



## Introduction

Salvation addresses God's saving presence among human beings, which was inaugurated at creation, given ultimate expression through the person of Jesus the Christ, and continues in the dynamic action of the Holy Spirit in history. In the second half of the twentieth century, widely influential theologians such as Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Gustavo Gutiérrez<sup>1</sup> argued that the human quest for salvation entails not a flight from the world but an engagement with the world.

This book builds on their contributions and suggests a reimagining of salvation. This book is therefore also a theodicy with a practical emphasis, one that begins with and continually returns to the standpoint of those who suffer. Suffering brought on by collective evil, and our corresponding drive for release from such suffering, reveals that *community* is a necessary condition for the possibility of salvation. *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez* takes up the task of a Latina feminist constructive proposal of salvation guided by an examination of the femicide in Ciudad Juárez, ongoing since 1993, and the practices of resistance that have been developed in response to this atrocity.

*Femicide*, a term widely used by feminist social scientists, refers to the killing of girls and women by men in an exceptionally brutal

manner, on a massive scale, and with impunity for the perpetrators. Use of this term indicates that we must analyze critically the power dynamics involved. Horrific violence is growing along the U.S.-Mexico border, and in Juárez specifically. Both men and women are targets of violence. In fact, every year more men are brutally murdered than women. In 2010 more than three thousand people were murdered in Juárez. And as this book goes to press, over one hundred people have already been killed since January 1, 2011, in little over a month. Obviously, this outpouring of violence is an atrocity that needs to be addressed.

However, the focus of this book is the horrific killing of girls and women, because this feminicide warrants particular attention. Females are being targeted because they are female. In April of 1994, the Rwandan government called upon the Hutu majority to kill the Tutsi minority. Tutsis were killed simply because they were Tutsi.<sup>2</sup> Somewhat similarly, in Ciudad Juárez females are being killed because they are female. This is a difficult phenomenon to comprehend. It seems too incredible to be real, but in fact this phenomenon is transpiring in various countries in the Americas (for example, Guatemala, Honduras, and Canada, among others).<sup>3</sup> And while men are being murdered at an alarming rate, these killings are not hate crimes based on gender coupled with a desire to assert power.

This book is deeply rooted in the particular, and its import is its reflection on the insights this particularity provides for a reimagining of salvation. The particularity is the experience of Latinas in Ciudad Juárez who have suffered feminicide. In this book their experience does not function as a theological norm for universal truth claims. Rather, “context” serves as a theological norm. Claims to truth, meaning, and significance invariably emerge out of a particular context. The Ciudad Juárez feminicide (just as any given context) provides an angle on truth yet does not represent truth in an ultimate way.

What serves as a theological norm in this book is the contextual rootedness of all knowing. This is not to say that all claims to theological knowing are relative. Indeed, they are not. Some theological claims are much more adequate than others, making the issue one of criteria and judgment. I stand with feminist thinkers who attempt to “unearth the politics of epistemology,”<sup>4</sup> in my case as they come to light in the Christian doctrine of salvation. My commitment here does not reduce theological knowledge to politics but rather recognizes the complexity inherent in making any and all theological claims.

Recognizing this complexity is crucial because the politics of theological discourse matters and matters greatly. As Latin American liberation theologian Ignacio Ellacuría warns, “There is an ahistorical conceptual universality and there is an historical, or historicized, conceptual universality. The former may seem more theoretical and more universal; that is not so much because it conceals a historicity that by its concealment operates perversely, as because it ignores the universal dimension of historical reality. If theology does not reflect critically on what specific historical praxis the conceptualizations come from and what praxis they lead to, it places itself at the service of a history that the concept may be trying to negate.”<sup>5</sup> In short, I believe that the universal is mediated by the particular, and the political impact of our theological constructs matters.

Consonant with these ideas of particularity, history, and context, Mary McClintock Fulkerson once described theology as a “response to a wound.” Like a wound, the work of constructing theology begins with an experience so compelling that it demands a response. “Wounds like the idolatries of the German church compelled Karl Barth to articulate a theology of the Word; falsely universal white theologies in a context of deeply entrenched racism compelled James Cone to write black theology.”<sup>6</sup> The wound of femicide in Juárez, too, compels a response. This book is a response. In Juárez, we find a rapidly accelerating destruction of society under the weight of femicide and an extended culture of violence. The violence against women signals a sociocide, a complete collapse and deterioration of the bonds of society. The aim of this book is to argue that if salvation is to be meaningful today, then it must speak to the overwhelming evil of femicide. A social, communal response is now required.

While Christian salvation must be interpreted as both individual and social, in the here-and-now of femicide a social interpretation takes on greater urgency. This book begins with a “reading” of the suffering of the victims of this atrocity, described and analyzed in terms of both its social, political, as well as cultural and symbolic dimensions. This “reading” shows the multilayered need for release from suffering, or alternatively, the longing for salvation.

The prevailing understanding of salvation, namely satisfaction atonement theologies focused primarily on Jesus’ death, fall far short of an adequate response to the suffering of femicide. In contrast, the religious practices designed by those who have suffered femicide hold a

clue to a more adequate understanding of salvation. Those who have lost loved ones have created religious practices of resistance that are richly suggestive of how salvation emerges in history and of its *social* character. These practices indicate that *community* is necessary for the realization of salvation.

In chapter 1, I briefly clarify the meaning of “femicide” and then proceed with a thick description of this particularly heinous evil. It concerns the overwhelming, brutal, ritualized murdering of young, poor Latinas in large numbers with impunity for the perpetrators. This trauma began in 1993 in Ciudad Juárez, Estado de Chihuahua, just over the U.S.-Mexico border from El Paso, Texas (the region of my childhood, adolescence, and young adult years). In this chapter I consider the political, social, and economic conditions that create an ideal climate for these killings to begin and continue. I consider also the ways these conditions have been manipulated to prevent any accountability. A “prepolitical” society has been established with no agreed-upon norms for behavior and no civil context for developing norms.

And so I ask: How are we to regard this suffering? What are we to make of it? How are we to understand it? I draw on the work of Paul Farmer and Arthur Kleinman to answer these questions, but I also extend their work to create what I term a “social-suffering hermeneutic,” a way of regarding the suffering of others. Through this lens, I consider the significance embedded first in how we identify the suffering; second, the various interests competing to promote how they would like others to view this suffering; and finally, the interplay of, on the one hand, the destructive political and economic interests that lead to the suffering of vulnerable populations in society and, on the other hand, the consequential personal accounts of suffering. By attending to the interplay of powerful interests and personal accounts, this hermeneutical approach not only addresses itself to the social origins of femicide but also compels us to see what is at stake in our response.

This chapter then establishes that the femicide destroys not only female human lives but also indicates the destruction of society, sociocide. Accordingly, on the surface it might appear that this book is concerned with the absence of meaningful government to investigate these brutal killings and to get to the bottom of whatever hidden conspiracy or strategy sustains this brutality. That, however, is not the focus of this book. Rather, a more serious problem is suggested, namely the underlying,

deep-rooted presence of evil and the tragic consequences that result. Widely divergent theories have been developed to explain the feminicide, but taken together these conflicting theories suggest that the insidiousness of evil emerges from a much deeper level, thereby raising not only political but theological questions.

Chapter 2 further develops a social-suffering hermeneutic by focusing on the cultural-symbolic dimensions of female suffering. I consider social imaginaries and how they function, which leads to an examination of certain conventional Latina cultural representations of suffering (for example, the dualism of Guadalupe-La Malinche, La Llorona, and Coyolxauhqui). These “cultural representations” of suffering command our attention because they come packaged in an alluring narrative that presents how women (and men) should relate to their experience of suffering, and they come wrapped in a mantle of desirability. Powerful interests have manipulated and commodified these representations to serve their own end and have done so for generations. This commodification of suffering fosters a worldview that women either unconsciously absorb or consciously resist. Either way, the horrific suffering brought on by feminicide drives a relentless urge for release, for justice, and for healing. The chapter concludes by reframing the human quest for salvation through a series of theological questions. What is the relationship between salvation and ethics? What is the relationship between salvation and female humanity? What is the relationship between salvation and history? What is the relationship between salvation and the image of God?

Having explored some of the soteriological questions that emerge out of the feminicide at the end of chapter 2, the next chapter turns to the Christian tradition to consider one of the most influential theological constructs in soteriology. Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* (CDH) and the satisfaction atonement theologies that it spawned deserve significant attention. In many ways, they occupy space in the Christian religious imagination of our own day. Today, Anselm and his progeny are in many respects still setting the terms of the salvation debate. This chapter, before it delineates the argument set forth in CDH, places Anselm in his context, trying to understand the world that spawned CDH. Next, I examine the Gadamerian notion of “effective history” in relation to Anselm’s legacy. Finally, I offer an analysis and critique of Anselm’s model, thereby demonstrating its inadequacy to illuminate the experience of Latinas as outlined in chapters 1 and 2. Essentially, contemporary satisfaction atonement theologies

have led to the separation of salvation from ethics to disastrous effect. This analysis concludes with attention to the ways this model leads to the exclusion of particular insights pertinent to the experience of Latinas. This chapter thus establishes the need to rethink salvation in light of Latinas' experience.

David Tracy tells us that when it comes to the question of evil, the religious sensibilities of those who know oppression and suffering—their songs, protests, prayers, and laments—often bear particularly insightful theological wisdom.<sup>7</sup> Chapter 4 returns to the experience of femicide but this time to discover the practices of resistance that courageous (mostly) women have developed as their response to their suffering. It is my contention that their practices of resistance reveal much about how Latinas experience salvation (articulated in chapter 4), which stands in contrast to satisfaction atonement theologies. Latinas' practices of resistance to femicide suggest much about how we might understand the meaning of salvation today (which will be developed in chapter 5).

Chapter 4 continues by examining how, through these practices, Latinas connect Christian religious symbols (for example, the cross and exodus) to symbols that affirm female humanity (for example, days honoring women and their courage, the color pink). This connection manifests itself in public actions that not only validate female humanity but also subvert the destructive political interests and damaging cultural-symbolic representations that idealize female suffering. These practices foreground the universal community of humanity and creation; they point toward a social conception of salvation. Not only do the practices of resistance inherently stand against all that undermines the humanity of women—they likewise stand against all that renders religion banal and domesticated. They stand in solidarity with the women who have suffered femicide, both those directly affected and all female humanity, which has come under threat. Through these practices, practitioners have thwarted efforts to domesticate the faith and have ensured that the radical message of the Christian gospel remains vital. I call attention to the subversive character of the religious practices of resistance, an angle on popular religious practices not significantly developed in U.S. Latino/a theological discourse. This chapter tills the soil for the constructive theological work done in chapter 5.

Chapter 5 begins with the claim that embedded in our response to suffering lies the possibility of salvation. Through practices of resistance,

which are ritualized responses, the members of the victims' families and other supporters have created community and affirmed that community is foundational to life. The practices not only create community but also forge the beginning of a salvific community. A salvific community makes the spiritual unity of the world more visible and demands that the crucified people (those who have suffered femicide) be brought down from the cross. I delineate the marks of a salvific community, drawing connections to the practices of resistance. The central thesis of this chapter and the book is that through our response to suffering we learn that community is the condition for the possibility of salvation.