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The Chosen Ones Who Cry Out Day and Night:
The Applicability of Staurology to Woman Victims of Violence
Rachel Knight

Abstract: No small amount of feminist theological scholarship has been dedicated to questioning whether a male savior can save women. Some scholars have further asserted that the crucifixion is inherently tainted by its intrinsic theme of violence. This paper argues for the relevance of the cross to women victims of violence. There are many factors that point to the possibility of an inclusive theology of the cross that does not glamorize violence. These include but are not limited to Biblical accounts of the “many women” who walked in solidarity with the battered Christ; female disciples who mourned together after His murder; the necessity that a being who suffers all manner of afflictions be, in some sense, bigender; the alleviation of suffering which many find in the Christian faith; and the systemic and worldly, rather than organic or genuine ways in which the Christian God was masculinized. This paper utilizes liberation theology, especially in regard to the feminicide in Ciudad Juárez, to argue that the crucified Christ is neither an entirely male symbol, nor one which advocates for violence. On the contrary, the cross is a symbol of Christ’s alliance with women. It demonstrates that he was persecuted, as the victims of feminicide are today. The pink crosses in Ciudad Juárez communicate—to women, to perpetrators of violence, and to the world—who’s experience Jesus Christ most identifies with, and therefore, who’s side Christ is on. This perspective on staurology has significant implications for Christian and ex-Christian women today.

Keywords: Gender-Inclusive, Societal Sin, Liberation Theology, Pink Crosses, Staurology
Through what lens can Christ’s crucifixion be viewed as salvific for woman victims of violence? An exploration of this question may benefit from studying the pink crosses used by activists in Ciudad Juárez. In 1993, the contemporaneous “ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)…and escalation in various drug cartel operations” put unparalleled strain on the Mexico-United States border.1 That year, United States law enforcement authorities closed major cocaine entry points in Florida.2 This redirected a significant amount of narcotrafficking through the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez border. At the same time, NAFTA gave companies based in U.S. southern border cities an attractive alternative to Chinese assembly plants. Cheap and unregulated labor could now be exploited in more geographically convenient areas. This resulted in sudden and substantial job openings. Because women were viewed as more docile than men, and therefore less likely to organize, they filled most of these jobs. In Mexico, one can legally take up residence on land that has remained unused for five years or longer. This had long before resulted in shantytowns, which were now perfectly positioned to take advantage of increased factory positions.3

Placed under acute stress, a society will quickly inflict its basest instincts upon its most vulnerable citizens, thereby exposing its social sin of choice. Almost immediately, women’s corpses began piling up at the border.4 These bodies ranged from being barely hidden, to entirely visible, to intentionally displayed.5 It became increasingly clear that the entire woman gender was understood to be disposable to society. The systematic and virtually unchallenged slaughter of women at the border has continued ever since.

Society may want to see women as disposable, but the family members of victims refuse to let that happen. Relatives of feminicide victims regularly demand that systematic femicides be addressed.6 Organized feminist activist movements do the same.7 By far the most iconic method used to issue these demands is the placement of pink crosses personalized to individual victims.

No small amount of feminist theological scholarship has been dedicated to questioning whether or not a male savior can save women. Some scholars have even asserted that the crucifixion is inherently tainted by its intrinsic theme of violence. This paper argues for the relevance of the cross to women victims of violence. Many factors point to the possibility of an inclusive theology of the cross that does not glamorize violence. These include but are not limited to Biblical accounts of the many women who walked in solidarity with the battered Christ; female disciples who mourned together after His murder; the necessity that a being who suffers all manner of afflictions be, in some sense, bigender; the alleviation of suffering which many find in the Christian faith; and the systemic and worldly, rather than organic or genuine ways in which the Christian God was masculinized.

2 Ibid., 25.
3 Ibid., 29-30
4 Ibid., 25.
5 Ibid., 25.
7 Pineda-Madrid, Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez, 99.
To circumvent the dehumanizing usage of “female” in popular culture, “woman/women” will be used throughout this paper as an adjective as well as a noun. “Salvation” will refer to the amelioration of suffering. Suffering will be understood as something that is caused by the sins of others and that is forced upon a person, community, or demographic which consequently desires salvation. The standard definition of “staurology” as the theological study of the cross, is used, however it is not intended to imply that the cross is more important than other aspects of Christianity.

Critics may point out that Christianity is an unlikely source of salvation for women. Some would even argue that Christianity only furthers the oppression of women. The historical figure of Christ was male, but scriptural evidence points to His gender being neither eternal nor exclusionary. The figure of divine wisdom in Proverbs 8 and in the Wisdom of Solomon is theologically identical to what the New Testament describes as the Logos, or “Son” of God. Because Christianity chooses the male symbol for this idea, however, the unwarranted idea develops that there is a necessary ontological connection between the maleness of Jesus’s historical person and the maleness of Logos as the male offspring and disclosure of a male God.8

The crucified Christ is neither an entirely male symbol, nor is it one which advocates for violence. Unfortunately, many girls grow up in misogynistic Christian traditions, and while Christ may be gender-inclusive, the Church is not. Monica Mahler asks,

How is it that the widespread violence against women occurring in Latin America is not widely condemned by the Christian Churches? Why is it not a central concern of pastoral praxis and prophetic preaching, an area of visible public activism? The Latin American Catholic Church, for example, has taken a firm stand against the ravages of neo-liberal economic globalization in terms of the growing numbers of absolute poor, spoken out increasingly in many countries for the rights of groups marginalized within present socio-economic and political structures, including imprisoned gang members. Why, given the alarming increase in feminicide, have Churches not taken a vocal stand, even when the situation cries out for such a response?9

Allowing for a feminist narrative of the crucifixion does not necessitate passive acceptance of patriarchal Church structures. The pink crosses of Ciudad Juárez are definitively staurological, and they in no way represent deference to religious authorities. A lens of staurology that comforts women victims of violence does not preclude activism any more than Christ’s mission precluded activism. Brazilian ecofeminist Sister Ivone Gebara acknowledges the complexity of separating orthodoxy from embedded structures:

Gebara sees the acquisition of knowledge, including about God, as an ongoing process of continual change... Gebara’s concern is the way [the Aquinian] distinction between natural and divine truth...has been utilized to...enforce unjust power structures... Gebara asserts of patriarchal theological discourse that when “abstraction becomes an ideology that promotes the domination of the knowledge of some over others” then “this abstraction is no longer knowledge but the politics of domination.”10

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10 Mahler, “Daring to Dream: Faith And Femicide In Latin America,” 192.
Any narrative of the cross which provides salvation for women victims of violence must question doctrines of male supremacy within the church.

Many social scientists have shared their perspectives on the ongoing feminicide in Ciudad Juárez. The first book-length theological work on the subject, however, was *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez*, by Nancy Pineda-Madrid. Pineda-Madrid defines the term “feminicide” as follows, “the killing of women and girls in an exceptional manner, on a massive scale, and with impunity for the perpetrators.”¹¹ The feminicide in Ciudad Juárez is an example of the real-life applicability of staurology to women victims of violence. Pineda-Madrid characterizes the pink crosses as such:

The victimized have created practices of resistance that demonstrate how individual persons and the community have identified the evil in their midst, have faithfully endeavored to subvert it and to dismantle it, and have used collective religious symbols as a means of entering into the living mystery of life, thereby ensuring their community’s survival. These practices of resistance “claim a space” that enables those who suffer to be “present to” but not “consumed by” their experience of suffering. As such, the claiming of a space enables the victimized to realize some release from their experience of evil, and in that very release they come to know a healing presence, God’s saving presence.¹²

The cross is a symbol of Christ’s alliance with women. It demonstrates that He was persecuted, as the victims of feminicide are today. The pink crosses in Ciudad Juárez communicate—to women, to perpetrators of violence, and to the world—who’s experience Christ most identifies with, and therefore, who’s side Christ is on.

It may very well be that there are multiple lenses through which the crucifixion is salvific for sexually victimized women. In fact, I think that this is probable. However, I will offer several additional qualities that, when combined, form at least one of these possible lenses.

First, this narrative is not necessarily a theodicy. It does not seek to reconcile the concept of a beneficent Creator with the problem of evil. The problem of evil, as a concept, suggests that the existence of evil was ever in opposition with the idea of a loving God. It is possible—perhaps necessary—that there is no problem of evil. Perhaps the concept of free will should be expanded beyond its Augustinian limitations. The idea that one can consent to do good, in the absence of any alternative, is nonsensical.

Perhaps evil simply exists, by virtue of genuine free will simply existing. Christ was crucified. Women are murdered for being women. Acknowledging that each of these events occurred does not need to glamorize either of them. Some narratives have used the cross to justify the subjugation of others, particularly women. And yet, the cross is a symbol of solidarity. The crucified Christ is unequivocally blameless, yet he is brutalized anyway. He does not ask others to suffer; he mirrors the blamelessness of those who do suffer. His resurrection assures those who suffer, even unto death, that their persecutors lack ultimate “power over them (Rev 2:10)” over them.

Salvation is not limited to satisfaction. Perhaps a long history of a predominantly Anselmian model of Atonement theory contributed to perceived limitations of the cross. Individuals, and even entire groups, can be harmed by sins which they did not themselves

¹² Ibid., 98.
perpetrate. As Gerald O’Collins notes, “In many, tragically numerous, cases the greed, fear, hatred, or downright selfish indifference of powerful persons cause the immense suffering and even death of millions of others.” The cross of Christ was a subversion of power and dominance—it is a symbol of resurrection, love, and salvation.

So how can the cross be seen as salvific for women victims of violence? It already is. Since a sizable portion of this paper has involved specifying precisely when, how, and why this may be the case, I now offer the following story from Serene Jones, with context sufficient to demonstrate how straightforward the connection really is.

I encountered this group of tough women several years ago when I helped lead a women’s self-defense class that met...in the basement of my church...I was the only properly church-active person in the class. Most of the others had come via referral from domestic violence centers around the city.

Not surprisingly, during the 12 weeks that we met, the dozen or so woman gathered rarely spoke of things theological...All told, it was a wonderfully bonding and empowering event, and its force was lodged firmly in the physical world, where we fought together to empower our bodies against the wounds inflicted by the world.

The last meeting of the self-defense class, as it happened, coincided with Maundy Thursday. In the UCC tradition, we mark this day in a service that celebrates the Last Supper and tells, in gory Gospel detail, the long tale of Christ’s betrayal, trial, and crucifixion—the passion play. As the service progresses, the lights in the sanctuary are dimmed until, at the end, only a single candle casts shadows on the cross that sits in the front of the room. It is quite a dramatic liturgy, one in which the theaterlike character of the crucifixion tale is made vividly apparent; ritually, everyone present is required to join in its reenactment, albeit metaphorically and prayerfully.

That evening, I was surprised when four women from the class appeared at the church’s front door and slipped into back pews just in time for the start of the service. Two sat alone, two together, and as they lost themselves in the growing darkness of the liturgy, they all wept, silently, profusely. So did most others.

After the service, Mari spoke to me first...“this cross story...It’s the only part of this Christian thing I like. I get it. And, it’s like he gets me. He knows.” She hugged me and walked out. Shanika left next, saying something about Jesus standing between her and her ex-partner, taking blows meant for her, keeping her safe. Sarah, her closest friend from the shelter, disagreed, smiling. “He’s the King, man. He’s throwing your ex’s sorry ass in Hell’s jail soon as he can.” Joanne, the last to leave, didn’t say anything but gestured toward the cross with a slight shrug just before walking out the door.

Why did they come that evening? And what did they experience as they listened to the story and participated in the ritual? Why had this story—and not the nicer healing tales or Easter’s glad tidings—enticed them into pews? What was the appeal?

As a feminist theologian, my first reaction was to worry that somehow they had been inadvertently harmed by being there. I worried that as they sat there, they were once again being emotionally battered by bad theology; that by having to listen to the story, they were being lulled into believing that God was an abusive father who willingly sacrificed his son for the good of the world (substitutionary atonement); and that if they were beaten and sacrificed by abusive people in the future, they might believe they were undergoing something similarly salvific.

Yet I knew from class that none of these women valorized or romanticized the violence done to them or to others...Furthermore they had as much as told me that the service was empowering to them, not devastating, and I had to believe that they meant what they said, that they could be trusted arbiters of their own sentiments...Granted, each of them sobbed and shook during the reading...But when it came time to leave, they seemed neither diminished nor depleted to have been there, to have heard the story, and to have cried together.

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Their reaction was not only not traumatic; it also seemed healthy, perhaps even healing. Rather than provoking fear, the story-ritual had nourished them…that nourishment flowed from a strong, positive connection they felt with Jesus in the mist of his passion…

What, then, did the passion play have to say to each of these women? Mari’s comment struck me as significant: “I get it,” she had said. “He gets me. He knows.”

Jones goes on to explain what causes rape victims, in particular, to relate to the crucified Christ. Some readers might feel that this would have been the more appropriate section for me to cover. However, doing so would negate the most salient point Jones makes above. Perhaps Jones’ companions see the connection between the cross and sexual victimization as self-evident precisely because they are not religious; but in the end, there are not two mutually exclusive categories of people called Feminist Theologians and Rape Victims.

James Cone’s experience of the cross strengthens this argument by expanding it. His experiences identify an intersection between Golgotha, Jim Crow America, Latina feminist theology, and more. “Just as Jesus did not deserve to suffer, [black people] knew they did not deserve it… because of their experience of arbitrary violence, the cross was and is a redeeming and comforting image for many black Christians.” Even more palpably, he explains that “both Jesus and blacks were publicly humiliated, subjected to the utmost indignity and cruelty. They were stripped, in order to be deprived of dignity.” Cone notes that “The crucifixion of Jesus…and the lynching of blacks are so amazingly similar…that one wonders what blocks the American Christian imagination from seeing the connection.” The cross can liberate the oppressed and marginalized. Positive interpretations of the cross lead to hope and community. Pink crosses are a demand for space and hope. The Passion is Christ’s promise to atone for the sins of others. The cross as analogous to the lynching tree. Each of these Pink crosses represents an oppressed community which finds solace in this specific icon of crucifixion leading to resurrection and salvation.

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16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.


