Making Peace with the Cross: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Dorothee Sölle and J. Denny Weaver on Nonviolence, Atonement, and Redemption

by

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Abstract

This thesis brings German liberationist-feminist theologian Dorothee Sölle and American Anabaptist-Mennonite peace theologian J. Denny Weaver into conversation as a way of addressing two significant debates within contemporary theology – namely, the debate among feminists and womanists asking whether the cross can be redemptive for women and other historically marginalized groups and the debate among Anabaptist-Mennonite and other peace-oriented theologians asking whether God is nonviolent. I take the position that by holding Sölle’s more Abelardian emphasis on the cross as divine solidarity with the oppressed together with Weaver’s “narrative Christus Victor” understanding of Jesus’ resurrection as nonviolent divine victory over evil, both debates can be addressed. I therefore synthesize their views into an integrated Mennonite-feminist theology of the cross and redemption which neither reifies violence nor all forms of suffering as redemptive.

The first two chapters provide context for the conversation between Sölle and Weaver. Chapter 1 establishes their respective theological approaches and methods as a political, liberationist-feminist, mystical and pacifist theologian (Sölle) and as creating a more thoroughly nonviolent, “post-Yoderian” Mennonite peace theology using insights from
feminist, womanist, and liberationist theologians (Weaver). Chapter 2 traces the three major historical atonement theories (i.e., Anselm’s satisfaction, Abelard’s “moral influence,” and the patristic Christus Victor theories), elaborating Sölle’s and Weaver’s critiques of the historical theories as well as her liberationist redefinition of the Abelardian theory and his nonviolent, ethically-oriented revision of Christus Victor.

The final two chapters explore the theological and ethical implications, respectively, of bringing Sölle’s and Weaver’s views together. Chapter 3 redefines God Christocentrically as nonviolent, passible/compassionate, and “other” in transcending the cycles of violence and retribution through immanent solidarity with the oppressed. Chapter 4 redefines Christian ethics in imitation of this nonviolent and suffering God, positing that we as disciples are empowered to redemptively take up the cross and “walk in the resurrection” in nonviolent, compassionate, and life-giving ways. I close with a trinity of reimagined crosses expressing the nonviolence of Jesus of Nazareth, the compassionate solidarity and birth-like struggle of the Crucified Woman, and the empty cross of resurrection as a tree of life.
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Introduction

Jesus was not an acceptable sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, because God does not need to be appeased and demands not sacrifice but justice. To know God is to do justice (Jer. 22:13-16). Peace was not made by the cross. “Woe to those who say Peace, Peace when there is no peace” (Jer. 6:14). No one was saved by the death of Jesus. Suffering is never redemptive, and suffering cannot be redeemed.

- Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker¹

God’s means of achieving the ultimate reconciliation of all things are not immediately evident to us. God cannot be subjected to our interpretation of the non-violent way of Jesus. Our commitment to the way of the cross (reconciliation) is not premised on God’s pacifism or non-pacifism. It is precisely because God has the prerogative to give and take life that we do not have that right. Vengeance we leave up to God.

- A. James Reimer²

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, the central symbol of Christianity, the cross, has been undergoing a radical reinterpretation within certain strands of Western theology. The above quotations give brief glimpses into two such strands: on the one hand, the above selection from Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker’s provocative 1989 essay, “For God So Loved the World?,” shows evidence of the critical analysis of the traditional atonement theories (i.e., theologies of the salvific power of the cross) by liberative feminist and womanist theologians in light of the patriarchal idea of redemptive suffering. This has yielded a debate between feminists and womanists who dismiss the cross as an oppressive symbol for women, such as Brown and Parker, and those who continue to find redemptive

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² A. James Reimer, Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics, Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies Series (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2001), 492.
meaning in it as a symbol of divine solidarity with all of the oppressed, including women. On the other hand, as A. James Reimer’s above comments suggest, the increasing engagement of Anabaptist-Mennonite theologians with other theologies of nonviolence has sparked a debate concerning whether or not God is violent and the relationship between the divine character, particularly in the atonement, and Christian peace ethics.

These two strands of theology have thus been asking parallel questions as they grapple with the significance of the cross: How do Christians who are concerned with the sins of violence and oppressive, dominating power interpret the cross – a Roman imperial torture-device – which is the central symbol of our faith tradition? As Anabaptist-Mennonites, how can we reconcile our identities as people of peace or shalom with ideas that the violence of the cross is not only an act of God, but the way God saves or redeems us? As feminists and womanists concerned with liberation from oppression and avoidable suffering, we must ask: can the violence and suffering of the cross be ‘good news’ for women – especially racialized, colonized, impoverished, and sexually and physically violated women – and other historically marginalized groups? Should we get rid of the cross or is there a way we can reinterpret and redeem it? In the following study, I take up all of these questions within the notion of “making peace” with the cross, which represents a way of addressing our valid and valuable misgivings and lament over the harm which has been

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3 I use shalom here to refer to the holistic peace spoken about in the Hebrew Scriptures or Old/First Testament as well-being and right relationships with God, other human beings, and creation. Malinda E. Berry also uses this term, stating, “shalom is the Bible’s word for justice, salvation, and peace.” See Berry, “‘This Mark of a Standing Human Figure Poised to Embrace’: A Constructive Theology of Social Responsibility, Nonviolence, and Nonconformity” (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, 2013), 26.

caused by grounding theologies and ethics of redemptive violence and redemptive suffering in the symbolics of the cross. At the same time, “making peace” with the cross connotes a subversive reinterpretation and reimagining of the cross as an important moment within the narrative of the Incarnation, life, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, precisely because it represents divine compassion, nonviolence, and peacemaking, from which we can derive Christian ethics in *imitatio Dei*, in imitation of the compassion and nonviolence of our peacemaking God. In this way, my project respectfully and only partially parts ways with both Brown and Parker and Reimer. While taking seriously their concerns about the harmful impact traditional interpretations of the cross and redemption have had on women, I disagree with Brown and Parker’s statement that “Peace was not made by the cross.” It is not the cross alone which represents God’s and our nonviolence, but it is linked to peace and justice. As part of the narrative witnessing to the nonviolent way of Jesus, it comprises one aspect of divine and human compassionate solidarity with the suffering as well as the possible consequences of nonviolent resistance and peacemaking in a violent world. Likewise, while I agree with Reimer that Christians are called to follow “the non-violent way of Jesus,” this does not rest, for me, on the assumption that “[v]engeance we leave up to God.” As human beings created in God’s image and as Christians called to follow Jesus Christ as a community of equal disciples, I see our nonviolence and peacemaking as imaging God, who refuses to be limited by cycles of violence, retribution, or revenge, but creates, sustains, and restores humanity and all of creation through a peace which surpasses understanding (Phil. 4:7).

The proliferation of theological studies of the cross and redemption in recent decades has made it impossible to survey this vast and varied body of work within a single study. As a way of focusing my discussion, I have chosen to bring German feminist-liberationist
theologian Dorothee Sölle and American Anabaptist-Mennonite theologian J. Denny Weaver into conversation. This is in part because they are representative of these two broader theological debates, but also because they both reinterpret the cross and atonement theories in such a way that both feminist/womanist/liberationist and Anabaptist-Mennonite debates are addressed; that is, they interpret the cross and redemption from theological-ethical perspectives which are both oriented toward (human and divine) peace and nonviolence and alert to feminist and womanist arguments concerning gender, suffering, and power. Despite the outward similarity of their positions, however, Sölle and Weaver are not obvious conversation partners. Not only are the two theologians not exact contemporaries, since Sölle’s most influential writings were published from the 1970s to the 1990s while Weaver’s most widely-read book, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, was first published in 2001, but their thought also diverges at key moments. Because Weaver does not explicitly engage Sölle’s thought and she does not explicitly engage Mennonite thought, they are left speaking past one another. In my view, this results in omissions and shortcomings in each of their theologies which can be illuminated and addressed by bringing them into conversation.

**Context and Aims**

As a woman doing theology from a Mennonite-feminist perspective, the distance which remains between Sölle’s and Weaver’s theologies troubles me, because both resonate profoundly with my hybridized identity and perspective. While I remain deeply committed to my Anabaptist-Mennonite peace church tradition because of its emphasis on peacemaking and nonviolence and the empowering understanding of discipleship in the way of Jesus Christ, I am also aware, as a feminist theologian and a mother, of its underemphasis on
embodied experience – especially of women and/or sexual minorities – as a source for theological reflection. Allowing experience to inform our theological and ethical discernment prompts a thorough re-evaluation of gendered/sexual power dynamics within and beyond the Mennonite church and academy, especially in addressing sexual violence and abuse as well as affirming the life-giving and creative power of women. My project is thus partly motivated by a personal concern to bridge these two perspectives on nonviolence as a way to carve out a space of theological belonging for myself and others who are both Mennonites and feminists and/or womanists. In another way, however, my project follows trajectories already set in Sölle’s and Weaver’s writings, as Sölle makes reference to the nonviolent praxis of Mennonite and other historic peace church traditions on several occasions⁵ and Weaver engages and critiques feminist, womanist, and liberationist perspectives which strongly resemble Sölle’s position.⁶ Thus, my project also follows through on the steps that Sölle and Weaver each take toward dialogue with one another. In initiating this conversation between Sölle and Weaver, I aim to allow them, and, by extension, the feminist-liberationist and Anabaptist-Mennonite traditions they represent, to mutually inform and correct one another. Specifically, I take the position that in formulating her nonviolent ethic, Sölle overlooks the subversive understandings of enemy-love and resurrection in contemporary Mennonite peace theology. Conversely, I also argue that Weaver fails to sufficiently integrate feminist and womanist thought into his Mennonite peace position, resulting in the full and

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radical implications of the vulnerability of God remaining unexplored in his theology. In
dialogue with Sölle and Weaver, I draw from the best of their theologies to make peace with
the cross, constructing a more complete and integrated Mennonite-feminist interpretation of
the cross and redemption as an instance of God’s solidarity with the oppressed and a sign of
God’s nonviolence, a task involving a look at Jesus’ call for his followers to take up their
crosses in such a way as to balance Sölle’s realism regarding suffering with Weaver’s
empowering ethical-eschatological hope.

**Key Definitions**

Within this study, I use *feminist theology* to refer to a form of liberation theology
which is particularly concerned with oppression on the basis of sex, gender, and/or sexuality.
As a liberative movement within Christianity, feminist theology seeks to name evidence of
patriarchy and misogyny within Scripture and theology, as well as in the exclusion of women
from positions of authority and their relegation to secondary, submissive, and sexualized
status in the church, home/family, and society. Privileging the gender-egalitarian aspects of
Christian Scripture and theology and the embodied experience(s) of women as the central
sources for theological reflection, feminist theology aims to empower women, not least
through the ordination of women as church leaders, and to establish equality/mutuality
between women, men, and others by working together toward resisting interrelated forms of
oppression, including sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, and eco-cide. Rosemary
Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza are key, pioneering examples of this

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7 While I recognize feminist movements within Judaism and other religions and spiritual traditions, this project will focus on revisionist Christian feminists such as Sölle, who are to be distinguished from “post-Christian” feminists who reject Christianity as irredeemably misogynistic and patriarchal (e.g., Mary Daly, Carol P. Christ, Daphne Hampson).
stream of (second-wave) feminist theology. I follow Jacquelyn Grant in defining womanist theology as a liberative movement of black or African American Christian women who share many of the key concerns of feminism, but insist on doing theology independently of mainly white and privileged feminists and of black men, based on their experiences of being triply oppressed by racism, classism, and sexism. Womanist JoAnne Marie Terrell adds the oppression of heterosexism to this list and also promotes a distinctly African American form of “pacifist activis[m]” which she terms a “sacramental understanding of sacrifice.”

Though the term Mennonite may bring to mind Old Order Mennonite and Amish communities which reject modern technology and retain distinctive clothing, the stream of the Mennonite tradition in which I was raised and of which I am an active, baptized member is more integrated into contemporary North American culture(s). I thus define the Mennonite tradition as an egalitarian protest movement and one of the historic peace churches with roots in the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement of the Radical Reformation, which I have experienced as an increasingly multi-cultural faith community with a strong peace perspective and praxis and a broadened understanding of violence encompassing sexism and other systemic understandings of sin or violence. As I will explore further in chapter 1 below, Weaver’s thought also emerges from this stream of Mennonites.

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8 See Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology (Boston: Beacon, 1983), and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus, Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology (New York: Continuum, 1994). The additional dimension of oppression caused by heterosexism points to a “third-wave” feminist understanding of gender and sexuality as linked, and indicates my solidarity with those oppressed due to their identities as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and/or queer or questioning.


10 Terrell, 137, 139-141. Emphasis hers.
These three theological perspectives all inform my definitions of violence and peace/nonviolence as well. I understand violence as encompassing physical, sexual, verbal, psychological, and systemic forms of domination, including sexism, classism, racism, and heterosexism, which are all manifest in theological ideology. I view peacemaking as encompassing active and confrontational resistance to these multiple, intersecting forms of violence as well as the establishment of communities which model love, mutual empowerment, and peaceful/reconciliatory action and relationships both within and beyond the church. This holistic – i.e., both critical and constructive – definition of peace or shalom encompasses both the term nonviolence, which Sölle and Weaver both use, as well as what she terms “love” or “solidarity” and “the peace movement” and what he speaks of as “restorative justice” and “making the reign of God visible.” Following Sölle and Weaver, I will use nonviolence and peacemaking somewhat interchangeably, but I remain aware of the limits of the term nonviolence, which can imply passivity in being defined by its opposite or by what it seeks to avoid or resist. Sölle’s and Weaver’s specific definitions of violence and peace/nonviolence will be explored in more detail in chapter 1 below.

**Method and Theological Grounding**

As a Mennonite-feminist theologian, I employ a dialogical method of comparison and contrast to bring Sölle and Weaver, as well as key Mennonite, feminist, womanist, and liberationist interlocutors, into conversation. This method is based on Mennonite-feminist Lydia Neufeld Harder’s characterization of both feminist and Mennonite communities as “hermeneutic communities” (i.e., communities of egalitarian biblical, theological, and ethical

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dialogue, interpretation, and discernment), albeit based on distinct central biblical hermeneutics, feminists being principally guided by the “hermeneutics of suspicion” and Mennonites by the “hermeneutics of obedience.” The commonalities between feminist and Mennonite theologies – their shared status as egalitarian protest movements centred on discipleship, concerns with “the sin of domination and violence” and a “strong expectation for new life through Christ” – provide the larger context for the specific dialogue I am initiating between Sölle as a feminist-liberationist theologian and Weaver as an Anabaptist-Mennonite theologian.

My dialogical method also stems from the specifics of bringing Sölle and Weaver into conversation – that is, it follows from the nonviolent content of their theologies. Despite not being exact contemporaries, Sölle’s and Weaver’s thought is similar in several profound ways, which makes it possible to develop a fruitful dialogue between them; put differently, the two thinkers have several key theological-ethical norms in common, which I also share. These include their common emphases on the historical, political, and nonviolent Jesus Christ of the biblical Gospels as the key to that which is liberative in the Christian tradition and Scripture, their understandings of faith as primarily praxis (some prefer to speak of the Mennonite tradition as having an “orthopraxy” instead of “orthodoxy,” which resonates with Sölle’s “mystical” activism and praxis of resistance – or what Dianne Oliver calls Sölle’s

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“Christopraxis”), and their radical peace ethics which are based on the compassionate, peacemaking, and egalitarian example of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, both thinkers express concern over the theological violence which those in power within the Christian tradition have perpetrated against the oppressed through neglecting their voices and experiences and perpetuating notions of divine violence and the redemptive quality of all human suffering.

Again, the dialogue I am constructing between these two Christian advocates of peacemaking follows their lead, particularly in their engagement with the often-neglected voices of key feminist, womanist, and liberationist theologians of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and thereby aims to be theologically and methodologically nonviolent as well.

Outline

In initiating dialogue between Sölle and Weaver, my aim is to synthesize their positions into an integrated Mennonite-feminist theology of the cross and redemption. In broad strokes, I combine Sölle’s Abelardian and liberationist-feminist interpretation of the cross as divine solidarity with the suffering with Weaver’s “narrative Christus Victor” understanding of the resurrection as the nonviolent divine victory over sin, violence, and death, which empowers our nonviolent praxis. I argue that Sölle and Weaver fill in the gaps, so to speak, in one another’s thought, since Weaver underemphasizes the cross in his efforts to distance God from violence and Sölle underemphasizes the resurrection in her efforts to

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16 Sölle, Thinking about God, 7, 11, 170, 15, 162, and Of War and Love, 7.

17 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 4-5, 221 n. 3, and Sölle, Suffering, 27, 17-19, 22, 163.
avoid depicting God as omnipotent (wielding absolute, controlling power over human history). My synthesis thus involves redefining God as the image of Christ: nonviolent, passible and compassionate, and “other” in terms of being transcendentally immanent. Furthermore, this redefinition of God transforms Christian ethics and understandings of how we are empowered to redemptively take up the cross and “walk in the resurrection” in nonviolent, compassionate, and life-giving ways.

My study unfolds in four major sections. In the first chapter below, I delineate and define the specific theological perspectives from which Sölle and Weaver speak. In Sölle’s case, this involves tracing her theological development from Bultmannian existentialism to political theology “after Auschwitz” (alongside fellow German theologians Jürgen Moltmann and Johann Baptist Metz), to liberation theology for the apathy and spiritual-ethical poverty of the “First World,” which corresponds to the liberation of the “Third World” or Majority World from material poverty and exploitation, and finally, to the feminist influence and mystical outlook which characterize her later theological writings.¹⁸ In Weaver’s case, this involves defining the roots of the Mennonite tradition in the Anabaptist movement of the Radical Reformation, its distinctiveness as one of the historic peace churches with an egalitarian, voluntary understanding of the sacramental, “visible” church of discipleship (following the example of Jesus’ life); it also involves a sense of the church as a “hermeneutic community” of biblical-ethical discernment. Furthermore, I explain and identify Weaver’s modern manifestation of active and politically relevant Mennonite theology which I have termed ‘post-Yoderian,’ in that it moves beyond the influential theology of John H. Yoder in engaging feminist and womanist concerns in a sustained way.

and exploring the radical implications of a nonviolent/peace ethic within systematic theology. A look at the parallels and divergences between Sölle’s and Weaver’s definitions of violence and peace/nonviolence concludes this chapter.

My second chapter provides an historical grounding for Sölle’s and Weaver’s understandings of redemption and the cross through briefly outlining the three major atonement theories of the Christian tradition. These are: Anselm of Canterbury’s substitutionary theory of the atonement, in which he argues that only a “God-Man” could have both borne the just punishment of death which was required for human sin and revealed God’s mercy in offering forgiveness; Peter Abelard’s “moral influence” theory of the atonement, in which he makes the case that Jesus underwent the crucifixion primarily to demonstrate the “greatest charity” of God for humankind, a charity Christians are to imitate; and the ancient patristic variations on the Christus Victor theory of the atonement identified by twentieth-century theologian Gustaf Aulén, which depict the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as a divine victory over the powers of evil and death (represented by Gregory of Nyssa’s ‘fish and hook’ or “ransom” variation and Irenaeus’s “recapitulation” variation).

This is followed by a look at Sölle’s and Weaver’s critiques of the depictions of God in these three major atonement theories, specifically, Sölle’s historical-liberationist take on the “moral influence” theory of Peter Abelard in which the cross represents God’s loving solidarity with the oppressed and Weaver’s nonviolent reinterpretation of the Christus Victor

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19 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 140-141, 316-319, 37-39, 221 n. 3, and Harder, 2-3, 9.

theory which he terms “narrative Christus Victor” because it emphasizes the narratives of Jesus’ nonviolent life, ministry, and resurrection. More specifically, I follow Sölle’s arguments in support of maintaining an intimate connection between God and Jesus Christ, which prevents God from being depicted as a “tyrant” or “executioner” who requires and causes suffering and bloodshed or as an apathetic, “almighty spectator (which would amount to the same thing),” and Weaver’s parallel critique of notions that God is responsible for Jesus’ death instead of the “powers of evil,” notions which depict God as violent and thus contradict and undermine the nonviolent message and praxis of Jesus Christ throughout his life, death, and resurrection (the latter being God’s nonviolent victory over the powers of evil, violence, and death). I show that Sölle’s and Weaver’s concerns about divine violence are already apparent in the historical atonement theories, albeit in reference to distinctive understandings of what constitutes violence or injustice. I close with a look at some of the theological, Christological, and ethical implications of holding together Sölle’s more Abelardian emphasis on God’s loving solidarity with the oppressed in the event of the cross with Weaver’s refurbishing of the ancient Christus Victor model of the atonement which stresses the nonviolent divine victory over the powers of sin and death, above all in Jesus’ life and resurrection.

The debate among Mennonite and other theologians of peace or nonviolence over whether or not God is a “pacifist” is the subject of my third chapter. This debate touches on three major issues. First, it concerns the relationship between the “first” and “second”

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21 Sölle, Thinking about God, 123-4, Suffering, 163-4, and Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 5-8, 306.

22 Sölle, Thinking about God, 121-22, and Suffering, 148.

persons of the Trinity, whom Sölle and Weaver both connect intimately, she through her Christology “from below” and he through his “high Christology.” Both of their positions are to be distinguished from the “low Christology” of many feminists, particularly feminist arguments which go so far as to claim that Jesus was not in fact divine (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Carter Heyward). These perspectives rest on the assumption that divinity connotes hierarchy in asserting God’s exclusive superiority over humankind, an assumption not shared by Sölle and Weaver, who both understand divinity as something in which human beings participate (through her radically immanent reinterpretation of divine transcendence and his emphasis on sanctification and the enabling power of the resurrection). Relatedly, this debate also affects discussions of God’s passibility, countering the orthodox stipulation that only Jesus Christ, the Son (or, alternately, only his humanity), experienced suffering in the event of the cross. While Sölle overtly repudiates orthodox notions of God’s impassibility, arguing that God’s (co)suffering is the only possible ethical option exonerating God from both culpability and bystanderism in light of the reality of human suffering, Weaver is not as clear about his stance on God’s passibility. He arguably distances God “the Father” from the cross in his efforts to undo the link between God and violence through de-emphasizing the theological significance of the cross within salvation (its only significance being that Jesus accepted death rather than turning to violence). Still, both thinkers thus part ways with other theologians who argue that Christ’s singular and solitary suffering was

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26 See Pinnock, 4, and Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 269, 47, 94, 97, 322.

27 See Sölle, Suffering, 42-43, 140, 148, and Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 166-167, 44.
in some sense intended or caused by God’s abandonment of Jesus Christ to death on the
cross, which serves a greater purpose within redemption (Jürgen Moltmann, S. Mark
Heim).\textsuperscript{28} Thirdly, this debate concerns claims that God is exempt from human
understandings of nonviolent ethics, claims which Weaver rejects on the basis of the
nonviolence taught and exemplified by Jesus Christ. Weaver’s argument that God is
nonviolent, especially the need to revise traditional understandings of the salvific power of
the violence of the cross which stems from that argument, is problematic for many other
violence-limiting theologians, who make the case that Weaver’s line of argument impinges
on God’s absolute freedom, since God’s mysterious otherness is not reducible to human
ethics, including the ethical norm of nonviolence (A. James Reimer, Darrin W. Snyder
Belousek, J. Alexander Sider).\textsuperscript{29} For Weaver, however, to divide the central witness of Jesus
Christ from the identity of God “the Father” in this way is unacceptable, as it contradicts the
unity of the persons of the Trinity. It is also reductive in its own way, since it rests on the
assumption that God works within a paradigm of retributive justice, where acts of violence
and punishment serve to accomplish divine justice.\textsuperscript{30} Going beyond Weaver, I make the case
that such arguments fail to recognize the profoundly mysterious, counter-intuitive nature of
peace ethics themselves, which means that calls to peacemaking can themselves be seen to

\textsuperscript{28} Jürgen Moltmann, \textit{The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of
Mark Heim, \textit{Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 156-59, 110-
114, 162, 129.

\textsuperscript{29} Reimer, \textit{Mennonites and Classical Theology}, 487, Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, \textit{Atonement, Justice,
and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 409,
William H. Willimon (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 121-122, and Sider, “‘Who Durst Defy the Omnipotent to
Arms’: The Nonviolent Atonement and a Non-Competitive Doctrine of God,” in \textit{The Work of Jesus Christ in
Anabaptist Perspective: Essays in Honor of J. Denny Weaver}, ed. Alain Epp Weaver and Gerald J. Mast

\textsuperscript{30} Weaver, \textit{Nonviolent Atonement}, 236, 245.
have their source in God’s “otherness.” In order to flesh this out further, I also draw on Sölle’s mystical theology, especially her discussions of thirteenth-century mystic Meister Eckhart’s prayer for “God to rid me of God,” which Sölle interprets as an apophatic, “via negativa” prayer to let go of “every God who is less than love.” Sölle’s recovery of the redemptive significance of God’s solidarity with the oppressed on the cross also provides a corrective to Weaver’s undervaluing of the cross, as she approaches the issue from the perspective of the divine response to the present reality of suffering instead of the divine avoidance of violence at all costs. But Weaver’s emphasis on the resurrection remains valuable in its emphasis on the subversive and counter-intuitive power of divine nonviolence. I conclude this chapter by exploring the depiction of God and the understanding of divine power which emerges from allowing Sölle’s and Weaver’s perspectives to mutually inform one another. In my view, the combination of their emphases results in a God who suffers with the oppressed and also offers ultimate liberation from sin, violence, and death through the nonviolent power of the resurrection; in other words, it results in a God whose vulnerable, loving, nonviolent power inhabits the world in mysterious ways which subvert the power of violence, control, and domination.

My fourth chapter takes a more ethical turn in examining the feminist and womanist critiques of theologies which promulgate notions of redemptive suffering and redemptive violence. I look at the range of major feminist and womanist reinterpretations of the cross, from those whom Weaver follows, who dismiss the cross as an oppressive symbol with no redemptive significance (Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, Rita Nakashima Brock, Delores Williams) to those like Sölle who uphold the redemptive significance of the cross.

31 Sölle, Suffering, 94, 163-164, and Silent Cry, 68.
as a symbol of God’s solidarity with the particular suffering of the oppressed, including women (Jacquelyn Grant, JoAnne Marie Terrell, Julie Clague, Mary Grey). This overview is followed by an exploration of Sölle’s critique of “Christian masochism,” which for her goes hand in hand with “theological sadism” and apathy toward the suffering of others, and of Weaver’s rejection of notions of redemptive suffering and advocacy of an active and confrontational form of nonviolent resistance – i.e., pacifism which is not passive. I argue that at stake for both Weaver (and those like him, who essentially reject the redemptive significance of the cross) and Sölle (and those like her, who continue to find redemptive significance in the cross) is what she calls the “repeatability” of the cross and what he calls Jesus’ “imitability.” Sölle’s attention to the problem of “Christian masochism” and Weaver’s attempts to de-emphasize the cross within redemption both reflect the misinterpretation of the call to “take up our crosses” in imitation of Jesus. In other words, they agree that the cross has been and continues to be repeated/imitated in harmful ways in the ongoing, unjust suffering of the innocent, who are encouraged to submit unquestioningly to all forms of suffering, a pervasive issue to which feminist and womanist theologians rightly draw attention. But Sölle simultaneously recognizes that the cross can provide an impetus for Christians to recognize and share the suffering of the oppressed precisely through seeing their suffering as a repetition of the cross (i.e., instances of God suffering), and that


35 Sölle, Suffering, 82, and Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 265, 316.
this kind of suffering (solidarity with the oppressed) is the suffering of love which is redemptive in being part of the (nonviolent) struggle to abolish suffering.\textsuperscript{36} Weaver, on the other hand, distinguishes between “voluntary” and “involuntary” suffering, but restricts the redemptive meaning of the cross to the former,\textsuperscript{37} arguably in part because he neglects the Mennonite-feminist and/or womanist theologies within his own tradition. Bringing a number of these voices (Nekeisha Alexis-Baker, Mary Schertz, Carol Penner, Malinda E. Berry, Lydia Neufeld Harder, Gayle Gerber Koontz, as well as Hilary Scarsella)\textsuperscript{38} into conversation with Sölle, I argue that in order to address the reality of involuntary suffering, there must be a sense of God’s solidarity with all suffering, and that this sense of compassionate solidarity can lead to the transformation of suffering into life-giving resistance which Sölle terms “the pain of birth.”\textsuperscript{39} Still, Weaver provides an important element of optimism concerning the feasibility of nonviolent ethics – encompassing the love of enemies, reconciliation, restorative justice, etc. – in light of God’s empowering of human beings and God’s nonviolent victory over evil and death in the resurrection,\textsuperscript{40} an element which is less pronounced in Sölle’s theology. Thus, while Sölle and Weaver both attempt to promote nonviolent ethics which do not glorify suffering, Sölle’s perspective ultimately reflects a realism concerning the present reality of suffering which balances and is balanced by Weaver’s groundedness in the empowering hope of divine nonviolence manifest in the


\textsuperscript{37} Weaver, Nonviolent God, 264ff.

\textsuperscript{38} Since I use multiple sources by each of these theologians, I will refrain from citing them here. See chapter 4 below for specific references.

\textsuperscript{39} Sölle, Suffering, 94-95, and Against the Wind, 78.

\textsuperscript{40} Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 316-319, 37-39, 213-214.
resurrection of Jesus Christ. In synthesizing Sölle’s and Weaver’s nonviolent ethics, I therefore delve into the ethical ramifications of my redefinition of divine power, since Sölle and Weaver agree that Christians are likewise called to “take up their crosses,” but Sölle brings to the conversation an awareness of the limits of nonviolence and the necessity of suffering solidarity and Weaver brings a sense of hope in the resurrection which empowers believers to have confidence that God can make use of their human acts of peacemaking, both of which are arguably necessary for Christian peacemaking to be ethically viable.

I close this chapter by synthesizing Sölle’s and Weaver’s positions into three re-envisioned crosses which represent their redefinition of divine power and the corresponding redefinition of peace ethics: the cross of nonviolence represented by the narrative of Jesus, the cross of compassionate solidarity and the redemptive struggle to birth new life represented by the Christa, and the empty cross of resurrection, which is a tree of life.

Theological-Ethical Contributions and Implications

In examining questions surrounding the cross, divine violence, suffering, and redemption from an integrated Mennonite-feminist perspective, my project adds a distinctive voice to these theological debates and conversations. Though Weaver’s work represents the sustained engagement of feminist perspectives (as well as other liberationist views) by a Mennonite theologian, including attention to feminist concerns about the notions of redemptive suffering at the heart of most theologies of the atonement, he maintains a clear division between his Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective and that of feminists and others, claiming that he does not “speak for them.”41 In distancing himself from feminist theology in this way, Weaver stops short of fully incorporating the previously-unrecognized gender

41 Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 323.
complexities which feminists and womanists highlight into his Mennonite thought. Other theologians – most notably Lydia Neufeld Harder, Carol Penner, and Malinda Berry – are not as reticent to identify themselves as feminist and Mennonite (or in Berry’s case, “(black) feminist” and “Anabaptist”).42 I follow Harder in particular, as she arguably does not subsume her Mennonite peace theology under feminist theology, but draws from both streams of thought and identifies shortcomings in each as well, including feminist disinterest in the particular contributions of Mennonite peace theology.43 Like her, I adopt a deliberately hybridized Mennonite-feminist identity, but while her work is in the area of biblical theology, I adopt such a perspective within systematic theology, a relatively unexplored discipline for Mennonite scholars, who have tended to focus predominantly on biblical theology and ethics.44

According to feminist theologian Joy Ann McDougall, this hybridized critical yet confessional/ecclesial approach is increasingly common among contemporary Christian feminist theologians, who view “feminist and ecclesial traditions as inseparable and mutually informative dimensions of their theological identity. They move to and fro between these two

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42 See Harder, 1, Carol J. Penner, “Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence against Women” (Ph.D. diss., University of St. Michael's College, 1999), 13-14, and Berry, “Poised to Embrace,” 37. Harder writes, “In my personal struggle to understand the nature of biblical authority, I read many feminist theological writings that began with assumptions foreign to me. . . . As a member of a minority Christian denomination, I have often felt that these construals of biblical authority did not fully express my convictions born out of my Mennonite faith tradition [i.e., a tradition in which the Bible remains central to ethical discernment]. At times I have felt excluded from these conversations, silenced because my critical reflections were ignored and not understood.” In a slightly different way, Penner “strives to find a balance which neither compromises the integrity of feminist experience, nor loses the essence or the substance of my own Mennonite religious background.”

43 Harder, 10.

44 Weaver, “The General versus the Particular,” 28-29. He states that it is only in the last several decades that Mennonites have “started to become comfortable talking about theology as theology.” Because several other Mennonite scholars have recently published thorough studies of biblical atonement imagery in relation to peace theology, I have chosen not to include a chapter on that material, but to focus on theology and ethics. See Weaver’s major works as well as Ted Grimsrud, Instead of Atonement: The Bible’s Salvation Story and Our Hope for Wholeness (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), and Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, Killing Enmity: Violence and the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).
received traditions giving neither absolute authority nor uncritical acceptance as norms for their theological construction” or reconstruction of central Christian doctrines. She writes, “Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, many feminist theologians are ‘taking back’ their confessional traditions, refusing to let them go until they wrestle a feminist blessing from them,” by which they, in turn, “revitalize the entire community of faith.” In attempting to (nonviolently) “wrestle a feminist [and Mennonite] blessing” from the cross and redemption, I am following Rebecca S. Chopp’s call for Christian feminists to undertake “saving work,” moving beyond discussions of critical methodology alone (“the atheological limits of secular feminist theory”) to feminist reinterpretations of central Christian doctrines, including Christology, divine omnipotence and impassibility, and soteriology or redemption.

Along these lines, a conversation between Sölle and Weaver has far-reaching theological implications. As Weaver and Sölle each recognize, critiquing traditional Christian depictions of God in light of the experiences of the oppressed leads to the necessity of a radical reworking of our depictions of the divine on ethical grounds. Combining Sölle’s and Weaver’s critiques signifies detaching God from deep-seated notions of dominating power and control over history, as well as from notions of violence and punitive justice. These theological shifts in how God and God’s power are understood significantly impact several aspects of church life, including the language of worship, preaching, and prayer, pastoral care of those experiencing suffering and loss, and the relief, development, and peacemaking work


of the church. In ethical terms, I am not only intending to remind the Mennonite church of the importance of “peace with justice,”\textsuperscript{48} but also remind feminists, womanists, and other liberationists of the need for justice with \textit{peace}, or nonviolent, restorative understandings of justice which combine empowerment with reconciliation. This also encompasses part of a Christian contribution to public discourse and advocacy for social justice in the pluralistic and multicultural context of Canadian social ethics.

It is my hope that my work here can be helpful for those struggling with the cross – may it offer the possibility of peace to those who have been disturbed and harmed by the violence of the cross and may it disturb those who have seen and experienced the cross as a call to take up the sword instead of to abandon the sword. Above all, I hope my work can be useful for those engaged in all forms of peacemaking \textit{praxis}, which is so crucially needed in the church and in our world today.

Chapter 1
Approaching the Cross: Starting Points, Assumptions, and Methods in Sölle’s and Weaver’s Theologies

Perhaps you may be wondering what these imposing substantives “feminism,” “liberation” and “mysticism” have to do with each other at all. What is their common denominator? We can say that there are people who are involved in the search for nonauthoritarian human relationships and who are working toward the abolition of class rule and class injustice. . . . They are also working to abolish patriarchy and the colonization of women. . . , and they are searching for a nonauthoritarian language to use in describing a God whose essential attributes are not independence, distance, power, and domination.

- Dorothee Sölle

The recognition that there are systemic forms of violence such as racism (as well as sexism, patriarchy, poverty, and more) makes clear that why the principle of nonresistance is no longer an adequate peace stance. . . . Nonresistance can have a powerful impact when it constitutes a refusal to reply to evil and violence with another evil and violent act. It means little, however, in the face of systemic violence such as racism or poverty. In fact, to refuse to resist in that context is to accept the status quo and its violence. . . . If the church is not confronting injustice, then it is not being the church.

- J. Denny Weaver

Before turning to Sölle’s and Weaver’s nonviolent interpretations of the cross and redemption, it is necessary to explain the starting points and perspectives from which they theologize and their theological methods (i.e., how they do theology and why). Accordingly, in this first chapter, I will place Sölle and Weaver within the broader theological developments of the twentieth century. First, I will outline the development of Sölle’s theology from Bultmannian existentialism to German political theology, to a form of

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nonviolent liberation theology informed by feminist and mystical theologies. After tracing the roots of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition in the Radical Reformation and defining it as one of the historic peace churches with a distinctive ecclesiology, I will then specify the actively nonviolent and politically relevant Mennonite perspective from which Weaver theologizes, which I term post-Yoderian. As previously mentioned, Sölle and Mennonite thinkers do not engage one another’s theologies directly, but Sölle does make reference to the praxis of Mennonite and other historic peace church traditions on several occasions, and a number of Mennonite theologians position themselves and their tradition in relation to liberation, feminist, and womanist theologies. A look at these articulations of the commonalities between the methods and central assumptions of feminist/womanist and Mennonite theologies will provide a foundation upon which to build the dialogue between Sölle and Weaver. I will close this chapter with a look at the parallels and divergences between Sölle’s and Weaver’s definitions of violence and peace/nonviolence, which will lead into the more focused discussion on the cross and redemption in the chapters that follow.

1. Mystical Resistance: Sölle’s Existentialist-Feminist-Liberationist Theology

The theology of Dorothee Sölle (1929-2003) is not easy to define or categorize, nor can it be extricated from her full and varied biography. Theologian Sarah K. Pinnock describes her thusly:

> She is a leader among German Christians grappling with the collective shame of Auschwitz. She is a poet expressing utopian longings for a better world and the beauty of the here and now. She is a liberation theologian who challenges doctrinal orthodoxy and institutional complacency. She is a mystic offering a vision of faith for people disillusioned with bourgeois Christianity.3

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While Pinnock describes many of the key influences on Sölle’s thought, she omits mention of feminism’s significant influence on Sölle, which cannot be overlooked in the context of this study. What follows is an overview of the development of Sölle’s compelling and accessible theology throughout her lifetime, which will touch on the existentialist, liberation, feminist, mystical, and nonviolent aspects which comprise her distinctive theo-poetics.

Sölle delineates three different streams within twentieth-century Protestant theology: orthodox (e.g., Karl Barth), liberal (e.g., Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich), and radical (e.g., the Radical Reformation and the women’s, peace, ecological, liberation, and solidarity movements). For Sölle, these three theological streams constitute phases in the history of Protestantism, with orthodoxy arising in the main thrusts of the sixteenth-century Reformation, liberalism being birthed during the European Enlightenment, and the radical being grounded in the Radical Reformation as well as experiencing a renewal in the liberation movements of the latter half of the twentieth century. Simultaneously, however, she speaks of these as phases in the development of the faith of individuals, orthodoxy being the faith of “the village,” liberalism that of “the city,” and the radical being a voluntary and “post-Enlightenment” form of faith, faith reshaped to enliven its context and provoke liberative action. She aligns herself with the third category but is clear that her theology has shifted from liberal to radical during her lifetime.4

Sölle names Bultmann among her most formative early influences, in particular his “demythologizing” of the Bible, a project which strips away the vestiges of its ancient, mythological worldview in order to translate biblical truths into the modern, scientific

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worldview. Beyond the bare rationalism of historical-critical biblical interpretation, however, Bultmann undertook what he called an “existentialist interpretation” in applying biblical teaching to “human existence” today, something which held great appeal for Sölle. But for Sölle, Bultmann and other liberal thinkers did not go far enough, as their understanding of faith remained limited to an individual or interpersonal level, and thus failed to speak to social, political, and economic issues; while liberalism hints at praxis, it cannot name or demand it, according to Sölle. In her view, Jesus’ life exemplifies a mingling of the private and public, such that “Religion and faith suddenly have a bearing on politics,” and vice versa: “tell me how you think and act politically,” she claims, “and I will tell you in which God you believe.” Thus, alongside fellow Germans J.B. Metz and Jürgen Moltmann, Sölle at first set out to do “political theology,” in particular, “theology after Auschwitz” in conversation with Bultmann and others. Asserting that politics is “the comprehensive and decisive sphere in which Christian truth should become praxis,” she describes her method as using Marxist socio-political analysis for theological “self-critique.” As a way to “put into practice the statement that faith and politics are inseparable,” she and several of her activist Christian friends began to organize services of “Political Evensong” in Cologne during the late 1960s. These were ecumenical evening prayer services involving political information,

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5 Sölle, Thinking about God, 35-36, 30, and Against the Wind, 29. Cf. Sölle, Political Theology, trans. John Shelley (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 2. Sölle goes one step beyond Bultmann: “Yes to myth, if it is an eyes-wide-open engagement, a third step that leads out of naïve belief, through the liberating, demythologizing critique, and into a reappropriation of the hope for all humanity that is promised in the myth.” See Against the Wind, 31.


liturgy, scripture reading, and calls for action—a combination which obviously influenced Sölle’s developing theological voice.

As suggested above, Sölle came to her existentialist-yet-political understanding of the Christian faith by employing a thoroughly Christocentric lens, beginning already in her first book, *Christ the Representative.* For Sölle, the example of Jesus Christ is thus the measure of that which is liberative in the Christian tradition and Scripture, and epitomizes her critique of the tradition from within. Believing that “after Auschwitz one cannot speak of God as before” (i.e., as the omnipotent ruler of history), Sölle states that “the man Jesus Christ . . . had a hold on me.” She was drawn instead to the powerless and suffering Christ as understood by “radical Christian thinkers” such as Blaise Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, Simone Weil, and especially Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s powerless Christ “for others” whom Christians are called to imitate. In her autobiography, she writes, “I identified myself passionately with the powerless Christ. From beginning to end, my entry into theology was Christocentric; it did not proceed via God the Father but via the Son, the older brother. It would never have occurred to me to become a Christian if there had been no more than an almighty God.”

Declaring, with the nihilists, that this “almighty God” was “dead” (in terms of being experienced as absent after Auschwitz), Sölle found her way out of the hopeless paralysis of nihilism through glimpsing “the face of a man, tortured to death 2,000 years ago, who did not

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10 Sölle, *Against the Wind,* 33-4, and *Of War and Love,* 9.

choose nihilism,” but rather “passion and devotion.” Stated differently, when faced with the oppression and injustice of his day, Jesus chose to love “the last” and thereby to live “without violence and without protection from violence.” For Sölle, the biblical accounts of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection thus constitute a subversive narrative or, to use Metz’s famous term, a “dangerous memory”; that is, a memory of oppression which prompts revolution – specifically, a nonviolent existential-political-theological revolution.

This form of political theology easily led Sölle to liberation theology, and she eventually came to identify her own work as such. She speaks of learning a new way of interpreting and implementing biblical teachings from “the poor” of the “Third World” or Majority World, those oppressed because of race, sex, and/or class. But unlike Douglas John Hall, for instance, who views the liberation paradigm as inappropriate to the context of the privileged oppressors, Sölle recognizes that the affluent “First World” also requires liberation from capitalism, militarism, loneliness, and apathy – in her words, “liberation from the frightful role of causing misery to the innocent, condemning children to death by our financial policy, and suppressing the hopes of the poor by police regimes, military dictatorships and open war.” In her later work, she describes this existentially as “this hunger for spirituality, this search for meaning, or this bottomless emptiness into which consumerism plunges people,” deeming it “a hunger that is no less life-threatening.”

Accordingly, she speaks of her work as liberation theology for the spiritual/ethical poverty of

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12 Sölle, *Against the Wind*, 32, 20, and *Wind*, 34, 44.


the apathetic “First World,” which corresponds to the more critical liberation of the
“Third”/Majority World (largely southern nations) from devastating material poverty and
exploitation.16 While upholding God’s absolute “preferential option for the poor,” Sölle
affirms those from her own context who are “living for liberation” and who “collaborate with
God’s work of liberation,” especially through “resistance” (such as James Cone, Elisabeth
Schüssler Fiorenza, and Beverly Harrison).17

Sölle’s connection to feminist theology only came later in her career, and because of
the alternative way in which she came to incorporate (second-wave) feminist insights into her
political, liberation theology, her status as a feminist theologian remains contested.18 Sölle in
fact identifies herself as a feminist on numerous occasions, and credits her colleagues and
students at Union Theological Seminary in New York for awakening a feminist
consciousness in her. Her work, in many ways, manifests the feminist slogan that “the
personal is the political,” but, as with any theological label, it would be a mistake to limit
Sölle to feminism, or rather, to presume that she adopts a conventional definition of
feminism.19 Turning away from separatist and/or secular forms of feminism (and with them,
a kind of female supersessionism), Sölle adopts a revisionist, gender-egalitarian, and
Christian feminism which calls for radical social change. She states, “The essence of
feminism is not just a big ‘Me, too!’ It is the creation of something new. We do not want to

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16 Pinnock, “Introduction,” 3, and Sölle, Window of Vulnerability, x. Sölle also spoke at the
Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians conference “Doing Theology in a Divided World”
(Switzerland, 1983).

17 Sölle, Thinking about God, 18-20, 96, 71, 73-74, Against the Wind, 72, 65, and Silent Cry, 204. In
the latter, she speaks of First World “resistance” rather than “liberation.”

18 Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The Feminist Liberation Theology of Dorothee Sölle,” in The
131-133. Interestingly, feminists from her native Germany are more likely to question Sölle’s status as a
feminist than are their American counterparts.

become like men and have and do everything that they have and do. We want a different kind of life; that is feminism in its most profound form today, and this is what I mean when I say that it is the conscious segment of the women’s movement that wants this cultural change and is working to effect it.”

In (re)defining feminism in this way, Sölle makes it one of several key liberation movements, one which contributes a specific focus on the gendered dimension of oppression or colonialism. This framework allows her to transcend the “bourgeois” concerns of privileged Western, predominantly white feminists and to speak also of those in the Majority World who are doubly or triply oppressed. A key example involves the feminist (d)evaluation of family and children. According to her former student, Christian ethicist Christine Gudorf, Sölle “rejected the idea of childbearing and child rearing as a burden, insisting that even in her years as a single mother her children had been a principle source of joy and empowerment, and pointed to women around the world who understood their motherhood as the defining role in their lives.”

Along these lines, Sölle goes so far as to draw on her experience of childbirth for theological reflection. Relatedly, Sölle insists that while the feminist reliance on a hermeneutic of suspicion is crucial, it cannot by itself address the profound spiritual needs nor enable hope and action; for that, she argues, we need a constructive “hermeneutic of hunger” alongside the critical hermeneutic of suspicion.

Though she only develops these terms later in her thought, they can be seen at work in her earlier analysis of the image of God as “Father,” for instance. Like other feminists, Sölle

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20 Sölle, *Strength of the Weak*, 82-83. Cf. 54.


finds the traditional understanding of God’s fatherhood to be profoundly problematic, at its worst, functioning to bolster patriarchy through the “masculinization of God” and the infantilizing understanding of femininity as submissiveness and helplessness. She asks, “How could I honor a God who was not more than a man” or “whose most important attribute is power, whose prime need is to subjugate, whose greatest fear is equality”? But Sölle does not completely reject divine fatherhood because she sees its potential to be reinterpreted in a liberative way: to depict the Divine as “the father of all orphans, father of those whose empirical fathers have long since taken off, . . . [as] an image of longing to find justice and a home.” Likewise, to bring God’s motherhood into focus alongside God’s fatherhood serves to “bind us to nature and the human family,” as opposed to the language of God’s absolute sovereignty or Lordship and power-as-domination. Thus, Sölle’s is a revisionist feminist-liberationist hermeneutic: she uses resources within the Christian tradition (such as liberative biblical narratives, especially the political-historical narratives of Jesus, and liberative movements and/or figures within Christian history, such as the Beguines and mystics like Meister Eckhart and Teresa of Avila) to critique that which is oppressive and patriarchal. In short, she reads the Christian tradition against itself. While her thought cannot be reduced to feminist concerns or methods alone, she arrives at many values arguably shared by feminist theologians, including: resistance to domination and violence of all kinds; community, relationality, and interdependence or vulnerability; responsibility, empowerment, mutuality, or cooperation with God; and an emphasis on contextuality and


experience, especially the experience of women and others who have historically been and continue to be marginalized.26

Of course, this emphasis on experience also led Sölle to Christian and other religious mysteries and her project of “democratizing mysticism,” especially in her major work, The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance, which she published toward the end of her life.27 From the beginning of her foray into feminist theology, Sölle linked it closely with the mystical tradition, asserting that mysticism, feminism, and liberation theology all “search for nonauthoritarian relationships and conditions,” both in between the divine and humanity as well as among human beings, as seen in the opening quotation of this chapter. She defines mysticism as

a cognitio Dei experimentalis, a perception of God through experience. This means an awareness of God gained not through books, not through the authority of religious teachings, not through the so-called priestly office, but through the experiences of human beings, experiences that are articulated and reflected upon in religious language but that first come to people in what they encounter in life, independent of the church’s institutions.28

Stated differently, a mystical outlook does not concern itself primarily with intellectual/doctrinal belief, but with a living and enlivening faith; it is not enough to say that “Jesus lives” without adding, “And with him I live, too.”29 For Sölle, mysticism, like feminism, thus speaks to a direct, unmediated, non-hierarchical access to God, and even


27 Sölle, Silent Cry, 11.

28 Sölle, Strength of the Weak, 80, 86.

beyond it to union with the divine and all of creation. For Sölle, this “everyday experience of lived union with God” and creation necessarily involves the erasure of the distinction between “a mystical *internal* and a political *external*” (or faith and *praxis*) as well.\(^{30}\) Another aspect of mysticism that resonates deeply with Sölle is its penchant for overcoming the narrow confines of orthodox language for God in its description of the lived experience of or encounter with God as “the beloved” instead of “the commanding lord”; alternately, the God of mysticism overflows all anthropomorphic – and hence all authoritarian and “chauvinistic” language – to become “‘Wellspring of all good things,’ ‘living wind,’ ‘water of life,’ ‘light,’” etc. According to Sölle, this linguistic creativity in the mystical naming of God – something she finds in the mystical traditions of multiple religions, not only Christianity – is a profound resource for feminist theology.\(^{31}\) Furthermore, this creativity stems from a theological sensibility that is not confined to the rational, objective, scientific language of so many male(stream) theologians; in this way, too, mysticism is “women-friendly.” Admitting that “Every idea we have of God fails God,” mysticism involves a call to, in the words of Meister Eckhart, “ask God to rid me of God” – that is, to let go of our preconceived notions of God as Lord for the sake of the non-anthropomorphic God, and thereby move into negative or apophatic theology, a move which takes Sölle somewhat beyond her earlier Christocentrism without losing sight of Jesus.\(^{32}\) For Sölle, the ethical corollary of this theological shift is to live and love “without a why or wherefore” (what Eckhart terms “*sunder warumbe*”), which


again interrupts our utilitarian, efficient, and control-oriented Western mindset and calls for acts of love and justice to be done for their own sake.\textsuperscript{33}

There is one final way in which Sölle practices what she preaches, so to speak: in her theological writing itself. Sölle’s accessible writing style, interwoven with personal and communal narratives, both her own and that of others, could in itself be interpreted as a way of democratizing theology. Her work has been described as “theo-poetics” or theology done “sensually, poetically, confrontationally,” and her eclectic theological sources have led Pinnock to characterize Sölle’s thought as “moderate postmodern theology” in that she recognizes the cultural/historical specificity or contextuality of theological language and symbols, and likewise values “religious experience and practice over theory and doctrine,” as seen in her preference for narratives over more systematic argumentation.\textsuperscript{34} Feminist theologian Carter Heyward speaks of this as the “poetic license that Dorothee Sölle brings to theology.”\textsuperscript{35} Sölle herself explains her theological writing style thusly: “Perhaps the university had its difficulties with me because I took diverging paths, in search of a way of writing that was different from that of established scholarship. I did not want to overload my books with footnotes; I wanted to document my thought process, not my knowledge. The dominant pattern is to line up as many authorities as possible behind oneself instead of risking saying something new.” She concludes that “theology is much more akin to praxis, poetry, and art than to science,” and hence her writing was centrally guided by “self-expression,” “creativity,” and “greater chances to change people.”\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{33} Sölle, \textit{Silent Cry}, 60-62.

\textsuperscript{34} Wind, 7-9, and Pinnock, “Postmodern Response,” 130-131, 137, 140-141. Cf. Wind, 42.

As previously mentioned, Sölle does not engage Mennonite theologians directly but references Mennonite and other peace church *praxis* several times. With admiration, she mentions Mennonite participation in protests against the Vietnam War in the U.S. and the deep-seated counter-culture rooted in the Sermon on the Mount that grounds their position as “radical pacifists.” At the same time, she cautions against reducing peace to withdrawal from conflict, to “a mere ‘count me out,’” calling for new forms of active protest to address the widening scope of the military-industrial complex.37 This critique reveals Sölle’s understanding of peace as primarily activism or a public, visible effort to change the socio-political landscape through “nonviolently and illegally” acknowledging, speaking out, and resisting the exploitation of the poor through militarism and capitalism.38 But her view is to be distinguished from a naïve, liberal understanding of nonviolent activism, as it is informed by her eschewing of notions of efficiency or easy success and her embrace of mystical vulnerability. She states, “If we have faith, we can dare to ‘let go’ of the security of weapons; we can render ourselves vulnerable, even as Jesus did, refusing to bear arms […], no matter how risky or even foolish it may seem.”39 Elsewhere, she concludes, “All nonviolent action in a violent world participates, in this sense, in the ‘without a why’ of the rose,” which blooms without justification.40 Sölle’s understanding of nonviolence arises from her work in

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36 Sölle, *Against the Wind*, 67-68, 36.


the peace movement, and though her comments about Mennonite peace *praxis* are fairly accurate, she does not thereby acknowledge the efforts of Mennonite theologians and ethicists to bring Mennonite peace *theology* into conversation with liberation and feminist/womanist perspectives. I now turn to these scholars, including Weaver.

2. *Nonviolent Discipleship: Weaver’s Post-Yoderian Mennonite Peace Theology*

According to J. Denny Weaver (b. 1941), it is only in the last several decades that Mennonite scholars have “started to become comfortable talking about theology as theology,” moving from a predominant focus on biblical theology to systematic theology. Given the relative newness and minority status of Mennonite peace theology within the Christian tradition, I will first provide some historical background and context for the Mennonite tradition, which will help explain the distinctive emphases and perspectives from which Weaver and other Mennonite scholars theologize and engage feminist, womanist, and other liberative theologies.

The Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has its roots in the Radical Reformation of sixteenth-century Europe, and began in Zurich, Switzerland in 1525, when Georg Blaurock asked fellow-layperson Conrad Grebel to baptize him. This is widely considered the first adult or “believer’s” baptism, which sparked a movement of Anabaptists (or “re-baptisers”) who rejected the validity of infant baptism and, correspondingly, envisioned the church as

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41 See especially Sölle, *Against the Wind*, 116-121.


the voluntary, non-hierarchical, and sanctified Body of Christ. As a “movement from the ‘underside,’” the Anabaptists were perceived, in some cases rightly, as a threat to the established political and social order, which included the “established or state church,” whether Catholic or Protestant. Approximately 2000 to 2500 Anabaptists were brutally martyred by Catholics and Protestants alike during the Reformation, amounting to 40 to 50 percent of the Christian martyrs of the era – a high number for such a minority group. A detailed depiction of the faith and deaths of these martyrs emerges from court testimonies, prison records, martyr songs and hymns, and the vast collection of martyr stories known as *The Martyrs Mirror*. According to the latter and surprisingly for the time, women comprised fully one third of sixteenth-century Anabaptists martyred for their faith. Mennonite historian C. Arnold Snyder notes that their persecutors were scandalized when, despite their lack of education or even illiteracy, “Anabaptist women ably debated learned clerics or court officials, defending their faith with numerous biblical texts, with ready wit and intelligence. It was even more astounding when these women, commonly considered the ‘weaker sex,’ nevertheless withstood torture and death with [what was then termed] ‘manly courage.’”

Mennonite-feminist/womanist theologian Malinda Berry notes that because of the intensity of their persecution, the early Anabaptists “did not have the opportunity to make an

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45 Many Mennonites have copies of this book in their homes; among conservative groups, the Bible and *The Martyrs Mirror* are the main (if not only) books. The full title reads: *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized Only upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Savior, from the Time of Christ to the Year A.D. 1660*, and it was compiled in the eighteenth century by Thieleman J. van Braght. It was published as *Martyrs Mirror* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1972), and evidently continues to have a hold on the Mennonite imagination. See Kirsten Eve Beachy, ed., *Tongue Screws and Testimonies: Poems, Stories, and Essays Inspired by the Martyrs Mirror* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2010).

46 Snyder, 160-161, 177-178.
academic contribution to theology in the same way Luther and Calvin . . . did.” The Reformation emphases on personal faith and the return to Scripture versus complex, metaphysical-theological argumentation, as well as the fact that the vast majority of the early Anabaptists were uneducated, “common” people, likely also contributed significantly to the lack of a more “academic” articulation of Anabaptist theology. Still, this does not mean that Anabaptist theology was simplistic or incoherently diverse. Despite the diversity of the early Anabaptists, several common convictions/practices can be identified, including “a sense that divine authority is found in both the Spirit and Letter of Scripture (sola scriptura with a pneumatological emphasis),” “an anthropology based on free will, yieldedness (Gelassenheit), and grace,” a soteriology not based on “faith alone, but . . . a faith that obeys” (such that the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit “must be visible in works” or a “visibly holy life,” made possible by human cooperation with God’s grace), and a “visible church” ecclesiology “marked by the baptism of adults, the mutual admonition and discipline of members, a memorial Lord’s Supper, . . . and mutual aid (community sharing) among members of the church.” As Weaver points out, not all early Anabaptists were pacifists, but already by the mid-1500s, Anabaptist groups agreed that “true disciples of Christ would live without weapons and would not participate in warfare,” thus the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition came to be known as one of the historic peace churches.

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48 Ibid., and Snyder, 52-53.


50 Snyder, 26.

51 Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 140, and Snyder, 26. Snyder adds that Anabaptists also agreed at this time that they would not swear oaths.
These distinctive characteristics of Anabaptism may seem to suggest that the movement was essentially a radicalized form of Protestantism, since it shared the Reformation principles of the priesthood of all believers, primarily memorial understandings of the sacraments, *sola scriptura*, and *sola gratia, sola fidei*, but implemented and interpreted them differently than mainstream Protestantism. And yet, there are also undeniable ties between Anabaptism and lay monastic movements, which is not surprising given that several of the key early Anabaptist leaders, including Menno Simons, from whom the Mennonite tradition gets its name, were former Catholic priests or monks. This link leads some to assert that the early Anabaptists were in fact “theologically orthodox” (i.e., “they accepted Christendom’s creeds and symbols” even while straining and subverting “orthodox” understandings of church and the life/practice of faith). On this basis, Mennonite historian Walter Klaassen has stated that Anabaptism is neither Catholic nor Protestant, but instead “represents some of the best of both traditions.” In short, Anabaptism retains an “ambiguous” relationship toward both Catholicism and Protestantism, in some ways combining them and in other ways providing an alternative to both.

The voluntary, egalitarian nature of Anabaptism as well as its spread among numerous non-European cultures within the past century or so has led to a great diversity within the tradition in its contemporary manifestations as well. According to Lydia Neufeld Harder, Anabaptists today are linked “not primarily by institutional structures but rather connected historically by the recognition of common faith origins and . . . a common conversation about themes important to the Anabaptist movement, such as discipleship, adult

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52 Snyder, 27, and Berry, “Theology of Wonder,” 12.

53 Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity*, 150-151.
baptism, the separation of church and state and peace-making.”\textsuperscript{54} The Mennonite tradition continues to practice a distinctive form of “visible church” ecclesiology characterized by discipleship, following the example of Jesus Christ, including a rejection of violence, and a view of the church as a “hermeneutic community” of biblical-ethical discernment – that is, a community empowered by the Spirit to read, interpret and apply biblical teachings to its own faith and life.\textsuperscript{55} A history of persecution and migration has resulted in varying degrees of integration into modern culture(s) among contemporary North American Anabaptists, ranging from the small minority of “plain” or “Old Order” Mennonite, Amish, and Hutterite groups, which retain distinctive clothing and reject modern technology and/or live communally, to Weaver’s and Harder’s communities of largely acculturated – and increasingly multi-cultural – Mennonites.\textsuperscript{56} Most acculturated or multi-cultural Mennonites today belong to my own denomination, Mennonite Church Canada, or its sister body, Mennonite Church USA.\textsuperscript{57} These conferences or denominations have produced several notable biblical scholars and theologians, including perhaps the most influential Mennonite theologian of the twentieth century, John Howard Yoder (1927-1997).

A student of Karl Barth’s and an influence on his later colleague, Stanley Hauerwas, Yoder both led and reflected the shifts in North American Mennonite theology during the twentieth century, particularly concerning definitions of peace. Building on Mennonite historian Harold S. Bender’s 1944 speech, “The Anabaptist Vision,” which distilled the

\textsuperscript{54}Harder, 3.


\textsuperscript{56}Weaver, \textit{Nonviolent Atonement}, 141. In the rest of this dissertation, I use the term “Mennonite” to denote this acculturated stream.

\textsuperscript{57}These two church conferences were so named in 2002, when the Mennonite Church (predominantly Swiss) and General Conference (predominantly Russian) groups joined together in both the U.S. and Canada.
Anabaptist tradition into the three central principles of discipleship, “voluntary church membership,” and “an ethic of love and nonresistance,” Yoder set out to articulate Mennonite theology in an academic context and thereby defend an active form of Christian pacifism based on the alternative politics of Jesus’ example. American Mennonite theologian Gayle Gerber Koontz helpfully illuminates the context of Yoder’s work, arguing that the first half of the century saw Mennonites holding to a tradition of peace as “nonresistance” to violence (as in Bender’s work), with its consonant image of the church as strictly separate from the “world.” By the 1960s and 1970s, however, Mennonites were recognizing common ground in other egalitarian protest movements – namely, second wave feminism and the liberation movement – including concerns with “the sin of domination and violence” and a “strong expectation for new life through Christ.” Thus, “the focus of ethical language gradually shifted from nonresistance to nonviolence, and from commitment to pacifism to commitment to peacemaking.” Yoder’s work reflects this increasingly outward focus and sense that the church should be more politically engaged, as he used the term “nonresistance” in his earlier writings, but was describing Jesus’ stance as active “nonviolence” by the time he published The Politics of Jesus in 1972.

A second, related shift identified by Koontz is an expansion in the definition of violence to include classism and sexism, among other forms of oppression, which has led to new definitions of peacemaking as economic redistribution, mediation, conflict resolution, and restorative justice. Koontz argues that Yoder’s work reflects this broadened

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understanding of peace, but other Mennonite theologians disagree, particularly with regard to sexism. At points, he does appear to affirm that men and women are equals in the church community; for instance, in his affirmation of women’s gifts for ecclesial ministry and his interpretation of the New Testament Haustafeln (Household Codes in Colossians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter) as calls for the voluntary and mutual “subordination” of women and men to one another, which he interprets as “revolutionary” in its context because it addresses women and slaves as “moral agent[s].” He dismisses feminist Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s concern that these epistles are more reflective of the status quo than of Jesus’ egalitarian ministry, however, and thus he arguably does not sufficiently acknowledge feminist arguments that calls to obedience, humility, and “subordination” affect women differently than men, since women have historically held less social and political power and have been socialized into harmful tendencies toward self-effacement. This example from Yoder’s work mirrors the predominant practice within Mennonite churches where, as Harder writes, “[d]espite strong affirmations of the church as a hermeneutic community, the pattern of communication and social interaction often did not encourage an active participation by women in the theological process of determining the meaning of biblical texts for the community.” Harder is not alone in making use of feminist socio-political analysis and “hermeneutics of suspicion” to

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62 Harder, 1.
critique the gender inequalities apparent in Mennonite theology and practice, including Yoder’s work.\(^{63}\)

In Yoder’s case in particular, however, the need to apply a feminist hermeneutic of suspicion is compounded by the deeply shameful side of his legacy: namely, his sexual harassment and abuse of a number of his female students. In 1984, he was dismissed from his teaching position at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, because stories of abuse were surfacing, but he continued to teach at the University of Notre Dame. Though Yoder eventually underwent a closed church discipline process lasting four years (1992-1996), at which point it was recommended that “Yoder’s teaching and writing ministries be restored,” many remain deeply dissatisfied, skeptical of the notion that the process held him sufficiently accountable for his actions. In particular, a concern that the process focused on “Yoder-church reconciliation not Yoder-victim reconciliation”\(^{64}\) has led Mennonite Church USA to begin a new “discernment and listening process” within the past several years to hear from and address the needs of survivors of Yoder’s abuse, even now, long after his death in 1997.\(^{65}\) Along similar lines, Herald Press, which has published many of Yoder’s books, has begun including a disclaimer in his books which mentions his legacy

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of abuse alongside “the hope that those studying Yoder’s writings will not dismiss the
complexity of these issues and will instead wrestle with, evaluate and learn from Yoder’s
work in the full context of his personal, scholarly and churchly legacy.”66 It remains
controversial for his abusiveness to even be mentioned in this cursory way, because for some,
his “personal” failures have no bearing on his theological work,67 and for others, the
disclaimer does not sufficiently question the authority of his theology on the basis of his
decades of abusive behaviour toward over one hundred women, according to historian
Rachel Waltner Goossen.68 Berry observes that “alone, Yoder’s work does not offer us a
sufficient analysis of power that helps us understand what is happening theologically in faith
communities where we perpetuate cycles of violence an[d] injustice. Rather, Yoder becomes
an example of how we have perpetuated these things.”69 I would agree that Yoder’s profound
failure and abuse of power severely compromises his work on gender and sexuality in
particular, and should signify that it cannot be held as authoritative for Mennonites or
others.70 And yet, precisely because of this failure, Yoder’s theology must continue to be

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70 See Susie Guenther Loewen, “Remembering Yoder Honestly,” Canadian Mennonite 18, no. 1 (Jan. 6, 2014): 33-34. A striking example of the uncritical use of Yoder’s work to address experiences of trauma
engaged critically, especially since, as Berry mentions, it reflects to some degree the gender dynamics within the Mennonite church and tradition more broadly, including the danger of sexism within traditional Mennonite peace theology. I would argue that despite Weaver’s laudable and significant strides in the right direction, these dynamics affect his work as well.

Given the complexity and ethical/theological significance of Yoder’s legacy both in the church and the academy, it is perhaps not surprising that Weaver’s relationship with Yoder’s work is likewise complex, though largely implicitly so. In some ways, Weaver relies heavily on his former teacher’s work, particularly on Yoder’s reading of Christian history as encompassing a major “Constantinian” shift away from the nonviolent ethics of Jesus and toward imperial Christendom’s accommodation of the violence of the sword (which reached its extreme in the “holy wars” of the crusades). Weaver also builds on Yoder’s Christology, but admits that in using nonviolence to critique traditional atonement theories and orthodox, creedal Christology, he has “chosen to engage in a theological task eschewed by Yoder.”

There is another sense in which Weaver deviates from a Yoderian path, however – namely, in his engagement in a sustained conversation with feminist and womanist theologians. In doing so, he takes his place among the handful of Mennonite scholars who take the concerns and experiences of women seriously, specifically with regard to problematizing the Christian glorification of suffering. Surprisingly, however, this solidarity with the concerns of


71 See, for instance, Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 102-113, etc.


women does not lead Weaver to overtly mention Yoder’s legacy of abuse or its theological implications. Nevertheless, on the grounds that his theology moves beyond Yoder’s in these significant ways, I identify Weaver as a “post-Yoderian” Mennonite theologian.

Two other aspects of Weaver’s theology in relation to that of other Mennonite theologians are important to note here. One is his biblical hermeneutic, which views the New Testament narratives about Jesus, particularly his Sermon on the Mount, as normative for Christians.74 In prioritizing these narratives for biblical hermeneutics, Weaver establishes his strongly ethical emphasis, arguing that “narrative christology” is “preeminently a christology for following,” a Christology which must involve discipleship, in contrast to the more ontological orientation evident in creedal, orthodox Christology, which he declares ethically vacuous. He observes disapprovingly that the Christological formulation of Nicaea-Chalcedon “has become the arbiter of what constitutes an orthodox or acceptable reading of the New Testament,” rather than the other way around. In effecting this reversal, he also claims greater continuity with the historical-eschatological Hebrew worldview rather than with the more Platonic worldview of Greek philosophy and a strongly ontological or metaphysical Trinitarian theology (such as that of Canadian Mennonite theologian A. James Reimer). Furthermore, for Weaver, Jesus’ teachings and example provide Christians with “peaceable” or nonviolent ethics as the specific norm for discipleship75 as well as for biblical hermeneutics. This norm allows Weaver to argue for a nonviolent understanding of God, since in the “ongoing [intra-biblical] conversation about God and how God works,” divine

74 J. Denny Weaver, “Perspectives on a Mennonite Theology,” The Conrad Grebel Review 2, no. 3 (Fall 1984): 199-200, 203.

violence does not receive confirmation and fulfillment in the Jesus narratives, whereas divine peace and nonviolence do; in fact, according to Weaver, this emphasis “suggests a rereading of the Bible’s story from beginning to end.” Thus, Weaver argues against a “flat” biblical hermeneutic which would allow divine violence in the Bible to remain authoritative on par with divine nonviolence for Christian theology, Christology, and, in turn, ethics and discipleship.76

Weaver’s emphasis on the particularity of the narratives of Jesus also translates into an emphasis on Mennonite distinctiveness. Resisting the urge to defer to the Christology of the creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon (which he argues is often assumed to constitute a universal “theology-in-general or Christianity-as-such”), he turns instead to the New Testament narratives as a more truly ecumenical starting point, and one which lends specific content to the life and ministry of Jesus and thereby illustrates the particularity of God’s (nonviolent) character.77 Moreover, Weaver argues that beginning with the biblical narratives avoids the pitfall of “evaluat[ing] Mennonite theology on the basis of the theology of another tradition”; in other words, it safeguards the distinctive contribution that Mennonite theology makes to wider Christianity. Instead of viewing Mennonite theology as the addition of several distinctive features, including an emphasis on Jesus’ rejection of violence, to a universally Christian “core” of orthodox doctrines, Weaver suggests that for Mennonites, Jesus’ nonviolence is a key part of the core; it is not necessary for Mennonite theology to assert its “validity” on the basis of the priorities of other, majority Christian traditions, which


sideline peace from the start. In short, Mennonite theology can take its place among other Christian theologies because they are also particular, distinctive, or contextual. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Weaver defines the Mennonite contribution or “agenda” as emphasizing discipleship or “a lived out faith,” peace/nonviolence, “visible church” or “the visible people of God in history,” a “communal gospel,” authoritative but not inerrant “biblicism,” etc., which provide a corrective for theologies which reflect “a separation between salvation and ethics” or “a view of the work of Christ which neglects both history and ethics.”

Concomitantly, this Mennonite contribution leads, for Weaver, to a rereading of Christian history such that an ethic of peace or nonviolence becomes the ultimate measure of the faithfulness of the church, hence his negative evaluation of the church of Christendom or of the Constantinian era, which “has supported crusades and accommodated extending the church by the sword, has countenanced colonial expansion and domination, and has condoned slavery, apartheid, and more.” Interestingly, Weaver prioritizes a distinctive Mennonite tradition even in relation to feminist, womanist, and black theologies; in other words, despite drawing deeply from these contextual, liberative theologies in developing his nonviolent theology and soteriology, Weaver does not attempt to create a theological hybrid, but instead uses contextual/liberative theologies as resources for (a more thoroughly nonviolent) Mennonite theology. Calling himself a “recovering nonresistant Mennonite,”

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80 Weaver, Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity, 137.
Weaver argues that nonresistance to evil and violence does not adequately denounce and resist systemic injustices. In his terms,

The recognition that there are systemic forms of violence such as racism (as well as sexism, patriarchy, poverty, and more) makes clear that why the principle of nonresistance is no longer an adequate peace stance. . . . Nonresistance can have a powerful impact when it constitutes a refusal to reply to evil and violence with another evil and violent act. It means little, however, in the face of systemic violence such as racism or poverty. In fact, to refuse to resist in that context is to accept the status quo and its violence.83

Rather than leading to the questioning of a peace church identity, for Weaver, the liberationist (feminist, womanist, and black) analysis of systemic violence must lead Mennonites to broaden their historic or traditional understandings of violence and peace. He calls his tradition to move beyond a simple “refusal of military violence” to recognizing injustice and oppression as forms of violence which are also to be resisted through nonviolent means. He concludes, “the would-be peace church needs to become more active in nonviolent resistance to systemic violence.” Ultimately, in Weaver’s estimation, “[i]f the church is not confronting injustice, then it is not being the church.”84

In advocating this change, Weaver echoes the concerns raised by Mennonite-feminist theologians like Carol Penner, who writes that “women’s experience has not been an important source for written Mennonite theology” and Lydia Neufeld Harder, who observes that “[t]he theology of peace, justice and non-violence that has characterized the Mennonite

81 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 5-7, 323. Weaver’s organization of this book reveals his compartmentalization of these voices, along with his claim not to speak for these other theologies as his perspective is strictly Anabaptist-Mennonite. Cf. Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity, 123.


83 Weaver, Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity, 140-141.

84 Ibid., 141.
community has generally not examined the power relationship between women and men.”

More recently, Berry has advocated contemporary Mennonite reflection on the intersection of gender and race, stating that as we “admit that Mennonite theology is not a theology that has been significantly informed by black women’s experience,” we must ask, “Exactly whose experience has significantly informed our theology?” If we remain beholden to “our favorite sixteenth-century Anabaptist(s),” Berry concludes, then we are problematically out of touch with our present-day context, and its crucial critiques of “the high price of pointless self-sacrifice.”

But as will be explored in chapter 4 below, Weaver does not sufficiently acknowledge the feminist and womanist voices within his own Mennonite tradition.

Weaver’s use of feminist, womanist, and black theologies – that is, his orientation toward the difficult questions raised by experiences of various kinds of oppression and violence – suggests, as I have argued above, that there is much common ground between Mennonite and contextual/liberative theologies. Yet, Weaver’s maintenance of the distance between feminist and womanist theologies and his own Mennonite perspective likewise draws attention to the key differences which remain between these theologies, which do not align fully. These include the feminist assumption that the feminist hermeneutics of suspicion is incompatible with a Mennonite “hermeneutics of obedience” with regard to biblical authority; a feminist emphasis on justice as opposed to the Mennonite nuance of “liberation pacifism” or “peace with justice,” especially when it comes to violence against women (which for many Mennonite women, against the grain of much feminist thought, does not

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85 Penner, “Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices,” 14, and Harder, 10-11.

86 Berry, “Needles not Nails,” 272-273, 278.

connote an exemption from the call to forgiveness and nonviolent/non-retaliatory forms of justice); and feminist calls to leave the (mainline Protestant or Catholic, politically and socially influential) church, which seldom fit with the Mennonite experience of being an often-persecuted minority with a distinctive understanding of the church as a sacred community of discipleship. This minority, communal experience suggests that Mennonite theology is often closer to black liberation and womanist perspectives than mainline feminist thought. Indeed, Weaver describes Mennonite and black perspectives as two “social location[s] on the underside,” which are “marginal in different ways and to different degrees.” Mennonite, black, and womanist theologies share emphases on the centrality of the Bible, especially the exemplarity of biblical narratives of Jesus; the alternative, subversive identity formed by the church community in an often hostile wider society, which has fostered Mennonite pacifist witness and sparked the Civil Rights movement, respectively.

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90 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 141-42.

as well as an ethic of nonviolent love, as made famous by Martin Luther King, Jr. – with its accompanying danger of sexism within the minority community.\footnote{Cone, 65 ff., Terrell, 67-68, 73-83, Grant, 206 ff., and Williams 206-219.}

3. Resistance and Love: Sölle and Weaver Define Violence and Peace

Before turning to Sölle’s and Weaver’s thoughts on the historical, theological, and ethical significance of the cross, it is necessary to sketch some of the major similarities and differences between her existentialist-liberationist-feminist understanding of peace and violence and a Mennonite peace perspective more generally, as well as Weaver’s specific post-Yoderian Mennonite understanding of peace and violence which is informed by feminist and womanist theologies. Though these distinctions may seem subtle, they have a substantial effect on Sölle’s and Weaver’s respective interpretations of the cross and redemption, as the next several chapters will reveal.

As a nonviolent liberationist-feminist, Sölle shares more Mennonite presuppositions than other feminists. Both Sölle and Mennonites are Christocentric, critiquing and measuring the Christian tradition according to the political, historical Jesus of the Bible. Sölle, therefore, does not share many feminists’ profound suspicion of biblical authority, as suggested by her supplementing of the feminist hermeneutic of suspicion with her “hermeneutic of hunger.”\footnote{See Sölle, \textit{Silent Cry}, 46-47.} Sölle and Mennonites also both view faith as primarily \textit{praxis} (some prefer to speak of Mennonite “orthopraxy” instead of “orthodoxy”),\footnote{See J. Denny Weaver, “The General versus the Particular: Exploring Assumptions in 20\textsuperscript{th}-Century Mennonite Theologizing,” \textit{The Conrad Grebel Review} 17, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 35.} which lends a certain mystical or sacred significance to relatively ordinary human action. Despite Sölle’s vehement rejection of an
ethic of “obedience,” which seems to indicate her disagreement with Harder’s Mennonite “hermeneutics of obedience,” there are in fact interesting parallels between Sölle’s appeal to Eckhart’s living “without a why or wherefore” and Mennonite understandings of Gelassenheit or surrender/yieldedness to God’s will, arguably also rooted in medieval lay monasticism, which have yet to be explored. On these grounds, both Sölle and Mennonites promote related radical peace ethics in emulation of Jesus’ empowering ministry of peace and new life, as seen above.

But crucial differences remain as well. Sölle’s existentialism sets her apart from the Mennonite tradition which, in its communal focus, has underemphasized the importance of personal or individual experience. The inverse is also true; while Sölle does not discount the contribution that the church can make toward liberation, it does not play as central a role in driving socio-political change as in most Mennonite political theologies, the latter being grounded in a minority communal experience. This was evident already in the opening quotations to this chapter. Despite their shared political focus, then, Sölle and Mennonite outlooks are shaped by distinct core experiences: for Sölle, individual experience and activism change mainstream society, while for Mennonites, the church exemplifies peace in its communal life and provides a witness as it engages in various forms of advocacy and


96 Mary H. Schertz, “Creating Justice in the Space Around Us: Toward a Biblical Theology of Peace Between Men and Women,” in Peace Theology and Violence against Women, ed. Elizabeth G. Yoder, Occasional Papers No. 16 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992), 14. She notes, “In our effort to disassociate ourselves from the abuses of western individualism, we [Mennonites] have introduced ideas and practices that come very close to sacrificing the sanctity of the individual for the good of the community into our theological understandings.” Tragically, this is especially the case in situations of sexual and physical violence against women.

97 See Sölle, Thinking about God, 139-140, and Weaver, Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity, 123-124.
promotes peace in mainstream society. This affects the way Sölle and Mennonites define peace. For Sölle, peace is the way to liberation and justice; the latter are ultimately more important to her, as she is not an absolute pacifist. But Mennonites, as evident above, are wary of joining the liberation and feminist/womanist movements uncritically, out of a concern that these movements often emphasize justice at the cost of peace. While Mennonite thinkers draw upon liberation and feminist/womanist insights, then, they also maintain a certain distance in retaining a distinctive historic peace church perspective, as seen in Weaver’s work.

Turning to Sölle and Weaver in particular, it is clear that both promulgate Christocentric ethics of active, confrontational nonviolence and thereby address the problematic theological violence of Christian masochism and redemptive suffering, but there remain distinctions between their definitions of violence. Sölle recognizes the interrelated forms of violence that lead to affliction: sexism, racism, militarism, capitalist consumerism, and apathy, which signifies her concern that failing to act or remaining a bystander when others are suffering is also violence; indeed, that seems to be one of the lingering lessons of the horrors of Auschwitz. Weaver, too, includes systemic forms of violence, namely racism, sexism/heterosexism, and classism, in his definition of violence, alongside capital punishment, war, and interpersonal verbal and physical violence. It is striking, however, to note the absence of sexual abuse and assault in his fairly detailed definition of violence in his major work, The Nonviolent Atonement, given his claim to be taking the concerns of feminist

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98 See Weaver, Nonviolent God, 171ff., 193-194.


100 Sölle, Suffering, 148.

and womanist theologians with utmost seriousness. This significant omission, which Berry also notes, reveals that Weaver has not in fact thoroughly integrated feminist and womanist insights into his critique of the atonement; despite his admirable efforts to engage these liberative theologies, he treats them as distinct, self-contained theologies, leaving little room for hybrid identities such as my own and others’ feminist-Mennonite or womanist-Mennonite positions, as I have already noted above. Sölle, on the other hand, provides a stark contrast to this compartmentalization with her multi-layered and richly hybridized theology which overflows conventional theological categories. It is safe to conclude, then, that while Sölle’s and Weaver’s definitions of violence are both greatly influenced by feminist and/or womanist theologies, she finds it much easier to self-identify as a feminist and to integrate feminist emphases into her theology, perhaps in part by virtue of her gender but also because of her close attention to experience.

Needless to say, this difference in perspective alters Sölle’s and Weaver’s respective definitions of nonviolence as well. In keeping with her existential focus – i.e., her focus on the experience of victims – Sölle stresses Jesus’ assertive nonviolence and calls for solidarity with the suffering or “the poor” as the primary means of resistance to violence. Thus, she understands peace primarily in terms of nonviolent resistance to the interrelated ills of


103 Nonviolent Atonement, 323. Weaver’s organization of his book reveals his compartmentalization of these voices, along with his claim not to speak for these other theologies as his perspective is strictly Anabaptist-Mennonite. Cf. Weaver, Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity, 121 ff. As previously mentioned, Harder, Penner, and Berry are key examples of “hybrid” theologians.
militarism and capitalism. Weaver, on the other hand, views peace somewhat more constructively, as more than the absence of war and exploitation. Thus, he advocates assertive nonviolent resistance as the following of Jesus’ call to love one’s enemies through restorative justice and reconciliation, which is embodied by the church.  

While arguably central to the Christian theological and ethical imagination, the kind of peace which arises from the love of enemies enters more rarely into the realm of experience, but is of a more eschatological significance. For Weaver, it represents a way of embodying God’s nonviolent defeat of the powers of sin and violence in the resurrection, a process which has begun but has not yet been realized in its fullness. While Sölle does not thoroughly develop an ethic of enemy-love, she does mention it in passing as common ground between Buddhist and Christian teachings.  

In my view, it also appears implicitly in her delineation of a liberation theology for the people of the “First World”; in other words, she makes room for the redemption of the perpetrators of the affliction of the “Third World.” Sölle’s references to “liberation” and “justice” are therefore much closer to the peace that Weaver envisions.

As will become clear in the chapters that follow, this is a key distinction between Sölle’s and Weaver’s approaches to the cross – Sölle starts with the experience of suffering (“from below”) and then articulates a theological response, whereas Weaver begins with commitment to a traditional peace theology and ethic and uses questions and issues drawn from contextual/ liberative theologies to render it more thoroughly and consistently nonviolent. In my view, both theological methods are crucial for a holistic theology of suffering, peace, violence, and both will contribute much to the present discussion as it approaches that central symbol of the Christian tradition, the cross.

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104 Weaver, Nonviolent God, 210ff.

105 Sölle, Silent Cry, 262.
Chapter 2
The Cross as God’s Work? Sölle’s and Weaver’s Critiques of the Three Major Historical Atonement Theories

“The Word of God . . . did righteously turn against that apostasy and redeem from it His own property, not by violent means, as the [apostasy] had obtained dominion over us at the beginning, when it insatiably snatched away what was not its own, but by means of persuasion, as became a God of counsel, who does not use violent means to obtain what He desires; so that neither should justice be infringed upon, nor the ancient handiwork of God go to destruction.”

– Irenaeus (second century, C.E.)¹

As Christian advocates of nonviolence, Sölle and Weaver both reflect on God’s role in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in order to address the puzzling disconnect between a God of peace, as depicted in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, and one of the central claims of the Christian tradition: that a violent death by crucifixion played a key part in salvation. In wrestling with this issue, both Sölle and Weaver evaluate the three atonement models that have dominated Christian history: Anselm of Canterbury’s infamous “satisfaction atonement” model, his younger contemporary Peter Abelard’s “moral influence” model, and the patristic “Christus Victor” model identified by twentieth-century theologian Gustaf Aulén. Sölle and Weaver also both make use of feminist, womanist, and liberationist interpretations of the cross which express contemporary concerns about the violent depiction of God within traditional understandings of the atonement.

¹ Irenaeus, Book V of Against Heresies, in The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1, The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1867), 527. As much as possible, I have changed the historical texts to reflect gender-inclusive language for God below, but for the sake of clarity, I have left some pronouns unchanged.
In this section, I will first delineate the three major historical atonement theories, looking specifically at how they speak about violence and justice in relation to God, followed by a summary of Sölle’s and Weaver’s critiques of the violent depictions of God and unnecessary separation of God and Jesus Christ within these theories, especially Anselm’s model and those who have built upon his model to apply it to contemporary theology (following Weaver, I will term these “Anselmian” models of the atonement). I will then explore Sölle’s historical-liberationist take on the Abelardian “moral influence” theory in which the cross represents God’s loving solidarity with the oppressed and Weaver’s refurbishing of the Christus Victor theory to emphasize Jesus’ life, ministry, and resurrection in his “narrative Christus Victor.”² I pay particular attention to Sölle’s arguments in support of maintaining an intimate connection between God and Jesus Christ, which prevents God from being depicted as a “tyrant” or “executioner” who requires and causes suffering and bloodshed or as an apathetic, “almighty spectator (which would amount to the same thing).”³ and Weaver’s parallel critique of ideas that God is responsible for Jesus’ death instead of the “powers of evil,” ideas which depict God as violent and thus contradict and undermine the nonviolent message and praxis of Jesus Christ throughout his life, death, and particularly in his resurrection, which represents God’s nonviolent victory over the powers of evil, violence, and death.⁴ My purpose in surveying the three historical atonement theories and Sölle’s and Weaver’s critiques thereof, is to show that the impulse to distinguish God’s ways from


³ Sölle, Thinking about God, 121-22, and Suffering, 148.

violence and injustice were present already in the early atonement theories, as far back as the patristic theologians, but that understandings and definitions of what constitutes violence and injustice have come to look quite different within contemporary theologies, including those of Sölle and Weaver. So, while Sölle’s and Weaver’s theologies of divine nonviolence in one sense grapple with very contemporary concerns and questions, they also, as the opening quotation above suggests, build upon a clear precedent within Christian history and theologies of redemption.

1. Justice, Charity, Victory: The Three Major Historical Atonement Theories

In the history of Christian interpretations of the cross and redemption, Anselm of Canterbury’s eleventh-century work, Cur Deus Homo (or Why God Became Human) stands out as one of the most influential articulations of the role of God in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, which he deems redemptive. It takes the form of a dialogue between Anselm and the monk, Boso, guided by the following question: “For what reason or necessity did God become [hu]man and, as we believe and confess, by his death restore life to the world, when he could have done this through another person (angelic or human), or even by a sheer act of will?” Anselm’s methodical response attempts to hold together a sense of “the ineffable height of [God’s] mercy” and “the just judgement of God” over human sin. He reasons that because of humanity’s disobedience and sin, which was undertaken “freely,” humanity is in debt to God. He writes, “[n]othing is less tolerable in the order of things than for the creature to take away the honor due to the Creator and not repay what he [or she] takes away. . . .

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5 Anselm of Canterbury, “Why God Became Man,” in The Major Works, ed. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University, 1998), 101. Where possible, I have changed the gender-exclusive language of the historical texts, including gendered terms for God. It should be noted that the Latin “homo” means “human being,” despite being commonly translated as “man” in English, perhaps because “homo” is grammatically masculine.
Therefore, either the honor that was taken away must be repaid or punishment must follow. Otherwise, God will be either unjust to himself [sic] or powerless to accomplish either; but it is impious even to imagine this."6 The problem, however, is that human beings are unable to repay God, since they owe God their very lives and everything they do, aside from the additional ‘debt’ of sin, which continues to accumulate.7 Though God is “rich in mercy beyond [human] understanding,” God cannot simply forgive the debt without the required punishment, according to Anselm; that would make a “mockery” of God’s justice and place God “in opposition to [God]self,” which is “impossible.” God requires “satisfaction,” understood as “the willing payment of [human] debt,” but because of the enormity of that debt, “no one but God can make this satisfaction”; since humanity remains “stained by the dirt of sin,” it is impossible for an ordinary human being to satisfy God’s justice.8 Anselm determines, then, that since only a human being can rightly undergo the punishment for sin and only God can freely forgive sin, it must be accomplished by a “God-Man” who is fully divine and fully human. In this way, he holds together God’s justice (satisfaction for sin) and God’s mercy (in forgiving humanity).9

In the tradition of the classical Christological formulations, one of Anselm’s key concerns in Cur Deus Homo is to ensure the logical coherence of salvation, since he is responding to those “unbelievers who reject the Christian faith because they regard it as contrary to reason.” Anselm is also careful to avoid impinging upon the absolute power, freedom, and justice of the divine, again conceived in ‘orthodox’ terms. He clarifies that God

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6 Ibid., 104, 108-9, 122.
7 Ibid., 137.
8 Ibid., 142-144, 135, 150-152. Cf. 119.
9 Ibid., 149-152, 120.
and Christ acted freely (i.e., without “violence” or “force”) for the sake of salvation – that is, God was not compelled by the devil to judge sin, nor was Christ compelled to give his life. Instead, God acted according to God’s own sense of justice and Christ, the sinless “God-Man,” went willingly and undeservingly to his death to satisfy divine justice. Finally, when asked about the inconsistency between the violence of the cross – especially insofar as it constitutes the death of an innocent – and the commandment to forgive (Matt. 6), Anselm replies that vengeance belongs to God alone and is just when God undertakes it. He also stresses that because Jesus Christ went willingly and obediently to his death, knowing it was the only way humanity could be saved, it was not unjust for God to will Jesus’ death.

Anselm’s younger near-contemporary, Peter Abelard, produced a decidedly different atonement theory, stressing the subjective rather than the purely objective workings of salvation in his *Commentaria in Epistulam Pauli ad Romanos* (or *Commentary on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*). Though Abelard was not responding directly to Anselm, he was critiquing two other objective models of the atonement and salvation put forth respectively by William of St. Thierry and Bernard of Clairvaux; thus, his critique applies indirectly to Anselm as well. Abelard grounds his commentary in the Johannine saying of Jesus’ that “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13, NRSV), thereby making the case that Jesus underwent the crucifixion primarily to demonstrate the “greatest charity” of God for humankind. In other words, for Abelard, God

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10 Ibid., 100, 107-109, 159, 161-162. See the next chapter for a contemporary Mennonite discussion of God’s freedom.

11 Ibid., 120, 115-118.


13 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.
the “Father” did not spare God’s own Son but that Christ died “to show us [God’s] love or to teach us how much we ought to love [God].” Accordingly, Abelard highlights Paul’s statements about God’s “patience” or “forbearance” in allowing sinful humanity time to repent, God’s forgiveness of believers through sheer grace, not merit, and the atonement as reconciliation.14 Commenting on Romans 3:25 (in bold), Abelard speaks of Christ,

[w]hom God the Father put forth for us as an atonement, that is, a reconciler, in his blood, that is, through his death. And because this atonement is put forth, that is, established, by God not for everyone but only for those who believe, he [Paul] adds through faith, because this reconciliation extends only to those who believed and waited for it. To demonstrate his righteousness, that is, his charity, which, as was said, justifies us with him, that is, to show us his love or to teach us how much we ought to love him, who did not spare his own Son for us.15

The key question for Abelard is how the death of God’s innocent Son brought about salvation since God could have forgiven without it, as Jesus did in the Gospels, and since it constituted a far greater crime than the tasting of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden.16 Against the satisfaction and ransom atonement theories, Abelard asserts, “How very cruel and unjust it seems to me that someone should require the blood of an innocent person as a ransom, or that in any way it might please him that an innocent person be slain, still less that God should have so accepted the death of his Son that through it he was reconciled to the whole world.” In Abelard’s view, the “blood of Christ” both justifies sinful humanity and reconciles humanity with God. Jesus’ Incarnation, teachings, and “example” in that he “persevered to the death” reveal God’s “matchless grace” and “supreme love,” freeing humanity from “slavery to sin” and from fear, so that “we may complete all things by his

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14 Abelard, 162-163.
15 Ibid., 163. Emphases his.
16 Ibid., 166, 164.
love.”17 In his view, then, neither Christ’s death itself nor its satisfaction of divine justice are salvific. Rather, Christ’s willingness to lay down his life for humanity and God’s intimately-related willingness to “put forth” the Son as a reconciler are salvific; this kind of sacrificial love on God’s and Jesus’ part is what awakens and “kindles” the same kind of sacrificial love in human beings. For Abelard, Jesus’ death is thus ultimately and lovingly directed toward humanity, not, as per Anselm, toward satisfying God “the Father’s” presumed demands for justice. For Abelard, then, “our redemption is that supreme love in us through the Passion of Christ,” that “true charity” which is not concerned with a “hoped-for benefit,” but rather “might fear to endure nothing for his sake,” to the point of “renounc[ing one’s] own will for the love of God.” Unlike Anselm, then, who stresses that Jesus went willingly to his death, Abelard reasons that “no one suffers in something unless it opposes his [or her] will. Therefore, we should not say that Christ’s soul so much desired the afflictions of the passion as it suffered them; but, what even Christ himself elsewhere professes, that he did not come to do his own will but the will of the Father.”18

Though much has been made of the seemingly modern tone of Abelard’s questions and misgivings concerning more objective interpretations of the atonement, it is important to note his two-fold understanding of sin, which is evidently influenced by the penitential system of his historical context. Abelard speaks of the cross as the “punishments of our sins,” but, following Augustine, distinguishes between original sin (that is, Adam and Eve’s initial sin of disobedience, passed down through “carnal conception and birth”), which is overcome

17 Ibid., 167-168. Cf. 163.
18 Ibid., 167-168, 231-232. It should be noted here that while Anselm speaks of God as the agent of Christ’s death, Abelard speaks of the death of Jesus Christ both as the willing act of Christ and God’s act of sacrificing the Son. Thus, Abelard does not seem to make as stark a distinction between God and Jesus Christ as Anselm does.
by the sacrament of baptism, and any subsequent sins (i.e., the sins one commits oneself during one’s lifetime), which require “the satisfaction of penance.” Since original sin alone is worthy of eternal damnation, God condemns children who die without being baptised to “the perpetual fire” (which he understands figuratively, as representing God’s absence), just as God handed Jesus over to a punishment he did not deserve. Abelard asks, “Should it not be judged most unjust among men [sic] if someone should hand over his [or her] innocent son to transitory flames on account of the father’s [or mother’s] sin, much less to perpetual ones?” Though this seems contrary to the justice or “righteousness” of God which gives to each what he or she deserves, Abelard argues, somewhat against Augustine, that God’s “charity” and “grace” supersede the simple weighing of “merits,” as in the command to “repay our enemies good for evil, not according to their merits.” Like Anselm, Abelard is interested in preserving the absolute freedom and otherness of God, so he argues that “in whatever way God wishes to treat his creature, he cannot be accused of any injustice”; “vengeance” belongs only to God. Even when God seems unjustly cruel, as in the condemnation of unbaptised children, God is in actuality being “lenient” and acting out of God’s “great grace” for “our correction” and the good of humanity, in the same way that “good princes” can justly use violence. Thus, it would seem that Abelard ultimately applies his emphasis on subjectivity or internal intention to God and God’s actions as well.

The third major model of the atonement traces a broad pattern within the writings of a number of patristic theologians; namely, the *Christus Victor* or Christ the Victor pattern, so

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19 Ibid., 175-176, 221, 223.

20 Ibid., 218-219, 221-222. Cf. 235 for further discussion of the “law of love.”

21 Ibid., 220, 222, 224. Despite distinguishing between God’s ways of acting and ours, he nevertheless compares God’s acting for “our correction” with the violence of “good princes” who inflict violence on the innocent “subjects” of “some tyrant.”
identified by twentieth-century theologian Gustaf Aulén. According to Aulén, in limiting debates concerning atonement to the Anselmian and Abelardian theories alone, theologians up to his time had been neglecting a third, more ancient or “classic” type, partly because it was dismissed as a mere rough draft of the more polished atonement theories of Anselm and Abelard, and because of a distaste for its use of “dramatic,” “mythological,” and dualistic imagery for salvation, understood as a cosmic struggle between God and the powers of evil.  

In Aulén’s terms, “Its central theme is the idea of the Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ – Christus Victor – fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the ‘tyrants’ under which [hu]mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to [God]self.” While Aulén used the thought of sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther as a key example of this theory, I will instead limit my discussion to two patristic variations which have gained considerable influence as representative of the Christus Victor model: Irenaeus’ “recapitulation” model and Gregory of Nyssa’s ‘fish and hook’ metaphor for the ransom variation of the Christus Victor model.

Aulén refers to Irenaeus’ second-century interpretation of Christus Victor as the earliest “thorough treatment” of the atonement. In Irenaeus’ Adversus Haereses (Against Heresies), he draws heavily from Scripture, especially from the Pauline letters, to outline his theology of “recapitulation” (i.e., Christ’s repetition of human history in order to reverse human sin and its consequences) based on I Corinthians 15:22: “for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.” According to Irenaeus, the Incarnation and death of Christ as

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23 Ibid., 19-20.

24 See Ibid., 32 ff., 119 ff.

25 Ibid., 16.
the Second Adam comprised an allegorical echo of Adam’s creation, while Christ’s sinless obedience and righteousness undid Adam’s disobedience, with its attendant “bondage” to sin and death, and estrangement from God. He thus emphasizes, against various heresies of his time, that Christ indeed took on human flesh “of the same substance as ours” in order that our same flesh, which “had perished” and “become inimical through transgression,” might be “saved” and “reconciled” to God or brought back “into friendship with God.” Irenaeus likewise emphasizes the salvific power of the blood of Christ, understood as his passion on the “tree” of the cross, which recapitulates Adam’s disobedience in tasting of the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: “‘He became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross;’ rectifying that disobedience which had occurred by reason of a tree through that obedience which was (wrought out) upon the tree (of the cross).” Interestingly, Irenaeus also applies the logic of recapitulation to the actions of Eve and Mary, paralleling the disobedience of the “espoused” “virgin Eve” in listening to the false words of an angel (the Serpent) with the obedience of Mary, also an espoused virgin, to the truthful words of an angel. Accordingly, Irenaeus describes salvation primarily as the victory of Christ over death, glimpsed most clearly, of course, in the resurrection, which is an eschatological promise of the future resurrection of all of the saved. He describes this at length in terms of the defeat of Satan:

it was necessary, that through man himself [sic] he [“the apostate angel of God”] should, when conquered, be bound with the same chains with which he had bound man [sic, etc.], in order that man, being set free, might return to his Lord, leaving to him (Satan) those bonds by which he himself [humanity] had been fettered, that is,

26 Irenaeus, 527, 541-542.
27 Ibid., 544. Cf. 545.
28 Ibid., 547. He states, “And thus, as the human race fell into bondage to death by means of a virgin, so it is rescued by a virgin.”
For Irenaeus, recapitulation accomplishes: the just exposure and defeat of Satan through obedience to the law (which he argues using the narrative of Jesus’ temptation in the desert), divine victory over death through resurrection, and the sanctification of humanity, including the restoration of human beings into “the image and likeness of God” through the Incarnation itself, which in turn makes possible the human imitation of Christ. Thus, Irenaeus concludes, “our Lord Jesus Christ, . . . did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.”

For the purposes of this study, several aspects of Irenaeus’ perspective are worth noting, particularly his understanding of divine power in relation to violence. He asserts that God’s means of bringing salvation about are just, reasonable, and not tainted by violence, in contrast to the injustice and violence of Satan. Here I return to the opening words of the present chapter, and Irenaeus’ statement that God redeemed humanity “not by violent means, as the [apostasy] had obtained dominion over us at the beginning, when it insatiably snatched away what was not its own, but by means of persuasion, as became a God of counsel, who does not use violent means to obtain what He desires; so that neither should justice be infringed upon, nor the ancient handiwork of God go to destruction.” Irenaeus likewise speaks of God’s power in terms of healing and the ability to bring forth life, as in both creation and resurrection, which translates into a valuing of the body as God’s good

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29 Ibid., 567, 549-550.

creation. This signifies for Irenaeus that even the witness of the martyrs does not ultimately convey the inferiority or disposability of the body, but the integration of the strength of the Spirit into human flesh, which leads martyrs to “despise death” itself. This way of framing martyrdom shifts the focus again to sanctification, and begins to unravel the idea of their supposedly redemptive and passive submission to suffering. Still, Irenaeus is somewhat inconsistent when it comes to God’s violence. Though he speaks of God loving humanity while humanity was yet God’s enemy through disobedience and sin, he also asserts that God’s salvation is selective instead of universal, that God exacts vengeance on Satan, and that God works through the violence of kings and ruling authorities, which act as God’s “ministers.”

In his *Oratio Catechetica Magna* (*Great Catechetical Oration* or *Great Catechism*), fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nyssa expands upon the theme of the captivity of humanity, describing Jesus Christ as the ransom given to Satan (“the Enemy”) in exchange for humanity, which was in bondage to sin and death. Gregory is careful to argue, against his “opponents,” that evil did not originate with God, nor does it consist in anything but the “absence of virtue,” as blindness is the absence of sight. Evil is the consequence of the free choice of humanity to turn away from virtue and emulate the “envy” of “the adversary,” “like one who in the sunshine lets his [or her] eyelids down upon his eyes and sees only darkness”; but this blindness and captivity also results from the deception of “the adversary,” which “would never have succeeded, had not the glamour of beauty been spread over the hook of

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31 Ibid., 527, 529-531, 564. Cf. 550, 534.
32 Ibid., 535.
vice like a bait.” To the question of why God did not prevent human captivity, Gregory replies by reiterating that evil and sin did not originate with God, but God already foresaw and “pre-arranged” the salvation and restoration of humanity to its “original beauty” before creation. For Gregory, God thus responds lovingly to the human need for a “healer” and a “ransomer,” even devising death as but a temporary “coat” over the true immortality of humanity, a coat which will be removed when sin no longer holds humanity captive. The divine response he speaks of is not the cross alone, however, but the entire Incarnation, Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection. For Gregory, it was necessary for Jesus to undergo a human life in its entirety in order for him to touch and heal every aspect of human experience, including uniting the soul and body, formerly divided by death, through resurrection. More famously, Gregory also expounds on the image of the divine “ransomer,” explaining that God took on human form as a kind of disguise, and in leading a miraculous human life, appealed to Satan as a superior captive. Satan thus agreed to the exchange and Christ was handed over to death, leading to divine victory over evil. In Gregory’s words, God was “hidden under the veil of our nature, that so, as with a ravenous fish, the hook of the Deity might be gulped down along with the bait of flesh and thus, life being introduced into the house of death, and light shining in darkness, that which is diametrically opposed to light and life might vanish.”


35 Ibid., 484, 500, 487, 482-483.

36 Ibid., 488-489, 496, 499.

37 Ibid., 487, 493.

38 Ibid., 494. Cf. 493.
Like the other theologians above, Gregory argues that God used just means to redeem humanity, as the exchange of Christ for sinful humanity connotes an avoidance of the use of violence or of sheer divine will to save humanity. In Gregory’s view, God even went so far as to heal Satan, and thereby exemplified enemy-love. As for God’s use of deception in disguising Godself as human, God’s intentions exonerate God from any wrongdoing, since unlike Satan’s deception, which was for evil purposes, God used deception for good; interestingly, Gregory makes this distinction despite describing both using the imagery of fish-hooks.39 Also of note is Gregory’s emphasis on the entire Incarnation. Though the cross was important as the “pre-arranged death” which ensured the fairness of the divine transaction with Satan, redemption is not reducible to the cross, since the entire Incarnation was necessary to appeal to Satan as a valuable ransom, and since the resurrection, the post-resurrection miracles, and the ascension ultimately confirm the divinity of Christ and the divine victory over sin and death.40 Finally, Gregory also understands divine power as healing, loving, and unifying power, which is ultimately stronger than death, as seen especially in his description of the cross as a unifying embrace.41

In sum, there are several aspects of these historic atonement theories which arguably begin to lay the foundation for Sölle’s and Weaver’s nonviolent interpretations of the cross and redemption. These aspects, furthermore, are not limited to the two specific theories which Sölle and Weaver revise (i.e., a liberationist Abelardian theory and “narrative Christus Victor,” respectively).42 First, three of the four theologians link violence with injustice,

39 Ibid., 492-493, 495-496. Cf. 487, 491, 499. This resonates with Augustinian and Thomist thought on intention and the just use of violence, which I will explore further below.

40 Ibid., 493, 500.

41 Ibid., 483, 486-9, 496, 498-500. Cf. 481, 479.
arguing that God does not impose God’s will on others (Anselm, Gregory) nor simply steal humanity away from Satan, its captor (Irenaeus, Gregory). All four mention the love of enemies (Abelard, Irenaeus, Gregory) or forgiveness (Anselm), but make exceptions either for God and/or ruling authorities, who justly exercise “vengeance” on the basis of their power and authority (Anselm, Abelard, Irenaeus), and/or on the basis of internal, subjective intention of “correction” or the greater good (Abelard, Gregory). Abelard’s theory in particular helpfully highlights that God’s love, like the love of enemies, overflows notions of justice as the simplistic weighing of merits, but nevertheless asserts that God and divinely-ordained authorities are free to use violence for good, or even as a form of love – a disturbing line of argument shared by other theologians above, which also undergirds much Just War thinking.43 It is above all clear that patristic, Christus Victor theologians like Irenaeus and Gregory have a much broader sense of the redemptive significance of the entire Incarnation, including the resurrection, and provide an interesting precedent for Christian feminist valuing of embodied experience, rejection of soul/body dualism, and suspicion of masochism. Like Irenaeus and Gregory, Abelard presents a thoroughly biblically-grounded theology, regularly citing the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life and teachings. Anselm, by contrast, is the most removed from the biblical narratives, presenting a much more philosophical and abstract theology, thus, he has a reductive understanding of redemption as primarily limited to the moment of the cross or almost exclusively to Jesus’ death. Even when he speaks of Jesus’ example, he is referring to Jesus’ exemplary self-sacrifice.44 Furthermore, in Anselm’s and,

42 As with my use of “Anselmian” above, here I use “Abelardian” to express that Sölle builds upon Abelard’s theory but augments and reinterprets it according to her liberationist-feminist theological emphases.

43 Just War logic will be explored further in the next chapter.

44 See Anselm, 161, 177, 180.
to a lesser extent, Abelard’s theories, the roles of God and Jesus Christ within that moment have been radically distinguished; as Aulén argues, Christus Victor presents atonement or redemption as a “continuous Divine work” (i.e., as carried out by God Godself), whereas the other theories present it as a “discontinuous Divine work” (i.e., carried out by Christ and directed toward God).45 Again, Anselm’s theory divides God from Christ more starkly, especially since he argues that God’s justice requires Christ’s death, whereas for Abelard, God allows Christ to die and Christ goes to his death to demonstrate God’s love for humanity. Still, this separation between God and Christ, whether stark or more subtle, is at the root of what is problematic about traditional understandings of the atonement for contemporary theologians like Sölle and Weaver, who are concerned about the theological and ethical implications of notions of divine violence. I now turn to their critiques and reinterpretations of the major historical atonement theories.

2. Divine Solidarity or Defeat of ‘the Powers’? Sölle and Weaver on Nonviolent Atonement

Sölle and Weaver each evaluate aspects of these three major historical atonement theories from their respective liberationist-feminist and Anabaptist-Mennonite perspectives, closely analyzing the relationship between God, Jesus Christ, and violence. While Sölle does not organize her critique around these three atonement theories, her argument touches on all of them. Sölle finds Anselm’s theory to be the most problematic, perhaps because it is, as she points out, the most influential atonement theory within Western Christianity. In her early work, she determines that Anselm’s perspective is “juristic,” based on a view of God as a king who has been dishonoured by human sin, and that Christ’s role, according to Anselm, is

45 Aulén, 5-6. Emphasis his.
to restore this honour through satisfaction. But Sölle finds several gaps in Anselm’s theory: first, she finds the logic of satisfaction arbitrary, since if God forgave after satisfaction was made, God must have been predisposed to forgive. “In other words,” she asks, “is *satisfactio* as an objectifiable fact sufficient to explain forgiveness as a voluntary act? What view of God lies behind all this?” The necessity for satisfaction rests on the assumption that God is “irreconcilable” in Godself (i.e., God “needs first to be appeased by Christ’s act” before even considering forgiveness), which creates “an artificial yet irreducible tension” between “God’s justice or Christ’s mercy,” in Sölle’s view. She deems this division within God unbiblical since according to II Corinthians 5:19, God is the *subject or agent* of reconciliation with the world, not the *object*.⁴⁶ Here Sölle presents a variation on Aulén’s “*continuous* Divine work.” In her view, Anselm’s theory thus “legalizes” the relationship between God and humanity, or, alternately, depicts salvation in terms of “the injured good. . . rather than as the restoration of a broken relationship.” In addition, Sölle argues that Anselm omits Christ’s relationship to humanity in his theory, since Christ’s action is “unrepeatable” and occurs independently of humanity; as Sölle states, “[i]n Anselm’s presentation, Christ stands facing God, so to speak, but with his back to us.” There is little sense that Christ suffered *for* humanity or even *instead of* humanity, but mainly that Christ suffered to appease or satisfy God, which cements redemption into a “system of domination and servitude.” There is also no mention in Anselm of the new life made possible by Christ, in part because Anselm reduces Christ’s representative role to his death alone.⁴⁷ As she puts it,

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⁴⁷ Ibid., 73-75, 119. Though she does not sufficiently differentiate satisfaction from substitution, Dianne L. Oliver writes that Sölle’s *Christ the Representative* posits that “There is no need for any relationship between the substitute and the one for whom substitution is offered. In that way, our reconciliation with God,
it is only indirectly that Christ acts ‘for us,’ his representation being narrowly circumscribed and in fact confined legalistically to one particular unrepeatable action [i.e., the cross]. The representative intervenes for those represented, not with his whole existence, but with one particular act. Further, . . . representation is inevitably interpreted in exclusive terms, and its provisional character is missing. Christ stands where we shall never stand, either actually or potentially; his action creates salvation independently of those he represents.48

In her later work, Sölle stresses the distinction between atonement theories which depict God reconciling Godself through God’s own suffering and “victory over death,” and those, like Anselm’s, which starkly separate Christ from God, depicting Christ as an offering made to appease God. The latter type of theory is clearly more problematic for her, as it places God either in the position of the “tyrant” “executioner” who requires and causes suffering and bloodshed or in the position of “almighty spectator (which would amount to the same thing).”49 According to Sölle, such a stark division between God and Christ is based on an apathetic notion of God which bears much more resemblance to Greek philosophical (Aristotelian) definitions of divinity than to the biblical God, who is passionate, emotional, and suffers. In an effort to remain faithful to this Greek concept of God’s apathy or impassibility (i.e., God’s inability to suffer), Christian thinkers have distanced not only God and Christ, asserting that only “one of the persons of the Trinity’ suffered,” but also splintered Christ’s humanity from his divinity, so that only part of Christ (his humanity) suffers and dies on the cross. Sölle rejects the doctrine of God’s impassibility in favour of the witness of the Gospels that Christ indeed suffered, and therefore that God is passible, as

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48 Sölle, Christ the Representative, 74. Cf. Oliver, 116-117, who states that Sölle is here critiquing “Christian perfectionism which claims that Christ’s action two thousand years ago has completed the act of redemption once and for all” rather than viewing “redemption as a process in which we are involved,” which engages “our responsibility in transforming the world.”

49 Sölle, Thinking about God, 121-122, and Suffering, 148.
suggested by Jesus’ assertion, “I and the Father are one (John 10:30).” Sölle here agrees with fellow German political theologian Jürgen Moltmann that God can and does suffer, but he maintains that God the “Father” and God the “Son” suffered differently in the event of the cross. Moltmann states, “[t]he suffering and dying of the Son, forsaken by the Father, is a different kind of suffering from the suffering of the Father in the death of the Son. . . . The Fatherlessness of the Son is matched by the Sonlessness of the Father. . . .” Sölle finds this compromise unacceptable, as it divides God too much from Godself.  

For Sölle, Jesus “represents” God to us, both the “death of God” in the sense of the “dissolving of a particular conception of God” as one who apathetically fails to intervene or “who has left us,” and in the sense of representing/revealing God as one who in fact “lives for us and with us,” which includes sharing our suffering. This recovery of the intimacy between God and Christ signifies for Sölle that in the event of the cross, it truly is God who is being crucified. She states, “God is not in heaven; [God] is hanging on the cross. Love is not an otherworldly, intruding, self-asserting power – and to meditate on the cross can mean to take leave of that dream.” For Sölle, the cross is thus a revelation of God’s solidarity with human suffering, a sign that God remains “on the side of the victim.”

Sölle’s assertion of God’s closeness to the cross seems to place her in line with the depictions of God in the Christus Victor and moral influence theories. But despite this basic similarity, I would argue that her view does not easily align with the Christus Victor theory, which is predicated on an understanding of God as in some sense already victorious (or

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51 Sölle, Christ the Representative, 130, 132-134.

52 Sölle, Suffering, 148.
guaranteed to be unequivocally victorious in the eschaton) over the powers of evil through the “pre-arranged” exchange on the cross. For Sölle, this perspective does not address the ambiguity of our experience of the ongoing, real power of evil and our responsibility to resist it and not simply wait for redemption to occur by divine fiat. The above summary has already hinted that in Sölle’s view, orthodox theology overemphasizes God’s power, understood as absolute sovereignty and control over history, at the cost of God’s love, which is “shared power.”

Her commitment to doing theology “after Auschwitz” does not allow her to dismiss the questions posed by theodicy by appealing to an end to suffering only in the afterlife (a ‘heavenly reward’) or to an almighty God’s inscrutable plans. In other words, Sölle’s rejection of the doctrine of God’s impassibility corresponds to her questioning of the doctrine of God’s omnipotence, which undergirds theodicy. With fourteenth-century mystic Meister Eckhart, Sölle prays for “God to rid me of God,” that is, for the God of the crucified Christ to rid her of the omnipotent, impassible, apathetic God, or “every God who is less than love.” For Sölle, the only way God can be “justified” in the face of innocent suffering is “in sharing the suffering, in sharing the death on the cross.” But in Sölle’s estimation, the cross of Christ is also not a unique event. She states that the suffering of Christ “is only understood and appropriated when its continuation is understood. Jesus continues to die before our eyes: his death has not ended. He suffers wherever people are tormented.” Therefore, she concludes, “the truth of the symbol [of the cross] lies precisely in its repeatability.”

Elsewhere, she quotes Blaise Pascal’s statement that “Jesus will be in agony until the end of the

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54 Sölle, *Suffering*, 92, 149, 95, 94. Sölle is here rejecting a certain kind of eschatology that protects the status quo in encouraging the oppressed to submit to their suffering in hopes of being rewarded after death.

55 Ibid., 146, 139-140, 82.
the world; we must not sleep during that time.” Sölle’s rejection of an omnipotent God as well as her assertion of the ongoing “repeatability” of the cross – signify that her position cannot be easily reconciled with the Christus Victor model, including Weaver’s revised version, as will become evident below.

Sölle’s emphasis on the cross as primarily demonstrative of loving divine solidarity with human suffering suggests that her position best aligns with Abelard’s moral influence theory of the atonement. Indeed, I would argue that her position is a variation of that theory, but with several significant qualifications. In her brief treatment of this theory as characteristic of Enlightenment liberalism (evident in the theologies of Friedrich

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56 Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 99. Cf. Oliver, 118, 111, who identifies *Christ the Representative* as Sölle’s most “eschatological” work because Christ “ provisionally” represents us before God and God’s absence requires that we “ provisionally” represent God to each other. Oliver concludes that this ethical understanding of eschatology (“not simply as an attempt to ‘postpone’ fulfillment and hold out the proverbial carrot, but to recognize our role and responsibility in transforming the world”) is already less pronounced in *Suffering*, which stresses the “transformation of suffering . . . in the world and in history.”

57 Ibid., 125.
Schleiermacher, Ernst Troeltsch, etc.), Sölle posits that its basic premise is that God’s love for humanity does not change, and that the cross is therefore not needed to convince God to love, as Anselmian atonement theories suggest. Instead, Christ reveals the “fatherly love” of God, which God was offering all along.\textsuperscript{58} Sölle’s statements elsewhere echo this sentiment, from her repudiation of “every God who is less than love” to her key statements concerning God siding with the suffering victims instead of being the great causer of suffering. She writes, “the cross is neither a symbol expressing the relationship between God the Father and his [sic] Son nor a symbol of masochism which needs suffering in order to convince itself of love. It is above all a symbol of reality. Love does not ‘require’ the cross, but \textit{de facto} it ends up on the cross.”\textsuperscript{59} This indicates Sölle’s divergence from the moral influence model, which for her, treats the cross as a mere symbol and lacks a groundedness in history and experience, a groundedness she finds in liberation theology. For liberation theologians, the cross signifies the oppression of the poor, who have been and continue to be crucified by injustice, both in Jesus’ time, when those who spoke against the Roman occupation were condemned to the brutal torture of crucifixion, as well as today, when people who dare to speak out and act against injustice experience suppression, torture, and death at the hands of governments and/or occupiers. Sölle terms this the “real-political” and “objective” significance of the cross, which she translates into the idea that “Love does not cause suffering or produce it, though it must necessarily seek confrontation, since its most important concern is not the avoidance of suffering but the liberation of people. Jesus’ suffering was avoidable. He endured it voluntarily.”\textsuperscript{60} In other words, for Sölle, God does not love humanity in some

\textsuperscript{58} Sölle, \textit{Thinking about God}, 123.

\textsuperscript{59} Sölle, \textit{Suffering}, 94, 148, 163-164.
abstract, otherworldly way, but loves through sharing the plight of the “least of these” and struggling with them for the sake of liberation; “within visible reality” (i.e., the reality of present experiences of suffering), she states, “God chooses to act paradoxically.”

Interestingly, despite the closeness and near-interchangeability between God and Jesus Christ in her theology, she avoids forging a ‘high’ Christology in which Jesus is more divine than human (a perspective which can drift into Docetism), but instead describes her perspective as “christology ‘from below’” (Christology from the perspective of the oppressed). She clarifies that while Christology “from above” is most concerned with “Easter” or the resurrection (the victorious, triumphant Christ), Christology “from below” stresses the cross, which the oppressed can relate to their experiences of suffering. While not unrelated to “high” and “low” Christologies which respectively stress Jesus’ divinity and humanity, the categories “from above” and “from below” are not primarily references to Jesus’ identity in and of himself (i.e., the “substances” of his humanity and divinity, as the classic Christological formulations emphasize), but rather about how Jesus is experienced by and alive to people (especially people who are suffering).61 Indeed, I would argue that Sölle’s theology (as in, theology proper, her depiction of God the Creator) is likewise “from below,” since she seeks to dethrone the almighty, omnipotent God of orthodox Christian theology who offers nothing but cruelty or indifference to the oppressed. Her focus on the cross as above all a demonstration of divine love thus signifies that her position resonates most profoundly with

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60 Ibid., 164, and Thinking about God, 123-124. Cf. Theology for Skeptics, 106.

61 Sölle, Suffering, 164, Thinking about God, 111-114, and Theology for Skeptics, 96-97. Sölle’s position is distinct from feminist arguments that Jesus was not divine, which will be discussed further in chapter 4 below. See Isabel Carter Heyward, The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation (New York: University of America, 1982), 31-34, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus, Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology (New York: Continuum, 1994), 157, 178, 164, 161.
the moral influence theory of the atonement, but with an added historical-liberationist emphasis.

Weaver’s treatment of the three theories of the atonement is much more systematic than Sölle’s, but he also examines the Anselmian theory and variations thereof in the most depth, as it is likewise the most problematic explanation of the atonement for him. In Weaver’s estimation, Anselm sets up a false dichotomy between God’s “justice” and God’s “mercy,” such that God changes from one disposition to the other before and after the event of the cross. Weaver concludes that because of Anselm’s overemphasis on a “legal and penal framework” for salvation and because he removes Satan or the powers of evil from salvation, “[t]he God envisioned in satisfaction atonement is not actually a merciful God. This God forgives only after receiving his ‘pound of flesh,’ only after having divine justice or divine honor restored through the death of Jesus.”62 Weaver turns to feminist theologians Joanne Carlson Brown, Rebecca Parker, and Rita Nakashima Brock, who see satisfaction atonement as an image of “divine child abuse” or “cosmic child abuse” (in that the “Father” requires or even causes the death of the “Son”), as well as womanist theologian Delores Williams, who is critical of substitutionary interpretations of the atonement because they imply that African-American women’s experiences of sexual/reproductive, nurturing, and labour “surrogacy” during and after slavery are likewise redemptive instances of suffering on behalf of others.63 Following these theologians, among others, Weaver concludes that the God depicted in Anselmian satisfaction atonement is unacceptably violent, especially in light of the

62 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 16-17, 96-98.

nonviolence of Jesus Christ. For Weaver, God and Christ cannot be starkly divided in this way – at least not without contradicting the orthodox understanding of the unity of the persons of the Trinity. He writes,

I suggest . . . that if Jesus rejected the sword and his action portrayed nonviolent confrontation of evil in making the reign of God visible, then it ought not to be thinkable that the God who is revealed in Jesus would orchestrate the death of Jesus in a scheme that assumed doing justice meant the violence of punishment, or a scheme in which a divinely sanctioned death paid a debt to restore God’s honor. If Jesus truly reveals God the Father, then it would be a contradiction for Jesus to be nonviolent and for God to bring about salvation through divinely orchestrated violence. . . .

Weaver further disagrees with Anselm’s atonement theory because it renders the cross an intra-Trinitarian “transaction” between God the “Father” and God the “Son” which transpires somehow outside of history, divorced from Jesus’ life and resurrection. This transcendent ahistoricity obscures the ties of Anselm’s theory to his hierarchical, feudal context. In such a context, it becomes clear that Anselm’s concept of God’s offended honour is based on the roles of the feudal lords and kings of his day; even Anselm’s copious use of economic metaphors for sin (as overwhelming debt beyond human ability to repay) shows evidence of a hierarchical worldview which uncritically accepts not only violence as redemptive, but, I would add, poverty and economic injustice as somehow willed by God and correlated with a penitential understanding of sin. Also, Weaver points out that “Anselm’s Cur Deus Homo appeared during the first crusade,” and in depicting God as violent, comprised part of the theological foundation for the Christian accommodation of violence (or “Constantinian”


Though Anselm, perhaps surprisingly, exhorts Christians to the imitation of Jesus, Weaver makes the case that Anselm reduces Jesus’ example to his death, and thus that he contributes to the sacrificial theological logic which compelled soldiers to give their very lives for the “holy war” of the crusade. As a result, as Brock and Parker argue, in Anselm’s Cur Deus Homo, “the Incarnation’s sole purpose was to drive relentlessly to the act of dying,” which, Weaver agrees, problematically “models submission to abusive authority as a virtue.”

By contrast, as will become evident below, Weaver’s attention to the “life, death, and resurrection” of Jesus translates into looking beyond what Jesus died for to what “he lived for” – meaning that in a very different way from Anselm’s sense of it, the imitation of Jesus “costs us our lives, which we give to God for the rest of our time on earth.”

Weaver also applies his critique to contemporary defenses and reinterpretations of Anselm’s satisfaction atonement theory (which he calls the Anselmian “family of atonement theories”), including penal or punitive models, which stress Jesus’ “payment of the penalty that the law required of sinners,” and satisfaction models, including substitutionary variations, which stress what God in Jesus Christ has done on behalf of human beings in suffering and dying in their place. Weaver recognizes the considerable status Anselmian atonement has gained within “orthodox” Protestantism, in part due to Luther’s and Calvin’s propensities for this theory at the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, and also acknowledges the distinction between “satisfaction and punishment” within Anselm’s original theory (i.e., in voluntarily offering himself on the cross, Jesus makes satisfaction

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66 Ibid., 113, 315, 312-313, 17, 98-100. Cf. Nonviolent God, 69-80. For imagery of sin as debt or poverty, see Anselm, 122-123, 135-137, 142-145.


68 Ibid., 46, 65, 75, 312.
instead of God punishing sinners through divine wrath/violence). But Weaver nevertheless insist that Anselmian models of the atonement are irretrievably tainted by violence; all defenses of Anselm depict God as requiring violence for the sake of salvation, and therefore undermine the centrality of the biblical-historical, nonviolent Christ – that is, the very “life and work of Christ.”

For Weaver, the biblical narrative of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection in its entirety thus functions as “an arbiter” within biblical hermeneutics, picking up the thread of references to divine nonviolence which runs throughout the Old and New Testaments, indicating that nonviolence is central to God’s character – as well as to the Christian calling.

Interestingly, Weaver has been described as “largely Abelardian” because of his emphasis on nonviolent discipleship – that is, the importance of human ethics as co-operation with God in redemption. As seen above, though, an ethical emphasis is not exclusive to Abelard; even Anselm speaks about following Jesus’ example (though, as seen above, he reduces this example to the cross alone). Weaver also admits to sharing Abelard’s discomfort with the “harsh and judgmental” God whom Christ died to appease according to Anselmian satisfaction atonement theories. Despite these similarities, however, Weaver deems several central premises of the moral influence theory problematic. Firstly, he takes issue with the Abelardian notion that salvation is purely subjective, that the cross only marks a change from sinful rebellion to love of God within the minds and hearts of believers. For


Weaver, such a stance is reductive, as the resurrection marks God’s decisive defeat of the powers of evil as an ‘objective’ event in history which “invites” believers to ally themselves with God’s reign (the ‘subjective’ aspect, which engages the agency of believers). In his words, “[t]he resurrection revealed the true balance of power in the universe whether sinners perceive it or not. Sinners can ignore the resurrection and continue in opposition to the reign of God, but the reign of God is still victorious.” In this way, Weaver accounts for the reality of sin, making human evil directly responsible for the violence of the cross instead of attempting to excuse it as God’s will or as necessary for redemption. For Weaver, to sin is to side with the powers of evil against God, and thus to be responsible for the cross. The alternative offered by God

occurs when we switch sides, from the side of the powers arrayed against the rule of God to the side of the reign of God. This . . . engages our own responsibility. It is represented by Jesus’ call, “Follow me,” which is presumed in the Anabaptist emphasis on “discipleship.” On the other hand, . . . we cannot save ourselves, we cannot successfully oppose the powers of evil on our own. We need help. That help is the transforming action of God to grab us and change us to the side of the reign of God in spite of ourselves. To put that in trinitarian language, this transforming action is the Holy Spirit. . . .

Weaver clearly does not place his hope in the human ability to turn away from sin on our own, but he nevertheless makes space for human responsibility or agency as well; true to his Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, Weaver here stresses the real possibility of sanctified discipleship, against perspectives stressing the total depravity of humankind, predestination, or a Niebuhrian Christian realism (which deems nonviolent ethics naïve). In this way, Weaver asserts that salvation is a balance of subjective and objective elements. Weaver likewise disagrees with the premise that the death of Jesus itself demonstrates God’s love

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73 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 315, 312-313.
instead of constituting an attempt by the powers of evil to defeat God’s reign.74 Within feminist and womanist debates concerning the significance of the cross for those who are oppressed (due to sex/orientation, race, class, etc.), Weaver sides with Brown and Parker, Brock, and Williams, who, in rejecting the myth of redemptive suffering, see the cross as a moment of tragedy rather than of triumph.75 Weaver states, “the death of Jesus is clearly the responsibility of the forces of evil, and it is not needed by or aimed at God.”76 Correspondingly, Weaver dismisses feminist, womanist and liberationist theologians who argue that the cross is redemptive as an instance of divine solidarity with human suffering, as Sölle does.77 He claims that this line of argument underemphasizes the resurrection, dispenses unnecessarily with a high Christology, and fails to overcome the problem of God requiring violence, even in the form of divine self-harm or “divine suicide,” to show God’s love. For Weaver, the cross was not the “will of God” except insofar as Jesus died rather than betraying the reign of God through violence; death is “the result of Jesus’ mission rather than its purpose,” and in and of themselves, his suffering and death are not redemptive.78 To ascribe any further theological significance to the cross is to reify “sacrificial violence”; here, Weaver follows Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker’s critique of Abelard, who implies “that we come to love most fully be [sic – by] being moved by torture and execution as an act of self-sacrificing love for us, which then becomes the model for our own lives.” In

74 Ibid., 18-19, 47-48.
75 See Brown and Parker, 27; Brock, 93-94; and Williams, 162-167.
76 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 161.
Weaver’s revised model of redemption, “narrative Christus Victor, the death of Jesus is anything but a loving act of God.”79 Thus, Weaver claims that his perspective on the cross ultimately clashes with the moral influence theory, including the variation stressing God’s suffering solidarity with the oppressed.

In naming his perspective “narrative Christus Victor,” Weaver is overt about revising the Christus Victor model of the atonement to fit with his understanding of the nonviolent character of God and therefore of salvation.80 As with Anselmian and Abelardian atonement theories, Weaver takes issue with the violent depiction of God in “classic” Christus Victor, particularly the idea that God is “the Father who sacrifices one of God’s children for the sake of the remainder of God’s children.” Instead of the framework of a “cosmic battle” and the idea that God uses Christ’s violent death “as a ransom or ploy” to effect salvation, Weaver advocates a “demythologized and historicized” version of Christus Victor grounded in the biblical narratives of Jesus.81 He thus revises Christus Victor to emphasize Jesus’ life of active, confrontational nonviolent resistance alongside his death and resurrection, and thus addresses both the issues of redemptive violence (i.e., God requiring or causing Jesus’ death) and redemptive suffering (i.e., Jesus as the exemplary, passive victim of abuse). It is important for Weaver that Christus Victor maintains a place for the devil in salvation; in his view, Anselm’s attempt to remove Satan or “the powers of evil” from salvation was


81 Weaver, Nonviolent God, 62-63, 73. Cf. 65, 86.
erroneous, as it makes God responsible for the brutal violence of the cross. As already mentioned, in Weaver’s estimation, the powers of evil are responsible for the death of Jesus; the cross is the culmination of their rejection of his ministry of making “the reign of God visible.” In keeping with his ministry of nonviolent resistance, Jesus’ “nonviolent submission to death” reveals the character of God’s reign, which risks extending love even to enemies, no matter the cost. But, Weaver states, “When evil did its worst, namely, denying Jesus his existence by killing him, God’s resurrection of Jesus displayed the ability of the reign of God to triumph over death, the last enemy. The power of the reign of God over the forces of evil is made manifest in the resurrection of Jesus,” rendering it “the ultimate power in the cosmos.” While God is present with Jesus throughout his life, death, and resurrection, for Weaver, there is a sense in which God “give[s] up the Son” to death on the cross (or, as Weaver states elsewhere, “God did not intervene in Jesus’ death and allowed Jesus to die in fulfillment of his mission to bring redemption to all people”), a line of argument which, against Sölle, empties the cross of divine suffering and points instead to the victorious resurrection and ultimate reconciliation with God. Far from involving a call to passively submit to suffering and violence, Weaver’s view depicts Jesus’ active-yet-nonviolent confrontation of and resistance to violence and injustice as exemplary – and, in fact, as a way of participating in the power of the resurrection, which connotes human freedom from sin. As Weaver summarizes,

82 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 5-8, 306, 308. Cf. Nonviolent God, 64.
83 Ibid., 42-43, 47, 45. Cf. Weaver, Nonviolent God, 143.
84 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 166-167, 44, and Nonviolent God, 57, 2. In Nonviolent God, Weaver speaks of the “life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus,” which, while of course broader than a focus on Jesus’ death, nevertheless omits mention of the Incarnation.
narrative Christus Victor is indeed atonement if one means a story in which the death and resurrection of Jesus definitively reveal the basis of power in the universe, so that the invitation to participate in God’s rule – to accept Jesus as God’s anointed one – overcomes the forces of sin and reconciles sinners to God. Through identification with Jesus, humankind shares in Jesus’ death and in his resurrection. To identify with Jesus is to have life in the reign of God.  

In this sense, “[s]alvation is present when allegiances change and a new life is lived ‘in Christ’ under the rule of God.” Early Anabaptists called such a new life “walking in the resurrection,” and linked this idea with the vision of the church as the body of Christ, the body of disciples living in the way of Jesus. There is also an eschatological dimension to this new way of life, since it participates already now in God’s triumph over sin and death, which is yet to come in full.

I have suggested that the discussions of violence and of the Incarnation within the three major historical atonement theories lay the foundation for Sölle’s and Weaver’s nonviolent interpretations of the cross and redemption. As the above summary has shown, Sölle’s and Weaver’s critiques draw upon and reimagine the historical Abelardian moral influence and the Christus Victor theories, respectively, and present several key issues to be explored in depth in the following chapters – namely, understandings of divine violence and nonviolence, the distinction between “high Christology” (Weaver) and Christology “from below” (Sölle), and the possibility of synthesizing Sölle’s Abelardian and Weaver’s Christus Victor perspectives.

85 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 46, 48.
86 Ibid., 47.
87 Weaver, Nonviolent God, 87, 170-171. Cf. 69, 81.
As I have identified above, it is important to note that Sölle and Weaver’s impulse to distance God from violence and injustice is in fact shared by all four early atonement theologians (Anselm, Abelard, Irenaeus, and Gregory). A major difference, of course, is in their respective definitions of violence and injustice. The patristic and medieval atonement theories speak of violence and injustice as the overpowering of another (especially someone weaker) or the abuse of power/imposing of one’s will upon another; in this way, they speak of God avoiding using unjust means to redeem humanity (especially Anselm and Irenaeus). I would call this a more objective understanding of violence, based upon an understanding of particular acts as intrinsically violent, and conversely, particular acts as intrinsically just, such as the fair exchange of Christ as a ransom, the use of persuasion, reconciliation, etc. Weaver’s thought would fit better into this definition of violence. But there is also a more subjective definition of violence based not upon specific means, but upon intention, as seen in Gregory’s argument that both God and Satan used a deceptive fish-and-hook tactic, but God used it for good, or in Abelard’s argument that God can use violence lovingly, for human correction. Though this train of thought bears much resemblance to Just War logic, Sölle arguably inverts it, applying it not to violence, but to suffering. While Weaver aims to distance God from all forms of violence and suffering (though he admits that Jesus suffers as a result of his nonviolence), Sölle’s perspective on the importance of the intention of the sufferer – i.e., whether suffering is voluntary and meaningful, as a form of solidarity – shares this more subjective emphasis.

Interestingly, when it comes to the cross, Sölle speaks of two kinds of violence in which God is potentially implicated: the direct violence of putting Jesus to death or requiring Jesus’ death and the violence of apathy, as in the idea of an “almighty spectator” or
‘bystander’ God who passively allows Jesus to die.\textsuperscript{88} Her rejection of both of these
depictions of God does not lead Sölle to reject the cross as hopelessly oppressive, but to a
crucified God – a God who, like in the historic atonement theories, does not impose the
divine will upon others through omnipotence or power understood as ultimate, absolute
control, but rather suffers in love and struggles for justice in solidarity with the oppressed.
However, Weaver’s reticence to associate God in any way with the violence of the cross,
including the suffering of the oppressed, arguably leads him to a bystander God – a God who
“did not intervene” and allowed Jesus to die – instead of one who co-suffered with Jesus.\textsuperscript{89}

Precisely at the moment of the cross, Weaver slips into Aulén’s category of redemption as a
“discontinuous Divine work,” with God and Jesus taking on distinct roles. In addition,
Weaver’s insistence on God’s sovereign control over history,\textsuperscript{90} as seen in his explanation of
salvation as God essentially forcing human beings to change “in spite of ourselves,” contains
vestiges of divine exceptionalism when it comes to controlling or dominating power, of
which even the early atonement theologians were wary. Interestingly, the Christus Victor
theologians are the most overt about God loving sinful humanity while it was yet God’s enemy and Gregory argues that God even goes
so far as to heal Satan, which is a prime example of divine enemy-love.\textsuperscript{91} Though it would
strengthen his argument, Weaver does not mention either of these, though he does emphasize

\textsuperscript{88} See Sölle, Suffering, 148.
\textsuperscript{89} See Weaver, Nonviolent God, 57-58.
\textsuperscript{90} See Ibid., 141, 143.
\textsuperscript{91} See Irenaeus, 544, and Gregory, 495-496.
the larger Christus Victor theme of reconciliation with God, and surprisingly, Sölle does not develop the notion of enemy-love in much detail within her theology.92

Despite sharing deep suspicions of Anselmian Christology (which effectively divides God-the-Creator/“Father” from God-in-Christ within redemption), Sölle and Weaver place themselves on different Christological spectra. She moves in the direction of developing a Christology “from below” or from the experience of the oppressed, whereas Weaver aims to develop a “high” Christology of a more divine view of Christ (which is again related to Aulén’s distinction between redemption as a “continuous” or “discontinuous” act on God’s part). But it is also more complicated than these self-designations suggest. Sölle and Weaver each move toward God’s closer, more intimate identification with Christ, and in this sense, both promote high Christologies. Interestingly, for both Sölle and Weaver, it is women’s experience and/or the experience of the oppressed which prompts a rethinking of Christology and redemption; in this sense, both of theirs are Christologies from below as well. This displays a certain valuing of embodied experience and a related emphasis on the importance of the entire life and ministry of Jesus Christ, not just the moment of the cross; these emphases are shared by the patristic Christus Victor theologians above, though they stress the Incarnation as well as Jesus’ life and ministry, death, and resurrection. This theme of Incarnation, arguably typical of high Christologies, is notably not treated in depth in either Sölle’s or Weaver’s theologies. Instead of speaking of God’s choice to become flesh and dwell among human beings for the sake of redemption, then, these two theologians speak of Jesus’ lovingly and “voluntarily” taking the side of “the least” (Sölle) or living for confrontational, nonviolent resistance to violence and sin, which led to his death (Weaver); in

other words, both speak of Jesus’ suffering as voluntary without being masochistic, because it is the foreseeable consequence but not the goal of his actions. Jesus’ suffering, then, presents a kind of paradox of being voluntary-yet-involuntary – a paradox which Abelard also encounters in arguing, contra Anselm, that one cannot willingly suffer; by definition, suffering is inflicted upon one, against one’s will. Setting aside the stark distinction between God and Jesus Christ here, which leads to a God who wills violence, Abelard’s Christology here is remarkably resistant to masochistic logic, and thus resonates with Sölle’s and Weaver’s concerns that Jesus did not intentionally suffer and die in a passive, masochistic act of self-destruction. Still, Weaver’s minimization of the theological significance of the cross within redemption (through his claim that it is “anything but a loving act of God”) means that he actually falls short of a high Christology at the moment of Jesus’ death, unlike Sölle, who insists that it is truly God who is crucified. Finally, while Weaver, true to the high Christology of Christus Victor, makes the resurrection central to his nonviolent interpretation of the atonement, for Sölle’s existential, liberationist perspective, the resurrection offers little except a fairly subjective form of inspiration for the work of liberation. Here, Sölle arguably falls short of a Christology from below, opting instead for a low Christology. Weaver’s perspective, which traces a transformative and empowering experience and ethic within the historic, minority Anabaptist understanding of new life in Christ as “walking in the resurrection,” offers an important challenge to Sölle’s view, not least because it looks beyond the cross and takes into account both the “subjective” and “objective” aspects of redemption. As will be developed below, this means that Weaver

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94 Here I disagree with Brown and Parker’s assessment of Abelard, though their critique arguably still applies to Abelardian theologies which do not maintain his subtle understanding of suffering as by definition inflicted upon a person from without. See Brown and Parker, 11-12.
provides a more empowering ethical-eschatological hope in the real possibility of nonviolent ethics.

These central themes – divine violence and peace, Christology and the cross, and the ethical/discipleship implications of a Mennonite-feminist theology of redemption – will be explored in much more depth in the following chapters. Within this chapter, I have attempted to show that Sölle’s and Weaver’s concerns with distancing God from violence in fact find their roots already within the historic atonement theories, but this does not signify that all atonement theories share this concern equally. It is no accident that Sölle and Weaver find Anselmian understandings of the atonement most problematic, as they are the least biblically-grounded and the most reductive of salvation to the cross. In emphasizing the continuity between Jesus’ life, death, and discipleship or faith-as-praxis, Sölle and Weaver turn respectively to the Abelardian and Christus Victor atonement theories, as these are arguably more helpful in framing redemption as an act of divine love, albeit in very different ways: as solidarity with the oppressed and a defeat of the powers of evil, violence, and sin. Though I have stated above that the two are not easily reconcilable and even seem to clash on some levels, my purpose in the rest of this project is in fact to synthesize them – an admittedly difficult but not impossible task. I rely in part on the notion that Weaver is more Abelardian than he admits, which creates room within his narrative Christus Victor for Sölle’s liberationist-historical reinterpretation of Abelard, which salvages a liberative place for the cross within redemption. Also, I contend that Weaver’s revised Christus Victor shares Sölle’s concerns that God not be implicated in the violence of the cross, but in maintaining that God is nonviolently victorious over the powers, he begins to disassociate victory from domination, and thereby to redefine it in a subversive way. This combination of Sölle’s
redefinition of love as shared power and solidarity with Weaver’s redefinition of victory as nonviolent resurrection begins to point toward the intriguing possibility of synthesizing the best of Sölle’s and Weaver’s thought. In moving toward a more consistently and thoroughly nonviolent feminist-Mennonite understanding of redemption, I will essentially hold together Sölle’s cross with Weaver’s resurrection, viewing divine solidarity with human suffering as the means by which the powers are nonviolently defeated; in other words, I will retain a redemptive place for the cross in salvation while naming the subversive victory of nonviolence in the entire Incarnation: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Thus, if the three historic atonement theories primarily represent justice, charity, and victory, then together, Sölle and Weaver illuminate the way in which love and victory mutually transform one another, suggesting that the power of nonviolence and peace has its source in the Divine and leads to a renewed understanding of justice not as retribution or satisfaction, but as reconciliation. In the following chapter, I will look more closely at this notion of rooting human nonviolence in the nonviolence of God, as well as its implications for Christian definitions and practices of justice, reconciliation, and peacemaking, placing Weaver and Sölle within the debates on whether or not God is a pacifist among feminist, Anabaptist-Mennonite, and other theologians who are oriented toward nonviolence and peace.
Chapter 3
Suffering God, Nonviolent God: Sölle’s and Weaver’s Redefinitions of Divine Nonviolence, Passibility, and Otherness

[O]ne of the longest-running distortions in Christian theology has been the attribution of violence and violent intent to the will and activity of God. But if God is truly revealed in Jesus Christ, and if Jesus rejected violence, as is almost universally believed, then the God revealed in Jesus Christ should be pictured in nonviolent images. If God is truly revealed in the nonviolent Christ, then God should not be described as a God who sanctions and employs violence.

- J. Denny Weaver¹

Mystical theology answers suffering with a love in view of which the “Lord” has to feel ashamed, for it is stronger than he. But “the Lord” is no longer the object of this theology. Therefore “I pray God to rid me of God.” . . . Mystical love . . . transcends every God who is less than love.

- Dorothee Sölle²

Within her critique of Anselm’s understanding of atonement, which I explored in the previous chapter, Sölle asks a crucial question: “What view of God lies behind all this?”³

Sölle and Weaver arguably each use this question to guide their theologies of peace or nonviolence, ultimately depicting God in the image of a nonviolent Jesus Christ, specifically advocating nonviolence, peace, reconciliation or enemy-love, and restorative justice (Weaver) or, relatedly, as a God who is not “less than love,” especially in the face of the reality of human suffering (Sölle). In this chapter, I will place Sölle and Weaver within the larger, contemporary debates among feminist, Mennonite, and other theologians of peace or

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² Dorothee Sölle, Suffering, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1975), 94.
nonviolence over whether or not God is a “pacifist,” and, furthermore, in what way pacifism or nonviolence can be ascribed to the divine.

In my view, this debate touches on three major issues. First, it concerns the relationship between the “first” and “second” persons of the Trinity, whom Sölle and Weaver both connect intimately, she through her Christology “from below” and he through his “high Christology.” Both of their positions are to be distinguished from the “low Christology” of many feminists, as well as from hierarchical understandings of divinity as a form of exclusive superiority over humankind, since both Sölle and Weaver (re)define divinity as participatory. Relatedly, this debate also affects discussions of God’s passibility. While Sölle overtly repudiates orthodox notions of God’s impassibility with her notion of divine (co-)suffering with the oppressed, Weaver is not as clear about his stance on God’s passibility, though both thinkers part ways with theologians who argue that Christ’s suffering was in some sense intended or caused by God or that it was uniquely redemptive. Thirdly, this debate concerns notions of divine otherness, including the claims made by a number of Mennonite theologians that God is exempt from human understandings of nonviolent ethics based on the assumption that these constitute attempts to limit God’s mysterious, transcendent “otherness.” I contend that Weaver’s Christologically-based arguments for God’s nonviolence themselves reveal that God is not abstractly other, but particularly so, with nonviolence as one aspect of God’s particular yet counter-intuitive “otherness.” In order to flesh this out further, I will also draw on Sölle’s mystical theology which lets go of

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harmful views of God’s ultimate sovereignty and power in order to arrive at the notion of
divine co-suffering with the oppressed. My purpose in this chapter is to gradually reveal the
profound redefinition of divinity which results from the combination of Sölle’s and Weaver’s
theologies: theirs is a God revealed in Christ as a nonviolent and suffering God, a God who
hears the cries of the oppressed and walks with them toward peace with justice, and a God
who has revealed Godself and God’s particularly other form of power as mutual participation
and life-giving love.

1. God and/as Christ: Sölle’s and Weaver’s Christocentric Theologies

As I indicated at the close of the previous chapter, Sölle and Weaver each critique the
violence of traditional understandings of the atonement, particularly those in the Anselmian
tradition, by advocating a closer identification between God and Jesus Christ. In
Christological terms, Sölle promotes a Christology “from below” or from the experience of
the oppressed, viewing the ministry and death of Jesus Christ as representative of divine
solidarity with the oppressed, while Weaver speaks of adopting a “high” Christology which
views Jesus’ nonviolent life, death, and resurrection as a revelation of the very nonviolence
of God. These respective Christologies set Sölle and Weaver apart from the tendency toward
“low” Christology within feminist theological discourse.

Feminist theologians have identified the divinity of Christ – as the “Son” of God the
“Father” – as profoundly problematic because it has been assumed to reflect that God is
exclusively male. Based on this assumption, women have been deemed inferior images of
God, incapable of becoming leaders, equal disciples, or even full participants within the
church (and predominantly Christian societies) simply because of their sex and/or gender; as
post-Christian feminist Mary Daly so succinctly put it, “if God is male, then the male is God.” This prompted Rosemary Radford Ruether’s famous question, “Can a male savior save women?,” and has led many feminists to diagnose the problem as a too-close association between God and Jesus Christ. Thus, many have opted for “low” or very human Christologies, eschewing claims of Jesus’ divinity in an effort to break the association between God and maleness, and to address the related problem of Christian supersessionism in relation to the Jewish tradition, a position represented in this section by feminist theologians Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Carter Heyward. But despite sharing some of the same concerns about how Christology has been abused and abusive (especially toward women and the Jewish tradition), Sölle and Weaver do not take this route, but seemingly move in an opposite Christological direction – a difference which hinges on their definitions of divinity. Rather than accepting notions of divinity which are predicated on domination, exclusivity, and superiority, Sölle and Weaver constructively redefine divinity as radically nonviolent, nonhierarchical, and participatory or empowering, which renders the rejection of Jesus’ divinity ultimately unnecessary.

In her book, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet*, Schüssler Fiorenza argues with and beyond other feminists that the classical Christological formulations which remain the measure for “orthodox” Christian belief ultimately reflect not only androcentrism and patriarchy (male-centred ideology and “the rule of the father,” respectively), but what she terms “kyriocentrism” (lord-centred ideology and structures of power) and “kyriarchy” (“the

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6 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), 19. Also paraphrased by Dorothee Sölle in *Theology for Skeptics*, 38.

rule of the emperor/master/lord/father/husband over his subordinates”).\(^8\) Within contemporary theologies, she sees vestiges of kyriarchy in Christian preoccupation with imperial understandings of Jesus’ divine Lordship in combination with “masculine liberal” or “Enlightenment notions of Jesus as singular religious genius,” “the greatest man who ever lived, the exceptional individual,” the “hero-savior figure” and “perfect man for whom they [women] live.”\(^9\)

Furthermore, Schüssler Fiorenza makes the case that Christian feminists are not exempt from kyriarchy, but are complicit, above all, in the supersessionist tendencies of their tradition. She follows Jewish feminist Judith Plaskow’s assertion that “Jesus is not the Messiah and the incarnate son of God on any traditional interpretation of these terms,” and that this “deconstructing [of] Jesus’ divinity” leads to questions of how then to maintain the authority or “uniqueness” of Jesus for Christians. Plaskow wonders, “[c]an Christians value Jesus if he was just a Jew who chose to emphasize certain ideas and values in the Jewish tradition but did not invent or have a monopoly on them?”\(^10\) One of the most problematic lines of argument among feminists, according to Schüssler Fiorenza, involves the stark contrast between Jesus’ enlightened treatment of women and the first-century Jewish tradition out of which he came, which is presumed to be monolithic and thoroughly patriarchal. In attempting to claim “Jesus the feminist” as exceptional, Christian feminists have thus succeeded in depicting him as “un-Jewish or anti-Jewish,” which plays into the supersessionist logic of deeming the “New” Testament superior to the “Old,” and the “Christian G*d of love” and “gospel” superior to the “Hebrew tribal G*d of wrath” and

\(^8\) Schüssler Fiorenza, Jesus, 20, 14.

\(^9\) Ibid., 83, 18-19, 42-43.

\(^10\) Judith Plaskow quoted in Ibid., 67.
“law.” Against such assumptions of Jesus’ unique superiority, Schüssler Fiorenza proposes that first-century Judaism was diverse, meaning that it is more accurate to see the Jewish Jesus and his first followers as one movement among many within that particular context—specifically, as “a prophetic movement of Sophia-Wisdom” in a long line of such movements, which includes Elijah, “Miriam of Nazareth,” “Elizabeth of Ain Karim,” and John the Baptist. Schüssler Fiorenza even resists calling the Jesus movement a “Jewish renewal movement,” which still implies superiority, preferring to speak of it as an “emancipatory movement,” concerned primarily with Jewish liberation from Roman occupation. In privileging the early traditions which depict Jesus as a sage, teacher, and “messenger of Sophia,” Schüssler Fiorenza argues that it is possible to “assert the unique particularity of Jesus without having to resort to exclusivity and superiority.” She thus presents a thoroughly demythologized Jesus, effectively returning the elevated, divine language traditionally used for him to God, where it has its proper place.

Though I share Schüssler Fiorenza’s concern to counteract Christian supersessionism, including its manifestations within feminist theologies, questions remain for me with regard to what, if anything, Jesus contributes to the tradition if he ceases to be unique in relation to

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13 Ibid., 157. Cf. 72.

14 Ibid., 178, 164, 161. Interestingly, Schüssler Fiorenza’s thorough demythologization of Jesus does not lead her to discount the validity of the resurrection narratives; instead, it involves a recovery of the “tradition of the ‘empty tomb’ attributed to women,” a tradition which “centered around the proclamation ‘that Jesus going ahead of you to Galilee,’ the site where antimonarchical prophetic traditions of the Northern Kingdom were still alive.” In her view, this open-ended tradition of the empty tomb values the witness of women, vindicates the crucified Jesus in that his “struggle did not end with execution and death,” “insists on the bodily materiality of resurrection” (as opposed to “a platonic or docetic ‘supernatural’ misreading”), and affirms the ongoing, empowering presence of Jesus, the “Resurrected One,” “on the road ahead,” which leaves open an inclusive and inviting space for Christians to follow as disciples. See Ibid., 90, 123-126. Emphasis hers.
God but he remains simply the leader of one among many first-century Jewish movements.

In short, I think she relativizes the Jesus movement too much, such that both Jesus’ uniqueness and his particularity become uncertain. Thus disconnected from the divine, Schüssler Fiorenza’s Jesus no longer reveals God’s character and concerns, a key example being her assertion that God remained “absent” from the cross, which suggests that God remains removed from situations of suffering.\(^{15}\) Schüssler Fiorenza also resists speaking of Jesus’ relationality as an important aspect of his ministry and his struggle for liberation, arguing that such an emphasis fails to overcome the Western, kyriarchal gender binary and slips into gender essentialism in equating femininity with (“middle class,” white understandings of) relationality.\(^{16}\) But in arguing this way, Schüssler Fiorenza distances Jesus from the Gospels, which are full of accounts of Jesus’ radically relational ministry, and arguably undercuts her own emphasis on liberation by undervaluing the revolutionary and liberative power of relationality. In a sense, she herself reinscribes the kyriarchal gender binary in failing to value relationality, which has traditionally been associated with femininity and/or lower socio-economic status within Western cultures. This is a key point of divergence between Schüssler Fiorenza’s perspective and that of Carter Heyward.

If Schüssler Fiorenza can be said to relativize Jesus’ divinity, Heyward relativizes it to the point of explicitly denying it. Speaking from a lesbian feminist perspective influenced by Sölle’s theology, Heyward presents a relational Christology premised on the notion that “power in relation is God” in her book, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation*.\(^{17}\) She argues that the orthodox Christological formulations of Nicaea and

\(^{15}\) See Ibid., 125.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 55-57.
Chalcedon erased the voluntary, chosen nature of Jesus’ relation to God, replacing it with a
metaphysical-ontological “inner union” of divine and human substances. As a corrective,
Heyward finds it necessary to overtly sever Jesus Christ from the “mis-conception” that he is
divine, declaring that “Jesus matters only if he was fully, and only human,” and arguing that
Jesus’ significance is not primarily about “who he was,” or his “essence,” but about his
“actions,” “what he did,” which she calls “functional christology.” Likewise, following
Sölle, she speaks of the “death of God” as the idea that “there is no impassive, wholly other
deity in charge of the world,” but rather that the divine-human relationship is mutual,
“reciprocal, dynamic, and of benefit to both parties.” In “our voluntary participation in
making right-relation [or justice] among ourselves,” human beings live out our “love of God”
or “our act of making God incarnate in the world,” which she also calls “goddng.”

Heyward’s radical “re-imaging” of Christology is an attempt to correct the distortion
of traditional Christology, which is not only anti-Semitic, as proposed by Rosemary Radford
Ruether (as well as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza above), but also, according to Heyward,
“anti-female” and “anti-human.” She denounces notions that Jesus must be placed far above
ordinary humanity, as a superior being with a “monopoly” on divine power grounded in his
uniquely intimate relationship to God, as this has undermined the human power to participate
in redemption and to co-operate with God in creating justice and right-relation. She writes,
“No one is God. No one is without the possibility of active relation to God. Everyone can

17 Isabel Carter Heyward, The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation (New York:
University of America, 1982), 2, 216.


19 Ibid., 8-9, 6. Heyward admits that Sölle does not claim “unequivocally” that (human) “love is God,”
but does seem to claim that her own denial of Jesus’ divinity follows a trajectory of Sölle’s thought. I disagree,
in part because I am consulting a much larger body of Sölle’s writings (Heyward, writing in the late 1970s, only
draws on Sölle’s early works). I discuss this further below. See Heyward, 214-216. Emphasis hers.
incarnate God: the disciples, the woman with the flow of blood, the scribes and the pharisees.” This is “a capacity no less ours than his,” once he ceases to be seen as a “super-human” “Lord” or “Son of God, or God the Son” or our “only Savior (a demi-god unlike you and me).” In this way, Heyward recovers a sense of Jesus’ authority which is not based on his exclusive, singular divine status, but rather in his mutual relationship with God as a human being who embodied the power of justice or right-relation and empowered others to do the same. Arguing that the two love commandments should actually be conflated (since “to love one’s neighbor as oneself . . . is to love God”), she thus calls for human beings to recognize that Jesus has been placed in an unnecessary and harmful mediatory role between God and humanity, who are already connected through human relational power, which is “mutually-messianic.” Even her re-imaging of the cross as the “suffering” of others in the broadest sense (“in the case of Jesus, to bear up God in the world” in both his relational ministry of solidarity and his “final” and “unjust” death) and her re-imaging of resurrection as “an event not in Jesus’ life but rather in the lives of his friends,” reflect a kind of democratizing or redistribution of Jesus’ divinity and identity as Messiah.

Though she strips Jesus of his divinity and denounces such notions as “Jesusolatry” or “Christolatry,” Heyward recognizes that Jesus is a permanent part of Western thought and culture, and thus that he and his influence cannot be easily dismissed or excised from people’s consciousness. But he is only one among many other (very human) teachers and

20 Ibid., 196, 33, 47, 168. Cf. 49.

21 Ibid., 1, 53, 165, 36, 33, 44. Against Schüssler Fiorenza’s accusation, Heyward’s relational Christology is not grounded solely in a feminist recovery of relationality as a particularly (Western, middle-class) female attribute, but looks to the Hebrew Bible and Jewish theology/ethics, which make love of God and neighbour central (Martin Buber, Elie Wiesel, etc.). I agree with Heyward, who sees revelatory power in the relational aspect of Jesus’ ministry. Both Schüssler Fiorenza’s and Heyward’s low Christologies are based on a concern to avoid anti-Judaism.

22 Ibid., 54, 57-58.
examples Heyward looks to. At one point, she asks, “why Jesus? Why not Socrates? Sappho? Sojourner Truth? Martin Luther King? Camilo Torres? Mother Theresa?” Her answer is that Jesus’ life (actions and ministry) reveals the relational power which is “the only way” to make God incarnate in the world – as do the lives of others. She explains at length,

> God’s incarnations are as many and as varied as the persons who are driven by the power in relation to touch and be touched by sisters and brothers. To focus messianically on any one person, to try to locate and establish God in any single figure, to insist that relational tension and ambiguity be broken and that the definition of ‘God’ be handed to us as a package in the person of a lone messiah, is to deny the movement of power in relation through many incarnations in history. To worship a messianic figure is to lose touch with our power in relation. It is to distance ourselves from God.23

She concludes that “Jesus is to be remembered, not revered,” and this means “participation in a mutual messianism that was neither begun nor completed in the life of Jesus, but was rather revealed in his relation to others” (and is thus irreducible to his individual identity).24

Heyward, importantly, elucidates why she keeps Jesus in a central position despite re-imaging or reinterpreting his significance as that of an ordinary human being. But despite her attention to the question of why Jesus still matters if he was no more divine than any other human being, and her particularly compelling critique of the ontological-metaphysical Christological formulations of the classical councils, it remains unclear, given her dramatic redefinition of divinity, why Heyward finds it necessary to ‘demote’ Jesus from his connection with the divine as the Christ. It is arguably possible to retain Jesus’ intimate connection with God while asserting that this same connection was not exclusive and does not connote superiority, but rather meant to draw others into connection with the divine (through sanctification). To some extent, Schüssler Fiorenza takes this position in not overtly


24 Ibid., 199, 168.
denying the divinity of Jesus, but still relativizing him within Jewish emancipatory movements. Even more strikingly, Weaver draws on his own Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition to critique the orthodox Christological formulations of Nicaea and Chalcedon along lines similar to Heyward’s critique, but he makes the exact opposite claim regarding Jesus’ relationship to God, proposing a “high Christology” in which Jesus reveals God as profoundly nonviolent.

In Weaver’s view, it is not the divinizing of Jesus which has led to problematic depictions of a violent, even bloodthirsty God within the Christian tradition (and the accompanying legitimation of war, a violent/retributive justice system, etc.), but rather the inverse: not taking Jesus’ nonviolence seriously as a revelation of the very character of God. Weaver grounds his “high Christology” both in the biblical tradition and in the tradition of trinitarian theology. He makes the case, firstly, that the Bible encompasses “an ongoing conversation about God and how God works. Parts of that conversation visualize a violent God, while other parts present other images of God and place divine sanction on other ways of acting.”

Importantly, Weaver resists neatly dividing the God of the Hebrew Scriptures or Old/First Testament from the God of the New Testament, a move which, as Schüessler Fiorenza has rightly identified, has disastrously anti-Jewish implications. Instead, he traces the “ongoing conversation,” and therefore the thread of the nonviolence of God and God’s people, throughout the Bible. In the Hebrew Scriptures or Old/First Testament, God is the nonviolent creator in Genesis 1 and 2, and this idea is carried forward into the narratives of the patriarchs which “reflect conflict avoidance or nonviolent conflict resolution” (“Isaac walking away from fights over wells, Abraham dividing the land with Lot”), and into the anti-militaristic narratives of the people of Israel defeating large armies with a near-comically

small group of soldiers (e.g. Gideon), winning over their enemies with feasting instead of fighting (e.g. 2 Kings 6, 1 Samuel 25), and even practicing “nonviolent cultural resistance” (e.g. Joseph, Esther, Jeremiah 29, Daniel). In this way, Weaver argues, the Old/First Testament is “not at all vexed about juxtaposing texts that explicitly contradict each other.”

According to Weaver, the New/Second Testament does not shy away from contradiction either, but continues this “conversation” about the divine character. The violent imagery used for God, especially in Revelation and the Gospel accounts of Jesus pronouncing (or threatening) judgement, suggest that ideas about divine violence and wrath carried over into the New/Second Testament as well. In Weaver’s view, however, it is the theological thread of nonviolence which finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. While “[q]uoting these violent stories in the Old Testament or the conclusion of a parable attributed to Jesus in the New Testament is a time-honored method used by those who want to preserve the idea of a God who uses or sanctions violence and war,” Weaver proposes that Christians already have an “arbiter” for this debate in Jesus Christ: “If God is revealed in Jesus, as the Christian faith professes, then God should be considered nonviolent as a reflection of the nonviolence of Jesus.” Using a “christocentric hermeneutic” (as opposed to a “‘flat’ or literal reading of the Bible” which holds all biblical images of God as equally authoritative) allows Weaver to interpret Revelation as depicting the “nonviolent victory” of the “nonviolent conqueror – the slain lamb” (whose supposed “weapon” is in fact the Word of God, for instance); to speak of the seemingly violent judgment or wrath of God in Jesus’

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26 Weaver, “Response,” 40-41, Nonviolent Atonement, 119, and Nonviolent God, 124. The latter is a quotation from Walter Brueggemann. I added the story of Abigail (1 Sam. 25), a peacemaker who is female.

27 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 21, 33-34, and Nonviolent God, 119, 129, 138-140.

28 Weaver, Nonviolent God, 124-125.
Gospel sayings as “statements that acknowledge the ‘hell’ to which evildoers condemn themselves,” and thereby reflect “righteous indignation” regarding injustice rather than literal violence; and to likewise highlight the continuity between the Hebrew/Old/First Testament notions surrounding divine mercy and the nonviolent yet confrontational life of Jesus who called for the love of enemies and instructed Simon Peter to put away his sword. Though Weaver’s language of Jesus as the hermeneutical “key” for the Bible and of notions of a violent God as “distortions or even errors by the biblical writers” appears to slip into Christian supersessionist logic, he avoids that pitfall both by tracing the conversation concerning divine violence through the entire Christian Bible and, relatedly, by following John Howard Yoder in asserting that there is in fact a long-standing tradition of Jewish pacifism in which Jesus and the early church can be placed. In striking this balance between acknowledging and valuing the Jewish roots of Jesus’ pacifism and simultaneously maintaining or even deepening his particular significance for Christians, Weaver clearly diverges from Schüssler Fiorenza’s and Heyward’s impulses to relativize Jesus. In fact, Weaver makes Jesus Christ the central revelation of the divine character through emphasizing that nonviolence – which is by definition inclusive and anti-hierarchical – is the specific content of that revelation.

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30 Weaver, Nonviolent God, 132, 138.

31 Ibid., 126, and Nonviolent Atonement, 83-85. As will be discussed below in conversation with other Mennonite theologians, Weaver and Yoder part ways with regard to asserting God’s nonviolence. The one shortfall is Weaver’s language of the historical development of the image of God over time, which falls victim to supersessionist logic, in my view, and in fact contradicts his tracing of a nonviolent image of God throughout the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures. It is possible to argue for change or contradiction/conversation within the Bible without promoting theological progress, which indeed implies Christian superiority. See Nonviolent God, 132ff.

32 See for instance, Weaver, Nonviolent God, 3-4.
Weaver also grounds his high Christology in Christian trinitarian theology, agreeing with the answer the “early church” gave to the question of “how Jesus relates to God” – namely, that “God is truly or fully present and revealed in Jesus Christ.” Of course, as Weaver rightly points out, this assertion alone does not convey the specifics of what Jesus reveals about God and the divine character; as argued in my first chapter, Weaver is profoundly critical of the “classical” creeds and the Christological formulations of Nicaea and Chalcedon because they “render . . . invisible” the ethical aspect of the Christian faith (i.e., discipleship in the nonviolent way of Jesus), thus paving the way for the accommodation of violence as per “Constantinian” Christianity. In one sense, then, Weaver’s position resonates with traditional or “orthodox” Christian understandings of the relationship between members of the Trinity and Christological assertions of the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus Christ. But by making the specific idea of divine nonviolence, gleaned from the narratives of Jesus’ life, teachings, death, and resurrection, central to his high Christology, Weaver ends up in a different and much more radical place, theologically, than most proponents of ‘orthodox’ Christianity. He concludes,

[i]f Jesus is ‘one in being’ with God or ‘equally God’ or ‘equal to the Father in respect of his divinity,’ these statements would certainly seem to support belief in a nonviolent God. Traditionalists who would preserve a prerogative of violence for God are put in the position of arguing for an interpretation of this language that applies Jesus’ equality with God only to the incarnation and not to God in other settings and persons of the Trinity. Stated differently, they argue that there are attributes in the person of God that are not in the person of Jesus.35

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33 Ibid., 4-5.
34 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 121-123, 125-126, and Nonviolent God, 164-169.
35 Weaver, Nonviolent God, 158-161.
By contrast, Weaver concludes that “if God is truly revealed in Jesus Christ, and if Jesus rejected violence, as is almost universally believed, then the God revealed in Jesus Christ should be pictured in nonviolent images. If God is truly revealed in the nonviolent Christ, then God should not be described as a God who sanctions and employs violence.” On the basis of an intimate closeness between Jesus Christ and God, Weaver elsewhere argues, with regard to the cross and redemption specifically (and using even stronger language), that “it ought not to be thinkable that the God who is revealed in Jesus would orchestrate the death of Jesus in a scheme that assumed doing justice meant the violence of punishment, or a scheme in which a divinely sanctioned death paid a debt to restore God’s honor. If Jesus truly reveals God the Father, then it would be a contradiction for Jesus to be nonviolent and for God to bring about salvation through divinely orchestrated violence.”

But despite his claims to espouse a high Christology, there is a sense in which Weaver’s Christology is not entirely consistent. To be more exact, as I have already alluded to above, Weaver’s Christology arguably becomes quite low at the moment of the crucifixion. Though Weaver allows a certain trinitarian fluidity in that God is with Jesus throughout his life, death and resurrection, he stops short of allowing God to share in Christ’s death on the cross, arguing instead that God “give[s] up the Son” to death on the cross: “God did not intervene in Jesus’ death and allowed Jesus to die in fulfillment of his mission to bring redemption to all people.” The cross therefore does not symbolize divine self-giving love or solidarity with the oppressed for Weaver, since that line of argument fails to overcome the problem of God requiring violence (in this case, divine self-harm or “suicide”) to show God’s love. Here Weaver clearly differentiates his view from those tending toward

36 Ibid., 5, and Nonviolent Atonement, 245.
“partripassianism.”  

Thus, Weaver maintains a harsh distance between Jesus and God at the moment of the cross, speaking of (a very human) Jesus’ unwavering “obedience” to God’s way of nonviolence as the only redeeming factor in the event of the crucifixion, the only way in which it was indirectly “willed by God”: “Rather than fail his mission, Jesus chose to accept death, and God willed that Jesus remain faithful, which meant willing that Jesus die.” Here Weaver’s high Christology unravels into a low Christology, with God only sharing Jesus’ suffering at a distance, and the true basis for Weaver’s supposedly high Christology or the “unity of Jesus with God” is revealed as nothing more than a unity “of will and deed” – i.e., “Jesus’ perfect obedience to the will of the Father.”

Despite Weaver’s intention to maintain a certain trinitarian intimacy between God and Jesus Christ, such intimacy arguably does not include the cross.

Weaver’s reticence concerning associating God with the event of the cross can be explained in part by his underlying emphasis on ethics, or his assumption that Jesus’ nonviolence is exemplary and formative for discipleship. Taking into consideration the critiques some feminist and womanist theologians have made concerning interpretations of the cross which perpetuate notions of redemptive violence and redemptive suffering, Weaver resists presenting the cross as the primary model for discipleship. Rather, he stresses Jesus’ life, teachings, and resurrection, speaking of Christian discipleship as “walking in the resurrection.” For Weaver, the difference between Jesus’ death and the resurrection encapsulates the distinction between “the modus operandi of the reign of God” and “that of

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38 Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 299, 244-245 n. 69, 322. Cf. 91-92.


the rule of evil.” As such, it not only represents the triumph of God’s nonviolence over the
powers of evil, including violence and death, but also exemplifies and renders viable the
nonviolent ethic Jesus’ disciples are to espouse. As Weaver summarizes, “Christians, Christ-
identified people, participate in the victory of the resurrection and demonstrate their freedom
from bondage to the powers by living under the rule of God rather than continuing to live in
the power of the evil that killed Jesus.” 41 In this way, Christians become “co-laborers with
Jesus” in bringing about the fullness of God’s reign. 42 But despite his valuable intentions to
contextualize the cross and to “avoid” glorifying suffering and violence, as he tellingly puts
it, 43 he arguably ends up underemphasizing the cross and its potential for addressing and
providing a more adequate response to questions surrounding divine impassibility and its
implications for the reality of human suffering, which I will address more fully in the next
section.

Weaver’s concern to avoid rather than address suffering seems especially
questionable in light of Sölle’s critique of theism and apathy, and her relational and
existential proposal of a deeply passionate and suffering God. Sölle grounds her Christology
“from below” in the experience and reality of human suffering, or in the terms of liberation
theology, the experience of the marginalized and the idea of God’s preferential option for the
oppressed. Her Christology therefore prompts a profound reversal of conventional
understandings of divinity, based on the “Christ of the poor” who “is not recognizable by his
halo,” but rather by his ordinariness. This Jesus is “the ‘God who sweats on the street, the

41 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 269, 47. Cf. 62, 313.
42 Ibid., 94, 97, 322.
43 See Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 161, where he argues that “Narrative Christus Victor avoids the
problems that Brown and Parker identify for classic Christus Victor, as well as the problems they find with
satisfaction and moral influence atonement models.” Brown and Parker’s perspective will be explored in depth
in the next chapter.
God with the sunburnt face, who looks and feels as we do, the *Cristo trabajador*, Christ the worker.’” Of course, this Christ understood from below also bears “all the traces of torture on his body,” and “looks like the other peasants who were hanged and impaled at that time.”

God thus becomes inseparable from the moment of crucifixion, for Sölle, which symbolizes God’s own crucifixion, God’s own presence among those undergoing innocent suffering. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Sölle insists on the intimate closeness between God and Jesus Christ, such that in the event of the cross, “God is not in heaven; [God] is hanging on the cross. Love is not an otherworldly, intruding, self-asserting power – and to meditate on the cross can mean to take leave of that dream.”

Sölle speaks of her reversal or reinterpretation of divinity in striking and poetic terms. She prays, with fourteenth-century mystic Meister Eckhart, for “God to rid me of God,” that is, for the God of the crucified Jesus Christ to rid her of “every God who is less than love,” by which she means dominating, sadistic, theistic, and apathetic understandings of God. In the same way as Weaver distances God from violence, Sölle finds it critical to distance God from the roles of both oppressor and bystander, writing, “God is no executioner – and no almighty spectator (which would amount to the same thing).”

She grounds her rejection of such a God both biblically and existentially, citing key narratives (most from the Hebrew Scriptures or Old/First Testament) which undermine ideas that God is the great source of suffering. She speaks of the God of the Exodus, who is never described as causing the suffering of the Israelites: “God has nothing to do with this suffering – aside from being on

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44 Sölle, *Thinking about God*, 114, 117.


46 Ibid., 94.

It is this God, Sölle insists, to whom Job also appeals when he is faced with suffering despite his innocence. His friends advise him to submit to God and admit guilt, but Job refuses, and instead insists on waiting for his “goel” (redeemer or advocate; Job 19:25). In Sölle’s terms, “Against God the Murderer, who violates justice, Job appeals to another God,” since, “Not the one who causes suffering but only the one who suffers can answer Job”; here she makes the connection to Christ as the one who reveals this suffering, redeeming God. She speaks similarly of the narrative of Jacob wrestling with God (Gen. 32), interpreting it as a narrative of Jacob wanting more from God, of refusing to “reduce” God to the role of afflicter: “What should ‘wrestling’ with God really mean, other than to press God so hard that God becomes God and lives out more than God’s dark side?!” In wrestling with God until he receives a blessing, Jacob waits to know “that God is named love.” Finally, Sölle offers a reinterpretation of the narrative of the rainbow following the flood as a story of God’s own conversion from a violent God of destruction (who used the bow as a weapon) to a peaceful God of the covenant, symbolized by the rainbow (Gen. 9). She even speaks of the Jewish tradition of viewing “shalom,” that profound, holistic definition of peace, as one of God’s names.

For Sölle, these biblical examples illustrate the “death” of a certain understanding of God which has ceased to be – and perhaps never was – life-giving. In her different books and essays, she rewrites Eckhart’s prayer in various ways, to dispel the narrow misconception of divinity along dominating/sadistic and patriarchal/theistic/apathetic lines which prevails

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49 Sölle, Theology for Skeptics, 55, 57.

within Western Christianity and the wider cultural context. There are two main ideas about God which she rejects: one is the idea of God as all-powerful and dominating “Lord,” and the other is a related concept of God as a patriarchal Father. She speaks of overcoming the image of God as “Lord,” as the all-powerful one who dominates and overpowers, who alone rules and controls history and demands human obedience. In her terms, “we have to leave the Lord in order to find God in our brothers and sisters. . . We have to overcome the master-servant relationship and become one with our brothers and sisters, and in the course of this becoming one, as Eckhart says, we become quit of the God who commands and dominates.” This allows her to “become free of the false God, the Lord God, the commanding God, the God of power,” and thereby “leave God for God’s sake.” 51 In her view, this notion of a domineering God is fundamentally reductive, functioning to narrow our understanding of God to the worst of human qualities. She asks “why it is that human beings honor a God whose most important attribute is power, whose prime need is to subjugate, whose greatest fear is equality,” a God “whom his theologians have to describe as all-powerful because he cannot be satisfied with being merely powerful”? 52 Because of this emphasis on dominating power over other possible attributes of the divine (such as justice and love), this is also a God who is understood to be the source of suffering, a sadistic God who inflicts suffering in an arbitrary way, or else observes human suffering with detached unconcern and is thus incapable of love, an idea I will take up in more depth in the next section. 53

51 Ibid., 105, 103. Cf. Sölle, Suffering, 94, Thinking about God, 172.

52 Ibid., 97. Cf. 111.

53 Ibid., 30, 98. She states that it is “beyond my powers to conceive of a powerful God who could look at Auschwitz, tolerate it, participate in it, observe it, or whatever. If he is all-powerful, then he is devoid of love.”
But relatedly, Sölle also rejects this view of God on the grounds that it confines the divine to the patriarchal or androcentric notion of “Father.” She also rearticulates Eckhart’s prayer thusly: “Therefore I ask God my Mother – so I understand Eckhart today – to rid me of the God of men,” of “a God who is no more than a father.” Here Sölle affirms the feminist impulse to at least relativize “Father” as one among many divine names, and furthermore to reinterpret it so that it becomes disentangled from the sexism of a God conceived in exclusively masculine terms premised on patriarchal hierarchy – or what she calls “phallocratic fantasies” which effectively sacralize power-as-control and domination. Along these lines, she wonders, “Why should we honor and love a being that does not transcend but only reaffirms the moral level of our present male-dominated culture? Why should we honor and love this being . . . if this being is in fact no more than an outsized man whose main ideal is to be independent and have power?” To limit the divine to this conception of fatherhood results, for Sölle, in reifying divine self-sufficiency, which distances God from humanity. Based on Greek philosophical ideals rather than the depiction of God in the Hebrew Scriptures and New/Second Testament, this perspective gives God the Aristotelian attributes of apathy and aseity – this God is “untouched” by suffering or even by emotions, and being “perfect” “a se” (in himself), God “has no need for friends.” Because aseity is an exclusively divine attribute, it also “ensures his [God’s] infinite superiority,” to humankind.

This means that a theology of anthropological pessimism – an infantilized view of humanity as utterly tainted by sin – corresponds to the image of the patriarchal “Father” God.

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This perspective trivializes and denies the human ability to co-operate with God in any way other than complete dependence and unquestioning obedience, since God is seen as ultimately in control of the course of human life and history. Sölle calls this “authoritarian religion,” and contrasts it with “humanitarian religion” which is based on an invitation into participation and mutuality with the divine.57 The imagery of God as Father can point beyond infantilism and a “one-sided and asymmetric dependence” on an omnipotent and apathetic God only if it is seen as the contrast, not the corollary, of the image of divine Lordship – that is, only if it is severed from power which demands obedience and linked instead to the kind of power which is shared, which Sölle terms love. She finds liberative meaning in God as a father who is with those whose fathers are absent, who reminds us of the importance of acknowledging our “voluntary dependence” on one another and on the earth as human beings, and in this way places God’s fatherhood alongside other helpful familial images of God as mother, brother, and sister.58 But Sölle finds non-anthropomorphic images of God, such as “wellspring of all good things,” “living wind,” “water of life,” and “light,” even more helpful, since they completely sidestep “authoritarian” and “chauvinistic” connotations, pointing instead to notions of mystical union with God. Within this mystical theology, the emphasis is on “belonging” to the whole rather than on “submitting” or being obedient to an ultimate and distant authority: “People do not honor God because of God’s power and lordship; rather, they ‘submerge’ themselves in God’s love, which is ‘ground,’ ‘depth,’ ‘ocean.’”59 This mystical imagery therefore also implies mutuality with God, since a


relationship based on love and union is mutually empowering, pointing to the notion that God is “in us.” Thus, Sölle can assert that “[j]ust as we need God, so God needs us.”

Though the discussion above has focused more on Sölle’s theology from below rather than on her Christology, it is possible to read her Christology between the lines. Christ remains paradigmatic for her – she calls him “God’s clearest voice” – and like Weaver, she too identifies the too-stark division of God and Christ as problematic, since it contributed to the rise of an apathetic, sadistic, and omnipotent understanding of God. She often speaks of God and Christ using the same terms, or slips from talking about one into talking about the other, especially in her discussions of the cross; they are interchangeable figures for her, which is to say that there is a certain fluidity and intimacy to their relationship in her view. At times, however, she seems to reduce Christ to a mere human being and thus edge into a low Christology which resembles Schüssler Fiorenza’s and Heyward’s positions. This is particularly the case in her rejection of a Christology “from above,” which, in rendering Jesus an omnipotent, “unreachable, completely other Superman” who “regards himself as God,” amounts to “christolatry.” Such a Christology, being both “high” and “from above,” goes hand in hand with an escapist understanding of salvation of which human beings are merely passive recipients, in Sölle’s view. Especially within her discussion of resurrection, Sölle shies away from speaking of Christ as “victorious,” not even in Weaver’s sense of a


60 Sölle, Thinking about God, 177, 182-184.

61 Dorothee Sölle, Sölle, Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 34, and Suffering, 143.

62 See Sölle, Strength of the Weak, 30, and Thinking about God, 112-116, etc.
nonviolent victory over sin and death. Rather, she speaks of resurrection more enigmatically in terms of the inability of Jesus’ opponents to actually kill him, since his “love of justice” continues to empower and give life to those who follow his liberative way. Sounding much like Heyward and, to a certain extent, Schüssler Fiorenza, she states, “In a certain sense the word ‘Christ’ thus expresses a collective meaning. If Jesus of Nazareth was the poor man from Galilee who was tortured to death, then Christ is that which cannot be destroyed, which came into the world with him and lives through us in him.”

But Sölle does not say with Heyward that Jesus was “only human.” She also rejects the “danger” (as she calls it) of reducing Jesus Christ to humanity alone, and thereby “overlooking God’s power in him.” She says, “Unless I hear God’s voice in him, unless I see something sympathetic, helpless in him . . . then I have got no further than admiration and remain uncommitted.” In this way, Sölle strikes a balance between Christ’s humanity and divinity – her mystical theology allows her to hold them together by redefining both, or rather by reversing the usual order in which they are viewed. She speaks at one point of a Christology which “brings together the ‘below’ and the ‘above’” in recognizing Christ among “the least” and the way in which he “draws me into the mystery of God.” Rather than deriving the divinity of Christ from his superiority and distance from human experience, she identifies his weakness, his profound humanity, as the very locus of his divinity. Thus, it is not Christ’s resemblance to “God” which is of crucial importance for Sölle, but God’s resemblance to Christ. Thus, Christ radically transforms the way Christians view God, for

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64 Ibid., 94, 106-107, 93.


66 Ibid., 119.
Sölle\(^{67}\) – and in this sense, she and Weaver are in agreement. Both of them manage to redefine divinity in a way which takes seriously the God of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Jewish worldview rather than privileging Greek philosophical understandings of divinity, and hence addresses Schüessler Fiorenza’s charge of anti-Judaism. For both Sölle and Weaver, Christ is unique and paradigmatic, but not exclusive in the way Schüessler Fiorenza and Heyward rightly renounce, since in redefining divinity along Christological lines, Sölle and Weaver associate God with human cooperation, participation, vulnerability, and mutuality – in short, they redefine divinity in ways which resonate with the Jewish and Christian mystical traditions (including Martin Buber, Simone Weil, and the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition), and a focus on faith as praxis or discipleship. In this way, they agree with Heyward that relationality, mutuality, and non-domination are central to the person, life, and ministry of Jesus,\(^{68}\) but precisely because of this, find it important to associate him more closely with God, whose character likewise reflects these aspects, which are by definition inclusive and invite the participation of human beings. They point, in short, to Sölle’s insights that God is “not less than love,” and that shalom is one of the divine names, reflecting nonviolence at the very heart of God’s character.

Despite all of the ways in which Sölle’s and Weaver’s work runs parallel, however, they remain in disagreement over God’s relationship to suffering, as the discussion of the cross above has indicated. This is no small matter, since Sölle’s redefinition of divinity hinges on the cross – the image of the suffering Christ – and its implications for God’s response to human suffering. Thus, I now turn to a discussion of divine passibility and

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\(^{67}\) Sölle, *Theology for Skeptics*, 96, 120, and *Suffering*, 130-131.

\(^{68}\) Sölle references Heyward approvingly with regard to mutuality on several occasions. See *Mystery of Death*, 80, and *Against the Wind*, 96-97.
impassibility as it relates to Sölle’s and Weaver’s understandings of a nonviolent, non-dominating God.

2. “Only a Suffering God Can Help”: Divine Passibility and Impassibility

In some ways, it is surprising that Sölle’s and Weaver’s theologies diverge so profoundly when it comes to divine passibility (the concept that God can and does suffer). After all, they begin with similar theological methods and intentions: to redefine God on the basis of what Jesus Christ reveals, and thereby to rid Christian conceptions of God of vestiges of violence and domination. On a basic level, they agree that God never intends to cause violence or suffering, but Sölle goes a step further in asserting that God, not only Jesus Christ, suffers in solidarity with the oppressed; here, she echoes Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s assertion that, “only a suffering God can help.”69 Weaver, by contrast, maintains that God avoids perpetrating violence, but does not clearly elucidate God’s actual response to suffering, which results in a passive, bystander God who fails to adequately address the reality of human suffering. In short, while Sölle unequivocally asserts the passibility of God, Weaver’s position on divine passibility or impassibility remains, at best, ambiguous.

The basic agreement between Sölle and Weaver sets them apart from theologians who argue that the suffering of Jesus Christ is exceptional and exempt from notions that God does not cause or intend suffering. The theologies of Jürgen Moltmann and S. Mark Heim represent two major variations of this position – namely, arguments for the redemptive nature of the divine abandonment of Jesus Christ to death on the cross and/or for the utterly unique and solitary nature of Christ’s suffering. Moltmann, whom I referenced in the previous

chapter, attempts to find a middle way between what are incidentally Sölle’s and Weaver’s positions: the view that the cross connotes the crucifixion of God Godself and the view that Christ alone (not God “the Father”) suffered on the cross. He does so by appealing to the separate persons of the Trinity, arguing that God is passible, and indeed suffered the event of the crucifixion, but that as two distinct persons of the Trinity, God and Christ suffered the event differently. Moltmann makes Jesus’ cry of abandonment – “My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34 and Psalm 22:2) – central to his discussion, arguing that “in his death there was a unique abandonment by God,” such that upon the cross, Christ was truly godforsaken; this was the ultimate cause of his death. But God also suffers as a result of forsaking the Son; God in fact suffers a paradoxical “enmity” within God as the cross pits “God against God.” Thus, according to Moltmann, “what happened on the cross was an event between God and God. It was a deep division in God himself, in so far as God abandoned God and contradicted himself, and at the same time a unity in God, in so far as God was at one with God and corresponded to himself. In that case one would have to put the formula in a paradoxical way: God died the death of the godless on the cross and yet did not die. God is dead and yet is not dead.” In short, Moltmann argues, Jesus’ cry of abandonment can also read: “My God, why hast thou forsaken thyself?” Elsewhere, he puts this paradox in more trinitarian terms, speaking of the correspondence between the distinctive kinds of suffering experienced by the First and Second Persons of the Trinity:

We cannot say in patripassian terms that the Father also suffered and died. The suffering and dying of the Son, forsaken by the Father, is a different kind of suffering from the suffering of the Father in the death of the Son. Nor can the death of Jesus be understood in theopaschite terms as the ‘death of God.’ To understand what happened


71 Ibid., 151-152, 244. Emphasis his.
between Jesus and his God and Father on the cross, it is necessary to talk in trinitarian terms. The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the son. The Fatherlessness of the Son is matched by the Sonlessness of the Father. . . . 72

In arguing along these lines, Moltmann recognizes that he is deviating from the usual interpretation of Jesus’ suffering which, in an effort to defend divine impassibility, stresses his two natures, limiting the experience of suffering to Jesus’ human nature alone and thereby creating a deep rift within the person of Jesus Christ and “‘evacuat[ing]’ the cross of deity.” By contrast, Moltmann asserts not only that God suffers, but that the Triune God suffers in two ways in the event of the cross: God is both crucified and God abandons/sacrifices God to death on the cross. The cross, for Moltmann is above all not a “divine-human event” but “a trinitarian event between the Son and the Father.” 73 And yet, this suffering is motivated by God’s love for humanity, including the “godless and godforsaken”; in other words, the cross represents the divine love of enemies. In suffering and dying “the death of the godless,” the very worst of human deaths, God has taken these experiences into Godself, “so that all the godless and godforsaken can experience communion with [God]” through the Holy Spirit. According to Moltmann, this means that rather than envisioning God entering human history, all of human history exists in God: “There is no suffering which . . . is not God’s suffering; no death which has not been God’s death in the history on Golgotha.” All of human history – even Auschwitz – is redeemable and will be redeemed by God when God becomes “all in all.” 74

72 Ibid., 243.

73 Ibid., 244-245. Moltmann argues that this “overcomes the dichotomy between immanent and economic Trinity,” such that the doctrine of the Trinity becomes a kind of shorthand for “the passion narrative.”

Though she agrees with Moltmann’s assertion of divine passibility, Sölle disagrees substantially with his position as a whole, which, in its rigid adherence to a trinitarian view of God, ends up depicting God “the Father” as sadistic. Within this explanation of redemption, “the first person of the Trinity casts out and annihilates the second.” For Sölle, this is sadistic theology at its worst.\(^{75}\) It may seem merciful for God to lovingly take the death of the godless into Godself through the Son, but such a concept rests on the assumption that God would abandon sinners in the first place, that God is a God who would indeed forsake; in short, that there is such a thing as the godforsaken. Indeed, Moltmann’s own logic points toward the impossibility of God ultimately abandoning anyone, since God-in-Christ suffers even with the “godforsaken.” But Jesus Christ remains the great exception, for Moltmann. Contrasting the “crosses” of Jesus’ followers with Jesus’ own cross, Moltmann states, “There is no question of their being on the same level, as is shown by the story of Gethsemane. Jesus suffered and died alone. But those who follow him suffer and die in fellowship with him.”\(^{76}\) Addressing Sölle’s position in *Christ the Representative*, Moltmann argues that Sölle’s Christology does not render Christ unique enough, because in her view, he is a representative who ultimately “makes himself superfluous”; the “provisionality” of his role as representative gives humanity hope of participating in its own redemption. But for Moltmann, Christ’s uniqueness lies not in his superiority but his inferiority to the rest of humanity; his death is the worst death that has ever been experienced by a human being. The suffering of Jesus’ followers, however profound it may be, can never match the depth of his

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\(^{75}\) Sölle, *Suffering*, 27.

suffering upon the cross. In response, Sölle dismisses this notion as “macabre” and an impediment to the recognition of the equally tragic suffering of people around us, asserting, “It is not in Jesus’ interest to have suffered ‘the most.’”

Despite Moltmann’s attempt to hold together his trinitarian paradox of God and Christ suffering differently, Sölle argues that what finally stands out within his theology is God’s deliberately sadistic treatment of God-in-Christ. She states, “Jürgen Moltmann has repeated the attempt to show that Jesus suffers ‘at God’s hands,’ that God causes suffering and crucifies – at least in the case of this one person.” And when viewed as one who “deliberately abandoned” and “subjected” Christ to a torturous death, it is “God’s brutality,” not God’s love, which is brought into the clearest focus. Sölle concludes that Moltmann ends up “worshiping the executioner.”

Weaver does not address Moltmann’s theology directly, but it is nevertheless instructive to compare their perspectives. Like Moltmann, Weaver rejects patripassianism and slips into a more overtly trinitarian view of God at the moment of the cross. But Weaver’s view does not involve a trinitarian paradox of God-against-God, which means that Weaver is more reticent than Moltmann to assert that God suffered at all in the event of the crucifixion, or that God is indeed passible. His Christology is finally lower than Moltmann’s, since God is not the one crucified, but only the one who “give[s] up the Son” and stands by while Jesus is put to death. Sounding curiously like Moltmann, Weaver speaks

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77 Ibid., 262-263.
78 Sölle, Suffering, 81. Cf. Christ the Representative, 74.
79 Ibid., 26-28.
80 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 244-245 n. 69, 235. Weaver mentions Anselm’s defense of divine impassibility here (i.e., “that incarnation does not challenge God’s . . . impassability [sic]”), but not his own position. In rejecting patripassianism, he arguably implicitly supports the doctrine of divine impassibility, however.
of the cross as “costly” in distinct ways for God and Christ: “It cost Jesus his life to make God’s rule visible, and it cost God the Father the death of the Son, Jesus.” Interestingly, Moltmann and Weaver agree that the cross symbolizes the profound divine inclination toward enemy-love, but end up interpreting divine intentionality in significantly different ways. According to Weaver, the only redemptive aspect of the cross is that Jesus chose death over a turn to violence; only in this way was the cross willed by God and symbolic of God’s nonviolence, ultimately much more clearly evident in the resurrection. It is critical for Weaver that while God sacrificed Jesus and allowed his death to occur, God did not cause the cross, because that would imply that God “sanctions and employs violence.” Weaver’s critique of Moltmann, as for other Abelardians, would be that in making God ultimately responsible for Jesus’ death, Moltmann attempts to make an act of violence symbolic of God’s love, or, in a clear echo of Just War logic, attempts to excuse an act of violence on the basis of its being motivated by divine love – and thereby neglecting the more overtly life-giving event of the resurrection. For Weaver, the cross is “anything but a loving act of God,” since the powers of evil, sin, and death are ultimately responsible for it, not God, as it represents the powers’ violent rejection of the reign of God. With Sölle, then, Weaver would take great issue with Moltmann’s insistence that God intentionally caused the death of Jesus Christ, because even if God’s intentions were loving, such a God remains guilty of violence.

S. Mark Heim represents a different variation of the notion that the suffering and death of Jesus Christ are unique and that God uses them for good, though they are not

81 Ibid., 44, 94, 245 n. 69, and Nonviolent God, 57.

82 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 42-45, 91-93. Cf. 299.

83 Weaver, Nonviolent God, 5, and Nonviolent Atonement, 48, 90-93, 161.
directly caused by God. Drawing extensively on René Girard’s influential concept of the “scapegoat mechanism” at work in human societies and religions throughout history, whereby someone deemed evil or different was lynched in order to cathartically “make peace” within the community, Heim speaks of the cross as simultaneously repeating and decisively undoing this mechanism. God is not the one who causes the suffering and violence of the cross, but these are “accepted by God for a saving purpose.” In Heim’s words, “Redemptive violence is our equation. Jesus didn’t volunteer to get into God’s justice machine. God volunteered to get into ours. God used our own sin to save us.”84 “Far from being a rationalization of redemptive violence,” he concludes, “the passion accounts definitively undermine it.” By associating God with the victim of injustice instead of with the victimizers and their actions, the cross joins and fulfills the biblical tradition of the “scapegoat Psalms,” Job, and other passages which give voice to victims and assert God’s solidarity with them, contrary to scapegoat myths, in which the victim is never even acknowledged as such.85 Heim views the ambiguity of the Gospels, their naming of the injustices which led to Jesus’ death and their simultaneous declarations of its redemptive fulfillment of Scripture, as part of the same paradox: “Jesus’ death saves the world, and it ought not to happen. It’s God’s plan and an evil act. It is a good bad thing.”86 For Heim, the cross is thus a triple-edged image: it is the “myth revealed,” in that scapegoating becomes visible in the crucified Christ as a harmful versus a redemptive process; it is “sacrifice reversed,” connoting the recognition of divine solidarity with and “vindication” of the

84 S. Mark Heim, Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 40-1, xi, 15.

85 Ibid., 11, xii, 82-83, 85.

victims, symbolized by the resurrected Christ; and it is “a new basis of reconciliation substituted,” represented by the empty cross, which means that the church of Jesus’ followers is a “new nonsacrificial community” centred around the sharing of “a humble meal and a prayer, not a new cross.”

Heim’s soteriology rests on the uniqueness of the cross in that it marks the end of human innocence concerning scapegoating. Though there have been attempts to “remythologize” or re-sacralize the cross as paradigmatic of redemptive violence, Heim argues that within the Gospels, it is actually Pilate and Herod who see Jesus’ death as a necessary or even atoning sacrifice, thus Christians “must beware that in our reception and interpretation of the Gospel we do not end up entering the passion story on the side of Jesus’ murderers,” nor, like Anselm, assuming that the purpose of the cross is to “perfect” instead of to abolish sacrifice. He asserts, “we too readily confuse God’s becoming a victim of our violence to overcome it with God prescribing violence to save us.” Precisely because, in Heim’s view, it is God incarnate who is crucified, this particular repetition of the scapegoat mechanism has the power to subvert it with “finality,” “once for all.” Therefore, while God’s taking on the role of victim brings to light other innocent victims and calls for solidarity with them, Heim insists that “Christ’s death is completely unique.” He explains, “God steps into this double bind [“the no-win choice between using violence to stem violence . . . and simply joining the line of victims”] and overcomes it. No other could. Jesus did not encourage his disciples to think they might do what he is doing. This task is appointed to him alone. No ordinary victim can change this process, can uncover what is

87 Ibid., 18, 328, 114, 123, 235.


89 Ibid., 18, 129, 159-160, 197.
obscured in the constant practice of scapegoating.” For Heim, the scapegoating of God was such a unique and formative event that even the “condemnations of the cross as divine sadism” and calls to set it aside as an irredeemably violent symbol themselves stem from the effectiveness of the cross in convincing us of the inherent injustice of scapegoating; in other words, they are proof that the cross has already converted and transformed us.

Weaver agrees with Heim on a number of levels. There are definite echoes in Heim’s theology of the Christus Victor model of the atonement: the pattern of Jesus overcoming death by undergoing it is here reinterpreted along nonviolent lines, like Weaver’s “narrative Christus Victor.” Heim also stresses the unity of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, placing the cross within its context, as Weaver also does, and reading the resurrection as the nonviolent vindication of Jesus and as symbolic of divine forgiveness, peacemaking, and love of enemies, which characterize the life of the church, the community of disciples.

In Nonviolent Atonement, Weaver lists other points of agreement with Heim, including his emphasis on the biblical tradition of siding with victims, his critique of Anselm’s interpretation of the atonement as an offering to God, which makes God “the ultimate practitioner of scapegoating,” and his reinterpretation and at times, rejection of violent atonement language and imagery. But in Weaver’s view, Heim does not go far enough in excising sacrificial imagery from his theology and replacing it with novel, nonviolent imagery. The key issue, for Weaver, is “divine intentionality” within Girardian models like Heim’s, which

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90 Ibid., 111-112, 114, 159, 196-197. Cf. 18, 144-145.

91 Ibid., 11, 113.

92 See Ibid., 160ff., 145-147, ix-x, 2.
walk right up to the line of divine intent . . . without quite stepping over it. When the intent is to show compassion and halt the scapegoat mechanism, that comes painfully close to the divine intention that Jesus should die, which allows the idea of a God who uses and sanctions violence to creep in via a back way. This is a bothersome element of the Girardian analysis even when resurrection asserts that God overcomes death and validates Jesus’ life as the model of Christian discipleship.\textsuperscript{93}

Despite Heim’s attempts to overcome the myth of redemptive violence as well as redemptive suffering, vestiges of it remain, albeit exclusively in the cross. Heim is clear that human beings are not to emulate either the scapegoat mechanism or the self-destructive sacrifice of the cross. Insofar as Christians are to imitate the divine, they are to emulate the life of Jesus, not his death, so the only form of sacrifice they should aspire to is “the sacrifice of praise, of doing good, and sharing what you have.”\textsuperscript{94} And yet, for Heim, the cross remains a hallowed and, to a certain extent, premeditated or intentional instance of sacrifice, since it lacks Weaver’s narrative emphasis, which is rightly problematic for Weaver. But part of what underlies Weaver’s discomfort is, once again, the issue of his low Christology at the moment of the cross. Heim is able to find redemptive meaning in the cross because of his high Christology: for him, as for Sölle, it makes all the difference that God is the scapegoat in the case of the cross. But Weaver stops short of making this claim, in part, as I will explore below, because he does not sufficiently distinguish divine suffering from divine violence, and thus, arguably, confuses “God’s becoming a victim of our violence to overcome it with God prescribing violence to save us.”\textsuperscript{95}

Sölle’s perspective resonates with Heim’s on a number of levels as well, though she does not address his theology directly. Aside from their fundamental agreement that God

\textsuperscript{93} Weaver, \textit{Nonviolent Atonement}, 297-299.

\textsuperscript{94} Heim, 197, 221, 159.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 112, 18.
does not cause suffering, for both, it is critical that God is the one crucified in Jesus, that “God is not in heaven; [God] is hanging on the cross.”  

96 This allows the cross to represent divine solidarity with the victims of violence as redemptive instead of divine violence or divine apathy in the face of violence and suffering. In this sense, Sölle agrees with Heim’s idea that the cross unveils or renders visible the many other victims of violence and scapegoating, since “It is easy to overlook the crosses by which we are surrounded.” They also agree that this connotes that God is unequivocally on the side of the victims; God is visible in the victims, not the victimizers.  

97 But Sölle’s Christology is not as high as Heim’s either, which yields several profound distinctions between their views. She would take issue with his claims concerning the utterly unique nature of the cross, since she writes, “the truth of the symbol [of the cross] lies precisely in its repeatability.”  

98 Heim’s perspective suggests that the cross somehow did away with scapegoating, that there was a finality to its subversive repetition of the scapegoat mechanism. But Heim’s own observation that the cross draws attention to other (i.e., subsequent) victims suggests that while there has been an identifiable turn toward the victim, there has also been ongoing victimization. In other words, there continue to be crosses today.  

99 Sölle writes that the cross “is only understood and appropriated when its continuation is understood. Jesus continues to die before our eyes; his death has not ended. He suffers wherever people are tormented. If we thought about Jesus’ death only in a historical sense, without meditating on its ongoing nature, then this remembrance would remain a liturgy devoid of truth. In so far as we forget the continued

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96 Sölle, Suffering, 148.

97 Ibid., 147-148, 132.

98 Ibid., 81-82. Cf. Christ the Representative, 73-74, 125-126.

99 For a similar critique of Girard, see Hans Boersma, Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 149.
dying of Jesus in the present we deny the passion itself.” In stressing that the cross constituted the unique, unrepeatabale, and final scapegoating that undid the myth, Heim thus blunts its resonance with the crosses of today. In other words, the crucified Jesus of Heim’s schema is predominantly divine and hardly human, which arguably distances him instead of bringing him closer to human victims; like Moltmann, Heim makes a case for divine passibility, but stops short of declaring the interchangeability of God and those who suffer. Sölle allows no such ambiguity, plainly asserting that “God suffers where people suffer. God must be delivered from pain.” Sölle’s concern that God not be distanced from the cross nor its ongoing repetitions of the cross is applicable to both Heim and Weaver’s positions, albeit in different ways. But it also means that she would likely agree with Weaver that Heim’s interpretation of the uniquely redemptive violence of the cross maintains traces of intentionality and premeditation on God’s part.

However, for Sölle, as for Heim, there is still a sense in which the cross can be viewed as a loving act, an idea Weaver vehemently repudiates. Again, the difference lies in that the present, ongoing experience and reality of suffering take precedence for Sölle as she confronts notions of theodicy and divine sadism. In her book, Suffering, she recounts a horrifying story from Elie Wiesel’s experience in Auschwitz which poses the question of theodicy (why a good and all-powerful God allows suffering) in the harshest of lights:

The SS hung two Jewish men and a boy before the assembled inhabitants of the camp. The men died quickly but the death struggle of the boy lasted half an hour. “Where is God? Where is he?” a man behind me asked. As the boy, after a long time, was still in agony on the rope, I heard the man cry again, “Where is God now?” And I heard a voice within me answer, “Here he is – he is hanging here on this gallows.”

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100 Sölle, Suffering, 139-140.
101 Ibid., 146.
According to Sölle, theodicy attempts to reconcile the divine characteristics of “omnipotence, love, and comprehensibility,” but only succeeds in holding two of these together at one time. She explains, “either God is omnipotent and comprehensible,” the great causer of suffering and therefore a sadist; or “God is indeed omnipotent and all-loving, but at the same time . . . incomprehensible,” since we do not know why God would be so distant and apathetic as to allow suffering (“This God is dead,” Sölle concludes); or else, God is love but not omnipotent, as in Wiesel’s thought: “Between the victors and the victims God is credible only if God stands on the side of the victims and is thought to be capable of suffering.”¹⁰³ In refusing to explore theodicy via philosophical abstractions, but rather turning to devastatingly concrete instances of meaningless suffering like the one above, Sölle arrives at a position similar to Wiesel’s. Thus, she is not interested in God remaining omnipotent, which leads inevitably to a sadistic God; even “the growing atheism of the masses” is preferable to the worship of such a God, she asserts; it has more ethical integrity and treats the experience of suffering with more gravity. Sölle invites us to “assume that God is not a sadist,” and thus states that the only way God can be “justified” in the face of innocent suffering is “in sharing the suffering, in sharing the death on the cross”; within such realities, “only a suffering God can help.” When faced with an image of an omnipotent God who is culpable for devastating and meaningless experiences of suffering like Wiesel’s story above, Sölle is thus compelled to let go of God’s absolute power and choose a God who is not “less than love.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Ibid., 145. This story of Wiesel’s is also recounted in Moltmann, Crucified God, 273-274, and Heyward, 93.

¹⁰³ Sölle, Theology for Skeptics, 64-65.

Whereas theodicy deals for the most part with a theistic God, Sölle brings Christology back into the conversation, or rather crafts a Christocentric theology proper (image of God the Creator, the First Person of the Trinity). Sölle interprets Jesus as encompassing all three aspects of Wiesel’s story, as “the question, victim, and answer in one person,” the ultimate symbol of “where God is, rather who God is – the victim.” Defenses of divine impassibility try to sidestep what Jesus reveals about God, or to “be in God’s image without attaining Christ’s image,” which “means in our world worshiping the great Pharaoh.” In denying God’s ability to suffer, they deny the human vulnerability of Jesus and end up promoting Docetism. Here she names Augustine, for example, who could not stand that Jesus cried out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” from the cross (Matt. 27:46), concluding that it must have only been his human nature which despaired in this way. But of course, Sölle reminds us, the Gospels make no attempt to deny that Jesus suffered, was afraid, and wept. And unlike Moltmann and Heim, who set Christ’s suffering above that of others, Sölle reads the cross as the ultimate sign that God is with all those who suffer.105

So in a way, Sölle argues that theodicy pursues a false question. It is not about asking how and why God allows suffering, as if God is in full and absolute control of human history, like a puppet-master. Rather, Sölle asks, given the present reality of suffering, what is God’s response? And the cross, she determines, conveys not a divine fiat to end all suffering, but loving solidarity with those who suffer.106 She explains at length,

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106 Sölle, Theology for Skeptics, 71-72.
crosses of the rebellious slaves under Spartacus adorned the streets of the Roman empire. The cross is no theological invention, but the world’s answer, given a thousand times over, to attempts at liberation. . . . *De facto* love ends up on the cross and within visible reality God chooses to act paradoxically. 

Love does not cause suffering or produce it, though it must necessarily seek confrontation, since its most important concern is not the avoidance of suffering but the liberation of people. Jesus’ suffering was avoidable. He endured it voluntarily.  

God became wholly vulnerable in Jesus, to the point of suffering and dying as a victim of injustice; God cannot stand by, disaffected by suffering, but being a God of love, weeps and suffers with the least. “Pain is a part of life because pain is a part of love,” Sölle states. “I do not wish to have a God free of pain for I could not trust such a God.”  

This incarnational assertion “from below” jettisons divine omnipotence and impassibility from their historically central positions in Christian understandings of God, replacing them with divine compassion and vulnerability. 

But God’s compassion or co-suffering also transforms suffering; Sölle goes so far as to speak of the cross as the “tree of life.” In taking the side of the victims, God exemplifies a certain kind of suffering, then, which Sölle terms “God’s pain,” rather than hallowing all forms of suffering as redemptive.  

This pain is not one-sidedly destructive or meaningless, but in being accepted and in a sense, actively undertaken, has the potential to change and transform the suffering into something meaningful, into the “pain of birth.” Here Sölle turns to the Jewish philosopher and mystic Simone Weil, who differentiates suffering from devastating “affliction,” as the latter encompasses three types of suffering: physical, psychological, and social. According to Sölle and Weil, compassion, solidarity, or suffering love does away with the social isolation that so often accompanies suffering, and thereby

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108 Sölle, *Against the Wind*, 77.

begins to point toward the possibility of transforming the suffering so that, like the pain of childbirth and/or of love, it contributes to life rather than sinking passively into death. Sölle thus asks, “How does this transformation from fruitless, meaningless pain to God’s pain occur? How do people move from stomach pains to labor pains that usher in a birth? . . . And how does God’s pain light up our pain?” Regarding the cross, specifically, she wonders, “How can the tree of life grow out of suffering, out of caprice, out of violence endured? How does the instrument of torture used by the Roman military administration become a tree of life?” In the choice to open Godself to love and to make Godself vulnerable for the sake of justice, God encountered the cross. “It is not God who makes us suffer,” Sölle asserts. “But love has its price.” In unconditionally embracing those who suffer, God’s presence with them transforms their suffering, empowering them to resist injustice and choose life. Sölle is above all clear that not all suffering participates equally in this process: “Only that pain is good which furthers the process of its abolition.” The cross then reveals that “the one whom God forsook [Jesus] himself becomes God.” Rather than being viewed (at best) as those whom God has forgotten, those who suffer become the face of God, who is “endangered” and “threatened” in this world, a God who “must be delivered from pain.” In this way, the cross is a “tree of life,” pointing us to God’s vulnerability, love, and resistance as the answer to the experience of suffering – as well as calling us to emulate this kind of vulnerable, loving resistance, as I will discuss in the next chapter.111

Given Sölle’s profound and nuanced arguments for divine passibility, which reach their peak in the image of the cross as a tree of life, Weaver’s discomfort with or ambiguity

110 Sölle, Suffering, 13, 95, 102-103, 107, 125, and Theology for Skeptics, 76-79.

111 Sölle, Theology for Skeptics, 77, 72, 102-104, Suffering, 45, 146-147, and Thinking about God, 134-135.
concerning divine passibility is puzzling. At the outset, he is, like Sölle, attempting to take
the experiences of the oppressed seriously in reinterpreting the cross so that it no longer
supports notions of redemptive violence or redemptive suffering. But unlike Sölle, who
speaks first of the existential reality of human suffering and from there moves to the divine
response, Weaver turns first to the question of how God can avoid supporting redemptive
violence and redemptive suffering – and arguably concludes that God must be distanced or
insulated from both.  

This means, in short, that Sölle’s God responds to and addresses suffering, but Weaver’s God ends up avoiding the cross, and thus avoiding suffering for the
sake of avoiding becoming a perpetrator of violence. In using this tactic, however, Weaver
arguably falls into the confusion which Heim identifies, failing to sufficiently distinguish
divine suffering from divine violence. And by Sölle’s standards, of course, such a tactic
leaves those experiencing suffering with an apathetic (and unbiblical) God who refuses to
hear their cries and act on their behalf. Indeed, according to Weaver’s own standard of using
the Jesus of the Gospels as a hermeneutical key to the character of God, the countless
examples of Jesus’ solidarity with the “least” of his context as well as his teachings (e.g.:
Matt. 25, Luke 4) reaffirm the centrality of God’s solidarity with those who suffer; in this
way, Weaver’s position is more Abelardian than he admits. Thus, the cross is not an
anomaly within the Jesus-narrative, but an integrated part which must not be
underemphasized nor, to use Moltmann’s phrase, “evacuated of deity.” In his efforts to avoid

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112 See Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 161, 244-245 n. 69.

113 See Heim, 18.

114 I referred to this at the close of the previous chapter. Weaver’s method is arguably Abelardian in
that he draws on marginalized theologies and thus places himself and God in solidarity with them, but
theologically, he does not follow through in his interpretation of the cross. He has been called “largely
Abelardian.” See Boersma, 43.
making God a victimizer, then, Weaver ends up distancing God from the cross and thereby from victims as well.

I have established above that Sölle and Weaver are in agreement that God does not cause or intend violence or suffering. Weaver states unequivocally that “God is not the author of evil,” and approvingly cites womanist theologian JoAnne Marie Terrell’s “God-affirming” reversal of the usual logic of theodicy: “Since God is so good, why are people so evil?” While he has previously stressed divine “control of history,” Weaver softens this approach in his later work, taking the position that God has “limited God’s own power in order to allow the freedom of creation,” and because of the “noncoercive, nonviolent character of God,” God “has to ‘suffer’ the consequences, sometimes deadly consequences, of the freedom given to creation and human beings.” He explains, “The ultimate demonstration of God’s acceptance of suffering is allowing Jesus, the Messiah, to suffer and die. To imitate Jesus and to have the ‘image of God’ is to imitate the ‘moral character of God,’ which means to refuse to participate in coercion. This . . . can and does mean suffering. But God is not the cause of suffering. Rather, God is on the side of those who suffer in a life of sacrifice,” and promises to vindicate them through the power of the resurrection. It is especially true, for Weaver, that God does not cause “involuntary suffering” which results from poverty, prejudice (racism, sexism, heterosexism), disease, accidents, natural disasters, and war. But the cross, for Weaver, is an instance of “voluntary suffering” in that “the chosen, justice-seeking activity may result in suffering. Loving enemies and confronting injustice is not always easy.” God thus desires us to imitate Jesus’ nonviolent confrontation

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of injustice, and yet the suffering which may result is not part of God’s will, and is not redemptive, according to Weaver. The problem remains, however, that apart from not being the cause of involuntary suffering, within Weaver’s theology, God remains silent and offers no response to those experiencing it. In this way, Weaver implies that the existential meaninglessness of involuntary suffering is mirrored by a theological meaninglessness as well.

Interestingly, however, there is some evidence of Weaver’s movement toward a theology of risk and vulnerability. Just as Sölle makes the assertion that “love has its price,” so Weaver speaks in *The Nonviolent Atonement* of the cross as evidence of just how “costly” it was for Jesus to nonviolently confront the powers within an “ethic of risk,” and expands this notion in *The Nonviolent God*, speaking about God and the risk inherent in love. In creating the world out of love and allowing human freedom to choose love, God gave up ultimate control over the world, or “‘ruled out a world in which [God’s] will is always done.’ “Love involves risk,” Weaver recognizes, because “for love to be genuine, it cannot be coerced, which in turn means that people can oppose God.” These discussions are steps in the right direction, and start to approach Sölle’s convictions of a passible and passionate God. But even here, Weaver sets up stark divisions between God and Jesus Christ, speaking of their distinct experiences of this costliness. Though he notes in passing that God “is with us” and “on our side” when we suffer, how does it make sense to speak of God’s presence with those who suffer when God does not even fully share in the suffering and death of

118 Ibid., 269, 269 n. 32, 103, and *Nonviolent Atonement*, 213.
119 Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 44, 94, 245 n. 69, and *Nonviolent God*, 57.
120 Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 271, 262.
Jesus? This results in a God who risks the life of Jesus for the sake of God’s reign – in other words, a God who does not make Godself vulnerable, but sacrifices another instead. There may be limited comfort in knowing that God does not cause suffering, but a God who passively allows it while remaining an uninvolved bystander is no better. It is much more profound to know that God suffers with us. Here I must agree with Sölle and Bonhoeffer: “only a suffering God can help.”

So what lies behind Weaver’s reticence to allow God sufficient vulnerability to suffer, to truly share in the cross? In part, it is a desire to hold onto a certain understanding of divine sovereignty and power – vestiges of the omnipotence of God which Sölle discards. In stressing that God “refuse[s] to participate in coercion,” Weaver remains focused on God’s avoidance of violence, not on God’s response to the reality of suffering. In fact, risk and suffering remain somewhat theoretical within Weaver’s theology; they remain real “possibilities,” but do not become the devastating reality which Sölle calls us to face and respond to. In a general way, Weaver projects the perspective of the powerful onto God – God must avoid using God’s power to cause evil and suffering – rather than viewing God as a “victim,” as Sölle does, whose suffering must be shared for the sake of being (at least somewhat) alleviated. Weaver indeed makes the case that divine nonviolence and sovereignty are not mutually exclusive. He argues that God’s sovereignty and omnipotence are visible in the “cyclical nature of violence,” and the way that “evildoers are handed over to the consequences of their evil deeds,” which proves that “violence is always self-

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122 See Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 267.
The resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate proof, for Weaver, that God will ultimately and nonviolently triumph over the powers of evil through “the restoration of life.” There is an “eschatological” dimension to his understanding of divine sovereignty, then, since God has already triumphed over evil but that triumph has yet to be realized in full. “The reign of God is victorious, God is sovereign, even as suffering and evil are still present.” In the meantime, Weaver assures us, “God is with us in the midst of evil.” This emphasis on divine sovereignty arguably confirms that Weaver keeps God at arm’s length from human experience, including the experience of suffering, something which starkly contrasts Sölle’s immersion of God into the very thick of human suffering. In Sölle’s terms, he comes close to answering the question of theodicy with the assertion of God’s omnipotence and incomprehensibility. It ultimately points to Weaver’s attempt to have things both ways: he wants Jesus’ nonviolence to be normative for our images of God, and yet maintains that God is “other” than the suffering and dying Jesus. This brings us to the debate concerning divine “otherness” among contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite theologians.


As I mentioned in chapter one, it is only recently that the biblically- and praxis-oriented Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has ventured into systematic theology; as such, the majority of Mennonite theologians are involved in working out the theological implications

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123 Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 141-142. Weaver is quoting John Howard Yoder in the latter. Here Weaver glosses over the complicated issue of the innocent suffering that also invariably results from the cycle of violence.

124 Ibid., 143-144, and *Nonviolent Atonement*, 216.

of a Mennonite peace ethic or orthopraxy (something of a reversal from other Christian traditions). Weaver’s perspective represents one major line of argument within the Mennonite debates surrounding God, violence, and peace, as he responds affirmatively to the question, “Is God a pacifist?” Making the New Testament narratives of Jesus central to his biblical hermeneutics, theology, Christology, and soteriology, he stresses the unique contribution of the Mennonite tradition to wider Christianity – a contribution which builds its “core” around peace and nonviolence, which mainline, Constantinian Christianity has historically sidelined. Weaver’s arguments for divine nonviolence are thus based on feminist, womanist, and black liberation theologies with the aim of making Anabaptist-Mennonite theology more thoroughly nonviolent. One of Weaver’s major interlocutors within this debate is the late Canadian Mennonite theologian, A. James Reimer, whose response to the question of divine pacifism is resoundingly negative. In this section, I will therefore provide an overview of Reimer’s critiques of Weaver’s nonviolent depiction of God and Weaver’s response, bringing in several other key Mennonite theologians as well as Sölle, whose perspective supports and deepens Weaver’s claim that God is, indeed, a pacifist.

Identifying as a “self-critical Mennonite,” Reimer argued against several prevailing assumptions within late-twentieth-century Mennonite theology, especially among Yoderian theologians such as Weaver. He was known to have confronted Weaver with the accusations of “ethical reductionism” and “Jesusology” – i.e., the reduction of the Christian tradition to nonviolent ethics based on the norm of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and the collapsing of the

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Trinity into its second person, respectively.\textsuperscript{127} Against Weaver (and other Yoderians), Reimer reads the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition as a theologically orthodox, trinitarian tradition with a distinctively “heightened ethical fidelity to the Jesus narrative.” The starting point for Reimer is the “classical theological orthodoxy” of the creeds as the “metaphysical-theological” foundation for a Mennonite peace ethic. He states, “[i]t is the Christian doctrine of God that is the foundation for good ethics, not good ethics which is the norm for our view of God.”\textsuperscript{128} Reimer argues that to begin with nonviolence, as Weaver does, is to buy into the “human history-making arrogance” of modern liberalism; in other words, it is to project one’s own (human or, in the case of Mennonites, “ethnic”) ideology onto God instead of viewing God as beyond every ideology. Since, in his view, the very definition of heresy is reduction, narrowing, or “the part wanting to be the whole,” Reimer turns to a Barthian, neo-orthodox sense of God as radically transcendent or wholly ‘other,’ a train of thought he also finds in classical orthodoxy, especially in the tradition of apophatic or negative theology (“God as limit, as unmasker, as absolute boundary, as standing over-against the ideologies of any given age”).\textsuperscript{129} Underlying Reimer’s claim is his disagreement with Weaver’s (and Yoder’s) characterization of all Constantinian-era theology as irretrievably tainted by violence; he states, “trinitarian orthodoxy cannot be equated with Constantinianism, but is in fact the best theological defence against all Constantinian-type political theologies (whether


\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 248-249, 261. Similarly, he argues that the Sermon on the Mount “ought not to function as a canon with a canon. The Sermon on the Mount should itself be understood in light of the whole Bible and not the other way around.” See Ibid., 281.

of the left, right, or centre).”\textsuperscript{130} In short, classical orthodoxy ensures that no human political or ethical system is absolutized, including nonviolence. Thus, for Reimer, “God cannot be said to be nonresistant and pacifist in any strict, univocal sense”; “God is no Mennonite pacifist,” he asserts, but is “beyond all human ethical systems.”\textsuperscript{131}

A key aspect of divine “otherness,” for Reimer, is a robustly trinitarian theology. He argues that the Mennonite fixation on the Sermon on the Mount as the paradigmatic measure for ethics has led Weaver and others to reduce God to Jesus, to call into question God’s ability to judge evil and bring meaning out of violence and suffering, and to ignore the diversity of images of God portrayed in the entire Bible, some violent and some nonviolent.\textsuperscript{132} In response, he proposes his “theocentric Christology,” which places Jesus within the context of the Trinity, understood as encompassing “diversity within unity” (in that there are three distinct persons who nevertheless co-operate). He explains,

(1) God the Father represents the unbegotten and mysterious origin of all things, the one who has power over life and death, and can in his hidden way turn violence (which in itself is evil) into good, and thereby bring about the providential divine purpose; (2) God the Son or Word as incarnated in Jesus the Christ reveals the mystery of redemption through nonviolent love and the cross, the reconciliation of God and humanity, and embodies the standard for all Christian ethics; and (3) the Holy Spirit as the great reconciler and sanctifier who is the mysterious source of life, power, and reconciliation of all things separated by sin and the fall.\textsuperscript{133}

On this basis, Reimer argues, it is possible to build a theologically-sound peace ethic which does not impinge on the absolute otherness of the divine and also problematizes absolute pacifism.


\textsuperscript{131} Reimer, \textit{Mennonites and Classical Theology}, 487, 492.


Within Reimer’s theology, then, the otherness of God and the imitation of Jesus Christ are linked, since, “It is precisely because God has the prerogative to give and take life that we do not have that right. Vengeance we leave up to God.” God’s violence, “wrath,” and “judgement,” far from operating as summons for human violence, actually make our nonviolence possible; thus, he concludes, “God’s means of achieving the ultimate reconciliation of all things are not immediately evident to us. God cannot be subjected to our interpretation of the non-violent way of Jesus. Our commitment to the way of the cross (reconciliation) is not premised on God’s pacifism or non-pacifism.”

Reimer is also not an absolute pacifist, and rejects the notion that nonviolence alone can address the complex conflicts of the present global context (genocide, new forms of terrorism, etc.), and the enormous responsibility to “protect vulnerable people.” Since he finds support for holy war, just war, and pacifism in the Bible, he is less concerned with avoiding violence at all costs and more suspicious of claims that it is in fact possible to purify oneself or the church from complicity in all forms of violence; because of the reality of sin, even those committed to nonviolence can only carry out such an ethic in “penultimate and fragmentary ways.”

Here, Reimer presents a middle way between the “Christian realism” of Reinhold Niebuhr, who spoke of the “impossibility (of following the Jesus ethic),” and a Mennonite peace ethic, which does not permit sin “to cancel out the normativity of love.” Reimer’s proposed middle way involves “just policing,” which aims “to restrain evil and maintain order for the common good,” and thus constitutes “an alternative to war” and its “culture of killing.” While “just policing” cannot avoid the use of violence, even deadly violence, it can be

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136 Ibid., 54, 131, 113, and *Dogmatic Imagination*, 67-68.
guided by the call to love the enemy, according to Reimer.137 Through the atonement, he argues, God “forgives us our sins, even our violence, without excusing them,” since “the loving God is amid death and violence in ways that are not clear to us.”138

Weaver, by contrast, takes issue with Reimer’s assumption that there is such a thing as a universal “theology-in-general or Christianity-as-such,”139 arguing that all theology, even the presumed orthodoxy of the creeds, is contextual and therefore contestable. “Much of the theology of Western Christendom has accommodated violence and war,” he states, specifically by emphasizing the generic categories of Christ’s humanity and deity and thereby undermining the normativity of his historical life and example. This produced a particular Christology and ecclesiology which sidelined peace from the start, or, in Weaver’s words, “unhook[ed] Christology from ethics (and soteriology).”140 On this basis, Weaver states, “It remains unclear how the creedal formulations, which Reimer acknowledges were the end result of a process that allowed ethics to get lost and that contain no explicit ethical dimensions, now turn out to be best foundation for ethics.” In Weaver’s view, such a tactic concedes too much of the distinctive peace church perspective, and “has succeeded more in enabling Mennonites to identify with some version of wider Christendom than it has


138 Reimer, Christians and War, 173, and Mennonites and Classical Theology, 492.


produced a genuine peace theology for the Mennonite churches,” or even genuine ecumenical dialogue. He ultimately disapproves of attempts, such as Reimer’s, to “salvage Christendom’s violence-accommodating theology.”

Weaver thus rebuts Reimer’s accusation that his theology reduces the Christian faith to the Mennonite emphasis on the nonviolent example of Jesus and a discipleship-ecclesiology, arguing rather that he effects a methodological and hermeneutical reversal that does not aim for “agreement with Christendom” but maintains as foundational the distinctiveness of the Anabaptist-Mennonite peace stance. After all, states Weaver, the Anabaptist tradition’s “departures from dominant orthodoxy were important enough to die for,” as evidenced by the many early Anabaptist martyrs. They do not replace the broader body of Christian doctrines and beliefs, but colour the Anabaptist-Mennonite reading of them, as seen in Weaver’s major books, which address soteriology (The Nonviolent Atonement) and Christology/theology (The Nonviolent God) from an explicitly Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective.

The same could be said of Weaver’s Christology; while Jesus is central to it, providing the hermeneutical “key” by which he sifts through the diversity of images of God within the Bible and theology, God is not reducible to Jesus. Against Reimer’s accusations of “Jesusology,” Weaver states that he has nothing against trinitarian theology as such: “one can

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142 Weaver, Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity, 106-107. He continues, “Rather than seeing these [Anabaptist-Mennonite] formulations as suspicious or unsophisticated versions of orthodoxy, it is possible to interpret them as initial inclinations – the implications of which were not fully recognized – to amend the received, classic theological tradition on the basis of new learning.”

143 Weaver, “Mennonites,” 74, 78. Weaver asserts that he therefore agrees with Reimer that “Mennonites need to give more attention to doctrine, that is to correct thinking about theology,” but stipulates that they must do so from their own distinctive perspective and tradition. While “the normativity of Jesus, a communitarian ecclesiology and rejection of violence” provide “the uniqueness of systematic theology for Mennonites, they are not in themselves that theology,” Weaver asserts.
of course talk about the loving Father whom Jesus proclaimed and obeyed and about the Holy Spirit who empowered Jesus. . . . That said, however, I am . . . much more reluctant than Reimer to make trinitarianism – threeness – an abstract quality of God to be confessed in and of itself.” In fact, Weaver appeals to Nicaean formulations about the Trinity in making his case for divine nonviolence, arguing that there must not be glaring contradictions between the characters of different members of the Trinity, as in Reimer’s and others’ distinctions between God’s violence and Christ’s nonviolence. In his words, “Since human minds can make no claim to know everything about an infinite God, it [his statement that “God is truly revealed in Jesus”] is not a claim that by looking at the narrative of Jesus one can know everything about God. . . . It means that whatever we might say or think about God should not be contradicted by what is revealed about God in the narrative of Jesus.” In other words, he “disputes those efforts to defend the violence of God by claiming that, because we cannot know everything about God, the full character of God was not revealed in the incarnation.” In contrast to the “abstract” and “general” claims of orthodoxy, then, Weaver sets out to develop “a theology specific to Jesus.” This implies that Reimer’s God is ultimately not specific or particular enough, in Weaver’s estimation. In my view, Weaver’s recognition of God’s nonviolence as revealed in Jesus Christ thus does not impinge upon divine “otherness,” as Reimer and others fear, but redefines and radicalizes it as paradoxically particular, immanent, and participatory.

Other Mennonite theologians share Weaver’s propensity toward a more specific depiction of God than Reimer offers, including J. Alexander Sider and Philip E. Stoltzfus,

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144 Ibid., 78.
145 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 245.
146 Weaver, Nonviolent God, 4-5, 9. Emphasis added.
among others. Though he follows Reimer in aiming to preserve God’s “otherness” by not
imposing nonviolent ethics onto God, Sider contends, interestingly, that both Weaver and
Reimer attempt to “domesticate” God or to render God “a stable referent for our speech,”
since both limit God to either nonviolence or violence alone. Sider posits that Reimer, in
particular, misuses apophatic or negative theology, which is not simply the “denial of
positive claims about God,” but comprises only part of the paradoxical/metaphorical quality
of theological language (which must assert and deny every concept used for God). Thus, as
framed by Sider, both Weaver’s assertion of God’s pacifism and Reimer’s denial thereof
constitute attempts to hem God in, as well as, incidentally, falling under Reimer’s own
definition of heresy as reduction or narrowing. I would argue, however, that though we are
called to imitate God’s nonviolence, God and human beings are nonviolent in different ways:
God’s nonviolence is entirely consistent, while we fulfill such a calling in “fragmentary and
penultimate ways,” as Reimer points out. But Sider is also more cognizant than Reimer of
what I would term the particularity and immanence of God’s otherness, and is critical of
Reimer’s “incipient Trinitarian modalism” and its accompanying “inadequate Christology.”
For Sider, the Incarnation itself “is ultimately and unimaginably strange,” thus it is simplistic
to equate divine otherness with transcendence alone, as Reimer implies, without taking the
otherness of God’s immanence into account, as per “the Christian story.”

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147 Also, see Miroslav Volf’s arguments in Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 251.

of God: Negative Theology as Social Ethical Resource,” in Vital Christianity: Spirituality, Justice, and
120-122, and Reimer, Dogmatic Imagination, 39.

of Christ in the Drama of Reconciliation,” The Conrad Grebel Review 32, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 279-286.
Christ, places Sider in line with Weaver’s narrative-centered high Christology. But based on Weaver, I would add nonviolent resistance, itself profoundly counterintuitive and mysterious, to the particularity of God’s otherness, something which neither Reimer nor Sider recognize. In fact, because Reimer refuses to privilege Jesus’ nonviolence, it becomes unclear what exactly Jesus reveals about God, if anything, resulting in a form of Christological agnosticism. With the exception of his brief discussion of the cross as God’s own crucifixion, Reimer does not allow Jesus’ message and example to permeate or even colour his understanding of God, implying, somewhat ironically, a low Christology.

In his critique of John Howard Yoder’s distinction between God’s violence and the exemplary nonviolence of Jesus Christ, Stoltzfus wonders whether for Yoder and other Mennonite theologians, “there remains. . . at the end of the day, a horrifically violent, Hollywoodesque image of God lurking in the shadows.” Despite their claims to be taking the Old/First Testament more seriously, such theologies are out of sync with the biblical narratives of Abraham and Moses, for instance, who overtly protest God’s violence; theirs is not an ethic of “Stand still and allow God to commit genocide.” Such theologies do not sufficiently participate in the “self-consciously critical and constructive” task of “theological construction” – i.e., taking responsibility for the ways in which we name and speak of God. Stoltzfus also cites Ray Gingerich’s perspective on the “untenable theological and ethical dilemma” which arises from attempts to hold together God’s violence (or the image of God as a warrior) with Christ’s nonviolence as the basis for a peace ethic:

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151 Reimer, Dogmatic Imagination, 40-41.

Ascribing a necessary behaviour and way-of-being to God that is forbidden by God for the followers of Jesus is a peculiarly fateful flaw in pacifist and Anabaptist theologies. For if God is violent, and God – however we may conceive of God – is Power, then power in the final analysis is violence. And if violence is a characteristic of God, and we hold that Jesus is the fullest revelation of God available to us, then we cannot, in truth, believe that Jesus is nonviolent. And if Jesus is not nonviolent, then we who claim that as Christians our lives must be in conformity with the teachings and example of Jesus are in error.\(^{153}\)

In a similar vein, Gingerich and Ted Grimsrud wonder whether Mennonite theologians who continue to defend the image of God as a warrior are implying that such images are somehow exempt from the category of (constructed) theological metaphors and therefore above accusations of idolatry. Sounding much like Weaver, they conclude, “Perhaps the best way to avoid making our God-concepts idolatrous is to make sure that they never become the justification for violence toward other human beings. That is, understanding God as nonviolent may actually be the best approach for constructing theology that is as non-idolatrous as possible. We believe the nonviolent way of Jesus best protects us from the self-assertion that allows us to accept values as ultimate that require taking others’ lives.”\(^{154}\)

These respective critiques of Reimer’s and others’ defenses of divine violence suggest, as I have noted, that Reimer’s depiction of God as utterly transcendent and wholly other underemphasizes the particularity and immanence of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. But, simultaneously, there is a sense in which, according to these various critiques, Reimer’s God is not “other” enough; that is, Reimer’s God remains limited to the cycle of violence and to retributive understandings of justice rather than transcending them through peace and nonviolence. Any defense of divine violence, for Weaver, “is based on an intrinsically

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violent assumption – restoring honor or justice depends on a divinely sanctioned death” or “the idea that doing justice means punishment [which] is the hallmark of many criminal justice systems.”¹⁵⁵ Despite his intent to safeguard God’s otherness, both Reimer’s depiction of God and his ethics fail to transcend human understandings of justice as violence, which suggests to Weaver that there is a correlation between divine and human violence. “I cannot prove in quid pro quo fashion that the image of a God who resorts to violence results in violence by human beings.” Nevertheless, he concludes, “I suspect there is a reciprocal relationship between imaging a God who uses violence and human resort to violence.”¹⁵⁶ This insistence that human behaviour images divine behaviour is perhaps Weaver’s most striking critique of Reimer’s position. Reimer argues that God’s otherness must be preserved, and that God’s violence prevents human violence rather than fostering it. But, Weaver points out, “the key ethical question is whether Christians imitate God’s vengeance,”¹⁵⁷ and compares a violent God to “a loving parent who viciously attacks when provoked and then tells the children to ‘do as I say, not as I do.’”¹⁵⁸ It is quite remarkable to note that Reimer retains the image of a violent God and interprets one sort of violence (just policing) as a form of enemy-love. Even in this rigorously limited way, Reimer makes a space for humanity to imitate God’s violence, thus, for Reimer, as for Weaver, human ethics do end up imaging God.

Once again, this concerns how God’s otherness is to be understood. Reimer and others are concerned that human notions of nonviolence are projected onto God such that

¹⁵⁵ Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 242, 245.

¹⁵⁶ Weaver, “Response,” 45.

¹⁵⁷ Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 249. Weaver is addressing Miroslav Volf, here, whose perspective on the divine “monopoly on violence” parallels Reimer’s.

¹⁵⁸ Weaver quoting Sharon Baker in “Response,” 46.
God is made in our image as pacifists, but I would ask how exactly nonviolence reflects the human image, since, as Reimer himself recognizes, even those committed to nonviolence cannot entirely escape complicity in various forms of violence. How can it be that Weaver “put[s] the nonviolent horse before the biblical cart,” as Harry J. Huebner argues, when Weaver derives that nonviolence from the Bible itself, i.e., from God’s particularly other self-revelation in Christ, as I have argued above? It seems this leads to something of a chicken-and-egg conundrum: which came first, God’s nonviolence or humanity’s?

Combining Reimer’s and Weaver’s emphases, Darrin W. Snyder Belousek argues that while God is free to exercise God’s “exclusive right to retribution,” God’s forgiveness offered in the cross indicates that God is “free to transcend retribution” as well. Going beyond Belousek as well as beyond Sider, I would argue that limiting God to vengeance and a retributive understanding of justice in fact places just as many – if not greater – constraints on God than notions of God’s nonviolent ‘otherness’; restorative justice as glimpsed in Jesus Christ is arguably more profound than its alternative, which would confine God to the all-too-common cycles of violence and retribution. In this way, the case for God’s nonviolence is rooted in divine freedom rather than being misconstrued as a claim that God cannot be (i.e., is somehow prevented from being) violent, and also establishes that it is God’s prior choice to “transcend” retribution and violence which is subsequently imaged by

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human nonviolence, not the other way around, if the two can even be severed in this way (since God makes possible and works through human nonviolence). In other words, though human nonviolence is limited and thus an imperfect, non-identical image of God’s nonviolence, it does not thereby cease to be a realizable and profound possibility, precisely because it has its source in God’s life-giving creativity.

But, following Sölle’s trajectory (though she does not engage Reimer directly), I also take issue with the related assumption that God is simply “other” in the sense of being everything humanity is not, in direct opposition. While Sider expresses concern over this issue from the divine side, in that such an assumption reduces divine otherness to transcendence alone and fails to adequately account for the paradox of divine immanence, especially the immanent transcendence of the Incarnation, the problem arises from the human side as well – namely, divine otherness understood simply as “other-than-humanity” also presupposes an abstract and generic humanity. In other words, when Reimer and others insist that God is “other,” the crucial question, “other than whom?,” remains unanswered. If God simply replicates human impulses toward retributive violence on a grander scale, then God is not “other” than those who dominate, which results in a god who is limited to a violent understanding of justice and power. As Sölle wonders, “Why should we honor and love a being who does not transcend the moral level of contemporary culture as shaped by men, but instead establishes it?”

To reduce God to an untouchable, wholly other, and absolute form of power (which Sölle terms “objectified transcendence”) is in her view to “imprison” God within “the projections and wishes” of patriarchy, and thus, ironically, “misses the transcendence of God.” This perspective, she argues, remains “fixated on power” conceived as “coercive authority,” “one-sidedly masculine, as command, physical superiority,

162 Sölle, Theology for Skeptics, 24-25, 28.
hierarchical order, control of the higher over the lower,” or “the relationless, self-sufficient power of the ruler who also uses force.”163 The God of neo-orthodoxy thus ends up imaging the worst human qualities, including violence and domination, rather than overcoming them. It is arguably in claiming, rather, that God is “other” than the powerful, privileged, and dominating that one touches on God’s mystery in a radical way. This is where Weaver’s turn to the experiences of the oppressed is so crucial, and places him firmly in line with Sölle.164

Interestingly, within their redefinitions of divinity, Sölle and Weaver both redefine divine power along nonviolent, non-dominating lines as well. Sölle speaks of God’s power as “shared power, which we can also call love” (she also speaks here of Heyward’s “‘power-in-relationship,’ which lets us take part in the power of life”). Thus, Sölle distinguishes between “evil power” which seeks to dominate others and “good power,” which is the “creative,” “non-compelling,” “shared,” and participatory power of a “non-violent God.” She even speaks of the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the ultimate instance of life-giving power being shared and multiplied, and thus triumphing over “death wishes.”165 This bears obvious resemblance to Weaver’s emphasis on the resurrection as the clearest revelation of divine nonviolence; for Weaver, the difference between Jesus’ (nonviolent) resurrection and his violent death encapsulates the distinction between “the modus operandi of the reign of God” and “that of the rule of evil.”166 Weaver states, “When evil did its worst, namely, denying Jesus his existence by killing him, God’s resurrection of Jesus displayed the ability of the

163 Ibid., 37-38, 14, 47.


165 Sölle, Theology for Skeptics, 14, 47, 49, and Thinking about God, 188.

166 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 269. Cf. 251, 308.
reign of God to triumph over death, the last enemy. The power of the reign of God over the forces of evil is made manifest in the resurrection of Jesus,” rendering it “the ultimate power in the cosmos.” Indeed, Weaver’s emphasis on the resurrection as God’s ability to bring life even out of the most dire situations of violence and death is a different way of articulating Sölle’s redefinition of divine power as loving, shared power. God’s power does not dominate, destroy, or take away life – God’s power restores, heals, and is life-giving even in the face of death. But while he laudably critiques positions like Reimer’s, which maintain that only “under the protection of divine violence” are human nonviolent ethics possible, and takes several tentative directions in the direction of steps in the direction of divine “vulnerability” and “risk,” Weaver still reasserts notions of divine omnipotence and absolute sovereignty over history. In short, he does not allow the *intrinsic vulnerability of nonviolence* to permeate his view of God, at least not to the extent that Sölle does, and vestiges of power-as-control arguably remain within his image of God.

The key here is Sölle’s feminist-mystical exploration of divine vulnerability through her redefinition not only of power, but also, thereby, of transcendence. In *Theology for Skeptics*, she writes, “Transcendence is no longer to be understood as being independent of everything and ruling over everything else, but rather as being bound up with the web of life,” through the “voluntary dependence” of love. “Transcendence is radical immanence,”

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167 Sider argues that this implies that God is somehow “in competition with created powers” and “the only issue is quantity” of power. He makes a case for the “incomparability of God’s power,” but does not redefine God’s power as nonviolent love. See J. Alexander Sider, “‘Who Durst Defy the Omnipotent to Arms’: The Nonviolent Atonement and a Non-Competitive Doctrine of God,” in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective: Essays in Honor of J. Denny Weaver*, eds. Alain Epp Weaver and Gerald J. Mast (Telford, PA: Cascadia/Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2008), 251, 253, 259.

168 Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 254, and *Nonviolent God*, 103, 269, 269 n. 32, 143-144.

she asserts; “it is immanence loved and affirmed from the roots,” and this is no reduction of God but a reassertion of the paradox of God as “the far-near one,” as transcendent in God’s very immanence. Furthermore, this paradox is by no means novel, but utterly central to the Christian tradition – namely, in the idea of incarnation.\textsuperscript{170} Sölle in fact frames her redefinition of transcendence as an outworking of the mystical tradition of negative theology, which affirms divine “otherness” by recognizing that all human names for God are “too small,” that “every idea we have of God fails God.” And yet, she realizes, “no one can ever really settle for ineffability”: “Of course God remains an infinite mystery that we cannot interpret, but in ethical terms that is a foolish statement, because what God wants of us is quite clear and recognizable: ‘You have been told what is good and what the Lord requires of you’ (Micah 6:8).”\textsuperscript{171} In this way, Sölle’s foray into transcendence via negative theology leads her to the empowering notion of mystical union with the divine, precisely within Christian praxis. Here, she evokes a shift “from God-above-us to God-within us and overcome[s] false transcendence hierarchically conceived.”\textsuperscript{172} For Sölle, transcendence “hallows our everyday life” in its very immanence, insofar as it is shaped by the practice of radical love. This means that in a very real way, God needs and depends on our acts of love, solidarity, and peacemaking, since, as Teresa of Avila affirmed, “God has no other hands than ours.”\textsuperscript{173} To name God’s power as the shared power of vulnerability and love thus leads

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\item Sölle, Thinking about God, 190-192, 187, and Silent Cry, 106. Cf. Silent Cry, 105. The phrase “loin pres” or “far-near one” comes from mystic Marguerite Porete.
\item Sölle, Silent Cry, 56-57, 37, and Thinking about God, 185.
\item Sölle, Theology for Skeptics, 50. Cf. Thinking about God, 189, and Silent Cry, 29.
\item Sölle, Thinking about God, 192, 184, and Suffering, 149.
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Sölle to affirm the central importance of the cross in two major, interrelated ways: on the one hand, it means that God is the crucified victim, the one suffering “wherever people are tormented.” But in another sense, the cross also leads Sölle to ask, rhetorically, “Is not the God of the powerless also powerless, the God of women also pushed to the periphery and trivialized, the God of the peacemakers also unprotected and an object of mockery?” In other words, the cross holds together experiences of suffering with calls for loving, nonviolent solidarity with those experiences as per the divine example.174

Still, Weaver echoes these notions, but approaches them through the resurrection instead of the cross. There is some merit, then, to his argument that Sölle and others who espouse the Abelardian perspective of the cross as divine solidarity with the oppressed neglect the resurrection. Indeed, Sölle thoroughly demythologizes the resurrection, making it no more than the ongoing presence of the dead in the memories of the living.175 She seems to assume that lending any further weight to the notion of resurrection goes hand in hand with a triumphalist God who controls history. But Sölle is also concerned about God being depicted as no more than a human ruler, as a mere image of human power. Arguably, however, if Jesus’ life ends with the cross, then Sölle has simply inverted the image, making God no more than a human victim.176 Without the resurrection, Jesus offers no sign of ultimate liberation from the powers of sin and death, no sign that the reign of God has already begun,

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174 Sölle, Suffering, 139-140, Thinking about God, 186-187, and Theology for Skeptics, 50, 44-45. Cf. Silent Cry, 59-62. As a powerful symbol and an act symbolic of an altogether different kind of power, the cross thus aligns God with love instead of domination, and thus also provides a reminder that enacting and embodying this love carries no “guarantee of success,” as will be explored in the next chapter.


176 Chris K. Huebner argues that martyrdom overcomes the violent victim-victor binary in A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity (Waterloo, ON: Herald, 2006), 189ff.
and is not only deferred or to come. If God offers only suffering, then there is, finally, no “help,” no hope that peace, justice, reconciliation, and new life are real possibilities. In this sense, Sölle’s God is also not “other” enough. Here I follow Weaver’s narrative Christus Victor in allowing a greater space for eschatology understood as a subversive (i.e., nonviolent) victory. Interestingly, while Sölle makes a case for retaining the image of God as “father” on the grounds that God makes up for instead of glorifying absent or abusive human fathers, she does not make a similar case for royal images of God. As per Weaver’s line of argument, God’s servant-kingship and nonviolent, victimless victory (the only ‘casualties’ being the powers of sin and death) are subversions and not idealizations of the authority of human rulers and of power-as-domination. In holding together Sölle’s and Weaver’s emphases, then, a picture of God emerges which undermines the victim-victor binary in combining variations of the moral influence and Christus Victor atonement models. It signifies a God who suffers with the oppressed and also offers ultimate liberation from sin, violence, and death – a God who, in other words, is not only present in the cross, but also in the resurrection.

“What view of God lies behind all this?,” Sölle asks, and here the combination of Sölle’s and Weaver’s perspectives has provided a glimpse. This is a God who has been revealed in the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus Christ, not as a dominating, violent ruler who hoards divinity and power, but as a nonviolent God who invites humanity to participate in redemption and to share God’s loving power. This is a God who does not cause nor avoid suffering, but who suffers in solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized, as symbolized by the paradigmatic yet repeatable event of God’s own crucifixion. And this God is not

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177 Sölle, Theology for Skeptics, 19-34.
abstractly or distantly other or one-sidedly transcendent, but particularly, nonviolently, and
immanently “other” than human impulses toward violence, power-as-domination, and
apathy, as suggested by the resurrection, that life-giving, empowering event of divine enemy-
love in response to the cross. In other words, if the relationship between God and Jesus Christ
is fluid and revelatory, and if God is capable of suffering because God is love, not
domination and violence, and if God is therefore nonviolently other, not confined to
retributive views of justice or redemptive violence, then a composite depiction of a
nonviolent, peaceable, vulnerable, and suffering God begins to form which reflects the entire
Incarnation, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The discussion above has confirmed that Sölle and Weaver need one another’s
perspectives for balance. Sölle’s attention to the existential reality of suffering and her
theology of a God who addresses that suffering, answering the cries of God’s people, places
the cross at its centre. Within her theology, the cross is both devastating, especially as we are
“surrounded” by its repetitions, and yet it also answers the question of what God is doing in
relation to suffering: always present, suffering-with, in solidarity. Weaver stops just short of
making this claim, splitting God from Christ at the crucial moment of the crucifixion. Sölle
helps prevent any such division, and thereby ensures that God is not a bystander to suffering.
She also makes a space for the cross to be a “tree of life,” a life-giving event in which
liberation from suffering begins to be a possibility through love and shared suffering. Here
Weaver helps her look beyond the cross to the resurrection as symbolic of the real, if “other”
power which God has and shares, making possible our human acts of peacemaking, justice,
and liberating love which extends even to enemies. Weaver provides a crucial reminder that
God does not offer only suffering, but the promise of peace and liberation from suffering, domination, and violence which is already unfolding within human history.

Of course, this balance cannot but lead into a discussion of Christian ethics, since Sölle and Weaver both speak of aspects of the cross and the resurrection as exemplary, symbolic of the costliness, vulnerability, and life-giving possibilities of Christian nonviolence and love. Weaver is right to ask difficult questions about the cross in its relationship to redemptive suffering and experiences of oppression, especially in dialogue with feminist and womanist voices; Sölle too distinguishes between liberative and oppressive perspectives on what she calls the “repeatability” of the cross. But both Sölle and Weaver spend much time speaking about our human imperative to imitate the nonviolence of God; for both, God’s nonviolent, non-dominating, peaceable character is not simply to be praised, but is something in which we are called to participate. The next chapter thus turns to our human imaging of the nonviolent, peaceable way of Jesus, and to ethics that enable us to live out and embody God’s nonviolent and radical love.
Chapter 4  
Taking Up the Cross: Sölle, Weaver, and Feminists/Womanists on the Ethical Ramifications of the Cross, the Resurrection, and Redemption

For women who have been assaulted or abused, the message to passively accept suffering as the will of God is not good news. The encouragement that there is a reward in heaven and that their suffering will strengthen their faith does not offer concrete hope in difficult circumstances. There is no indication that God’s way may lead away from suffering to new life. It would be theologically treacherous for a violated woman to reject further suffering. This theology would question whether she was refusing to take up her cross and follow Jesus.  
- Carol Penner

Compassio means, in the first place, suffering with the crucified Christ. The cult of the cross is hotly disputed these days. Represented in churches and schools, at crossroads and on mountaintops, it once served to educate one in suffering with another. According to Christian understanding, until the end of the world, as Blaise Pascal put it, Christ still hangs on the cross; namely in the victims of injustice, every one of whom is to be regarded as a sister or brother of Christ (see also Matt. 25:31-46). . . . Without compassio, there is no resurrection.  
- Dorothee Sölle

To imitate Jesus and to have the ‘image of God’ is to imitate the ‘moral character of God,’ which means to refuse to participate in coercion. This imitation of Jesus and the moral character of God can and does mean suffering. But God is not the cause of the suffering. Rather, God is on the side of those who suffer in a life of sacrifice.  
- J. Denny Weaver

It is impossible to discuss nonviolent interpretations of the cross and redemption without incorporating an examination of the ethical ramifications of differing atonement theories, as many of the contemporary thinkers who challenge the violent depictions of God in the

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1 Carol J. Penner, “Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence against Women” (Ph.D. diss., University of St. Michael's College, 1999), 68.


3 J. Denny Weaver, The Nonviolent God (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 262.
historical atonement theories do so on ethical grounds. Sölle and Weaver are no exception. They share convictions that depictions of God impact the construction of the role of the powerful in various socio-cultural and political contexts, including the acceptability of violence, while depictions of Christ impact expectations surrounding the role of the oppressed, including women, and the significance of suffering. In theological terms, these are the ethical outworkings of the biblical assertions that humanity is created in the image of God and that Christians are called to discipleship, to ‘take up their crosses’ and follow the example of Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23).

In this chapter, I will look at Sölle’s and Weaver’s key ethical concerns surrounding the relationship between the cross and notions of redemptive violence and redemptive suffering, bringing them into conversation with key feminist, womanist, and/or Mennonite interlocutors. I will begin by surveying the major (mainline) feminist and womanist reinterpretations of the cross, which range from those who dismiss the cross as a symbol of tragedy and oppression with no redemptive significance (Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, Rita Nakashima Brock, Delores Williams),4 whom Weaver follows, to those who see redemptive significance in the cross as symbolic of divine solidarity and co-suffering with the oppressed, including women (Julie Clague, Mary Grey, Jacquelyn Grant, JoAnne Marie Terrell), among whom Sölle can be placed.5 I will argue that at stake for both Weaver (and


others who essentially de-emphasize the cross within redemption) and Sölle (and others who reclaim the redemptive significance of the cross) is what she calls the “repeatability” of the cross and what he calls Jesus’ “imitability.”

Sölle’s attention to the problem of “Christian masochism” and Weaver’s attempts to de-emphasize the cross within redemption both reflect that the cross has been and continues to be repeated/imitated in harmful ways in the ongoing, unjust suffering of the innocent, who are encouraged to submit unquestioningly to all forms of suffering, a pervasive issue to which feminist and womanist theologians rightly draw attention. But Sölle simultaneously recognizes that the cross can provide an impetus for Christians to recognize and share the suffering of the oppressed precisely through seeing their suffering as a repetition of the cross (i.e., instances of God suffering), and that this kind of suffering solidarity with the oppressed is the suffering of love which is redemptive in being part of the (nonviolent) struggle to abolish suffering. Importantly, Weaver rejects notions of redemptive suffering by differentiating between “voluntary” and “involuntary” forms of suffering and by advocating an active and confrontational form of nonviolent resistance – i.e., pacifism which is not passive. Within Weaver’s theology, however, the cross does not ultimately speak meaningfully to women’s (and other oppressed groups’) experiences of involuntary suffering, in part because he arguably neglects the feminist and

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womanist voices from within his own Mennonite peace church tradition and their exploration of the seeming contradiction between the central pacifist ethic of enemy-love and issues pertaining to violence against women. I will bring a selection of these voices (Nekeisha Alexis-Baker, Mary Schertz, Carol Penner, Malinda E. Berry, Lydia Neufeld Harder, Gayle Gerber Koontz, as well as Hilary Scarsella) into conversation with Sölle, indicating those whose views approach her more nuanced and realistic take on the double-edged nature of the cross in relation to suffering, which can be transformed into life-giving suffering, or what she calls “the pain of birth.” Together, these voices and Sölle’s provide an important corrective to Weaver here. Still, Weaver provides an important element of optimism concerning the feasibility of nonviolent ethics – encompassing the love of enemies, reconciliation, restorative justice, etc. – in light of God’s empowering of human beings and God’s subversive, nonviolent victory over evil and death in the resurrection,9 an element which is less pronounced in Sölle’s theology. Thus, while Sölle and Weaver both attempt to promote nonviolent ethics which do not glorify suffering, Sölle’s perspective ultimately reflects a realism concerning the present reality of suffering which balances and is balanced by Weaver’s groundedness in the hope and power of divine nonviolence manifest in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which makes human nonviolence possible and redemptive. As in my previous chapter, I advocate the combination of Sölle’s understanding of the cross with Weaver’s interpretation of the resurrection, but looking at the ethical ramifications of their reinterpretations of divine power understood as nonviolence, passibility, and transcendently-immanent “otherness.” In short, I take the position that holding together Sölle’s and Weaver’s emphases means taking up the cross of compassion, solidarity, and nonviolent resistance to suffering and being empowered by an ethical-eschatological understanding of

the resurrection to live out nonviolence and embody peace in the here and now. I close with a trinity of reimagined crosses which express three ways the repetition or imitation of Jesus’ cross and resurrection can empower Christian disciples to work toward the peace of Christ, which surpasses understanding.

1. *Can the Cross Be ‘Good News’ for Women? Feminists and Womanists on Redemptive Suffering and the Ethics of Cross-Bearing*

Before turning to Sölle’s and Weaver’s specific reinterpretations of the cross, it is important to survey representative voices within the ongoing, mainline feminist and womanist debates concerning whether or not the cross is salvific for those who have historically been marginalized, particularly women. Profoundly aware of the harm that has been caused in exhorting women to submit to abuse and violence, these theologians question the facile connections drawn between their suffering and that of Jesus Christ on the cross, which results in the problematic notion that all suffering, perhaps especially undeserved or innocent suffering, is redemptive. The opening quotation to this chapter from Mennonite-feminist theologian and pastor Carol Penner articulates this well: “For women who have been assaulted or abused, the message to passively accept suffering as the will of God is not good news. . . . It would be theologically treacherous for a violated woman to reject further suffering. This theology would question whether she was refusing to take up her cross and follow Jesus.”¹⁰ In the face of this, these feminist and womanist theologians in a sense ask a corollary question to Ruether’s famous “Can a male savior save women?” – namely, given the harm which has been caused in pressuring women (and other marginalized people) to take up their crosses of abuse and avoidable suffering, can the cross be good news for

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¹⁰ Penner, “Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices,” 68.
women? This is also an echo of womanist JoAnne Marie Terrell’s questions: “. . . is the profession of faith in the cross inimical to black women’s self-interests? Or, is there power in the blood?”

At one end of the spectrum are those who argue that the cross is not liberative, that it is solely symbolic of tragedy, and, like all suffering, is therefore to be avoided. Examples include feminists Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, who famously call the cross a symbol of “divine child abuse,” since God the “Father” requires or even causes the death of God the “Son.” They apply this critique to all three traditional atonement theories. In their view, the Christian tradition, with the cross at its centre, has convinced women to accept abuse by promoting Jesus’ example of “sacrificial love, passive acceptance of suffering, humility, [and] weakness,” resulting in a “scapegoat syndrome for women.” Calling for atonement to be unilaterally rejected, Brown and Parker conclude that “[n]o one was saved by the death of Jesus,” since “[s]uffering is never redemptive.” Likewise, feminist theologian Rita Nakashima Brock speaks of traditional, trinitarian soteriologies as “necrophilic,” glorifying suffering and death in the form of “cosmic child abuse.” She finds it unacceptable “[t]o make claims that any person’s tragic, painful death is divinely willed or necessary for others to be saved,” because it limits or quashes our ability to “rage at injustice.” Brock speaks instead of Jesus’ death as his tragic victimization by “oppressive

11 Terrell, 6-7. Cf. Delores Williams’ similar question: “Can there be salvific power for black women in Christian images of oppression (for example, Jesus on the cross) meant to teach something about redemption?” See Williams, 145.

12 Brown and Parker, 2-3, 26-27. The list of values is quoted from Mary Daly. Cf. 8, where Brown and Parker go on to claim that the cross “encourages women who are being abused to be more concerned about their victimizer than about themselves.” Another articulation of this critique can be found in Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us (Boston: Beacon, 2001), 40-41.

13 Brock, 56, 90.
powers,” including patriarchy, which must be resisted and dismantled through the healing or “erotic” power experienced in community. This resistance, she admits, involves “risk” but “the point of risk is not to invite death.” Finally, in light of African-American women’s experiences of sexual, reproductive/child-rearing, and labour “surrogacy” during and after slavery (i.e., ‘standing in’ for white women as they were raped by white slaveowners and as they served as “mammies” to white children, and doing traditionally male work in the fields) womanist theologian Delores S. Williams questions the image of Jesus as the ultimate surrogate figure, which raises the problems of “the part God the Father played in determining the surrogate role filled by Jesus, the Son” and “whether Jesus on the cross represents coerced surrogacy (willed by the Father) or voluntary surrogacy (chosen by the Son) or both.” In light of these issues, Williams “frees redemption from the cross and frees the cross from the ‘sacred aura’ put around it,” asserting that “the womanist theologian must show that the redemption of humans can have nothing to do with any kind of surrogate or substitute role Jesus was reputed to have played in a bloody act that supposedly gained victory over sin and/or evil.” She concludes, “[t]here is nothing divine in the blood of the cross.” Williams disagrees with other African American theologians as she insists,

Women must question [James Deotis] Roberts’s [and others’] way of seeing such positive value in oppressed black women identifying with Christ through their common suffering wrought by cross-bearing. Black women should never be encouraged to believe that they can be united with God through this kind of suffering. There are quite enough black women bearing the cross by rearing children alone, struggling on welfare, suffering through poverty, experiencing inadequate health care, domestic violence and various forms of sexism and racism.

14 Ibid., 94-95, 98-99.

15 Williams, 54-55, 143, 145-146, 148.

16 Ibid., 150.
In this way, all four of the above theologians view Jesus’ life and ministry as salvific and exemplary, especially his resistance to evil/struggle for liberation and the egalitarian community he formed to continue his life-giving ministry. But they specifically exclude Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross from this list of redemptive aspects of his narrative. As indicated above, Weaver prioritizes these voices in his engagement with feminist and womanist theologies. While these theologians make valid critiques of the connection between the cross and the notion that all suffering is intrinsically redemptive, which has caused great harm to women and other marginalized groups, their approach leads, in my view, to emptying the cross almost entirely of theological significance. Stated differently, I agree that the cross symbolizes violence and tragedy on one level, but because of its connection to the divine, that is not the sum of its significance.

A second family of feminist positions rests on the notion that Christ’s death on the cross is only meaningful because of his maleness. Rosemary Radford Ruether speaks of Jesus’ life and ministry as the “kenosis of patriarchy,” the emptying or undoing of the hierarchies of patriarchy.17 Going beyond Ruether, Tina Beattie locates this “kenosis” in the cross itself, arguing that it is necessary for Christ to be male in order to “topple the Freudian [i.e., phallic] world from within.” Beattie’s view thus clashes with images of the crucified Christ as female, such as Edwina Sandys’s sculpture, Christa. According to Beattie, such images undermine God’s intentions and reify patriarchal violence against women. She states, “The crucified woman’s body affirms rather than subverts the social order, holding up an image that does not call into question the values of patriarchy but affirms those values in their most violent aspect. Christa perpetuates the violence done to woman by eternally

inscribing the female body with the marks of her suffering.”¹⁸ For Beattie, the redemptive quality of suffering lies along gendered lines: women’s physical suffering, including the suffering of childbirth, is never redemptive, while men’s suffering mirrors the (redemptive) cross.¹⁹ In my view, however, feminists who interpret Christ’s maleness in this way de-historicize the cross to make it fit a simplistic gender binary and the symbolics of emptying patriarchy, thereby failing to take into account Jesus’ status as Jewish peasant under Roman occupation – that is, a member of an oppressed class and cultural/religious tradition put to death by an occupying empire. In other words, in de-contextualizing the cross, they fail to acknowledge the violent, tragic aspects of the cross, which are no less painful when inscribed on Jesus’ particular, male body.

But what about those who find liberative significance in the cross, especially in the cross re-imaged as a female crucifix? Doris Jean Dyke studies one such image from a pastoral-theological feminist perspective: Almuth Lutkenhaus-Lackey’s 1976 sculpture, *Crucified Woman*, which currently stands on the grounds of Emmanuel College of the United Church of Canada in Toronto (incidentally, the college at which I am completing my doctoral studies). She describes how in 1989, upon hearing of the massacre of fourteen young engineering students – all women – at the *Ecole Polytechnique* in Montreal, shot by a man who declared himself anti-feminist, hundreds of people gathered around the sculpture of the


¹⁹ Tina Beattie, *God’s Mother, Eve’s Advocate: A Gynocentric Reconfiguration of Marian Symbolism in Engagement with Luce Irigaray* (Bristol, U.K.: Centre for Comparative Studies in Religion and Gender, 1999), 78-79, 83, 196. Beattie highlights the gendered symbolics of blood: “The male body only bleeds when it is wounded, but the bleeding female body is more likely to be communicating messages associated with fertility than with aggressive violence.” Nevertheless, for her, Mary’s painless childbirth (as per the Catholic doctrine of her perpetual virginity) points to women’s redemption from Eve’s curse, concluding that women’s physical suffering is never redemptive. Brown and Parker also speak of women’s life-giving blood. See Brown and Parker, 10-11.
Crucified Woman. In light of such blatantly misogynistic violence, people were drawn to this sculpture of a suffering woman – depicted nude and sorrowful, with arms outstretched in a cruciform shape – to express their anger and grief, to remember the victims, “some to pray, many to weep.” Vigils for the victims of the Montreal Massacre were held there in 1989 and in subsequent years. If the above theologians are right, this cross only symbolizes tragedy, or worse, the triumph of violence against women. And yet, in Dyke’s description, these gatherings and vigils around the Crucified Woman were clearly not meant to glorify misogyny, and while on one level, they facilitated lament for tragedy, there was an additional dimension to them. Dyke writes, the “feeling of being abandoned and vulnerable was shared and talked about and yet all were standing together, committed to end the needless suffering of women.” In another similar instance, “[a] battered wife, told her social worker that when she saw the Crucified Woman she was able to relate to Christ for the first time.” Here, according to Dyke, “[w]omen [can see…] their suffering, their dying, and their resurrection embodied in a woman’s body” and “know that their suffering is gathered up into the suffering of Christ.” This clearly speaks to a different kind of “power in the blood,” to use Terrell’s terms, a form of healing and strength for resistance which can be gleaned from the cross – in other words, it speaks to a redemptive aspect of the cross, something present even or perhaps especially in female depictions of Christ crucified.

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21 Ibid., 73. Cf. 76.

22 Ibid., 2. Cf. 44-45, where she writes, “Some people have said, ‘Don’t you know that Jesus was a man?’ Yes, indeed Jesus was a man and he was a Jew. Artists have sometimes presented the Christ figure as African, Asian, and Native American, but more often white. Always as a man, seldom as a Jew. So finally, the question surfaces: Why not as a woman?” Sandra Schneiders has likewise argued, “Christ, in contrast to Jesus, is not male, or more exactly not exclusively male. Christ is quite accurately portrayed as black, old Gentile, female, Asian or Polish.” Quoted in Beattie, “Sexuality and the Resurrection of the Body,” 136.
These interpretations of the *Crucified Woman* thus exemplify the other end of the spectrum, comprised of those arguments that the cross has liberative significance because it represents divine solidarity with human suffering, in which resistance to suffering can begin to take root. These perspectives differentiate between destructive forms of suffering (meaningless or needless) and the life-giving suffering of resistance, struggle, transformation, or birth.\(^{23}\) Within this perspective, female images of Christ crucified are not read as glorifications of female suffering, but represent divine solidarity with the suffering particular to women. Feminist Julie Clague argues that the cross cannot be reduced to tragedy alone because it “is a *polyvalent sign offering multiple theological possibilities,*” encompassing “*Christus victor, Christus victima,* and so on.” She discusses several contemporary sculptures which depict a nude female form with arms outstretched, as if nailed to a cross, including *Crucified Woman* and Sandys’s well-known *Christa* (1974, first displayed in New York).\(^{24}\)

In the controversies which surrounded both sculptures, with some deeming them heretical or too sexual, and others protesting “the sight of one more female in an agony of suffering,” Clague speaks also of the double-edged poignancy of associating female suffering with God-in-Christ. This association, which is novel for many Christians, both reflects the unjust suffering particular to women – due to sexual and physical violence and other forms of sexism and misogyny – and also offers God’s presence and solidarity with them. This is why many women, including survivors of sexual and physical abuse and those who gathered at the foot of the *Crucified Woman* in 1989, have found the crucified Christa to be a “healing”

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\(^{23}\) See, for example, Dyke, 66-67. Building on Sölle, she distinguishes between “needless suffering, which can be prevented,” like sexual violence, and “the kind of suffering that is part of what it means to be human.”

\(^{24}\) Clague, 44, 32, 34.
and not an oppressive image.\textsuperscript{25} As British feminist Mary Grey explains, “Christa liberates not by . . . proclaiming that there is an innate redemptive quality in [women’s suffering]; but by being present with and sharing in the brokenness, identifying this as the priority for God’s healing love, Christ gives hope, empowers, and enables the process of resistance.”\textsuperscript{26} Elsewhere, Grey reinterprets atonement as “at-one-ment” or “mutuality-in-relation,” building on the Christian traditions of viewing God and Christ as mothers and the cross as symbolic of childbirth, which resonates with women’s experiences of the singular suffering of birth as empowering and (literally) life-giving.\textsuperscript{27} Recognizing the dangers of gender essentialism and the reification of motherhood as women’s primary or exclusive vocation, she explains:

This is far from being a call for women to have more children to save the world. Nor is it an over-glorification of motherhood at the expense of fatherhood. What I am arguing is that as Christianity has now had two thousand years of death symbolism, it is at least possible that the slaughter perpetrated in the name of Christianity is related to its symbols of death, blood-guilt and sacrifice, and an alternative way of encapsulating the redemptive events might stimulate more compassionate lifestyles.\textsuperscript{28}

In this way, for Grey, the life-promoting reimaging of the cross as the “birthing of God” reflects women’s experiences of birth as a time of pain, darkness, and “‘letting go’ of self” in order to co-create new life with God; in other words, it both draws us to remember and lament those who suffer and “to take up our responsibility to be co-sufferers, co-redeemers and co-creators – to stand in solidarity to prevent further crucifixions.” Paradoxically, the cross interpreted as birth reflects “both the process and the end of the process.”\textsuperscript{29}

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\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 36, 47-48.
\textsuperscript{26} Grey quoted in Clague, 49.
\textsuperscript{27} Grey, 160, 174, 177, 179.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 175. Emphasis hers.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 186, 191.
\end{flushright}
Critiquing the racism and classism/elitism of much of feminist theology, womanist theologians Jacqueline Grant and JoAnne Marie Terrell concur that to image Christ as a female “divine co-sufferer” is liberative, but take issue with a generalized notion of gender. Against Williams, they suggest that to image Christ specifically as a Black woman represents God’s identification with “the least” (i.e., those who are triply oppressed due to race, class, gender and/or sexual orientation, a reference to Matt. 25). To highlight this distinction, Grant strikingly differentiates between white/privileged women’s concern for “fulfillment” and Black/oppressed women’s concern for their very “survival.” Grant roots her reimaging of Jesus in the narratives of Black slave women who identified their own suffering with the cross (“Their crucifixion included rape, and babies being sold.”) but through this very identification also saw Jesus as an empowering “political messiah” (“Jesus means freedom.”). In Grant’s terms, “Jesus Christ thus represents a three-fold significance: first he identifies with the ‘little people,’ Black women, where they are; secondly, he affirms the basic humanity of these, ‘the least’; and thirdly, he inspires active hope in the struggle for resurrected, liberated existence.”

In a parallel way, Terrell asserts that to image Jesus Christ specifically as a Black woman represents God’s identification both with “all people of color,” who “share the cross of systemic racism and the issues endemic to it,” as well as with “all women,” who “still die daily on the cross of sexism and issues particular to it, including physical domination, economic injustice, political marginalization and jeopardized

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30 Grant, 200, 209, 220-221, and Terrell, 124.

31 Grant, 212, 215, 217. Cf. 216, and James H. Cone, The Cross and the Lynching Tree (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 150-151. In a method shared by Grant, Terrell, and others, Cone argues that the significance of the cross cannot be logically or rationally determined in abstraction, but must arise from “the social context of black people’s struggle for justice.” Stated differently, theological interpretations of the cross cannot be imposed by intellectuals on the community, but must thus draw on Jesus’ life in his context and the outworking of that story in the concrete life, thought, and struggle of the African American community itself. Cf. Kelly Brown Douglas, The Black Christ (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 177.
reproduction rights." In her view, Williams is right to state that “there is nothing of God in the blood of the cross” insofar as that means, “there is nothing of God’s sanction in violence.” Still, the crucified Jesus understood as “divine co-sufferer” has made it possible for African American women to find meaning in their experiences of suffering, while the empty cross of resurrection empowers them and gives them hope to overcome and survive it. Against a Christian “hermeneutics of sacrifice” which links “suffering” and “merit,” Terrell relies on an “anthropodicy” which inverts the concerns of theodicy; rather than questioning the goodness or existence of God, her own experiences of suffering lead Terrell to ask, “Since God is so good, why are people so evil?” Holding this profound conviction of “God with-us-ness” as central to the symbolics of the cross means, for Terrell, that “we who suffer can be redeemed” as “self-love becomes imminently possible” for Black women through the “empty cross [as] a symbol of God’s continuous empowerment” and the “continuous intercession of the spirit of Christ.” This family of positions, in which Sölle’s can be placed, strikes a balance between acknowledging the tragedy and violence of the crucifixion in its historical-political context and affirming its nonviolent theological significance as an event of divine solidarity with the oppressed, including and especially women oppressed by the systemic sins of racism, classism, and (hetero)sexism. Perhaps most

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33 Ibid., 124-125.

34 Ibid., 26-27, 125, 69, 143. Emphases hers. Terrell argues that the “hermeneutics of sacrifice” has functioned to reify suffering from the time of the martyrs to the ascetic movements, to historical and present-day “appeals to agape (or sacrificial love), enemy love, and (radical or) nonacquisitive love.” I will return to this critique of enemy-love below. As seen in the previous chapter, Weaver concurs with Terrell’s anthropodicy. See his Nonviolent Atonement, 212, 208.

importantly, it depends on a nuanced differentiation between types of suffering, and the crucial recognition that not all suffering is redemptive.

2. “Repeatability” of the Cross, “Imitability” of Jesus: Sölle and Weaver on the Ethics of Cross-Bearing

At stake in this debate among feminists and womanists is the question of the emulation of the cross, which Sölle terms its “repeatability” and Weaver the “imitability” of Jesus. Both those who reject the cross as a liberative symbol and those who accept it as such perceive the cross as exemplary, whether for good or ill. Though they do not agree on the extent to which the cross can be reclaimed as redemptive, Sölle and Weaver are both cognizant that the cross has been misused and its suffering misinterpreted, with devastating results for women and other marginalized people. In other words, both take feminist and womanist critiques of the cross with utmost seriousness. For Sölle, the corollary of the sadistic/apathetic/dominating view of God discussed in the previous chapter is masochism in emulation of the suffering Christ. In her view, both of these set harmful examples and constitute twin misuses of the cross within Christian ethics. On one hand, she speaks of theologies which foster “unconditional submission” to suffering through ideas that all suffering comes from God and is meant to punish sin or test individual believers, and hence is to be accepted unquestioningly, even gladly. In Sölle’s view, such theologies of “theological sadism” conceive of “a God who only becomes great when he makes us small,” a God who enjoys inflicting pain upon humanity and for whom inflicting pain is supposedly an expression of love, a way of ultimately drawing us closer to God.36 Within this theology of masochism, characterized by an “anthropological pessimism” which overemphasizes

36 Sölle, Suffering, 24-25, 19.
human weakness, sinfulness, and powerlessness, Jesus’ teaching, “Do not resist evil” (Matt. 5:39) is interpreted as a “push for a willingness to suffer, which is called for as a universal Christian attitude. . . . Why God sends affliction is no longer asked. It is sufficient to know he causes it.” But in spiritualizing and individualizing all suffering in this way, theological sadism/masochism obscures the true causes of suffering, including socio-political causes (i.e., social, structural, or systemic sins), and thus both blurs the lines between victims and perpetrators (such as the abuser and the victim within an abusive marriage relationship) and disregards the distinction between avoidable and unavoidable suffering (such as when a woman does not consider the option of leaving an abusive marriage partner). Here Sölle names the biblical example of Abraham, who did not question the “absurdity of the demand” to sacrifice Isaac, his long-awaited and only son (Gen. 22). Within what Søren Kierkegaard termed a “teleological suspension of the ethical,” Abraham submitted himself to the violence of God’s supposed command – at least until God’s messenger intervened, which signifies, for Sölle, precisely that God does not require child sacrifice. Interpretations which link this story to the apparent sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the “Son,” at the hands of God the “Father” at the moment of crucifixion miss this key aspect of the narrative, and end up reifying rather than subverting child sacrifice, since, in the cross, there is no last-minute intervention: “the sacrifice is bloodily carried out” as God the “torturer” and “executioner” “strike[s] the final blow” and Christ submits obediently, unquestioningly to his sacrificial death. Against such destructive masochism, Sölle protests, “[t]he meaning of the cross is not to reconcile God with misery and finish us off in the paradox.”

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37 Ibid., 27, 17-19, 22, 163.

38 Ibid., 28-32, 166. Cf. 85-86.
Given the harmful legacy of Christian masochism, one might expect Sölle to call for the de-centralizing of the cross within Christianity, and for suffering to be avoided. But, she asserts, “[t]he question of whether love needs the cross for its actualization holds only a speculative and not an existential interest.” In other words, such a question is too theoretical and abstract, out of touch with the present, ongoing reality of suffering. The answer, for Sölle, does not lie in the avoidance of all forms of suffering any more than it lies in a masochistic submission to all forms of suffering. As discussed in the previous chapter, Sölle’s view is that the cross reveals God not as a great dominator and executioner but as unequivocally on the side of the oppressed. “But,” she asks, “who besides [God]?” Here Sölle identifies another destructive aspect to the sadist/masochistic understanding of the cross: apathy, “an unconcern that is incapable of suffering” and blind to the suffering of others. After all, if all suffering is equally deserved and God-sent, or equally and redemptively in the image of the crucified Christ, there is no motivation to intervene or to help alleviate the suffering of others. Apathy also arises, in part, due to a failure to distinguish between avoidable and unavoidable suffering. As previously stated, Sölle builds on Simone Weil’s idea of “affliction,” which encompasses physical, psychological, and social suffering, the latter of which is the easiest to remedy (through solidarity and compassion). Speaking of this tendency to blame those who suffer for their circumstances (i.e., to associate suffering with individual sins), Weil writes, “It is natural for us more or less to despise the afflicted, ‘although practically no one is conscious of it.’”

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39 Ibid., 164, 139-140. Cf. Terrell, 124-125, and Cone, 150-151.

40 Ibid., 36-37, 13-15, 105-106. Distinguishing between “biologically derived and socially caused suffering,” and within those, between “suffering we can abolish and suffering we can at best soften,” she states that “the natural cause means virtually nothing compared with the social situation.” “That all suffering is social suffering, then, means that all suffering is to be worked on. No suffering can be clothed and transfigured any longer with the appearance of fate.”
apathy inflicts social suffering and isolation upon those already suffering physically and psychologically, thus giving rise to “affliction.”

In Sölle’s estimation, this dynamic is writ large in the global relationships between the so-called “First World” and the “Third World” or the “developed” and “developing” nations. She describes how apathy runs rampant in the affluent, (over)developed West, where “people are so dominated by the goal of avoiding suffering that it becomes a goal to avoid human relationships and contacts altogether.” Thus isolated from our own suffering and that of others, we become unable to acknowledge or name and express it, whether through prayer, lament, or other means, never mind being able to share and transform suffering through solidarity.41 Within our apathetic, affluent society, we forget that “the truth of the symbol [of the cross] lies precisely in its repeatability.” We fail to recognize that suffering is an ongoing reality for many: “it is easy to overlook the crosses by which we are surrounded” and to numb our sensitivity to and complicity in global suffering. We thus ignore our own need for “liberation from the frightful role of causing misery to the innocent, condemning children to death by our financial policy, and suppressing the hopes of the poor by police regimes, military dictatorships and open war.” But remaining within an apathetic, “suffering-free Christianity” in which we aim to be “in the image of God without attaining the image of Christ” (such as the capitalist-Evangelical ‘prosperity gospel’) simply means that “one leaves the suffering to others.”42 For Sölle, “pain is part of life because pain is part of love,” therefore to “desire freedom from pain means to desire death.” There is in fact no neutrality

41 Ibid., 39, 73, 78. Cf. 45, 48-49, 76. I am borrowing the term “overdeveloped” from Mennonite ethicist/home economist Doris Janzen Longacre’s Living More with Less, 30th Anniversary Ed., ed. Valerie Weaver-Zercher (Waterloo, ON: Herald, 2010), 50. She asks, “What if we became as concerned about our overdevelopment or maldevelopment as we are with the underdevelopment of poor nations?”

in the face of the reality of suffering, for such a stance amounts to bystanderism which enables the violence of injustice: “[o]ur only choice is for whose sake we suffer, not whether we have to suffer or remain free of suffering.”  

Theologically, apathy can only reflect the veneration and imitation of an impassible, omnipotent, bystander God. For Sölle, through both masochism and apathy, Christians thus emulate the worst depictions of a submissive Christ and a sadistic or at best indifferent God.

As discussed above, Weaver also takes seriously the feminist and womanist critiques of redemptive suffering, but he follows theologians like Brown and Parker, Brock, and Williams in radically de-emphasizing the cross within Christian soteriology and ethics. Unlike many of his male interlocutors on the violence of the atonement, Weaver crucially acknowledges that the cross has been misused to promote masochism on the part of those suffering abuse, agreeing that feminist/womanist accusations of “divine child abuse” or reified “surrogacy” are justly leveled at violent interpretations of the cross. As previously mentioned, his “narrative Christus Victor” model attempts to avoid this specific pitfall through de-emphasizing the cross in favour of the entire narrative of Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection; in other words, Weaver draws attention primarily to what happened before and after the cross. He states, God did not “send Jesus for the specific purpose of dying, nor was his mission about death . . . . Jesus’ mission had a life-giving purpose – to make the reign of God visible.”

Even more strongly, he asserts that the cross is “anything but a

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43 Sölle, Suffering, 37, 32, 133, and Against the Wind, 77.

loving act of God,” but rather constitutes the violent rejection of God’s nonviolent reign by the powers of evil, sin, and death; “it is not needed by or aimed at God.”46 The bulk of the problem, for Weaver, lies with the most popular, Anselmian, satisfaction theory of the atonement. As he explains,

The most sensitive to this model are those whose history has involved abuse and suffering – women abused by spouses, children abused by adults, slaves, people whose ancestors were slaves, native peoples expelled from their ancestral lands by immigrants with technologically superior weapons, or persons who currently experience oppression because of race, gender, nationality, poverty, sexual orientation, and more. . . . [T]he various salvage efforts for satisfaction do not remove this abusive image, but rather camouflage it with additional motifs and emphases. Satisfaction poses the temptation to accept such suffering as salvific, as suffering that identifies the sufferer with Jesus. This stance entails a passivity that accepts rather than resists the existing injustice. Feminists and womanists are correct to protest the image it poses.47

As discussed in previous chapters, Weaver also rejects the Abelardian, moral influence notions that the cross represents divine solidarity or compassion for the oppressed, arguing that such interpretations still attribute some violence to God, even if it takes the form of “divine suicide” (i.e., God sacrificing Godself on the cross). Such a stance “deflects the image of divine child abuse but does not address the underlying, fundamentally violent assumption . . . that divine justice requires the violence of punishment,” a critique he would likely apply to Sölle’s position as well.48

Like Sölle, then, Weaver acknowledges that the cross has been misused while nevertheless insisting on Jesus’ “imitability.” But he locates this “imitability” firmly in Jesus’

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45 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 160-162. Cf. 308, 92.
46 Weaver, Nonviolent God, 5, and Nonviolent Atonement, 48, 90-93, 161.
47 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 246.
48 Ibid., 166-167, 183, 245 n. 69, 251. Weaver critiques Julie M. Hopkins and Carter Heyward, whose positions are similar to Sölle’s.
ministry of nonviolence or “rejection of the sword,” almost to the exclusion of the cross. 49

Within Weaver’s schema, then, the cross represents the notion that practicing nonviolent resistance in order to “make God’s reign visible” is “costly” – it “may” involve “suffering and death.” Such a mission “cost Jesus his life,” and likewise costs believers “our lives, which we give to God for the rest of our time on earth.”50 Weaver maintains that suffering and death are the “result” of the nonviolent ethic of Jesus, not the goal of such an ethic, so that following his example entails an “ethic of risk” but not masochism or “passive” submission to abuse. There is thus only one, indirect way in which Weaver salvages the cross as an ethical symbol, stating, “[t]he ultimate nature of the confrontation of reign of evil and reign of God that took place in the life of Jesus made his death inevitable. Rather than fail his mission, Jesus chose to accept death, and God willed that Jesus remain faithful, which meant willing that Jesus die.” Weaver makes the case that Jesus did not masochistically submit to this death, but struggled with its “inevitability” in the Garden of Gethsemane; in asking God, “if it is possible, let this cup pass from me” (Matt. 26:39), Jesus reveals that he “did not relish dying and did not want to die,” according to Weaver.51 In this, Jesus was no different from others who risk their lives for life-giving causes: “Christian martyrs who die rather than recant, parents risking death to rescue a child, environmental activists trying to save trees, peace activists working to prevent or halt a war, and more.”52 Calling himself a “recovering

49 Ibid., 265, 316.

50 Ibid., 94, 277, 312.

51 Ibid., 299, 92. Cf. 91-92, where he states it differently: “Jesus’ mission was to witness to the reign of God. It was God’s will that Jesus carry out that mission faithfully, even when it meant death. . . . God willed that Jesus face his death rather than abandon his mission.” Cf. Tom Yoder Neufeld’s critique that Weaver tries to reduce the cross to a single meaning. See Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, Killing Enmity: Violence and the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 91-96.

52 Ibid., 93.
nonresistant Mennonite,”53 Weaver delineates a pacifism which is not passive, but rather encompasses nonviolent resistance to evil, love of enemies, non-retaliation, and restorative justice and reconciliation; in short, it is “an assertive and confrontational nonviolence that provides an opponent with an opportunity for transformation.” Weaver builds his understanding of nonviolent resistance on Walter Wink’s interpretation of Jesus’ teachings in Matthew 5:39-41 (turning the other cheek, giving one’s cloak, going a second mile), which, tellingly, directly precede Jesus’ call to love one’s enemies within his Sermon on the Mount. According to Wink, turning the other cheek was in fact a resistance strategy meant to assert one’s personhood or humanity, since turning the other (left) cheek forced the aggressor to use his/her right hand, which was a sign of equality within that context. Similarly, giving one’s cloak or undergarment to the one who sued for one’s coat left one naked in court, publicly exposing and shaming the exploitative injustice of a wealthier person suing someone whose most valuable possession was a coat. Finally, walking a second mile with a Roman soldier’s “burden” put the soldier in the awkward position of begging for it to be returned, since he was only legally permitted to make a civilian carry a heavy load for one mile.54 On this basis, Weaver establishes a nonviolent ethic which empties suffering and passivity of their redemptive quality and calls for nonviolent resistance and creative confrontation in the spirit of reconciliation and restorative justice.

Within this non-passive pacifism, Weaver therefore clearly differentiates between voluntary and involuntary suffering. According to Weaver, involuntary suffering connotes any and all suffering which occurs apart from one’s own choices, such as suffering due to


54 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 316-19, 37-9.
poverty and economic systems which favour the rich, “discrimination against people because of race, gender, or sexual orientation,” the suffering caused by “disease and accidents,” natural disasters, and “war, which touches many innocent people.” Voluntary suffering occurs when these injustices and forms of involuntary suffering are confronted through the love of enemies, which is a “very difficult and dangerous” undertaking which “can easily result in suffering,” as Jesus’ life and death exemplify. But Weaver is careful to insist that suffering in itself is not the goal of enemy-love, and is not in itself redemptive or constitutive of discipleship in the nonviolent way of Jesus. In his words, “When we live in the story of Jesus, we know that just as suffering was a reality for Jesus, suffering is a possibility for us.” Nevertheless, he asserts,

it is important to emphasize that suffering per se, suffering as an end in and of itself, is not desired for us by God. As I understand the God revealed in Jesus Christ, God does not desire that we suffer. Suffering is not the means by which we are saved. We may suffer because we are Christians, but that suffering is the result of faithfulness to our calling to live for the reign of God. We may suffer as a result of choosing to confront injustice and oppression, but such suffering is the result of the confrontation and is not redemptive.

In this way, Weaver insists that despite its connection to nonviolent resistance, suffering is never redemptive or willed by God, a position with clear echoes of Sölle’s critique of Christian masochism and the notion that all suffering has its source in God.

As I argued in the previous chapter, however, as laudable as it is for Weaver to take feminist and womanist critiques of the cross with uncompromising seriousness, to the point of radically de-centralizing the cross within Christian redemption, there is a sense that he does not sufficiently address the experience and present reality of involuntary suffering. In reducing the symbol of the cross to a single meaning – namely, as the lamentable possible

55 Weaver, Nonviolent God, 264.
56 Ibid., 266-268.
consequence of voluntary nonviolent resistance – Weaver arguably implies that the existential meaninglessness of involuntary suffering is mirrored by a theological meaninglessness as well, since God does not even fully share the suffering of Jesus, but remains a bystander. Weaver’s summary of his position, with which I opened this chapter, reveals that in his view, involuntary suffering is not directly addressed by the cross: “To imitate Jesus and to have the ‘image of God’ is to imitate the ‘moral character of God,’ which means to refuse to participate in coercion. This imitation of Jesus and the moral character of God can and does mean suffering. But God is not the cause of the suffering. Rather, God is on the side of those who suffer in a life of sacrifice” (i.e., those who undertake an ethic of nonviolence and its attendant risks voluntarily). Of course, Weaver does parse out different types of nonviolent resistance and, following Delores Williams, speaks of victims and perpetrators of oppression being guilty of different sins and thus equally transformed by God’s reign, such that “[t]he oppressed ceased [sic] acquiescing to oppression and join the rule of God; oppressors cease their oppression and submit to the rule of God.” Admittedly, he also speaks in passing of God’s presence in the midst of suffering as “providing the strength to endure,” and even of Jesus’ exemplary ministry of service to the marginalized, which the church is called to imitate. But in severing the connection between divine solidarity with the oppressed and the powerful symbol of the cross, Weaver in effect severs such concern for the oppressed from its theological grounding in the unconditional, vulnerable compassion of God. Even more problematically, this severing discounts and disregards the liberative dimensions of the cross as experienced by the oppressed themselves

57 Ibid., 262.

58 Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 213-14, and Nonviolent God, 273.

59 Weaver, Nonviolent God, 271, 173-174.
– that is, among those who find resonance and empowerment precisely in the cross as connected to their involuntary suffering, as seen above in the work of Clague, Grey, Grant, and Terrell. That Weaver does not explore the image of Christa in any detail reveals his privileging of rejectionist feminist/womanist voices and, concomitantly, his sidelining of those (revisionist) feminists and womanists who find liberative meaning in the cross as divine solidarity with the suffering particular to women, including those within his own Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, to whom I now turn.


Several prominent feminist and womanist thinkers have identified the Christian ethic of enemy-love and its link to the cross as particularly problematic and harmful for women and other marginalized groups. Brown and Parker, for instance, claim that the cross “encourages women who are being abused to be more concerned about their victimizer than about themselves.” Terrell explores the question with more nuance, likewise critiquing “appeals to agape (or sacrificial love), enemy love, and (radical or) nonacquisitive love.” In her view, such appeals, while feigning equality or “moral ‘levelling’” have in fact functioned to maintain the status quo by placing “the moral onus on oppressed people.” She claims,

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60 The only reference to Christa is Weaver’s passing mention of Brock’s terminology of the church as “Christa-Community.” See Ibid., 174-175, 178.

61 Aside from one passing reference to Malinda Berry’s theology in Weaver’s Nonviolent Atonement (217 n. 86), I did not find any passing references to these other female, feminist/womanist and/or Mennonite theologians who grapple with some of the same questions Weaver is addressing. Berry also draws attention specifically to the lack of references to the collection of essays on Peace Theology and Violence against Women in Weaver’s work. See Berry, “Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium and The Nonviolent Atonement” [Review Article], in Mennonite Life 59, no. 1 (March 2004), accessed 23 January, 2015, http://ml.bethelks.edu/issue/vol-59-no-1/article/anabaptist-theology-in-face-of-postmodernity-a-pro/.

“[p]rivileged exegeses of the Sermon on the Mount and other texts . . . enable . . . oppressor classes to maintain their privilege by any means while they proscribe the kinds of liberative options that may be taken by those whom they have already violently disempowered.”63 Incidentally, she advocates a distinctive “love-justice ethic” for the oppressed based upon the biblical calls to love “one another” and to “love the neighbor.” These are more appropriately applicable to the oppressed than the call to love enemies, since the latter “misconstrue[s] self-defense as violence” and thus serves to reify sacrifice and redemptive suffering, in Terrell’s view.64

These two representative critiques of the ethic of enemy-love are of particular concern for those like Weaver and myself, who theologize from within the Anabaptist-Mennonite, peace church tradition. For our tradition, Jesus’ ethic of enemy-love is utterly central, comprising the core teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, which functions as a “canon within a canon” – the guiding passage or hermeneutical key of biblical ethics.65 This focus on peace represents a valuable tradition of rejecting redemptive violence which can be traced back to the Radical Reformation in the sixteenth century, which itself built on and drew attention to the pacifist minority within the Christian and Jewish communities and the often-neglected theme of peace and nonviolence within the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. That said, the problem of redemptive suffering is perhaps more acute within historic peace

63 Terrell, 26.

64 Ibid., 55, 57, 139-42. This “love-justice ethic” arose African American pacifist activists, who understood it as “a way of sacramentally witnessing to the goodness and the power of God, evincing God’s proleptic activity” in the here and now. Terrell simultaneously affirms that it is worse to kill than to die for “one’s cause,” and asserts that “anyone’s death has saving significance inasmuch as we learn continuously from the life that preceded it.”

65 Reimer in fact protests the way the Mennonite focus on the Sermon on the Mount makes nonviolent discipleship central. See A. James Reimer, Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics, Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies Series (Kitchener, ON: Pandora/Waterloo, ON: Herald, 2001), 281.
churches such as my own. In other words, though – or even because – it has rejected notions of redemptive *violence*, the Mennonite church has historically emphasized nonresistance to evil and thereby given redemptive *suffering* a central place within its theology, ethics, and soteriology. Mennonite-feminist theologian and pastor Carol Penner argues that despite its orientation toward peace and nonviolence, Mennonite theology has thus been largely silent regarding violence against women and women’s suffering.66 The harmful effects of such a silence are all-too-apparent in the story of an anonymous abuse survivor, quoted by Mennonite feminist trauma theologian Hilary Scarsella,

> Should I be angry, accuse the [physically and sexually abusive] men in my life of horrible things and leave? Should I be understanding, forgiving and stay? The answer I got from our worship services was that I should love my enemies and do good to those who harm me. I’m a pacifist, so of course that’s the answer I got. I go to a [Mennonite] church that preaches nonviolence. I’ve been taught for my whole life that I should endure harm rather than resist or retaliate. So, I took communion every time it was offered and recommitted myself to what I believed to be the way of Jesus, the way of suffering love. . . . Jesus was willing to endure harm and we’re supposed to follow Jesus into danger and uncertainty and even death.67

Despite their absence in Weaver’s work, a number of Mennonite theologians who are women, most of whom identify as Mennonite and feminist or womanist, have been examining these very questions for several decades now – that is, questions arising from the clash between the incipient reification of redemptive suffering within the peace theology of their tradition and the particular, gendered issue of violence against women. This is not to say, however, that all Mennonite-feminist/womanist theologians interpret the cross along the same lines. Like their mainline counterparts, they can be placed on a spectrum (though a somewhat different spectrum) of (re)interpretations of the cross as they, to varying degrees,

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integrate feminist/womanist attention to women’s experiences of suffering with the Mennonite orientation toward peace. Though others could be included, I will here limit my discussion to a survey of this spectrum. It ranges from those like Weaver, who primarily interpret the cross in relation to “voluntary suffering,” or the tragic consequences of commitment to the *ethic* of nonviolent resistance exemplified by Jesus (Nekeisha Alexis-Baker, Mary Schertz) to those who begin to make space for the additional, *theological* dimension of the cross as exemplary divine solidarity with and compassion for those undergoing involuntary forms of suffering (Carol Penner, Malinda E. Berry, Lydia Neufeld Harder, Gayle Gerber Koontz). While I find the latter group provides more compelling and complexly layered interpretations of the cross, I should note that my purpose here is not to undercut the emphasis on ethics and the *praxis* of faith, which Mennonites and feminists/womanists share, but rather to knit together even more closely our theology and its embodiment in our *praxis*. In this way, I side with those who point toward an integrated, feminist/womanist-Mennonite reinterpretation of the cross as good – peaceable *and* liberative – news for women.

Mennonite-womanist Nekeisha Alexis-Baker follows a Yoderian trajectory much like Weaver’s. Speaking of the double-edged nature of the cross, which has at times been empowering” to slaves and at other times “reinforced their oppression,” she argues that the cross is “the result of Jesus’ voluntary decision to reject violence, hate, hostility, and non-involvement in confronting the powers.” This assertion allows Christians to denounce “racial discrimination, domestic violence, sexual abuse, or emotional neglect” as entirely different, involuntary, and therefore not redemptive forms of suffering. Against womanist perspectives such as Grant’s and Terrell’s, Alexis-Baker concludes that “equating the rape of Black
women during slavery with Jesus’ crucifixion ... risks supporting theologies of the cross which already undercut Black women.” Simultaneously, however, she pushes beyond Yoder’s ideas of “revolutionary subordination” and submission to tyrannical authority because they do not adequately name the necessity of “public” nonviolent resistance.68 While Alexis-Baker recognizes that the cross can be used to oppress or empower, she arguably downplays the latter. By effectively separating women’s suffering from the cross, her position, like Weaver’s, forecloses on any liberative experience of the cross that women can and do have. In my view, she is also not sufficiently critical of the thought of Yoder, who was himself abusive toward women.

Biblical scholar Mary Schertz also builds on Yoder’s interpretation of the cross as one of the central themes necessary to create a “biblical theology of peace and justice between men and women.” Schertz is critical of Mennonites for valuing the needs of the community and the “permanence of marriage” over individual safety and “sanctity” – something reflected, for instance, in pressuring women to stay in abusive marriages. She admits, “The logic of protecting the illusion of a marriage covenant already broken by violence escapes me. ... [and] as members of the body of Christ we have contributed to the violence by accepting silence as a way of dealing with it.”69 Schertz acknowledges that the traditional Mennonite interpretation of the cross as the symbol of peacemaking or nonviolent love has been harmful, since the “ethos of suffering love practiced by the wives of abusive husbands has produced not shalom but its opposite” – namely, “escalating the cycle of


violence.” Like Weaver, she affirms the cross only as “the last resort” faced by Jesus after his years of teaching, preaching, healing, and other life-giving work among the poor and oppressed. She states, “In the last resort, when the choice really was a choice between returning, reversing or perpetrating violence on the one hand and absorbing violence into his own body on the other hand, Jesus made a clear choice – and died on the cross.” With Jesus’ life firmly in view, Schertz thus speaks of taking up the cross daily not as “setting one’s course by the star of suffering love,” but rather “setting a course which involves announcing good news to the oppressed and living a new relationality.” This course involves “confrontation, healing, strategizing, persuasion, denunciation, parables and demonstrations,” as well as the cross as a last resort, but, she insists, “[t]o accept and absorb violence prematurely is neither true to the biblical portrayal of the cross nor an effective resource against violence – since such action leads only to more violence.”70 In this way, Schertz makes a space for righteous anger, asserting, much like Sölle, that the opposite of love is not anger but apathy, and citing Jesus’ strong response to the desecration of the Temple as an example. In her words, “Perhaps the situation of violated women, a situation that I suggest violates us all at the very heart of our relationship to God, demands our anger, our very serious response, our extreme action.”71 Like Weaver, Schertz compartmentalizes and avoids the issue of sexual abuse, but does take physical violence against women seriously. There is some problematic evidence of victim-blaming in her logic, especially the suggestion that women cause more violence if they do not leave abusive relationships. Within Schertz’s interpretation, the cross is again reduced to an all-too-Yoderian example of redemptive, voluntary suffering, albeit one of “last resort,” but to the exclusion of the cross itself, she at

70 Ibid., 17-19.

71 Ibid., 6, 17.
least begins to imply that Jesus’ ministry and his righteous anger reflect divine solidarity with the oppressed, including women.  

As the opening quotation of this chapter indicated, feminist-Mennonite theologian Carol Penner is profoundly critical of the silence of the Mennonite church on the matter of violence against women, stating that “parts of our Mennonite peace theology tradition have not brought peace to women’s lives, but rather increased suffering,” in part because “women’s experience has not been an important source for written Mennonite theology.” As an example of this dynamic, she mentions the copious Mennonite materials on peace as conscientious objection to war, which is, by and large, an exclusively male experience. Meanwhile, violence against women has not historically been considered a peace issue. “While the historical silence of the Mennonite church on the subject of abuse is not unique,” she concludes, “it is particularly ironic given that the theology of this historic peace church has wrestled with the importance of nonviolence in the Christian life.” In Penner’s view, traditional interpretations of the cross have caused great harm for women, since they have encouraged passive submission to all forms of suffering as redemptive, unconditional obedience to authority, and facile forgiveness of abusers within a self-abnegating ethic of enemy-love. She writes, “[f]or example, in Mennonite theology little effort has been made to distinguish between different kinds of suffering, between the pain of sickness and the pain of sexual assault, the anguish of natural disaster and the anguish of family breakdown. The common message in Mennonite thought is often that suffering, all suffering, should simply

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72 Ibid., 22 n. 6, 12-13, 19, 20. Schertz ends with the idea of “post-critical” hope in a God who will ultimately create peace and shalom here on earth.


74 Ibid., 2-3, 29-50. Penner discusses this in her chapter on the theologies of John H. Yoder and Guy F. Hershberger.
be endured, just as Jesus endured the cross.” As a result, according to Penner, “women with broken bodies have sat in pews and listened to a theology that seemed to spiritualize their very real agony.”75 She singles out Yoder’s work on “revolutionary subordination” as particularly harmful, since it “provides no corrective” to the notion that victims of abuse who choose to remain with their abusive partners are participating in the kind of voluntary, innocent suffering which Yoder deems a redemptive echo of the cross.76 As a corrective to the past Mennonite misuse of the cross and blindness toward gendered power dynamics in the church and theology, Penner calls for a broadening of the Mennonite understanding of peace so that it can ‘hear’ women’s own articulations of their particular experiences of suffering, which she calls a ‘narrative’ feminist-Mennonite approach. Within such an approach, the cross cannot be dismissed outright as oppressive, but must be viewed from the perspective of those experiencing suffering, because among abused women, “some . . . have found comfort in Christian symbols, while others have found them to be relentlessly oppressive.” Despite being overlooked by their tradition for much too long, Penner acknowledges that “women have always turned to their faith to find hope, meaning and the strength to carry on.” Here she includes, in passing, the notion of a Christ or God who suffers with them, which, she implies, can be experienced as the first step toward liberation.77

Penner thus ends up bridging feminist and Mennonite approaches to the cross. Unlike Weaver, she does not privilege rejectionist feminist and womanist voices (like Brown’s and Parker’s) or develop a single, full-fledged interpretation of the cross and redemption, but

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76 Ibid., 103-104.

leaves the ultimate decisions over what is meaningful and life-giving within the Christian tradition up to victims and/or survivors themselves. But despite this disagreement, Penner also sounds much like Weaver when she calls for the cross to be contextualized within the arc of the life and resurrection of Jesus, and also when she draws on the Mennonite identity as a historic peace church to include conscientious objection to violence against women within our call to be peacemakers. In her poignant words, “Some writers have characterized patriarchy as a ‘war against women.’ In the face of this violence, who will be the new conscientious objectors?”

Mennonite-feminist theologian Malinda E. Berry also grapples with the significance of the cross for women, offering both alternative, life-giving imagery and also reinterpreting the cross itself as “redemptive embrace,” a vivid image with the potential to encompass divine solidarity with the suffering. In her evaluation of Weaver’s theological method of engaging feminist, womanist, and black liberation theologies, Berry frames her “reconstructive” theology using the imagery of quilting “needles” rather than the traditionally masculine language of “nails,” presumably offering an alternative more focused on the resurrection than the cross. Drawing from “women’s ways of knowing, being, and doing,” Berry redefines “theological work as a communal process of bringing ‘scraps’ of materials used elsewhere and joining them in new ways,” thus weaving, quilting, and piecing a theology which “bind[s] up the brokenhearted rather than keeping old wounds open and even creating new ones: We favor needles over nails.” Going one step further than Weaver,

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78 Penner, “Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices,” 146-147, 150-151, 156ff., 174. It should be noted that she agrees with Sölle that obedience is a harmful concept, and that Penner evaluates most accounts of forgiveness as oppressive. Cf. 13-14, where she speaks of her theological method, which “strives to find a balance which neither compromises the integrity of feminist experience, nor loses the essence or the substance of my own Mennonite religious background.”

Berry wonders, “what might feminist, womanist, and Mennonite theologians have to say to one another about the tension between violence against women and the love of enemies and neighbors?”80 In her more recent work, however, Berry places the cross at the centre of her “(black) feminist, Christian, Anabaptist, U.S. American, and multicultural” theology, drawing from African American novelist Toni Morrison’s description of the cross as the “mark of a standing human figure poised to embrace.” Within this image, Berry sees beyond the traditional symbolics of death and resurrection alone to “new possibilities” for Christian faith and praxis/ethics. In her words, “As the central figure of the Christian faith, Jesus is a standing figure poised to embrace, and he calls us to do more than just take the hits. In this christological sense, an embrace is an act of social engagement. It is a personal and political act. It is an act of justice and love.”81 Within Berry’s theology, then, the cross understood as embrace is clearly a redemptive symbol, and one which avoids connotations of masochism or redemptive suffering (as in, “just take the hits”); here she differentiates herself from Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas, who base their pacifism on Jesus’ “suffering, obedient love rather than prophetic faith.” But in a Niebuhrian vein, the cross is also paradoxical in encompassing both sin (human finitude, limitations, broken and unjust relationships with God and each other) and new ethical possibilities centred around restored relationships with God and each other, political/“public” justice, healing, and ultimately, the shalom of human communities and all of creation. In this way, the cross as a “matrix of . . . reconciling energies” brings

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81 Malinda Elizabeth Berry, “‘This Mark of a Standing Human Figure Poised to Embrace’: A Constructive Theology of Social Responsibility, Nonviolence, and Nonconformity” (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, 2013), 37, 15-16. Emphasis hers.
together or embraces former dualisms through justice, nonviolence, and love, for Berry, including the divine/shalom and the human/political in the Incarnate and Risen Christ. This embracing cross thus “develops humanity’s creativity in responding to God’s way of embracing the world through us,” in such a way that the cross becomes a “Tree of Life.” We become midwives of justice (in the tradition of Exodus 1), fed by “biblical shalom and a logos-sophia Christology” to co-operate redemptively with God as she gives birth to “right relationships” and “the things that will turn the cosmos toward love, justice, and shalom.”

Perhaps more than the other Mennonite theologians above, Berry develops an integrated theological ethic of the cross, and reinterprets it as a decidedly redemptive and empowering symbol which is inseparably bound up with the resurrection, which is also an “embrace.” In her words, “As Resurrected Presence, Jesus became the living Christ who embraces us, that we might embrace others in acts of redemptive love.” But though the symbol of embrace seems to hold rich possibilities for exploring divine solidarity, including solidarity with those who suffer, Berry does not develop this trajectory, aside from mentioning it in passing. In fact, aside from naming suffering as the result of injustice, Berry remains focused predominantly on the cross as overcoming sin rather than speaking directly to suffering as in Sölle’s thought. Thus, despite the contrast between her embrace of the cross and Weaver’s de-emphasizing of it, Berry, like Weaver, actually ends up avoiding or at best glossing over the link between the cross and the existential reality of suffering. In my view, she comes

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82 Ibid., 15-16, 21, 25, 71.

83 Ibid., 18, 16, 29. Cf. 72, where Berry explains, “Shalom is a way of invoking the power of life’s goodness despite the suffering, exploitation, violence, and alienation that remind us that evil is as powerful as ever.” Cf. Malinda E. Berry, “Shalom Political Theology: A New Type of Mennonite Peace Theology for a New Era of Discipleship,” The Conrad Grebel Review 34, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 49-73.

84 Berry, “Poised to Embrace,” 16.

85 See Ibid., 30.
close to having the opposite problem Brown and Parker, Brock, Williams, and Weaver share. In her efforts to overcome the problem of redemptive suffering, Berry nearly disconnects the cross from its tragic dimensions as an instrument of torture and execution, pointing too quickly to the triumphant, redemptive cross as a life-giving ethical example, albeit based on a high, largely symbolic-theological rather than a historical Christology.\footnote{She is missing Weaver’s emphasis on the cross as the work of the powers and principalities or the response of hostile Roman imperial powers to Jesus, so her interpretation comes across as somewhat triumphalistic not by avoiding the cross, like Weaver, but by depicting it as an overwhelmingly positive symbol. Interestingly, Gregory of Nyssa’s interpretation of \textit{Christus Victor} includes the image of the cross as God’s embrace of the world. See chapter 2 above.}

Mennonite-feminist Lydia Neufeld Harder delves even more deeply into the notion of divine solidarity with human suffering. Like Weaver and others, she emphasizes the cross as representative of voluntary suffering and the “risk of death” as a consequence of God’s way of love, a risk ultimately assuaged by the resurrection as representative of God’s power to bring life out of death. Following the apostle Paul, she links the “wisdom of the cross” with the “power of the resurrection,” which is God’s “creative and redemptive power.”\footnote{Lydia Neufeld Harder, “Seeking Wisdom in the Face of Foolishness: Toward a Robust Peace Theology,” in \textit{At Peace and Unafraid: Public Order, Security, and the Wisdom of the Cross}, ed. Duane K. Friesen and Gerald W. Schlabach (Waterloo, ON: Herald, 2005), 144-145.} But beyond Weaver, Harder begins to integrate this risk with notions of divine solidarity: “The cross represents for Paul God’s loving will to stand with the suffering world against the ‘rulers of this age,’ even to death (1 Cor 2:8). True power is thus born not of oppressive control or violence, but of solidarity in divine love. . . . The cross, therefore, is also the wisdom that will reconcile enemies and bring together those who are alienated” (as per Ephesians). Harder also goes on to reinterpret the symbol of the cross in life-giving ways, explaining resurrection and “eternal life” not as “a depreciation of biological life” but the idea of “abundant life” which “overflows for the other.” For her, the “cruciform shape” of
Jesus’ life most fully represents this life-giving power. Thus, “Wisdom recognizes the need to suffer on behalf of others, but it also strongly asserts that fear of death, insecurity, and violence are not God’s will for humans.” Against a tendency she has seen in Mennonite communities, Harder specifies that this type of “self denial” should not function as “another way to assert power over another.”

Here Harder, like Weaver and others, again approaches the cross through an ethical lens which speaks primarily to voluntary suffering connected to resurrection, but she simultaneously affirms a more Sölleian/Abelardian paradigm in speaking of divine solidarity as reflective of God’s alternative wisdom and power. Though her use of more conventional Pauline language, including the call to self-denial and “to suffer on behalf of others” rather than in solidarity with them, remains insufficiently critical of redemptive suffering and surrogacy, she is elsewhere more careful to attend to women’s experiences of violence and involuntary suffering. Harder recognizes that for Mennonite women, the “tradition of discipleship as obedience, service and self-denial, has sometimes not been life-giving. The theology of peace, justice and non-violence that has characterized the Mennonite community has generally not examined the power relationship between women and men.”

With these gendered power dynamics firmly in view, she calls for a re-reading of the Gospels. She asks, “Was the way of the cross the same for those who felt weak and inconsequential as for those who felt a sense of worth and authority?,” and turns


89 Lydia Neufeld Harder, Obedience, Suspicion, and the Gospel of Mark: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Biblical Authority, Studies in Women and Religion Series (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1998), 10-11, 1. She also uses even stronger language: “I have often felt angered by a practice of biblical interpretation in Mennonite churches that was oppressive and stifling to many women in the congregations. . . . Despite strong affirmations of the church as a hermeneutic community, the pattern of communication and social interaction often did not encourage an active participation by women in the theological process of determining the meaning of biblical texts for the community.” This was also discussed in my first chapter above.
attention to Jesus’ own weakness and the times he “needed to be strengthened and
empowered before he could go the way of suffering love.” In facing, naming, and discerning
about injustice together, she speaks of making a “home” for ourselves within biblical
theology. Thus, she writes, “we will discover anew the Source of Love who is the centre of
our home, our God who has given birth to us, suffered with us in our lack of shalom,
challenged us in our injustice and empowered us anew to live the way of love in a violent
world.”

Gayle Gerber Koontz’s discussion of forgiveness within “liberation pacifism” thoroughly integrates the ethical and theological significance of the cross, offering the most
developed Mennonite account of divine solidarity and compassion for involuntary forms of
suffering. Koontz helpfully articulates women’s responses to their suffering from a
Mennonite-feminist perspective: as women responding to violence with peace and
compassion and thereby asserting their agency and personhood in the image of a
compassionate God. She argues that while all Christians are called to nonviolent “redemptive
resistance to evil,” for an abuser, this means “let[ting] go of dominating power,” while a
victim “needs to claim her power to act.” She names nonviolent tactics for victims, such as
“fleeing,” “breaking silence and seeking help,” and “rather far down the list,” forgiveness of
the abuser, clarifying that forgiveness here does not exclude anger, divorce, or leaving an
abusive relationship. She explains, “it is important for Christian survivors to act immediately
according to the norm of enemy love….That is, a survivor may not feel forgiving, but she

90 Lydia Neufeld Harder, “Response [to Mary Schertz],” in Peace Theology and Violence against
Women, ed. Elizabeth G. Yoder, Occasional Papers No. 16 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992),
28.

91 She draws this category from J. R. Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds., Mennonite
should not *retaliate* with violent or revengeful acts.” She further stipulates that abusers cannot ask “anything” of the one they harmed, and that the faith community is to both support the victim and hold the abuser accountable in love. Koontz’s reinterpretation of the ethic of enemy-love for women who have experienced abuse is profound in its reinterpretation of forgiveness and “Christ-like love” as an empowering choice oriented toward survival and liberation. In calling survivors to this kind of actively compassionate response to their suffering, she allows them to choose forgiveness as an assertion of their agency and a tactic of nonviolent resistance instead of reducing them to self-abnegating victims. Not unlike Harder, Koontz here differentiates between dominating power and the power of “persuasion,” “influence,” or compassion, associating the latter with God’s power and with the paradox of the cross itself, speaking of Jesus’ words of forgiveness from the cross as exemplifying the very “love and compassion of God.” While posing the important question: “How can we trust the goodness and power of a God who does not use violent or coercive power to resist evil, when there is so much relentless violation and suffering?,“ Koontz also affirms the paradoxical power of “compassionate love,” which does not constitute “nonresistance,” but “ultimate resistance” in refusing to acknowledge dominating power as the strongest or only kind of power; it refuses to “dominate in turn, by refusing to turn evil with evil.” Furthermore, she argues that compassionate love provides an alternative between “just” violence and bystanderism in the face of the suffering of the innocent – namely, compassion as “a power which helps people who are suffering to claim their own

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power,” gain the “courage to resist,” and even sense “divine love” in situations of “inevitable or hopeless suffering.” Here Koontz identifies the specific suffering of women with the cross in a redemptive and liberative way, speaking both of divine solidarity with all forms of suffering and of the paradoxical call to emulate and be empowered by divine compassion to resist suffering.

The feminist/womanist-Mennonite theologians above take crucial steps in the right direction by raising questions surrounding what it means to take up our crosses, what kind of suffering can be redemptive, and how the church can respond to women’s experiences of abuse in life-giving, liberative, and empowering ways. While much has been gleaned from the feminist and womanist critiques of how the cross has been harmful, Koontz is the only one who explores in depth the constructive and redemptive possibilities of the cross as an exemplary divine act of solidarity in response to the suffering specific to women. She thus overcomes the tendency to view the cross primarily as symbolic of ethics/discipleship or voluntary suffering as part of the practice of nonviolence to the exclusion of the additional, theological significance of the cross as God’s response to the reality of involuntary suffering which calls for us as disciples to likewise respond with a compassion which “embraces” the sufferer(s) (to use Berry’s language) and resists further suffering. The implications of such a turn toward divine and human solidarity and compassion are profound, especially with regard to power: not only are the powerless (those suffering involuntarily) addressed by God in the event of the cross, they are also empowered by it, since power is redefined as the counter-intuitive power of compassion, love, and nonviolent resistance.

This kind of hopeful reinterpretation of the cross is also occurring in the context of worship, among Mennonite-feminists/womanists in the church. A key example is Hilary

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94 Ibid., 34-37.
Scarsella’s work on revising the Communion liturgy from the Mennonite Minister’s Manual. The revision project, which has just recently been submitted for publication, arose when a group of Mennonite women began sharing their experiences as survivors of sexual violence, and realized together that the language of Jesus’ exemplary self-sacrifice on the cross within the Communion liturgy has “exacerbated their trauma.” They formed “a small group of pastors, theologians, liturgists, and survivors of sexualized violence” who undertook the revision of the Communion liturgy to be more healing and life-giving for survivors and the wider Mennonite church, including such lines as: “My God, …as I prepare to share in the abundant life you offer through this bread and wine I recognize the ways I have been living in death: these I lay down. I step into life.” But importantly, the revised liturgy also includes a prayer for healing, which reads, in part, “O God our Savior, you came to share our pain and our suffering, our wounds and our scars. You have promised that wherever we find violence and fear and hurt you will share in that suffering and remain in our midst. Grant that [we] may find strength in your presence.”95 In holding together death and new life, suffering and strengthening, the cross and the resurrection, without promoting theologies of redemptive suffering, this revised liturgy echoes Koontz’s holistic perspective involving both compassion and nonviolent resistance. In this way, Koontz’s Mennonite perspective provides the closest parallel to Sölle’s interpretation of the cross, to which we now turn.

4. “The Pain of Birth”: Sölle on the Cross as Reality, Solidarity, and Tree of Life

Sölle’s position illuminates what I see as missing from Weaver’s and others’ Mennonite and/or feminist/womanist approaches to the cross, with their strongly ethical emphasis, or predominant focus on voluntary suffering. In the discussion of Christa above, it is equally important to see the cross as representative of involuntary suffering, as echoed in a poignant anecdote from American feminist theologian Serene Jones: a group of women survivors of sexual abuse meet in a church basement. Some of them decide to attend the church’s Passion play, even though they’re not part of the congregation or even “religious.” Afterwards, one responds, “This cross story, . . . it’s the only part of this Christian thing I like. I get it. And it’s like [God] gets me. [God] knows.” It’s this story, “not nicer healing tales or Easter’s glad tidings,” which both resonated with their experiences as victims of suffering and “lifted them up” as being understood by a God who has suffered trauma. In this way, a trauma narrative such as that of the crucifixion can produce what Jones calls “double tellings”: paradoxical layers of significance which recall Clague’s language of the cross as a “polyvalent sign offering multiple theological possibilities” and certainly reverberate through Sölle’s work as well.96

Just as Sölle’s critique of the cross involved two types of misinterpretation (masochism and apathy), so her constructive reinterpretation involves two interrelated notions: the cross as a reminder of involuntary suffering and as a loving act of divine solidarity with the suffering or voluntary co-suffering for the sake of liberation and life, which Christians are to “repeat.” As discussed in the previous chapter, Sölle approaches the cross from the perspective that suffering is not, as in Weaver, only a future possibility as a

96 Serene Jones, Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 76-77, and Clague, 44. Emphasis hers.
consequence of present nonviolent action for justice; rather, she approaches it from the present, existential reality of (involuntary) suffering as well as the (voluntary) co-suffering or compassionate solidarity to which Christians are called. Both of these are rooted in the cross, for Sölle, rather than only the latter. For Sölle, the cross “is above all a symbol of reality. Love does not ‘require’ the cross, but de facto it ends up on the cross.”\textsuperscript{97} The key terms here are reality and love. Like Weaver and other Mennonite theologians, she specifies that Jesus’ acceptance of the cross was voluntary suffering arising from his loving solidarity for the sake of liberation; as seen above, she does not fall into the trap of Christian masochism, but clearly stipulates: “[o]nly that pain is good which furthers the process of its abolition.”\textsuperscript{98} The cross indeed symbolizes the consequences of choosing nonviolent, vulnerable love, or what Weaver calls its “costliness.”\textsuperscript{99} But for Sölle, there is another, prior experience to which the cross points, such that the other significant aspect of the “repeatability” of the cross is that there are ongoing “crucifixions” in our world, “by which we are surrounded,” and which we ignore and overlook through apathy. “In so far as we forget the continued dying of Jesus in the present we deny the passion itself,” she asserts.\textsuperscript{100} The cross thus also draws attention to the involuntary, unjust suffering of the least (Matt. 25), suffering which it must face and acknowledge, but which it does not tolerate. This is the reality of present suffering. Echoing feminists and womanists who find meaning in the crucified Christa image, Sölle writes, “A fifty-year-old woman pieceworker hangs on the cross no less than Jesus – only longer.”\textsuperscript{101}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{97} Sölle, \textit{Suffering}, 163-164.
\item \textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 163-164, 44-45.
\item \textsuperscript{99} Cf. Sölle, \textit{Silent Cry}, 204-205.
\item \textsuperscript{100} Sölle, \textit{Suffering}, 139-140.
\item \textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 130, 132-133, 146.
\end{itemize}
She unequivocally links the cross with the devastation of Auschwitz, the agony of Vietnam, and the utter inhumanity of poverty, as in the heartbreaking practice among the people living in a slum in Brazil, “who every time yet another child has died affix a diaper to the cross they carry with them” through the streets.\footnote{Ibid., 148-149, 46-47, and Silent Cry, 288.} This means that there are, once again, ethical or, rather, mystical ramifications of these statements, for Sölle. The cross also calls Christians to open themselves to suffer in loving solidarity with others, which involves peacemaking as active “rebelling,” “resistance,” and the “confrontation” of injustice. These acts transform senseless suffering into what Sölle sees as the most meaningful form of pain within the Christian tradition: the “pain of birth.”\footnote{Sölle, Against the Wind, 77-78, and Suffering, 125, 147.} Thus, in my view, Sölle establishes an interplay of these two understandings of suffering in the cross through a series of fluid representations. In one sense, the crucified Christ represents those “crucified” by oppression, and vice versa, such that the identification of the divine Christ in the oppressed motivates work for their liberation, which is the liberation of Christ himself/Christa herself/God Godself. At the same time, those who struggle for liberation represent the divine at work in the world, since “God has no other hands than ours.”\footnote{Sölle, Christ the Representative, 150-152, and Suffering, 146-149. She is quoting Teresa of Avila here.}

But how exactly does solidarity become the “pain of birth,” for Sölle? It is important to understand her distinction between “stoic” and “Christian-mystical” paradigms in relation to suffering. Within stoicism, suffering is to be avoided, kept at a distance, even “denied.” Stoicism values “indifference” to suffering, the “absence of emotions” and “world-conquering coldness,” a fatalistic “resignation” – in other words, apathy. In Sölle’s
estimation, this approach to suffering is elitist and does nothing for those experiencing the triple burden of affliction (encompassing physical, psychological, and social suffering) as identified by Weil.\textsuperscript{105} A mystical perspective, by contrast, is able to face, name, and in a sense “assent” to suffering, to actively take it on as a “necessary part” of our lived reality and a part of love, thereby transforming suffering and working toward its abolition. Here Sölle differentiates between “meaningless” or “mute” suffering, which dehumanizes and disempowers to the point of a paralyzing passivity, apathy, and isolation, and two phases moving out of such affliction: the expression of suffering through lament, prayer, and “psalmic language” (essentially, conscientization) and solidarity, which begins to organize and work toward socio-political change of the injustice at the root of the suffering.\textsuperscript{106} Within the “mysticism of the cross,” Sölle clarifies, “the stance over against suffering is not that of averting or avoiding it. For the religion of slaves and of the poor, avoidance and ‘the hidden life’ are not real possibilities. . . . [Rather], the soul is open to suffering, abandons itself to suffering, holds back nothing.” But though it resembles masochism – that is, “fruitless, avoidable, and self-inflicted suffering” or the “masochistic substitutionary satisfaction” of asceticism – it is altogether different, because it is the suffering of passion and “compassio” which in fact strengthens and empowers as an aspect of the life of discipleship. “It arises in the immediacy of innocent suffering and from solidarity with those who have to bear it.”\textsuperscript{107}

Critical for Sölle is this sense of accepting suffering, which is voluntary; that is, “whether we carry out the act of suffering or are acted upon, indifferent as stones. What matters is whether the suffering becomes our passion, in the deep double sense of that word. We work with the


\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 101-103, 73.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 101-102, and \textit{Silent Cry}, 138-139.
suffering. We perceive, we express ourselves, we weep.”108 Along these lines, she speaks of the depth of feeling exemplified by someone like Weil, who felt the suffering of others as if it were her own. Simone de Beauvoir recounts meeting Weil once and being impressed that when she heard the news of a famine in China, Weil wept. De Beauvoir writes, “these tears compelled my respect even more than her philosophical talents. I envied her for having a heart which could beat right across the world.”109 Believing that Christianity does not do away with suffering but finds “a supernatural use for it” in the love of God and neighbour, Weil wrote, “Love is not consolation. It is light.” Similarly, Sölle refuses to “be consoled prematurely,” and asserts that for Christians, “[t]here is no alien sorrow,” for “the hammer of love” and *compassio* “nails us to the cross.”110

It is in this very vulnerability that Sölle finds true, paradoxical empowerment, or what she calls “the strength of the weak,” since in accepting suffering, one says “yes to this life” and to the struggle inherent in the love of life, and the love of a life-giving God.111 Sölle poignantly likens this struggle for life with the singular pain of labour and childbirth: “The physical pain of giving birth, which was used again and again as a metaphor for such suffering, cannot be compared to senseless kidney stones. Mystics have tried to turn all suffering into labor pains and to abolish all senselessness.”112 More recently, she speaks of a “theology of pain” that “feminizes” these questions from the perspective that women’s

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110 Sölle, *Suffering*, 172-173, and *Silent Cry*, 150-151, 141. The final quotation is from Mechthild von Magdeburg.


112 Ibid., 94-95.
suffering in childbirth exemplifies “pain on behalf of life.” She asks, “How does our pain become the pain of God? . . . How do we come to suffer so that our suffering becomes the pain of birth?” This kind of transformative suffering is what, for Sölle, makes it critical that the cross remain at the centre of Christianity, for it participates in the symbolics of life-giving love and its counter-intuitive, mystical power. In her words,

This “proneness to suffering,” that is, the suffering that a person has experienced as well as the capacity to suffer, is what makes [one] stronger than anything that comes [one’s] way. What is meant is not only that it is better to suffer wrong than to do it, although this thought – with its rejection of the illusion of neutrality – does play a role in the Christian explanation of suffering. But what is decisive for Christian mysticism is first of all the knowledge that the one who suffers wrong is also stronger (not just morally better) than the one who does wrong. That “God is always with the one who is suffering entails not only consolation but also strengthening: . . . a mystical defiance that rebels against everything ordained and regulated from on high and holds fast to the truth that it has discovered. . . . Nothing “can separate us from the love of God” (Rom. 8:39).

In showing compassion as the first step on the way toward the resistance of suffering, death, and violence, the cross thus becomes, for Sölle, “a tree of life,” pointing toward the power of life to overcome the death-ward pull of suffering. In contrast to Weaver, who, to some extent, subsumes the cross under the resurrection, Sölle thus links the cross and the resurrection inseparably: “[w]ithout compassio, there is no resurrection.” This brings us, once again, to Weaver’s Anabaptist notion of discipleship as “walking in the resurrection” and the resonances and dissonances between Sölle and Weaver there.

113 Sölle, Against the Wind, 78.
114 Sölle, Suffering, 107, 102-103.
115 Sölle, Silent Cry, 141.
5. “Walking in the Resurrection”: Between Realism and Hope for the Way of Peace

In the previous chapter, I argued that Weaver underemphasizes the cross within redemption, stressing instead the entire narrative of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and holding the resurrection up as centrally revelatory of God’s life-giving nonviolence. Though I agree with his contrasting of God’s peaceable ways with the violence of the powers and principalities, I contended that Weaver too easily dismisses interpretations of the cross as divine solidarity with those who suffer, which suggest God’s radical compassion as the divine response to the reality of human suffering. As seen above, this notion is important not only as a theological assertion about the character of God, but also as a key aspect of Christian ethics and discipleship in the image of this compassionate and nonviolent God. As I made a case for above, Weaver and many other Anabaptist-Mennonite theologians respond to feminist and womanist rejections of theologies of redemptive suffering by stressing the cross as symbolic of Jesus’ voluntary suffering as a consequence of his refusal to use violence, even in self-defense. I do not want to lose sight of this important dimension of the ethical significance of the cross, including Weaver’s vital distinction, following Williams, between the ways in which oppressors and oppressed people are respectively transformed by God’s reign. However, I want to suggest, with Sölle, that the cross understood as divine solidarity with the oppressed adds another, in some senses prior layer of ethical significance to the cross – namely, exemplifying compassion for those undergoing involuntary forms of suffering which laments suffering, brings healing, and empowers nonviolent resistance to suffering.

But how might this kind of compassion relate to the resurrection? For Weaver, it is not the cross but the resurrection which offers, empowers, and makes possible a new,
nonviolent way of life “now, on earth, in our lives as human beings.” He speaks of the resurrection as representative of the triumph of God’s nonviolence over the powers of evil, including violence and death, in which Jesus’ disciples are invited to participate; in Weaver’s words, “Christians, Christ-identified people, participate in the victory of the resurrection and demonstrate their freedom from bondage to the powers by living under the rule of God rather than continuing to live in the power of the evil that killed Jesus.” In this way, Christians “change sides” and become “co-laborers with Jesus” in bringing about the fullness of God’s reign. On this basis, Weaver speaks of Christian discipleship as “walking in the resurrection,” i.e., being empowered to resist evil, violence, and death nonviolently. This is precisely a key aspect of Weaver’s critique of contemporary, Abelardian feminist and womanist reinterpretations of the cross as divine solidarity with the oppressed. In his view, they underemphasize the resurrection, or fail to acknowledge its empowerment of a new, nonviolent way of life for disciples in the here and now. For instance, in his critique of feminist Julie M. Hopkins’s position, which bears many similarities to Sölle’s, Weaver writes, “[n]arrative Christus Victor has a more profound view of resurrection,” encompassing the “eschatological dimension of resurrection.” This “means that Christian life now, in history, is more than a mere commitment to life. It is the beginning of the actualization of the reign of God. It is the beginning of a new age.” Thus, for Weaver, “[r]esurrection is not simply inspiration to continue to challenge oppression,” but marks a change in history and in our reality which goes beyond the “subjective” realm, as Jesus’ resurrection “revealed the

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118 Ibid., 94, 97, 322.
true balance of power in the universe.” In short, the resurrection is not simply about life, but about making new life possible for the whole cosmos – revealing, as Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, “the long arc of the moral universe that bends toward justice.” Stated still differently, resurrection offers not only restoration but also transformation.

For Weaver, the transformation effected by the resurrection is made manifest in the nonviolent action which the church, as the community of disciples, is “invited and empowered” to undertake. Since resurrection epitomizes Jesus’ nonviolence, disciples imitate the way of resurrection rather than the cross. Walking in the resurrection, for Weaver, therefore involves all the ways in which “the church that lives out the narrative of Jesus opposes . . . both systemic and direct violence at all levels. That opposition can be passive – a refusal to participate in direct violence and seeking ways to minimize participation in the systemic violence of our society. But in keeping with the engaged, activist character of discipleship that results in a lived witness to Jesus in the world, the church can also engage in active opposition,” which includes everything from “public demonstrations against war, refusal to pay that portion of income taxes that supports the war effort, active work against spousal abuse” and “capital punishment,” as well as education and support for pacifism and conscientious objection to war, survivors of abuse, anti-racism and anti-discrimination projects, advocacy for the economically marginalized and “undocumented” immigrants, interreligious dialogue and relationships, and restorative justice and “Victim Offender Reconciliation” efforts, etc. In these somewhat ordinary efforts of the church to practice nonviolence or peacemaking, Weaver finds “living testimony to the futility of attempting to

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122 Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 177.
solve problems at any level with violence,” and, furthermore, speaks of this kind of church as “the body of Christ” and “an extension of the incarnation.” Following Yoder, Weaver speaks of the nonviolence of the church, including its practice of forgiveness and its political and cultural engagement, as transformative in that it “produce[s] a new social reality” in which the barriers between people (“cultural, ethnic, or gender differences”) are “transcended.” When the church baptizes people, it is therefore baptizing them into the community which already embodies peace, despite the ongoing presence of the powers of sin, death, and violence in the world. The voluntary baptism of individual adults into this community means “a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17), pointing to God’s ways of healing, reconciliation, and redeemed wholeness which are already a “relational” reality in the church as the embodiment of “Christa-Community,” to use Rita Nakashima Brock’s language.

Of course, it must be asked whether Weaver’s interpretation of the church as the resurrection-community is altogether too idealistic, or worse, triumphalistic. In Sölle’s terms, one might ask if Weaver allows himself to be “consoled prematurely,” or to approach a notion of suffering as illusory which is more stoic than mystical. This can be seen in his assertion, for example, that “The reign of God is victorious, God is sovereign, even as suffering and evil are still present.” This suggests that the triumph of the resurrection trumps the reality of suffering and evil. By contrast, reality, for Sölle, refers to ongoing forms of meaningless suffering, the ongoing crucifixions which mar our world. Here she quotes

123 Ibid., 193-194, 171.
124 Ibid., 173, 177. Cf. 175.
125 Ibid., 174-175, 178. Weaver quotes Brock here. This is the only context in which he mentions “Christa.”
126 Ibid., 144.
Blaise Pascal: “Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world: we must not sleep during that time.” She elaborates,

This doctrine of Christ’s continuing, representative suffering is contested by those who regard the resurrection rather than the cross as the central event which forms the basis of the Christian faith, and who see the resurrection itself as God’s final victory over [God’s] enemies and not simply an anticipatory sign of hope. For them, the cross on which Christ puts himself at risk, is simply an event in history, a transitional stage, ended by the power and glory of God. For them, the reality of history is prefigured in Easter, and from Easter dates the rule of Christ.128

In calling Christians to imitate the resurrection almost instead of the cross, Weaver thus risks presenting a triumphalist ethic which ignores the cries for liberation from suffering. In effect, when he speaks of the new life of resurrection, Sölle and other liberationists ask, what about those who do not yet even have life, who are living in the death of poverty, oppression, and unspeakable suffering? Is it enough to speak about the triumph of resurrection in the face of ongoing crucifixions and deaths? Elsewhere, Sölle critiques a too-heavy reliance on the guarantee of God’s ultimate triumph: “[t]hat Christ will finally come again and finally ransom all captives, that the hungry will be filled” offers a “comfort” which in “its supposed nearness to God . . . cut[s] itself off from the griefs of others, though these are the birth-pangs of the Messiah.”129

Two aspects of their distinct approaches are worth noting here. First, it becomes clear that Weaver and Sölle ultimately approach these ethical questions from the perspectives of privilege and oppression, respectively. When Weaver speaks as the cross as symbolic of the “costliness” or vulnerability inherent in adopting a commitment to nonviolence, he speaks of the resultant suffering only as a risk, which arguably presumes a privileged position as yet

127 See, for instance, Sölle, Suffering, 163-164.

128 Sölle, Christ the Representative, 99 n. 1, 125.

129 Sölle, Thinking about God, 140.
untouched by suffering. By contrast, Sölle understands suffering as an intrinsic aspect of love or vulnerability, hence it is an unavoidable component of the Christian calling. Solidarity with the afflicted in itself recognizes that suffering is a present reality, not a mere possibility, and thus that those who undertake solidarity with “the least” will take that suffering onto themselves. It again becomes evident within his account of resurrection that Weaver assumes, with some feminists and womanists, that all forms of suffering are equally destructive and therefore undesirable, whereas for Sölle, destructive or pointless suffering (affliction) is to be distinguished from suffering which is loving and life-giving, which is akin to childbirth. For Sölle, then, suffering is not optional, but there is a choice as to the telos of suffering. Secondly, though Weaver makes a crucial distinction between different kinds of sin (domination and passivity) and the different ways in which oppressors and the oppressed experience the transformative power of the resurrection (the oppressors cease their domination, the oppressed resist their situation), this focus reveals that for him, the resurrection deals primarily with sin rather than with suffering. Weaver’s language of “changing sides” is especially telling here, as it suggests that the oppressors and the oppressed are equally guilty of being on the ‘wrong side,’ so to speak (i.e., not aligned with God’s reign). But arguably, the oppressed do not primarily need to be rebuked for wrongdoing, nor is the process leading to their nonviolent resistance to situations of oppression as simple as Weaver makes it seem. Here Sölle helpfully speaks about the slow and non-linear processes of lament and healing which divine and human (or divine-as-human, immanent transcendent) solidarity and compassion can potentially set in motion among the oppressed, which may lead to nonviolent resistance and struggle. Sölle’s
existential focus on suffering is remarkably different from Weaver’s approach, which makes sin the central problem.

Despite Weaver’s use of the language of sin, however, it is also possible to read Sölle’s perspective as much more reflective of a Niebuhrian Christian realism, which she combines with a liberation focus on social/structural sin as injustice and a preferential option for the poor and suffering. Because suffering is more multi-faceted for Sölle, she seems to be more realistic about the limits of nonviolence, recognizing that at times, all one can do is suffer-with; as she states, sometimes the struggle “can come to naught.”130 This admission resonates with the Niebuhrian Christian realism of other theologians of peace and nonviolence, such as Stanley Hauerwas and A. James Reimer, for whom nonviolence, much like violence, is fraught with ethical ambiguity, uncertainty about intention, and difficult choices. Hauerwas writes of “the tragic fact that at times there is no alternative than to have other people, who may not share our conviction, suffer for our commitment to nonviolence.”131 As mentioned in the previous chapter, Reimer attempts to combine a Niebuhrian Christian realism with a Mennonite peace ethic, speaking of how nonviolent ethics are, at best, practiced in “penultimate and fragmentary ways” because of the reality of sin. Nevertheless, he also values the Mennonite faithfulness to the Sermon on the Mount, which involves a refusal to allow sin “to cancel out the normativity of love” nor render it, in

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130 Sölle, Suffering, 125.

131 Stanley Hauerwas, “On Being a Church Capable of Addressing a World at War: A Pacifist Response to the United Methodist Bishops’ Pastoral In Defense of Creation (1988),” in The Hauerwas Reader, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2001), 436. In my view, Hauerwas here presents a pacifist version of the Thomist doctrine of double-effect, which stresses intention: instead of killing to achieve a greater good (peace), pacifists refrain from violently intervening (to end suffering, etc.) for the sake of a greater good (faithfulness to a nonviolent ethic). Hauerwas assumes too easily that there is often no choice but violence, however.
Niebuhr’s terms, an “impossibility.” On this basis, Reimer argues for the limited and just use of violence, including lethal violence, “to protect vulnerable people,” thus advocating what he terms “just policing” as “an alternative to war.” Evidently, both Hauerwas’s and Reimer’s lines of argument disregard Sölle’s tactic of solidarity or suffering—with as an alternative act of peacemaking in circumstances where there is no other nonviolent choice. Still, all three of these realistic perspectives highlight that Weaver’s language of “changing sides” from sin and violence to God’s nonviolent reign is too simplistic and triumphalist, approaching the implication that those who espouse a nonviolent ethic are somehow exempt from sin. Elsewhere, he speaks of this another way, asserting that “violent resistance, retaliation, or rebellion” all “provoke more violence,” whereas nonviolence presumably does not. In maintaining that nonviolence only involves the risk of suffering, then, Weaver does not sufficiently address either the ethical anguish and ambiguity or the suffering of solidarity that are part and parcel of a realistic nonviolent ethic.

But that is not to say that Weaver does not speak about the limits of nonviolence within his concept of its “costliness,” particularly in his thorough study of The Nonviolent God. There, he admits that “Nonviolent confrontation does not guarantee a happy outcome. It can certainly fail. However, the possibility of failure or injury ought not in and of itself be a reason to abandon nonviolence.” In fact, he claims, it “equally means acknowledging that violent efforts also contain the potential for failure and injury. The Christian who intends to

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133 Reimer, Christians and War, 173, 158-9, 161, 170. This echoes Augustine’s intention-centred claim about just war: that “violence may under certain circumstances be an act of ‘ordered love.’” See Boersma, 47.

134 Weaver, Nonviolent God, 190. Here we might cite Schertz’s victim-blaming discussion, above, of women who stay in abusive relationships as causing further violence.
live out the story of Jesus will thus find the norm for behaviour in that story rather than in a calculus of so-called ‘real-world’ consequences or in the natural desire to retaliate in kind,” and will try to choose “ultimately to convert enemies to friends rather than to destroy them.”\textsuperscript{135} But such efforts to live in the nonviolent way of Jesus do not “ignore our complicity in sin,” since, as Weaver asserts, “receiving God’s forgiveness means that the sinner has begun a life-long process of learning to live in the reign of God. It is a life-long process since evil is never fully overcome and God’s forgiveness is therefore ongoing as well. Nonetheless, the fact or intent to change is what demonstrates that the sinner is now on the side of the reign of God.” In this way, while retaining his language of “changing sides,” Weaver helpfully qualifies and nuances it to reflect that a commitment to nonviolence involves an ongoing struggle and recommitment to “go and sin no more” (John 8:11).\textsuperscript{136}

Ultimately, in this qualified and somewhat more existential form, I would not want to entirely do away with Weaver’s optimism concerning the real possibility of nonviolent resistance and enemy-love. As in the previous chapter, I find Weaver’s subversive understanding of the eschatological reality represented by the resurrection to be helpful. Drawing on his peace church tradition, he defines eschatology in primarily ethical terms, as that which makes the new life of nonviolent discipleship possible in the here and now. In short, a choice need not be made between recognizing the limits of nonviolence and a conviction that God’s nonviolent resurrection or creation of life out of death ensures that our human attempts at nonviolence, however limited and ambiguous, can be sanctified and used by God for the furthering of God’s redemptive and transformative \textit{shalom}. Another way of speaking about this is to claim that in our limited way, we nevertheless are empowered by

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 198-199.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 203.
God to image God’s nonviolent love. As Weaver poignantly states, “[w]alking in the resurrection means being cared for by God, even when we cannot completely overcome the sin in our lives or fix the abundant evil that still rules in the world. Living in the resurrection nonetheless enables us to address evils in the world under the power of God’s grace.” In this way, Weaver speaks a profound and empowering word of hope for the possibilities of the way of peace, affirming that in the resurrection, the impossible becomes possible by means of the counter-intuitive, loving, and life-giving power of God.

In this sense, Weaver’s critique of feminists and womanists who dilute the subversive power of the resurrection, speaking of it predominantly as inspiration for the struggle, is, in part, applicable to Sölle. As seen above, she is certainly more reticent than Weaver to affirm the resurrection as a “reality.” Sölle actually equivocates on this question, as reflected in one of her poems: “O don’t ask me about resurrection . . . O do ask me about resurrection, / o don’t stop asking me.” She speaks at times of the mystical power of love which exists “without a why,” and at other times seemingly reducing the resurrection to inspiration for resistance, undercutting it with existential notions of the absence of the divine from our world. Interestingly, I hear echoes of Weaver’s Anabaptist-Mennonite ethical-eschatological interpretation of resurrection in Sölle’s notions of mystical love, and indeed, she does at one point speak of the hope of peace churches, among others working for peace, as not primarily dependent on conventional understandings of success. In her early work on Suffering, Sölle explains hope as a paradox “firmly established in the present, as consolation for the

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137 Ibid., 88.


139 Sölle, Thinking about God, 170.
people who are now suffering. God must be thought of as present with those who are in misery, and thereby the truth even of love that has not yet achieved its goal remains certain.” In short, this kind of love “speaks the yes of faith, even against all experience.” But this certainty is not triumphalist or bound by theistic understandings of God, since it “stresses the strength of those who now believe and not the future strength of God, who brings in [God’s] kingdom.” In later work, she builds on Meister Eckhart’s mystical imagery of the rose which exists “sunder warumbe” – that is, without ulterior motives or “without a why,” but simply “blooms because it blooms.” Against “cynical” perspectives which ridicule the ineffectiveness of the “struggle for justice and peace,” she argues, “[b]ut the rose has no why, and one has to do some things sunder warumbe, even when they meet with no success now. There is an inner strength of being-at-peace which cannot make the goal orientation of action the measure of all things. All nonviolent action in a violent world participates, in this sense, in the ‘without a why’ of the rose.” This sense of living the way of peace in a violent world, or of embodying resistance to suffering and domination which puts one at odds with the world, rendering one “homeless” in a suffering and violent world. As Weaver speaks of the resurrection making a new life possible despite the ongoing but waning existence of sin and death, Sölle calls Christians to live “as if we lived in a liberated world,” “to be ‘in this world but not of it’ or to give reality to the new life in the husks of the old.”

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140 Sölle, Suffering, 165, 93.


142 Sölle, Silent Cry, 195-196, and The Mystery of Death, 34, 76.

143 Ibid., 191, 250. In the latter, Sölle is using Dorothy Day’s Christian socialism as an example, but the notion of nonconformity to the world as being “in the world but not of it” is central in the Mennonite church as well.
This understanding of mystical love, however, remains cruciform, in Sölle’s view, associated more closely with the cross than the resurrection. When reflecting on the resurrection itself, her interpretation arguably amounts to inspiration. As I argued in the previous chapter and above, she certainly would not assert unequivocally with Weaver that the resurrection marks the victory of God over the principalities and powers. Instead, she speaks of the resurrection as the ongoing presence of the dead in the memories of the living, citing the Latin American liberation practice of calling out the names of those who have been martyred and asserting their presence among those remaining resisters, gathered in solidarity: “‘Oscar Romero?’ ‘Presente.’” In this way, she states that the proper questions we should ask about the resurrection are not concerned with Jesus’ bodily resuscitation, but are rather existential and subjective ones: “Is Jesus dead or is he still alive? Does he still bring something about? Does he change people’s lives? Can one still say, ‘Jesus lives, and in him I live also’?” In this “demythologized” way, Sölle defines resurrection simply as the inability of the Roman empire to “do away with” Jesus; they “simply could not succeed in destroying him” – that is, “[w]hat his life meant, what his spirit was, what his disciples did, this ‘yes’ to God’s will lived, and lives today, and this life appears in the cross.” It is this memory or “dangerous memory” which spurs the disciples of Jesus onward to follow his way of life, his valuing of “life before death” over any mythologized sense of life after death or bodily resurrection. Of course there is an aspect of sanctification or grace to this memory,

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145 Sölle, Window of Vulnerability, 34, and Theology for Skeptics, 106.

146 Sölle, Theology for Skeptics, 106-107. Cf. 94.

147 Sölle, Thinking about God, 132.
in that it calls us to act, not to wait for God’s fiat to do away with suffering and injustice. In this way, Sölle insists on holding open the notion of God’s absence from the world, alongside the conviction of God’s utter dependence on us to work for the cause of life. Christ, too, is absent, or rather is “more helpful” as “one who suffers with us” than as “the risen one,” showing us the way of “conscious inconsolability.” Only in the sense that “Nothing can separate us from the love of God” (Rom. 8:39) does Sölle allow Christians a form of consolation that inseparably knits together the cross and the resurrection. She does not care to speak of the resurrection without the cross. She thus concludes, “as long as Christ lives and is remembered his friends will be with those who suffer. Where no help is possible he appears not as the superior helper but only as the one who walks with those beyond help.”

But is such a thin view of hope sufficient, especially as we consider the difficulties and costliness of the task of taking up our crosses? Is God really that helpless, or does such a view ultimately ascribe too much power to sin and death – i.e., is too “realistic” in the Niebuhrian sense? Indeed, her realism leads her to speak of the “powerlessness” of God and of those working for peace: “Is not the God of the powerless also powerless, the God of women also pushed to the periphery and trivialized, the God of the peacemakers also unprotected and an object of mockery?” Arguably Weaver here offers a more concrete confidence in God’s empowerment of our work for peace, justice, and new life, because such

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is “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7). Nieburian realism finally cannot be extricated from an anthropological pessimism that declares the ethical task God gives us to be “impossible,” and thus forecloses on the real possibility of God’s invitation and empowerment to walk in the resurrection. In part, this difference can be explained on the basis of Sölle’s and Weaver’s differing ecclesiologies: whereas he sees the possibility of the embodiment of peace and reconciliation within the church itself as a communal Body of Christ as well as in Christian socio-political engagement and advocacy, Sölle looks primarily to the latter, and thus sees those working for peace as relatively “powerless” to effect change.153 Weaver’s Anabaptist-Mennonite understanding of the church as already embodying God’s peace thus shifts power from the official channels of socio-political leadership to the grassroots, which in turn affects and influences the social and political landscape through its alternative identity and *praxis*.

Interestingly, however, there is a sense in which the two of them agree on the alternative power of peace and nonviolence. Weaver’s discussion of the subversive, ethical-eschatological, nonviolent power of the resurrection resonates with Sölle’s notion of the mystical power of solidarity, which she locates in the cross as the tree of life, which blooms “without a why.” As with their perspectives on God in the previous chapter, Sölle and Weaver require each other’s perspectives to fully redefine the power of nonviolence, compassion, and peace. In one sense, the cross is the quintessential symbol for nonviolent ethics: it is a matter of vulnerability, costliness, and co-suffering solidarity. But in that seeming powerlessness, there is already a transformed understanding of power which renders the cross a symbol of life and birth, of love which is aligned with God’s *shalom* vision for the

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153 She speaks of her “self-contradictory experience of the *church as traitor* and the *church as sister,*” – i.e., the church as promoter of the status quo and the church as active against social injustice. See Sölle, *Window of Vulnerability*, 24, and *Against the Wind*, 94. Emphasis hers.
world, of the real if counterintuitive power of peace. This is when the cross slips into the resurrection. Sölle’s cross thus needs the hope of Weaver’s ethical-eschatological resurrection, but Weaver’s resurrection also cannot forget the reality of the cross, without which it becomes a symbol of empty triumph in a violent and suffering world. Together, Sölle’s cross and Weaver’s resurrection can empower a realistic and hopeful nonviolent ethic which addresses those suffering and yearning for peace. But such a balance requires another look at the theological and ethical symbolics of the cross.

6. A Trinity of Crosses: Re-envisioning the Crosses of Nonviolence, Compassion, and New Life

Is there a way to symbolize this balance between Sölle’s cruciform realism regarding the reality of suffering and Weaver’s empowering, ethical-eschatological hope in the resurrection? Can we re-envision the cross to express her imitation of the cross and his imitation of the resurrection? Rather than looking too quickly to the triumph of the resurrection, as Weaver does, and yet without falling prey to Sölle’s inconsolability in the face of the anguish of suffering, I believe we must speak of the interrelatedness of the cross and the resurrection, or even of their indivisibility. A point of departure is Sölle’s insistence that the cross and resurrection cannot be severed from one another, but built upon a more robust hope supplied by Weaver. But what kind of cross does this leave us with?

In re-envisioning the cross, resurrection, and redemption without falling prey to either a theology of redemptive violence or a theology of redemptive suffering, I return to Clague’s assertion that the cross is a “polyvalent sign offering multiple theological possibilities,” that it
can encompass “Christus victor, Christus victima, and so on.” As evocative as the image of the Christa is, or Berry’s poignant language of “embrace” for that matter, neither alone captures the layers of ethical and theological significance which emanate from the symbol of the cross and together represent redemption: some tragic, some compassionate, and some reflecting the power of life over death. My point then is not to reduce the cross to a single meaning, but to name its multiple layers of resonance which emphasize different aspects of a nonviolent, compassionate, and participatory understanding of redemption. I therefore offer a trinity of interrelated crosses which attempt to image this multiplicity. These are: the historical-political cross of the nonviolent Jesus of Nazareth; the crucified Christa, who represents divine solidarity and compassion with all those who suffer and begins to point toward the redemptive struggle for life represented by the “pain of birth”; and the empty cross of the resurrection as the tree of life.

**Jesus of Nazareth, Crucified by the Romans**

The crucified Jesus of Nazareth, a young Jewish man tortured to death by the occupying Romans, executed publicly as a traitor to Rome, represents the historical-political significance of the cross which provides the foundation for Sölle’s and Weaver’s nonviolent theological ethics. This is above all a cross of remembrance, pointing to Jesus’ life, teachings, and ministry of nonviolent resistance to the violent powers of imperialism, injustice, sin, and death and his passionate and compassionate identification and friendships with the marginalized of his first-century context: women, economic/political/sexual

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154 Clague, 44.

155 These bear some similarity to but are distinct from Heim’s three images of the cross, discussed in Chapter 3 above. See S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 18, 328, 114, 123, 235.
outcasts, the unwell, and others counted among the “sinners” or “the least” (see Matt. 25). This cross calls Christians to “do this in remembrance of me” – to opt for the “least,” to eat and drink with them, to walk with them, and to struggle nonviolently with them for liberation (Luke 4). But it also reflects the “costliness” of this call, or the hostility that will meet this ethic of nonviolent compassion, as it threatens the status quo of domination and apathy. In taking the side of life, love, and peace, Jesus ultimately faced a violent death rather than escalating the cycle of violence. Only in that sense was Jesus’ suffering “voluntary.” When no other option was before him, he accepted death, going so far as to offer an embrace of forgiveness to his enemies from the cross, asserting his agency to resist violence even as it was being done to him. But he was only able to accept his death as an inevitable consequence of his life-giving ministry through the knowledge that “nothing can separate us from the love of God.” In the face of similarly hostile socio-political realities, we who follow the nonviolent way of Jesus are likewise called to choose the way of love and nonviolent resistance, knowing that even its risks and costs cannot “separate us from the love of God” (Rom. 8:39).

**Embracing Christa, the Crucified Woman**

A young woman stands, arms outstretched, naked and vulnerable, her head bent to one side in her sorrow. The image of the Christa or Crucified Woman (depicted in these powerfully moving sculptures, among others) both reflects and overflows Jesus’ lifetime, which he spent befriending many marginalized women (prostitutes and “adultresses” (e.g., Matt. 21, Luke 15, John 8), female members of ethnic minorities (Mark 7, John 4), women suffering from various illnesses (e.g., Matt. 9, Mark 5, Luke 8), impoverished mothers and
widows (Mark 7, 12)). In other words, Christa is a profound symbol of divine solidarity with the oppressed and suffering: that God hears spilled blood crying out from the ground (Genesis 4) and the cries of the people groaning under slavery in Egypt (Exodus 3), including, crucially, the cries of women and the forms of suffering particular to them (Exodus 1, Hannah in I Samuel, Mary in her Magnificat, etc.). Christa is Sölle’s Abelardian-feminist-liberationist cross, which draws our attention to “the crosses by which we are surrounded,” revealing that God takes the unacknowledged suffering of women into the compassionate divine embrace – and drawing us to participate in that embrace, whether as suffering women or in solidarity with them. Christa thus reveals that God does not only side with those who risk repercussions for doing the right thing, but also for those suffering involuntarily – truly, nothing can separate us from the love of God. For women who have been sexually and physically abused, Christa offers lament for their anguish and the possibilities of healing, wholeness, and strength for resistance to suffering and violence – in other words, the faith of African American slave women and their descendants that God can “make a way out of no way.”\(^\text{156}\)

In another sense, then, Christa draws from women’s singular experiences of life-giving suffering and struggle, pointing simultaneously to “the pain of birth” as a mystical-ethical symbol of redemption, in Sölle’s sense of those terms. Christa is thus not an one-sidedly tragic image, pointing only to rape and other forms of misogynistic violence which ‘crucify’ women with destructive forms of suffering. It also has positive resonance in pointing to the ancient connection between the cross and birth, which a number of previously-cited feminist and womanist theologians, including Sölle and Mennonite theologians, have revived and reinterpreted in contemporary ways. This link reminds us of

\(^{156}\) Williams, xv. Cf. Cone, 2.
the profoundly embodied nature of redemption and the resurrection: as women embody life-giving love and struggle in pregnancy and childbirth, “co-creating” new life with God, as feminist theologian Mary Grey puts it, they are embodying the very opposite of violence and unjust death. For Grey, the cross understood as birth both acknowledges that labour and childbirth are “painful, messy, and hard work” and combine mutuality, passion, and compassion to bring forth a new creation.\footnote{Grey, 185, 180, 176-177.} Without idealizing them, women’s experiences of labour, childbirth, and mothering, especially when women choose to undertake these tasks, can thus reflect what feminist poet Adrienne Rich describes as a redemptive “passion to make and make again / where such un-making reigns.”\footnote{Ibid., 1. Emphasis hers. Cf. 177-179, 185, where Grey points out that such imagery pervades the Bible and the writings of various theologians and mystics throughout Christian history, from Isaiah’s image of God giving birth to the people of Israel (Isaiah 42:14-16) to Jesus’ comparison of the struggle and joy of childbirth to the coming of the kingdom of God (John 16:21-22), and from Hildegard of Bingen’s interpretation of God’s nonviolent victory through birth (“without even using a warrior!”) to Meister Eckhart’s statements about God’s mothering: “What does God do all day long? God gives birth.”} Christa therefore also depicts God as our Mother, in whose womb we “live and move and have our being,” who births us with the words, “My body given for you. / My blood shed for you.”\footnote{Dyke, 58, 62. Emphasis hers. Cf. Grey, 185, where she quotes Sara Maitland: “It seems that the creative birthing of God as expressed in Christ’s passion . . . can be given a deeper relating if we can learn to hear as holy the bodily experiences of women, and trust the metaphor of God the Mother.” Italics added by Grey.} God as Mother is likewise imaged from a Mennonite peace perspective by Harder as “our God who has given birth to us, suffered with us in our lack of shalom” and by Berry, who speaks of God as giving birth to right-relationships, justice, and shalom, with us as her midwives.\footnote{Harder, “Response [to Mary Schertz],” 28, and Berry, “Poised to Embrace,” 29.} Beyond these images, however, Sölle emphasizes that we as disciples are not just midwives, but, as literal and/or symbolic mothers, mutually give birth to and with God to liberation, shalom, and life, a
mystical-ethical image which echoes Meister Eckhart’s assertion that “We are all meant to be mothers of God.”

The Empty Cross: Resurrection and the Tree of Life

The cross of resurrection is the bare cross, emptied of its tortured human figure and thereby symbolic of the nonviolent defeat of suffering, violence, and death. As an empty – or emptied – cross, it carries with it the task of likewise emptying the crosses which surround us, a task which it invites, challenges, and empowers us to do. As we take up the empty cross and its task, we witness to the hope of God’s peaceful reign of abundant life, which has already begun but not yet in its fullness. This image tempers Sölle’s inconsolability, affirming its acknowledgment and lament for the cross of suffering which continues to burden so many in our world – the cross was not always empty, after all. At the same time, it is an ethical-eschatological image in Weaver’s sense, pointing to our walking in the resurrection, which connotes participation in the transformative and life-giving nonviolent action empowered and made possible by God-in-Christ, the Risen One. The empty cross of resurrection does not allow us to forget that resurrection is preceded by struggle, resistance, and unjust death, just as women face their own mortality in undergoing the overwhelming process of childbirth, touching death in order to give life. But it also does not leave us inconsolable, either upon the cross or at the foot of the cross, because the possibility of resurrection, of coming down from the cross, is before us, making the “empty cross a symbol of God’s continuous empowerment,” as Terrell recognizes. In this way, it is “the

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162 Terrell, 125.
dimension of the resurrection which becomes visible in the cross itself,” as Sölle puts it.163 This corrects Weaver’s underemphasis on the cross, providing an image of the cross as *emptied and emptying*, which reflects the major aims of his narrative *Christus Victor* understanding of the atonement and redemption.

But as an image of the cross which points primarily to life, this emptied and emptying cross also fits with Sölle’s and Berry’s language of the cross as a “tree of life” which, Sölle writes, will “turn green and blossom” and thereby lead us to realize: “[w]e are the tree of life” which “blooms because it blooms.”164 In this way, it resonates again with the imagery of birth. The emptied cross, evoking both the emptied grave and the emptied womb, thus remembers the birth-struggle for liberation, new life, and *shalom*, while suggesting that such gifts have already been birthed and are among us; a new life of *shalom* is already possible in the here and now. Sölle’s emphasis on birth as symbolic of an entirely different, redemptive and life-giving form of suffering165 here meets Weaver’s language of new creation and the power of participating in the resurrection as the real possibility of living and embodying peace, compassion, and life-giving power. Taking up the empty cross is thus an affirmation of the life we are all given by our mothers and our Mothering God, whose story of incarnation is book-ended by birthing struggles, from his mother Mary, the young Jewish peasant woman who literally gave birth for the sake of liberation and redemption (“Rejected by society and lying in a barn among animals, she suffered for the salvation of the world.”),166 to Jesus’ nonviolent struggle for liberation and *shalom*, which ended in an

163 Sölle, *Thinking about od*, 131.
165 See Sölle, *Against the Wind*, 78, and *Suffering*, 94-95, 147.
emptied cross and an emptied grave, with women as the first witnesses to this seemingly impossible birthing of life out of death, according to all four Gospels. As we take up the emptied and emptying cross of resurrection, we are also empowered to live “the way of love in a violent world,”167 incarnating together, as the peaceable Body of Christ/Christa, the profound hope that injustice, violence, suffering, and death will not have the last word.

With these three images of the cross, encompassing reality, lament, birth, and new life, costly nonviolence and co-suffering for the sake of abolishing suffering, Sölle’s and Weaver’s perspectives are brought together into an integrated Mennonite-feminist and mystical-ethical theology. Here they are knit into profound images of nonviolence as compassion and resistance which address and do not simply avoid the problems of redemptive violence and redemptive suffering which are of central importance to feminist and womanist theologians, revealing a God who is deeply concerned to end all forms of domination and violence, walking with us through both voluntary and involuntary times of suffering. These crosses therefore also compellingly call us to image that God as disciples of the way of shalom, of peace with justice, empowered by the empty and emptying cross of resurrection. In other words, in taking up this trinity of reimagined crosses, I believe we can do justice to the multiple ways God is inviting and empowering us to participate in our own redemption. And in this way, we can truly make peace with the cross.

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167 Harder, “Response [to Mary Schertz],” 28.
Conclusion: 
Continuing the Conversation, Continuing the Incarnation

The cross can heal and hurt; it can be empowering and liberating but also enslaving and oppressive. There is no one way in which the cross can be interpreted.
- James Cone¹

While we should not glorify suffering and senseless sacrifice, these [Third World, marginalized, and/or postcolonial] theologians are looking for pastoral and theological insights to address the questions of suffering and healing that they see daily in their communities.
- Kwok Pui-lan²

As I was nearing the completion of this manuscript, I spoke in my congregation’s adult education class about the *Crucified Woman* sculpture and her significance to me personally and to my work as a Mennonite-feminist theologian. I recounted visiting this statue often on the grounds of Emmanuel College in Toronto, as I was undertaking doctoral studies in Mennonite and liberation/feminist/womanist theologies there. I observed the way that the imagery of divine solidarity with the suffering particular to women supplements and transforms my Mennonite peace theology with notions of divine compassion, co-suffering, and empowerment for nonviolent resistance, contemporizing the cross to speak to the gendered power dynamics of our context. To my disappointment, the discussion which followed centred predominantly around the question, “But what about men?” One person even suggested that I was guilty of violence in speaking of systemic structures which

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privilege the experiences and voices of white men. The *Crucified Woman* was perceived by many as exclusive, even threatening. If this tense encounter is any indication, the Mennonite church continues to remain uncomfortable with and to sideline questions of gender, experience, suffering, and systemic violence. This needs to change if Mennonite peace ethics and theology are to maintain their credibility, as Weaver and others have argued.

The conversation I have initiated between Sölle and Weaver has provided one way of taking seriously and engaging feminist and womanist voices in a sustained way which, at the same time, offers particular insights from an Anabaptist-Mennonite peace perspective. This mutually-transformative dialogue led me to see value in both Sölle’s liberationist Abelardian perspective focused on the cross, which exemplifies the profundity of God’s love and compassion for the suffering and oppressed, as well as Weaver’s “narrative Christus Victor,” which proclaims the counter-intuitive victory and power of nonviolence and peacemaking as exemplified in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It led me to proclaim a God who overflows reductive depictions of divine violence and dominating power, who did not cause the cross but found Godself upon it, as Emmanuel, God-with-us, who is “other” in the sense of being passible and loving, suffering nonviolently with all of the crucified and resisting violence and death with a divine peace which surpasses understanding. Finally, it led me to an ethic of nonviolence and compassion in imitation of a nonviolent, compassionate God which resists masochism, transforms suffering and violence through walking in the resurrection, and struggles nonviolently, taking up the cross redemptively to participate with God and each other in giving birth to life, peace, and liberation for all. This ethic was represented by my reimagined trinity of crosses: the cross of the socio-political reality of Jesus of Nazareth’s violent death as a result of his voluntary commitment to
nonviolence, the cross of Christa, who represents God’s and our compassionate solidarity
with the suffering of women, encompassing both instances due to the tragedy of misogynistic
violence and related to the redemptive experiences (both literal and symbolic) of birth or life-
giving struggle, and the empty cross of resurrection, which calls us to participate in bringing
the suffering down from the cross, thereby emptying the tombs and transforming the cross
into a tree of life.

This exploration of Sölle’s and Weaver’s thought, including my trinity of reimagined
crosses, is not, as members of my congregation feared, an attempt to replace Christ with
Christa, or to lose sight of the crucified Jesus. In part, this is why I deliberately chose to
present three re-imagined depictions of the cross, representing the multiple ways in which
God encourages and empowers us to participate in redemption; even within my project, I did
not reduce the cross or redemption to a single, ‘universal’ meaning. This kind of multiplicity
in speaking about salvation or redemption is, of course, not a novel phenomenon. Referring
specifically to the redemptive significance of Christ, postcolonial feminist theologian Kwok
Pui-lan speaks about the multiple contextual Christologies which have arisen in recent
decades among liberation theologians in various marginalized communities and contexts,
grounding such a multiplicity, hybridity, and even “fruitful ambiguity” already in the notion
of “Jesus/Christ,” and in the many biblical depictions and images for Jesus.3 She cites Indian
biblical scholar George Soares Prabhu, who states,

New Testament christology is inclusive and pluriform. Every community evolves its
own understanding of Jesus responding to its cry for life. And because life changes
Christologies change too. The New Testament preserves all of these christologies,
without opting exclusively for any one among them, because it does not wish to offer
us (as dogmatic theology pretends to do) a finished product, to be accepted
unquestioningly by all. Rather its pluralism indicates a christological open-endedness,

3 Kwok, 170-171.
inviting us to discover our own particular christology, that is, specific significance of Jesus for our situation in the Third World today.⁴

In much the same way, one could speak about the multiple understandings of atonement which are “preserved” in the Bible, and the fact of the three major historical atonement theories which have largely remained distinct and unharmonized, with none of them deemed the “orthodox” doctrine of redemption (with the possible exception of the strong Protestant evangelical and fundamentalist propensity for the Anselmian substitutionary/satisfaction model of the atonement). This sets redemption apart from Christology and other central Christian doctrines, around which orthodoxy has set clear parameters. As Mennonite biblical scholar Tom Yoder Neufeld argues, “[i]t is clear that no one [atonement] theory, however ‘classic,’ ‘orthodox,’ or ‘non-violent,’ can by itself lay claim to the witness of the New Testament,” which he terms “kaleidoscopic.”⁵ My preservation and valuing of the cross as offering multiple, layered meanings (or what Julie Clague calls its polyvalency) can therefore find precedents in the Bible and Christian history and tradition.

Furthermore, I offer my reinterpretations of the cross not as a way to foreclose on further conversation in a way which duplicates or simply inverts the hegemony of patriarchal “orthodoxy” (as identified by Kwok and Prabhu), but to add to the conversation from my particular vantage point as a Mennonite and a feminist, or someone involved in both Mennonite discernment and feminist discourse in the church and the academy. In other words, I am joining the conversation and initiating further dialogue which is cognizant of the particular contexts, perspectives, and embodied experiences from which we try to theologize

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⁴ Prabhu cited in Ibid., 172.

or speak about God, not attempting to draw universal and final conclusions about the cross and redemption. This is in part why I express in offering three images of the cross which speak to three dimensions of redemption which I find crucial and central to a thoroughly nonviolent, peaceable, and life-giving theology of redemption.

Of course, this is not to say that all atonement theories or interpretations of the cross are equal, or that theological multiplicity and diversity exists for its own sake. Rather than slipping into this kind of theological relativism, I agree with Black liberation theologian James Cone’s statement above that the “cross can heal and hurt,”6 that the multiple interpretations of the cross are in one sense dangerous, in that the cross can be distorted and used to bolster violence and dominating power by encouraging the oppressed to submit unquestioningly to their suffering. As Cone’s perspective reveals, the concern of the feminists and womanists whom I have included in this study are only some of the voices calling for the cross to be re-examined and reinterpreted on ethical grounds, with a view to acknowledging the harm, violence, and broken relationships that the distorted cross has caused. In this way, the multiplicity of crosses is only helpful insofar as it points, in Sölle’s terms, to the “crosses by which we are surrounded” – that is, insofar as it helps us name, lament, and resist suffering and oppression, and work subversively, in hope, toward peace with justice. Our interpretations of the cross are ultimately measured by their theological and ethical effects among us, and by the extent to which they prompt liberative and life-giving praxis in our hurting world.7 In that sense, my approach resonates more deeply with postcolonial theologies rather than postmodern theologies.8

6 Cone, xix.

7 Here I agree with Indian theologian R.S. Sugirtharajah, that “the most challenging approach would be to accept these multiple [christological] images as a gift, scrutinizing their diversity and probing their meaning,
As I have argued, the cross of Jesus of Nazareth can be claimed as the solidarity of God with the persecuted and tortured in contexts of military political occupation, leading to nonviolent resurrection. The Christa can convey to women who have been sexually assaulted that God is with them in their pain, making possible lament, healing, and resistance. Despised peacemakers can read the cross and resurrection as God’s promise that peace and life are embodiments and incarnations of the divine will for humanity and all of creation, despite the hostility they face in a violent and retributive world. In my view, these crosses can take their place among the many others which are needed in today’s world, including: Cone’s reclaming of Jesus as a lynched black person among black former slaves during the postbellum “Lynching Era” in the southern U.S., which prompted the Civil Rights movement;9 Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George “Tink” Tinker’s anti-colonial affirmation of the connection between Christ and the North American Indigenous figure of the “Corn Mother,” who provides food for the people from her own body and thereby reminds them that all plants and animals are their relatives;10 and Marcella Althaus-Reid’s popular Christian figures of the Librada and La Difunta Correa, “ambiguous Christ/Marys and cross-dressed Christs” (or “the unstable image of a Christ dressed as a Mary”)

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8 Cf. Kwok, 6.

9 Cone, xv, 26-28, 158-159.

overflow heteronormative gender binaries to reflect lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered or queer identities among the poor in Argentina.\footnote{11 Marcella Althaus-Reid, \textit{Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics} (New York: Routledge, 2000), 79-80.}

These represent only a few examples of the forms and varieties of violence which I have not sufficiently addressed in this study by virtue of limiting my discussion largely to two Western theologians of European descent. Stated differently, I recognize that further conversations remain to be had concerning the globalized violence of colonialism and dehumanizing, poverty-inducing, and ecocidal capitalist neo-colonialism, the related devastation of cultural genocide against Indigenous peoples, and the corresponding denigration and erasure of the sexual identities of those who “queer” Western heteronormativity, to name but a few. Ultimately, of course, the goal of such conversations is not merely abstract theological dialogue but concrete ethical and pastoral theologies, as in Kwok’s observation that postcolonial, marginalized, and/or Third World “theologians are looking for pastoral and theological insights to address the questions of suffering and healing that they see daily in their communities.”\footnote{12 Kwok, 184.} This emphasis on \textit{praxis} multiplies and concretizes our images of Christ even further. As Weaver and Sölle together remind us, the goal is therefore to move toward seeing God among all of the crucified by which we are surrounded and, empowered by the resurrection, to constantly incarnate God’s nonviolence and compassion, making, embodying, and birthing peace in countless, ongoing, redemptive ways in our violent and suffering world today.
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