

# Can the Cross Be “Good News” for Women?

## Mennonite Peace Theology and the Suffering of Women

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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<sup>2</sup>

Within the past several decades, as there has been a proliferation of women’s interpretations of the Christian Scriptures and theology in light of their neglected experiences *qua* women, aspects of traditional interpretations of the cross have become profoundly problematic. Many theologians have highlighted the harm that has been caused in exhorting women to submit to abuse and violence because it supposedly images the cross of Jesus Christ: they question the simplistic connection of women’s suffering to the crucified Christ, because this connection results in the problematic notion that all suffering, perhaps especially undeserved or innocent suffering, is redemptive and God-willed and therefore to be “endured” rather than resisted.<sup>3</sup>

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

3 Carol J. Penner, “Content to Suffer: An Exploration of Mennonite Theology from the Context of Violence against Women,” in *Peace Theology and Violence against Women*, Occasional Papers No. 16, ed. Elizabeth G. Yoder (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992), 99.

As Canadian Mennonite-feminist theologian Carol Penner highlights above, this problem is perhaps more acute within historic peace churches such as her Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. Though—or even because—this tradition has rejected notions of redemptive *violence*, it has historically emphasized nonresistance to evil and thereby given redemptive *suffering* a central place within its theology, ethics, and soteriology. Penner argues that despite its orientation toward peace and nonviolence, Mennonite theology has been largely silent regarding violence against women and women’s suffering. In her view, aspects of Mennonite peace theology have been harmful toward women, as they have encouraged passive submission to all forms of suffering as redemptive within a self-abnegating ethic of enemy-love.<sup>4</sup> This ethic elevates the crucified Christ as paradigmatic for peace ethics, emphasizing that Christians are to likewise take up our crosses. But for Penner, because of a neglect of women’s experiences of violence and abuse within the Mennonite church and theology, this understanding of the cross has perpetuated the suffering of women.<sup>5</sup>

Penner is certainly not alone. In recent years, many Mennonite women and some men have been asking corollary questions to those of mainline feminist<sup>6</sup> and womanist<sup>7</sup> theologians—seen, for instance, in feminist theologian Rose-

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4 Ibid., 2–3, 29–50. Penner discusses this in her chapter on theologians John H. Yoder and Guy F. Hershberger.

5 This understanding of nonresistant enemy-love also negatively affects other historically marginalized groups, but this paper will focus on the suffering of women, including the countless ways women are disempowered, sexually objectified, impoverished, and denied a voice within their families, places of worship, and/or communities simply because of their female bodies—the most overtly destructive example being the all-too-common experiences of physical violence and sexual violation or rape.

6 I define feminist theology as particularly concerned with the sin of sexism or discrimination based on sex, gender, and/or sexuality. Privileging gender-egalitarian, liberative aspects of Christian Scripture and tradition and the embodied experience(s) of women as the central sources for theological reflection, feminist theologians resist interrelated forms of oppression, including sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, and eco-cide.

7 I follow Jacquelyn Grant and JoAnne Marie Terrell in defining womanist theology as a movement of Black or African American Christian women who share many key feminist concerns but insist on doing theology independently of feminists and of Black men, based on their experiences of being triply oppressed by racism, classism, and (hetero) sexism. See Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1989), 209, and Terrell, *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African American Experience*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 136–37.

mary Radford Ruether’s famous question, “Can a male savior save women?”<sup>8</sup> which becomes more specific as womanist theologian JoAnne Marie Terrell wonders, “Is the profession of faith in the cross inimical to black women’s self-interests? Or, is there power in the blood?”<sup>9</sup> Mennonite theological discussions focus on the disturbing legacy of nonresistant understandings of the cross that pressure women in particular to take up their “crosses” of physical and sexual abuse and avoidable suffering.<sup>10</sup> As such, these discussions can be summarized as asking, “Can the cross be good news for women?” I contend here that the cross can indeed be preached and taught as good news for women but only if it is carefully (re)interpreted *theologically* as well as *ethically*: that is, as conveying Divine solidarity with the oppressed, which promotes liberation, not as a symbol that all suffering is redemptive nor that women are to submit to violence and abuse. In what follows, I will explore this possibility within mainline feminist and womanist theologies as well as among Mennonite scholars who engage women’s voices, and thereby aim toward an integrated, feminist/womanist-Mennonite reinterpretation of the cross as good—peaceable *and* liberative—news for women.

### Tragedy or Triumph? Feminist and Womanist Theologians Discuss the Cross

Before turning to a specifically feminist/womanist-Mennonite reinterpretation of the cross, it is important to survey the mainline feminist and womanist theological debates concerning whether or not the cross is salvific for women. At one end of the spectrum are those who argue that the cross is not liberative, that it is solely a symbol of tragedy. Examples include feminists Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, who famously call the cross a symbol of “divine child abuse” and conclude that “no one was saved by the death of Jesus,” since “suffering is never redemptive.”<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Rita Nakashima Brock finds it unacceptable “to make claims that any person’s tragic, painful death is

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8 Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 116–38.

9 Terrell, *Power in the Blood?* 6–7.

10 I distinguish between “avoidable suffering,” life-giving forms of women’s suffering such as childbirth, and other forms of suffering that are simply part of being embodied, finite creatures (illness, death, etc.). See Doris Jean Dyke, *Crucified Woman* (Toronto: United Church Publishing, 1991), 66–67, and Mary Grey, *Feminism, Redemption and the Christian Tradition* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third, 1990), 7.

11 Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, “For God So Loved the World?” in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, eds. Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim, 1989), 2, 27.

divinely willed or necessary for others to be saved.”<sup>12</sup> Finally, in light of African American women’s experiences of sexual, reproductive, and labor “surrogacy” during slavery, womanist Delores S. Williams questions the image of Jesus as the ultimate surrogate figure “in a bloody act that supposedly gained victory over sin and/or evil.” She concludes that “there is nothing divine in the blood of the cross.”<sup>13</sup> All four view Jesus’s life and ministry as salvific and exemplary but not his death by crucifixion. While this is one possible response to the misuse of the cross in light of women’s suffering, it leads, in my view, to a low Christology that empties the cross almost entirely of theological significance, a notion I will take up in the next section.

At the other end of the spectrum are those who argue that the cross can be redemptive, and go so far as to depict the crucified Christ as female (sometimes called “Christa”) to represent Divine solidarity with the suffering particular to women.<sup>14</sup> 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.”<sup>15</sup> Womanists Jacqueline Grant and JoAnne Marie Terrell likewise image Christ as a “divine co-sufferer,” specifically as a Black woman, which represents God’s identification both with “all people of color,” who “share the cross of systemic racism,” as well as with “all women,” who “still die daily on the cross of sexism.” Terrell further specifies that the cross is salvageable only with the recognition that “there is nothing of God’s *sanction* in violence.”<sup>16</sup> Liberationist-feminist Dorothee Sölle also speaks of the cross as “repeatable,” since Jesus “suffers wherever people are tormented.” The God of love does not

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12 Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 94, 98–99.

13 Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, 20th Anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), 143, 145–46, 148.

14 Tina Beattie argues that the Christa renders the cross a monument to violence against women, but she assumes it is somehow less tragic to crucify a Jewish man under Roman occupation. See Beattie, “Sexuality and the Resurrection of the Body: Reflections in a Hall of Mirrors,” in *Resurrection Reconsidered*, ed. Gavin D’Costa (Rockport, MA: Oneworld, 1996), 142–43.

15 Grey quoted in Julie Clague, “Symbolism and the Power of Art: Female Representations of Christ Crucified,” in *Bodies in Question: Gender, Religion, Text*, eds. Darlene Bird and Yvonne Sherwood (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 44, 49. Clague quotes Grey here. See also Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 81.

16 Grant, 220–21; and Terrell, 124, 122, 100.

apathetically cause or ignore suffering but remains “on the side of the victim”: “God is not in heaven; [God] is hanging on the cross.” This siding with the victim leads Sölle to speak of nonviolent resistance as a purposeful co-suffering for the sake of liberation, which she compares to birth pangs or life-giving suffering. For Sölle, the cross is thus double-edged—reminding the oppressed that God is with them and desires their liberation, and calling the privileged to emulate God’s loving solidarity with the oppressed and nonviolent resistance to suffering.<sup>17</sup> In my view, this understanding of the cross both names the tragedy of the innocent/unjust suffering while affirming its exemplary, nonviolent, and liberative theological symbolism of Divine co-suffering with women.

### **Peace and Women’s Suffering: Feminist/Womanist-Mennonite Interpretations of the Cross**

Building on feminist/womanist critiques of traditional interpretations of the cross, a number of Mennonite theologians have reinterpreted the cross. Methodologically, they have begun integrating feminist and womanist attention to women’s experiences of suffering with the Mennonite orientation toward peace and nonviolence. The majority of such discussions, however, remain focused on the *ethical* significance of the cross (i.e., how it is or is not exemplary for Christians) rather than its *theological* significance (i.e., what it communicates about God and God’s actions in history). While admittedly related, the two questions are not identical. While I value the emphasis on ethics and praxis that Mennonites, feminists, and womanists share, I would like to see our theology and its embodiment in praxis knit even more closely together.

American Mennonite theologian J. Denny Weaver has been criticized for his nonviolent reinterpretation of the atonement (i.e., soteriology of the cross).<sup>18</sup> Agreeing with feminists and womanists that traditional, violent understandings of the atonement are justly accused of connoting “divine child abuse,”

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17 Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 82, 94–95, 147–48, 163–64, and Sölle, *Christ the Representative: An Essay in Theology after the Death of God*, trans. David Lewis (London: SCM, 1967), 99. See M. Susanne Guenther Loewen, “Making Peace with the Cross: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Dorothee Sölle and J. Denny Weaver on Nonviolence, Atonement, and Redemption” (PhD diss., University of St. Michael’s College, 2016).

18 J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 5–7, 323, 141–42. Weaver recognizes that “James Cone’s black theology of liberation developed from a very different underside” and had a “different agenda” from his nonviolent atonement theology.” He acknowledges that these “twin critiques” are “marginal in different ways and to different degrees....” Weaver uses Cone’s critique alongside a Mennonite critique, which takes seriously Cone’s charge that slavery

Weaver constructed his “narrative Christus Victor” model that de-emphasizes the cross within redemption, contextualizing it within the narrative of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. In Weaver’s terms, 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”—that is, to announce God’s nonviolent victory over the powers of sin, death, and violence through resurrection.<sup>19</sup> According to Weaver, both of the other major historical interpretations of the atonement—in which, briefly put, God required Jesus’s death either to satisfy Divine justice (Anselmian satisfaction and/or substitutionary atonement) or to show Divine solidarity (Abelardian moral influence)—fail to overcome the problem of God requiring some form of violence for the sake of salvation. In Weaver’s words, “If God is truly revealed in the nonviolent Christ, then God should not be described as a God who sanctions and employs violence.”<sup>20</sup> The cross is thus “anything but a loving act of God,” Weaver insists, but rather signifies Jesus’s rejection by “the powers” that he confronted nonviolently. This nonviolent resistance and distinct “modus operandi” cost Jesus his life and likewise costs believers “our lives, which we give to God for the rest of our time on earth.”<sup>21</sup>

Weaver’s position commendably seeks to overcome both the problems of redemptive violence, as per his Mennonite peace tradition, and the problem of redemptive suffering identified by feminists and womanists.<sup>22</sup> It is also crucial that Weaver makes a case for human and *Divine* nonviolence, speaking of Jesus as the clear revelation of God’s nonviolence and thereby drawing close connections between theology and ethics through a Christocentric imaging of God. But precisely in the event of the cross, Weaver does not follow through on this trajectory. Speaking of God as somewhat removed, he states, “God did not

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and racism against African Americans is an insidious form of violence that must be addressed by a church and theology claiming to be nonviolent. See J. Denny Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium*, C. Henry Smith Series (Telford, PA: Pandora U.S., 2000), 140–41.

19 J. Denny Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 160–62. See also 46–48.

20 Ibid., 245–46, 183, and J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 5.

21 Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 269, 94, 48, 312; see also 308.

22 For instance, Weaver follows womanist Delores Williams in recognizing that turning away from sin has a distinct meaning for the oppressors and the oppressed: “The oppressed ceased [*sic*] acquiescing to oppression and join the rule of God; oppressors cease their oppression and submit to the rule of God.” Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 213–14, and *Nonviolent God*, 273.

intervene in Jesus’ death and allowed Jesus to die in fulfillment of his mission to bring redemption to all people.” In following rejectionist feminists and womanists who dismiss the notion of the cross as Divine solidarity and posit a low Christology,<sup>23</sup> Weaver therefore ends up distancing God not only from violence and suffering but also from those who suffer, ultimately depicting an apathetic God who avoids rather than addresses human suffering. If God remains a bystander even to Christ’s suffering, the cross is effectively reduced to a mere moment of human tragedy, and it becomes difficult to see how it could speak meaningfully about God’s response to women’s experiences of suffering.<sup>24</sup>

In her article “Freedom of the Cross,” womanist-Mennonite Nekeisha Alexis-Baker brings womanist theologies in particular into conversation with Mennonite scholar John Howard Yoder’s interpretation of the cross. She speaks of how the cross has at times been empowering to slaves and at other times has “reinforced their oppression.” Following Yoder, she differentiates between voluntary and involuntary forms of suffering, arguing that the cross is “the result of Jesus’ voluntary decision to reject violence, hate, hostility, and non-involvement in confronting the powers,” which allows Christians to denounce “racial discrimination, domestic violence, sexual abuse, or emotional neglect” as entirely different, involuntary, and therefore non-redemptive forms of suffering. She concludes that “equating the rape of Black women during slavery with Jesus’ crucifixion...risks supporting theologies of the cross which already undercut Black women.” Still, she pushes beyond Yoder’s ideas of “revolutionary subordination” and submission to tyrannical authority because these ideas do not adequately name the necessity of public nonviolent resistance.<sup>25</sup> While Alexis-Baker recognizes that the cross is double-edged in that it can be used to oppress or empower, her position—like Weaver’s—also separates women’s suffering from the cross. In other words, if the cross only relates to voluntary forms of suffering, then it offers no “good news” of God’s liberating and empowering presence among those suffering involuntarily. Additionally, Alexis-Baker relies too heavily and uncritically on Yoder’s thought, given his abuse

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23 Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 44, 166–67, 245n69, and *Nonviolent God*, 57.

24 See Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 161, in which he states that his atonement theory “avoids” the problems raised by Brown and Parker. See also 8–9, 151, where Weaver’s detailed definitions of violence fail to include reference to sexual abuse or assault, though he mentions sexual abuse within feminist and womanist theologies and in passing in *Nonviolent God*, 193–94.

25 Nekeisha Alexis-Baker, “Freedom of the Cross: John Howard Yoder and Womanist Theologies in Conversation,” in *Power and Practices: Engaging the Work of John Howard Yoder*, eds. Jeremy M. Bergen and Anthony G. Siegrist (Waterloo, ON: Herald,

of women.

Other Mennonite theologians, however, do move toward recognizing that the cross can speak to women's suffering in liberating ways. As alluded to above, Penner writes 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." She contrasts the copious Mennonite materials on peace as conscientious objection to war with the glaring neglect of violence against women, which has not historically been considered a peace issue.<sup>26</sup> She writes, "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 be endured, just as Jesus endured the cross." "The result," according to Penner, "is that women with broken bodies have sat in pews and listened to a theology that seemed to spiritualize their very real agony."<sup>27</sup> For Penner, Mennonite theologian John H. Yoder's work on "revolutionary subordination" has been particularly unhelpful for women who have been abused, since it "provides no corrective" to the notion that abuse victims who choose to remain with their abusive partners are participating in the kind of voluntary, innocent suffering that Yoder deems a redemptive echo of the cross—to say nothing of Yoder's own abuse of women.<sup>28</sup> But for Penner, the cross cannot be dismissed as oppressive, because among those experiencing suffering, "some... have found comfort in Christian symbols," even "hope" and "the strength to carry on" in the notion that Christ or God suffers with them; this image, she implies, can be experienced as the first step toward liberation from suffering.<sup>29</sup> Penner thus outlines a life-giving, narrative approach that takes women's experiences as abuse victims and/or survivors seriously and also "grapples with the [Christian] tradition rather than rejecting it outright." In this way, she takes an important step toward giving theological depth to an ethical reading of the

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2009), 84, 87–89, 92–94. For a discussion of Yoder's abuse, see Rachel Waltner Goossen, "Defanging the Beast: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015): 7–80.

26 Penner, "Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices," 180, 14.

27 Penner, "Content to Suffer," 99, and "Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices," 137.

28 Penner, "Content to Suffer," 103–4.

29 *Ibid.*, 106, 108, 99, and "Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices," 143–45, 173–74.

cross, but she does not develop a full-fledged, constructive interpretation of the cross. Penner’s reframing of women’s suffering within a Mennonite feminist peace theology remains methodologically vital, however; to name but one poignant example, she writes: “Some writers have characterized patriarchy as a ‘war against women.’ In the face of this violence, who will be the new conscientious objectors?”<sup>30</sup>

Along similar lines, American theologian Gayle Gerber Koontz goes one step further regarding the notion of Divine solidarity with the suffering of women. Her discussion of forgiveness within “liberation pacifism”<sup>31</sup> helpfully articulates from a Mennonite–feminist perspective women’s *response* to their suffering—as women responding to violence with a peace and compassion that assert their agency. 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 being angry, divorcing, or leaving an abusive relationship—the latter do not constitute “violent or revengeful acts,” for Koontz. 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.<sup>32</sup> 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 primarily toward survival and liberation.<sup>33</sup> In calling survivors to this actively compassionate response to their suffering, she understands forgiveness not as reducing them to self-abnegating victims, but as an assertion of their agency and a tactic of nonviolent resistance. Importantly, 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

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30 Ibid., 174, 165, 146–47, 171.

31 Koontz draws this category from J. R. Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds., *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1991).

32 Gayle Gerber Koontz, “Redemptive Resistance to Violation of Women: Christian Power, Justice, and Self-Giving Love,” in *Peace Theology and Violence against Women*, Occasional Papers No. 16, ed. Elizabeth G. Yoder (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992), 30, 34, 39–41, 44–45. Penner disagrees with Koontz on this. See Penner, “Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices,” 160–61.

33 Koontz, “Redemptive Resistance,” 31, 33, 35.

of the cross itself, speaking of Jesus's 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 claim their own power," gain the "courage to resist," and at least sense "divine love" in situations of "inevitable or hopeless suffering."<sup>34</sup> 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 this 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 they have learned much from the feminist and womanist critiques of how the cross has been harmful, Koontz is the only one who explores in some depth the constructive and redemptive possibilities that feminists and womanists find in the cross as a *Divine act responding to the suffering specific to women*. She thus overcomes the Mennonite tendency to view the cross primarily as symbolic of ethics, discipleship, or *voluntary* suffering to the exclusion of the additional, theological significance of the cross as God's compassionate response to the reality of *involuntary* suffering. In this way, Koontz's perspective provides the closest parallel to Grey's, Grant's, Terrell's, and Sölle's interpretations of the cross as symbolic of Divine co-suffering, which can be profoundly life-giving for victims of oppression. This interplay between theology and ethics transforms God's relationship to suffering. To claim God's nearness to those who suffer—not in the sense of God willing or causing their pain but rather as being "the priority for God's healing love," as Grey puts

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34 Ibid., 34–37. This recognition that suffering cannot always be avoided or resolved moves away from an understanding of God as being in absolute control of history, toward a nonviolent God who is unconditionally present among the suffering and desires their empowerment and liberation whenever possible.

it<sup>35</sup>—leaves us with a God who is not in absolute control of history but whose compassion empowers nonviolent resistance. In this sense, to image God as crucified need not signify masochistic submission to suffering, since it can subversively symbolize resistance to suffering through the power of compassion, which aims toward liberation, healing, and new life.

Still, the implications of such a theological notion remain to be explored in depth from a Mennonite perspective attentive to the suffering of women. While most Mennonite thinkers surveyed above attempt to move from the traditional ethic of nonresistance to evil toward an ethic of nonviolent resistance, the cross here points us toward another ethical imperative: compassion for the suffering, which images the compassion of God as Jesus Christ. In effect, this turns our attention primarily from the perpetrators of violence (as enemies to be loved) to the victims or “the least of these,” with whom Jesus identifies (Matt 25). Finally, the evocative connections between the cross as solidarity, the new life of resurrection, and many women’s powerful experiences of birth and mothering also comprise an unexplored aspect of this wider question, as literal instances of women’s struggle to create life.<sup>36</sup> Thus, women’s life-giving experiences can interrupt the self-destructive and violent narrative of redemptive suffering with an affirmation of life that is both symbolic and embodied—that is, both theological and ethical, sometimes termed “sacramental.”<sup>37</sup>

### **Glimpses of the Good News: Three Narratives of Women at the Foot of the Cross**

Instead of closing with a summary of the various feminist, womanist, and/or Mennonite theologies I have explored above, I would like to end with three glimpses into the way in which the cross has been and can be experienced as good news with regard to the suffering of women:

1. 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

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35 See Grey quoted in Clague, “Symbolism and the Power of Art,” 81.

36 See references to Sölle above and Grey, *Feminism, Redemption, and the Christian Tradition*, 160, 174–79, 186, 191. Mennonite feminist Malinda E. Berry also explores the connection between God giving birth and the cross as a “Tree of Life,” but without a developed notion of the cross as divine solidarity. See Malinda Elizabeth Berry, “‘This Mark of a Standing Human Figure Poised to Embrace’: A Constructive Theology of Social Responsibility, Nonviolence, and Nonconformity” (PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 2013), 18, 16, 29.

37 Here I follow Terrell’s understanding of the “love-justice ethic as a way of *sacramentally* witnessing to the goodness and the power of God, evincing God’s proleptic activity” in the here and now. See Terrell, *Power in the Blood?* 55, 57.

they're not part of the congregation or even "religious." Afterward, 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. He knows." It's this story, "not nicer healing tales or Easter's glad tidings," which both resonates with their experiences of suffering and "lift[s] them up" as being understood by a God who has suffered trauma.<sup>38</sup>

2. In sharing their experiences, a group of American Mennonite women survivors of sexual violence realize together that the language of Jesus's exemplary self-sacrifice on the cross within the Communion liturgy has "exacerbated their trauma." They form "a small group of pastors, theologians, liturgists, and survivors of sexualized violence," who are currently revising the Communion liturgy from the Mennonite *Minister's Manual* 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.**"<sup>39</sup>
3. On the grounds of Emmanuel College in Toronto—a theological college of the United Church of Canada—stands a sculpture called "Crucified Woman," by Almuth Lutkenhaus-Lackey. Though many find it scandalous, calling the female Christ-figure heretical or too sexual, others see it as a revelation of Christ's closeness to women's suffering—both life-giving forms like childbirth and tragic forms like rape and physical abuse. The artist was told that for the first time, many "women saw their suffering, their dying, and their resurrection embodied in a woman's body." It has become "a place where women know that their suffering is gathered up into the suffering of Christ." In 1989, upon hearing of the Montreal Massacre of fourteen engineering students, killed simply for being women, hundreds gathered around the "Crucified Woman" to remember the victims—and also to remember that

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38 Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 76–77.

39 Hilary Jerome Scarsella, "The Lord's Supper in Relation to Sexualized Violence: Harm and Healing throughout the Ecclesial Body," Paper presented at the Mennonite Scholars and Friends Forum at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, San Diego, CA, November 22, 2014; and Scarsella, "Sexual Abuse and the Lord's Supper," 95–96, 107. In the latter, she indicates in bold type the changes she has made to the liturgy from John D. Rempel, *Minister's Manual* (Newton, KS: Faith & Life, 1998), 73–74. See Scarsella et. al, "The Lord's Supper: A Ritual of Harm or Healing?" *Leader* (Summer 2016): 33–48.

God has not turned away but knows and feels their pain.<sup>40</sup>

These crosses—and the God of Solidarity and Life they portray—have the potential to move us beyond the myths of redemptive violence and redemptive suffering. At the foot of these crosses, women name their pain. We can, with them, witness to God’s call for nonviolent resistance and conscientious objection to all the ways we are living in death. With compassionate desire we might then step into liberation, healing, and life.

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<sup>40</sup> Clague, “Symbolism and the Power of Art,” 36, and Dyke, *Crucified Woman*, 2, 56, 66.