Here are some introductory remarks about the book that is now in press and due to be released in October 2010; the table of contents and chapter six follow. Not to be used without permission.

Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account

Introduction

In the last two decades a significant literature has emerged in response to disasters, terrorism, global climate change, and other risks. Initiatives by the United Nations, World Health Organization, governments, universities, and corporations assess “vulnerability and risk.” This literature, and the specific threats and risks that it tracks, suggests something of the globalized concerns that are shaping our time and place. In this literature, definitions of vulnerability point to the risk of harm from hazards, epidemics, and disasters; the contrasting term is resilience. In other words, damage has a force of inevitability and the main questions are how to prevent it and, if and when hazards are met, whether persons, communities, and environments will be able to resist and rebound from it. There is “menace in the air” of contemporary existence.

How to attend to vulnerability is a perennial religious question. The biblical notion that humans are creatures made of earth and breath likewise suggests vulnerability—but to transformation as well as to devastation. While theodicy—to justify God's goodness in the face of evil and suffering—is one way of thinking theologically about vulnerability, it is not the only way. In this book, I focus on how devastation and transformation are related in creaturely existence and before God. I attend to vulnerability—here defined as susceptibility to being changed, for good and for ill—as an enduring feature of creaturely existence. Persons and communities remain vulnerable: they are always susceptible to harm and therefore almost inevitably marked by suffering and wrong—sometimes by unfathomable tragedy or brutality—and yet they are always also susceptible to transformation. Note, then, that vulnerability does not equate with or necessarily entail powerlessness or weakness. Vulnerability is intrinsic to being creatures who are interdependent with other persons, living things, and the earth. Creaturely life is also tinged with glory—so the heavens and the lilies of the field attest, according to the psalmist and the gospels. Vulnerability and glory are part of being creatures who are situated in particular times and places with particular bodies, desires, capacities, needs, and life spans, and who come to know something of their situatedness and interdependence in relation to vaster contexts and purposes.

I pair vulnerability with “glory” rather than with “risk” or “resilience” to indicate the possibilities of transformation as well as the realities of devastation. In changing the central contrast from "risk/resilience" to “glory,” I am not disputing the real hazards that contemporary analyses address. The characterization of seemingly inevitable damage fits scores of threatened communities and cultures—and the whole planet in the face of global climate change. Furthermore, risks ought to be minimized, damage prevented, and capacities for resilience fostered. Nor am I advocating a renewed confidence in progress. The threats are real and the damage is significant. Indeed, with many theologians through the centuries, I argue that an awareness of devastation and tragedy is heightened by a correlative awareness of the grace and glory of God manifest in creation and transformation. Vulnerability is the situation in which persons and communities may receive and bear the glory of God; it is also the situation in which earthly existence may be harmed and degraded. The point, then, is not to encourage greater optimism or pessimism—neither progress nor regress is inevitable—but rather to provide ways of thinking critically about and living transformatively within these global realities.
Life before God

This account of vulnerability to devastation and transformation is, more exactly, an account of life given by and lived before God as vulnerable and as capable of bearing glory. I use the phrase, life before God, to designate two related spaces of reflection and existence.

First, “life before God” indicates a locus of theological reflection, a field of systematic inquiry. I use the phrase as an analogue to what theologians conventionally have discussed within the systematic loci of theological anthropology (the nature and condition of human life) and ecclesiology (the nature and purpose of the church). However, these conventional topics designate more specific objects and narrower fields of inquiry than I want to signal with life before God. This account attends to the individuality, sociality, responsibility, and interdependence of earthly existence—of human creatures especially—before God. Neither individual piety nor churches exhaust the reality of life before God.

In fact, theological strategies for depicting Christian life and community have been more varied historically than is typically understood. As theologians depicted the church descriptively and normatively, they also grappled with vulnerability and suffering, with the ambiguity of persons and institutions, with the devastations of poverty, hunger, and persecution, with tyranny and freedom, with how organizations, texts, practices, and traditions mediate “salvation,” and with the presence and sometimes seeming absence of God in history. Once the vitality and breadth of these questions are regained, then historical theological perspectives can offer vital resources for an account of life before God as vulnerable and capable of bearing glory.

Rather than constructing a new ecclesiology or theological anthropology, the aim of this book is to attend to possibilities of devastation and transformation in life that is shared with and for others before God. My method involves focusing on figurations of individual and communal existence and the transforming reality of God as they respond, or fail to be responsive, to creaturely vulnerability and ambiguity. (Note that I construe persons and communities as both vulnerable and ambiguous. They have already been harmed and transformed and therefore always already live within vectors of devastation and transformation.) I retrieve and “condense” theological metaphors, tropes, and logics in order to depict conversion, salvation, and sanctification in relation to such threats and possibilities. Thus this book offers a fairly comprehensive theology of the vulnerability and glory of creaturely existence, especially in personal and shared Christian life, and of transformation and devastation, interpreted in relation to the grace and glory of God.

Second, “life before God” designates the space of existence as encompassed and indwelt by the transforming reality of God. “Before God” or coram Deo, “in the sight or presence of God,” is a phrase often associated with Martin Luther. The scene that typically illustrates Luther’s coram Deo is of the man at the Imperial Diet of Worms, bearing his conscience’s solitary witness to God against a hostile gathering: “Here I stand, I can do no other.” In fact, although Luther and other sixteenth-century theologians, perhaps John Calvin especially, prized the testimony of conscience, they also insisted that the whole world was before God. There was no secular exclusion, no place that was farther from the presence of God; neither was there any place, any church structure, authority, or ritual, that could be said to possess or control the presence of God. God’s grace and glory ought to be proclaimed and made manifest particularly in Christian life and ministry, but all life, from the depths of individual conscience to the breadth of public life, from the misery of betrayal to the marvel of love, exists before God. Luther may have crystallized the formulation coram Deo, but the insight was already there in Augustine’s vision of the city of God, in Paul’s
vision of a world aching with the pains of new birth, in Jesus' welcoming of strangers and outcasts, in the prophets who announced the presence of the Lord in the midst of the poor and oppressed, and in stories of a creator who sculpted a world and pronounced it good.

In this account, the basic meaning of "before God" is an affirmation of the reality of God as the horizon that delineates and orients creatures and cosmos. The focus of this account is on life before God, that is, not on the horizon, God, but on the moving space of creaturely and cosmic existence that is encompassed and transformed by this horizon. This is a space constituted by the relation between God and cosmos and among God and creatures in their individuality, sociality, and interdependence. Moreover, it is a space shaped by the relations of creatures with each other in the earth and in response to God. These are moving, changing relations that defy simple definitions, grammars, or logics. Life before God is a field of ongoing tensions and conversions—among God and creatures, among creatures and cosmos, between past and future, between glory that is known and glory that is yet emerging.
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Vulnerability in a World Marked by Suffering

In spite of everything, there was in the life I fled a zest and a joy and a capacity for facing and surviving disaster that are very moving and very rare.

James Baldwin

In 1983, a group of Salvadoran campesinas met to “reflect on the word of God and to see what it was saying to us and what we could do in our communities.” Soon other groups of women joined them; they became known as the Congregations of Christian Mothers for Peace and Life. They organized their communities against the decimation of war. They started schools and literacy programs, collectives for food and health care, and sewing workshops. They confronted the army to demand their rights, and, in doing so, mobilized entire communities to “defend life always.” In the face of daily devastations, their response offered a means by which the people could “insist on deciding, until their last breath, how to live.” The Christian Mothers made no sharp distinction between “more theological” and “less theological” in their work and witness: the struggle for human rights, dignity, and survival was a matter of social and theological significance, of political existence and existence in faith, and of life and death.

Salvadoran theologian Jon Sobrino argues that when a community persists in works of love and justice despite repression, they recover the deepest sense of the kenosis or sacrificial self-emptying of God. Here we are close to what Luther meant by the sign of the cross as a sign of a holy Christian people. When the Christian Mothers chose to face persecution, even death, by organizing against a repressive regime, they attested to the reality of an encompassing power of
goodness and justice. In their harsh existence, annihilation was possible, yet there, too, God was manifest. “[L]ife is already present in death; the resurrection in the crucifixion; and fear need not paralyze but can be transformed into boldness through the Spirit,” María Pilar Aquino explains. “The divine presence is felt within this tension between life and death, oppression and liberation.”

In our day, after death squads in El Salvador, after the organized brutality of slave trade, death camps, killing fields, and more, and in the face of ongoing torture and terrorism, we must reject any notion that suffering in itself can be a positive sign of the church or of human existence. Yet, the fact of suffering is part of the witness of those who face and resist devastation; it cannot be disregarded. In this chapter, I argue for a more complex interpretation of the relationship between suffering and life before God, one that focuses on vulnerability to destruction and to transformation in a world that can itself be understood to be marked with suffering. This interpretation re-engages Luther on the sign of the cross and Calvin on suffering, and suggests the need to train attention, imagination, and action to the presence of God and to creaturely need in a suffering, yet glorious world.

**A world marked by suffering**

With the Christian Mothers, we have come full circle to the passion of early Christian communities. The apostle Paul wrote, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (2 Cor. 4.8-10). In this passage the subject who bears affliction, perplexity, persecution, and death is a “we”—bodies plural and a collective body. Their trials already unite them and mark their common life. Their collective body also bears suffering in a way that attests to and bears God.
We are marked, Paul writes, “so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.” Irenaeus and other second-century theologians asked “how the frail mortal body might become a reliable container for the Spirit of God.” Irenaeus insisted that Christians “gradually become accustomed to receive and to bear God.” In twentieth-century El Salvador, where repression threatened destruction, the Christian Mothers practiced domestic arts that recreated their world. Like their forebears in faith, they were marked by survival wrought from adversity, by a confrontation with forces of destruction that became a testimony of the grace and glory of God. They became, in Renny Golden's phrase, “the crucible of communal survival.”

As we have seen, Luther and Calvin also wrote about Christians who were afflicted in and persecuted for their faith. They contrasted the suffering of modest Christians to the abuse of wealth and power by civil and ecclesiastical authorities, while also reinterpreting Christian existence in relation to Christ's cross and God's glory. Although they sometimes veered toward the valorization of suffering, neither Luther nor Calvin construed the Christian life as involving a passive acceptance of suffering. They assumed that churches would have critical, transforming relations with the cultures of which they—for good and for ill—were part. They employed the sign of the cross to interpret and pattern those relations.

Can the mark of suffering or the sign of the cross have any significance for our day? Does it serve only to indicate vulnerability to devastation? Can it also be understood as pointing to the possibility of transformation for vulnerable, often ambiguous creatures? When persons and even the earth itself are scarred by enslavement, impoverishment, torture, and genocide, no simple answer will do.

A series of aerial photographs by Yann Arthus-Bertrand, taken in the corners of every continent, witness a world “marked” in graphic ways. (A few years ago, huge enlargements of his
photographs—think of small billboards—were displayed in public squares from Chicago to Kraków.) Many of his photographs depict a lush world, altered and inhabited by all manner of living things. A patchwork of Turkish rugs dry in an open field, a river of changing colors cuts a dramatic swath through trees, sun-soaked naturists populate a French beach. Viewed from the photographer's distance, many of these subjects appear in patterned images. The pattern that emerges in some of his work is, speaking theologically and in language that Arthus-Bertrand does not himself employ, the sign of suffering and brutal death on the spaces of earthly habitation. His photographs reveal an evidently “mortal” world that has suffered damage. One photo shows an impoverished mud and stick village, one- and two-room dwellings collapsed together in row after row; in another, cattle carcasses are strewn across a rooftop slaughterhouse, while their blood-stained butchers look up, surprised by the camera. In yet another view, B-47 fighter jets, painted in camouflage and angle-parked in precision, make a herringbone design across the Arizona desert. In other photographs, there are places of ecological devastation, places of forced evacuation, places of forced incarceration, places scarred by warfare and violence.

When the earth itself seems to be marked by affliction and brutality, what could it mean to affirm that life before God is marked by anything resembling the ancient sign of the cross? First and foremost, it ought to mean neither that Christians alone bear suffering nor that all trauma and brutality can somehow be comprehended, gathered up, in the cross. Rather, any reengagement of that ancient sign and its theological heritage must begin by acknowledging that Christian life is always situated, in fact but also constitutively, in the midst of a highly ambiguous world—one that is sometimes glorious and sometimes vicious, sometimes unfathomably so.

If no place in the world is left unmarked, some places are more affected than others. Arthus-Bertrand's project suggests that we humans must train our eyes—and minds, hearts, and
strength—to the vulnerability and glory of earthly existence. His photographs serve to tutor
attention and to nurture a range of responses: wonder, delight, compassion, sorrow, horror, guilt,
outrage. They help to attune us to brutality and beauty, to alert us to threats and possibilities, and
thus to elicit appropriate relationships and response. As I shall argue next, a world marked by
suffering requires not only recognition of vulnerability and accounting for damage that has been
done, but also moral and theological attention to threats and possibilities that circulate in global
interdependencies.

Re-engaging the sign of the cross

When theologians write about suffering as a mark of Christian life and community, they
take yet another step. They claim, in effect, that sites of suffering demand special attention—have a
privileged place—as keys to interpreting the transforming reality of God. For example, Martin
Luther trained his attention to vulnerable children and poor preachers, finding that their plight
clarified the purpose of the church. Suffering, epitomized in Jesus’ death on the cross and
manifest in the hungry poor, provided an epistemological key to reality: bringing the cross into
central focus enabled a perspective that “calls the thing what it actually is.”

We can step back for a minute to reflect on “marks” and “signs” in contemporary cultures.
Consumer cultures are pervaded by them—often very different ones from Luther's sign of the
cross. Persons mark themselves with corporate logos and brand name swooshes, body piercings
and tattoos, wedding bands and clergy collars; they declare affiliations on hats and shirts. These
marks clamor for attention, claim possession and belonging. Note such marks can distinguish a
person while also submerging that person in a group identity. We might say, “Sara’s the one who
always wears a pink ribbon,” at the same time that the ribbon tells us, “Here is one of millions who
have been affected by breast cancer." These marks can also indicate value. Dollar signs, four star-ratings, American flags, pink triangles, red crosses, and labels like "pro-life" and "fat-free" offer interpretations of what has value and what does not.

I met a man in central Los Angeles who had “Florence” tattooed across his forehead, over his skull, and around his neck. He was literally marked as belonging to one particular L.A. neighborhood, to one particular tribe, if you will. His forehead bore a threat: any disrespect shown to him was to be understood as disrespect for his ‘hood, and subject to violent retaliation in the prevailing culture of honor and shame. Tags marked the physical boundaries of his neighborhood as well, creating a realm of power—often violent power—within relative economic, interpersonal, and political powerlessness. Outside of the neighborhood, his tattoos subjected him to the power of opposing realms, that is, marked him for death.

The equally vivid “tattoos” of some religious elite—tonsures, miters, flowing robes—and “tags” of restricted cloisters and corridors signal the power of an other-worldly realm. Consider, too, how a well-cut suit, precise haircut, and gated access may indicate expansive realms of economic, political, and social power. Martin Luther said, in effect, that attention to such marks of power distorts reality. He charged that when theology attends to “glory”—that is, to pretensions of power, not the rightful glory of God—and neglects suffering, it will misconstrue reality and call “evil good and good evil.” Luther rejected such signs and argued for the cross as a more adequate point of reference for knowing what really is good and what really is evil.

In reinterpreting the mark of suffering and the sign of the cross, we are considering such a point of reference—an epistemological key—by which to orient judgments of what is creative and destructive, good and ill, holy and demonic, true and false. As we saw in chapter two, the focal point of Luther's theology of the cross was surrender of pretensions to glory and knowledge more
than suffering *per se*. “Christ crucified” indicated, among other things, the surrender of human feeling, efforts, and knowledge to God's favor, action, and word. As we have also seen, Luther called attention to the hungry poor of his day and supported relief efforts. Ultimately, for him, it was the extent of their reliance on God alone, not the fact that they suffered hunger or poverty, that made them exemplary signs of the cross. Therefore, Luther's paradoxical view of the relation of divine purposes and human existence could negate the use of human capacities for responding to God, and thus could vitiate response to hungry people and naked children as such.

Any reinterpretation of the sign of the cross must direct attention to such devastation rather than diverting it to some supposedly “more theological” reality. Pain, want, and diminishment in themselves demand response from fellow creatures. In sites of greater, or at least more evident, suffering and oppression, life cannot be said to flourish. Persons may go hungry, ill-clothed, homeless, destitute, sick, and weary; they may be demeaned, victimized, tortured, or struck down. Other living things and environments may be endangered as well. Suffering ought to be encountered as a cry for mercy and justice that beseeches fellow creatures and indicts passive bystanders, as well as the powers that be. Figurative and literal cries for mercy show suffering as suffering and unmask brutality, tyranny, and indignity as such. In Luther’s phrase, these situations “call the thing what it actually is,” and necessitate theological thinking together with acts of mercy and justice.

Yet suffering is not always evident. Moreover, the problem is not only lack of attention to its reality. Symbols of power typically increase the perception of power, if not actual power—likewise for symbols of value. Pain, however, resists communication. Intense pain reconfigures the felt world of the person who suffers it, demanding the center of attention and shrinking all else along the peripheries. That reconfigured world may become incommensurable with the worlds of those outside the pain. When others suffer something that we ourselves do not,
we may attempt to touch our fingers to their wounds and to enter the reality of their pain, but finally we are asked to believe or disbelieve the reality of their pain. Here Luther, following Paul, Jesus, and the prophets, was right to associate profound suffering with questions of epistemology and faith. As Elaine Scarry observed and we discussed in chapter one, intense pain not only resists expression, it "actively destroys" language. Pain is certain to the person suffering it, even if it cannot easily be shared with another. "For the other person," she explains, "it is so elusive that 'hearing about pain' may exist as the primary model of what it is 'to have doubt.'"16 When the pain of others becomes believable, it can become the basis for collective response.17

Building on Scarry's work, we observed how early Christians "domesticated" torture's weapons by insisting on the agency of torture's victims till death and on the lasting power of memories of the martyrs for the church. The church became the artifact made by articulating and confessing the unmaking that reigns in torture and by preserving the agency of victims (martyrs), and in them, of the early church, against the action of Roman authorities. Early Christians believed the terrible reality of suffering and torture; they also believed in the power of God to create and restore over against the claims of the empire to determine life and death. They affirmed the church as a place where vulnerable lives could be strengthened to receive and bear the power of God. Similarly, Luther, in writing about the suffering of poor Christians, claimed it as a "holy thing (Heilighthum)"—as an artifact, sanctuary, and defining practice that makes manifest, sanctifies, and forms a holy people.

Centuries before, the Hebrew prophets had interpreted the demand for response to suffering as none other than God's own call. Deutero-Isaiah offered these words as God's own: "This is the fast I desire: to unlock fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke; to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. It is to share the bread with the hungry, and to take the
wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin" (Is 58.6-7 JPS).\textsuperscript{18} Response to human need is the means by which divine presence is made known in sites of suffering. Sites of suffering are therefore also potential sites of restoration and thus of revelation and redemption. When resistance and compassion are offered, then human life is restored and renewed, and, Isaiah says, God draws near and is made known: “Then shall your light burst through like the dawn and your healing shall spring up quickly; your Vindicator shall march before you, the Presence of the Lord shall be your rear guard. . . . [W]hen you cry [the Lord] will say: Here I am” (Is. 58.8-9a JPS, also 9-14; see also Mt. 25.34-40).

Like the prophets before him, John the Baptist proclaimed the presence of the Lord in places of oppression and devastation. The Baptist's calling of Jesus signaled Jesus’ continuity with the prophets. Jesus' ministry with the poor and outcast proclaimed God's healing, vindicating presence. The cross—Jesus’ crucifixion by imperial powers and the rise of courage and faith among his followers—can be interpreted within this ancient prophetic calling so that it signals the presence of the living, transforming God in the midst of persecution and oppression.

When the reality of suffering is believed such that diminishment and need are met with compassionate response, then situations of suffering may become places where God's grace and power are made manifest. Interpreted in this way, the sign of the cross can be understood as pointing to transformation that comes through the recognition of pain and response to it, rather than as a sign of divine favor for suffering or resignation. For instance, let us look again at south central Los Angeles, not as viewed by rival powers, but directing our attention to places where the violently imposed definitions of warring gangs are resisted. I met the man, whose tattooed forehead signaled threat and marked him for death, at an agency that helps persons face and reject the definition of their lives and worth by gang culture. Through that organization's ministry, he
came to reject a deadly economy of honor and shame. An alternative community that fostered
dignity and responsible interdependence with others and that afforded experiences of love and
forgiveness helped to reconstruct his sense of self and vocation. At the same time, he was literally
changing the signs that marked him: he was having his tattoos removed through months of
treatments that effectively involved second degree burns.19

The sign of the cross can serve, then, as an acknowledgment that suffering is real—even if
its depths are unfathomable—but that suffering itself is neither the purpose nor the determinative
feature of earthly existence. Vulnerability is a basic feature of human existence, that is,
vulnerability to devastation and to transformation is a basic feature. Human creatures remain open
to being damaged and to open to being transformed because they remain susceptible to being
changed by others—whether the "others" be neighbors, strangers, or enemies, communities,
economies, or the flow of media. These others, in turn, may become means through which God's
grace and glory are made manifest. Even at the point where humans are most vulnerable to the
deadliest organized brutality of fellow creatures, they remain susceptible to restoration and
healing. To underscore this point we can revisit and reformulate the affirmation of the second and
third centuries, “caro salutis est cardo: the flesh is the pivot of salvation” as “vulnerability is the
pivot of salvation.” Not suffering—or “the flesh” or embodiment or emplacement—but
vulnerability is the creaturely opening to God's grace and glory. It also opens the possibility of
devastation.

This reformulated affirmation implies the necessity of a stance of critical consciousness
that enhances moral agency in a world marked by suffering and that alleviates brutality rather than
a stance of passivity or victimization in the face of suffering. Interpretations of the Christian life
and the church that define them passively by the fact of suffering or oppression should be rejected.
Moreover, important as it may be to acknowledge the suffering and threat that mark our world, that is not enough. Neither is solidarity with those who suffer. The claim heard in suffering must be heard as “call[ing] the thing what it actually is," namely, as an epistemological opening to reality of indignity and degradation known as such in the gap before the transforming reality of God. The glory of God is made manifest in the restoration of creaturely integrity and dignity, and made possible through acts of recognition, mercy, and justice.

Suffering, brutality, and devastation are evident and yet hidden throughout the world. We creatures and the cosmos itself are vulnerable to harm and devastation. How will Christians situate themselves with others and before God in a world marked by suffering? Will they be distinguished by their efforts to dignify creaturely life and tend earthly flourishing? At stake is a proper sense of human capacity, agency, and responsibility before God and with and for fellow creatures on the earth. In the next section, I explore to what extent Calvin's interpretation of "bearing the cross" can help train attention, imagination, and action.

**Going through suffering**

In interpreting the mark of suffering in relation to the transforming reality of God, I have been threading two challenges. First, I have rejected the notion that suffering is good or salvific in itself, while yet acknowledging the sometimes complex relationship among perception, valuation, revelation, and suffering. Second, I have accented attentiveness, responsibility, and agency in the face of suffering and rejected passivity and victimization, while yet recognizing that human powers are limited and that, ultimately, grace alone enables persons to bear the weight of their lives.
A third challenge meets us along with these other two. Can persons acknowledge life as not only vulnerable but also profoundly ambiguous and yet receive it as a gift of God? And, how are human capacities and incapacities entailed in receiving and bearing the grace and glory of God? Note that the challenge before us is not theodicy per se—to justify God's action in relation to suffering—but rather whether suffering and susceptibility to suffering ought to characterize or constitute life before God.

Our lives are not fully under our own powers and control. Persons may come to believe that their lives, rimmed as they are by brutal and glorious mysteries, are encompassed ultimately in an abundance of just and merciful power that they dare to call God. In believing, they may receive their lives—and the mercies that allow them to bear the joys and burdens of their lives—as gifts of God to be shared and enjoyed. However, Christians and their communities ought neither presume power to evade suffering and struggle, nor pretend the ability to master suffering—whether through mortification, submersion in the wounds of Jesus, or thoroughgoing rebellion against “the world.” Rather, persons and communities must “go through” suffering, neither denying nor avoiding it but acknowledging its reality.

John Calvin sought a way of existing before God that neither falsely exalted the church for its own power and glory nor assumed its moral and spiritual perfection. To confess reliance on God alone, Calvin taught, neither placed persons triumphantly above “the world” nor removed them from it. In fact, to live before God in a corrupted and yet glorious world inevitably involves suffering and hardship. Calvin distinguished such struggle from striving somehow to obtain one's own salvation, in other words, from what might be called works righteousness.

Triumphantism and sectarianism take new forms in our day. We cannot merely recuperate Calvin's approach. However, his map between these tendencies remains instructive.21 A middle
The way between triumphalism and sectarianism involves “going through” suffering—that is, neither immersion in suffering nor evasion of it, but acknowledging vulnerability as basic to creaturely life. To “go through” suffering involves resisting powers of degradation and indignity. At the same time living before God involves affirming God as gracious and glorious, fostering gratitude for life in its vulnerability and glory, and enjoying God and the life God grants. Such joy and enjoyment, in turn, offer sustenance even while persons struggle to survive and flourish in the face of devastation and evil. This approach—through suffering, against the diminishment of God and life's integrity, and toward the grace and glory of God—can avoid triumphalism and sectarianism.

With these challenges in mind, we now return to Calvin's notion of bearing the cross, following it to its most problematic and its most promising insights. My intent is to explore vulnerability and transformation in relation to Calvin's thought, not to rehabilitate a divine pedagogy of suffering. However, training of attention and response is needed. I call for “going through” suffering by moving away from idolatry and indignity, in the call and testimony of resistance, and moving toward the grace and glory of God in an itinerary of delight and gratitude.

**Calvin on bearing the cross**

Calvin didn't instruct Christians to welcome suffering and to pursue martyrdom. Rather, he described sorrow and affliction as already part of human life. He rejected impassibility as an appropriate response to the afflictions that humans inevitably suffer, and therefore opposed the Stoics of his day.22 “We have nothing to do with this iron philosophy which our Lord and Master has condemned not only by his word, but also with his example. For he groaned and wept over his own and others’ misfortunes.”23 Calvin's Christians also “groan”:24 they suffer disease, poverty, persecution, and loss, and “shall weep the tears that are owed to our nature.”25 It may be of
immense human significance to sense that one's deepest sorrows somehow also register in the depths of the divine, but perhaps not enough. At least Calvin thought not. He was unwilling to leave history framed by fate. He taught that these very real afflictions—afflictions that in themselves may be brutal and evil—must be understood within a horizon of divine order and care. The real ambiguity of history, including Christ's suffering and death, ought to be viewed within, rather than outside of, the scope of divine providence. “Whether poverty or exile, or prison, or insult, or disease, or bereavement, or anything like them torture us, we must think that none of these things happens except by the will and providence of God, that he does nothing except with a well-ordered justice.”

In effect, Calvin's instructions were: rest assured that your afflictions are not the travails of death but the birth pangs of a well-ordered justice, a divine order that extends beyond history as mortals can know it.

Is there is more to life than to weep and to hope? Yes, according to Calvin. Even in the midst of profound suffering, God restores and teaches humanity. Christians who suffer “harsh and difficult conditions” that are in themselves “adverse and evil” nonetheless can know this as sharing Christ's sufferings. “By communion with him the very sufferings themselves not only become blessed in us but also help much in promoting our salvation.” Calvin elaborated a divine pedagogy of suffering by which God's people are tested and trained in humility, patience, and moderation. He instructed Christians to bear affliction patiently—that is, to bear patiently the pain and brutality that they already suffer, not affliction that they somehow seek—and to trust that “with the cross" God is indeed “providing for our salvation." Calvin not only counseled patience, he portrayed Christians as patients of suffering, and correlativeiy, portrayed suffering as a divine pedagogy and “medicine." In bearing suffering, he concluded, “we consent for our own good," and
“the bitterness of the cross [can] be tempered with spiritual joy.”\textsuperscript{28} Note that joy comes not from suffering, but despite it, from confidence in God’s mercy.

Is this exactly the sort of acquiescence to and valorization of suffering that I have eschewed? Yes and no. Calvin rejected impassibility and absolute passivity while construing patience itself as a distinctive kind of agency. In contrast to the Stoic cultivation of apathy, Christians must constantly “train,” “keep,” and “pursue” patience in face of real sorrow and pain. He referred to the exercise of patience, moderation, and humility in the face of suffering as “bearing the cross.” As we saw in chapter three, Calvin interpreted bearing the cross as a pattern of living in which pride is emptied out and surrendered before a merciful, sovereign God. Christians are to “depart from themselves,” to be united with Christ as the true source and power of their lives, and to express the pattern of Christ in their lives. Calvin’s notion of bearing the cross can be understood, then, as a certain kind of consciousness and agency that is patterned in and empowered by Christ. However, it appears to be a relatively passive “agency,” having to do mainly with taking one’s place in the divine drama and with consenting ultimately to the mysteries—or vagaries, as it seems to many readers of Calvin—of divine providence.

The background against which Calvin developed this picture of Christian life must be noted. He contrasted Christian life that was intentionally patterned by bearing the cross to a clerically-driven, institutionally-controlled penance system that undercut individual responsibility and response to God. From Calvin’s perspective, “it makes a great difference whether you teach forgiveness of sins as deserved by just and full contrition, which the sinner can never perform; or whether you enjoin him to hunger and thirst after God’s mercy to show him—through the recognition of his misery, his vacillation, his weariness, and his captivity—where he ought to seek refreshment, rest, and freedom; in fine, to teach him in his humility to give glory to God.”\textsuperscript{29} We are
inclined to ask how great a difference it really makes whether persons learn that they can never be contrite enough to extricate themselves from the wages of sin or whether they learn, through divine judgment and punishment, how miserable they are and finally seek mercy. But if we set these suspicions aside for a moment, a matter of great significance comes more clearly into view: Can divine mercy be known within vulnerable, ambiguous human life? Correlatively, can human capacities, fallible and faltering as they may be, be reoriented to the goodness and glory of God? It matters greatly, for Calvin, as for our day, whether theologies support responsive, responsible life and its flourishing before God.

The optimal effect of Calvin’s teaching was to counter self-deception, to dethrone false gods and tyrannical powers, to enable persons to receive life as a gift of God, and to orient the right and joyful use of God's gifts for the benefit of others. Despite our “puny capacity,” Calvin taught, we are being transformed; though we cannot attain perfection, we “should strive and struggle” toward the fullness of God's glory. At the heart of his vision of the Christian life was the conversion of the self and transformation of social relations through divine grace, restoration, and instruction. Conversion entailed a thorough destabilization and reorientation of consciousness and agency. According to Calvin, the first step in conversion was a confrontation with one's “puny capacity” to avoid sin and seek the good. Only when pride and undue self-concern are disrupted do persons come to the reorienting awareness that “we are not our own, we are God’s.”

Without a doubt, profound suffering destabilizes selves and communities, disrupts expectations, and disturbs assumptions about God and the world. In itself, such suffering cannot be understood as creative, holy, or good, even if, in the broader scheme of things, pain and loss may serve other purposes and tragedy may be accepted as an inevitable part of creaturely and cosmic existence. That does not make pain and suffering constitutive of life before God. It is not bearing
the cross but rather resistance to idolatry and indignity—resistance that involves the risk of being harmed—as well as delight and gratitude that ought to orient life before God. That said, to receive and bear God will sometimes take a cruciform pattern, lead through brutality, and end in death, as it did for early Christian martyrs and for Salvadoran martyrs, and for the hungry poor in Luther's day and in our own. In this sense, life before God may still be epitomized by “bearing the cross”—but then the cross is understood to mark not suffering itself, but rather, the transforming reality of God manifest at the point of need and pain.32

**Alternative pedagogies?**

A focus on bearing the cross could have the effect of subduing human agency, of over-accenting human incapacities, and thereby vitiating response to God and others. In interpreting the meaning of bearing the cross, Calvin emphasized training in patience, moderation, and humility. By contrast, I will emphasize resistance to idolatry and indignity and call for attending to delight and gratitude.

Calvin's accent on Christian patience and emptying out of pride correlated with a strong sense of divine providence and a strong confidence in the authority of Scripture when rightly proclaimed. Such hardy confidence may appear as overconfidence in a world marked by brutality, oppression, and more mundane threats and sorrows, and may become zealous religiosity that fuels the flames of intolerance and viciousness. A world marked by suffering suggests the need for more modest claims about divine pedagogy and power than Calvin presumed, yet also the need for caution about assuming that persons therefore teach themselves salvation. At the same time, the vulnerability of creatures and cosmos requires a greater accent on human responsibility and on collective response than Calvin articulated.33
Calvin's discussion of bearing the cross related to his doctrine of providence as well as to his teaching about the Christian life and redemption. Partly in response to scientific discovery, rapid change, and the traumas of his day, as well as to his study of the Bible, especially the Psalms, and of classical philosophy and theology, he reformulated the doctrine. For instance, he joined the doctrines of creation and providence, and set aside the distinction between general and special providence. Without right knowledge of God as creator and redeemer, persons “can hardly avoid entangling themselves in inscrutable difficulties." Lacking such knowledge, he observed, persons might conclude that God is arbitrary and “throwing them about like balls" or they might not take their own responsibility and freedom with due seriousness; persons might be overwhelmed with adversity; they might feel “menace" instead of “joyous trust" in existence. Similar questions persist today: Is there a good order to the universe? How free and responsible are human creatures? How can suffering be endured? Are joy and trust possible in life?

When suffering is subsumed under a divine pedagogy, theology risks mocking God and both the real devastations and transformations of creaturely life. The picture of a god who teaches by punishing—whether God is father or mother, benevolent or severe—is not adequate to the best insights of the Jewish and Christian traditions, including of Calvin's own thought, or to contemporary existence. Moreover, Calvin's pedagogy of bearing the cross arguably ought not be read as a theodicy—that is, as a justification of God's goodness in the face of evil and suffering—but rather as an account of how Christians who were already suffering persecution can be strengthened to persevere toward God's truth and righteousness. Notably, Calvin drew the line at seeking speculative knowledge about God's being and at defending divine goodness. His primary interest was the significance of the doctrine of providence for earthly existence: how it might enable persons to live with a sense of certainty and trust rather than a sense of arbitrary fate,
so that they might use their freedom well, be responsible and fair in their relations with others, and refer their lives to God's care. (He devoted more pages of the *Institutes* to writing about the salutary effects of the doctrine for daily existence than to its exposition.) Calvin approached the “inscrutable difficulties” of his day by offering practical guidance for living rightly before God.

Calvin himself suggested that the Christian life was shaped in more ways than through a pedagogy of suffering. The *Institutes* itself was a pedagogical text, as was the Bible for Calvin: both texts clarify right knowledge of God and self and thereby elicit conviction, contemplation, understanding, and action. As we have seen, Calvin construed the church as a mother and a school of life, and God as a benevolent but strict father and teacher. Calvin's God was always tutoring and disciplining, and Calvin's interpretation of divine accommodation made teaching and learning central to the whole order of creation and redemption.

In his teaching about providence and about the Christian life, Calvin also outlined what might be called a pedagogy of gratitude and enjoyment. Human life may indeed be harsh, filled with pain, and disfigured by deception. Nevertheless, Calvin contended, it can reflect the glory of God and, through Christ and the Spirit, be united with God as the source of goodness. Human existence does not need to be bolstered by the accumulation of power and embellished with possessions. Rather, when all that we are and all that we have are offered gratefully and reverently to God, then self, others, and the goods of life are given their proper place and stature in relation to God. God's mercy shows where “to seek refreshment, rest, and freedom” once proper place is given to God. Human life, work, possessions, and relations can be received rightly as gifts of God and governed rightly through proper stewardship.

Right use of these gifts involves a persistent, other-directed impulse. “[A]ll the gifts we possess have been bestowed on us by God and entrusted to us on the condition that they be
Enjoyment and gratitude inform care for others and for common life. Others should not be regarded with contempt and neither should their worth be judged. Rather, Christians ought “to look upon the image of God in them, which cancels and effaces their transgressions and with its beauty and dignity allures us to love and embrace them.”

Other-regard was more than a matter of viewing others “as if” they were the image of God, attributing to them dignity and beauty that they do not actually possess. According to Calvin, the flow of love and regard is not merely directed “through” the other to God. Rather, “a sincere feeling of love” will guide Christians toward the well-being of others. Feelings of love and kindness toward fellow creatures attest to the intrinsic value of life. The perception of the goodness of what God provides in turn informs how Christians share these benefits with others.

Calvin did not limit the inclination to gratitude and fellow feeling to interactions with human beings. The entire creation evokes delight, offers enjoyment, and deserves proper attention. “Now if we ponder to what end God created food, we shall find that he meant not only to provide for necessity but also for delight and good cheer. . . . Did he not, in short, render many things attractive to us, apart from their necessary use?” At the same time, Calvin cautioned against abuse of these created goods. He warned about overindulgence in culinary pleasures, when “the smell of the kitchen or the sweetness of its odors so stupifies others that they are unable to smell anything ‘spiritual.’” These last observations suggest that true enjoyment may contain its own limits, a sense of what is “enough” and what is “too much.” In addition, proper proportion and integrity are gauged in relation to God's own “sweetness”—one of Calvin's favored descriptions of God's goodness.

Profound joy can attune creatures to each other, the cosmos, and God; it can foster gratitude and inspire worship. Delight and gratitude can thereby serve to integrate and bind
creatures with each other, creation, and God. By contrast, profound suffering destabilizes selves and communities, disrupts expectations, and disturbs assumptions about God and the world. One can reject the construal of divine action as fatherly punishment that accompanies Calvin's pedagogy of bearing the cross and the precedence he gives to this pedagogy, and yet agree that destabilization and reorientation are necessary for the Christian life. Moreover, indignation, sorrow, and anger experienced in the face of suffering may attune persons to injustice, falsehood, and evil. “A chief evidence of the grace of God—which always comes to us in, with, and through each other—is this power to struggle and experience indignation,” Beverly Wildung Harrison observed.38 A sense that all is not well can animate resistance to harm and brutality and lead to critical consciousness of vectors of destruction and transformation, which can then further inform what and how to resist. When indignation or sorrow demands attention and leads to resistance, it can also disrupt self-preoccupation and undue pride—but with less danger of vitiating human capacity and responsibility than a pedagogy of patience in suffering.39

For Calvin, the central dynamic of the Christian life was, first, to “depart from” or deny one's self and, second, to seek God's will and to advance God's glory.40 Calvin addressed suffering primarily in relation to this dynamic: bearing the cross (undergoing suffering) provides training in patience, humility, and moderation that enables self-denial. In a world already marked by suffering, attention must necessarily shift to how Christians will be responsive to devastation and to possibilities of transformation in such a world. The valorization of suffering must be rejected and distinguished from the acknowledgment of vulnerability. Life before God must “go through” suffering. However, it does not require a pedagogy of suffering. Rather, attention and action can be directed by indignation and resistance, on the one hand, and by delight and gratitude, on the other. The final chapters develop these themes while leaving behind the language of pedagogy. They
depict ways of living before God: a call and testimony of resistance and an itinerary of delight and gratitude. This depiction does not reject learning as important to life before God, rather it signals distance from Calvin's portrayal of human creatures as relatively passive students in a world determined by a teaching, disciplining God.

**Ways of living before God**

Properly understood, Calvin's approach was not a theodicy; rather he provided practical wisdom for living amid suffering and before God. This account of vulnerability and glory is likewise not a theodicy; it concludes by developing and depicting ways of living with and for others before God. In this chapter, I have argued for reinterpreting the sign of the cross as pointing to vulnerability as the “pivot” open to both transformation and devastation and as the situation where God may become manifest. Living before God involves going through suffering, moving in indignation and resistance, and toward delight and gratitude. The final chapters develop these two ways.

The call and testimony of resistance and testimony, considered in chapter seven, and the itinerary of delight and gratitude, depicted in chapter eight, evoke the ancient ways of knowing God, the *via negativa* and the *via affirmativa*, but as ways of living before God. They draw together practical arts of living, working, and worshiping rightly with others before God. Like Calvin's pedagogy, these ways of living before God can destabilize privileged presumptions and attune attention to others and God. They train persons to recognize and to respond to what tears down God and creaturely dignity and to what restores and renews life as a good gift of God; they can place human (in)capacities in their proper proportion to God and to others. Note that resistance and delight/gratitude are closely related to the religious impulses that H. Richard Niebuhr referred to as
iconoclasm and sanctification, and they can also be articulated in relation to early Christian practices of right witness and right welcome.

The call and testimony of resistance and the itinerary of delight and gratitude are interrelated, ever-converting ways of living with and for others before God. They are, to use (and shift slightly) Niebuhr's formulation, polarities that cannot be lived without each other. These formulations assume each other; they are not options to choose between. I organize my presentation of each of these ways around depictions of individual lives: the way of resistance and testimony is explored in relation to the seventeenth-century Calvinist Marie Durand, and the itinerary of delight and gratitude is depicted in relation to novelist Paule Marshall's character Avey Johnson. These figures to point to lived realities beyond their particular historical and fictional existences—such as to later Reformed resistance against anti-Semitism and Christian anti-Judaism and to African American culture, respectively. Thus, in some ways, use of these figures also serves to ground and test the ways of living before God in historical struggles and patterns. That said, Marie Durand and Paule Marshall's character are not presented as exemplars; neither do they represent either/or choices. Rather, in the next chapters, these historical and fictional figures and their struggles offer means for cumulating metaphors and perspectives from previous chapters, and for portraying more vividly the interactive contrasts and relations among ways of living before God.

There is yet another pattern that informs the interpretation and interrelation of the two ways: the Protestant marks of the church. These ways of living before God align the Protestant reformers' insistence on right proclamation of the gospel with the testimony and call to resist idolatry and inhumanity, and align the emphasis on right worship with corporate practices that foster delight in and gratitude for the good gifts of life. In a world marked by suffering and in
which creatures are vulnerable to devastation and transformation, such testimony and resistance
and such delight and gratitude may provide a baseline for living with others before God.

Finally, by depicting vulnerability and transformation in terms of an ongoing tensive
negotiation of multiple dimensions of existence—affective, moral, religious, and epistemic—I want
to indicate that no aspect of existence should be understood to be “outside” of or unengaged by
Christian life and community. All existence and every dimension of existence is before God.
Every human creature is vulnerable to transformation and to devastation, although some, by virtue
of privileged social and economic situations, may be less at risk to damage and/or better able to
recover from devastation. In a world marked by suffering, life before God ought also to be
distinguished by attention to and care for vulnerable creatures and not merely by the fact of
suffering. There is no secular exclusion: no creature ought to suffer cruelty, brutality, and
indignity.

Chapter 6: A World Marked by Suffering

Martin’s Press, 1985), 349.

2. Venancia [pseudonym], a Salvadoran mother and catechist, as translated in Renny Golden, The Hour of the Poor, The


See also idem, No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008); Gustavo Gutiérrez,
We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books,

5. María Pilar Aquino, Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993),

6. This is Peter Brown’s framing of a central concern of Irenaeus and Melito of Sardis in *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 68. See the discussion above in chapter one.


13. When Bernard Madoff was sentenced for his massive financial fraud, his changed appearance was covered prominently and taken as symbolic: “He was no longer the carefully tailored and coiffed financier. His hair was ragged,” noted the *New York Times* headline story. Diana B. Henriques, “Madoff, Apologizing, Is Given 150 Years,” *New York Times* vol. 158 (June 30, 2009), 1.


19. This example comes from the work of Rev. Gregory Boyle, S.J., and Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, as observed
March 21, 2005.


21. Ernst Troeltsch’s later church- and sect-types correspond roughly to each of Calvin’s rejected options. In Troeltsch’s categories, this third way would retain the universal concern and embracing scope of the church-type without its triumphalism, and the emphasis on this-worldly transformation without sectarian exclusion.


24. Possibly he picked up the verb from Romans 8, where it is associated with labor pains and also anticipates and contrasts with “the glory about to be revealed to us” (Rom 8.18, 21); throughout his writings he described Christians as “groaning.” See 3.8.9; also 2.1.3, 5; 3.3.16.

25. Ibid., 3.8.10. Susan Schreiner explains that for Calvin, “Christ’s suffering is the fundamental reality that lies at the heart of faithful and obedient existence.” Yet, she clarifies, “it is not simply suffering for the sake of Christ or the gospel that is so important; suffering in itself is definitive of the spiritual life.” Schreiner, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Calvin’s Exegesis of Job from Medieval and Modern Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 95. She cites *Institutes*, 3.8.7, and Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 67-68.


27. Ibid., 3.8.1.

28. Ibid., 3.8.11.

29. Ibid., 3.4.3.

30. Ibid., 3.6.5.

31. Ibid., 3.7.1.


35. Ibid., 3.4.3; 3.7.5.

36. Ibid., 3.7.6.

37. Ibid., 3.10. 2, 3. Note also Calvin's polemical caricature of gluttonous adversaries who are preoccupied with keeping “their belly full” and whose “kitchen [is] their religion” in his “Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France,” 14.


39. See several decades of feminist critiques of sin interpreted centrally or solely as pride, beginning with Valerie Saiving's landmark essay, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* (1960): 108, and as elaborated in Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980). Anne E. Carr summarized the early critique and reformulation: Feminist thinkers have shown how dominant theological “understandings of sin as pride and rebellion against God . . . have failed to attend to the sin of those who are powerless, who lack agency, selfhood, and responsibility, who have suffered violence and abuse. . . . Sin is understood, in a feminist perspective, as the breaking of relationship with both God and human beings that can take the form of weakness as well as pride in its denial of the importance of human responsibility in both the personal and the political realms." *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (New York: Continuum, 1988; with new intro., 1996), 186.
