

Excerpts

Chapter 1 Summary

In this introductory chapter, I begin to explore the origins of this christological adventure. “JESUS”—what does this name mean to me? What am I inviting you, the reader, to assume with me? I suggest that, consciously or not, we begin *in God* and in prayer. In this study, I am especially attentive to the theological claims of “those who are right” and to presenting an alternative way of thinking about what it means to be Christian.

“Those who are right” refers not only to the Religious Right in the United States and elsewhere today, but moreover—and more importantly, probably—to all of us whenever we assume that we know it all or that our way is the only way to think or act. Those who are right tend to be impatient, I suggest, with God, themselves, and others. They do not accept the imperfection, or incompleteness, of God’s creation. Their response to the soul’s yearning is to block it with easy answers rather than to more graciously hold the unfinishedness and mysteries of God and God’s creation.

Trying to be clear and firm, Christians who are right often imagine that JESUS is an authoritarian Lord, a righteous moralist, an embattled adversary, and an obedient Son to a righteous Father. In this book, I offer alternative images to the authoritarian, moralistic, adversarial, and obedient JESUS of the right. I suggest that mutuality, passion (or real presence), and forgiveness are more genuinely moral relational possibilities for our life together.

As the chapter ends, I cite origins of this book in my own life-journey.

Chapter 2 Summary

Why do I speak here mainly of JESUS, less often of CHRIST or JESUS CHRIST? And who am I to speak at all, and who are you to speak of these matters? In this chapter, I explore what would be called, in more traditional theology or philosophy, the “epistemological” basis of this book. “Epistemology” refers to how we know what we know. Here I examine the existential, political, and mystical ways I have come to make the spiritual, intellectual, and political claims I make in this book. With sister theologians Kwok Pui-lan and Dorothee Soelle, I also lift up the role of theological *imagination* as a primary resource for knowing what we know about JESUS, about ourselves, about God and the world.

Finally, I look at the “postmodern” underpinnings of much theological work being done today, and I cite ways in which this study is, and is not, in my judgment, an addition to postmodern discourse.

Chapter 3 Summary

Who or what is this “God” whom JESUS loved? What is this Spirit that infused the life of the brother from Nazareth and also fills and spills over in the lives of all creatures great and small, if only we will cooperate? I suggest here that God is our Sacred Power in the struggle to generate more fully mutual relation, in which all of us, not just a few, are empowered to live more fully just and compassionate lives. Injustice, or oppression, is both source and consequence of evil — non-mutual power relations of domination and control. We are urged in and by God to struggle for justice, peace, compassion, and liberation.

And it is not simply we humans who are involved in this Trinitarian (radically relational) “goding”—all creatures are part of the ongoing processes of life and liberation in the world. We humans seldom see this or let ourselves realize it. Our romanticizing of “nature” is one of the ways we avoid taking other creatures seriously as members of our Body.

God’s Power and Spirit are ours, as they were JESUS of Nazareth’s, insofar as we are making justice-love in the world, in smaller and larger realms of our life together. There is no arena too small, and none too large, for God’s power to be shared and celebrated.

Chapter 4 Summary

Those who are right usually suggest that the solution to the problem of evil is for good people to “obey” those who know what’s right. This self-absorbed reasoning serves primarily to hold the power in the hands of authoritarian leaders—especially secular and religious “fathers” and parental figures. This is the basis of patriarchy. I suggest here that evil is rooted in non-mutual, authoritarian relational dynamics that, in the real world, are usually patriarchal.

Drawing on biblical texts, I explore several roots of evil in our life together: fear of our power in relation (which is, in fact, our fear of God); intolerance of ambiguity; denial (refusing to see what is actually happening); and lack of compassion, hence a willingness to do violence to one another, ourselves, and the Spirit of God.

Chapter 5 Summary

In these pages, I am interested in helping us move beyond the moralistic self-righteousness that pretends to know what’s right for all persons and creatures in all times and places regardless of how it actually affects real human and creature life. The problem with “moralism” is that it is an abstraction, an idea, usually an absolute, that gets “applied” to actual life irrespective of the consequences.

As a more liberating and compassionate response to the serious, complex moral quandaries and questions of our life together, I interpret the Passion of JESUS as the basis of how he lived in the context of similar quandaries and questions. He lived passionately. By that, I mean that he lived a fully human life—really present, deeply rooted in God, able to be there with and for others, friend and stranger alike. He was able to be in the questions, share the quandaries, not put himself outside or above others. There was nothing pretentious about JESUS, and certainly nothing moralistic. He was simply himself, an embodied bearer of hope and faith to sisters and brothers for whom life itself often must have seemed like a quandary of suffering and confusion.

In the midst of it all, JESUS was someone whose Passion for God was his Real Presence in life as teacher, brother, friend, and advocate. His Passion was fueled by his faith in the Spirit that, he realized, was at work in and through him—and through others.

How might we describe his Passion, which is also ours? There are many ways. In these pages, I explore three, all of them “embodied.” Each involves our Real Presence as bodies with communities and histories, needs and feelings, hopes and dreams. We are bodies living among other bodies and involved together, collectively and individually, in life, love, work, and struggle. In our embodied life together, our Passion involves our “coming out” for justice-love; our solidarity with the poor, outcast, and marginalized; and often our breaking of those boundaries that hinder the meeting of human, divine, and creaturely need.

I suggest that, like JESUS and in his Spirit, if we are living passionately, we are participating simultaneously in what Christian theologians have named the “incarnation” (God’s embodied place among us) and the “atonement” (God’s redemptive action among us). God is with us and God saves us precisely by being Really Present with us, among us, ever a sister or brother in the struggle for more mutually empowering relation.

Chapter 6 Summary

In this final chapter, I examine some of the problems with the dominant Christian atonement tradition, which, with other feminist theologians, I also reject as being cemented in the patriarchal logic of blood sacrifice. Unlike most feminist Christians, however, I reject not only such violence at the hands of God, but moreover the patriarchal logic that has produced a deity—Father or even perhaps a Mother—who reigns above us and seeks our “submission” or “obedience” as children to a parent. Against an understanding of a Lord or Father who asks us to obey, much less forces us to submit to His will or destroys us (or an “innocent” in our place), the Sacred Power presented in this book is One whose very essence is to forgive us, to yearn for our repentance, and to wait patiently—generation upon generation, through evils of many kinds—for us to turn in sorrow and repentance for our failures to love one another.

Aware that forgiveness often is misused and trivialized among Christians as a way of baiting victims to “forgive” those who have wounded them, I suggest that we cannot comprehend the Sacred Power of forgiveness unless we realize that it is, above all, *a moral foundation of our life together in community*. Forgiveness, to be granted and received in sustainable ways, requires not only that individuals repent and make amends, but moreover that our communities

support these processes of healing and reconciliation and that all of us seek to build new ways of living together.

This is something we can only learn, and do, together—with one another’s support and sometimes, in one another’s stead, for there are situations in which it is impossible for particular groups or individuals to forgive those who have violated them or destroyed their loved ones, so devastating has been the violence.

In order to give or receive forgiveness, we need solidarity through community and friendship; we need to be involved in the struggles for justice-love because this can teach us compassion; we need compassion (commitment, irrespective of feelings, not to harm one another, including our enemies); we need humility (awareness that the ground on which we stand is common ground); we need to be honest with ourselves about what has happened (what we and/or others have done); we need to be able to imagine ourselves healed, liberated, and transformed; and we need to pray hard and meditate well on these things.

My primary concern as I draw the book to closure is to underscore what I believe to be its basis: the spiritual and political truth that, far beyond being simply a personal option, forgiveness is the hope of the world. Learning it together is the only way we can begin to move beyond the resentments and violence that are tearing our collective and individual bodies apart. Learning forgiveness, if we are, will involve our learning nonviolence as a shared way of life. Nonviolence is, at root, a public, collective commitment, not simply an option for individuals.

Learning forgiveness and teaching nonviolence should become the vocation and strongest mission of the church and other religious organizations and movements. This is the only way any religion can truly be “a light to the nations.”

Summary of Liturgical Resources

I have included several liturgical resources here which I have written for particular occasions over a period of more than twenty years. The reason I have added them is to demonstrate that, yes, it is possible to move away from “right thought” about JESUS (various orthodox and classical Christologies) in order to celebrate the Sacred Spirit and the JESUS, as well as the humankind and creaturekind, presented in these pages! It can be done liturgically. Much of it is being done all over the Christian world by feminists, womanists, *mujeristas*, and other theologians of healing and liberation. These few liturgical pieces represent one small effort in this direction.