphor
for transgendered realities?)
In other words, for womanist theologians, the work of shattering the idol of the white male monarch requires attending to the particularity of Black women’s experiences of classism and racism. To affirm the dignity of Black women and men in the *imago Christi* means explicitly affirming the Blackness of Christ.\(^{69}\)

Womanist theologians and Black liberation theologians have turned our attention to the ways in which the Christian tradition has consistently and historically represented Jesus Christ as white in theological imagery and artistic representations.\(^{70}\) The idolatrous fixation on the whiteness of Christ in a society in which white symbolizes goodness and black symbolizes evil reinforces racism by divinizing whiteness.\(^{71}\) By way of response, a number of theologians have turned to the Black Christ, as represented in literature, poetry, and slave narratives, in order to signify Christ’s opposition to racism.\(^{72}\) Yet, as Douglas explains, even this symbolism is not without its problems for African American women. The mere identification of Christ as Black does not “readily challenge Black

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71. Ibid., 62.

72. See Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ*, for a detailed exploration of this history. The parallel argument is that the mere identification of Christ as woman is not enough to challenge feminist communities to resist racism, classism, and heterosexism.
people to free themselves from sexism, classism, and heterosexism within the Black community.”

In response, both Douglas and Grant identify Christ as a Black woman. Yet, there remains a critical difference between Douglas’ and Grant’s affirmation of the femaleness of Christ and Johnson’s symbolic reconstruction. In identifying Christ as a Black woman, Grant and Douglas turn to the lives of particular women who have worked to “move the Black community to wholeness.” For example, Grant asserts that Christ is found in the experiences of Black women, especially in the commitment of Black women to struggle with the symptoms and causes of oppression in history and in the present. Grant sees the commitment to the work of transformation as yielding “deeper theological and Christological questions having to do with images and symbolism.” In her perspective, it is out of the Christ-like commitment of Black women that new symbols and metaphors for God will arise. Similar to Grant, Douglas concludes that Christ is a Black woman “when Black women are acting to establish life and wholeness for the Black community.” The symbols and icons of the living Christ are found in the faces of Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Fannie Lou Hamer, and especially in the faces of the poorest Black women. Lifting up the faces of actual women and men who have worked toward wholeness in the Black community presents us with a female image of Christ that

74. Ibid., 108.
75. Grant, *White Women’s Christ, Black Women’s Jesus*, 220.
resists abstraction and objectification. Thus, for womanist theologians, the locus of the
imago Christi is a radical subjectivity embodied in the lives of particular individuals
struggling for justice.

Idolatry comes in many shapes, forms, ages, and colors. Indeed, the classical
Christian tradition in its exclusive, literal, and patriarchal use of male language and
imagery for God has idolatized the maleness of Christ. As Elizabeth Johnson argues,
this has had a profound impact on the religious identity of women. The failure to
“image” women in bodily form as imago Christi and imago Dei has neglected to train the
eyes of women and men to perceive the iconic power of female bodies in their fullness.
Christa, as a female symbol of the divine, plays a critical role in shattering this form of
gender idolatry. Yet, we must employ a multifaceted lens in naming women’s experience
and in naming Christ, a lens that includes an explicit consideration of interlocking
oppressions. Womanist theologians Kelly Brown Douglas and Jacquelyn Grant remind
us that subjectivity is found in the active struggle for wholeness. The womanist emphasis
on particularity as expressed in the lived experiences of communities and individuals is
important in creating theological and aesthetic paradigms that resist idolatry. Certainly,
the transformation of patriarchal language and symbolism is an integral aspect of
liberation. Yet, too much attention to language and symbolism runs the risk of obscuring
the values, needs, and desires of those who are not a part of the academic and cultural
elite, thereby creating new idols. The transformation of our symbols and metaphors for
God must emerge alongside a liberative praxis that extends beyond the walls of the
academy.
Redemptive Suffering and the Quest for Wholeness

Feminist theologians have not only critiqued the ways in which the classical tradition has suppressed feminine imagery for the divine, but they have also voiced concerns about the ways in which patriarchal imagery for the divine has influenced the doctrine of salvation. In its reliance upon patriarchal imagery in order to articulate the nature of redemption and divine love, the classical tradition has idealized the roles of hero and helpless victim in its atonement theology. This has consequences for the moral lives of individuals and communities, as it creates a paradigm that fails to hold perpetrators of violence accountable for their actions and overlooks our own responsibility in ending suffering in the world. In response to these criticisms, feminist theologians have offered new models for redemption that seek to contextualize sin, evil, and suffering in ways that restore embodied subjectivity within the work of redemption.

Divine Suffering as God’s Compassion Poured Out

In the previous section, we turned to the work of Elizabeth Johnson to explore the role of gender imagery in shaping the theological imagination. Shaping new speech about God involves more than a shift in pronouns; it also involves a shift in the ways in which we think about the nature of God. The symbol functions, giving rise to new ways of thinking and being in the world. In one of the most compelling sections of the book, Johnson explores the ways in which the metaphor SHE WHO IS gives rise to new ways of thinking about God’s involvement in the suffering of the world.

Through its doctrine of atonement, the Christian tradition has maintained the *apatheia* of God, while painting a picture of Jesus as a Divine Victim. As Johnson explains, in classical theism suffering is viewed as being incompatible with the divine nature because it is a “passive state requiring that one be acted upon by an outside force.”\(^78\) This assertion is based upon a “root metaphor of motion adapted primarily from the nonpersonal, physical world” in which suffering is seen as a “passive state requiring that one be acted upon by an outside force.”\(^79\) Since God is pure act, to suggest that God suffers would be to compromise the integrity (changelessness) of the divine being. As we saw earlier in the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, the problem becomes: what do we do with the cross? If God cannot suffer, then how do we interpret the dogmatic claims about the one person and two natures of Christ? One approach has been to argue that the “sufferings of Jesus belong to God insofar as the Logos has assumed a human nature; but it cannot be predicated of God as such.”\(^80\) Other attempts to bridge the chasm between divine immutability and the cross have identified the divine omnipotence with *kenosis*.\(^81\) God’s power is found in the weakness of the cross. This dialectical construction allows

\(^{78}\) Ibid., 247.

\(^{79}\) Ibid., 265.

\(^{80}\) Ibid., 248. Balthasar affirms a variation of this argument in affirming that Christ is both feminine and masculine. As feminine, Christ’s *kenosis* takes the form of suffering, pain, and abnegation. As masculine, Christ’s *kenosis* is an “emptying out into another.”

\(^{81}\) Balthasar also makes this move. See Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols OP (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 29.
the author to maintain divine omnipotence while simultaneously affirming God’s *pathos*. As Johnson points out, this kind of thinking about divine suffering and the cross creates a number of problems for feminist theology. First, and foremost, is the issue of divine *apatheia* in the face of human suffering. Not only is the idea of a God who “is simply a spectator” in the face of human suffering “morally intolerable,” but the basic premise that divine perfection resides in self-containment undergirds the feminist value of relationality and connectedness. “In the patriarchal system the nonrelational human male exercising unilateral power sits at the pinnacle of perfection.”^82^ This is an interpretation of freedom and perfection based upon androcentric experience. ^83^ But what if we were to look at a different set of experiences in articulating the meaning of perfection and freedom? Perhaps, as Johnson suggests, perfection resides in the vulnerability of mutual relations.

For Johnson, mutuality extends beyond reciprocal relations to include an “indwelling” of friends. ^84^ Love in the context of mutual relations involves more than willing the good of another. It is an affective and embodied relationality that includes

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^83^ A number of theologians critique process theologies on the grounds that they are impinging human categories of existence on the divine (i.e. Barth’s axiom—let God be God). However, as Johnson notes, the issue is not whether one vision of the divine is constructed in light of human experience, but whose experience is foregrounded in the construction. To suggest that divine perfection resides in a model based upon hierarchical notions of power is a construction based upon androcentric experiences of power and freedom. In other words, both the classical tradition and feminist theologies rely upon experience in the shaping language for God. The question becomes which experiences are elevated as divine.

^84^ Elizabeth Johnson further develops the category of friendship in *Friends of God and Prophets* (New York: Continuum, 1999).
“openness to the ones loved, a vulnerability to their experience, a solidarity with their well-being, so that one rejoices with their joys and grieves with their sorrows.”85 This means that divine love, as expressed in God’s relationship with creation, will involve suffering insofar as it is a consequence of God’s care for others. Sophia-God, as the one who loves with overflowing compassion, suffers.

In reconstructing the symbol of God’s suffering, Johnson draws upon four experiences of pain: the pain attending labor and childbirth, the penalty incurred for freely chosen actions for justice, the grief over harm that comes to others, and the pain as a result of dehumanization.86 In each of these experiences, Johnson attends to the ways in which pain, suffering, and power intertwine. Central to Johnson’s construction is the claim that a God who is only pleasure, love, and joy does not adequately reflect the multidimensional layers of human experience, love, and redemption.

In the first description, God is a woman giving birth. She cries out in pain “pushing with all her might to bring forth justice.”87 In this metaphor, pain is accompanied by the joy of new life. Intense suffering is an ingredient in the labor of liberating life for a new future. Next, Johnson looks at the pain that is involved in the struggle for justice. She points to the ways in which those who are involved in the work of justice are met with strong resistance and suffer social, economic, and even violent consequences as a result of their commitment. While these consequences are not freely

85. Johnson, She Who Is, 266.

86. Ibid., 254.

87. Ibid., 255.
chosen, nor are they empowering, they accompany the work of bringing about new social structures. In both metaphors, birthing and the work of justice, suffering, pain, and power intermingle in ways that have the possibility of a fruitful outcome. Suffering is a result of a commitment to a greater good. This does not mean that suffering in and of itself is redemptive, nor is it freely chosen. What is chosen is the commitment to bring about new life in a way that seeks justice. It is also important to note that each of these experiences highlight the ways in which pain is experienced in the body as well as in the spirit. Suffering is not spiritualized, nor is creative power. Liberating for new life is a messy and embodied process that is fraught with risk and uncertainty.

Yet, not all suffering is linked to redemption. The suffering that arises out of degradation of the earth and humanity is not redemptive. This kind of suffering also finds a place within the symbol of the cross. In the face of the suffering that destroys human dignity, God weeps: “[t]he suffering body of Christ includes the raped and denigrated bodies of women.” On the cross, God suffers in solidarity with all those who are persecuted, forsaken, and abused. SHE WHO IS keeps vigil while her grief awakens protest. Here divine compassion, as a companion to pain, works to transform suffering through communion. That is, knowing we are not abandoned makes a difference as “communion becomes a profound source of energy for the healing of

88. Anyone who has ever witnessed a birth knows that the challenge of labor is not only physical, but also emotional. For example, many new mothers face doubt and anxiety over whether they will be good parents.

89. Johnson, She Who Is, 264.

90. These phrases are Elizabeth Johnson’s. See She Who Is, 260-261.
The symbol of the suffering God “re-orders the human ideal toward solidarity with the oppressed” and strengthens human responsibility in the face of suffering. In the face of human degradation and destruction, it says that to be aligned with God is to be engaged in a praxis of compassionate solidarity.

Christa/Community and the Embodiment of Eros for Mutual Relation

In Journeys by Heart, Asian American feminist theologian Rita Nakashima Brock looks at the dynamics of power relations operative within Christological constructions. In particular, Brock is concerned with theological constructions that privilege humanity’s powerlessness and divine omnipotence. This framework for understanding the nature of redemption reflects a unilateral notion of power wherein the singular locus of redemption rests with divine activity. Not only does this model eclipse the relational nature of existence, but, when filtered through the language of the patriarchal family, it reflects a view of “divine power that sanctions child abuse on a cosmic scale and sustain benign paternalism.” In Brock’s reading of the classical theological tradition,

[i]n sacrificing his most beloved and only son, god the father demonstrates his love for all others. In believing that this transaction reveals the loving grace of god the father, the faithful are absolved of the need to suffer the consequences of sin. Rather than being cocreators and corevealers of grace, human beings are the dependent recipients of the fruits of an event working within a transcendent god. We are encouraged to believe our own suffering has been taken away by someone else’s suffering and by a cosmic transaction within the divine life. If we are willing to remain dependent upon this power, we live in grace.

91. Ibid.


93. Ibid., 55-56.
According to Brock, the classical tradition not only misconstrues the roots of human suffering, but it also fails to empower the community to act in ways that will lessen suffering in the world. While Brock’s criticisms need to be nuanced in light of the plurality found within patristic and medieval models of atonement, the issue she raises about the role of human agency remains pertinent for Christian theology today. After Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Cambodia, we can no longer feign innocence about the depths of the damage human beings can do to one another. “In upholding as normative the patriarchal family and its structures, Christianity has ignored the suffering of women and children at its very center and has not understood the implications of patriarchy for those who live within such structures.”

Brock contends that unless Christianity comes to terms with the depths of its involvement in the pain created by patriarchy, it will struggle to provide a vision of salvation that facilitates healing and transformation for both men and women.

In *Journeys by Heart*, Brock models the tripartite structure of feminist theological methodology: deconstruction, search for new sources of wisdom, and reconstruction. In the first part of the text, Brock explores the ways in which the classical tradition has misnamed the source of pain and suffering through the doctrine of original sin. While pain and suffering are a part of the human condition, to trace its roots back to the mythical Fall of Adam and Eve leaves us “impotent to take responsibility for our own

94. Ibid., 3.

95. Ibid., 2.
evil except through dependence upon a ‘higher’ power.”\textsuperscript{96} In this model, perpetrators of violence are not held fully accountable for their actions, as sinful behavior can be attributed to the fallen human condition. The problem is exacerbated by theological constructions that equate sin with prideful self-assertion, leaving little room for the agency of victim-survivors of violence. As Brock explains, the doctrine of original sin lends toward a theological understanding of grace that places “divine incarnation and human redemption in someone else’s perfection and heroic action, or in a power outside ourselves that helps us transcend the concrete realities of our lives.”\textsuperscript{97}

Drawing upon the resources of process thought and object-relations theory, Brock locates the source of our pain and suffering (as well as our joys) within what she terms primal connectedness. According to Brock, we are “by nature, vulnerable, easily damaged, and that vulnerability is both a sign of our connectedness and the source of our damage that leads to sin.”\textsuperscript{98} Suffering emerges because “our relationships have the capacity to destroy us and we participate in destruction when we seek to destroy ourselves or others.”\textsuperscript{99} In this way, sin is a sign of our “brokenheartedness” and needs to be healed, not punished. While relatedness is the source of our pain, it also is the source of our healing and grace. We are all born with original grace, which is the capacity to

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 8.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 9.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid.
“heal the damage and suffering of our deepest selves and society.”

In order to tap into the depths of our own healing power, we must work to transform patterns of relating that are marked by a dynamic of dominance and dependence.

According to Brock, the dynamic of dominance and dependency is imparted through punitive models of parenting that teach children to bury feelings of pain instead of integrating them. As most early punishment involves some sort of bodily deprivation or pain, children learn to “deny the feelings they receive through their bodies, especially feelings that are associated with their earliest suffering.” At an early age, children learn to suppress their own needs and wants and to give the parent what he or she wants in order to gain approval. In cases of child abuse, this denial of self is taken to an extreme level wherein the child will often “split off the frightening or negative aspects of the self and project them onto others.” Unable to assert him or herself against abusive treatment, the child will often project his or her need for control, authority and dominance onto another, repeating the pattern of violence.

This way of relating to pain has a ripple effect in society. Suppression of all that is considered vulnerable (body, pain, interdependence) as a means of self-protection is not only characteristic of abusive family relationships, but it also marks male-female relations in patriarchal societies. Reading object relations theorist Alice Miller, Brock

100. Ibid., 8.

101. Ibid., 13.

argues that “the production of oppression and violence is grounded in social forces and relationships that hurt us and teach us to repress and project our feelings, especially pain, reproducing violence on a massive social scale. Repression becomes oppression.” In response to male dominance, women either suppress their own subjectivity or resort to manipulation in order to get what they want. This dynamic of dependency and dominance has harmful consequences for both women and men, as it eclipses possibilities for healing and self-acceptance. As Brock illustrates, unilateral models of power not only limit “the extent to which we can give and receive in relationships,” but they also confuse the meaning of love and violence. Those on the underside of power learn to equate self-acceptance with a suppression of one’s own needs and desires. Those who assert power as dominance learn to associate self-identity with aggression.

In emphasizing the locus of Christian virtue and love as obedience to another’s will for us, classical atonement theologies mimic this dynamic of dominance and dependency. Humanity, as born with a tragic flaw, is dependent upon “the perfect father to show us the way to a restored relationship with him and each other.” The Son’s perfect obedience even to the point of death on a cross not only models appropriate behavior, but is celebrated as salvific—atoning for our sins and revealing the extent of the father’s love. In Brock’s perspective, this framework divinizes fused relationships (i.e.,


104. Brock, Journeys by Heart, 37.

105. Ibid., 55.
the will of the Father is the will of the Son). Yet, intimacy is not fusion. Intimacy involves more than obedience. “Real intimacy is grounded in the contextual, unique and particular, and in interdependence.”106 Moreover, to suggest that one person can fulfill all our needs and desires is hardly reflective of lived experiences of love. Yet, this model remains attractive within contemporary and pastoral theologies because it alleviates feelings of uncertainty surrounding one’s salvation. The locus of grace rests with obedience to a higher power instead of processes of moral discernment, which are much more ambiguous.

In response, Brock constructs a christology of erotic power wherein redemption resides in the honest memory and compassionate commitment of Christa/Community. Before exploring Brock’s christological constructions in detail, it is important to note a few things. In turning to object-relations theory to name the source of pain in the human condition, Brock seeks to move away from the language of oppression/liberation in articulating the problem of patriarchy. Brock believes that most liberation theological models, including feminist liberationist models, set up an emotional distance that obscures the reality that “we are all, or at least most of us, both conscious agents and victims enmeshed in the same systems of violence that afflict us all.”107 As she writes, “it is far safer to identity with victims and want to help them than to look at our own participation in systems of oppression and our responsibility for changing ourselves and

106. Ibid., 57.

the systems from which we benefit.” Moreover, this language of victim/oppressor has the potential to create false dualism whereby the term “victim” is equated withinnocence and oppressor is equated with evil. The danger with this model is that if a victim can be proven to lack innocence, then whether he or she deserves justice can be called into question. As Brock states, “abuse is wrong not because victims are innocent, but because abuse, even by good people for a good cause, dehumanizes the abuser and the abused.”

Second, Brock seeks to challenge the notion that abuse is a private problem. Too often the problem of abuse is considered to be a private matter between a victim-survivor and her counselor. In using psychosocial categories to describe the abuse of power and the problem of sin, Brock redraws the lines between public and private spheres. Violence, whether inflicted in the home or abroad, is a public problem. As Brock suggests, patriarchy—and I would add racism and homophobia—rears its ugly head first in the home. The home is the place where we learn about what it means to be human in relation to one another, as well as what it means to be intimate with one another. These values and relationships are not immune from the politics of power. The types of behavior that are acceptable and not acceptable within the domestic sphere are often tied to political

108. Brock, Journeys by Heart, 8.


decisions. As Susan Moller Okin argues, the “state is responsible for the background rules that affect people’s domestic behaviors” in more ways than one.¹¹¹

Employing the metaphor of heart, Brock interprets *eros* as original grace embodied in the flesh and in the community. Drawing upon the work of Haunai-Kay Trask and Audre Lorde, she defines erotic power as “the energy that produces creative synthesis, and is enhanced by the relationships that emerge from creative synthesis.”¹¹² Erotic power integrates all aspects of the self and resides in our connectedness to one another, our bodies, and the earth. Erotic power cannot be owned, controlled, bought, or sold. It arises in communities working together. It is the energy of incarnate love that undergirds all of human experience.¹¹³ Tapping into this energy, however, requires the work of anamnesis in which we remember “honestly, without nostalgia, the truth of the violence of human history.”¹¹⁴ Honest memory is both binding and liberating; it “binds us to the suffering of others” as we begin to see the connections between our own pain and the pain of others. It is liberating as giving voice to our pain within the context of community provides us with routes to empowerment and self-acceptance.

¹¹¹. Susan Moller Oikn, *Justice Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 130. For example, until recently women have been legally denied “rights routinely exercised by men in the spheres of work, marketplace, and politics, on the grounds that the exercise of such rights would interfere with the performance of their domestic responsibilities.” In theological discourse it is often forgotten that historically marriage is also a political, social, and economic construct.


¹¹³. Ibid., 49.

¹¹⁴. Ibid., 99.
In refocusing incarnate love on erotic power, Brock contends that christology needs to move beyond Jesus as the Christ to a feminist vision of Christa/Community. For Brock, ecclesiology and christology come together in the construct of Christa/Community. Christa/Community “is the church’s imaginative witness to its experiences of brokenness and sacredness of erotic power in human existence” of which Jesus is one historical part.\(^{115}\) In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus reveals a new understanding of power that connects the community. In exorcising demons and healing the sick, Jesus is a catalyst of erotic power—restoring relations and facilitating the recreation of power in the community.\(^{116}\) The metaphor of Christa/Community underscores the need to emphasize the communal nature of redemption and discipleship. To be a disciple of Christ is to be a person in relationship. Second, Christa/Community signifies that ecclesiology must extend beyond the formal boundaries of the hierarchical Church and into the lives of those who participate in the work of discipleship. That is, leadership like salvation does not reside in the hands of a single individual or elite group. The locus of redemption and discipleship remains with those who gather at the foot of the cross. Conceptually, this model presents us with a picture of Christian unity engaged in the work of healing transformation. At the same time, it must be noted that Christa/Community’s all encompassing character does not adequately address some of the practical difficulties found in interdenominational dialogue nor is it able to

\(^{115}\) Ibid.

\(^{116}\) In her reading of the gospels, Brock relies upon the political interpretation of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza as developed *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).
accommodate the particular ways in which tradition is historically transmitted through the ritual life of the community. This being said, I do believe the metaphor is valuable with respect to the critical reconstruction of the symbol of the cross.

The community beneath the cross was left with the task of “integrat[ing] the tensions and paradoxes of expectations to glory and the reality of suffering.” 117 Undoubtedly, the death of Jesus produced feelings of “betrayal, defensiveness, rationalization, and fear.” 118 Therefore, the work of Christa/Community became one of finding a way to continue to witness to the healing work of Jesus in the midst of suffering and tragedy. Christian discipleship involves persistence “with heart in the midst of brokenness.” 119 As such, salvation is never an individual process. Salvation arises out of “a commitment to restorative justice and steady, active love, embraced in a common life with all its difficulties and rewards.” 120 It is important to note that for Brock, there is nothing final about the resurrection. The resurrection “is the ongoing witness to life that is always challenged and threatened.” 121 Ultimately, for Brock, the resurrection is only

117. Brock, Journeys by Heart, 99.

118. Ibid., 93.

119. Ibid., 98.


sustained by the community that forms beneath the cross, bearing witness to the honest memory of violence and seeking full flourishing even in the midst of tragedy.

In the end, Brock does not want to trade in the messiness of the resurrection community for a more utopian vision of justice. The work of justice happens within the context of pain and suffering. In looking to the cross as a source of dangerous memory, we are called to give voice to our own pain and suffering and to take stock of the ways in which we have participated in the suffering of others. To erase the cross from feminist theology is to symbolically remove the messiness involved in the work of redemption. Discipleship involves not only a “radical stubbornness in the face of intimidation and terrorism,” but also awareness of the fragility of human relationships.122

Analysis

We have explored the contributions of Elizabeth Johnson and Rita Nakashima Brock in contextualizing the problem of sin, suffering, and redemption so as to reclaim a space for the full flourishing of women within the body of Christ. Elizabeth Johnson helps us to reclaim the symbol of the suffering God for Christian feminist theology through an attentiveness to the multivalent dimensions of women’s interpreted experiences of suffering. Love as embodied in intimate relationships—whether among friends or romantic partners—involves more than willing the well-being of another. Love entails vulnerability to pain, especially when the ones we love deeply are suffering. For Johnson, the cross symbolizes God’s participation in the pain (pathos) of the world. Yet, this model is only viable for feminist theology if it makes the crosses of women visible.

As Brazilian feminist theologian Ivone Gebara explains, Christianity in its interpretation of the symbol of the cross has fixated on one specific form of suffering—martyrdom as “public suffering in the name of a group.”\(^{123}\) The cross can only be a liberative symbol for women if it “disclose[s] the sufferings of women so as to denounce, in the manner of prophets, the violence practiced against them.”\(^{124}\) As such, the symbol of the cross as a symbol of the suffering God must be one that attends to a plurivocity of experiences with the aim of seeking justice for all. To speak of the cross is always to speak of crosses. Attending to the contours of dark emotions, Johnson argues that not all suffering is the same, nor can suffering be easily parsed from new life. Ultimately, for Johnson, God does not demand our suffering. Instead, God is on the side of those who suffer, weeping when we are in pain. Knowing that we are not alone in pain makes a difference. It can sustain us on the journey and, at times, inspire acts of resistance and hope. Central to reclaiming a space for the full subjectivity of women (and men) within the theology of the cross is affective fluidity, mutuality, and justice-seeking.

Agency, accountability, and community are the cornerstones of Rita Nakashima Brock’s erotic christology. Brock contextualizes the cross within Christa/Community and locates the source of our pain and our joy in our “primal interrelatedness.” In Brock’s analysis, wholeness is found in the power of connection. Mutual relationships create “the possibility of a new vision, for power of real presence, erotic power.”\(^{125}\) These


\(^{124}\) Ibid., 116.

\(^{125}\) Joh, *Heart of the Cross*, 98.
relationships, as embodied by Christa/Community, are liberative and transformative in and through dangerous memory and the ongoing commitment to healing in the basilea community. Agency is found in the struggle to come to terms with pain and in the commitment to compassion. The cross remains important, not so much as a sign of God’s involvement in the pain of the world, but as a reminder that the work of discipleship involves an honest reckoning with pain—in its historical, social, and present day forms. There is no redemption without dealing with our own pain and the pain of others.

While Brock’s description of the problem of violence and oppression bears the mark of gender essentialism, her description of the abuse of power remains an important piece in a feminist reconstruction of the cross as we continue to operate on a unilateral notion of power, local and global. The connections Brock makes among power relations and their psychosocial origins remains pertinent today, especially in the context of imperialism and capitalism. As a nation-state, vulnerability and interdependence continue to be treated as threats (and not resources) to well-being. As church communities, we have yet to accurately name and respond appropriately to the sources of

126 While Brock seeks to avoid dualistic approaches to the problem of patriarchy through the use of psychological categories, she tends to equate dominance with masculinity and dependence with femininity throughout Journeys by Heart. This projects a very limited understanding of gender roles, especially with respect to the ways in which women appropriate unilateral models of power across racial and class lines. In her later writings, Brock shifts attention away from gender to include a more specific analysis of race and ethnicity. See, for example, her reflections (with Rebecca Parker) in Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Save Us (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001).
our pain. Until we learn to deal with pain honestly, we cannot begin the work of healing and reconciliation.

In sum, Johnson and Brock help us to think about subjectivity and the cross through attentiveness to the dynamics of relationality. To be in relationship involves an attunement to vulnerability, affect, and embodiment—as well as joy, creativity, and power. The symbol of the cross stands as witness not only to the terrorizing powers of history, but it also testifies to the capacity of the Christian community to persist in the work of justice even in the face of tragedy and uncertainty. As Christian communities, we are connected to the crucified bodies of Christ.

**Conclusion**

Interpretations of the cross shape the Christian community’s understanding of its own identity and agency within the redemptive work of God in the world. Johnson and Brock illustrate the importance of affective fluidity, justice-seeking, honest memory, and connectedness in empowering the full flourishing of women and men in christological constructions. While most feminist and womanist theologians would agree with this assessment, some have challenged the need to retain the symbol of the cross in order to make this claim. As Delores Williams asks, given the high value Christianity has placed on redemptive suffering, “should these images [of the cross and the crucifix], infused with premeditative violence, maintain their status as major sacred emblems of our

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127. For example, consider the Roman Catholic Church’s response to the sexual abuse scandals at the beginning of this century.
faith?”

Are there not other images from the Jesus story that we can use? In Williams’ perspective, “the cross is a constant reminder of innocent suffering and violence, regardless of the message it is supposed to communicate about salvation. Too often, Christians are thereby taught to believe that something good can result from violence.”

While Williams’ concern needs to be taken seriously, I believe that de-emphasizing the cross runs the risk of minimizing the reality of suffering that continues to exist within the Christian community. The symbol of the cross stands as a powerful reminder that profound suffering (its causes and effects) remains within the body of Christ. Twenty years later, Rita Nakashima Brock’s assessment still holds—as Christian communities we are still not very good at reckoning with our own suffering. The tendency to project and suppress suffering continues to exist at individual, communal, and national levels. Furthermore, we have a tendency to idealize the work of social justice and ministry. In part, our idealizing of this work is what allows us to pursue it. The problem is that idealizing justice, and even mutuality, does not provide us with the context or skills to deal with the disappointment that we meet along the way. A vision of justice is


129. Ibid., 26.

130. This is a genuine problem in the work of Rita Nakashima Brock and Elizabeth Johnson. While both authors make important contributions in the feminist reconstruction of the symbol of the cross and the symbol of the suffering God, respectively, the vision of justice, solidarity, and mutuality accompanying these reconstructions tends toward abstraction. Johnson has been criticized for the ways in which her theology tends to universalize women’s experience as well as the accompanying construction of the full flourishing of women. See Serene Jones,
essential to the work of transformation, but this vision needs to be inclusive of tragedy and disappointments in order to sustain communities over the long run. The symbol of the cross stands as a powerful witness to the disappointment, betrayal, and sorrow that faced the early Christian community. It reminds us that discipleship requires the ability to persist even in the face of tragedy. To be a disciple is to be graced by possibility even in the face of tragedy and suffering.

If the work of social justice is going to include long-lasting transformation, then it must also include a critical look at ourselves. We must ask: is the body of Christ a place where all are welcome—not only in theory, but in practice? To acknowledge that racism, sexism, and heterosexism exist within our theology, ministry, and ecclesial structures is to acknowledge our own complicity in perpetuating sinful structures. The cross remains an important symbol in naming our own brokenness—even the brokenness that exists within communities that work for justice. The symbol of the cross stands as a powerful reminder that the story of the passion and resurrection is not finished being told.

There is another, perhaps even more pressing, reason to insist on retaining the symbol of the cross for feminist theology: “the pathological tendency in the present culture of First World Countries to deny suffering and death in human experience, which leads to banality in thought and superficiality in values.”\textsuperscript{131} Attending to the cross,

\textsuperscript{131} Johnson, \textit{She Who Is}, 254.
especially the cross of Christa, brings to the fore the troubled relationship we have with our own bodies. We exist in a culture that commodifies bodies—our own and the bodies of others. In the United States, we regularly engage in practices that deny the value of our own physicality. When we treat the human body and the body of the earth as a commodity, violence becomes much more palatable and, even, justifiable. Womanist theologians have pointed the ways in which slavery objectified the bodies of Black women through labor, reproduction and erotic violence. As Kelly Brown Douglas demonstrates, dehumanization and exploitation continues today through stereotypes about Black female sexuality. Asian and Asian American feminist theologians have analyzed the ways in which sex trafficking continues to objectify and eroticize the bodies of Asian women. 

132. Market indicators suggest that Americans spent over $40 billion last year on weight-loss programs and products, while we continue to deny our reliance upon the earth and its resources. See “Profiting from America's Portly Population, “PRNewswire (Reuters) < 21 April 2009 > http://www.reuters.com/article/pressRelease/idUS107630+21-Apr-2008+PRN20080421, accessed 08 April 2009. As you will note, even the title of this article betrays cultural values about health, beauty, and purchasing power.


134. See Kelly Brown Douglas’ Sexuality and the Black Church and What’s Faith Got to Do with It?

135. A number of essays in the collection Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women’s Religion and Theology, eds. Rita Nakashima Brock, Jung Ha Kim, Kwok Pui-Lan, and Seung Ai Yang (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2007) address this issue. Also see Rita Nakashima Brock and Susan Thistlethwaite, Casting Stones:
of natural resources and human degradation—giving attention to its impact on the lives of women. 136

In speaking about the incarnation and redemption, feminist theologies cannot bypass the significance of embodiment. The image of Christa calls attention to the ways in which violence has been inscribed upon the bodies of women. 137 Women’s bodies are also sites of resistance, healing, new life, and survival. Reclaiming the full subjectivity of women not only means reclaiming our interdependence, but it also means reclaiming bodily integrity. To be a full subject is to participate in telling the story of redemption. It is to be graced with the possibilities of the resurrection community. To be a full subject is to be in the body—in the body of Christ. Toward that end, atonement theologies must seek a new grounding in embodied subjectivity. As Carter Heyward reminds, not one of us “can live creatively or responsibly apart from the needs of the rest of the human


137. While a number of feminist theologians have called into question whether Christa can be considered redemptive in light of the ways in which the Western visual tradition has eroticized the female naked body, regardless of one’s perspective on this issue—the statue calls attention to theological meaning of embodiment in unavoidable way. To learn more about the arguments made with regard to the appropriateness of Christa in feminist discourse as an image of redemption see Margaret Miles’ *Carnal Knowing* and Wioleta Polinska, “Dangerous Bodies: Women’s Nakedness and Theology,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16 (2001): 45-62.
body.” If we are to take seriously the goal of the full flourishing of all beings in their particularity and relatedness, then we must ask whether our theology truly honors the bodies of those who are least among us.

Embodied subjectivity is important for theological aesthetics as well. Yet, as illustrated in chapter one, the driving question behind many contemporary theologies of beauty continues to center on marking out a distinction between theological aesthetics and secular aesthetics. In lifting up the problem of secularity, these theologians have overlooked the ways in which their constructions inscribe violence upon the bodies of women. This, as I have argued in chapter three, is the central issue in Balthasar’s christological aesthetics.

Christa, in her nakedness, is a powerful witness to ways in which the bodies of women have been objectified. In a litany inspired by Sandys’ Christa, Carter Heyward brings recalls the toll of violence upon the bodies of women:

We remember slave women—servant women: Christa.
We remember battered and sexually abused women: Christa.
We remember women gone mad as the only way to survive violence: Christa.
We remember 200,000 Korean women servicing Japanese soldiers: Christa.
We remember hundreds of thousands of Filipina women used by U.S. soldiers: Christa.
We remember countless African American women abused by white men, often with the complicity of white women: Christa.
We remember the increasing numbers of Latin American women being used by multinational corporations to advance the profit from the south: Christa.


139. Recall that in these theologies, the cross functions hermeneutically to distinguish divine beauty (objective beauty) from worldly beauty (subjective taste). See literature review in chapter one for more detail.
We remember teenage girls raped by those whom they trust and children forced to bear unwanted children: Christa
We remember Palestinian women and children, Iraqi women, Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian women, Tibetan women, women of East Timor, of Ethiopia, Somalia, Zaire, Kenya, South Africa—women and children burned, raped, hungry; starving women, children and powerless men around the world—el cuerpo de la Crista.  

If theological aesthetics is to have relevance for theology today, it must attend to the question of embodiment in ways that affirm the full flourishing of all beings. What does it mean to be beautiful in the body? What does it mean to be beautiful in the body of Christ/a? In the next chapter, we will turn to the issue of embodiment in search of wholeness that brings aesthetics and redemption down to earth.

CHAPTER FIVE

TO BE CALLED BELOVED

to be called beloved
is to be called by God
to be called by the shining moments
be called deep within deep

to be called beloved
is more than one plus infinity
more than the million breaths of loving
than the sounds of tomorrows horizon

to be called beloved
is the marvelous yes to God’s what if
the radical shifting of growth
mundane agency of active faith

to be called beloved
is to ask the question
what would it mean
what would it look like if we actually believed
that we are washed in God’s grace

(Emilie Townes, In a Blaze of Glory)

The basic contention of this project is that the way in which we image beauty
theologically sends a powerful message about the kinds of relationships and behaviors we
name as desirable, attractive, and good. Aesthetic expressions of the Christian tradition
shape our perception of the meaning and value of God, the self, and creation. Today, one
of the more prominent themes in theological aesthetic discourse is that of the beauty of
the cross. To stake a claim in the cross’s beauty is to make a theological statement about the meaning of the passion of Christ and the character of human redemption. In its symbolic and metaphorical form, the beauty of the cross acts to define the praxis of the Christian faith. This is certainly the case in the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar.

For Balthasar, the beauty of the cross culminates in divinely ordained ordering marked by a nuptial purity that rests with Christ’s obedient self-surrender. The *pro nobis* of the cross is beautiful, shattering all our expectations about the nature of divine love. This response is also a fitting and proportional response to a masculine divine self-gift. As such, Christ’s death on the cross not only signifies the depths of God’s love for humanity, but it also sets the pattern for Christian discipleship in terms of a feminine receptivity marked by obedience and self-surrender. In an aesthetic framework, this model presents the free acceptance of innocent suffering on behalf of the guilty as something that is attractive and, even, desirable. That is, while Balthasar’s theological aesthetics may begin with the paradoxical form of the beauty of the cross wherein the *Ungestalt* perceived through the eyes of faith becomes the *Übergestalt*, it does not end

1. This was developed in detail in chapters two and three of this dissertation. Recall that at the center of Balthasar’s aesthetics and dramatics is a nuptial relationship at the cross.

2. This claim was expounded upon in chapter three in the section entitled “Suffering, Punishment, and the Aesthetics of Atonement.” While it can be said that the cross shatters all our expectations,

there.\textsuperscript{4} Through his dramatics, the beauty of the cross sets the parameters of Christian discipleship in terms of a penitential posture of obedient self-surrender.\textsuperscript{5} Balthasar’s theology is truly a kneeling theology in this sense. However, when paired with the gender symbolism and violence implicit in his dramatic rendition of the narrative of redemption, this construction mutes the embodied subjectivity of women.

The dissonance between Balthasar’s aesthetic and dramatic rendering of the cross and the questions arising out of women’s interpreted experiences of suffering are heightened when we consider Edwina Sandys’ \textit{Christa}. In chapter four, we turned to \textit{Christa} as an interpretive resource through which to contextualize theological discussions of beauty and the cross. By placing a naked female body on the cross, Sandys’ sculpture foregrounds the issue of women’s suffering, especially the suffering that is the result of gender injustice and sexual violence. The challenge \textit{Christa} poses to contemporary theological aesthetic discourses, especially those grounded in the theology of Balthasar, is whether it is even possible to speak of the beauty of the cross in the context of violent injustice.

From a feminist theological perspective, to speak of the symbol of the cross is to speak of the suffering body of Christ as it is borne by the bodies of women around the


\textsuperscript{5} This is most clearly exhibited in Balthasar’s meditations on the \textit{Way of the Cross}, reprinted in \textit{Theologians Today: Hans Urs von Balthasar}, ed. Martin Redfern (London/New York: Sheed and Ward, 1972), 122. For full quote, refer to the end of chapter 3.
world. As Elizabeth Johnson eloquently states, “the Christological symbol of God’s active suffering in Christ [is] a historically inclusive one, encompassing the suffering lives of women and men of all ages.”

Christ crucified encompasses the suffering and violence inscribed upon the bodies of women. Therefore, one of the crucial questions with which this project must contend is: where does beauty lie amidst violence and human suffering? At its core, this is a question about the nature of redemption and the place of women’s bodies within this narrative.

In a world in which suffering is inscribed upon the bodies of millions, beauty must stake a claim in human flourishing. As Carter Heyward reminds us, there is no flourishing apart from a flourishing in the body. As relational beings, not one of us “can live creatively or responsibly apart from the needs of the rest of the human body,” from the needs of the human family.

Beauty cannot be completely spiritualized. Therefore, the central question of this chapter remains: what is it to be beautiful in the body? What does it mean to be beautiful in the body of the Christ? This, as I will argue, is a critically important question facing women today given the strong hold patriarchy has had on the Western imagination, including the Western Christian imagination, in its regard of female bodies.

In the Christian West, we are in desperate need of a new model for beauty: one that seeks to live in harmony with the female flesh and not in a battle against it. While

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the tradition’s link between beauty and the cross signals at a fundamental level that beauty is found even in the midst of brokenness, the predominant model at the dawn of the twenty-first century is one that is more concerned with other-worldly perfection than the spiritual and material well-being of women. What we need is a model for aesthetics that propels us into the praxis of hope, healing the broken relationship the Christian community has with bodies—our bodies, the bodies of others and the body of the earth. This kind of beauty is one that asks us to move away from drawing straight lines in our imagination and to lean into the pains and joys arising in our midst. It is a beauty that seeks wholeness even in the midst of suffering.

**Female Fleshliness: The Devil’s Gateway**

While the Christian tradition affirms the goodness of the body in its incarnational theology, its valuation of the female body is ambiguous at best. In the Christian West, there is a long history of identifying the female flesh with carnal weakness and non-godliness. At the center of this history lies a patriarchal interpretation of the accounts of creation and the Fall, which emphasizes woman’s secondary status and her leadership in disobedience, resulting in a curse on humanity.

As the story goes, God created a world that was very good (Genesis 1:31). In the first creation account, told by the Yahwist, men and women are created together on the sixth day. God blesses them and says to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth

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8. Balthasar’s theology projects a vision of wholeness that is highly spiritualized and deeply tied to the nuptial purity of Christ-Mary.

and subdue it" (Genesis 1: 28). The creation story of found in Genesis 2:4b to 3:24 offers a slightly different picture of creation. Here, humanity (adam) is created from the dust of earth and placed in the Garden of Eden. God determines that man needs a helper, puts Adam to sleep, removes a rib, and from that rib creates a second female human being. All is well until the serpent enters the picture and convinces the woman to eat from the tree of knowledge:

So when the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she takes of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves (Genesis 3:6-7).

When God finds out, God places a curse upon the serpent and the first pair, banishing them from the garden. To the woman, God says "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (Genesis 3:16). To Adam, God curses the ground requiring that humanity toil for food. Eve, unlike Adam, must bear the curse of sin upon her body in the pain of childbirth, creating a link between sin and maternal suffering.

According to biblical scholar Phyllis Trible, this disparity in punishment has been historically interpreted as signifying that woman’s sin is greater than man’s. As such, the Genesis story not only offered an explanation for the plight of humanity for the early


Christian community, but it also highlighted the special role of women in bringing sin and evil into the created world. As Tertullian infamously wrote of women,

You are the Devil’s gateway. You are the unsealer of that forbidden tree. You are the first deserter of the divine Law. You are she who persuaded him whom the Devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of your desert, that is, death, even the Son of the God had to die.12

As the weaker of the two sexes, woman must be controlled lest all chaos break loose. It is important to note that for Tertullian and his contemporaries, it was not the “minds of women” that led creation astray, it was their bodies.13 Historically, women have been associated with the body and the natural world due to their physiological investment in reproduction (i.e., menstruation, childbirth, and lactation). While the processes of reproduction were highly valued, they were also feared and demonized. For example, in the early Christian community, a menstruating woman was considered to be unclean.14


This, when paired with the reigning androcentric philosophies of Tertullian’s day, further solidified the identification of female flesh with sin and evil.

As Michelle Gonzalez explains, the works of Plato and Aristotle were also influential in shaping patristic and medieval approaches to the body and sexual differentiation. Plato’s interpretation of sexual difference is tied to his understanding of the mind-body relation. In the *Republic*, the soul (or mind) does not depend upon the body in order to function and is able to grasp the nature of forms with greater ease when it is not encumbered by the body.\(^{15}\) Therefore, in relation to the soul, “men and women have similar natures;” however, with regard to their bodies, “women are inferior to men.”\(^{16}\) According to Plato, while a woman’s physical stature renders her inferior bodily, it does not necessarily hinder her capacity for rationality. Women simply have to work harder than men in order to attain intellectual achievement. Augustine later picks up on this distinction in his interpretation of Genesis and concludes that “woman, in spite of ‘her physical qualities as a woman,’ and because of her creation as a rational being, was, like man, made in the image of God.”\(^{17}\) Yet, Augustine also associates women with lower

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September 2009). This paper was actually the result of a controversial discussion over the language of women’s cleanliness among parishioners at Sts. Constantine and Helen in Middletown, OH.


17. Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, 93.
or worldly knowledge (scientia) and men with a higher form of wisdom (sapientia).\textsuperscript{18} As Tina Beattie explains in her study of Eve, because “masculine sapientia incorporates feminine scientia but not vice versa, the man alone can image God while the woman can only do so in communion with man.”\textsuperscript{19} Moreover, the association of women with scientia also explains the Fall:

The Fall of man is the result of the ‘lower reason’ throwing off the control of the ‘higher’, and devoting itself to the material and temporal . . . In the story of the forbidden fruit, this symbolized the yielding of the higher reason (Adam) to the solicitations of the lower (Eve), which has already been perverted by the flesh (serpent), so that sinful desire becomes a sinful act.\textsuperscript{20}

Thus, as set out by Augustinian theology, women must transcend their bodily nature through communion with men in order to express the image of God. Moreover, due to the relative weakness of lower reason and its intimate association with the female body, this communion must be ordered to male headship. While Augustine’s reading of the Fall does not directly impute sin and evil to the female flesh, his interpretation reinforces the notion of female subordination to masculine leadership on the grounds of women’s innate inferiority.

The other philosophic perspective important in shaping Christian understandings of the female body was that of Aristotle. Aristotle’s understanding of sexual difference is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} See Kim Power, \textit{Veiled Desire: Augustine’s Writing on Women} (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995), 139.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Tina Beattie, \textit{God’s Mother, Eve’s Advocate: A Marian Narrative of Women’s Salvation} (New York/London: Continuum, 2002), 54.
\end{itemize}
based in a philosophy of contraries. As Prudence Allen explains, his “description of the female as the privation of the male in the category of opposites, as considered in the area of metaphysics, was the foundation for the devaluation of woman in the area of generation.”

In a pair of contraries, one is always the privation of the other. This, along with his understanding of reproduction, led Aristotle to conclude that woman is a “mutilated male.”

Women are passive and, therefore, inferior to man’s activity. While the developments of modern science clearly indicate that the opposite is true in the inner workings of sexual reproduction, the link between femininity and passivity remains a significant element of the contemporary Roman Catholic portrait of sexuality. As we will see, the link between passivity and femininity is supported by an allegorical interpretation of Ephesians 5:21-33 instead of scientific knowledge.


22. In his understanding of reproduction, Aristotle thought that women were merely vessels in the work of generation, thereby making men the sole the active source in procreation. The female was passive and, therefore, inferior. See Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals*, trans. and ed. A. L. Peck (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1943).

23. Balthasar addresses this internal “contradiction” explicitly in “A Word on *Humanae Vitae*” *Communio* 20 (1993):437-450. While Balthasar clearly acknowledges that women are more active in work of procreation than men, biologically, he is adamant that the feminine principle—even on metaphorical terms—cannot be the initiator in generation. The central assertion is that God the Father is masculine. Interestingly, Balthasar also turns to another facet of modern science to support this line of argumentation: genetic research. As scientists are discovering, the basic “embryonic structure of all living beings, including man, is primarily feminine;” it begins with the X chromosome. Balthasar uses this as evidence to further support his claim that all of creation is feminine before God, especially women.
In sum, the story of creation and the Fall provided “the Christian West with a palimpsest on which attitudes toward bodies, sexuality, and women were inscribed.” While the nature of Eve’s guilt and complicity in the Fall has been theologically debated, normative (orthodox) interpretations of this narrative have highlighted her “secondary citizenship,” her leadership in disobedience, and her subsequent condemnation and curse in childbearing. A great deal of this symbolism was reinforced and perpetuated visually. Today, patriarchal interpretations of Genesis 1-3 remain significant in shaping Roman Catholic theological perspectives on sexual difference, embodiment, and, as I shall argue, redemption. Not only has the story of creation and the Fall been used as a proof text to validate theological argumentation about the construction of gender, but, more recently, it has also provided a template for explicating the doctrine of sin and grace. By and large, this is a consequence of the increasing influence of Hans Urs von Balthasar in contemporary theological circles, including papal theology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This is nowhere more apparent than in John Paul II’s theology of the body, where perspectives on sexual difference, personhood, and redemption largely parallel those set forth by Balthasar’s theodramatics.


25. Wioleta Polinska, “Dangerous Bodies: Women’s Nakedness and Theology,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16 (2001): 51. In Christian art the female nude became a visual sign of wickedness and decadence, as it was primarily used in depictions of moral corruption or sin. Reinforcing this notion are depictions of “good” women as fully clothed and asexual. The unclothed female body has been visually eroticized, and, in the Christian tradition, this eroticism is a projection of sinfulness.

26. Beginning in the fall of 1979 up until November 1984, Pope John Paul II held a series of general audiences to reflect upon the sanctity of human life and marriage. The
of the body, Balthasar’s work is beginning to take on a life of its own, extending beyond the walls of the ivory tower and into the devotional practices of the faithful.\textsuperscript{27}

While Balthasar’s theology retrieves the erotic and relational dimensions of Christian redemption, it is deeply embedded in a gender symbolism that persists in identifying the female flesh with sin and death, only to be redeemed through nuptiality and maternal sacrifice. By and large, this identification is a product of a nuptial soteriology that conflates kenotic and erotic love.\textsuperscript{28} Defining Christian discipleship, even in metaphorical terms, as a love that bears suffering to the point of death in the context of a familial relationship has the potential to reinforce the tacit acceptance of violence against women that is pervasive within our culture. While John Paul II’s approach to the female body is not couched in the same violent rhetoric as Balthasar’s, it holds a similar soteriological structure: one that is centered in a nuptial relationship at the cross.

**John Paul II’s Theology of the Body and the Spousal Nature of Redemptive Love**

John Paul II’s catechetical reflections on human sexuality, the body, and sexual difference begin by looking at Christ’s teachings on divorce in response to the Pharisee’s questioning in the synoptic gospels. As recounted in Mark 10:2 ff and Matthew 19:3 ff,

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\textsuperscript{27} Among young adult populations, theology of the body is gaining ground. By and large, this is a result of the work of Christopher West, founder of the Theology of the Body International Alliance. TOBIA hosts study groups in Europe and the United States, as well as international singles conferences. For more information see, http://www.theologyofthebody.net.

\textsuperscript{28} This argument was detailed in chapter 3.
Jesus response to the Pharisees’ questioning about divorce points to the text in Genesis and reads: “he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’” Subsequently, the two biblical accounts of creation in Genesis 1:1-2:4a and Genesis 2:4b-3:24 become the foundation for his reflections on the theological significance of embodiment. The centrality of these two texts lends itself towards a theological anthropology that foregrounds sexual difference and gender complementarity in the narration of sin and grace. In a manner that bears a striking similarity to what has been put forth by Hans Urs von Balthasar, John Paul II’s theology of the body presents us with a model of soteriology and ecclesiology that is grounded in nuptiality. This starting point also reveals a central concern of his papacy: the preservation of the sanctity of the family in the face of secularity. As Michael Waldstein notes in his commentary on the text, it is *Humane Vitae* that sets the agenda from the beginning. In response to what he deems a dangerous trend toward technical mastery over the human body, John Paul II constructs a theological understanding of the body wherein the body is subject to God, bringing the issues of sin and obedience to the foreground. Similar to Balthasar’s theological anthropology, the starting point for his...

29. TOB, 1:2.


reflections on Christian discipleship is that of humanity’s “No” in response to the divine “Yes.” In other words, John Paul II’s theology of the body is much more than a theology of marriage; it is also a theology of redemption. Humanity, as a wayward bride, is caught in the snares of the modern world and in need of a salvation that can only come from the divine Bridegroom.

The influence of Balthasar on John Paul II is most readily apparent in his theological anthropology. As discussed in chapter two, Balthasar presents us with a model of divine-human relations in which sexual difference informs theological difference. The human condition is marked by three polarities: spirit/body, man/woman, and individual/community. The polarity between man/woman is of primary significance, as sexual difference not only permeates the human condition in body and spirit, but it also “stand[s] as a paradigm of that community dimension which characterizes [our] entire nature.”

The human condition is marked by an inescapable otherness. We are always seeking fulfillment, but this fulfillment cannot be achieved apart from a harmony that


arises out of male-female reciprocity. Moreover, this reciprocity is an ordered reciprocity in which femininity is always subordinate to masculinity.

As we recall, for Balthasar, male-female reciprocity does not always correspond to biological difference. Rather, the operative construct in defining sexual difference, as well as theological difference, is the relation of receptivity to activity. To be feminine is to be receptive and obedient; to be masculine is to be the initiator of activity. By definition, then, to be feminine is to be responsive to masculine initiative; it is to be secondary. Therefore, in relation to the divine Bridegroom, all of humanity is feminine. This interpretation of gender relations also gives shape to male-female relations, whereby women’s “essential vocation [is] to receive man’s fruitfulness.”34 As such, Mary is the archetype of the feminine, as she “displays the paradigmatically feminine qualities as a model for all Christians in relation to God.”35 The human person, as eternally feminine vis-à-vis God, is incomplete apart from a relationship with the divine Bridegroom, and women are incomplete apart from a relationship with men. [Men are also incomplete without women.] Most importantly, this ordering of male-female gender relations is set


out by divine design, making any subversion of one’s gendered role simultaneously a subversion of the order of divine grace.\textsuperscript{36}

Similar to Balthasar, John Paul II relies on nuptial imagery in order to articulate the relationship between God and humanity in history. His initial reflections on the creation stories in Genesis set the stage for the ontological priority of sexual difference in the creation of humanity in the divine image. As expressed in the passage below, the telos of humanity is to reflect a nuptial communion of persons:

We can deduce that man became the image of God not only through his own humanity, but also through the communion of persons which man and woman form right from the beginning. The function of the image is that of mirroring the one who is the model, of reproducing its own prototype. Man becomes an image of God not so much in the moment of solitude as in the moment of communion.\textsuperscript{37}

Moreover, it is only in the sight of “the woman that [Adam] was able to identify and call by name what makes them visibly similar to each other, and at the same time what manifests humanity.”\textsuperscript{38} The very basis of our subjectivity and personhood is grounded in nuptial relationship.

In pre-lapsarian paradise, man and woman exist in an original unity that “is based on masculinity and femininity, as if two different ‘incarnations,’ that is two ways of

\textsuperscript{36} As noted in chapter two, this framework also has consequences for same-sex relations. Similar to Balthasar’s paradigm of sexual difference, there is no place for homoerotic union or any other forms of sexual and gender diversity in John Paul II’s theology of the body.

\textsuperscript{37} TOB, 9: 3.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 9: 4.
‘being a body’ of the same human being created ‘in the image of God’ (Gen 1:27).”  

Again, we find inherent in this construction a pairing of feminine receptivity with masculine activity that extends beyond biological differences. In relation to the divine Bridegroom, the human person is called to a feminine receptivity as exemplified by the Marian fiat. While Mary’s decidedly feminine response to God is lifted up as the ideal form of discipleship for both men and women in relation to God, in male-female human relations, one’s biological sex determines one’s vocation and identity. Women are the ones who “receive love in order to love in return.” This feminine receptivity “refers not only or above all to the specific spousal relationship of marriage, it means something more universal, based on the fact of her being a woman within all the interpersonal relationships which, in the most varied ways, shape society and structure the interaction between all persons. . .”  

For women, biology is destiny. The original unity is one in which feminine receptivity is ordered to masculine activity. This ordering is disrupted by the Fall.

39. Ibid., 8:1.

40. Ibid. “Although in its normal constitution, the human body carries within itself the signs of sex and is by its nature male or male, the fact that man is a ‘body’ belongs more deeply to structure of the personal subject than the fact in his somatic constitution he is also male or female.”


42. Ibid.
The Fall gives way to a situation marked by tension and division: “The body is not subject to the spirit as in the state of original innocence, but carries within itself a constant hotbed of resistance against the spirit and threatens in some way man’s unity as a person, that is, the unity of the moral nature that plunges its roots firmly into the very constitution of the person.”⁴³ This concupiscence is so disruptive that it results in “a breach, a fundamental loss of the primeval community-communion of persons,” leaving man and woman “set against each other because of their masculinity and femininity.”⁴⁴ The human condition is one marked by division and a tension of polar opposites (spirit/body, male/female, and community/individual). In the assessment of Tina Beattie, for John Paul II, the “fall in Genesis is a fall into dualism.”⁴⁵ As such, human finitude is marked by an inescapable otherness that cannot be reconciled apart from participation in a spousal relationship. The marriage covenant between God and creation, as well as the covenant between man and woman, has been broken by sin. Again, similar to Balthasar, we find an understanding of sin wherein disobedience bears the mark of nuptial infidelity.

The human person, created in the image of God, is a “subject of the covenant” and a “partner of the Absolute.”⁴⁶ Humanity, which has broken the covenant with God through an act of “disobedience,” that is, failing to “accept Love according to the fullness

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⁴³. TOB, 28:3.
⁴⁴. Ibid., 30:3.
⁴⁵. Beattie, Eve’s Advocate, chapter 4.
⁴⁶. TOB, 6:2.
of the demands of the creative Will,” is cut off from the Tree of Life.\(^{47}\) The consequences of nuptial infidelity are borne by the human body. After the Fall, “the life given to man in the mystery of creation is not taken away, it is restricted by the limit of conceptions, of births, [and] of deaths.”\(^{48}\) All of this is “worsened” by the condition of original sin, as our capacity for self-gift is muted by concupiscence: “the human body in its masculinity and femininity has almost lost the power of expressing this love in which the human person becomes a gift in conformity with the deepest structure of and finality of his or her personal existence.”\(^{49}\) In a practical and metaphorical sense, procreation becomes the manner in which humanity simultaneously acts as a co-creator with God and overcomes death.\(^{50}\) Echoing the curse in Genesis 3:16, it is women who must bear the brunt of these consequences as her husband’s response to her desire becomes one of domination.\(^{51}\) Due to the fallen nature of humanity, conjugal love has been corrupted by concupiscence and, therefore, is need of a redemption that can only come from Christ. Conjugal love must be

\begin{itemize}
  \item \(^{47}\) Ibid., 11:4.
  \item \(^{48}\) Ibid., 22:5.
  \item \(^{49}\) Ibid., 32:3.
  \item \(^{50}\) Ibid., 4:3. The human person “participates not only in the history of human sinfulness, as hereditary, and at the same time, personal and unrepeatable, subject of this history, but he also participates in the history of salvation, here too as its subject and co-creator. He is thus not merely shut out from original innocence due to his sinfulness, but also at the same time open to the mystery of redemption realized in Christ and through Christ.”
  \item \(^{51}\) Ibid., 30:5.
\end{itemize}
modeled after the kenotic relationship between Christ (the divine Bridegroom) and the Church (the Bride).

At the center of John Paul II’s reflections on the theology of the body is a claim about the nature of redemptive love. Divine love, as it is expressed through the person of Christ, is nuptial in character. Through Christ’s marriage with the Church, “the covenant of the grace of election that was broken in the ‘beginning’ by sin is renewed in a definitive way.”⁵² In the condition of original sin, the human capacity for self-gift, or love, is muted by concupiscence, only to be restored through Christ’s expression of perfect conjugal love on the Cross: “Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25).⁵³ Genesis no longer points to the “unity of the spouses,” but rather to “present the mystery of Christ with the Church, from which the author deduces the truth about the unity of the spouses.”⁵⁴ Genesis is no longer the central proof text in the construction of sexual and theological difference. Instead, Ephesians 5:25 becomes the hermeneutical clue for interpretation.⁵⁵

This shift is significant for a number of reasons. First, it makes apparent that the ethical norm for human love is “deduced” from the “mystery of Christ with the Church”

⁵². Ibid., 97:2.
⁵³. Ibid., 93:1.
⁵⁴. Ibid.
⁵⁵. Ibid., 93:2. “The analogy that permeates Ephesians 5:22-33 has its ultimate basis in God’s saving plan.” In the words of John Paul II, it is Ephesians that “authorizes us to understand Genesis in this way, and the truth about the ‘beginning’ of man and marriage contained in it” (TOB, 96:7).
and not the other way around. In other words, John Paul II is very clear that the norm for human love is set out by a theological principle: that of Christ’s kenotic self-gift on the cross as it pours out into the life of the Church. The choice of Ephesians locates the cross at the center of John Paul II’s nuptial theology. It is on the basis of “Christ’s spousal love for the Church” in the form of his total self-gift on the cross that “the sacrament of redemption—the fruit of Christ’s redeeming love—becomes a permanent dimension of the life of the Church itself.”

In effect, this linking between conjugal love and kenotic love reinforces the identification of Christian love and virtue with self-sacrificial love. This is expressed most clearly in his description of the salvific efficacy of “continence for the kingdom of heaven.” The vocation of celibacy is described as “the fruit of a charismatic choice” that “contains within itself the anticipation of eschatological life.”

By voluntarily renouncing married life, one is freed to participate more fully in the “mystery of redemption.” The embodiment of this eschatological sign is not without travail, or voluntary self-sacrifice. Rather, the Christ-like dynamism that is proper to this state is “denying oneself, taking up one’s cross every day, and following Christ (cf. Lk. 9:23), which can go as far as renouncing marriage and a family of one’s own.”

Marriage, while it is not to be devalued, is a lesser of two goods, and is for those who are not able to make the kind of sacrifice celibacy entails.

56. Ibid., 97:4.
57. Ibid., 74:5.
58. Ibid., 76:3.
59. Ibid., 79:3.
Second, Ephesians authorizes the primacy of the second creation account in defining the gender roles. The right ordering of creation is that whereby the feminine principle is subject to the masculine head and the body is subject to the spirit. While John Paul II argues that this submission is “not a one sided submission,” he also states in unequivocal terms that leadership in the household must remain with the bridegroom. More troubling here is the notion that God’s saving plan, by divine design, is grounded in a hierarchal ordering of male to female relations: the Church, “just as the wife, in virtue of spousal love, completes her husband, which was in some way already brought out ‘at the beginning,’ when the first man found in the first woman ‘a help similar to himself.’”\(^{60}\)

While this is clearly a relational model of redemption, (i.e., masculine activity is “dependent” upon feminine receptivity in order to bear fruit), feminine agency within the dynamic structure of redemption is always secondary. Moreover, similar to the theological construction set out in Balthasar’s dramatics, the nuptial relationship between Christ/Mary sets the parameters for the use of human freedom.

**Maternal Sacrifice and the Vocation of Women**

In the nuptial framework outlined by Balthasar and John Paul II, Mary provides the prototypical model for the Church and for women. In “uttering the first *fiat* of the New Covenant, [Mary] prefigures the Church's condition as spouse and mother.”\(^{61}\) The

\(^{60}\) Ibid.

New Covenant begins at the Annunciation, as her “Yes” to God restores the bond that was broken between God and creation in the Fall. Her _fiat_ culminates at the foot of the Cross, where she “suffer[s] deeply with her only-begotten Son and joining herself with her maternal spirit to his sacrifice, lovingly consenting to the immolation of the victim to whom she had given birth.” At the foot of the Cross, maternal love is closely aligned with the sacrificial love of her Son. Here, Mary’s role in redemption becomes one of loving voluntary consent to the execution of her own Son. While this description is intended to highlight the value of obedience and humility, it also bears a striking resemblance to the ways in which the classical atonement theologies have depicted God the Father as someone who voluntarily sacrifices his own Son. In a framework in which Marian faith is named as the exemplar of Christian virtue, this functions to reinforce the identification of self-sacrificial love with Christian behavior. In his commentary on _Redemptoris Mater_, Balthasar sums up this Marian faith as “a total, trusting self-surrender of mind and body to God; it is absence of understanding; it is uncalculating obedience; it is self-effacing, living humility; but it is also an acceptance of responsibility to God’s bidding.” Christian discipleship is defined as a fidelity to “God’s bidding” even when that bidding entails a divinely ordained suffering. It is this faith that not only defines the vocation of the Christian Church, but also becomes the prototype for

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Hereafter cited as RM. Balthasar also makes this argument in TD 3, 338. This was discussed in chapter 3.

62. Ibid.

womanhood. In the words of John Paul II, “women, by looking to Mary, find in her the secret of living their femininity with dignity and of achieving their own true advancement.” Christian discipleship is kenotic in character. For women, this *kenosis*, or self-gift, is uniquely and singularly expressed through physical and spiritual motherhood. As described in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, “motherhood brings about - on the woman's part - a special ‘gift of self’, as an expression of that spousal love whereby the two are united to each other so closely that they become ‘one flesh’.” In this way, motherhood defines the vocation of all women. It also signifies feminine agency in the work of redemption.

Women’s mission within the “redeemer's salvific struggle against the author of evil in human history” is accomplished through spiritual and physical motherhood. Mary, as the new Eve and the prototype of femininity, crushes the “serpent’s” head by ushering in a New Covenant. She breaks the cycle of death through giving birth to the Word. In a parallel fashion, the motherhood of all women releases humanity from the

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64. RM, 46.

65. MD, 19. Motherhood is “not only ‘of flesh and blood’: it expresses a profound ‘listening to the word of the living God’ and a readiness to ‘safeguard’ this Word, which is ‘the word of eternal life’ (cf. John 6:68).” In its perfect form, motherhood is tied to virginity.

66. Ibid., 18.

67. Ibid., 11.

68. Ibid. In the background are the words of Genesis 3:15, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”
bonds of human finitude through procreation. As such, feminine fruitfulness, in the form
of motherhood, plays an integral role in the transformation of sin and death to new life.
Yet, the redemptive value of feminine fruitfulness lies with more than generation; it also
facilitates the self-surrender of men. In his commentary on *Humanae Vitae*, Balthasar
elaborates on this point as follows:

On the Cross and in the Eucharist he [Christ] gives of his flesh and his blood so
unreservedly that in what results from this self-surrender—that is, in the Church
as a separate being outside himself—Christ finds himself again. This rediscovery
of himself in the Church would not be possible if Christ had only half-given
himself and half-kept himself back. If we reflect from this perspective on the
husband’s part in the sexual act, we will see that he can do justice to the
commandment to love his wife as his own body only if he hands himself over to
her unconditionally, so that from now on he can recognize in her all that he has
surrendered—that is, his entire self. . . Truly, a supernatural measure of
selflessness is required in order to bring a man to such a love as this, possessive as
he is by nature and rendered selfish in his sexuality by sin. Man needs woman in
order to release and satisfy himself, even though he may also feel the impulse of
love, strong or weak, genuine or imaginary.  

Women’s participation in the drama of salvation in the form of feminine receptivity is in
service of male *kenosis*. The bride is to be self-surrendering in her maternal role so that
the bridegroom (male spouse) can “stand under the norm of Christ” and “surrender his
very self, just as the eternal Father surrenders his very self and everything that is his in
order to beget the Son. If the husband does this, he will come all the closer to Christ,
who by his self-surrender fashions his own Mystical Body.” Not only do women
“teach” men how to be “feminine” in relation to God, but they also, in and through their

70. Ibid., 445.
receptivity, allow for men to “represent the very source of life,” effectively imitating God.71 Women in their maternal receptivity also teach men how to be fathers.

Clearly, women’s participation within the narrative of creation and redemption remains that of a “helper.” Not only does this re-inscribe a pattern of female subordination to masculine headship, but it is also used to legitimate a division of roles within society. The responsibility of women is first and foremost motherhood; everything else is secondary. The justification for this claim extends beyond an archetypical reading of Genesis. In the papal view, the female body is formed for motherhood: “The whole exterior constitution of a woman’s body, its particular look, the qualities that stand with the power of a perennial attraction . . . are in strict union with motherhood.”72 A woman’s physical form is what gives shape to her vocation in the Christian community and larger society.73 It also defines her beauty in terms of maternality. This is both on the

71. Ibid., 446. Balthasar describes this in the following manner. Since woman is the image of “creatureliness” itself, she is not “called upon to represent anything that she herself is not, while the man has to represent the very source of life, which he can never be.” While the intent of this statement is to reinforce the importance of women in teaching men how to be disciples, it also acts to reinforce the difference between women and the divine.


73. This idea is interpreted quite literally by proponents of the theology of the body. For example, in a presentation given at Charis Ministries “Sex in the City of God Retreat” that took place in Chicago in February 2008, Fr. Thomas Loya visually supplemented his presentation on the maternal vocation of women with a drawing of the female body made entirely out of circles. The picture emphasized her breasts and womb in order to express the point that women are naturally “soft” and “nurturing” beings, made physically and emotionally for maternality. Not only was this depiction an inaccurate representation of female bodies (i.e., it looked more like a Barbie doll in terms of proportions), but it also had the unintended effect of making a number of women feel
physical and spiritual plane. Physically, her attractiveness resides in her breasts, her curves, and her womb. Yet, the true beauty of women is found in a spiritual beauty that shines through in the “self-offering totality of love,” as exemplified by Mary. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of this construction is the way in which it transfers sacrifice on to the female body. If we look closely at the text, women are needed in order to support a masculine self-giving. As vessels of receptivity, women not only “teach” men how to be disciples, but they also, in effect, “stand in” for men when it comes to self-sacrifice. Put bluntly, the assumption is that men are not cut out for the kind of kenotic self-surrender that Christ exhibits on the Cross. Women, through their capacity to bear the pangs of childbirth, are closely united with Christ’s travail on the Cross. Yet, women, due to their biological sex, are unable to imitate Christ. Therefore, the couple together is able to express in human terms what is complete in Christ—masculine initiative and a feminine self-surrender.

On the one hand, the emphasis on maternality within the narrative of redemption is a significant and welcome change in light of the Western historic Christian tradition’s linking of the female flesh with sin and death. Through motherhood, the female body

self-conscious about their own physical stature. After the presentation, several women shared with me concerns about their body proportions. One young woman mentioned that she had always felt self-conscious about her small breast size. The presentation not only diminished women’s sense of self, but it also visually objectified the female body.

74. RM, 46. The passage as whole reads, “In the light of Mary, the Church sees in the face of women the reflection of a beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable: the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement.”
takes on a positive function in the narrative of redemption, introducing new life into the world. Yet, one has to ask whether the female “body” spoken of is a flesh-and-blood reality. The motherhood integral in redemption is the painless, bloodless, virginal motherhood of Mary. It is Mary’s obedience and self-surrender—not her physicality—that plays a significant role in redemption. For example, her deepest *kenosis* occurs not in the process of conception or birth, but at the foot of the Cross where “through faith [she] shares in the amazing mystery of her Son’s “self-emptying.” The act of faith that unites Mary most deeply with the Paschal mystery is a suffering love. Moreover, it is this *kenosis* that is “the deepest “kenosis” of faith in human history.” While Mary’s sufferings at the foot of the cross present the occasion to reflect on the sufferings of all women, the implication is that the fruitfulness of maternal sacrifice is so powerful that it transforms all suffering into joy. In a way that parallels the resurrection joy, “the woman who suffers when the time comes for her to give birth to her child, immediately afterwards expresses joy.” At first sight of her newborn, the pain of labor is forgotten. Indeed, many mothers speak of this experience in the relation to childbirth. The problem is that this metaphor only goes so far. Not only is this notion of motherhood and femininity one that valorizes “obedience, humility, passivity, and submission as the


76. MD, 19 and TD 4, 361.

77. MD, 19.
cardinal virtues of women,” but it does little to cultivate a sense of moral responsibility and agency in the face of human injustice. The implication is that suffering is a necessary part of human life. As a woman in labor must wait for her time to come, so must the “women who struggle alone to make a living; and women who have been wronged or exploited” wait for her suffering to be transformed in to new life. When we speak of the sufferings of women that arise out of the injustices of exploitation, a theology of the body that is grounded in an “other-worldly” notion of liberation is not enough to address the systemic and social dimensions of sin. Redemption of the body cannot be limited to a freedom from concupiscence. Rather, the redemption of the body must be concerned with putting an end to the sins of injustice that are borne by the bodies of the “least among us,” a concern that is often overlooked in papal pronouncements on human embodiment.

The real difficulty here is the way in which maternal sacrifice defines the nature of women’s participation in the redemptive work of God. In John Paul II’s theology of the body and in Balthasar’s theodramatics, the spousal metaphor provides theological grounding for normative claims for the expression of human and divine love within the


79. MD 19.

80. The most recent example is found in Benedict XVI’s visit to Cameroon in March of 2009 where he denied the helpfulness of condoms in preventing the spread of AIDS. This is a response that overlooks how socio-economic and gender injustice contribute to the spread of HIV and AIDS. See “Pope: Condoms not the Answer in AIDS Fight,” Associated Press MSNBC, 17 March 2009, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29734328/, (accessed 15 September 2009).
narrative of redemption. Spousal love and redemptive love as expressed by Christ in the Paschal Mystery are two sides of the same coin. Redemptive love is a nuptial love that flows out of Christ’s *kenosis* at the cross, giving birth to the Church. The bridegroom pours himself out for the bride, bringing forth new life. Christ’s *kenosis* becomes the standard by which human love is measured and results in a pattern that conflates conjugal relations and self-sacrifice. Not only is this a dangerous model in the context of sexual violence, but it also ignores some of the death-dealing aspects of motherhood that women in the two-thirds world experience.

**Maternal Sacrifice and the Cross**

Feminist and womanist theologians have criticized models of atonement theology that lift up Christ’s death as the locus of redemption on the grounds that it glorifies death and innocent suffering. In an attempt to shift attention away from the death of Jesus, a number of theologians have turned to maternal metaphors as resources for reinterpreting the symbolic significance of the cross. Tina Beattie, for example, drawing upon the work of Luce Irirgaray, argues that “to insist on Mary’s maternal presence in the self-giving of Christ is to introduce fecundity as well as sacrifice into the symbolic significance of the cross.” In “Maternal Sacrifice as a Hermeneutics of the Cross,” Mary Streufert argues that maternal sacrifice, unlike heroic models of sacrificial love, provides a “life-for-life”


model of redemption in contrast to the death-for-life model present in classical atonement
theologies. While Streufert’s attempt to retrieve the symbol of the cross in a manner
that takes women’s experiences of sacrifice seriously is noteworthy, the primary model of
redemptive love remains a self-sacrificing one. Additionally, while maternal metaphors
have a great deal to say to paternal theologies, one has to question their viability in a
global context. Not only is motherhood only one aspect of female embodiment, but we
continue to exist in a society where the bulk of parental care falls on the shoulders of
women. Even today in the United States, the majority of household duties, including
child-rearing, are the primary responsibility of women. To be very clear, my point is
not one of devaluing the importance of motherhood or its life-giving capacities, but to
attend to the gender disparities surrounding the experience of maternality in a patriarchal
society.

In the context of patriarchy, adopting a model that identifies maternal sacrifice
with redemptive love continues to support an inequitable and gendered division of labor.
Moreover, it ignores the historical ways in which maternal sacrifice has not always been
freely chosen. For example, as Delores Williams explains in *Sisters in the Wilderness*,
Black women’s oppression has been institutionalized in the form of social role surrogacy

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83. Mary Streufert, “Maternal Sacrifice as a Hermeneutics of the Cross,” in *Cross
Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad
(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 72.

84. This is what Arlie Russell Hochschild calls the second shift for those who
work outside the home. See Arlie Russell Hoschschild, *The Second Shift* (New York:
that capitalized on Black women’s nurturing capacities and sexuality. All of this is to say that it is one thing to live out John Paul II’s theology of the body in the context of economic and social privilege; it is quite another to do so in the context of the two-thirds world. The feminist constructions of Streufert and Beattie are grounded in a very particular set of experiences: namely, those of white Western women.

In sub-Saharan Africa, too often maternal sacrifice bears the mark of a death-for-life model than the life-for-life ideal of which John Paul II and Streufert speak. In countries like Kenya, motherhood, while highly revered, comes with a great deal of financial and emotional stress. Regardless of the family’s economic status, women are mostly responsible for the financial well-being of their children. They are the ones who provide food, clothing, shelter and education for the family. Consequently, when economic instability strikes as a result of political violence or ecological destruction, it is women who bear the brunt of this burden. As Mercy Amba Oduyoye explains, “the whole family suffers, but the traditional expectation that women will be more caring and more compassionate puts the burden of the situation on women. They give until they have nothing more to share but their poverty.” Indeed, this was the case for a number


86. For example, many of the women I met in Kenya in the summer of 2009 paid for their children’s clothing, education, and food. Their husbands did not contribute to these funds. They needed to work in order for their families to survive.

87. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Poverty and Motherhood” in The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Theology, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Maryknoll,
of the Gikuyu women I met in rural areas of Kenya in the summer of 2009. For these women, the responsibilities of motherhood involved giving until there was literally nothing left to give, leaving little energy and resources left for their own sustenance. This sort of emotional and physical sacrifice can hardly be said to be one that lends toward women’s flourishing. Moreover, maternal mortality, escalated by preventable diseases such as malaria, HIV/AIDS, malnutrition and poor health care facilities, is the leading cause of premature death and disability of women among reproductive ages in Kenya. Maternal health requires access to clean water, nutrition, as well as the capacity to make autonomous decisions about sexual and reproductive health. Often, a woman’s ability to make decisions about these matters is compromised by cultural expectations and/or a need to sustain one’s economic livelihood. Furthermore, studies

NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 126. Oduyoye is from Ghana, but the concept applies to Kenya as well.

88. These interviews were conducted as a part of my participation in “Global Feminist Theologies in Postcolonial Space: An Immersion Based Pedagogy Model for Theology Doctoral Students,” a project sponsored by Loyola University Chicago’s Department of Theology in partnership with The Maryknoll Institute of African Studies, Nairobi, Kenya. The project took place from June 20-July 20, 2009.

89. For example, many of the women I met were day laborers on tea farms. Their days began at sunrise and continued until late into the night, leaving them physically exhausted and malnourished. As custom dictates in this community, women eat last—taking whatever is left.


91. Ibid.
show that maternal health is proportionately related to women’s acceptance in the public and the political sphere. When women take a greater role in public life maternal mortality rates decrease. Not only are more resources proportionally allocated in the health system, but women have greater access to these resources. This is not to imply that motherhood in Kenya is without its joys. In fact, many of the women that I met in Kenya named their children as the source of their hope and joy. The issue is that if we are going to speak about the sacrifice of motherhood as an integral aspect of redemption, we must carefully consider the context. In the context of gender violence and impoverishment, lifting up maternal sacrifice as a model for Christian discipleship does little more than valorize women’s suffering.

On the whole, the Western Christian tradition, despite its claims to the incarnation, has viewed the human body as a hindrance to holiness and discipleship. In its more platonized forms, Christianity has regarded the body as that which separates humanity from God. Adopting a nuptial soteriology signals an attempt on the part of

91. This statement refers the gender inequality within a broad social context that includes and extends beyond elected officials. See World Bank, Gender and Development in the Middle East and North Africa: Women in the Public Sphere (Washington DC: World Bank, 2004). The findings of this study show that the countries that have the highest maternal mortality rates are those in which gender gap in education is also high. New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof makes this point in “A Tipping Point on Maternal Mortality?,” *New York Times*, 30 July 2009, http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/07/30/a-tipping-point-on-maternal-mortality/ (accessed 10 September 2009). As Kristof notes, during WWI more American women died in childbirth than men died in war. After women’s suffrage in the 1920s, maternal mortality rates declined sharply.

Balthasar and John Paul II to treat the body and, even, human sexuality as a site of grace within the drama of redemption. While this nuptial imagery opens the door to thinking about the embodied and relational aspects of redemptive love, identifying conjugal relations with Christ’s self-sacrificial love remains highly problematic in light of a feminist perspective. Not only does this model valorize self-sacrificial love, but, when paired with the gender symbolism in the text, it too easily lends toward a pattern of relations marked by female subordination and masculine domination. This is most evident in Balthasar’s theology, whereby divine love bears the mark of sexual conquest.

Moreover, traces of Platonism remain present even within this nuptial framework. Here, the spousal body is a highly spiritualized body whose purity rests with acts of continence. In the words of Balthasar, the human body “is an instrument not only of action but also of that suffering which is an essential expression of authentic human-self surrender, whether this surrender is to other persons or to a cause sufficiently worthy.” Within the inner workings of discipleship as modeled by Christ and Mary, the physical body, if it appears at all, takes on a utilitarian function. It is always sacrificed for a greater good. For John Paul II, sacrifice either takes the form of “continence for the

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94. Please refer to chapter 3’s discussion of “Kenosis, Impassibility, and Suffering.”

95. This is also evidenced by in the way in which continence for the kingdom is presented as the ideal spousal relationship.

96. TD 5, 475.
kingdom” or maternal sacrifice. For Balthasar, the outlook is much more grim. As he explains in the final volume of the *Theo-drama*:

> The Christian’s attitude to the body will be governed by this final sacrifice [death], which he is to perform as a conscious act; even in health and active life he will make the coming final surrender of corporality the inner meaning of all his action. He will be inspired to do this as he contemplates the surrender unto death of Jesus’ virginal flesh, making possible God’s gift of the Eucharist, which is “seed” and “blood” for eternal life.  

To clarify, this not a Manichean approach to embodiment, whereby the body is a source of evil. Rather, the body, when rightly valued, becomes a source of holiness through acts of self-surrender. While the accent is slightly different in John Paul II’s theology of the body, he also locates the nuptial significance of the body in self-surrender: “the renunciation of marriage for the kingdom of God at the same time highlights that meaning [spousal meaning of the body] in all its inner truth and in all its personal beauty.”

The beauty and truth of the body is found in its capacity to be given up for others.

The theology set forth by Balthasar in his dramatics and aesthetics continues to be of practical consequence for the lives of women, as it informs John Paul II’s interpretation of sexual difference and gender roles. Today, the Vatican continues to define the vocation of women primarily in terms of physical and spiritual maternality. This construction is supported by a soteriological vision that centers around a nuptial relationship at the cross. Not only does this model elevate maternal sacrifice to the level

97. Ibid., 476.

98. TOB, 81.3.
of Christian discipleship, but it also is one that sanctifies the exclusion of women from
the public sphere in the name of redemption, leaving them with little say in decision-
making processes that directly impact their livelihoods.

In the face of human suffering that is a result of grave injustices, the redemption
of the body must involve a liberation of the body from hunger, sexual violence, and
exploitation. We cannot continue to ignore suffering bodies. Perhaps a good place to
begin is with an understanding of ourselves—body and soul—as beings endowed with
original grace. What would beauty look like if we begin with our capacity to effect
change as moral agents in the world instead of our fallen nature? To quote the poetry of
Emilie Townes, what if the stirrings of discipleship began in “the marvelous yes to God’s
what if,” instead of humanity’s No to God’s Yes?99

To Be Called Beloved: Beginning with Original Grace

In Journeys by Heart, Rita Nakashima Brock centralizes the notion of original
grace in defining the human condition. Original grace is our heart, our primal
interconnectedness that begins at birth, and is both fragile and powerful. As Brock
explains, “sin emerges because our relationships have the capacity to destroy us and we
participate in destruction when we seek to destroy ourselves or others.”100 At the same
time, our relational existence is also a source of life and healing energy. As relational

99. Emilie Townes, In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness

100. Rita Nakashima Brock, Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power
beings, we have the capacity to heal ourselves and to facilitate the healing of others: “To be born so open to the presence of others in the world gives the enormous, creative, capacity to make life whole.”\textsuperscript{101} Central to Brock’s thesis is that patriarchy has muted our capacity for original grace.\textsuperscript{102} In the context of patriarchy, we need to engage in the work of honest memory. Specifically, this means taking responsibility for “recognizing our own damage,” including the ways in which we contribute to the pain of others, and “following our hearts to the relationships that will lead to self-healing.”\textsuperscript{103} In essence, what Brock is describing here is the work of erotic power, or a redemptive self-love.

Self-love struggles to find its place within Christian theology, especially in relation to the cross and beauty. By and large, Christian piety has encouraged Christians to live selflessly, to love one’s neighbor without counting the cost—in a word, to imitate Christ’s self-sacrificial love on the cross. In the wake of Balthasar’s theology, this motif finds a renewed emphasis in theological aesthetic discourses. Yet, genuine love and intimacy also require the assertion of responsible selfhood and agency. In loving, one must take responsibility for living with integrity, for cultivating personal and spiritual maturity, for owning and naming one’s own desires, needs, and brokenness—honestly

\textsuperscript{101.} Ibid.,17.

\textsuperscript{101.} According to Elizabeth Johnson, patriarchy suggests that the natural order of the universe and society is based upon male headship. Patriarchy and androcentric bias often function together in order to legitimate the subordination of women to men on the grounds that women’s secondary status is “natural” or “normative.” See Johnson’s \textit{She Who Is}, 26. A detailed discussion of patriarchy can also be found in the section entitled “The Silence/s Patriarchy Keeps and Feminist Speech about the Cross” in chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{103.} Ibid.,16.
and truthfully. In sum, participation in the very activity of loving entails an essential involvement of the self. Without the practices of self-care, self-knowledge, and self-assertion, we do not grow in love. This is apparent in our everyday living. Those who sacrifice everything to the point of loss of self are often rageful and bitter. They act out in domineering and controlling ways. This is not conducive to building up communities of erotic power, nor is it conducive to building up the body of Christ. As Cheryl Kirk-Duggan notes, “one must have the capacity to love one’s self to love the neighbor, to see the sacred, the divine image in another regardless of their behavior.”  

Without the capacity to love one’s self, agape falls flat on its face. Moreover, self-love is an integral aspect of human moral agency. When we embrace ourselves responsibly, honestly, and with passion, we can pursue that which “affirms, gives life, and celebrates our presence.” A redemptive self-love, by definition, is a kind of loving that “begins internally and then enables us to influence our surroundings.”

Redemptive self-love is exemplified by the story of the hemorrhaging woman in Mark’s gospel who simply refuses to be ignored. Sandwiched between the healing of

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106. Ibid.
Jairus’ daughter, the narrative relays the healing of a woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. It reads as follows:

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said “Who touched my clothes?” And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say who touched me? He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman knowing what had happened to her, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” (Mark 5:21-34).

In her re-telling of this story, Brock focuses on the way in which the hemorrhaging woman’s actions reveal a *kenosis* of patriarchy by taking away from Jesus “his patriarchal power as a man” and replacing it with a new vision of community. 107 I want to draw attention to something else that Brock mentions in her description of the story: the fact that the woman’s courage “compels her, despite her fear, to refuse her own invisibility and exclusion.” 108 In the narrative, the woman’s hemorrhaging signifies more than

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107. I find this statement to be problematic for the same reasons I take issue with the distinction Brock makes between Jesus the historical person and Christ. Implicit here is the assumption that Jesus was a patriarchal leader. While it is probable, given the religio-cultural order of his day, this sentiment does not align with the rest of Brock’s interpretation of the Gospel. One cannot claim in a single breath that Jesus was a patriarchal leader and also sought liberation of the poor, the marginalized, and the outcast. The bigger issue, though, is the way in which this construction undercuts one of the central ways in which the Christian tradition has affirmed the body through the doctrine of the incarnation by making a sharp distinction between Jesus the person and Christ.

physical ailment; it also marks her as one who is socially isolated from the community. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explains, “her predicament is not just incurable illness but also permanent uncleanliness. She was not only unclean herself, but polluted everyone and everything she came into contact with,” leaving her outside of the social and ecclesial community. In the laws of niddah, anything that a menstruating woman sits on or lies on and anyone that she comes into direct contact with is rendered impure. In the case of normal genital discharge, after a seven day waiting period and partaking in a cleansing ritual, the individual can re-enter the community. However, this woman’s situation is different. According to biblical scholar Susan Haber, the woman in Mark 5 is described as having abnormal genital discharge. In this case, she is isolated from her family and the community, forced to live on the margins of society.

As recounted in the story, the hemorrhaging woman is invisible to the disciples and even to Jesus. What she does is truly audacious; it is the kind of resourcefulness that arises out of a desperate situation. She reaches out and touches Jesus in public. This


110. Susan Haber, “A Woman’s Touch: Feminist Encounters with the Hemorrhaging Woman in Mark 5.24-34,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26.2 (2003): 174. As Haber essay notes, there is significant debate among biblical scholars in the interpretation of this passage. Early feminist scholarship has attributed the woman’s marginalization to her impurity. More recently, scholars like Mary Rose D’Angelo have argued that the story needs to be interpreted in light of the Christological framework of Mark’s gospel and, in this framework, her impurity is insignificant. Haber’s article provides an excellent review of the literature and issues at stake. Her own reading of the text takes a stance in between the two positions and argues that the woman’s health is the central feature of the narrative. In this context, her impurity is tied to her physical condition. In light of the issue of maternal health discussed in the earlier sections, I find this reading to be the most relevant.
woman breaks a social taboo in the hopes of being made whole. Ironically, it is this faith—a faith that publically refuses to be cast aside—that saves and heals her. Her *fiat*, or Yes to God, does not bear the marks of kenotic obedience. Rather, the hemorrhaging woman’s faith is marked by a refusal to give up on life even in the face of death.

Most feminist readings of this text focus on the liberative behavior of Jesus as sign of his solidarity with women. Yet, it is not the behavior of Jesus that is remarkable in this story; it is the woman’s refusal to remain invisible. There is something within her that refuses to give up on the hope of healing in the face of immense physical and emotional suffering. After twelve years of bleeding, she has spent her entire savings in search of a cure, attempts which only worsened her condition. Having heard about Jesus’ healing power, she reaches out and touches his clothing from behind. Here, healing does not come about through suffering, or even as a result of Jesus’ touch. Rather, healing and wholeness are initiated by the woman’s touch. Certainly, this narrative attests to the healing power of faith in Jesus, but it also, if read imaginatively from the perspective of the hemorrhaging woman, attests to the healing power of redemptive self-love. The woman’s actions and faith are grounded in a redemptive love that begins internally with a deep conviction about the value of human life, including her own.

Mark 5:21-34 gives us another model for thinking about the embodied and relational aspects of redemption. First, as highlighted by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a central motif in this story is the restoration of social relationships. In this story, brokenness is not the result of personal sin. It is the result of the invisibility that often accompanies physical affliction and socio-economic distress. This woman is excluded
from participation in the community on the grounds of her personal illness. Her exclusion points to the way in which social systems participate in the marginalization of those with little resources. Within this narrative, the woman’s touch of Jesus begins the process of healing these social relationships. That is, the healing work of Jesus is a catalyst in breaking down barriers that exclude those on the margins of the community from full participation in the *basilea*. No longer unclean, she would have been allowed to return to the community. Yet, we are left with a number of questions. We do not know what happened after Jesus left the scene. Did the community welcome her back? Did they assist her financially? These questions point to the unfinished aspects of the healing work of Jesus. Here, in this story, the healing work of Jesus is not a means to an end; it is the beginning of new relationships. The work of restoration remains unfinished and is left in the hands of the community.

Second, the story highlights the connection between material well-being and spiritual well-being in healing work. Not only is the vision of wholeness presented in this narrative incomplete apart from human moral agency, but spiritual well-being is inseparable from material well-being: “immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.” The locus of Jesus’ ministerial healing is this woman’s material well-being; it is her health. In the context of economic and social injustice, our visions of wholeness must seek the concrete spiritual and material well-being of those who are suffering. This is especially pertinent in light of women’s experiences of suffering. Around the globe, gender injustice and socio-economic

111. See Haber, “A Woman’s Touch,” 191.
injustice take a physical toll on women’s bodies. Social sin takes a toll on the bodies of women in the form of physical violence, malnutrition, exhaustion, and rape. To participate in healing the bodies of those who have been broken by violence and patriarchy is to participate in the healing ministry of Christ.

Finally, the story attests to the importance of resistance and resourcefulness in Christian discipleship. In this story, the agency of faith involves resisting a social order that marginalizes and makes women invisible on the grounds of their bodies. Participation in redemptive grace entails claiming one’s own moral agency even in the midst of suffering. The woman described in the story does not wait to be healed. She takes action and claims responsibility for this action. To be clear, taking responsibility is not a denial of the ways in which injustice is institutionalized. This is a self-responsibility that arises out of an affirmation of her own human dignity. In the words of bell hooks, self-responsibility means that “in the face of barriers we still have the capacity to invent our lives, to shape our destinies in ways that maximize our well-being.” Responsible living means homing in on this capacity for resistance. Passive suffering is not redemptive in this narrative. It is a courageous and resourceful faith that refuses to give up on life in the midst of suffering.

In many ways, the story of resistance and redemptive self-love recounted in Mark 5:21-34 is the story of Beatrice at the Success Program in Nairobi, Kenya. Success is a small non-profit organization that serves women living in one of the largest slums in

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Africa. The aim of Success is the empowerment of women living HIV and AIDS through educational programs, community organizing, and service ministry of Home Based Care. In Kenya today, there is a great deal of stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS. Much of this stigma is due to inadequate information about the way in which the disease can be contracted. Women often bear the burden of this stigma as they are blamed for contracting the disease. Once a woman reveals her status, there is a high likelihood that she and her children will be forced out their homes, leaving her with little resources for survival.

Beatrice, who runs the Home Based Care program at Success, was diagnosed with HIV eleven years ago. She contracted the disease through marital intercourse with her husband. Once her family found out she was HIV positive, Beatrice and her children were forced out of the house. Having nowhere else to go, and being unable to secure employment due to her status, Beatrice found herself on the streets of Kibera. To live in Kibera is to live in abject poverty. Kibera is situated a quite a distance from public transportation, making the transportation of goods and services difficult. Due to overcrowding and lack of clean water, people are easily susceptible to disease, a situation that is particularly dangerous for those persons living with HIV and AIDS.

Like the woman in Mark’s gospel, Beatrice refused to give up on life in the midst of tremendous suffering. As one of the founding members of the Success program, she

112. Kibera houses almost 1 million people. Visit http://www.kibera.org.uk/Facts.html more for information. Names have been changed in order to protect the identities of the individuals. Success is dedicated to raising awareness about HIV/AIDS.
initiated the Home Based Care program, which not only provides vital services and care to those who are bed-ridden, but it also engenders a sense of purpose and agency in the lives of those living “positively” with HIV. There is power in being able to give, in being able to make a positive contribution to society. This kind of power is what Rita Nakashima Brock speaks of when she describes erotic power as “the energy that produces creative synthesis, and is enhanced by the relationships that emerge from creative synthesis.”\(^{114}\) Marginalization strips individuals and communities of this power by rendering them invisible. And so can acts of charity, especially those that inculcate dependency.\(^{115}\) Similar to models of redemption based upon unilateral notions of power, the operative assumption in this kind of charitable giving is that those who are in need lack the capacity for leadership and self-actualization.\(^{116}\) This is not to ignore the systemic ways in which injustice is perpetuated, nor am I am claiming that Beatrice’s life is completely whole. My point is that the search for wholeness cannot be one that based upon an other worldly vision of salvation. Models of redemption that privilege humanity’s powerlessness and divine omnipotence obscure our capacity to participate in healing work. Salvation is found at the center of human flourishing. In the words of

\(^{114}\) Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 39.

\(^{114}\) Wangari Maathai makes this point in Chapter 4 of *The Challenge for Africa: A New Vision* (London: William Heinemann, 2009).

\(^{115}\) As discussed in chapter 4 in the section entitled “Christa/Community and the Embodiment of Eros for Mutual Relation,” models of redemption that are based in unilateral power are those in which the singular locus of redemption rests with divine activity.
Ivone Gebara, “it is everything that nourishes love, our body, our life.” It is found in the human capacity to create something of value, in our desire to participate in a meaningful way in society. Salvation is found in our “enormous, creative, capacity to make life whole,” even when all the odds are against us. This is the beauty of original grace; it is the beauty of whole-making work.

**Conclusion: The Beauty of Whole-making Work**

There is an aspect of aesthetics that involves resistance. Resistance does not always have to be loud; it can be quiet and persistent. Resistance can also take the form of organizing energy in a new direction. In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry defines beauty as having a forward momentum that incites in us “the desire to bring new things into the world.” Beauty “hurts[es] us forward and back, requiring us to break new ground, but obliging us also to bridge back not only to the ground we left but to still earlier, even ancient ground.” For Scarry, the very essence of beauty is defined by the movement it brings about in the world. Beauty becomes a creative and reconciling force in the world—igniting in us the desire to generate more beauty and reconciling the past.

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119. The phrase “whole-making work” belongs to Rita Nakashima Brock in *Journeys by Heart*.


with the future through its elasticity. This beauty resides in the mundane agency of an active faith and goes out in search of new ground.

Women around the globe are engaging in this kind of work. In Kenya, Wangari Maathai’s Greenbelt Movement (GBM) seeks to empower communities’ “consciousness for self-determination, equity, improved livelihood, security and environmental conservation—using trees as the entry point.”\(^{122}\) Deforestation has led to soil erosion and a scarcity of water in Kenya. In Kenyan culture, women bear the largest share of this burden. By teaching women to plant and nurture trees, Maathai’s efforts have led to the planting of over 30 million trees, engendered public interest about environmental conservation, and fostered community among the members of the GBM. This is a project that is open to all, for “anyone can dig a hole, put in a seedling and nurture it. When one plants a tree, one feels a connection to the earth and has a stake in its survival.”\(^{123}\) The Greenbelt Movement empowers Kenyan women to reclaim their land, culture and heritage in a very practical way. As women plant trees, they are not only improving their own livelihoods, but they are staking a claim in the livelihoods of future generations. Today, this movement has expanded to include environmental educational programs that help local communities identify the sources of their problems and implement solutions. As such, the program is self-sustaining. It creates jobs within the local Kenyan


community and provides education. Maathai’s work provides a model for beauty that is deeply rooted in the fragility and interdependence of all creation. Here, beauty does not come from above; it grows out of the earth among its people.

The Greenbelt Movement exemplifies the beauty of whole-making work because it harnesses the human potential for growth by simultaneously resisting structural injustices and tapping into humanity’s original grace. Through the planting of trees, Kenyan women and men are empowered to reclaim their land and heal some of the effects of environmental degradation. Clearly, this work is only one small step in the process of the healing the earth and its peoples. Yet, it is an important step because it taps into the human desire to make things whole. At the center of human flourishing is a desire to create beauty, to make a meaningful contribution to society. To adopt a model of redemption that reduces women’s contribution to the private sphere, as Balthasar does, is to place limits on this desire. In effect, it is to limit humanity’s original grace. In the face of profound human suffering, our visions of wholeness—of hope—must propel the human community out into the world in search of a greater good: the full flourishing of all peoples.

At the outset of the *Herrlichkeit*, Balthasar speaks of the need for a new perception: without beauty we “no longer have vision for wholeness.” It is for this reason that theology needs to be illumined by aesthetics. Yet, as I have argued in this dissertation, Balthasar’s vision of aesthetics is one that leaves us all less than whole

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because it mutes the embodied subjectivity of women. In his theological aesthetics and
dramatics, the attractive power of the cross resides within a nuptial love that suffers in
order to bear forth the fruit of redemptive discipleship in the Church. Wholeness and
harmony in this model are tied to an “other-worldly” vision of perfection. Ultimately, for
Balthasar, genuine beauty, truth, and goodness can only be attained by a perfectly
obedient receptivity. Christ’s perfect obedience renders humanity’s fallen attempts pure.
Genuine truth, beauty, and goodness are out of our earthly reach. This sort of beauty
passes too quickly over the human possibilities for transformation and lends toward a
model of the God-world relationship in which the distance is simply too great to
encompass the particularities of women’s interpreted experiences of suffering and
salvation.

Yet, as I have argued, wholeness is not found by chasing after a dream of
unattainable perfection. Wholeness, as suggested by the poetic vision of womanist
theologian Emilie Townes, seeks the concrete material and spiritual well-being of those
of who are suffering.125 Wholeness is found in the difficult space of making choices for
the common good in local communities. This is the kind of aesthetic that works in and
through the everydayness of life—as there is no stepping completely outside of sin and
evil. This is a wholeness that harnesses human potential by forming relationship among
real (not imagined) individuals. Here, in this place of mundane agency, of
“everydayness,” beauty is found. May the “marvelous yes to God’s what if” happen here

125. Townes, In a Blaze of Glory, 49.
on earth, as we seek a wholeness and beauty that has a stake in the spiritual and material well-being of all creation.
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