

**The Oppressive and Liberating Natures
of a Theology of Self-Sacrificing Love**

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Is a Christian theology of self-sacrifice, which attests collective freedom can only be found through embracing non-violence and self-sacrifice, an oppressive theology or a liberating theology for marginalized people? It is marginalized people and the planet itself that bear the weight and wounds of the human struggle for dominance. To this broken system Christ introduced and displayed self-sacrificing love, a way that values the other over the self. Many Christ-followers would attest that the Jesus-way of absorbing violence as opposed to responding in violence is the only manner in which healing will come to the communal human existence. In a Christian ethic, this responsibility of self-sacrificing love falls on the shoulders not just of those benefiting from the weak, but also on those at the bottom themselves, the very ones already disenfranchised by the broken system. Howard Thurman states, "The ethical demand upon the more privileged and the underprivileged is the same."¹ The only way to answer the question above is to seek out the voices of those in our societies who have sacrificed the most; therefore, this paper is choosing to focus on the ideas of Womanist theologians, as Black women "do theology out of their tri-dimensional experience of racism/sexism/classism."² Some Womanist theologians argue that the Christian theology of the cross is oppressive--period. Others disagree. This paper has chosen to highlight the voices of those who find hope in the Christian message of self-sacrificing love even as they embody the suffering of that reality. Drawing on Black women's ideas and voices, this paper will explain how an ethic of self-sacrifice, witnessed

¹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996) 82.

² Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 209.

as lived-pain by the oppressed, is 'necessary', by re-examining how Jesus' choice to experience pain was 'necessary'.³

Miroslav Volf admits that highlighting self-giving as a Christ-like way of living exploits marginalized people because self-donation is not a guaranteed return on one's investment; "you give yourself for the other--and violence does not stop but destroys you; you sacrifice your life--and stabilize the power of the perpetrator."⁴ The injustice of self-donation is a common theme in both Feminist⁵ and Womanist studies and is viewed as large a hurdle as the maleness of Jesus. This is because Christianity has been a primary voice in women's acceptance of their subordinate role in society, and their abuse by men. Womanist theologians take the conversation of wrestling through this tenant of the Christian faith much further than anyone. Existing at the intersectionality of oppression, it is no wonder Womanists have plumbed the depths of addressing inequalities and the personal costs associated with that work. This paper will examine how Womanists use language to describe suffering, whether suffering is divinely requested or human-inflicted, how the resurrection transforms suffering and Black woman's resistance in suffering.

Suffering Defined (Agony, Suffering, Pain)

Womanist thought has a detailed language for suffering and these definitions must be understood to grasp the theological consequences. Womanists have broken down

³ Written by a White woman, this paper does not seek to be prescriptive of Black suffering but seeks to understand how Womanists embrace what seems like a paradox and an injustice, with the hope that their discovered truth might also be liberating for others.

⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: a Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 26.

⁵ Feminist theologians have engaged this topic, but not to the depth that Womanist theologians have. Although it is somewhat of a general observation, Feminist theologians seem to skim the surface in discussions around pain and Womanists plum the depths. Most Feminist thinkers exploring these ideas use a Liberation lens. Notable sources would be Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendall, Mary Grey and Letty Russell.

suffering to three terms; agony, suffering and pain. To be clear, all three are the effects of evil and none are in and of themselves good. This manner of thinking was originally written about by Audre Lorde⁶ and has developed over time.

First, Womanist theologian St. Clair defines the word agony as an umbrella term which includes both suffering and pain. Agony is, “the disturbance of our inner tranquility caused by physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual forces that we grasp as jeopardizing our lives, our very existence.”⁷ Womanist agree there is more than one type of agony which they break down into suffering and pain. The term suffering describes, “unscrutinized and unmetabolized agony”.⁸ Suffering is a cycle of living in agony over and over again; a static state that is not redemptive and always ends in further oppression. Lorde and Womanists after her then understand pain as “recognized and named suffering.”⁹ For the most part pain that is named as unjust through self-awareness, has the potential to be transforming and therefore redemptive. Named pain must still be experienced or lived through, but it carries the potential to end suffering. Pain as it is described here comes closest to the Christian idea of self-sacrificing love. It is choosing to embrace a form of agony for a greater personal and/or communal good.

Womanist view each form of agony oppressive, both suffering and pain. Suffering is worse than pain because it accomplishes nothing and there is no end. An example of suffering could be a woman staying in an abusive relationship to preserve a covenant of marriage; the agony continues indefinitely. In this situation if the woman chooses to leave

⁶ Audre Lorde, “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger,” in *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 171-72.

⁷ Raquel A St. Clair, *Call and Consequences: a Womanist Reading of Mark* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 36.

⁸Emilie M. Townes, ed., *A Troubling in My Soul Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 84.

⁹ St. Clair, *Call and Consequences*, 36.

her abusive partner agony would still be present, but in the form of pain (potential for more abuse, stigma around divorce, or financial insecurity), but now named, such pain has the potential to end the agony she has lived in. All agony is oppressive, but named pain has the potential to be redemptive because it might have an exit point. One could argue pain is not the redemptive aspect in this equation, but the self-awareness and chosen embrace of pain is.

Suffering As Call of God or Consequence of Ministry?

Womanist theologians take these definitions and use them as they examine the life of Christ and Christ's suffering. Was Jesus' life about the endurance of consistent suffering or was it about naming pain in order that transformation may come out of that which is evil? To answer these questions, Womanist theologians take a step further back and ask questions about the nature of God. Was it God that poured out His wrath on Jesus, asking Jesus to suffer on behalf of creation? Does the Christian God demand self-sacrifice in the form of suffering as discipleship, and the manner in which one becomes Christ-like?

Black people have always valued and met Jesus as the one who suffers alongside them.¹⁰ This understanding views Jesus as motivated by compassion for those who bear the weight of domination. Black theologians have sought to reconcile Jesus' agony, and consequently their own, *not* as a divine mandate of required discipleship, but as a human-inflicted response to those choosing not to accept the suffering of oppressive systems. They reject the idea that they must be trapped from birth to death in the agony of an unending suffering from which they will never experience freedom. Instead Womanists

¹⁰ Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, 212.

understand the agony Jesus experienced, not as a *condition* of discipleship (suffering), but as a *consequence* of discipleship (pain as chosen self-sacrifice).¹¹ Jesus' obedience to the Father was not in suffering, but in doing ministry, a ministry of giving the poor good news, setting the captives free, healing the sick and wounded, and comforting those who mourn. The source of Jesus' suffering was the pushback from ruling power systems to his choice to bring freedom to the oppressed. The agony he embodied was the result of human reactions to his message and ministry, not a divine requirement.¹²

When one makes suffering a divine discipleship requirement for becoming Christ-like, it perpetuates suffering as a virtue. This is an example of the theology used by Christians to keep Black people enslaved, the influence of women silent in the church, and queer people deemed 'broken'. A theology that sees suffering as a divinely ordained necessity is at a risk of perpetuating the myth of redemptive violence. One could believe in non-violent, self-sacrificing love, as an ethic, but by making that demand of the poor or marginalized as a virtue, keep them locked in a cycle of suffering as the means of their own salvation.

Womanist theologian Raquel St. Clair gets to the crux of the issue when she looks at the whole gospel of Mark through the lens of Mark 8:31 when Jesus says suffering is *necessary*. She argues Jesus embraced agony as a consequence of pursuing justice and that each episode of Jesus' pain in Mark's gospel, including his death, is a result of the human and evil reactions to his ministry.¹³ When Christians argue the opposite, that Jesus' suffering was necessary because it was what God sent Him to do, it makes suffering

¹¹ St. Clair, *Call and Consequences*, 162.

¹² *Ibid*, 124.

¹³ *Ibid*, 109.

prescriptive. When a Christian ethic of self-sacrifice is used prescriptively by the powerful to the powerless, it endorses redemptive violence.

Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye argues that a Womanist reading of scripture understands that lived-pain must be a choice. She believes a woman's self-sacrificial way of living can be a model for the whole church, but that this must not be an expected kenosis, but always a voluntary act. For her this is the difference between being the *sacrificed* and "one consciously and deliberately becoming a living sacrifice".¹⁴ Voluntary and involuntary suffering is also discussed in Womanist circles around the idea of passive and active suffering. If Christ was just one more good person giving his life for a good cause, that is passive suffering, but if Christ was not only identifying with those who suffer, but actively resisting oppression with his pain on their behalf, that is active suffering. Passive suffering is not understood to be redemptive; active suffering is.

Suffering in Light of Resurrection

St. Clair in her study of Mark 8 points out that there are four things Jesus says are necessary for him to experience: to suffer, to be rejected, to be killed, and to rise.¹⁵ The rising is what changes everything. From a Womanist perspective, the resurrection does away with suffering (agony with no end) because it says all agony can be transformed into pain (agony with an end). "The resurrection is God's breaking into history to transform suffering into wholeness -- to move the person from victim to change agent."¹⁶ Because of the resurrection, named pain (calling one's experience injustice through self-knowledge)

¹⁴ Arnfridur Gudmundsdottir, *Meeting God on the Cross: Christ, the Cross, and the Feminist Critique* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 128.

¹⁵ St. Clair, *Call and Consequences*, 116.

¹⁶ Townes, ed., *A Troubling in My Soul*, 84.

can lead to struggle and pain, which can lead to freedom. With the resurrection Jesus cancelled non-redemptive suffering; now all suffering can be transformed into pain which can then bring life and wholeness.¹⁷ Jesus' actions on the cross were named-pain as he voluntarily chose to experience the pain that his life of ministry for others inflicted upon Him by systems of oppression. That decision led to his death, which is the very real cost of all suffering and pain, Jesus' and our own. Unlike us, death could not contain Jesus. Without the resurrection suffering goes on indefinitely. The fact that Jesus conquered death is the escape out of the infinity-loop of human oppression.

Suffering As Resistance

If the cross is a symbol of the violence of the oppressor, what does Jesus mean when he says, "you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me"?¹⁸ Womanist theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher says Black women "pick up the crosses to overcome them and to overcome the production of crosses. They actively seek to bring an end to unnecessary suffering and violence. They refuse to acquiesce to evil."¹⁹ She uses the example of Mamie Till-Mobley who chose to pick up her cross though a self-sacrificing embrace of pain when she decided that her maimed son Emmett would have an open casket, and when she showed up at his attackers trial knowing it might also cost her her own life, all to see justice for her son and an end to lynching. Picking up a cross is choosing to experience pain AND it is resistance. Baker-Fletcher makes sure to make clear that this is

¹⁷ Ibid, 85.

¹⁸ Mark 8:34.

¹⁹ Katie Geneva. Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims, eds., *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 161.

not a way of living that glorifies martyrdom and death and that rationalizes suffering as redemptive; it is instead loving life deeply and pursuing life to the fullest.

To overcome the cross by taking up one's cross is to claim divine and personal power over all crosses. It is the power that turns the cross into two pieces of wood instead of a tool for destruction.... It is the path of resistance against evil. It is the path of confronting evil and staring it in the face.²⁰

Black women know oppression and the agony associated with it; to fight that oppression through self-sacrifice, agony is also a given. Yet to experience the suffering of the cross is different than the pain of picking up one's cross. The first always ends in death, the second has the potential not to. Walter Wink speaks of this in relation to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and what it truly means to turn the other cheek. To be slapped the first time is what slave owners did to their slaves; a back-handed hit, right hand to right cheek. To turn the other cheek and be hit again requires a punch, it is the receiver of violence standing up and saying, 'I am your equal and in your violence you must treat me as such'.²¹ A slap and a punch both inflict agony, a punch maybe even more so. In this story the pain of the punch has the power to be redemptive where the suffering of the slap does not and with this scripture we find Jesus encouraging the pain of resistance through self-sacrifice.

Conclusion

Frederick Douglas said "power concedes nothing without a demand."²² Martin Luther King Jr. asked African American people to demand justice in a non-violent,

²⁰ Ibid, 159.

²¹ Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1999), 101-102.

²²BlackPast, "(1857) Frederick Douglass, 'If There Is No Struggle, There Is No Progress,'" Blackpast, August 8, 2019, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1857-frederick-douglass-if-there-no-struggle-the-re-no-progress/>.

self-sacrificing manner that cost them more than had already been taken from them. Is reconciliation still just when the cost falls so heavily on the oppressed? Demands made by the powerless can cost everything they have. Currently for Indigenous fisher-people in Nova Scotia this looks like exercising their treaty rights while being punched, burnt out of their establishments, experiencing theft and damage to their equipment and being shot at. For queer people in Christian institutions that reject their identity, pursuing justice through self-sacrificing love means showing up in spaces in which belonging has been lost and participation is limited. For Black Americans it means protesting for their lives to have value while being attacked violently by police. Pursuing justice will always cost the oppressed more than the oppressor, the risk of violence is always greater for the one on the bottom.

Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel says, “The cross remains a paradoxical symbol of life”.²³ Yet there is a difference between the abuse of the cross and an abusive theology of the cross.²⁴ A theology of self-sacrifice cannot be recovered without recognizing the abuse it has caused when it has been used by the powerful to justify oppressive behaviour. By listening to Womanist theologians, it is possible to re-write the evangelical understanding of self-sacrifice that causes further suffering for marginalized people.

When pain becomes a chosen resistance over silent acceptance of suffering, the Christian message of self-sacrificing love is transformed from a potentially oppressive theology to a liberating one. It is actively volunteering for one's pain to be resistance and not just more blood on an altar. Is it unfair that the oppressed must hold to this standard

²³ Fiorenza Elisabeth Schüssler, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet ; Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1995), 99.

²⁴ Gudmundsdottir, *Meeting God on the Cross*, 4.

even when their oppressors do not? Absolutely. Is there injustice baked into the Christian message of redemptive freedom? To find a verdict to that question would take more questions and more papers. Perhaps it is perfect justice that the keys to redemption and the communal healing of humanity are in the hands, not of the powerful, but in the hands of those who hold no power. Such a reality, although incredibly counterintuitive, might be a glimpse into a justice that is so righteous it remains difficult to comprehend.

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