Cultivating Insight Through Comparing Cycles:

How comparison with the Hindu Kali tradition can enrich the Christian understanding of life, death, and resurrection.

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How comparison with the Hindu Kali tradition can enrich the Christian understanding of life, death, and resurrection

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The Christian ecological tradition rejects problematic dualisms that separate and hierarchically value the body and soul, humans and creation, man and woman, etc. Ecofeminist theology seeks to provide alternatives that better recognize the interconnectedness of life overall, yet it has not fully responded to the dualism of life and death. This is evident in the work of Ivone Gebara, a leading ecofeminist theologian who addresses life, death, and resurrection within a more immanent understanding of the Trinity. Though she argues for a more ambiguous understanding of good and evil, creation and destruction, life and death, the tensions between these categories are never fully resolved. This is where the Hindu tradition, and in particular the Kali tradition of Hinduism, may shed new light on the Christian understanding of death as part of creation and of its interconnection with all life. The goddess Kali in particular is often referred to as the mistress of death, or death itself, and as such she does not protect her devotees from the inevitability of life, suffering, and death. Instead, Kali reveals the mortality of all life and frees devotees to embody their own fate and accept their own death as she grants them liberation from samsara (the continuous cycle of dying and rebirth into the world of materiality). Gebara advocates against hierarchical dualisms of good and evil, creation and destruction, life and death, where Kali already embodies the tension of these polarities, even the transcendence of them altogether. Even though there are fundamental differences between Hindu and Christian worldviews and conceptions of the divine, the figure of Kali addresses traditional tensions between life and death and between creation and salvation, and thus inspires a more integral liberation for all creation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION

For my dear sister Kelly.

Who I miss every day.

You are free now - go be lovely.

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INTRODUCTION

Pope Francis's landmark encyclical *Laudato Si'* (May, 2015) is the first to explicitly detail the state of our current ecological crisis including rampant pollution, water scarcity, dwindling biodiversity, deforestation, and climate warming. It also explains the human contributions to climate disaster and highlights the plight of the poor, who are the first victims of the degradation of creation. The title of the encyclical, taken from Saint Francis' canticle, reminds us that the Catholic Church has a rich tradition to draw from in the field of ecological theology. *Laudate Deum*, Pope Francis's exhortation published in October, 2023, is the sequel that reinforces the teachings of *Laudato Si'* while lamenting our inadequate response in caring for our common home. The Church's recognition of our planet in peril is powerful and Pope Francis continues to inspire an understanding of integral ecology and interconnectedness of all. This dissertation continues the perspective of *Laudato Si'* and *Laudato Deum*, in the necessary quest to care for our earth and each other.

There are aspects of Church documents that address ecofeminist concerns, like in *Laudato Si'* where Francis notes the unhelpful dualisms that have "disfigured the Gospel."[1] Ecofeminist theology pursues alternatives to dualism, and theologians like

[1] Francis. "Laudato Si'." *The Holy See,* 24 May 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (98)

Anne Clifford highlight the need to interrogate more deeply the relationship between women and creation.[2] While Church teachings and documents have a long history of reinforcing unhelpful stereotypical views of women, like idealizing the Virgin Mary and glossing over the disproportionate way in which women are affected in environmental degradation, there are also women like Dorothy Stang, SND who are recognized for the fullness of their lives and work, in her case as a martyr of the Amazon.[3] This project is thus grounded in the pursuit of caring for our common home, in order to dialogue with all people of good will, to especially address the relationship between women and the earth.

In fact, a woman is the first recorded example of ecological martyrdom in human history. Amrita Devi, an Indian woman from the indigenous Bishnois people of the early 1700s, led hundreds of her people to sacrifice their own lives to preserve the forest that they saw as sacred. Amrita Devi was the first to die in that moment, while hugging the trees to try and stop the king's soldiers from felling the forest to harvest timber. Hundreds of Bishnois followed suit and were massacred until the king gave the soldiers orders to stop and the forest was saved. Up through preset times, countless others have dedicated themselves to Chipko (hug or embrace) movements (often with a female leader like Gaura Devi) as they advocate for ecological protection, even impacting legislation in Indian states. Dorothy Stang, SND was recognized by the Vatican as a martyr of the amazon, who was also killed while advocating for the protection of forests and people who are interconnected with the land of the Amazon.

Chipko movements, Dorothy Stang, and theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Johnson, Ivone Gebara, and countless others have recognized 'integral

[2] Clifford, Anne. "Pope Francis' *Laudato Si,'* on Care for Our Common Home: An Ecofeminist Response." In *CTSA Proceedings 72/2017*.
[3] Deane-Drummond, Celia. *A Primer in Ecotheology.* Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2017. 52

ecology from an ecofeminist perspective. Ecofeminist theologians have recognized and interpreted an integral ecology for decades before *Laudato Si'*, yet are not included in a footnote of the document. Encyclicals and documents about celebrating and caring for our common home can be immensely more impactful if they include the scope of the Christian ecological tradition of theology and bring ecofeminism, ecowomanism, and indigenous ways of knowing into its approach to 'every human person living on the planet.' The Church has a significant opportunity to demonstrate its own interrelatedness with the poor and oppressed who are indeed striving for the liberation of all in its treatment of our ecological crisis.

In *For Our Common Home*, Vandana Shiva, a renowned Hindu ecofeminist, critiques *Laudato Si'* and the way nature is discussed. Her ecological view is grounded in the reality that nature is alive she calls out women, farmers, and indigenous communities as those who are aware of and embodying this view of nature (and in fact these are the voices that Francis did not draw from in the encyclical.) Also in this volume is Rita D. Sherma, the most prominent Hindu theologian who addresses ecofeminism. She highlights the Hindu worldview where the world is understood to be the body, or physical manifestation, of the Divine.[4] The Vedas, which are the earliest Hindu texts, address the earth as "the mother who deserves our respect and protection," and Sherma advocates for a renewal and re-envisioning of these ancient truths for the exact ecological crises we face today.[5] She lifts up the concepts of dharma (a code of ethics to maintain balance in the universe) and ahimsa (non-violence to all life) as potential resources for this renewal. *Laudato Si'* would be much stronger, and better able to appeal to all people, if it took

[4] Cobb, John B., Ignacio Castuera, and Bill Mckibben. *For Our Common Home: Process-Relational Responses to Laudato Si'.* Anoka, MN: Process Century Press, 2015. Pg. 358
[5] *Ibid*, 361.

seriously the rich doctrines from non-Christian sources, and Shiva and Sherma provide excellent starting points in their response to the encyclical.

The Christian ecological tradition rejects the problematic dualisms that separate and hierarchically value the body and soul, humans and creation, man and woman, etc. Ecofeminist theology seeks to provide alternatives that better recognize the interconnectedness of life overall, yet it has not fully responded to the dualism of life and death. This is evident in the work of Ivone Gebara, a leading ecofeminist theologian who addresses life, death, and resurrection within a more immanent understanding of the Trinity. Though she argues for a more ambiguous understanding of good and evil, creation and destruction, life and death, the tensions between these categories are never fully resolved. This is where the Hindu tradition, and in particular the Kali tradition of Hinduism, sheds new light on the Christian understanding of death as part of creation and of its interconnection with all life. The goddess Kali in particular is often referred to as the mistress of death, or death itself, and as such she does not protect her devotees from the inevitability of life, suffering, and death. Instead, Kali reveals the mortality of all life and frees devotees to embody their own fate and accept their own death as she grants them liberation from samsara (the continuous cycle of dying and rebirth into the world of materiality). Ecofeminists, including Gebara, advocate against the hierarchical dualisms of good and evil, creation and destruction, life and death, where Kali already embodies the tension of these polarities, even the transcendence of them altogether.

"Ecofeminism" was first coined in the early 1970s by Francoise d'Eaubonne who stated that no *male* led revolution would ever address and rectify the horrors of

overpopulation and overuse/degradation of natural resources.[6] D'Eaubonne recognized the inherent link between the degradation of the world and the oppression of women, and the necessity of liberation for all that will only come through an ecofeminist perspective. In 1975, Ruether's *New Woman, New Earth* was a landmark text that made clear the links between women, the earth, and theological implications.[7] Liberation theology began in Latin America in the 1970s, with Latin American ecofeminist theology taking shape within it between 1970-1990. It was not until the third decade of Latin American feminist theology that theologians began to challenge the overall patriarchal structure of Christianity in a meaningful way. From searching for feminine images and language about God within the existing patriarchal system to recovering cosmic terms and language about God from Christian resources, these changes led to an ecofeminist theology that eschews traditional patriarchal philosophies, theologies, epistemologies, and dualisms.

As a Brazilian theologian immersed in these shifts, Ivone Gebara's work began with an ecofeminist critique of Christian theological anthropology as she criticized the Catholic Church and Vatican II documents for maintaining anthro/androcentric interpretations of the world. Gebara thus worked to rid herself entirely of this way of thinking. She proposes an ecofeminist approach to epistemology, anthropology, cosmology, Christology, and Trinitarian theology. Epistemologically, theological knowledge can be acquired through bodily experience, anthropologically humans are primarily intrinsically interrelated, and cosmologically God is immanent in the world and interconnected with it. Gebara recognizes the Trinity as immanent in the world in such a

[6] D'Eaubonne, Francoise. *Le Féminisme Ou La Mort*. Femmes En Mouvement. Paris: P. Horay, 1974.
[7] Reuther, Rosemary Radford. *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1975.

way as to be interrelated to both the life and death, creation and destruction that takes place as she advocates for a renewed Trinitarian understanding and devotion. Her ability to portray the complicated and often chaotic experience of life uniquely counters an ordered, dualistic, and hierarchical perspective. Gebara's theology is particularly significant in examining the relational nature of life and death, creation and destruction which she locates in the Trinity. It is her theological analysis of death and life that this project seeks to deepen and push further, to comprehensively articulate a renewed understanding of the interconnectedness of life and death.

While the intersection of Hindu theology, ecology, and feminism is not as systematically developed as in Christian theology, it is distinctly visible through lived ecological movements and activists. The Chipko Andolan is the foundational movement in Hindu ecofeminism and Vandana Shiva publicly advocates for an ecofeminist worldview. Shiva, like Gebara, admonishes patriarchal ways of thinking in modern science and offers alternatives to our modern conception of 'development,' like the knowledge of women and indigenous populations who already had a developed forestry system before the British arrived in India.[8] She asserts prakriti, or the feminine principle, as the primary resource for ecofeminism, drawing on the Vedas to reclaim diversified epistemologies. Similarly, Rita D. Sherma highlights ecofeminism's ability to reveal how women and nature are often rationalized by the same theoretical structures and supported by the same religious constructs. She advocates for the Tantric Shakta tradition as the

[8] Garrity-Bond, Cynthia. 2008. "Ecofeminist Epistemology in Vandana Shiva's Feminine Principle of Prakriti and Ivone Gebara's Trinitarian Cosmology." *Feminist Theology*. 26 (2): 185-194.

most helpful resource in a Hindu ecofeminism, highlighting the necessity of the feminine aspect of divinity and radical immanence of the divine.[9]

This dissertation engages the Shakta tradition, focusing on the goddess Kali, in an illustration of Sherma's theological argument that a radically immanent feminine divine is foundational to a Hindu ecofeminism.[10] The Kali tradition is rich and multi-faceted, with various developments over the centuries. She potentially originated as a tribal goddess, who by the epic and Puranic periods (third century BCE to seventh century BCE) became part of the Sanskrit Brahmanical tradition.[11] In the sixth century "Devi Mahatmya" text of the Markandeya Purana, for example, Kali materializes as an embodiment of the goddess Durga's anger in one of her more well-known origin stories. Kali's identity is shown to be unique in comparison to the other deities, as she does not remain within the confines of her sex. She is a female god who is not limited to the perfect qualities of motherhood, being a supportive spouse, etc. like the other female deities. Kali is sometimes known as an independent deity, and when she is linked to a god it is usually Siva. She incites his wild and destructive capabilities, and is also portrayed in sexual intercourse with him where she is above him. Kali is associated with the low caste, tribal, and other marginalized communities of Hindu society, and her temples are supposed to be built far away from villages and towns and closer to cremation grounds and low caste dwellings. She sustains life while being nourished by the gift of life through animal sacrifices that are still practiced today, and she is often depicted drinking blood and dancing in cremation grounds.

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[9] Nelson, Lance E., ed. *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998. 93

[10] The Shakta tradition is not always identical with the Kali tradition.

[11] McDermott, Rachel Fell and Kripal, Jeffrey. *Encountering Kali; In the Margins, At the Center, In the West.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003. 4

As a folk village goddess, Kali is the protector of particular locations and people. In villages, devotees often worship her as an element like a stone, and she is invoked in that particular geographic place. In Tantrism, Kali is the one who destroys the practitioner's fear of death so that they can be transformed and liberated. For bhaktas, Kali is the Mother who is fierce and terrifying, and also a maternal and loving parent with endless compassion. Kali is complex and multi-faceted, though consistently through her forms and traditions she is intimately related to and identified with death and destruction. Two devotees in particular, Ramprasad (1718-1775) of West Bengal and Ramakrishna (1836-1886), also Bengali, were the earliest to publicly proclaim their love of Kali in all her complexity. Each engaged in tantric training and practice, and also were devoted to Kali in the bhakti tradition. Their widely known poems and hymns to the goddess articulate themes of social liberation, the inevitability of death, and Kali as both a deity of various dualisms like death and life, though ultimately transcendent of all. These aspects of their relationships with Kali and underlying theology are rich resources for comparison with Gebara's theology and Christian ecofeminism. In this project, comparative Hindu-Christian theology engages the Kali tradition, with its implicit theology articulated through Ramprasad and Ramakrishna, and Gebara's particular pursuit of social justice and loving your neighbor, while pushing more deeply on the unresolved tensions of contemplating and loving God.

There are a variety of types and expressions of comparative theology, all of which pursue theological truth. This dissertation is an exercise in confessional comparative theology, where the religious identity of the author guides the entire project. Thus, my Roman Catholic identity leads me to ask and answer questions framed within the topics

and categories of the Catholic tradition.[12] The choice to compare with the Hindu Kali tradition is a result "of exposure and appeal," incorporating my "personal religious quest" with "the social and historical importance of a particular idea or practice," in this case the relationship between life and death.[13] As a teenager, I witnessed and mourned the deaths of five friends, and since then have encountered death in ever-increasingly personal ways, from the sudden death of my only sibling to miscarriages of three of my own pregnancies. These personal and painful encounters with death raised eschatological questions, which I negotiated-and continue to-with dear Hindu friends who first exposed me to Hinduism, and the goddesses Durga and Kali.

In the face of personal loss, the reactions of well-intentioned friends and family who offered me theologically jarring platitudes including "it is God's will," "they are with God now," and "God only takes the best" increased my desire to explore the topic of death further. It is also worth noting that this dissertation topic was finalized in December 2019, just before the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus killed millions in 2020 alone, and isolated us all, while magnifying the unjust disparities in our societies that differentiate varying levels of access to basic human needs like food, water, and medical attention. This dissertation thus highlights the importance of increasing our contemplation and understanding of death itself, and how it is interconnected with our lives and our world overall.

Conradie, Moltmann, and other theologians demonstrate the need for renewed eschatology in Christianity. These theologians offer a few ways of discussing the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that takes ecotheology into account in an effort to include

[12] Cornille, Catherine. *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology.* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019. 25
[13] *Ibid,* 19.

all of creation in this life cycle as well. As Conradie mentions, however, there is an unresolved tension in the polarity of creation and redemption that needs to be reconciled. Ecofeminism in particular takes this challenge on in a profound way, for example where the creative and redemptive moments happen in daily life as well as in the more ultimate sense.[14] Elizabeth Johnson offers an articulation of "deep resurrection" that emphasizes the physical nature of the resurrection, where salvation is not an escape from materiality but "the transformation of the whole body-person."[15] She understands the cross as "a particular event of divine solidarity with the suffering and death of all creatures."[16] Christ's death in particular is a sacrament of mercy, that can lead us to a transformation of how we identify with the suffering earth and the hope we envision for the resurrection of all materiality. Deane-Drummond's eschatology also emphasizes "that God's love in the face of death is much better expressed through envisaging God as acting *through improvisation*, even in solidarity with the world of the dead," where "the continuance of human life beyond death is important inasmuch as it shows the capacity for humans to engage in an existential sharing with creatures beyond the grave."[17] Johnson, Deane-Drummond, and others thus highlight the possibilities in theological reflection on death and its contribution to the field of ecofeminism. Gebara notes that this line of thinking is only beginning, as **"**We are called upon to reflect on life and death beyond hierarchical

[14] In *Creation and Salvation Volume* 2, Grace Ji-Sun Kim articulates the need for Asian women to experience salvation in the present, just as they experience suffering in their religious traditions that assign them a subordinate role.
[15] Johnson, Elizabeth. "Jesus and the Cosmos: Soundings in Deep Christology." In *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015. 148
[16] Johnson, Elizabeth. *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018. 222
[17] Deane-Drummond, *A Primer in Ecotheology,* 86-87.

conceptions, but this task still needs a long historical trajectory for it to become flesh of our flesh."[18]

Dismantling dualisms is inherent in ecofeminism across traditions, and in comparative theology there are others who engage in Hindu-Christian scholarship to address Christian dualist metaphysics including: Henri Le Saux, Raimon Panikkar, and Michelle Voss Roberts.[19] Voss Roberts also engages in feminist theology, and in her book *Dualities* she comparatively engages Lalleswari and Mechthild, two medieval female thinkers from Hinduism and Christianity, respectively.[20] In this text she emphasizes fluidity between divine, human, and nature instead of relying on rigid dualisms.[21] For Voss Roberts, and for this dissertation, the feminist concerns raised by Shiva, Sherma, and others in the Hindu tradition reinforce Christian feminist critiques through attention to "analogous views and themes" in both traditions.[22] This dissertation thus engages in comparative ecofeminist theology, which will be a growing field in the years to come as we grapple with our ecological crisis.

A primary dimension of this project compares the Christian understanding of life, death, and resurrection along with the Hindu cycle of samsara and how Kali offers liberation through deep study, maintaining each tradition's own context, to draw out both similarities and differences. These cycles are analogous on one level: both have a tangible concept of life after death, and death is not a final stage. However, the language, metaphysics, and theological implications within each of the two traditions are certainly

[18] Ivone Gebara, "A feminist theology of liberation: a Latin American perspective with a view toward the future" in Pui-lan, Kwok. *Hope Abundant: Third World and Indigenous Women's Theology.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010. 63
[19] Cornille, *Meaning and Method,* 21.
[20] Voss Roberts, Michelle. *Dualities: A Theology of Difference*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.
[21] Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 33.
[22] *Ibid,* 120.

not equal. For example, Kali does not have the same experiential knowledge of continual dying and rebirth that the Trinitarian God does of life, death, and resurrection. In comparing both traditions in this dissertation, there is thus a tension between what Christian theology can learn from the Hindu Kali tradition and what cannot be absorbed from it, and vice versa. As a confessional comparativist, I will therefore selectively and constructively engage Hinduism for elements of value to Christian theological engagement and learning.

To maintain accountability to the Hindu Kali tradition and its complexity, this project deliberately draws from folk narrative, Sanskrit texts, including Tantric texts, as well as vernacular bhakti poetry written by devotees to provide a comprehensive overview of the available primary sources while focusing on the themes of life and death. The secondary texts are necessary, as the primary texts are so extensive, and these are the result of prolonged and careful study of the Kali tradition. Ivone Gebara's theology and select aspects of the Kali tradition provide fruitful comparison based on their resonance to her work.[23] Gebara's theology is grounded in her explicit and fundamental concern for the oppressed, as well as an ecofeminist critique of patriarchy and dualisms. She asserts relatedness as the primary part of a human identity, across humanity, creation, and the cosmos. Gebara affirms the necessity of engaging across religious traditions in pursuit of a deeper understanding of our interconnectedness. This project thus demonstrates how comparative theology can enlarge her theological scope to deepen her articulation of relationality, particularly that of life and death. After outlining Gebara's theology, and the Kali tradition, this project examines how these traditions address the dualisms of: good

[23] Cornille highlights Reid Locklin, Hugh Nicholson, and Francis Clooney as they articulate the seemingly arbitrary and intuitive process found in comparative theology in *Meaning and Method* pages 124, 89, and 165.

and evil, creation and destruction, male and female, body and spirit, social engagement and spiritual realization, life and death. Death, as portrayed in the Kali tradition, is a "catalyst" for Catholics to "reexamine their own tradition of Catholic reflection" on death and life, to use Daniel Sheridan's term.[24] This catalyst will "reinvigorate our imaginations and our enthusiasm, to re-stimulate our jaded perception of the beauty of God so that we may respond with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength to the lovable and personal reality of God."[25]

[24] Sheridan, Daniel P. *Loving God: Krishna and Christ. A Christian Commentary on the Narada Sutras.* Leuven: Peeters, 2007. 2
[25] Cornille references Sheridan, pgs. 6-7 in *Meaning and Method* pg. 21

1.0 CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN ECOTHEOLOGY

1.1 LYNN WHITE'S ECOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF CHRISTIANITY

Lynn White, a historian of science and technology, wrote an essay in 1967 titled *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,* which was one of the earliest academic critiques of Christianity's relationship to the natural world, and focused on the problematic anthropocentrism of a biblical perspective. White argued for an inability for the prevailing theology to include an ecologically helpful reading, and he offered Saint Francis of Assisi, who saw other creatures as brothers and sisters, as the most helpful patron saint of Christianity and specifically ecotheology.[26] White saw the re-examination of the Christian tradition as a necessity, in order to eradicate the notions of domination and utilization of the natural world, and pave the way for a more holistic view of ecology and the responsibility of humans to maintain balance. This essay inspired countless theologians to engage Christian theology through an ecological perspective, and continues to do so today as this article is referenced in nearly every Christian theological

[26] White, Lynn, Jr., *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*. Washington: American Association of Science, 1967.

work focusing on ecology. In a commentary on *Laudato Si',* for example, Joseph Prabhu draws a direct line from White's essay to Pope Francis's encyclical.[27]

Not all theologians agree with White's assessment of the Christian tradition's ecological shortcomings, however. Sallie McFague critiques his "ignorance of theological history" as she argues that "From the earliest days of Christianity, the cosmological context was a major interpretive category along with the psychological and the political."[28] McFague instead highlights the more recent "turn to the self" of Christianity which has led to the tradition's negligence of nature and oppressed human beings. Elizabeth Johnson similarly argues for a return to the cosmological roots of our tradition. She recovers Augustine's emphasis on the book of nature and the necessity to read it along with the book of the Bible, as well as other early Christian thinkers who approached theology with a cosmological perspective that is helpful for ecological theology. While Christian theology can be problematically anthro/androcentric, this has not always been the case, and Johnson and McFague (and others) endeavor to provide a model for what the tradition can reclaim and develop further toward a holistic ecotheology.

1.2 ENVIRONMENTALISM, ECOLOGY, AND DEEP ECOLOGY

One of the first recorded examples of environmental activism in human history comes from the Bishnois people of India in the early 1700s, who sacrificed their own

[27] Joseph Prabhu in *For our common home: process-relational responses to Laudato Si',* 82
[28] McFague, Sallie. "An Ecological Christology: Does Christianity Have It?" in Hessel, Dieter T., and Rosemary Radford Ruether. *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of Earth and Humans*. Cambridge: International Society for Science and Religion, 2007. 29

lives to preserve the forest that they saw as sacred.[29] Environmental movements did not become frequent and global until the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century. The Sierra Club and other environmental organizations developed during the late nineteenth century, many of which still operate and have even grown dramatically, as the United States saw the creation of organizations directed towards wildlife, soil conservation, and sustainable forestry. The women's suffrage movement, after securing the right for women to vote in 1920, went on to advocate for national, state, and city parks and land preservation in the United States.[30] A shift occurred in the 1970s and 1980s where the question of humans utilizing environmental resources responsibly became insufficient, and so the idea of the intrinsic value of creatures, instead of creatures as resources, led to the development of ecology and deep ecology.[31] Today, in the early twenty-first century, environmental activists like Greta Thunberg commandeer the world's attention in the ever-increasing severity of our global environmental crisis.

The difference between environmentalism and ecology is important, as the former concept maintains an anthropocentric view of the world where humans are often seen as primary over and separate from the rest of the natural world. Ecology, coming from the Greek *oikos* meaning home, connotes the interrelated web of life where humans are part of the natural world in a more holistic way. Deep ecology originated in 1972 when Arne Naess coined the phrase, which assesses "the symbolic, psychological, and ethical patterns of destructive relations of humans with nature," where Western culture and

[29] Chapter one of *Women Pioneers for the Environment* outlines the story of Amrita Devi, the first ecological martyr of India.
[30] MacKinnon, Mary Heather and McIntyre, Moni. *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*. Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995. 85
[31] Deane-Drummond, *A Primer in Ecotheology*, 11

Christianity are leading causes of this destruction.[32] Deep ecology must therefore include a deep transformation of society in order to avoid ecological collapse. The two "ultimate norms" deep ecology holds are self-realization and biocentric equality, where through political action on behalf of other creatures a new and holistic awareness and overall culture is the goal.[33] In the science of ecology overall, it is now understood that humans are part of an ecosystem with other creatures, where the primary difference is that humans are "at least potentially more self-aware of their impacts on the planet than other creatures." [34] This shift in awareness from an anthropocentric environmental understanding of humanity's relationship to creation to a holistic, interrelated ecological perspective led to a reframing of theological questions and the development of ecotheology.[35]

1.3 OVERVIEW OF CHRISTIAN ECOTHEOLOGY

In Hessel and Ruether's volume *Christianity and Ecology*, Elizabeth Johnson is quick to point out that early Christian and medieval theology included the world, humanity, and God in a cosmological approach, and the problematic hierarchy of dualisms came later from Christian uses of Aristotle and Neoplatonism.[36] This cleavage

[32] Reuther, Rosemary Radford. *Gaia and God: an Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992. 2
[33] MacKinnon, *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology,* 197
[34] Deane-Drummond, *A Primer in Ecotheology*, 14
[35] This reframing does not mean an absence of thought about the natural world in Christian history. See the anthology *Creation and Humanity: The Sources of Christian Theology*, edited by Ian A. McFarland, for an anthology of early church material on the natural world through the ecotheology of today.
[36] Johnson, Elizabeth. "Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition." In Hessel, Dieter T., and Rosemary Radford Ruether. *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of Earth and Humans*. Cambridge: International Society for Science and Religion, 2007. 7

introduced a worldview that did not in fact include the world, but instead was limited to discussions of God and the self that persisted until recent decades. Ecotheology seeks to transcend this dualism and ground Christianity in an interconnected ecological understanding of the world. The intersection between ecology and theology was emphasized in particular in 1963 when Philip Joranson organized the Faith-Man-Nature group.[37] This group began after speakers like Joseph Sittler, who addressed the World Council of Churches in 1961, "called for earthly Christology and greater emphasis on cosmic redemption" as a contribution to the theological understanding of liberation for all life.[38] Today there are many Christian theologians doing the necessary work of ecotheology, with a rich diversity of contributions to the field of theology. Ernst Conradie suggests that ecotheology "may be regarded as a next wave of contextual theology," intersecting with liberation, black, feminist, womanist, and indigenous theologies in order to adequately respond to the needs of today's world.[39]

Thus, ecological theology provides opportunity for reflection and critique of cultural practices that contribute to environmental degradation. Ernst Conradie defines ecotheology as "an attempt to reinvestigate, rediscover, and renew the Christian tradition in the light of the challenges posed by environmental destruction," and notes that this restructuring has a hopeful tone overall.[40] Conradie also posits this reformation of Christianity as the most helpful contribution Christian ecotheology can make to secular environmental issues. While the idea that God is present in some way in the natural world

[37] Johnson, Elizabeth. "Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition," xxxiv
[38] *Idem.*
[39] Conradie, Ernst M. *Christianity and Ecological Theology: Resources for further research.* Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2006. 3
[40] Conradie, Ernst M., Sigurd Bergmann, Celia Deane-Drummond, and Denis Edwards. *Christian Faith and the Earth: Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology*. London, England: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2014. 2

is far from novel in human thought, the focus on creation as sacrament in ecotheology consciously addresses environmental concerns, the metaphysical relationship between God and creation, the plight of the earth as it is intertwined with the most vulnerable in our societies, etc. The sacramentality of the natural world, a perspective not limited to recent or Christian theologies, is almost a universally implied theory in Christian ecotheology. A sacrament is at its core "the capacity to reveal grace, the agapic self-gift of God, by being what it is. By being thoroughly itself, a sacrament bodies forth the absolute self-donative love of God that undergirds both it and the entirety of creation…"[41] God's free, loving, creative act therefore renders everything created a sacrament.

The sacramentality of creation and presence of God in the material world is easier to grapple with than God's presence in the suffering, death, and resurrection of the world, however. There is an abundance of material to read about creation and life in ecotheology, with far fewer sources addressing suffering, death, and afterlife. Theologians like Denis Edwards call for a renewal of Christian theology around the topic of death and resurrection because of this gap, and the prevalence of theology that insufficiently addresses the life cycle in all its complexity. Ernst Conradie also argues that the Christian theological tradition has not yet been able to do sufficient justice to both creation and salvation, and this project will therefore delve into the unresolved tension.[42] This first chapter includes an overview of Christian ecotheology, which will

[41] Himes, Michael J. and Kenneth R. Himes, "The Sacrament of Creation: Toward an Environmental Theology." *Commonweal*, 26 January 1990. https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/sacrament-creation-toward-environmental-theology

[42] Conradie, Ernst M., ed. *Creation and Salvation: Volume 2: A Companion on Recent Theological Movements.* Zurich: Lit, 2012. 1

discuss a few prominent ecotheologies to trace the development and contextualize the focus of this dissertation, which is the cycle of life, death, and the afterlife.

1.4 LIFE CYCLE IN CHRISTIAN ECOTHEOLOGY: MAJOR THEMES AND FIGURES

The world needs to be included in all aspects of theology, and as Conradie demonstrates, one of the most challenging loci to reconcile is eschatology and the question of what a resurrected earth looks like? "What on earth could be the ecological significance of the Christian hope for the resurrection of the dead?"[43] Conradie challenges Christian eschatology as escapist and inadequately responding to the needs of the earth, and calls for an ecological reinterpretation.[44] He asserts that "salvation can be only an affirmation of the finitude of human nature, not an escape from it."[45] The hope for resurrection is, at its core, hope in the Judeo-Christian God who transcends finitude and "maintains an unconditionally creative relationship with the created order."[46] Hope is therefore not divorced from materiality, but rather functions as a more pressing reminder that this earth, life, and body are supremely important in the big picture that is eternal life. God's radical immanence in a vision of the resurrection of the body can in this way inspire conversion to an ecologically focused worldview. This section will therefore discuss the most relevant theologies and theologians and their attempts to work toward an

[43] Peters, Ted, Robert J. Russell, and Michael Welker, ed. *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments.* Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2002. 277
[44] Conradie, *Christianity and Ecological Theology.* 136
[45] Peters, *Resurrection*. 278
[46] Peters, *Resurrection*. 287

understanding of creation and the life cycle, considering all life forms and the universe itself.

One of the most prominent ecotheological theories is Niels Gregersen's Christological theory of "deep incarnation." He interprets Christ's incarnation in the world as God taking on an elemental body that is therefore connected with all of the physical elements that have ever existed, meaning that Jesus (and all of us) are part of the 'star stuff' that makes up the universe.[47] Deep incarnation is a crucial theory in ecotheology, and Denis Edwards was a primary proponent of his theory. In *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action*, Edwards posits that resurrection is the event which "reveals God's meaning and purpose in creation and redemption."[48] He argues for "an objective and powerful theology of resurrection that promises the final healing of creation," because he believes "Only a theology of resurrection that is eschatologically transformative can begin to respond to the suffering that is built into an evolutionary universe."[49] Edwards draws on Rahner and other theologians who were not in particular addressing the environmental crisis of the modern day, but whose theologies are useful in constructing, in this case, a theology of resurrection. For example, Rahner held the resurrection as the primary manifestation of God's action and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the cycle that is the sacrament of God's redeeming will. In drawing on Rahner, Edwards is contradicting theologies of redemption that rely on

[47] Gregersen, Niels Henrik. "The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World." *Dialog: A Journal of Theology.* 2001. Bind 40, Nr. 3. 192-207.
[48] Edwards, Denis. *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action.* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010. 91
[49] *Ibid,* 92.

atonement, and is advocating for a "much needed renewal in this most fundamental area of Christian theology."[50]

Edwards outlines classical redemption theologies, with Athanasius as a primary interlocutor, and sketches a theology of redemption he calls deifying transformation. He continues to draw on Rahner and his insight that the resurrection "is not only the promise but also the beginning of the divine act by which the whole universe is transformed and deified," and thus "the resurrection of the crucified Jesus is the beginning of the deification of the world itself."[51] Coupled with Niels Gregersen's deep incarnation, Christ's cross exposes God's interconnection with the entire created world, even and especially in the difficulties and agony. In Edwards's eschatological theory, deifying thus refers to the Spirit of God that dwells in humanity as we partake in divine life, and transformation indicates the redeeming act of God that includes humanity and the entire universe.[52] The resurrected Christ is "part of the material universe already taken into God as pledge and beginning of the fulfillment of material creation in God. Speaking of the deification of the material universe is claiming that the universe will reach its own proper fulfillment in being taken up in God's self-giving love."[53] Edwards provides a compelling argument for deifying transformation as a renewed Christian eco-eschatology, drawing from historical theologians and applying their theories to our modern-day ecological crisis.

In *Ecology at the Heart of Faith,* Denis Edwards traces ecological eschatological reflection, beginning with Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's view of Christ as the Prime

[50] Edwards. *How God Acts,* 108.
[51] *Ibid,* 123.
[52] Edwards relies on biblical reference, Rahner's theology, and Maximus the Confessor's theology to make the case for including all of the material universe in deifying transformation.
[53] *Ibid,* 155.

Mover of evolution, where Chardin argued for the risen Christ as the real Omega of the process, long before our current ecological crisis. Edwards then links Chardin to Karl Rahner, who saw the resurrection as the initiation of the divinization of the world. For Rahner, the resurrection means a unity of creation and God, and the promise of creation that is transformed like the risen Christ and includes the whole bodily person as well as the material universe. Thus, Edwards points out that Rahner was committed to a view of Christians as necessarily contemplating the future of ourselves without separation from the future of all creation. Edwards acknowledges that Rahner, too, was not explicitly addressing the ecological crisis, but that he is relying on Chardin and Rahner to provide foundational insights for an ecotheological framework.

Jürgen Moltmann is another theologian who addresses the tension between creation and redemption in a particular way through an ecologically focused theology. In his Gifford lectures from 1984-1985, he critiqued the scientific epistemological frameworks and advocated for more relational, communal, and integrative ways of knowing and being.[54] He began by defining life as "existing in relationship with other people and things…communication in communion," where "isolation and lack of relationship means death for all living things, and dissolution even for elementary particles."[55] Thus, nature is not something to be dominated or subdued, and the body is not something we own. Moltmann advocated for a holistic, ecological reformulation of the theological doctrine of creation that is eschatologically oriented, and directed "towards the liberation of men and women, peace with nature, and the redemption of the community of human beings and nature from negative powers, and from the forces of

[54] Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 3.
[55] *Ibid*, 3.

death."[56] He focused on the resurrection of Christ as that which illuminates history and death with hope for the future redemption, giving all of creation "an eternal hope that it will be created anew as the 'world without end.'"[57]

Moltmann emphasized that previously held dualities like life and death, creation and redemption, are in fact complementary and interconnected instead of hierarchically related. He advocated for Creation in the Spirit as the primary theological concept for an ecological doctrine of creation. Epistemologically, Moltmann does not want to divorce theological and scientific insights, but instead wants to have a communal relationship between the two. In his ecological doctrine of creation, the heart of it is "the recognition of the presence of God *in* the world and the presence of the world *in* God," where God is not only the world's Creator but also the Spirit of the universe.[58] Jesus underwent the suffering and self-destruction of creation to offer healing, and then it is through him and his embodied experiences that the Spirit proceeds. Both the growth and the destruction in the universe are therefore the movements of the Spirit of creation.[59] It is this point in particular that captures the imagination of this dissertation: the presence of God in suffering and death, and pressing further to identify the implications this presence has in our practical lived theology.

In *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, Moltmann outlines varying eschatological doctrines, derived from Lutheranism, Calvinism, Orthodox, and Catholic theologies. He discusses ecofeminism and its emphasis on the necessity of perceiving life and death as part of the same cycle of living. Indeed, Moltmann's theology has striking

[56] Moltmann. *God in Creation,* 4.
[57] *Ibid*, 7.
[58] *Ibid*, 12.
[59] *Ibid*, 16.

similarities with ecofeminist theology. Both critique modern science for its problematic dualism between nature and humanity and its emphasis on scientific ways of knowing. They also recognize the interconnection of all life, and of life and death in a particular way. Finally, they each put forth a theological re-grounding in the Spirit to resolve the tension between creation and redemption, life and death, evolution and destruction, and other cycles that they see as problematically portrayed hierarchically in Christian theology. These ecofeminist threads of thought will be further woven together in the following two sections. In fact, the theologians who most prominently focus on the cycle of life, death, and resurrection are ecofeminist theologians.

1.5 ECOLOGICAL THOUGHT IN THE CATHOLIC MAGISTERIUM AND ECOFEMINIST CRITIQUES

On January 1st, 1990 Pope John Paul II delivered a message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace entitled "Peace with God the Creator, peace with all of creation." He grappled with environmental destruction in a public way, and referenced the "new ecological awareness that is beginning to emerge which…ought to be encouraged to develop into concrete programmes and initiatives."[60] Pope John Paul II highlighted the relevance of ecological questions in the context of ethical values of a peaceful society, and cited the "lack of respect for life" as the most pressing issue in cycles of

[60] John Paul II. "Peace with God the Creator; Peace with All of Creation." *The Holy See*, 1 January 1990, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html #1

environmental pollution.[61] He claimed that Christians are especially responsible for their relationship with creation and with the Creator as he called on humanity to work together across religious and secular traditions for the common good. This message from Pope John Paul II was one of the first papal addresses to explicitly link environmental and ecological issues with questions of morality in the Catholic faith. He concluded this message with a reference to his 1979 Proclamation of Sant Francis of Assisi as the patron saint of those who work to nurture ecology, as he hoped that he would inspire us all.[62]

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI acted to make the Vatican carbon-neutral during his papacy. He installed solar panels on Vatican halls and sought out a hybrid popemobile. Continuing Pope John Paul II's theology, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI asserted that caring for the environment and adapting an ecological view is a religious and moral obligation. The current papal authority, Pope Francis, published *Laudato Si*' in a significant moment for the Church's relationship with creation.[63] The title of the encyclical, taken from Saint Francis' canticle, reminds us that the Catholic Church has a rich tradition to draw from in the field of ecological theology. The encyclical is ground breaking, as the first to explicitly detail the state of our current environmental crisis and its interconnection with the plight of the poor, who are the first victims of the degradation of creation. The Church's recognition of our planet in peril was welcome and necessary, and ecofeminists like Anne Clifford argue for a deepening of insights from the document, as the relationship between women and creation remains overlooked.[64] Women are the

[61] John Paul II. "Peace with God the Creator; Peace with All of Creation." *The Holy See*, 1 January 1990, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html #1.
[62] John Paul II. "Inter Sanctos." *The Holy See*, 15 January 1979, https://www.vatican.va/archive/aas/documents/AAS-71-1979-ocr.pdf
[63] Francis. *Laudato Si'*
[64] Clifford, "Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*.

first to suffer when environmental calamites occur, women are often the first to cry out on behalf of the earth, and women give birth to conservation movements around the world.[65]

Rosemary Radford Ruether finds hope in the encyclical, however, where it develops the Christian eschatological hope for final resurrection. In paragraph 237, *Laudato Si'* refers to the resurrection of Jesus as "the pledge of the final transfiguration of all created reality."[66] Here the resurrection from the dead includes all of creation, instead of the traditional anthropocentric view. This shift provides the grounds for people "to convert their consciousness and way of life to the care for the creation, leading it and themselves to that fulfillment in resurrected glory in union with God."[67] Elizabeth Johnson also finds resonance in *Laudato Si'* with the ecofeminist tradition where Pope Francis addresses the "unhealthy dualisms" that have "disfigured the Gospel."[68] Clearly, there is space in the encyclical and cause to invoke the rich ecofeminist tradition to further bolster the call to ecological conversion.

Laudato Si' articulates many opportunities to deepen our contemplation of integral ecology. The work of theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Johnson, Ivone Gebara, and countless others from an ecofeminist perspective contribute to understanding this concept, and in future encyclicals and documents they provide a rich resource for investigation and reflection. Vincent Miller describes integral ecology as "an imagination that enables us to perceive the interconnections among all things" in his

[65] In fact, "women" are not mentioned in the encyclical, except as part of the phrase "men and women."
[66] *Laudato Si,'* 237
[67] Cobb, *For Our Common Home,* 20
[68] *Laudato Si,'* 98

commentary on the encyclical.[69] Miller offers the Buddhist example of interdependence as a theologically productive comparison to integral ecology and mentions Lynn White Jr.'s essay, but even he does not note the Christian ecofeminist tradition.[70] Ecofeminist theologians have recognized and interpreted an integral ecology decades before *Laudato Si'*, though they are not included even in a footnote of the document. Further work on the encyclical on celebrating and caring for our common home can be immensely more impactful if the scope of the Christian ecological tradition of theology and ecofeminism, ecowomanism, and indigenous ways of knowing are brought into its approach to 'every human person living on the planet.' Women like Wangari Maathai and those who are in the Chipko movements in India know well the difference an ecofeminist perspective can make in the world and the continuance of our ecosystem, and the Church has a significant opportunity to demonstrate its own interrelatedness with the poor and oppressed who are indeed striving for the liberation of all. This project now turns to these ecofeminist theologies next, for a brief overview of the field and its development.

In *For Our Common Home*, Vandana Shiva, a renowned Hindu ecofeminist, critiques *Laudato Si'* and the way Francis discusses nature. Her ecological view is grounded in the reality that nature is alive and forceful, and that she is able to destroy humanity just as we wreak destruction upon her.[71] Shiva calls out women, farmers, and indigenous communities as those who are aware of and embodying this view of nature (and in fact these are the voices that Francis did not draw from in the encyclical.) Also in this volume is Rita D. Sherma, perhaps the most prominent Hindu theologian who

[69] Miller, Vincent. "Integral ecology: Francis's spiritual and moral vision of interconnectedness." In *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si: Everything is Connected.* London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017.
[70] White, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.*
[71] Cobb, *For Our Common Home.* 15

addresses ecofeminism. She highlights the Hindu worldview where the world is understood to be the body, or physical manifestation, of the Divine.[72] The Vedas, which are the earliest Hindu texts, address the earth as "the mother who deserves our respect and protection," and Sherma advocates for a renewal and re-envisioning of these ancient truths for the exact ecological crises we face today.[73] She lifts up the concepts of dharma (a code of ethics to maintain balance in the universe) and ahimsa (non-violence to all life) as potential resources for this renewal. *Laudato Si'* would be much stronger, and better able to appeal to all people, if it took seriously the rich doctrines from non-Christian sources, and Shiva and Sherma provide excellent starting points in their response to the encyclical.

1.6 DEVELOPMENT OF ECOFEMINIST THEOLOGIES

In the early 1970s French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne defined the term ecofeminism and stated that no *male* led revolution would ever address and rectify the horrors of overpopulation and overuse/degradation of natural resources.[74] D'Eaubonne recognized the inherent link between the degradation of the world and the oppression of women, and the necessity of liberation for all that will only come through an ecofeminist perspective.[75] Later in that same decade, the Three Mile Island meltdown in Pennsylvania was one of the first times women came together en masse to discuss the interconnections

[72] Cobb, *For Our Common Home.* 358
[73] *Ibid*, 361.
[74] MacKinnon, 198
[75] Before d'Eaubonne's proclamation, the American women's suffrage movement in the early 1900s, after working for the right to vote, went on to advocate for established preservation lands in the United States and the protection of National Parks and other spaces from development.

between the plight of women and humans, the natural world, the state of nuclear science, etc.[76] Ecofeminism is the realization of a connection between the oppression of women and the degradation of the natural world, where true liberation is envisioned as equality between men and women (and all marginalized peoples) coupled with respect and protection of the planet and all life forms within our environment. Because ecology signifies the interrelated web of life that makes up the environment, ecofeminism strives for true harmony and balance ecologically, which is inextricably linked to feminism.

In 1975, Ruether's *New Woman, New Earth* was a landmark text that made clear the links between women, the earth, and theological implications.[77] She advocated for a cooperative relationship model that includes all systems of life, instead of the prevalent oppressions that exist in humanity and between humanity and creation. Ruether spoke of the "exorcism of the demonic spirit of sexism in the Church" as revolutionizing and transforming "all the relations of alienation and domination-between self and body, between leaders and community, between person and person, between social groups, between Church and world, between humanity and nature, finally our model of God in relation to creation-all of which have been modeled on the sexist schizophrenia."[78] She sees eco-justice and spirituality as inextricably linked, constituting the internal and external conversion necessary to embody true liberation for all life.

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[76] The Three Mile Island meltdown, near Middletown, PA on March 28, 1979 involved the partial meltdown of the Unit 2 reactor. After this tragic incident, women were the first and primary protestors of the cover-up of the accident itself, and the consequences local residents would endure. The original four women continue to advocate for visibility and safety around nuclear energy and accidents. See the documentary *Radioactive: the Women of Three Mile Island*, 2024. https://www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/doc-collections/fact-sheets/3mile-isle.html

[77] Reuther, Rosemary Radford. *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1975.

[78] *Ibid*, 83.

Liberation theology was taking shape around the same time *New Woman, New Earth* was published, and it connected the plight of the poor and systemic oppression to Jesus's suffering in a radical way within Catholic theology.[79] Liberation theology began in Latin America, with Latin American ecofeminist theology taking shape within it between 1970-1990.[80] There were three phases of development throughout three decades, all of which overlap and integrate with each other.[81] It was not until the third decade and phase of Latin American feminist theology that theologians began to challenge the overall patriarchal structure of Christianity in a meaningful way. From searching for feminine images and language about God within the existing patriarchal system to recovering cosmic terms and language about God from Christian resources, these changes led to an ecofeminist theology that eschews traditional patriarchal philosophies, theologies, epistemologies, and dualisms.

In addition to Latin American liberation theology, there are other strands of ecofeminist theological thought. Heather Eaton recognizes the plurality of ecofeminisms and the diverse groups of women, contexts, and ways in which they are employed.[82] She acknowledges the overwhelming amount of Christian and English language contributions to the field, which is one reason why this dissertation seeks to develop Latin American

[79] Gebara notes that there was not enough room in liberation theology in the 1970s and 80s to include both women and the world.

[80] See Tamez, Elsa. "Latin American Feminist Hermeneutics: A Retrospective," in *Women's Visions: Theological Reflection, Celebration, Action*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995. In the first phase of liberation theology, there was a lack of dialogue between secular Latin American feminism or feminism from developed countries. In the next decade and phase, male liberation theologians began to work with female theologians on topics like sexism and oppression of women. The 1980s also brought Black and indigenous theologies to liberation theology. According to Gebara, Tamez, and Ress, while the phases and decades overlap and integrate with each other, it was not until the third decade and phase of Latin American feminist theology that theologians began to challenge the overall patriarchal structure of Christianity in a meaningful way.

[81] Ress, Ecofeminism.

[82] Eaton, Heather. *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2005. 7

ecofeminism in relation to Hinduism, to provide a more diverse contribution to ecofeminist theology. Eaton highlights the support inherent in ecofeminist ventures, where for example women in North Atlantic countries aided Indian women in protesting the Narmada Dam[83] project.[84] Eaton's introduction to ecofeminist theologies includes an acknowledgement of the evolutionary nature of ecofeminism, where activism inspires theoretical work and theory grounds activism in a cyclical relationship.[85] This project primarily focuses on theological theory, and will include embodied ecofeminist practices in a few sections as examples of this symbiosis. One of the most fundamental aspects ecofeminist theologies hold in common is a rejection of dualisms and hierarchies that problematically pit humans against God, humans against creation, man against woman, etc.

In an example of this rejection, Elizabeth Johnson critiques deep incarnation and the reliance on Hellenistic philosophy where God is the organizer of a chaotic world. The scientific world has proven that disorder and chaos is actually an important part of the creation and sustenance of a universe. The dualism between order and chaos that is linked to divine influence and a lack thereof is therefore no longer scientifically valid. Thus, there is no divide between God and the world, even though materiality is seemingly unpredictable and disordered. Secondly, the maleness of Jesus Christ is problematic where an emphasis on his sex can be devastatingly myopic to Christianity, where male superiority becomes the rule in a male-female dualism. Johnson advocates instead for

[83] In *The Cost of Living* (1999), Arundhati Roy outlines the devastation of India's dam projects. Since Independence, India has built over 3,300 Big Dams, displacing millions-though there are no government records of just how many displaced people. Yet, over one fifth of India's population does not have safe drinking water and over two thirds lack basic sanitation. The Dam and development projects of the Narmada Valley became known as India's Greatest Planned Environmental Disaster, and the people organizing against it became known as the Narmada Bachao Andolan.
[84] Eaton, Heather. *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2005. 25
[85] *Ibid*, 27.

understanding Christ as the human being that is Sophia incarnate, to be gender-inclusive.[86] Johnson advocates against a focus on the maleness of God by renewing emphasis on Sophia and other feminine aspects of the divine.

Anne Clifford also suggests "[listening] to Sophia immanent within nature as God's creation" as an "attempt to be attuned to the inner dynamism of our complex global ecosystem and discover ourselves as humans in continuity with it."[87] Clifford offers the Noahic covenant as a model of solidarity between humans, creation, and God to overcome the dualisms previously inherent in understanding these relationships. Our understanding of Sophia is somewhat ambivalent, where she is in the beginning of creation and it is unclear how separate she is from the Creator or creation in some texts. Other textual references show Sophia as the force that renews all things and orders the universe. This project will focus on a Trinitarian ecotheology, in order to similarly eschew Christocentric divine images, and renew emphasis on the dynamism of God's creative identity.

Intersectionality is another key aspect of ecofeminist thought. As the field of environmental science grows, so do the critiques of the underlying gendered nature of science and technology. Maria Mies, a German sociologist, partnered with Vandana Shiva to explore the link between activism and theory in ecofeminism. Together they "arrived at these common concerns because our experiences and insights, and the analyses we have formulated, grew out of participation in the women's and ecology movements rather than from within the cocoon of academic research institutions."[88] Mies

[86] Johnson, Elizabeth. "Jesus and the Cosmos: Soundings in Deep Christology." In *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015. 152
[87] MacKinnon, *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*. 355
[88] Mies, Maria and Shiva, Vandana. *Ecofeminism.* Atlantic Highlands: Zed Books, 2014. 2

and Shiva determined that science and technology are far from gender neutral, and in fact there is a "relationship of exploitative dominance between man and nature," founded in the 16th century's development of modern science.[89] This exploitative dominant relationship also exists between men and women, and is intimately linked to that of man and nature. Mies and Shiva call for a new cosmology and anthropology, where co-operation, mutual care, and the respect and preservation of diversities is paramount. There should also be no division between 'basic' (food, shelter, etc.) and 'higher' (knowledge, freedom, etc.) needs in an ecofeminist perspective.

Greta Gaard also critiques the environmental academics, as they continue to ignore feminist theory and activism, and denounces Baconian science as a field for its domination over feminized nature.[90] She argues for ecofeminism as the most comprehensive socio-political analysis to dismantle human oppressions and the exploitation of the natural world. Gaard, like Eaton and others, emphasizes the process that is ecofeminism and the intertwining of theory and practice. Ecofeminism explains the dualisms that "make us aware that a fundamental reconstruction of patriarchal culture is needed to solve the ecological dilemma" because of the intersectionality of oppressive systems. Ecofeminism is the most comprehensive and holistic system to address the interconnection of all things and provides the necessary ground for a transformation of worldview in modern science and technology. Johnson also underlines the cyclical nature of theory and praxis in ecofeminism, where "If we start thinking differently about

[89] Mies, Maria and Shiva, Vandana. *Ecofeminism,* 3
[90] Gaard, Greta. *Ecofeminism.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010. 15

redemption, then we will start acting differently too, and that will deepen our understanding even further."[91]

The ecowomanist tradition also embodies both theory and praxis in a pointed way, primarily relying on the race-class-gender analysis of womanist thought. Dorceta E. Taylor pointed out that the environmental movements and theories, in their nascent stages, did not take seriously into account the experiences of people of color. Ecowomanism thus centers on justice and "highlights the unique sociological, ethical, moral, religious, cultural, and historical contributions that African and African American women throughout the diaspora have made to the environmental movement." [92] Ecowomanism employs a myriad of interdisciplinary approaches, including but not limited to environmental studies, history, and medicine, to bring all relevant resources and methods together. Not only is there a critique and breakdown of oppressive systems, but the ecowomanist tradition also offers helpful and just models, methods, and practices that overturn racist understandings and work toward liberation for the entire earth community.

1.7 THE LIFE CYCLE IN ECOFEMINIST THEOLOGIES

Conradie, Moltmann, and other theologians demonstrate the need for renewed theologies surrounding the life cycle in Christianity. These theologians offer a few ways of discussing the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that takes ecotheology into account

[91] Johnson, Elizabeth. *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018. 196
[92] Harris, Melanie L. *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017. 153

in an effort to include all of creation in this life cycle as well. As Conradie mentioned, however, there is an unresolved tension in the polarity of creation and redemption that needs to be reconciled. Ecofeminism in particular takes this challenge on in a profound way, for example where the creative and redemptive moments happen in daily life as well as in the more ultimate sense.[93] This section will explore a few ecofeminist theologies and conclude with an introduction to this dissertation's primary Christian interlocutor, Ivone Gebara.

In Elizabeth Johnson's *Creation and the Cross*, it is "In Jesus Christ crucified we are gifted with an historical sacrament of encounter with the mercy of God, which impels us toward conversion to the suffering earth, sustained by hope for the resurrection of the flesh of all of us."[94] For Sallie McFague and Celia Deane-Drummond, hope is the clearest meaning of the resurrection in their sacramental Christologies, which is "emblematic of the power of God on the side of life and its fulfillment," where God affirms all life even in the context of suffering, pain, and death.[95] The suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, who is present in all materiality, has renewed meaning where Christians receive an invitation to include creation in the metaphysics of eschatological hope.[96]

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[93] In *Creation and Salvation Volume* 2, Grace Ji-Sun Kim articulates the need for Asian women to experience salvation in the present, just as they experience suffering in their religious traditions that assign them a subordinate role.

[94] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*. 225

[95] Deane-Drummond, Celia. *A Primer in Ecotheology.* Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2017. 50-51

[96] This focus on the death/resurrection in ecotheology is not the only way. Heather Eaton, in contrast to Johnson, McFague, and Deane-Drummond, takes issue with the Christian tradition and argues specifically that the resurrection and eschatology as a whole cannot function as holistic theology. She outlines that the concept of life after death reinforces dualisms, that feminism and ecofeminism work to overcome, and so she does not find this a compelling facet of Christian theology from which to begin an inquiry for a more liberative ecotheology.

Johnson articulates a "deep resurrection" while critiquing the Christocentric "deep incarnation" theory in "Jesus and the Cosmos: Soundings in Deep Christology."[97] She emphasizes the physical nature of the resurrection, where salvation for humanity is not an escape from materiality, "but resurrection of the body, the transformation of the whole body-person, dust and breath together."[98] A deep resurrection therefore includes the created world in the redemptive future of humanity. "The risen Christ embodies the ultimate hope of the Earth and all creation. The final transformation of history is the salvation of everything, even of matter, even of bodily life, even of the whole cosmos, reconciled in the mystery of God."[99] The dualism between the physical world and humanity that is eliminated in deep incarnation theory must extend into the life of the world to come, where divine immanence in all materiality extends through death and beyond. It is here in ecotheology that this project presses on deeper. In transcending the problematic dualisms through a reclamation of radical divine immanence, Christian ecotheology provides a compelling argument for the inclusion of creation in our salvation accounts.

The cross, for Johnson, is "a particular event of divine solidarity with the suffering and death of all creatures."[100] While the crucifixion details the horrible pain and suffering that humanity inflicts, it is a stark reminder of God's solidarity and participation in suffering and the end of all life. She points out that God continually was, is, and will be in this solidarity, with God's saving grace. It is precisely Christ's dying that Johnson points to as a sacrament of God's mercy, which can lead us to a transformation of how

[97] Johnson, "Jesus and the Cosmos: Soundings in Deep Christology."
[98] Johnson, "Jesus and the Cosmos: Soundings in Deep Christology." 148
[99] *Ibid,* 150.
[100] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross.* 222

we identify with the suffering earth and the hope we envision for the resurrection of all materiality. Ironically, it is in and through death that new life with God is possible.

In Deane-Drummond's eschatology, she describes 'deep incarnation' as God manifesting in the person of Christ materially in order to restore the sinful, broken relationship not only between humanity and each other, humanity and God, but also between humanity and the world. She suggests "that God's love in the face of death is much better expressed through envisaging God as acting *through improvisation*, even in solidarity with the world of the dead," where "the continuance of human life beyond death is important inasmuch as it shows the capacity for humans to engage in an existential sharing with creatures beyond the grave."[101] While she does not expand enough on the specifics, she recognizes the important and often neglected concept of an afterlife that is shared between humanity and creation. Deane-Drummond also emphasizes the crucial need for Christian wisdom to be open to and even combined with insights from other religious traditions, as well as secular environmental knowledge and practices, in order to make the world a better place through individual and societal conversions.

Mary Grey explicitly articulates the need for an ecofeminist eschatology that is an ethics of care, one that is applicable to all life and the idea of future life. The Kingdom of God and the ethics of peace and justice has the locus of a cycle of death and rebirth. "Resurrection faith first demands that our lives are surrendered at the mercy and hope of God, source of life."[102] Grey suggests that the idea of heaven might depend on the earth's resurrection, and that our own hope for resurrection is interconnected with how we treat

[101] Deane-Drummond, *A Primer in Ecotheology.* 86-87
[102] Mary Grey, "Ecofeminism and Christian Theology" in *The Furrow* journal, volume 51 #9 September 2000, p. 490

the earth and understand the communion we share with the earth and all life forms. She proposes the woman of Revelations 12 as a symbol, since the earth is the one who actively rescues her from the jaws of the dragon and from the flood of water the dragon tries to drown her with while simultaneously providing her a safe space to rest and be nourished.[103] "It may be that the woman is now returning from the desert to show a new way-*and this is the promise of ecofeminism.*"[104] Grey identifies the necessary link between theology and practice, if the tension between creation and redemption is to be adequately resolved in Christianity.

Brazilian theologian Ivone Gebara focuses on an ecofeminist approach to epistemology, a renewed pneumatology, and different ways of thinking about God, all of which begins with an ecofeminist critique of Christian theological anthropology. Her focus on the immanence of both good and evil for all humans impacts her description of God, who she describes as relatedness. She can no longer support the way of thinking about God as a Creator who existed before and is removed from creation, like an artist is related to their work of art, but instead she proposes a God who is part of the messy ambivalence of the world. By emphasizing the role of the Trinity, Gebara implicates the Trinity in both the creation and the destruction that is present in the world. She draws on examples like the Big Bang theory, which posits that a major explosion created our solar system and, in the process, destroyed others, to illustrate the dynamic relationship between creation and destruction. In chapter 2 of part I, her theology will be outlined in greater detail.

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[103] Mary Grey, "Ecofeminism and Christian Theology" in *The Furrow* journal, volume 51 #9 September 2000, p. 490.
[104] *Idem.*

1.8 CONCLUSION

It is tempting to see "nature as revelatory, to see nature through a paradisal lens, ignoring its violent and tragic fate."[105] However, we know all too well what the suffering of the earth and death of species and ecosystems looks like. We have watched the Amazon rain forests burn at devastating rates, witnessed the bleaching of coral reefs, and seen photos of endangered animals slaughtered at the hands of hunters. Through the field of ecotheology we understand that this suffering and death is inextricably linked to our own, but the question of resurrection remains uncertain. It is to the work of Ivone Gebara that we now turn, as she most pointedly explores the interconnectedness of life, suffering, death, and resurrection through a renewed understanding of the Trinitarian God's immanence and transcendence.

[105] Ruether, Rosemary Radford. "Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology." In Hessel, *Christianity and Ecology*. 108

2.0 CHAPTER 2:

THEOLOGY OF IVONE GEBARA

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 of this dissertation discusses the work of ecotheologians like Conradie and Moltmann who call for a renewal of theology about life and death within Christianity. These theologians are focused on incorporating all of creation into Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, and Conradie in particular points to the unresolved tension with creation and redemption. Ecofeminist theologians address this tension in a powerful way, where both and life and death are experienced every day. Elizabeth Johnson, Sallie McFague, Celia Deane-Drummond, and others emphasize the bodily nature of Jesus's resurrection and the ultimate hope for of all creation to be included in the ultimate transformation of our world.[106] Sallie McFague, in particular, says that the perspective of the Universe as God's *body* in particular allows for overcoming dualisms and provides fertile ground for the concept of ecological salvation, where the earth is the subject and object of this redemption. Ivone Gebara expresses her agreement with McFague's theology, and also calls for "[abandoning] a merely anthropocentric Christianity and open ourselves up to a

[106] See Chapter 1

more biocentric understanding of salvation."[107] I argued that Gebara is the ecofeminist theologian who most explicitly addresses the unanswered questions about life, death, and the afterlife through the eschatology, creation, and the Trinity.

In addressing the life cycle, Ivone Gebara proposes an ecofeminist approach to epistemology, anthropology, cosmology, and Trinitarian theology as she critiques hierarchical and patriarchal Christian normativity. Epistemologically, she argues theological knowledge can be acquired through bodily experience, anthropologically she argues humans are primarily inherently interrelated, and cosmologically she argues God is immanent in and interconnected to the world. In her proposal for a holistic ecofeminism, Gebara has two purposes: a fundamental concern for the oppressed and ending patriarchy in all its forms. She posits that by changing our image of men and women within the cosmos, our image of God will change, where "Any image of God is nothing more than the image of the experience or the understanding we have of ourselves."[108]

Gebara recognizes the Trinity as immanent in the world, interrelated to both the creation and destruction that takes place as she advocates for a renewed Trinitarian understanding and devotion. Her ability to portray the complicated and often chaotic experience of life uniquely counters an ordered, dualistic, and hierarchical perspective. She locates the cyclical nature of life and death, creation and destruction in the activity of the Trinity. Her methodology emphasizes closing the gap between academic theology and the poor and vulnerable in our world, and utilizes narrative as one of the tools to

[107] Gebara, Ivone. *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation.* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999. 183

[108] Ress, Mary Judith. "Interview with Brazilian Ivone Gebara." *Feminist Theology*, 8 1995, S. 107-116. 111

overcome this chasm. Thus, this chapter begins with Ivone Gebara's biography, and a timeline of her work, before delving into her methodology, eschatology, creation, and Trinitarian theology. It is to her biography that this project now turns.

2.2 BIOGRAPHY OF GEBARA AND TIMELINE OF HER WORK

Brazilian theologian, philosopher, and Augustinian canoness Ivone Gebara (b. 1944) is the daughter of first generation Lebanese immigrants to Brazil.[109] Family and cultural expectations in the 1950s and 60s were that she would marry and raise children while her husband provided for her, but when she was studying philosophy at the university level in São Paolo in 1960 she met some nuns who offered another example. These women religious were, for Gebara, more free to be devoted to justice and liberation than women in traditional family life. Gebara also met José Comblin, a Belgian priest and liberation theologian, while studying philosophy, who was a continual influence in her life and work. After she completed studies in São Paolo and entered religious life at the age of 22, Comblin helped facilitate the opportunity for her to study theology for two years in Louvain, at the end of which she was invited to return to Brazil and replace Comblin, who was in exile because of his theology. She was the only female theologian at ITER (Institute of Theology in Recife), primarily teaching theology and philosophy to men who were in formation to be ordained. In 1975 she earned her first doctorate from the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (Universidade Pontifica Católica de São),

[109] *Águas do Meu Poço*: *Reflexões sobre Experiências de Liberdade* (*Waters from my Well – Reflections on Experiences of Liberation*, 2005)

during the development of both liberation theology and ecotheology. Under Archbishop Hélder Câmara she became the first female vice-director of ITER.

ITER in the 1970s and 80s was a hub for liberation theology. Its location, in one of the poorest parts of Recife, and the area's diverse population included African descendants, led to rich liberation theology and dialogue between Christian and African traditions, respectively. Gebara was deeply committed to the development of liberation theology at ITER while vice-director, cultivating relationships with Christian Base Communities, and creating community educational programs. She was immersed in liberation theology, worked alongside male leaders of liberation theology, trained seminarians, and authored her own works of liberation theology.[110] Between 1896 and 1989, Gebara published articles and books about liberation theology, feminist theology, and feminist liberation theology that included experiences of poor women.[111] She was one of the earliest liberation theologians to articulate the need for liberation theology to address the plight of women and that of the earth.

While she was publishing her early works, however, all of liberation theology was under fire from the Vatican. In the early 1980's Gebara's colleague and fellow Trinitarian

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[110] Among these, Gebara co-authored *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* (1989) with Mary Clara Bingemer, although she does not refer back to this text in later works, or continue to work with Bingemer.

[111] Gebara, Ivone. 1986. "A Mulher Faz Teologia: Um Ensaio para Reflexão." *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 181:5–14.

Gebara, Ivone. 1987. "Option for the Poor as Option for the Poor Woman." *Concilium* 194:110–117.

Gebara, Ivone. 1988. "Cristologia Fundamental." *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 190:259–272. Gebara, Ivone. 1989a. "*Levanta-Te e Anda": Alguns Aspectos da Caminhada da Mulher na América Latina.* São Paulo, Brazil: Edições Paulinas.

Gebara, Ivone. 1989b. *As Incômodas Filhas de Eva na Igreja da América Latina.* São Paulo, Brazil: Edições Paulinas.

Gebara, Ivone. 1989c. "Women Doing Theology in Latin America." In *Through Her Eyes: Women's Theology from Latin America*, edited by Elsa Tamez, 37–48. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Gebara, Ivone. 1989d. "The Mother Superior and Spiritual Motherhood: From Intuition to Institution." *Concilium* 206:42–54.)

theologian Leonardo Boff was investigated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), as was Juan Luis Segundo, Jon Sobrino, and other individual liberation theologians. In August of 1984, Cardinal Ratzinger was the Prefect of the Vatican's "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation,"" which critiqued liberation theology for reducing faith to politics. Liberation theologians continued to teach and publish at great risk, and Gebara's career at ITER was seventeen years long, until the Vatican closed it in 1989. The Vatican also closed the Northeast Regional Seminary No. 2 (where seminarians lived with poor families instead of in a group house), both of which were established by Archbishop Camara and taught liberation theology to seminarians of Brazil.[112]

The catastrophic changes brought about by ITER's closing and the end of Gebara's career up to that point meant a two year publishing gap for Gebara. In 1991, she begins publishing prolifically again, with a renewed emphasis on women and feminism. The Vatican was continuing to investigate liberation theology and institutions that taught it, and also on the investigation list was the question of women's ability to teach theology. Gebara very clearly aligns herself with women through women's movements, her writings on feminism and ecofeminism, all grounded in liberation theology, which made her a marked subject. From 1990 on, Gebara was not associated with a particular university or academy, but instead she chose to "journey through them, both in Brazil and throughout the world, as guest professor."[113] She grounded herself in women's movements and her neighborhood in an urban slum of Brazil, and from there she "[opened] the dialogue and [made] connections with the world of the university," as she

[112] Sept 21, 1989 Catholic Courier
[113] Gebara, Ivone. "A Feminist Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Perspective with a View toward the Future" in *Hope Abundant,* 51.

began to work toward her most pressing concern: "the present and future of Latin American, Christian, feminist women."[114] Gebara chose to demonstrate liberation theology and feminism with her everyday life choices, which did not align with the Vatican's vision of where the institutional Church should be located, as evidenced by closing the Brazilian institutions and seminaries. Here we see the rare quality of a theologian and philosopher who is more committed to serving the poor than advancing her own career through traditional academic pathways of tenure-track positions and institutional awards.

Gebara's commitment to women and women's movements in poor urban Brazil led her to speak out about a variety of evils that women experience in the domestic sphere of daily life.[115] The Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith investigated, exiled, and silenced her for her comments on abortion in a magazine interview, and it was clear that she had been under scrutiny for years beforehand for her proliferation of liberation theology, just like all her colleagues at ITER and elsewhere. She did not focus on abortion, or other particular political issues. Gebara has always been dedicated to a just society, where the most vulnerable lives are central to her theology. Her comments about abortion had more to do with ensuring the survival of women in vulnerable situations than about the political hot-button issue. Undeterred by those two years of exile, Gebara earned a second doctorate degree in Religious Studies from the University of Louvain in Belgium to continue her work.

In a 1995 article, Gebara again impressively demonstrated her commitment to liberation over her own gain when she admitted that her first twenty-five years of

[114] *Gebara, Ivone. "A Feminist Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Perspective with a View toward the Future" in Hope Abundant, 51.*
[115] Nanne, Kaíke, and Mônica Bergamo. 1993. "Aborto Não É Pecado." *Veja* 26(40):7–10.

academic work did not include reflection or writing specifically on reproductive issues.[116] She was challenged to engage in such work by feminist groups in Brazil, which made her aware of the sexual reality women were facing every day, and she published this article, subtitled: "A Report from an Ecofeminist Under Siege," the title of which underscored how fraught Gebara's experience as a theologian was during these years. She articulated the lack of true freedom for most women, whether economic, sexual, medical etc, and stated that legal access was the issue, where safe options became a life and death issue. She therefore refused to support the official Catholic position of keeping abortion illegal and punishable in Brazil, and instead called for the question of abortion to "be placed in this social, economic, and political context" where "legislation of abortion for poor women is only one small step in making their lives a bit more sustainable, a bit more secure."[117]

Gebara's commitment to saving the lives of women in Brazil is part of an issue that remains urgent. Today in the Brazilian Criminal Code, abortion is still illegal and those receiving and performing abortions are all subject to penalties including years of imprisonment. Exceptions exist only for pregnancies caused by rape or incest, if the mother's life is at risk, or if the fetus is anencephalic. The question of how many women's lives are unnecessarily lost during illegal abortion is still a tragic one, as Brazil is notorious for having no, or incomplete, data on the topic.[118] It is clear, however, that the women who are at highest risk of death from abortion in Brazil are "black and indigenous women, with low educational levels, under 14 and over 40 years of age, living

[116] Gebara, Ivone. "The Abortion Debate in Brazil: A Report from an Ecofeminist Philosopher under Seige." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. Vol. 11, No. 2, Rhetorics, Rituals and Conflicts over Women's Reproductive Power (Fall, 1995), 129-135.
[117] Gebara, "The Abortion Debate in Brazil." 131
[118] https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32130313/

in the North and Northeast and Central regions, without a partner."[119] Unfortunately, Gebara's argument is still relevant today as there has yet to be an organized Church effort to save the lives of these women, in particular those who are children or past middle-aged, who are black and indigenous, and who are alone.[120] Gebara continues today in drawing attention to the experiences of these women through her life and work, as a model of how to do and live ecofeminist liberation theology.

As Gebara continued publishing in the wake of her second doctoral degree, she began to base her work in a pointed ecofeminist critique of Christian theological anthropology, while sharpening her criticism of the teachings of the Catholic Church and the documents of Vatican II for maintaining anthro/androcentric interpretations of the world. For example, she stated that Christian tradition and doctrine continues to use patriarchal referents with only minor concessions to women.[121] To remedy this, Gebara continues to advocate for feminist theology to offer a methodological process of deconstruction in order to demonstrate the dependency on patriarchal epistemologies, where the process is also constructive.[122] She acknowledges the uncomfortable nature of this job, as "it opens the instability, to the historical self-responsibility and to the common responsibility for

[119] https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32130313/
[120] In *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women's Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice* Gebara details the hierarchy that exists among women, where white women have power over non-white women on page 71.
[121] P. 155. *Pluralismo y Teologia.* Alternativas: Revista de analisis y reflexion teologica , Año 8-N 20/21 Julio-Diciembre, Editorial Lascasiana:Managua, 2001. *"Los contenidos tradicionales de la doctrina Cristiana continúan siendo formulados a partir de referents patriarcales, con, aquí o allá, algunas concesiones menores a las mujeres.*
[122] P. 164 Translation mine. *Ibid: "Así es como el feminismo teológico intenta introducer un proceso metodológico de deconstrucción de los contenidos teológicos tradicionales para mostrar cuán dependientes son de un modo patriarchal de expresar los valores humanos. El proceso de deconstrucción es también un proceso de construcción, aunque todavía frágil y movedizo.*

this earth, for our life, and our body."[123] However, it is in this opening that we can listen to and learn from voices different from our own, while bringing our knowledge and memory of the tradition with us in a hopeful way.

Gebara disclosed her own spiritual focus on an ethical life and the command to 'love your neighbor,' and explained the process by which liberation theology attuned her to the social struggles and feminism highlighted the need to work for justice from women's particular experience. She referenced Valerie Saiving's pivotal article in her contribution "Feminist Spirituality: Risk and Resistance" to *In the Power of Wisdom: Feminist Spiritualities of Struggle,* and admits that it took her some time to see that the 'love your neighbor' that is the focus of her spirituality "was just one pole of love: [she] needed to discover 'as yourself'" since "'Love yourself' and 'love your neighbor' derive from the same source and one cannot be practiced to the detriment of the other."[124] This process she identifies is clearer especially when her tumultuous history of education and teaching in Brazil is taken into account. Her identity as a liberation theologian was questioned, investigated, exiled, and "re-educated." She also witnessed the closing of her theological home and the investigation and silencing of her colleagues and partners by the Magisterium of her personal Catholic faith, which she is clearly devoted to as a canoness of St. Augustine. Coming out of these life events, Gebara's ability to articulate this discovery of self-love and its interrelatedness to love of neighbor is especially powerful.

Also in "Feminist Spirituality: Risk and Resistance," Gebara advocated clearly for a "certain 'suspension' of new spiritualities," for patience, for silence, and for carefulness

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[123] P. 166 Translation mine. Gebara, Ivone. *Pluralismo y Teologia: "El feminism teológico no es popular, puesto que se abre a la inestabilidad, a la autorresponsibilidad histórica y a la responsabilidad común por esta tierra, por nuestra vida, y nuestro cuerpo."*

[124] *In the Power of Wisdom: Feminist Spiritualities of Struggle* edited by María Pilar Aquino and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Concilium* 2000/5 "Feminist Spirituality: Risk and Resistance" by Ivone Gebara. 36

with our language and theologies in order to make space for creativity, and to avoid finding "ourselves simply using the same discourse 'feminized.'"[125] Her methods thus include pausing our theologies first, and critically reflecting before engaging with new methodologies. She wants to avoid what Audre Lorde calls dismantling the master's house with the master's tools, where problematic frameworks are re-employed in an attempt to deconstruct them. This is part of what sets Gebara apart from other theologians; she deliberately advocated for a cessation of thought. Only after a reset of sorts, and an opening to ourselves, others, and their narratives, can we carefully proceed with liberation theology. After the fallout from her *Veja* interview, and the propaganda disseminated against her and liberation theology as a whole, Gebara shows how risky this path of resistance is, and yet through her perseverance and prolific work, she demonstrates how meaningful and powerful it is, too.

Her work later in the 2000s, up until her 2021 book, *A Velhice Que Eu Habito* (*The Old Age I Inhabit*), emphatically maintains that the Christian tradition needs to be reexamined in light of both feminist and ecological concerns and insights.[126] She addresses the concepts of death and resurrection throughout her work, and now is reflecting on her own aging process as well, incorporating it into her theology as she again models holistic ecofeminist methodology.[127] Gebara has written contributions to dozens of texts about feminism, ecotheology, ecofeminism, liberation theology, etc. These texts are edited by prolific authors like Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, María Pilar Aquino, Kwok Pui-lan, Ignacio Ellacuría, Jon Sobrino,

[125] Gebara, Ivone. "Feminist Spirituality: Risk and Resistance," 42
[126] Conradie, Ernst M. and Hilda Koster, eds. *T & T Clark Handbook of Christian theology and climate change*. London, UK: Bloomsbury T&T Clark. 2020. "The Christian story of God's work-a Brazilian response" by Ivone Gebara, 471
[127] Gebara, Ivone. *A Velhice Que Eu Habito.* São Paulo: Claraboia Editora. 2021 (*The Old Age I Inhabit*)

and others. She gave the plenary address, "Knowing the Human, Knowing the Divine for the Human" in 2015 at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion.[128] Clearly, Gebara is well respected, valued, and included in the academic sphere of theology and religion, although I contend that her work continues to be under-valued by the non-Portuguese speaking world, as evidenced by the lack of translations to many of her works. Some of her works that have been translated would benefit from a more concentrated translation in tandem with the author herself, and one of the limitations of this project is a lack of advanced proficiency in Portuguese. Thus, this author includes the Spanish texts whenever possible. One major contribution of this dissertation to the field of theology is this timeline of her life and work, and the following deep study of her theology, of which there are few, especially as it pertains to the life cycle.

2.3 METHODOLOGY

As noted in the biographical section, Gebara critiqued and continues to critique the classical patriarchal Christian tradition and the way in which Christianity is received and propagated in Latin America in particular. One of the key frameworks that she would like to see change is the perceived dualism between the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in opposition to humanity.[129] Instead, she wants to reaffirm the relationships inherent in both, and the participation of humanity in Trinitarian divine and human relationships. The Trinity expresses the Mystery and the inherent unity and multiplicity.

[128] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0u-w0k_tn50
[129] Ecofeminists across traditions critique dualisms. See the works of Vandana Shiva, Elizabeth Johnson, Carol Christ, Maria Mies, and others.

The Trinity is not an abstract concept external to ourselves and our experiences of the world, and Gebara is countering this notion with a participative and relational understanding of the Trinity. She grounds this understanding in the knowledge of three key tenets:

> That the source of life is in all of us, that it is our common origin and dwelling place (Father/Mother); that we are therefore daughters and sons derived from that same source; and that it is out of this same relational energy source that we are linked with all that exists (Spirit) and are able to stand in solidarity and be merciful, tender, just, impassioned, and awestruck in the face of the wonder that has fashioned us.[130]

"Reconstruction" is the term Gebara uses to name her Trinitarian theology, where she delves into five reflections on the Trinity in the cosmos, on earth, in relationships among peoples and cultures, in human relationships, and in every person.[131] This all-encompassing perspective lends itself to an openness to all aspects of humanity and how they relate to the earth and to the universe, an approach Gebara deems fundamental.[132]

Gebara also criticizes the fields of science and philosophy as a whole, based on their paths to knowledge and epistemologies.[133] She believes that knowledge in these fields is built on processes and methodologies of sharing information generated by and for men. Women are thus left with experiential knowledge, which was and is not held to the same standard. "The hierarchization of knowing runs parallel to the hierarchizing of society itself that is characteristic of the patriarchal world."[134] In addition to hierarchizing, Gebara also notes the racializing of knowing (how we know) or knowledge (what we know), where black and indigenous groups are also categorized as less knowledgeable, or

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[130] Gebara, Ivone. *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999. 154
[131] Gebara, *Longing for Running Water. 1*55
[132] *Idem*.
[133] Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, and the ecowomanism tradition makes the same critiques, among others.
[134] Gebara. *Longing for Running Water.* 25

knowledgeable in a different-more experiential, perhaps-way. This ultimately limits us all and restricts true mutual sharing of knowledge, so she dedicates her epistemology to deconstructing the dualistic, patriarchal, problematic epistemologies and creating space for all ways of knowing.[135]

Gebara's ecofeminist methodology seeks to dialogue among different ways of knowing, diverse religious paths, and various institutional religions. In this opening process and perspective, she asserts that we are encompassing more of the constitutive parts of our identity, as relatedness.[136] Engaging across religious traditions through an anthropological lens is fundamental, she says, to working toward a better understanding of ourselves by assessing what human communities share in how they relate to the earth and the universe.[137] This insight implicitly calls for comparative theology and comparative ethics, as we work across religious traditions to address the survival of our planet and all life. This project enacts her dialogical methodology by introducing the Hindu Kali tradition and thinking comparatively between these two theological analyses of the life cycle. As humility is a core virtue of Gebara's methodology, in her discussion of theological anthropology she highlights the fact that we "know only a fraction about our origins," and in fact are "very limited in light of what we do not know."[138] I argue that this humility coupled with relatedness dovetails with comparative theology, and further bolsters this project in comparative theology. Although she is not specifically advocating for comparative theology, her articulation of humility is one of many

[135] Gebara. *Longing for Running Water*, 26.
[136] *Ibid*, 92.
[137] Gebara, *Longing for Running Water.* 155
[138] Conradie, *T & T Clark Handbook of Christian Theology and Climate Change*. 468

instances where the connection between her methods and those of comparative theology are clearly congruent.[139]

Gebara self-describes her methodology of Trinitarian theology as different from traditional ones, as she "[keeps] theological reflection in mind, [her] methodology has much in common with the philosophy of religion."[140] She advocates for an exploration of both Leonardo Boff's Trinitarian theology for a more classical approach to liberation theology, and Elizabeth Johnson's *She Who Is* for a more formal theological work that integrates feminism in a clear and engaging way. Although Gebara was trained in traditional Catholic theological institutions, and dialogues with theologians like Johnson who were as well, Gebara wants to avoid exclusive methods and theological positions as she complexifies the ways of doing theology. Since her primary community is that of Latin American feminist women, this demographic makes up the bulk of her research, narratives, and experiences in her theological method. As Gebara does this, she is clear that this is not a replacement of men's models with women's models, but instead is working toward "a new synthesis in which the dialectic present in human existence can take place, without destroying any of its vital elements."[141] Thus, she does not so much model the transcendence of men's and women's models, or a non-binary theology, but instead her goal is to make visible the poor women who are rendered invisible by the dominating culture, religion, and society. While she is crystal clear as she articulates her

[139] See Catherine Cornille's chapter, "Conditions for Inter-Religious Dialogue" in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, 2013.
[140] Gebara, *Longing for Running Water.* 139
[141] Cadorette, Curt ed. *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader.* Orbis Books, 1992. "Women Doing Theology in Latin America" by Ivone Gebara. 63

goals, Gebara's method of enacting her holistic ecofeminism needs a bit of polishing to be transparent for all Christians.[142]

Gebara's methodological reform includes placing herself at the starting point of theological reflection, "as a woman out of a particular socioeconomic, political, and cultural situation."[143] She advocates for theological methods that begin from shared experiences transmitted orally, from what she calls "the simple fact of sharing life."[144] She highlights the ability of women to do theology in a different way through this methodology, where elements of everyday life are interconnected with thinking and talking about God. Hearing from the experience of those who "[give] birth, [nurse], [nourish]… who for centuries [have] remained silent with regard to anything having to do with theology" means that women's experience of God will be heard, and theological discourse will be widened, diversified, and enriched.[145] Heather Eaton's ecofeminist liberation theology also draws upon daily experiences of women in her methodology, and Ruether's *Women Healing Earth* in 1996 was an early conversation between the Global North and the Global South that brought the experiences of Latin American, African, and Asian ecofeminists and their particular contexts together. Sharing narratives, both of one's self and of those one works and lives with, is a key tenet of ecofeminist methodology.

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[142] In *The Aesthetics and Ethics of Faith: A Dialogue Between Liberationist and Pragmatic Thought,* by Christopher D. Tirres, he has a chapter that compares Ivone Gebara's ecofeminism and John Dewey's pragmatic philosophy, and how both use a theory of experience, coupled with an ethics of liberation, and how their work enhances each other's. He offers Dewey's pragmatism as a way to sharpen and make even more explicit Gebara's insights and goal of a more interrelated, organic, holistic awareness and self-understanding.

[143] Gebara in Cadorette, *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader.* 56

[144] *Ibid*, 57.

[145] *Ibid,* 58.

Gebara's methodological inclusion of the philosophy of religion means that she is not beginning with the church fathers and then chronologically assessing church writings.[146] Instead, she is examining the Trinity by "exploring what, in human experience, is related to trinitarian language; examining religious language and its crystallization in religious institutions; and reconstructing trinitarian meanings and celebrating life."[147] By de theologizing the kenotic Trinity as much as she can, Gebara is addressing the impetus for the Trinity's existence, which she posits is grounded in the "very meaning of our lives" and "eternal substances and essences."[148] She also expands the Christian imagination by highlighting the importance of Trinitarian language and symbols throughout human history and religious traditions around the world, and allowing us to re-translate the meaning of the words "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."[149] The Trinity encompasses all life experiences, however, it exists within a "closed, eminently masculine, and more or less arcane theoretical system.[150] Therefore, the first task is to deepen understanding of the essential experiences that are the foundation for Christian belief in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Through an ecofeminist perspective, Gebara maintains an openness to the diversity of experiences and a humility in acknowledging that these terms may not be the most useful expressions of these encounters with the Divine.

To speak about the Trinity, then, Gebara advocates for experience as the first category.[151] She addresses the sociological interpretation of the Trinity, where the number three itself is identified with social life, plurality, and the diversity of life. Three

[146] Gebara, *Longing for Running Water.* 139
[147] *Idem*.
[148] *Idem*.
[149] *Ibid*, 143.
[150] *Ibid*, 144.
[151] *Ibid,* 145.

means many, and touches on the reality that life itself is multi-faceted and many-sided. This multiplicity leads us to understand creativity, evolution, and art in our own lives. There is unity in the way that we all experience creativity, and uniqueness where we have our own ways of being and ways of understanding the world.[152] Gebara encourages all of us, especially women, "to achieve an existential understanding of what we are saying: to express, in a simple way that is our own and yet intelligible, the really significant experiences in our lives."[153] In doing so, we can begin to understand the meaning of faith as we understand it, which Gebara articulates as the "essential values that support life," where we embody the lives of Jesus and his followers. In living out solidarity with the poor, defending life in all of its forms, speaking out against oppression and injustice, maintaining generosity with all, etc. we experience resurrection and a "[return] to life in every sense of the word."[154]

In her critique of *Laudato Si,'* Gebara points out that Pope Francis's "writings reveal an inadequate and ambiguous account of women's issues."[155] Women are not included in their own voices in the encyclical, and are never included as a category separate from men. What is interesting here is that the document can be argued as one that transcends the dualities of gender because it addresses all people, and considers the suffering of the poor and of creation, and yet it misses the mark on how people of color and women in particular are the most oppressed, along with creation, and are the most vulnerable.[156] Gebara acknowledges the account in *Laudato Si'* of the real situation of climate injustice as valuable and necessary, but argues that the encyclical "returns to a nostalgic and

[152] Gebara, *Longing for Running Water.* 145
[153] *Ibid*, 146.
[154] *Idem*.
[155] Gebara, *Planetary Solidarity.* 76
[156] Gebara, *Planetary Solidarity.* 69

patriarchal theology, with inadequate examples to address the real possibilities of the world today."[157] She is right that the particular suffering of women needs to be visible, and I would add that the tremendous amount of work being done by women, including Gebara herself, also needs mentioning. After the plight of the poor and the planet, in the intricacies and narratives, is fully comprehended, only then can a reconciliation of dualities and binaries begin to take place, although we do not have a blueprint in Gebara's work for how to do this.

In "Children's Experiences of Evil in their Multiple Worlds," Gebara demonstrates her self-critical methodology, where she has a reflective way of doing theology. She acknowledges that she has not addressed the question of children's experiences of evil as she points out that children and their experiences are not considered by the Christian tradition.[158] She addresses this blind spot in the church, where how to support and empower children is not something specific that the church addresses yet. To begin, she first advocates for taking children and their experiences of evil more seriously, both to better understand children and evil itself. In this way, new approaches to evil and methods of supporting children can then be pursued. She includes her own childhood, her observations of children, personal reactions to their behavior, and her philosophical and theological trainings in her analysis.[159] In this chapter she also relies on Paul Ricoeur, whose work she examined in her dissertation and is formative in her thought. Patriarchal values infiltrate the world of children, and "limit the power and place of girls as well as

[157] Gebara, *Planetary Solidarity.* 78
[158] Bunge, Marcia J. ed. *Child Theology: Diverse Methods and Global Perspectives.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021. 52
[159] *Ibid,* 53.

create experiences of evil among them."[160] Gebara advocates for churches to educate children on their interdependence, create formative child-adult relationships, invite and empower children to change the world, and to engage in biblical studies in mutual solidarity with children instead of in a top-down way.

This outline of Gebara's chapter on children accentuates her methodology, which includes self-reflection, a critique of the traditional Christian approach, inclusion of philosophy, theology, narrative, and experience, and a faint outline of how to address the injustice, where she invites others to help create more definition. More often than not, Gebara does "not want to close…with a conclusion" when she writes (she also says this in her 2015 plenary address at the AAR meeting).[161] The ending is really more of an opening, where she can express her hopes and dreams with the goal that the audience is dreaming with her. One of the most important areas in which she carries out these methodological steps is in her development of eschatology, and this is the topic of the next section which delves into her theology.

2.4 ESCHATOLOGY: LAST THINGS FIRST

This dissertation engages with the work of Ivone Gebara precisely because of her emphasis on eschatology in her theological works. With a focus on daily life, and the crosses and resurrections inherent within it, Gebara deepens the line of understanding faith in the resurrection through an ecofeminist perspective.[162] The word resurrection

[160] Bunge, *Child Theology.* 57
[161] Gebara, *Planetary Solidarity.* 79
[162] Isasi, *Mujerista Theology*.

itself means to straighten, lift up, stand up, to get life back, and is not exclusively referring to life after the historic present or personal deaths.[163] Gebara emphasizes the daily notion of resurrection, and the need to explore this line of thinking. She articulates a "daily way of the cross," from which we experience multiple types of suffering and pain.[164] There are also "multiple resurrections," and it is precisely in this place of both cross and resurrection "where one discovers relatedness as necessary for all life, especially all human life."[165] Thus, salvation is not only an abstract idea, but it is also part of our daily lives that include "both light and darkness, laughter and tears, in which our life unfolds." [166] The afterlife is not only life after death, but there is an interconnectedness between this life and bodily experience and the saving liberation of God.

Gebara believes it is necessary to be able to identify and then proclaim signs of life, which is the resurrection. She notes that not all resurrections are equal, just like not all crucifixions and suffering is the same, either.[167] This includes the resurrection of the body where women "begin to speak for those who cannot, to take the floor that they should not, to walk where they are prohibited, to yell when they are ordered to be quiet, to rise up when they should stay seated, to organize when they have to be submissive, to hope for the new when they were taught to repeat the same."[168] Resurrecting woman's body is

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[163] *Condimentos feministas a la teología* by Ivone Gebara, 2018, Doble clic Editoras, Uruguay. Translation mine. P. 121-122 "*La palabra resurreción significa levantarse, erguirse, recuperar la vida. Pero no necesariamente alude a una vida después de la historia presente o después de nuestra muerte personal."*
[164] Gebara, Ivone. *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. 109
[165] *Idem*.
[166] *Ibid*, 127.
[167] *Intuiciones ecofeministas* by Ivone Gebara 1998 Doble clic-Soluciones editoriales-Uruguay. Translation mine. P. 19 "*No todas las resurrecciones son iguales, así como no son iguales las crucifixions…"*
[168] *Levántate y anda: algunos aspectos del Caminar de la Mujer en América Latina* by Ivone Gebara, 1995. Ediciones Dabar México, D.F. Translation mine. P. 17 *"…resurrection del cuerpo de las mujeres que*

a communal activity that springs forth into all areas of life as we know it, and makes real the divine in human flesh.[169] Suffering, death, and resurrection occur in the body, and especially in the body of women (which the Christian tradition does not emphasize enough). Thus, women and women's experience in this body is part of the miracle of the incarnation.

In her chapter of *Hope Abundant*, Gebara critiques the Christian tradition's understanding of eschatology and emphasizes the need for more mixed interrelatedness in the Christian community around the topic of death and grief. The only language that is present already "has been passed down since the time of colonization" and has inherent problematic dualism about suffering and pain.[170] The pain and sadness relating to the life of the loved one and their death is problematically separated entirely into their "watching over" of the living. In this realm of the departed, "only perfection, kindness, and joy seem to exist," which is directly opposed to the "suffering, hunger, pain, exile, the absurd" that is to be endured while living.[171] Gebara calls this strict cleavage and separation into question, and instead of attributing all death, including unjust ones, to the mystery of God she calls for further reflection on life and death "beyond hierarchical conceptions," where

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empiezan a hablar de lo que no podían, a tomar la palabra que no debían, a andar por donde estaba prohibido, a gritar cuando la orden era callar, a levantarse cuando deberían permanecer sentadas, a organizarse cuando tendrían que estar sumisas, a esperar lo nuevo cuando les enseñaron a repetir lo mismo."

[169] *Levántate y anda: algunos aspectos del Caminar de la Mujer en América Latina* by Ivone Gebara, 1995. Ediciones Dabar México, D.F. translation mine. P. 17 *"La resurreción del cuerpo de la mujer es tarea colectiva de libertad que irrumpe en todos los lugares y provoca el acontecer de lo divino en carne humana."*

[170] Gebara, Ivone. "A Feminist Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Perspective with a View toward the Future" in *Hope Abundant,* 61

[171] *Ibid*, 61-62.

the polarity between life and death, suffering and peace, is destroyed.[172] She does not offer a finite theological understanding for how to resolve these tensions, however.

In Christianity death popularly 'does not have the last word,' and Paul asks "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" all of which paints death like an enemy that is to be overcome.[173] Gebara instead wants us all to reflect on life and death without hierarchy, where they coexist, as she admits that it will take a lot of time and effort for this new way of thinking to become endemic. Gebara understands the inevitability of death to be a reminder that although we may try not to dwell on this truth, death is always there, "like a continuous companion in the dance of life."[174] This language of continuous dancing companions is a step in the right direction of finding new (or renewed) ways of expressing the transcendence of dualities like life and death, although in dancing there is typically a 'lead' or 'leader' and the partners are separate. Another example of language Gebara uses for death and life is that they go hand in hand, part of the same body, where one cannot be without the other.[175] She does emphasize the necessity of reflection and analysis on death, yet she is not entirely clear about how death and life are related beyond the necessity of their necessary interrelatedness.

In her discussion of life and death, Gebara includes creation and destruction when she says that "Human beings, animals, and nature in general can be a source of either destruction or creation; in all of them, death and life are intertwined in a way that attests

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[172] Gebara, Ivone. "A Feminist Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Perspective with a View toward the Future" in *Hope Abundant*, 63.
[173] 1 Corinthians 15:55-57
[174] *Las aguas de mi pozo* by Ivone Gebara 2005 Doble Clic Editorias Montevideo, Uruguay. Translation mine. P. 208 *"La muerte es inevitable. E inevitable es también esa especie de lucha cotidiana e íntima por apartar a la muerte en sus multiples manifestaciones y que la hace provisoriamente ahuyentarse, alejarse; pero ella está siempre allí, como una continua compañía en la danza de la vida."*
[175] "The Mother Superior and Spiritual Motherhood: From Intuition to Institution" by Ivone Gebara in Concilium *Motherhood: Experience, Institution, Theology* edited by Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 51.

to the inseparability of these two poles."[176] Thus, she opens indissolubility of life and death, creation and destruction, to all life, instead of a more traditional anthropocentric understanding. In "A Feminist Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Perspective with a View toward the Future," Gebara is clear that her primary concern is of unjust deaths, and how to thwart the looming threats of continued unjust deaths.[177] Thus, she does make some distinctions in the realm of death, where there is an 'unjust' category. For example, the death that Jesus's suffering, death, and resurrection needs us to refuse "is the murder of others, that which comes from the social structures that favor a minority of people; it is that death that does not have the last word about life."[178] The classification of death mirrors Gebara's treatment of evil, where there is moral evil that humans choose to carry out, which is equated to murder, and then there is that which we call evil which actually is closer to what we might call destruction.[179] Thus, death that occurs in connection with moral evil, where humans choose the violent and ultimately murderous option is categorically different from the death that is inseparable with life. Gebara often uses the term 'unjust death,' or 'murder' to refer to this kind of end of life, to help distinguish between the two.

In her time spent with Christian communities in Latin America, Gebara has experience with grief and how people remember the dead, where "the Christian community that cries for and remembers its dead has no language with which to pour forth its feelings and no theology apart from that in which Christian religious culture has

[176] Gebara, *Longing for Running Water.* 13
[177] Gebara in *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth.*
[178] *Las aguas de mi pozo* by Ivone Gebara 2005 Doble Clic Editorias Montevideo, Uruguay. Translation mine. P. 212 *"Pero la muerte que es necesario rechazar es la que viene de nuestros comportamientos homicidas hacia otros, aquella que viene de las estructuras sociales que favorecen a una minoría de personas; es esa muerte la que no puede tener la última palabra sobre la vida."*
[179] This will be discussed in the section on Trinity.

been passed down since the time of colonization."[180] She names the accepted expressions of death "habits," where traditional theological interpretations consign death, even the deaths that Gebara would categorize as murder, as part of the "mysterious designs of God."[181] She acknowledges that in changing these "habits," and to reflect on life and death we need a great deal of time and space before new insights become integral to the Christian tradition. Gebara advocates for questioning the history of salvation, which was constructed, as was the doctrine of the resurrection, and concludes her chapter by expressing poetically what lingers for her after writing, which is the unjust deaths. Thus, her advocacy for reflection on salvation and resurrection is grounded in concern for the life of those most vulnerable.

Ivone Gebara is committed to the vulnerable populations of the world, and including their own experiences and voices in the field of theology. She recounts the events of March 8th 2006 in Rio de Janeiro, where the Peasant Women's Movement invaded laboratories of Aracruz, a cellulose conglomerate, and destroyed their genetically modified eucalyptus. Gebara argues that the women who participated in this destruction "were bringing in a different concept of sin and salvation from the one taught in a masculine Christian tradition linked to the process of colonization and to complicity in exploitation."[182] Instead, "what we call salvation also plays a part in this game of life," where it is not linear with a single directionality to it, it is not bestowed immediately and irrevocably by the omnipotent God, nor is it "everlasting bliss in heaven."[183] Salvation is

[180] Gebara in *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth.* 259
[181] *Ibid,* 260.
[182] "Can the Merchants be driven out of the Temple of Life? An Ecological Feminist Reflection from Latin America" by Ivone Gebara in *Wacker, Marie-Theres and Elaine M. Wainwright, eds. Land Conflicts, Land Utopias. London: SCM Press, 2007.* 97.
[183] *Ibid,* 99.

impacted "by the conflictive nature of our historical existence, by disputed interests, by the honest quests we embark on in the midst of our fragile make-up."[184] It is constantly occurring in creative ways, just as all life is continuously renewing and creating.

I argue that one of the reasons Gebara focuses more on the topic of death than most other theologians is because of her commitment to living in an urban slum and spending her time with women who also live there. Thus, she witnesses more death and resurrection than theologians who do not spend their lives living with the poor that they may write about. The majority of the world can relate to these experiences of poverty and the fragility of life, and yet theology as a field does not prioritize these ways of life. Gebara sees this as a shortcoming of theology, and would like to see this gap close. Thus, she presents the academic world with countless narrations of life and death from the perspective of those who are dehumanized by our societal structures. For example, she writes about life expectancy in Latin America, where many children die before their fifth birthday.[185] The life expectancy rates in developed nations are higher than those of developing nations, with a gap in rates that is staggering. For example, at the opposite ends of the spectrum in 2020 the life expectancy rate in Lesotho was 50 and in Japan was 84.[186] This massive discrepancy is a moral issue, according to Gebara, and is "marked by a history of conquest, colonization and exploitation which has taken different forms and has always continued to marginalize the masses, the great majority of whom are denied

[184] Gebara, Ivone. "Can the Merchants be driven out of the Temple of Life? An Ecological Feminist Reflection from Latin America," 99.
[185] In 2020, the under-five mortality rate for Brail was 14.7 deaths before the age of 5 per 1000 live births. In the United States, it was 6.3 deaths, and in Norway it was 2.2 deaths. The global rate is 37 deaths. See data.unicef.org for more information.
[186] See the World Health Organization for data. https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/life-expectancy-at-birth-(years)

access to a decent life."[187] Death and how we see it, or choose not to, is integral to theology and methodology for Gebara.

In addressing the need for renewed reflecting on the interconnectedness of life and death, Gebara also advocates for inclusion of the elderly and aging in discourses of theological anthropology.[188] She suggests that their exclusion is because of the reminder of the aging process and inevitability of death that their presence can suggest, in a society where youth, consumerism, production, etc. are some of the most important values. Gebara wants to incorporate aging and open dialogue about death in talking about God and reconciling human nature on its own and with the universe.[189] The cycle of life, death, and the afterlife that humans, the world, and the Trinity partakes in is precisely where Gebara sees potential for a reconciliation of dualisms and embracing relationality.

Gebara also articulates the unjust reality where aging is not a uniform process across humanity, but is entirely variable depending on one's location in the world and in one's society. Gebara asks why we fear the elderly across societies and cultures? And her hypothesis is that they serve as reminders of human mortality, and death is a topic that is not as readily embraced as life is, in cultures and communities where they are opposed to each other. Instead, she advocates for learning from the elderly as talking "about God from the experience of old people is finally to open the doors lovingly to what will come to all of us, what will come and is an integral part of the human and cosmic process."[190] Thus, in accepting death as part of life, Gebara points to a shift where changes in our comprehension would be intertwined with our ways of life, and accepting death can lead

[187] "Religion, Culture and Aging: A Latin American Viewpoint" by Ivone Gebara in Cahill, Lisa Sowle, and Dietmar Mieth eds. *Aging.* Concilium, 1991/3. London: SCM Press. 1991. 93
[188] *Idem.*
[189] *Ibid,* 105.
[190] Gebara in *Aging,* 104.

to recognizing interconnectedness with the elderly and others who are seen as closer to death. We then grow closer to God, through acknowledging and openly incorporating our mortality, and that of the animal and natural world, we also look forward to the transformation of our individual bodies into "the mystery of our Sacred Body."[191]

Death, though typically referred to as an enemy to be fought, and that which Christ won victory from, is instead part of the Trinitarian process of life and death in Gebara's theology. Though her eschatology does need more systematic clarity, Gebara maintains distinction between unjust murder and death. Not all death is part of the Trinitarian dynamic, where life and death are not exclusive to each other and there is no hierarchy. She speaks of the one, vital process of life and death, where they are not separate binaries. The task of theology, then, is to interrogate this process and the murder that humans commit, and to work to shed light on these issues and how to work toward a more hopeful world. Gebara includes the earth and cosmos in her explanations, but again here she stops short of providing an in-depth systematic analysis. Suffering, the salvation of the afterlife, and resurrection are all part of this life and this body; they are not only after death. She connects this world and this body to eschatological realities, as does much of the field of liberation theology. To be able to ignore the existence of suffering, death, the afterlife, etc. is an unjust reality. Those in this world who are able to do so are not participating in the fullness of life and death that is the Trinity, and then of course more vulnerable life is harmed in their decisions. Those with more resources are interconnected with those who have less, or none at all, and we are all part of this earth and universe. Gebara attends to this deep sense of interconnection, and stops short of interrogating how we live with this knowledge.

[191] Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*. 57

2.5 CREATION

Gebara's anthropological shifts also include a breakdown of the dualism between humans and the world, where humans are interrelated within the cosmos instead of above it as "Lords of creation' who are instructed only to 'increase and dominate the earth," which we have done quite well already.[192] In fact, we are already feeling the effects of this problematic dualism where humans get diseases and die from contaminated water, lack of food supply, etc. Just as our suffering can be linked to that of the ecosystem, so too must we understand our relationality with each other and the world. In her chapter "Ecofeminism: An Ethics of Life," Gebara discusses global environmental devastation as well as systems of oppression like slavery, with particular attention to the ways in which women are the first victims of systematic injustice and colonization. Arguing for a more developed ethics of life, she points out that "We have not sufficiently integrated the presence of death into social and religious systems."[193] Thus, an ethics of life is an "attempt at collective thought and action aimed at creating a society in which every person and species of animal and vegetable have the right to life within a collectivity because each one has a vital need for the other."[194] One of her primary goals in articulating an ecofeminist ethics is for women and the ecosystem to be understood as

[192] Ress, Mary Judith. "Interview with Brazilian Ivone Gebara." *Feminist Theology*, 8 1995, 112.
[193] Gebara, Ivone. "Ecofeminism: An Ethics of Life" in Eaton, Heather, and Lois Ann Lorentzen. *Ecofeminism & Globalization: Exploring culture, context, and religion.* Lanham, Maryland: Rowmann & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003. 173
[194] *Ibid*, 176.

"rightful subjects" as we work toward mutual respect and interrelated understanding of all creation.[195]

Gebara articulates a "holistic ecofeminism," which is a proposal for a new relationship with the Earth and the cosmos and for her has two primary purposes: fundamental concern for those who are oppressed, and a commitment to end all forms of patriarchy.[196] The dualistic concepts where the world and God, man and woman, heaven and Earth, good and bad, are polarized end up being hierarchical and opposed to each other. [197] She argues that we as humans are experiencing the world and our interconnectedness in more palpable ways, like the droughts and lack of clean water that cause people to be sick and die, or suffering bought on by a lack of access to and growth of nutritious food. She advocates for seeing this suffering of others as our own, as "We are part of one immense, pulsating body that has been evolving for billions of years-and is still evolving."[198] Gebara articulates a gap around theology of suffering, where the idea that persevering through suffering brings redemption is increasingly questioned, as is liberation theology where "The promise of a new society founded upon justice and equality just hasn't happened."[199] The turn to holistic ecofeminism offers a hopeful response.

This holistic ecofeminism Gebara articulates is aligned with panentheism, which Anne Clifford suggests is not antithetical to *Laudato Si,'* in particular the Pope's

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[195] Gebara, Ivone. "Ecofeminism: An Ethics of Life" in Eaton, Heather, and Lois Ann Lorentzen. *Ecofeminism & Globalization: Exploring culture, context, and religion*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowmann & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003. 176

[196] Gebara, Ivone. "Ecofeminism and panentheism: an interview with Ivone Gebara" in Jim Schenk, ed. *What does God look like in an expanding universe?* Cincinnati, Ohio: ImagoEarth Pub, 2006.

[197] *Ibid,* 194.

[198] *Idem.*

[199] Gebara in *What does God look like in an expanding universe?* 192

emphasis on God as Creator and our intimacy with God, creation, each other.[200] Pantheism and panentheism have a long history of being pitted against each other, and being opposed to theism, and we see this play out in ecofeminism.[201] In *Longing For Running Water*, Gebara responds to the critique of pantheism leveled against ecofeminism, where "the ecofeminist opens us to see the sacred dimension of our Cosmic Body and prompts us to assume a humility that dismisses all our totalitarian pretensions.[202] It opens us to an attitude that seeks community and solidarity among all beings."[203] Gebara does not dispute the idea of panentheism, and in *What does God look like in an expanding universe?* she sees holistic ecofeminism as questioning "theology that sees God as above all things," and breaking with the dualistic separation between God and the world, man and woman, etc.[204] God is not identical with the world, where ecofeminism affirms the interrelated nature of God and the world.[205]

This ecofeminist panentheism challenges traditional Christian interpretations of humans being the center of the universe, and dominating creation. Instead, we see ourselves as "the center through which all enters into fraternal communion."[206] The hope of this decentralization is to realize our relatedness in a deeper way. Prayer is one modality through which humans can better understand the multiplicity and unity inherent

[200] Clifford, Anne. "Pope Francis' *Laudato Si,'* on Care for Our Common Home: An Ecofeminist Response." In *CTSA Proceedings 72/2017*. 39
[201] For a detailed history, see https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/panentheism/#OntBas
[202] The relationship between categories of pantheism, panentheism, and theism have a long history where philosophers and theologians often critique each other: see https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/panentheism/ for more history and information.
[203] Gebara, *Longing for Running Water.* 123
[204] Gebara in *What does God look like in an expanding universe?* 192
[205] There are similar metaphysical distinctions in Hinduism, between dualism, nondualism, and qualified non dualism.
[206] Gebara, *Longing for Running Water.* 115

in the human condition, and Gebara presents prayer as a "human need."[207] Prayer is part of the concrete materiality of our reality within the created world, and is a personal and collective act. When we pray, it is not only making requests but it can be an effort to be present to our interconnection with the universe, our bodies, and our loved ones.

The openness to and necessity of exploring the rich diversity of human experiences and perspectives is key for Gebara in the goal of connecting with the most essential levels of ourselves, which she determines as "grounded in a single, shared mystery that invites us all to act in ways that express communion, equality, and reciprocity."[208] This single, shared mystery that is the foundation of us all reflects the reality that the cosmos has a trinitarian structure, which means it is "marked simultaneously by multiplicity and by unity, by the differences among all things, and by their articulated interdependence."[209] Humanity is set apart within the cosmos, since we are forms of life that are aware of our "great and extraordinary dependence on the cosmos."[210] Gebara does not emphasize human power over the material world, but instead recognizes the vulnerability of the human condition and our reliance on the universe to sustain human life.

The necessity of the plurality of human experiences, where the Trinity is symbolic of our own beings, in our unity and diversity, provides us the opportunity to be open to each other, listen, and be curious about and learn from the similarities between one another. We are also participating in the evolution of life and the processes this entails, where the new heavens and new earth are constantly "on the way," and heaven is not "something superior" or "the final aim of our efforts," but is instead "the place in which we will at

[207] Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 119
[208] *Ibid*, 156.
[209] *Idem*.
[210] *Ibid*, 157.

last enter into a state of divine peace and harmony."[211] Life after death is part of the mystery and sacredness of life, where "out of the dissolution of one living form there arise thousands of others; that one life nourishes a sequence of others; and in the end our living is part of this process, part of the dissolution and recomposition of life."[212] Including both dissolution and recomposition in the process of creation, of life, highlights the ambiguity Gebara proposes throughout her work. When she discusses the Big Bang Theory, again we see ambivalence as all life comes from and also "somehow contains these originating explosive ruptures, which are therefore constitutive."[213] Here we see her understanding of creation, which is inherently volatile, unpredictable, and mysterious. The mystery of creation is important in Gebara's work, where we know very little about our geneses and we must acknowledge the limitations of any hypotheses we raise. It is from this position of humility that Gebara articulates her Trinitarian theology, where she also emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life, and this is the topic of the next section.

2.6 THE TRINITY

Systematic reflection on the Trinity, and the prevalence of speaking about the Trinity in general, is typically relegated to the seminaries, religious orders, and more academic places within the church. Gebara reclaims Trinitarian reflection for all Christians, where the number three means multiplicity, and where "in their lived lives, people experience the awesome multiplicity of things-of their plurality, the great differences among them,

[211] Gebara, *Longing for Running Water.* 161
[212] *Idem*.
[213] Gebara in *T & T Clark Handbook of Christian theology and climate change*, 467.

their bewildering transformations, their fragility and transience, and the blend of life and death, death and life."[214] We are inherently interrelated with the Trinity and we live in it just as much as the Trinity lives in us. Gebara uses the imagery of a web from a spider to communicate the intimacy inherent in the relationship between ourselves and trinitarian experience and language.[215] Again Gebara relies on imagery to communicate her theological insight, to leave space for the reader to interpret as well.

By concentrating our efforts on reflecting on our personal and collective experiences, stories, and values, we are opening ourselves up "to a new birth or a rebirth symbolized by baptism of fire or baptism in the Spirit."[216] This rediscovery, Gebara elaborates, means that we are reborn in God; we are reborn to the earth, to the cosmos, to history, and to service to one another in the construction of human relationships grounded in justice and mutual respect."[217] The Trinity is interrelated with humanity, and also functions as a language or a way of communicating this "inner and outer experience of unity and multiplicity."[218] She notes that this respect and positive emphasis on our pluralistic reality and the differences between experiences is not always part of our religious formation. Patriarchal religion has not prioritized the dynamism inherent in our existences, and thus is not authentic to the dynamism of the Trinity that Gebara is recovering.[219] Ultimately, she points toward an understanding of rebirth and baptism that is always available in this body and this world, and it involves ourselves, others, the world, and the divine. Again,

[214] Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*. 147
[215] *Ibid*, 149.
[216] *Ibid*, 150.
[217] *Idem*.
[218] *Ibid*, 151.
[219] *Ibid*, 152.

however, she is less clear about the details and it is up to the reader to concertize this truth.

In her critique of the patriarchal roots inherent in much of traditional Christian theology, Gebara posits that there are limits to Christocentric theology, and that they have been reached.[220] She describes the gospel as "the story of the Jesus movement," or in other words "a movement of resurrection," as it details the various ways that Jesus and his followers gave back life to vulnerable people.[221] She takes issue with the communication of the Christian tradition when it is understood as the only way to explain the Mystery of divinity, when the Mystery is ultimately unfathomable. Gebara shifts the perspective to one of humility and openness, with Christianity being one response to Mystery, where the possibility of others is open, and none of them-even combined-have all the answers. She is not concerned with finding one theological perspective or way to talk about or be with God. This is an implicit opening to comparative theology, and learning from other traditions about the Mystery that is the divine. By emphasizing Jesus and his followers with their focus on resurrecting those who are experiencing suffering and death in this body, sometimes even literally raising the deceased, she reframes the Trinity. What is primary for her theology is that the Trinity is enmeshed in the process of life, suffering, resurrection, death, and so on.

Gebara outlines a Christology where Jesus is existentially central based on her personal experience in the Christian community and her own theology, as she advocates for a dogmatic shift. This shift means that "Jesus is no longer the absolute reference in a dogmatic sense, that is, in the way it was presented in the metaphysical Christology that

[220] Ress in *Feminist Theology*, 114.
[221] *Ibid,* 115.

characterized our discourse for centuries. It is a different kind of centrality, one that is more participative, more dialogical, and more open."[222] When we consider the lived experiences of Christians and believers of other traditions, we confront a reality where Jesus is not the only way of knowing God. Gebara sees this reality as particularly fertile ground for epistemological and theological growth, where we "dare to free Jesus from the hierarchical and dogmatic apparel in which the church has clothed him for so long."[223] The opening she articulates here provides a foundation to dialogue with other religions about the Trinitarian divinity that is also the dynamism of life, death, resurrection or rebirth, in a theology that is less exclusive than Christology.

This Christological opening is aligned with Elizabeth Johnson's critique of the problematic focus on Jesus' maleness in salvation, where it is a male body and blood that provides life. Gebara took up this same critique and reminds us that Jesus's experience with the bleeding woman in Mark chapter 5 can expand this view, where Jesus demonstrates that the blood of women is not impure.[224] Gabrielle Dietrich also raises the question of the redemptive nature of women's blood across Christianity and Indian religious traditions, similarly critiquing a centrality of Jesus's individual maleness.[225] Through reexamining our Christology in light of her holistic ecofeminism, Gebara hopes "to discover once again the meaning of walking Jesus' path, which is pluralistic and welcomes the presence of a variety of different paths."[226] She also highlights his focus on dialogue, his merciful compassion, his drive to speak out against oppression of all kinds,

[222] Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*. 178
[223] *Ibid*, 183.
[224] Gebara, *Out of the Depths*. 7
[225] Dietrich, Gabriele, I.S.P.C.K. (Organization), and Tamilnadu Theological Seminary. *A New Thing on Earth : Hopes and Fears Facing Feminist Theology (Theological Ruminations of a Feminist Activist)*. Delhi: Published by ISPCK for TTS, Madurai. 2004.
[226] Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*. 173

his emphasis on sharing the bread and wine, and his appreciation for flora and fauna as evidence for this ecofeminist investigation.[227]

Christianity, and indeed all religions are "not exempt from the social contradictions and cannot assert themselves as institutions that are immune to the transformations of history," and Gebara asserts that we need to respond to this challenge as we work toward more justice and tenderness throughout all of humanity.[228] Gebara references Hans Küng's theology, and agrees with him as she says that our survival depends on a worldwide ethic that is based in new conversations among religious traditions.[229] Christianity is dominated by patriarchal frameworks in a significant way, and so are the other religions and traditions of human history recorded largely by men. Gebara calls us to remove the patriarchal constructs of our traditions and ourselves, and to look for and build new ones, even though we will likely not see the finished product.[230]

I argue that Gebara's theology is thus primed for engagement with Hinduism and other non-Christian traditions. She articulates the pluralism of our world, and the importance of diversifying our epistemologies and theologies as we work toward real lasting justice. Her theology is not yet addressed in a comprehensive way by the field of comparative theology, and this project is a first step in that endeavor. Buddhist comparative theologian John Makransky discusses Gebara's ecofeminist vision as one that is "profoundly harmonious with the Buddhist vision of interdependence…and the

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[227] Gebara, *Longing for Running Water.* 190

[228] *Guzman, Alejandra de Santiago, Edith Caballero Borja, Gabriela Gonzalez Ortuño, eds. Mujeres Intelectuales: Feminismos y liberacion en America Latina y el Caribe. Buenos Aires, Argentina: CLACSO, 2017.* Translation mine. P. 225 *"Las religiones, una vez más, no están exentas de las contradicciones sociales y no pueden afirmarse como instituciones inmunes a las transformaciones de la historia."*

[229] Ivone Gebara, "Daily Life Challenges as the Criterion for Biblical and Feminist Theological Hermeneutics" in Lipsett, Diane B. and Phyllis Trible (eds.). *Faith + Feminism: Ecumenical Essays*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014. 214

[230] Ress, "Interview with Brazilian Ivone Gebara." 115-116

breadth of her social, political, and ecological vision is a valuable resource for contemporary Buddhist reflection."[231] Makransky comments that what is lacking in her vision is an explicit contemplative practice and discipline so that we can all participate in deepening our knowledge and experience of interrelatedness. Thus, here is a comparative model where Gebara and liberation theology can learn from Buddhism, which can learn from Christian epistemology, theology, and discourse, mutually rounding each other out on the path to justice and liberation. This project will similarly address Gebara's theology and its relationship with the Kali tradition in later sections.

Gebara's constructive Trinitarian theology accentuates the continuous, creative, unfolding processes of creation and destruction "that are expressions of a single vital process."[232] Creation and destruction are thus unified as part of one reality or process of the universe. The methodology she employs includes images and the imagination as she lists "the succession of geological eras, the birth of the continents, the transformation of seas into deserts, the flowering of forests, and the emergence of manifold expressions of vegetable and animal life" in order to make tangible her description of the Trinitarian structure she articulates. It is this diversity that is part of the Trinitarian structure and essential to the nature of all beings that removes the temptation to hierarchize and value any and all aspects of life as better than others in a problematic way. Plurality becomes the cornerstone of all that exists, and is "an essential component of our living tissue" that is necessary for humanity to continue developing and supporting one another.[233] Though Gebara does not reference deep incarnation, her emphasis on the Trinity's continual flow

[231] Makransky, John. "A Buddhist Critique of, and Learning from, Christian Liberation Theology." *Theological Studies* Vol. 75, no. 3 (Sept. 2014), p. 635-657. 651
[232] Gebara, Ivone. "The Trinity and Human Experience: An Ecofeminist Approach" in *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996.* 17
[233] Gebara in *Women Healing Earth,* 18

of life and death as present at an atomic level in organic material resonates with this theory.

This deep Trinitarian theology reveals "a transcendence within us, among us, in the earth, in the cosmos, everywhere."[234] It invites us to go further than the bounds of our own selfishness and focus instead on a communal ethic where we are centered on caring for and preserving all life, with the understanding that interrelatedness is the core of everything. The command to "love your neighbor as yourself" needs to be "understood as the way back to a Trinitarian balance" and instill in us "a balance between I and thou, I and we, we and they, ourselves and the earth since it is the way to turn around and allow the human, as well as plants and animals and all the creative energies of the earth, to flourish anew."[235] She calls us to "see the universe as our body, the earth as our body, the variety of human groups as our body-a body that is in evolution, in creative ecstasy, in the midst of destructive and regenerative labor, of death and resurrection."[236] In reimagining deep incarnation through the Trinity, Gebara is opening the tradition for dialogue across religions while shifting the focus on the life cycle.

2.7 THEODICY

Gebara wants to abandon all patriarchal, hierarchical, materialist, individualist, and classist understandings of the Trinity as we work together towards a reimagined understanding of theodicy. It is common in Christianity to think of God as a mysterious

[234] Gebara in *Women Healing Earth,* 21.
[235] *Ibid,* 22.
[236] *Idem.*

being that is "above us," who can reach down and alleviate our suffering, perpetuating hierarchical and patriarchal theodicy. She specifically critiques the Church and academia, that as institutions with hierarchies and power, they fail to address and alleviate the daily suffering and death of poor women in particular. The patriarchal God, and a patriarchal reading of scriptures, continues to justify suffering and merely console those who are in pain. For example, in *Out of the Depths*, Gebara "tried to show how everyday life can reveal aspects of evil that somehow are not included in the theories enunciated by philosophy and religions" as she "opened paths for a feminist phenomenology of evil based on the narratives of women's experiences stemming from different situations and different cultures. [She] wanted to show aspects of the complexity of evil not only in its ontological aspect but in its many existential manifestations."[237]

Whereas Western Christian tradition emphasizes that God is Love and God is Just, Gebara "[wants] to open and widen our perception of transcendence toward our experiences of evil, of suffering, of injustice."[238] The irrationality and transcendence of evil shocks us especially when an innocent life is lost, unjust torture occurs, millions starve to death, the forests are destroyed… There really is no end to the horrors of evil that humans experience and bring upon each other and the world. The unpredictable nature of humanity and our behavior causes us to exist in uncertainty, because even though there are social and systemic contributing factors, our ability to perpetuate evil is shocking. God, as transcendent, includes this evil as well as good, where they are not separate but instead are "necessary expressions of the same mystery in which we

[237] Gebara in *Planetary Solidarity,* 68.
[238] Gebara, Ivone. *Intuiciones ecofeministas,* 159. Translation mine. "Por eso quero abrir y ensanchar nuestra percepción de la transcendencia hacia nuestras experiencias del mal, del sufrimiento, de la unjusticia."

exist."[239] It is this interrelatedness and interdependence that ecofeminist theology grounds itself in, and while Gebara is clear that ecofeminism is "not a new religion," ecofeminists do assert an interrelated epistemology and a holistic and relational vision of life that critically counters the Christian tradition.[240]

"If we say that the Trinity includes everything, we then also have to affirm that evil is included in that and that, in a certain way, we also celebrate evil."[241] Gebara's provocative statement here about celebrating evil challenges Christian traditions, where evil is seen as dualistically opposed to good, and suffering is impossible to reconcile in the face of a God who is good, a God who is love. She references the countless figures like Jesus, the Buddha, Muhammad, etc. where suffering is endured, and then is transformed into compassion, mercy, and new possibilities.[242] Her Trinitarian perspective of celebrating evil thus means that from evil and suffering, we can learn about our humanity, about life on Earth, and all creatures. We need to fully understand and incorporate evil as we reflect on who we are as individuals and as a human community, and as we strive to fully value life in all its intricacies and understand our interconnectedness within ourselves and communally. Gebara admits that this will not be an immediate insight, and instead likens this transformative perspective to new clothing, that we need to sew and alter to fit our bodies, through dedication and work. Trinitarian ecofeminism is not a quick and easy solution, as it will take time for us to implement it

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[239] Gebara, Ivone. *Intuiciones ecofeministas,* 160.
[240] Gebara, *Intuiciones ecofeministas.* 161 Translation mine. "No somos una nueva religion ni pretendemos fundar o imponer nuevas creencias."
[241] Gebara, *El Rostro Nuevo de Dios.* 52 Translation mine.
"Si decimos que la Trinidad englobo todo, tendremos también que afirmar que el mal está incluido en ella y que, en cierta forma, celebramos también el mal."
[242] *Ibid*, 62. Translation mine.
"Buda, Jesús, Mahoma, los innumerables Franciscos, Claras y Teresas, las Severinas y los Antonios de siempre, han transformado el dolor en Fuente de compassion, en Misericordia, en nueva posibilidad de vida."

and cultivate the attitude that the universe, the Earth, and different human groups are like our own body.[243]

In the context of urban slums in Brazil, Gebara's experience living and working with poor women means that expressions of evil are palpable in everyday life. Her Trinitarian structure includes a reassessment of theodicy, where evil is not separate from God, ourselves, or the world, but instead "what we call evil is in ourselves; in a certain sense evil is also our body. Evil is a relationship we ourselves construct; it leads to the destruction not only of the individual but of the entire fabric of human life."[244] There is a fundamental difference between moral evil that we can choose and the singular and united creative and destructive cosmic process that is part of life's evolution. Gebara describes moral evil as human choices and actions where we take life, in all its multiplicity, which is therefore akin to murder. Cosmic creation and destruction, on the other hand, occur in inseparable ways, like the birth of our solar system requiring the death of others, the creation of a desert after the death of a river, the consumption of fish to sustain life, etc.[245] Gebara does not separate these into a dualistic and opposed relationality, but instead makes the point clear that creation and destruction are united as one and that this process is part of the Trinity.

According to Gebara, this evil that is inherently related to good and constitutive to being human, is different from our experiences of *effective* evil, as pain, robbery, destruction, injustice, lies, murder, etc.[246] This evil is a direct result of our limited understanding of ourselves and our interconnectedness with all other beings. So, when we

[243] Here we see Gebara's resonance with McFague, and appropriation of her "body" imagery.
[244] Gebara in *Women Healing Earth,* 19.
[245] *Idem.*
[246] Gebara in *T & T Clark Handbook of Christian theology and climate change*, 469.

suffer from these evils, we naturally want to get rid of all evil and Christianity thus counteracts this evil, Gebara posits, by deifying and worshiping the good instead. However, in divorcing good and evil and hierarchizing them, we move away from a Trinitarian vision of the universe. Cosmic "evil" or "natural evil" is actually the vital process of creation-destruction, according to Gebara, and when we suffer its consequences we are afraid and call it evil. This 'cosmic evil' is actually rooted in the Trinity, and is the emptiness that can be found everywhere in the universe, on earth, and among humanity. This emptiness is an opening for destruction, tension, conflict, etc. and therefore also creativity and the unfolding of our inner selves to the transcendent.

In the Christian tradition, however, God and the Devil are often talking with each other, fighting with each other, and dividing the world together like in the book of Job. Jesus even insists that he defeated the Devil. However, Gebara does not see this dynamic as helpful for the challenges we face today, where our world "blends order with disorder, evil with good, justice with injustice in a complex historical fabric that requires us to overcome the old dualisms and polarizations."[247] Gebara's perspective is that good is not possible if evil is not simultaneously possible and real. She believes that evil's manifestations of pain, lack of material needs, climate disaster, etc., "seem to dwell more in our bodies and minds than the benefits of the good we receive and do to one another."[248] Thus, "real" for Gebara is precisely the *mixture* of everything.[249] She would like to develop the Christian tradition around this mixture where we dialogue with the intense diversity of our world through understanding it and without imposing a particular single model that is seen as the best or the most sophisticated.

[247] Gebara in *T & T Clark Handbook of Christian theology and climate change*, 470.
[248] *Idem.*
[249] *Idem.*

In Gebara's theology, evil is especially unavoidable for the community where she has lived and spends her time, in the favelas of the Recife area. She admits that "what we call forces of evil can be the most victorious," making her interrogation of evil a pressing issue.[250] She maintains that we must address evil if we are to have a better, more global perspective, and attempt to reconcile the longstanding tension of the beauty and goodness of God with rampant suffering and injustice. While addressing evil, Gebara points out that in these chaotic, life-threatening, intense situations of human experiences we also clearly see boundless mercy and compassion throughout history.[251] There is eternal hope in Gebara's Trinitarian theology, since the universe and ourselves as part of it are made up of the same energy, which is constantly in a state of creation and change.[252] She inspires us to see the universe, the earth, and the diversity of humanity as our body, a trinitarian body that is constantly evolving through destruction and creation, death and resurrection.[253] Gebara is clear in this advocacy for a reimagining of Trinitarian theology in light of interconnectedness and relationality of life and death, good and evil, male and female, etc. To center our theology around these dynamics highlights the injustice, violence, and murder that are not of the Trinity. She is not systematic in her reflections on theodicy, however and does not offer a new structure in which to do theology and justice work.

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[250] *El Rostro Nuevo de Dios: Una Reconstrucción de los significados Trinitarios*. Ivone Gebara. Paulinas, São Paulo, 1994. Ediciones Dabar, SA de CV. Mexico, D.F. 1994. P. 52 Translation mine. *"...estamos viviendo tiempos difíciles en que lo que llamamos fuerzas de mal parecen ser las más victoriosas."*

[251] Gebara, Ivone. *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999. Pg. 168

[252] *Women Healing Earth* by Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Trinity and Human Experience: An Ecofeminist Approach" by Ivone Gebara p. 22

[253] Gebara, *El Rostro Nuevo de Dios.* 63. Translation mine.
"*Es un cuerpo en evolución, en éxtasis creador, en trabajo destructor y regenerador, cuerpo de muerte y resurrección. Todo es nuestro cuerpo, cuerpo trinitraio, tension y communion continuas de multiplicidad y unidad, en la extasiante y misteriosa aventura de la vida."*

Gebara's theological anthropology is also based in an interconnected understanding of the human person. She abandons the language of talking about human beings 'before the fall,' and instead wants to create a theological anthropology where humans are understood as inherently good and evil, just like the forces in nature that are at once creative and destructive. Gebara references Augustine and his theology about original sin, adding the thought of Paul Ricoeur, when she writes that "that the concept of 'original sin' should not only include the evil we do, but the *possibility* of evil that continually inhabits us." [254] She highlights the roots of problematic Christian theological anthropology where women are seen as intrinsically evil or bad and men are not. Her question is not about the existence of evil, but rather how evil is experienced, interpreted, or defined. According to Gebara, it is impossible to essentialize any constitutive aspect of a human person, but it is possible to assert that the first principle of being human is relatedness.

According to Gebara, then, the idea of "before the fall," or "original sin" as commonly understood, or a "defect" that occurred, is no longer valid. The divide between humans and each other, and humans and God, that this line of thinking entails does not exist anymore. Instead, there are "destruction of life processes, of human groups, and of persons as a result of the 'barbarity' we have developed within ourselves…Even though we struggle against evil, we know it is part of us: it is our body, just as good, love, and mercy are."[255] Gebara focuses on the mysterious origin of the cosmos, of all life forms, and of humans and in so doing removes the idea of a primordial state of perfection where evil comes along in some way, and breaks up the perfect state. Evil is a "*possibility*…that

[254] Gebara in *T & T Clark Handbook of Christian theology and climate change*, 468.
[255] Gebara, Ivone. *Longing for Running Water,* 95.

continually inhabits us" and good is not even a possibility without this possibility of evil being present and real at the same time.[256] The ecofeminist, Trinitarian perspective that Gebara develops removes any distinctions between evil, destruction, and suffering, and our lived reality. In this line of thought, the category of evil "is also our body. Evil is a relationship we ourselves construct. It leads to the unraveling of the entire fabric of human life."[257]

Gebara recognizes that Christian discourse about moral or effective evil has always privileged men and how they perceive evil, and the sacrifice of women is often rendered invisible. She begins *Out of the Depths* with an account of women in India and the unacknowledged suffering they endure in the domestic sphere in order to feed their family and maintain harmony. Here she is particularly concerned about the evil that we undergo, that we do not choose, and that is found institutionally or within social structures that allow it and even perpetuate it. This evil is endured on a daily basis, and is regularly unacknowledged or named as evil. Often it is called fate, God's plan, or retribution for sin.

Gebara insists that we must enlarge our understanding of evil, for example by examining women's (and children's and other marginalized entities) experiences of evil, evil encountered in our everyday lives, and identifying the obstacles to addressing these evils. She argues that theology so far is failing to attend to these problems, and while she validates the ways in which Catholicism has created some ways for women to be freer from patriarchy, as in her own experience, she maintains that it "has often upheld this understanding of women as vulnerable to evil, and has done little to denounce the evil to

[256] Gebara in *T & T Clark Handbook of Christian Theology and Climate Change*, 468.
[257] Gebara, *Longing.* 164

which millions and millions of women were and still are victims."[258] The Christian tradition as a whole, however, does open space where women can escape the "kind of domestic prison in which patriarchal structures have attempted to confine and constrain them," and sometimes churches aid in feminist struggles, however, Gebara's critique is that the Christian tradition has not "been a forum for criticizing the hierarchical structures found in religious institutions."[259] She is advocating for a fundamental shift in theodicy and Christian theology as a whole, where feminist and ecological struggles are central point of any analysis, theology, pastoral care, and power in the churches.[260] By including evil as a possibility for all, she removes the temptation for humans to view some of humanity as only evil and others as only good.

To conclude this section on a hopeful note, Gebara desires that all of humanity learns how to express to ourselves and share with others the meaningful experiences throughout our lifetimes, like the resurrection experiences of "solidarity with the poor, defending life in spite of the many threats against it, condemning oppression, sharing, forgiving, and expressing mercy and praise," when a returning to life happens.[261] She points to a lack of Trinitarian devotional practices or phrases, like the sign of the cross (which is more of a habit than reflective exercise) as a sign that we need to further explore ways of expressing Trinitarian theology. While we have many expressions of, prayers to, and devotional practices specific to God the Father, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit, we need a renewal of Trinitarian ritual, expression, and devotion. This signifies the need for

[258] Gebara, Ivone. "A Feminist Perspective on Enigmas and Ambiguities in Religious Interpretation" in Bamat, Thomas and Jean-Paul Wiest. *Popular Catholicism in a World Church.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999. 262
[259] Gebara in *Popular Catholicism in a World Church,* 262.
[260] *Ibid*, 264.
[261] Gebara, *Longing.* 147.

Trinitarian language, theology, and devotion to branch outside of religious orders and intellectual sectors of churches. In fact, Gebara argues that the multiplicity of the Trinity is closely related to our lives where the blending of strength and fragility, similarity and difference, life and death is clear.[262]

Gebara highlights complexity in human thought and action, and references Catherine Keller's *Cloud of the Impossible*, where we must welcome the darkness and lack of knowing that surround us as a place for freedom. Gebara recognizes that dualisms of good and evil occur in religious traditions outside of Christianity, too, and wants to do something different "to collectively live a more worthy life."[263] This "collective consciousness of our fragility" is the starting point, then, of "politics as the art of governing cities and the art of ruling the Earth in light of the life of its body, of all its inhabitants," and this is precisely the place where Gebara sees the potential for a more just coexistence.[264] According to Gebara it is imperative for us to see the world beyond the self, feel the pain of others as our own, and desire the right to mutual recognition. We must be firmly where we are, "to sink our feet firmly into the land of our time," as we "discover the *near causation*, the exclusionary and destructive choices that are made even when other choices could be better for all."[265] Turning briefly to the Con-Spirando women's collective that Gebara co-founded, this project will provide a glimpse into the embodied holistic ecofeminism that Gebara is developing, as a concrete sign of this hope for interrelatedness, before concluding this chapter.

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[262] Gebara, *El Rostro Nuevo de Dios*, "Pluralismo Religioso: Una Perspectiva Feminista," and "The Trinity and Human Experience: An Ecofeminist Approach" in *Women Healing Earth*
[263] Gebara in *T & T Clark Handbook of Christian theology and climate change*, 473.
[264] *Idem.*
[265] *Idem.*

2.8 CON-SPIRANDO

Gebara and a former student Mary Judith Ress were founding members of the Con-spirando Collective, which began in 1990 in Santiago, Chile and was comprised of women who were working with ecofeminist theology and spirituality. The Collective recognized the body as the theological starting point for providing a counter example to patriarchal mind-body dualisms as well as "a more holistic, intuitive way of learning that makes us more aware of the interconnectedness of all matter."[266] They collaborated with other women's groups across Latin America and the Caribbean and published a journal between 1992-2008. It was neither a purely academic collective nor was it a kind of church organization. In the publications of Con-spirando, there are articles, poems, works of art, songs, and interviews that embody their emphasis on epistemological diversification. The Con-spirando Collective was an extension of Gebara's theology and employed her epistemological, anthropological, and cosmological themes. The Collective demonstrated the implications of Gebara's ecofeminist theology in a lived social movement, and specifically addressed questions around life, death, and resurrection in a pointed way.

Through reflecting on life, death, and resurrection, Con-spirando members saw these elements as part of the same cycle, where death meant "returning to that primal energy, that original goodness from which they have come."[267] In the ecofeminist perspective, there is hope that what comes into existence is never lost. The elements that are present in human bodies today were present in the primordial beginnings of our

[266] Ress, Mary Judith. *Ecofeminism in Latin America.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006. 142
[267] Ress, *Ecofeminism in Latin America.* 173

world, so "it is probable that in some recycled form we will be present in the future generations of the community of life."[268] Death, therefore, is a return to this prehistoric energy and goodness that life originates from. Many of the Con-spirando members interviewed by Ress in *Lluvia para Florecer* (Rain to Flourish) spoke of death as initially scary to them, when God was known as a distant Father figure in a patriarchal worldview.[269] However, as their life experiences led them to understand a more immanent God and a more interconnected world outside of patriarchy and problematic dualisms, they also began to experience death as a transformation of life that is not separate from God or others. Life and death are therefore understood as interacting elements of the universe. There are daily death experiences where for example people who live without the basic conditions of life live through a kind of death, and daily resurrections could mean memories of a deceased loved one, experiences of their presence after they have died, or the knowledge that their loved ones are with Jesus. These insights, documented by the Con-spirando, are the clearest indication of a changing cosmology that is possible through Gebara's ecofeminist hermeneutic.

2.9 CONCLUSION

As noted in the first chapter of this project, Ivone Gebara addresses the polarity of life and death head on in a more comprehensive account than other ecotheologians. She

[268] Ress, *Ecofeminism in Latin America.* 203
[269] Ress, Mary Judith. *Lluvia Para Florecer : Entrevistas Sobre El Ecofeminismo En América Latina (Interviews about Ecofeminism in Latin America)*. Santiago, Chile: Colectivo Con-spirando, 2002.

includes life after death as "part of the mysterious and sacred journey of life itself, a mystery that is beyond ourselves," and acknowledges our inability to define or understand it in a complete way.[270] Emphasizing the mystery in this process, she notes that we are able to "deeply sense" the process nature of the life cycle, and the interconnected stages of this cycle.[271] By addressing death, and distinguishing those that are "unjust," that ultimately are motivating factors for her theology, Gebara's ecofeminist liberation theology makes visible the lives that are closer to death in a way that culture and Christian tradition do not. Her goal is to limit the unjust endings of life, and this includes women, the Earth, and those who are on the margins in a particular way. In working toward her goal, Gebara explores the interconnectedness of processes of death and life, creation and destruction, and she locates these within the Trinity.

Gebara views the interrogation of religion and religious beliefs as necessary for the survival of our species as we address ecological and feminist concerns.[272] She offers thoughtful critiques of the Christian tradition, and also constructs and imagines theological insights that are more generative, inclusive, liberating, and just. The question of resolving the tension between the dualism of life and death and the transcendence of this duality is left incomplete and open, as Gebara herself articulates throughout her work. Since these dynamics are central to the Trinity, the cosmos, the earth, relationships among peoples and cultures, human relationships, and every person, she provides a path to comparative dialogue and theology to address the effective evils that lie outside the Trinity. The necessity of dialoguing across religious traditions to address survival

[270] Gebara, *Longing.* 161
[271] *Idem.*
[272] Gebara, *Longing.* 199

concerns is an implicit invocation of comparative ecofeminist theology, which is echoed by Hindu scholars as well.[273]

Gebara confesses that even she feels "divided between [her] personal research and poor people's lives," as an example of the problematic nature of the patriarchy and dualism.[274] By focusing in on our "collective consciousness of our fragility," our vulnerable and interconnected humanity, where "as humans, we are conscious of sorrows and pain…joys and happiness," and "all that is good and bad is interconnected, touching our human condition and shaping our perceptions of the world."[275] Gebara then highlights the ways in which change is possible. To see more of the world that is beyond ourselves, sense the suffering of another as our own, and support the right for mutual recognition for all, we need to be aware of the destruction that we choose and create, even and especially when there are other choices that are better for all.[276] The first step to addressing evil, therefore is to take a step back from our current cycles of violence and unjust death and dismantle them. From there, Gebara is open to and calls for other perspectives, theologies, and narratives to flesh out her Trinitarian theology and work toward enacting interrelatedness to the point of entering into full communion with all life.

The comparative turn in this project to the Kali tradition fulfills Gebara's invitation to dialogue across religions. As a Hindu goddess who represents and embodies death and destruction, yet is also the compassionate Mother, she reconciles these dualities by ultimately transcending them and the world altogether. Chapter 3 will weave together the

[273] Rita D. Sherma and Vandana Shiva are two examples.
[274] Gebara, Ivone. "Daily Life Challenges as the Criterion for Biblical and Feminist Theological Hermeneutics" in Lipsett, Diane B. and Phyllis Trible (eds.). *Faith + Feminism: Ecumenical Essays.*Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014. 211
[275] Gebara in *Planetary Solidarity,* 67.
[276] Gebara in *T & T Clark Handbook of Christian Theology and Climate Change*, 473.

various threads from folk, tantric, bhakti, academic, and social interpretations of the goddess. Kali's rich and multi-faceted identity allows for Christians to reconsider the Trinitarian God in light of Gebara's focus on the life-death, creative-destructive process that is located in the divine. Then, in chapter 4, the life and work of two prominent devotees of Kali, Ramprasad and Ramakrishna, will be explored to articulate an implicit theology of love of Kali. Their devotion to and love for Kali, in all her destructive and creative capabilities, her ferocity and her tender compassion, is unwavering. Ramprasad and Ramakrishna spoke often of their own death, death as a force, death and destruction of the worlds, and their practice of maintaining constant love for Kali through it all. This devotion to the goddess allows for a deeper Christian reflection on the first commandment, to love God, especially in the face of the complexity of the divine.

3.0 CHAPTER 3:

THE KALI TRADITION:

THE GODDESS AS SHE APPEARS THROUGHOUT PURANIC TEXTS, FOLK TRADITIONS, TANTRISM, BHAKTI, SCHOLARSHIP, AND SOCIAL LIBERATION.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the goddess Kali, in her various traditions, from her first appearances in Sanskrit literature to popular devotion in the Kali temple of Calcutta in recent years, up to 2021. She is a goddess who is present in the Puranas, Tantric texts and rituals, and bhakti devotional worship and texts. She is a complex goddess who exhibits a spectrum of qualities, sometimes befitting traditionally benign and beautiful mother goddesses, and other times wildly destructive and chaotic. Like other such goddesses, Kali is also described as inhabiting both of these spheres at the same time, in her appearance and in her actions as a divinity. In the *Devi Mahatmya*, she is the blood-drinking goddess who is able to vanquish a demon that no other god or goddess was able to defeat, to save the cosmos. As a folk village goddess, she is the protector of particular locations and people. In Tantrism, Kali is the one who destroys the practitioner's fear of death so that she can be transformed and liberated. For bhaktas, Kali is the Mother who is fierce and terrifying, and also a maternal and loving parent. Kali is complex and multi-faceted, though consistently through her forms and traditions she is intimately related to

and identified with death. It is this facet of her identity that consistently draws me to Kali, and provides rich ground for dialogue with Gebara's Christian theology.

Western encounters of Kali tended at first to focus on her shocking appearance and identity, from the time of Christian missionaries who encountered her and claimed that they had met the devil, to the Rolling Stones logo inspired by her tongue, and the Indiana Jones Temple of Doom movie's grotesque depiction of a Kali ceremony.[277] The sensual, violent, bloody nature of Kali at once shocks and attracts outsiders of the Kali tradition. The academic study of Kali notes these fierce aspects of the goddess, and also brings the folk, bhakti, and other interpretations of her into focus. For example, Kali's image is used to represent liberation movements and feminist endeavors, both in Indian and Hindu contexts and by outsiders and this is referenced by many scholars. This chapter will delve into these various strands of the Hindu Kali tradition, Western studies of the goddess, and liberative imagery, focusing on her connection with death and life. Chapter 5 will discuss how these various dynamics in the Kali tradition provide resources for Christianity to enlarge its own contemplation of the reconciliation of dualisms. It is to the Puranic texts that this chapter turns to first.

[277] Humes, Cynthia Ann. "Wrestling with Kali: South Asian and British constructions of the dark goddess" in McDermott, Rachel Fell and Kripal, Jeffrey. *Encountering Kali; In the Margins, At the Center, In the West.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003.

3.2 PURANAS

Kali potentially originated as a tribal goddess, with various oral traditions. By the epic and Puranic periods (third century BCE to seventh century BCE) she became part of the Sanskrit Brahmanical tradition.[278] Kali is usually either on the battlefield, "or in situations on the periphery of Hindu society."[279] This makes her unique as a Hindu goddess, to be engaged in violence and also associated with inauspicious people and places. Kali is often worshipped by low-caste people, and her temples are prescribed, in the sixth to eighth centuries work the *Mana-sara-silpa-sastra*, to be built "far from villages and towns, near the cremation grounds and the dwellings of Candalas (very low caste people)."[280] Thus her identity as one that disrupts the existing narrative of goddesses, auspiciousness, and social norms, is visible early on. Low caste people are the ones to work closely with death and cremation, and cremation grounds as well as those who work there are understood to be polluting. Kali is thus interconnected with death, people of low castes, and places of death and cremation, unlike most deities.

In the sixth century *Devi Mahatmya* text of the *Markandeya Purana*, Kali materializes as an embodiment of the goddess Durga's anger in one of her more well-known origin stories. There is a narrative of a battle against a demon that the male gods are losing. Together, all the male deities decide to create a divine being to vanquish this demon, and thus they combine aspects of their strength and prowess in battle, and here we meet Durga. She is fierce, though calm, and carries a weapon of each male god who

[278] McDermott, Rachel Fell and Kripal, Jeffrey. *Encountering Kali; In the Margins, At the Center, In the West.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003. 4
[279] Kinsley, David R. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition.* Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987. 116
[280] Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses.* 117-118

created her. Through the battle, she remains calm and poised, beautifully adorned and with well-quaffed hair. When Durga is angered, from her forehead springs Kali, the embodiment of her fury, portrayed as fierce and wild and not at all calm. Kali is able to finally vanquish the demon by drinking its blood, as it was regenerating itself constantly and only by consuming its blood could this process end. Later, in the Puranas, specifically the *Agni-purana* and the *Garuda-purana,* Durga and Kali are also called upon for help in winning wars and defeat of enemies, so the warrior aspect of Kali's identity spans centuries.[281]

Kali's wildness contrasts with Durga in the above origin story, as Kali does not remain within the typical confines of her sex. She is a female god who is not limited to the perfect qualities like motherhood, being a supportive spouse, perpetually beautifully composed, etc. as most other female deities. Kali is often known as an independent deity, and when she is linked to a god it is usually Siva, the god of destruction. She incites his wild and destructive capabilities, and is also portrayed in sexual intercourse with him where she is above him. As a divine person who does not conform to gender or divinity norms, Kali also confronts a neat dualistic vision of many aspects of life, including life and death. She is described and depicted with four arms, wearing a garland of decapitated human heads, with blood on her body, and usually she is naked. Her arms demonstrate "the complete circle of creation and destruction, which is contained within or encompassed by her," as she makes the mudras of "fear not" and "conferring boons," and also holds weapons and severed heads.[282] These latter two represent destruction, of course, but the standard interpretation is that it is ignorance she wants to destroy, and the

[281] Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*. 117
[282] Kinsley, David. *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: The Ten Mahavidyas.* Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1997. 87

gates of freedom she wants to cut open. She offers freedom from societal norms, and she is incredibly powerful as she is able to break boundaries, transforming them into liberative pathways. Death is palpable in Kali's imagery, descriptions, temple geography, actions, etc. Comparison with the Christian tradition will shed new light on how Christians can better love God, and the world, through deeper contemplation of death and the divine.

As the symbol of death itself, Kali is also the symbol of triumph over death, where worshipping Kali overpowers death.[283] She may ride a corpse or ghost as her divine vehicle. Her hair is wild and unkempt, representing the end of social and cosmic order and the underlying chaos. Kali's tongue can be seen lolling out of her mouth, which denotes both sexual gratification and tasting the world, including what is polluted.[284] She challenges her devotees to partake of the flavors of the world in every way, so as to "detect its underlying unity and sacrality, which is the Great Goddess herself."[285] She has dark or black skin, which "symbolizes her all-embracing, comprehensive nature, because black is the color in which all other colors merge, black absorbs and dissolves them. Or black is said to represent the total absence of color, again signifying the *nirguna* (beyond qualities) nature of Kali as ultimate reality. Either way, Kali's black color symbolizes her transcendence of all form."[286] The devotee has the image of Kali in their heart, and with her help is able to burn off the boundaries to liberation, creating an inner cremation pyre in their heart, "the fire of knowledge, *jñanagni,* which Kali bestows."[287] It is this sacrifice of one's self or ego that brings about the devotee's death and their transformation into a

[283] Kinsley, David. *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine,* 86.
[284] *Ibid,* 81.
[285] *Ibid,* 83.
[286] *Ibid,* 87.
[287] *Ibid,* 88.

corpse, where Kali can enter their heart to free them from the desires of the world and offer her blessing. Thus, in ritually and mentally enacting "one's own death and destruction" the devotee "re-creates the cosmos with Kali at the center."[288] Death is the ultimate transformation for life, and Kali is the one to lead the devotee between the two.

3.3 FOLK TRADITIONS

Kali is a village goddess for many areas throughout India, and is seen to protect certain cities or localities. June McDaniel points out that many academic studies of Kali begin with the Sanskrit texts that mention the goddess, and leave out the folk traditions and their practices.[289] For many geographic locations, Kali is the deity who is understood to offer her protection and her presence, and in return the groups of people who live there provide offerings and worship to maintain the relationship.[290] For example, Kali is referred to as Bankali, the goddess of the forest, by the Oraons of the Sunderbans to the south of Calcutta. The Sunderbans invoke Kali's name "before cutting trees, collecting honey, and performing other work" as she is their primary deity.[291] She is understood to be the guardian, particularly for buffaloes. To worship Kali, the buffalos are washed and anointed with vermillion and a ritual chicken feast is prepared and offered to her first before feeding an extended family, all while the buffalos take a day off work, in order to please the goddess. For other Adivasi (tribal groups) in particular, Kali is offered blood

[288] Kinsley, David. *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine,* 90.
[289] McDaniel, June. *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004. 235
[290] There are many other deities that are part of these folk and geographic traditions throughout India.
[291] *Ibid*, 230.

sacrifices in the form of goats.[292] There are accounts of the goddess appearing in stones or trees, or other natural organic formations. Often there is no statue of the goddess, but an element of the earth that is worshipped.

There are also many oral traditions that depict Kali's origin story in a different way than the *Devi Mahatmya*, for example, and are passed down through generations in these folk traditions. In one community of Kalimpong, Sikkim, to the north of Bengal, Kali arises from Durga but not on the battlefield.[293] Instead, Durga is going to bathe herself and creates a young man, Ganesha, out of dirt from her hand and tells him to guard her so no one comes in during her bath. Her husband Shiva comes home and is barred from entering, as Ganesha does not know him. In anger, Shiva decapitates him and Durga is incensed by grief, telling Shiva he has murdered their son and when she cannot find Ganesha's head she is enraged. She is destructive, and eats people and drinks their blood throughout the world, and so the gods begin calling her Kali Ma. Earthquakes, lightning, storms, etc. fill the world and people are afraid so the gods meet to create a plan. They bring Ganesha back to life and replace his head with that of a white elephant. Only then is she calmed and the destruction and darkness end.[294]

What is similar in this and other oral origin stories of Kali, as well as in the *Devi Mahatmya*, is that she arises out of an abundance of emotion from Durga. Anger, grief, shame, etc. are all feelings that are associated with Kali's emanation, and death of a demon or someone else is also involved. Thus, Kali arises in chaotic events when Durga's calm disposition is threatened. The folk traditions that are dedicated to Kali rely

[292] McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*. 230
[293] *Ibid*, 236.
[294] Often this story is attributed to Parvati who is the mother of Ganesha, as goddess stories in Hinduism can often be overlaid across traditions.

on particular worship and ritual to appease the goddess, sometimes engaging in practices that are violent and painful toward themselves.[295] Their interpretation of these practices is that "a mother becomes worried by the pain of her children, and becomes benevolent and forgiving toward them."[296] Kali shows up in times of despair, like in the death of a loved one who she resurrects,[297] or as a young child who is alone and needs care and attention.[298] She originates in anger, grief, and death, yet folk traditions understand her to be present to their particular location and community. Her maternal care and attention can be invoked through ritual, and though she is not a perfectly predictable deity she is understood to be their protector.

3.4 TANTRISM

Etymologically, the Sanskrit term *tantra* comes from the root *tan* which means "to weave or stretch," and has a diverse set of meanings, going back to usage in Vedic times when the oldest Sanskrit texts were recorded.[299] The numerous definitions of the term itself is well matched with the variety of interpretations of the tradition, ranging from early missionary accounts of first impressions of "the most debased form of Hindu idolatry and the most shocking confusion of sexuality with religion" to "Sir John Woodroffe's highly apologetic, sanitized definition" where "Tantra becomes a noble and

[295] See McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls* p. 49 for an explanation of hook-swinging, where men and women swing from hooks that have been inserted into their backs or chests.
[296] McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls* p. 240
[297] *Ibid*, 235.
[298] *Ibid*, 232.
[299] *Urban, Hugh. Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003.* 4

orthodox tradition in continuity with the most ancient teachings of the Vedas and Vedanta."[300] Sir John Woodroffe (1865-1936), also known as Arthur Avalon, is hailed by Urban as "the father of modern Tantric studies in the West."[301] He was a High Court Judge in Calcutta and scholar of British Indian law, and also a student of the tantras who published many translations and works of research. In doing so, much of his work is apologetic and defensive of Tantrism against critics and efforts to prove its congruencies with the Vedas and Vedanta, though his work continues to be respected in the field of Tantric and Kali studies because of the "sheer volume, scope, and influence of his work."[302] Urban likens the term Tantrism to "Hinduism," as each is a relatively recent term that connotes a tradition that is multi-faceted and based on a dialogical relationship between the East and West, scholarly and popular theories.[303] The Tantras are texts within the Indian religious system that date back to at least the seventh century and are part of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions. There are multiple sects of Tantrism, and there is a large body of academic research dedicated to Tantra.

Tantra, according to Andre Padoux, "is inseparably made up of notions, of ideology, *and* of actions and practices, all being linked-a vision of the world, then, the means to give substance to this view on the existential plane of body-mind and in the world one lives in."[304] The Tantric view of the world is that everything is grounded in and composed of the feminine divine energy, sakti, including humans and other beings. Humans can use this sakti for goals in this body and lifetime, as well as in ultimate

[300] *Urban, Hugh. Tantra,* 5-6.
[301] *Ibid,* 135.
[302] Urban, *Tantra.* 135 and *Encountering Kali* p. 6
[303] Urban includes a critique of post-colonial work as setting up another binary where the natives have no power or agency, as opposed to white or colonial powers.
[304] Padoux, André. *The Hindu Tantric World.* Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2017. 16

liberation. Tantric deities are all-pervasive and feminine and masculine, where the female pole is a power that may be "auspicious and favorable but also fierce and fearsome-this especially if in the form of a goddess."[305] A Tantric practitioner is initiated into a tradition, with a particular master and a guru lineage, which is connected with the secrecy inherent in Tantrism.[306] This type of initiation and learning is not unique to Tantrism, however, and neither is worship of deities or puja, which also pervades Hinduism. Mantras are another example of a practice that pervades Hinduism, however what is specifically Tantric is "the fact that mantras are the highest form of deities, that one can approach the godhead and progress toward liberation only using mantras."[307] While Tantrism does have specificities, there are various aspects that are diffuse and pervasive throughout Hindu traditions.

The Tantric practitioner is referred to as a "hero" (*vira* in Sanskrit) because Tantric Yoga "is indeed a dangerous path that leads fools into greater bondage and only wise practitioners to freedom and bliss" where one "must navigate in treacherous waters that demand constant vigilance and great inner strength."[308] Tantric practitioners believe that it is always possible to attain liberation or enlightenment (moksha in Sanskrit), even during deteriorating and deteriorated social conditions like in the *kali yuga* (the final and worst, most dark and destructive ages in the four-leveled Hindu concept of time). Tantric practices resemble non-Tantric Hindu practices, except for "their inclusiveness and the radical attitude with which they are pursued."[309] Some Tantric practices are directly opposite to typical social and religious norms, like in the left-hand schools of Tantra

[305] Padoux, André. *The Hindu Tantric World*, 16.
[306] Most Tantrikas have been assumed to be men.
[307] Padoux, *The Hindu Tantric World*. 16
[308] Feuerstein, Georg. *Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy.* Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 1998. xvi
[309] *Ibid,* 8.

where believers engage in taboo practices like ritual sex with someone other than their spouse, eating meat, drinking alcohol, etc. Thus, it is not surprising that "the religious orthodoxy of the brahmins has always looked at Tantra and Tantric practitioners with dismay or even disdain."[310] Tantrism, however, validates the taboo which therefore "disarms it of its power to pollute, degrade, and bind, and changes that negative power into spiritually transformative energy."[311]

In Hugh Urban's book *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion* he raises the question of whether Western intellectuals should be studying Tantrism in the first place, as "this more "extreme" of all Oriental traditions"[312] is often intended only for those initiated into the tradition. The secrecy within Tantrism is intended to make sure practitioners are prepared for initiation and lifelong commitment to Tantrism and Tantric communities, and to protect those who are not prepared to receive the teachings, which could potentially be harmful to the unaware.[313] Urban thus incorporates Western fascination into a genealogy of Tantra, which he defines as "a densely tangled web of intersecting threads, both Eastern and Western, ancient and modern, woven through the intricate cross-cultural interplay of scholarly and popular imaginations, and creatively reimagined in each new historical era."[314]

Researchers in the field, such as Feuerstein, point out that Tantrism does not have as many publications or as much research as other sects of Hinduism, and there is a "Neo-Tantrism" that is so distorted from true Tantrism that often presents Tantric Yoga "as a mere discipline of ritualized or sacred sex" when in fact "nothing could be further

[310] Feuerstein, Georg. *Tantra,* 9.
[311] Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine.* 78
[312] Urban, *Tantra.* xiii
[313] Feuerstein, *Tantra.* 74
[314] Urban, *Tantra. xiii*

from the truth!"[315] Perhaps Feuerstein tried too hard to keep a distance from the sexuality that does have a rich presence in Tantrism, but his point stands that often from the Western perspective the sexuality of Tantric rituals and texts is highlighted to the detriment of the myriad other facets. The interaction between Westerners and Tantrism is a productive one, where Padoux and Urban agree that Tantrism as a term denoting one unified tradition is a recent development driven by Western scholarship that has its own complicated history. For example, the idea of Tantrism being understood as a horrible and 'degenerate' part of Indian thought and practice.[316] William Ward and J.N. Farquhar are among those who identified Tantra as "too abominable to enter the ears of man and impossible to reveal to a Christian public" and "an array of magic rites drawn from the most ignorant and stupid classes."[317] Now, however, Tantrism is often highlighted as "a much needed celebration of the body, sexuality, and material existence" and as a radical Other that is obviously opposed to traditions of modern Western thought.[318] Urban's book traces this historical development and the reciprocal dialogue between East and West in the study of Tantrism.[319]

Ritual is key for Tantrism, where through these embodied sacred acts, the elaborate and subtle geography of our bodies can be learned and then disciplined and ultimately controlled, like in yoga and other Hindu practices.[320] The practitioner can therefore use their body and the knowledge they have of their body to "bring the

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[315] Feuerstein, *Tantra*. xiii
[316] Urban, *Tantra*. 2
[317] Urban page 2, Ward's *A View of the History, Literature, and Religion of the Hindoos*, vol. 2 (1811; reprint, London: Kingsbury, Parbury, and Allen, 1817), 247; J.N. Farguhar, *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920), 200.
[318] Urban, *Tantra*. 2-3
[319] Rachel Fell McDermott traces a similar transformation in how the goddess Kali is incorporated into Western thought.
[320] Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine.* 77

fractured world of name and form…back to wholeness and unity."[321] This wholeness and unity is focused on a key deity, who is the ground and process of said oneness, which for many practitioners is Kali. Tantric ritual typically brings together opposites like "male-female, microcosm-macrocosm, sacred-profane, auspicious-inauspicious, pure-polluted, and Siva-Sakti," and invites us to see beyond them.[322] Through practicing Tantrism with the aid of a guru, the practitioner uses their own body in order to bring these opposites and polarities to the unification and wholeness that is Kali. In the eighth through sixteenth centuries, Kali developed throughout Sanskrit Tantric texts, became more independent, and became recognized as the dynamic origin of the entire universe, as Sakti, "energy or power." As death itself, she would fall into the ultimate taboo or prohibited inauspicious category within Hinduism, but the Tantric tradition specifically engages with these forbidden elements in pursuit of transcendence and freedom from the cycle of samsara (rebirth and re-death).[323]

In Tantrism, goddesses play a key role in understanding cosmic or ultimate reality, even though Siva is often referred to as the source of the tantras. His wife, Parvati, is referred to as the student who receives the scriptures as well as the embodiment of Sakti (Kali and other goddesses fulfill this role, too).[324] It is this Sakti who is present to the practitioner, "and whose presence and being underlie the adept's own being. For the tantric adept it is her vitality that is sought through various techniques aimed at spiritual transformation; thus it is she who is affirmed as the dominant and

[321] Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine.* 77-78
[322] *Ibid,* 76.
[323] The Tantric tradition is, according to Hugh Urban's *Tantra*, a "fluid and shifting collection of particular texts, practices, and traditions, woven and rewoven with a variety of other traditions."
[324] Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine.* 76

primary reality."[325] The primacy of Kali is illustrated in various texts, for example the *Nirvana-tantra*, which states that the males god Brahma, Siva, and Visnu arise from her like bubbles from the sea that leave the ocean unchanged, and to compare them would be "like comparing the puddle of water in a cow's hoofprint to the waters of the sea."[326] Kali is thus the ground of all creation and beings, even when it comes to male deities who are venerated in their own Hindu traditions as primary deities.

McDermott gives an overview of the development of Kali's Bengali iconography, which began around the eleventh century. The imagery from these early years is similar to what we see today, with Kali being described (in the *Mahabhagavata* Purana and the *Devibhaghavata Purana* as two such texts) as naked, as having big teeth, "a lolling tongue, a garland of cut heads, four arms, a corpse seat, and a covering of blood."[327] The thirteenth century *Yonigahvara* is claimed as the earliest text on Kali worship, where "its instructions on Tantric meditation, heroic rites, and heterodox practices all involve Kali."[328] In the early sixteenth century and the Dhaka region, Kali became key in "Sakta religious practice (*sadhana)* and praise verse (*stuti*)."[329] Between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, Kali was being worshipped with things like "skulls, corpses, and instruments of death, and who sat or stood on a corpse identified as Siva."[330] McDermott thus traces her iconography from that of "a fairly minor deity in the world of the Epics and earlier Puranas" to "[making] her splash in Sanskrit literature in the first half of the

[325] Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*. 76
[326] *Idem*.
[327] McDermott, Rachel Fell. *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: the Fortunes of Hindu Festivals.* New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011. 164
[328] *Idem*.
[329] *Idem*.
[330] *Idem*.

second millennium as a deity of life, death, transformation, and ritual."[331] Kali is, though, "primarily a Tantric deity, for she develops few myths or stories, except by association with Parvati, and her primary appearances occur in the context of instructions to spiritual adepts or *sadhakas*."[332]

The *Mahanirvana Tantra* is known in the West by scholars of Indian religion for its feminist themes, and Urban is clear that it is unique among tantras "in its conception of absolute reality, its description of ritual, its view of caste, and its attitude toward various social issues, such as marriage and women's rights."[333] The text claims to be an ancient revelation that has been kept secret, however, it is rarely referenced before the late eighteenth century and is only in a few libraries of Bengal, so some scholars argue that this text is in fact from this recent time period.[334] In the seventh chapter of the *Mahanirvana Tantra* there is a devotional hymn to the goddess Kali that is strikingly different from other Sakta texts. Instead of emphasizing Kali's bloodthirsty, destructive, wild capabilities, or indeed even mentioning them, Kali is "benevolent and "sanitized"" and only the benign aspects of her identity are included, thus limiting her to one dimension.[335]

The *Mahanirvana Tantra* is a key text that points toward a change in relationship with the goddess tradition during the colonial era, one in which Urban argues Kali was tamed or sweetened.[336] There are also numerous mentions of what today would be called women's rights within the text, where sex is permitted only with your wife, practicing

[331] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddess of Bengal*. 164
[332] *Idem*.
[333] Urban, *Tantra.* 64
[334] Gavin Flood, in *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion* (2006), calls the text a 'juridical hoax' on page 38, due to its inclusion of material he argues is derived from British law.
[335] Urban, *Tantra.* 65
[336] *Idem*.

sati is condemned, and all women are referred to as an image of the great Goddess.[337] While Flood dismissed the text, Urban argues that the *Mahanirvana Tantra* be treated as an example of how the role of tantras transformed under colonial rule, and reminds us that many texts claim to be ancient revelatory authorities that were kept secret until now, and they have value whether or not this is exactly true.[338] It is interesting that the wild, fierce, and strong nature of Kali is ignored while all women are connected with the great Goddess and certain practices concerning women are condemned. Alternatively, there is a rich history of the figure of Kali, in her blood thirsty glory, being employed as an image of liberation for Indians and for women, which will be discussed in a later section. Thus, between Avalon's incomplete translation of the *Karpuradi-stotra* that omits Kali's fierceness, and the questions raised about the *Mahanirvana Tantra* and its roots in dialogue with British colonialism, there is a need for re-translations of various one-dimensional texts on the goddess to maintain Kali's multi-faceted nature and further interrogate her relationship with colonial outsiders and various liberation movements.

The *Karpuradi-stotra*[339] refers to Kali as the "supreme mistress of the universe" (verse 12) who is "identical with the five elements" (verse 14), and "in union with Siva (who is identified as her spouse) she creates and destroys worlds."[340] She is associated not only with the terrible aspects of destruction, but is also a creator who is described as "young and beautiful" (verse 1), with "a gently smiling face," (verse 18) making

[337] Urban, *Tantra,* 66.
[338] *Ibid,* 70.
[339] Dupuche, John R. "The "Scandalous" Tantric Hymn to Kali *Karpura-stotra:* an Unexpurgated Translation." *International Journal of Tantric Studies,* Vol. 8 No. 1 June 22, 2012. "Avalon leaves out the "repulsive" aspects of Kali mentioned in the stotra: "the garland of skulls, the girdle of severed arms, the sword and severed head, the blood trickling from her mouth, the cremation ground strewn with corpses…sexual activity and the consumption of human flesh."… "Mother" is used 7 times and "Birth Giver" 4 times, but nothing "motherly" is depicted to connect with Bengali devotionalism.
[340] Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine.* 79

"gestures with her two right hands that dispel fear and offer boons" (verse 4).[341] John Dupuche provides a re-translation of this text, however, as until 2012 only Arthur Avalon's translation of the *Karpuradi-stotra* was available in English. Many Indian commentators have relied on Avalon's translation over the years, and Dupuche points out a glaring flaw.[342] Avalon's translation is scrubbed of the more violent or shocking elements of Kali's identity, where the stotra does include a description of "the garland of skulls, the girdle of severed arms, the sword and severed head, the blood trickling from her mouth, the cremation ground strewn with corpses…sexual activity and the consumption of human flesh…"[343] The term 'mother' is used seven times and 'birth giver' four times to describe the goddess, though there are no connections with Bengali devotionalism (a later development). These epithets used to describe Kali as mother and birth giver are not expanded upon or described, in contrast to the more ferocious aspects of Kali that are vividly detailed. Thus, Dupuche argues that the *Karpuradi-stotra* is perhaps a seventeenth century text, if not earlier, since Kali is not 'sanitized' or made only benevolent in the original verses.

Within the Mahavidyas, a group of "ten unusual goddesses" who are typically marginal within Tantrism, and who are related to death, blood, self-mutilation, and varieties of destruction, Kali becomes known as the first or primary goddess.[344] She also enjoys the strongest following of devotees who see her as their Mother. This grouping of ten goddesses was recognized as such in the early medieval period, after the tenth century C.E., although some predate this grouping and, like Kali, are notably independent. There

[341] Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine.* 79
[342] Dupuche, "The "Scandalous" Tantric Hymn"
[343] *Idem.*
[344] Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine.* ix

is no clear explanation for why exactly these particular ten goddesses are associated together. David Kinsley wrote a book about the Mahavidyas in 1997 "to bring a preliminary ordering to the Mahavidya tradition in the hope that it will encourage other scholars to undertake more detailed studies of the group and of its individual members."[345] As he completed research for this project, he was told by "priests, scholars, painters, and practitioners-that the Mahavidyas are "all one,"" however as he continued his careful study he realized that this comment was key to understand the meaning behind manifestations of individual goddesses and their worship.[346] For example, the origins of the Mahavidyas are described as ten forms arising from one goddess, like Kali, Durga, or Sati, where the ten goddesses are particular avataras or features of this primary goddess. Also, most people are initiated into only one goddess tradition, and then that goddess is the Great Goddess and the relationship between Her and the initiate is kept completely secret.

As a group, the Mahavidyas, according to Kinsley "are associated with marginality, inauspicious qualities, pollution, and death; they might be termed *antimodels*, especially for women. By antimodels [he means] that their roles violate approved social values, customs, norms, or paradigms."[347] Included here is death, which is incredibly inauspicious and polluting in Hindu culture broadly, and yet is a central theme in worship and iconography of the ten goddesses. It is the "liberating power" of antimodels that Kinsley appreciates, and a point he makes several times throughout his book.[348] He also argues for this liberation as a key aspect of Tantrism specifically,

[345] Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine,* 2.
[346] Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine.* 2
[347] *Ibid,* 6.
[348] *Ibid,* 7.

although he sees it as a "muted theme" in nontantric Hinduism also, where "The world is not the way we like to think it is, and the sooner we realize that, the quicker we will make progress in acquiring spiritual maturity."[349] The Mahavidyas as liberating antimodels awaken us, in the modern West, and as Christians, as they offer an image of the divine that confronts and upends our neat, easy, comfortable ideas, or fantasies as Kinsley refers to them, about how the world works. Thus, the liberating antimodel can also serve as a catalyst for the Christian tradition in pursuing liberation.

It is here that Kali, as the typically primary Mahavidya, is the "prototype" of what Kinsley means when he describes antimodels.[350] A female deity, she conforms neither to gendered norms around femininity nor the typical understanding of a perpetually benevolent and smiling, calm, transcendent being that pervades religious traditions. Rarely, if ever, is she depicted as the compliant and obedient wife who lives up to the virtues of *pati vrata* (a wife who is completely devoted to her husband as if he were her Lord), like the other goddesses. Kali is independently strong and powerful, and does not have children of her own but instead is responsible for the creation of all the worlds. Among the Mahavidyas, it is Kali who particularly "reveals the nature of ultimate reality and symbolizes fully awakened consciousness," as she is the Mahavidya who reveals ultimate truth in the most complete way.[351] Her nakedness, standing on Siva, or being in reverse sexual intercourse with him, symbolize the reversal of the creative process, an ancient theme, where "one "de-creates" the universe in order to experience the blissful union of Siva and Sakti."[352] Kali is death, unruly, unkempt, blackness, nakedness, etc.

[349] Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine. 7*
[350] *Idem.*
[351] *Ibid,* 79, 84.
[352] *Ibid,* 79, 88.

and she is transcendence and transformation of all this, as she guides the hero in their own processes of conversion and change. She both embodies and reveals the underlying chaotic connectedness of life and death, and invites us deeper into the reality of it all, into ultimate unity with her. The underlying interconnectedness of life and death, creation and destruction, offers the Christian tradition a dialogue partner for Gebara's Trinitarian theology and provides for deep contemplation of reconciling dualisms.

In Tantrism, the world and body are in essence divine, the world is an aspect of Sakti, and we must try to fully comprehend the body, world, and divine.[353] All life experiences, then, are also "the play of the same One," and be they good or bad, "all experiences are embedded in absolute joy, the great delight of Reality."[354] This relationship of oneness between the body and the world offers liberation through the understanding "that what we dread the most-be it loss of health, property, relationships, or life itself-is not occurring *to* us but *within* our larger being, we begin to see the tremendous humor of embodiment."[355] In Tantrism the world is realized as our true body where "cosmic existence unfolds and enfolds itself perpetually," and the body and the mind "in actuality form aspects of the same world process" because of "the identity of microcosm and macrocosm."[356] Even dead bodies are part of this "body-positive approach."[357]

Typically, throughout most of Hinduism, death, the dead, skulls, etc. are all seen as inauspicious. In Tantrism, however, June McDaniel notes that skulls can "bring luck and fortune in meditation," or "give protective energy and support the sadhu in his

[353] Feuerstein, *Tantra.* 53
[354] *Ibid*, 60.
[355] *Idem*.
[356] Feuerstein, *Tantra*. 60
[357] *Ibid,* 53.

efforts" as "ironic images, which represent death yet encourage the spiritual rebirth of the holy man or sadhu" since they are "relics that mediate the supernatural world, calling down the goddess Kali to help the practitioner."[358] In Tantric ritual, a dead object, through skull-feeding and corpse rituals, "can become a vessel for a living presence" of the Goddess.[359] Interestingly, throughout McDaniel's ethnographic research, the parts of Tantrism that focus on death and transcendence of this world are far more important for practitioners than those that emphasize the sexual aspects, even though the latter capture Western imaginations more often. She notes the possibility that this is a regional difference, where West Bengal emphasizes death as the primary way to paradise of the Goddess and ghosts serve as guides and protection on the path.[360]

In McDaniel's ethnographic work with Shakta practitioners, she defines who a Shakta is through their insights as "a person who worships, loves, seeks power from, becomes possessed by, or seeks union with any regional or pan-Indian goddess, and he or she is not disqualified by caste, worship of other deities, initiations, or level of education."[361] She describes various rites and rituals the Shaktas participate in, one of which being hook-swinging. In this ritual, men and women put hooks into their back or into their chest and spin from them, typically until the hook tears free from their body, to fulfill a vow to the goddess. "People who had performed this ritual claimed not to feel pain, for they were possessed by Kali at the time, and she took away their pain."[362] The offering of blood to Kali, often from the chest of the Shakta, "is also believed to show the

[358] McDaniel, June. "Interviews with a Tantric Kali priest: feeding skulls in the town of sacrifice." In David Gordon ed. *Tantra in practice.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000. 72
[359] *Ibid*, 77.
[360] *Ibid*, 80.
[361] McDaniel, June. *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004. 19
[362] *Ibid*, 49.

goddess one's reverence and dedication."[363] This is not typically practiced today, but was widespread in the nineteenth century, and the understanding that human blood and pain have transcendent power is still prominent. Kali offers boons to Shaktas who undertake ascetic practices. Many of McDaniel's interviewees believe that the most important ritual in Shakta tantra is the *Shava-sadhana*, or sitting on a corpse. This ritual has the power to make the practitioner's life in this world better, and enables them to challenge death and have immortality, or non-death. Then they will have a long life, wealth, power, a detachment from the physical world and union with the transcendent ground of *brahman.* Through the ritual, the practitioner can receive salvation through a loving relationship with Kali, and ultimately her grace.[364]

Though the origin of the corpse ritual is not known, McDaniel includes a narrative description of it though practitioners:

> In the typical *shava-sadhana* rita, on a new-moon night…the practitioner should go to a burning ground or some other lonely spot… He (or she) should bring a corpse, young and attractive, low-caste, of a person who died by violence, drowning, or snakebite. The practitioner should worship it, and then sit on the corpse and contemplate the god or goddess. He or she will experience fearful images and sounds, as well as temptations, but he must remain emotionally detached-or else he may go insane. If he is successful, he may gain the power to use a mantra (*mantrasiddhi*), or become one with Shiva using the corpse as a mediator, or have a vision of the goddess. In the visionary case, she may appear to possess the corpse, or appear before the practitioner as a beautiful woman, a little girl, or a great goddess in the sky.[365]

Tantrikas were clear that the goddess chooses the corpse, where murdering someone to have a corpse to perform the ritual with would displease the goddess (the opposite of the ritual's goal) and effectively take on her responsibilities. The corpse is the personification of death itself, which the practitioner is challenged to conquer and then control. It also

[363] McDaniel, June. *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*, 53.
[364] *Ibid*, 123.
[365] *Ibid*, 124.

helps cultivate detachment, and can identify as the deity since Siva is identical with the corpse.[366] In the destruction of attachment, the corpse parallels the destruction of life. The practitioner seeks the goddess's love and enlivenment, just as the corpse is resurrected under the Mother's gaze as she bestows her blessings upon the devotee.[367] It is interesting to note the type of corpse, as young and attractive, as well as the type of death they experienced, as violence, drowning, or snakebite. The type of embodied death called for in this Kali ritual is thus a sudden death, that is not the result of a naturally long and healthy life. Through the corpse ritual, it is this type of death embodied that becomes the point around which the practitioner realizes and experiences their interconnectedness with the divine. Here we see potential parallels with Jesus's corpse, as a young person who was certainly attractive to many followers, who died a very violent death. Then, his corpse is tended to and gathered around by disciples, notably the women, who return again to his tomb to continue anointing his corpse, when they witness and proclaim the resurrection as the ultimate Christian transformation.

David Kinsley, in *Corpses, Severed Heads, and Sex* explains that corpses are also seen as vehicles where the practitioners can travel the worlds through the recently dead person, who "hovers in the physical world while already having been transformed into a spirit being" with a "foot in each world, as it were."[368] Thus, the practitioner can make the transition as well by "riding" or associating with the corpse. Kinsley posits that perhaps Kali's exalted position in Tantrism is because of her unique identity as one who brings together seemingly opposite ends of poles, like life and death, for the practitioner

[366] McDaniel, June. *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*, 131.
[367] *Idem*.
[368] Kinsley, David R, et al. "Corpses, Severed Heads, and Sex: Reflections on the Dasmahavidyas." *Breaking Boundaries with the Goddess*. New Delhi: Manohar, Vol. 2009. 147

who hopes to continue on the path toward ultimate liberation. Death is the axis of liberation, both in this body and world and ultimately outside of the cycle of *samsara* or continual re-birth and re-death.

Kinsley explores Kali's exalted position within Tantra in *The Sword and the Flute*, which begins with a brief overview of the basic tenets of Tantrism, starting from the ritual orientation of Tantrism and the "elaborate, subtle geography of the body that must be learned, controlled, and ultimately resolved in unity."[369] The body, then, the physical and the subtle body, is the means of liberation. With a guru's aide, their own body, and knowledge of that body, the Tantric hero "[brings] the fractured world of name and form, the polarized world of male and female, sacred and profane, to wholeness and unity."[370] The practitioner is able to "[affirm] in a radical way the underlying unity of the phenomenal world, the identity of Sakti with the whole creation," and by doing so "controls and masters it," because by "affirming the essential worth of the forbidden, [they] [cause] the forbidden to lose its power to pollute, to degrade, to bind."[371] Kali, as identified and associated with death and destruction, is thus "the forbidden par excellence." [372] In contrast, Gebara's emphasizes the suffering, evil, and death experienced on a daily basis, particularly in the lives and bodies of women and the earth. She argues for the necessity of theological exploration of such experiences to be included in broader academic discourse and models the possibility for this kind of contemplation.

Kali originated in Sanskrit ritual starting in the eleventh century and going forward, and then her popularity increasing through Tantrism and Tantric texts. "But she

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[369] Kinsley, David. *The Sword and the Flute: Kali and Krsna, Dark Visions of the Terrible and the Sublime in Hindu Mythology.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000. 111
[370] *Idem*.
[371] *Idem*.
[372] *Idem*.

was principally a deity of the tutored elite, and the details of her appearance derived from and were germane to the largely esoteric arena of Tantric ritual and power," whereas in the seventeenth century Kali begins to have a more popular and vernacular identity.[373] During this popular, vernacular development, the *Kalikamangalakavyas*, part of the medieval Bengali poetry genre (*Mangalakavyas*) that came from an earlier oral tradition, glorify Kali and depict her as fierce and gruesome, but also endearing.[374] She visually encompasses the polarities of these aspects of her identity, as she is shown wearing earrings with corpses that are also bejeweled, ankle jewelry with bells, her body is bedecked in gold and gems, and so on. These descriptions of Kali immediately precede the Sakta *padas*, or "short lyrical poems of praise, petition, and complaint set to music and sung to the Goddess, now addressed as Ma, or Mother."[375] Here we see a layered incorporation of the rich and various aspects of Kali, "the cremation-ground wanderer of the Tantric *dhyanas*," and also "the one who can be teased, berated, pouted at, and threatened by her poet who approaches her in a spirit of devotion (*bhakti*)."[376] The *padas* continue the Tantric practices and visuals, with the goal of "personal devotion and spiritual enrichment."[377] It is to the bhakti tradition of Kali that this chapter turns, to understand the love and devotion of those who worship Kali.

[373] *Kinsley, David. The Sword and the Flute*. 111
[374] *Ibid*, 167.
[375] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddess of Bengal*. 168
[376] *Idem*.
[377] *Idem*.

3.5 BHAKTI

Bhakti in Sanskrit means "attachment, devotion, fondness for…" and comes from the root bhaj which means "to distribute, to share with."[378] This part of Hinduism is centered around the love a devotee shares with god, where loving god is primary to any other aspect of life. It is "more a general religious lifestyle or movement than a specific sect" that "was a major force for inclusiveness with its antinomian attitudes toward Pariahs and women."[379] Bhakti started in Tamil-literate people and spread throughout India, retaining "Tamil qualities" throughout.[380] The earliest texts that reference bhakti as supreme devotion to a god include the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* (fourth century BCE), the *Ramayana* (fifth century BCE), and the *Bhagavad Gita* (400 BCE-100CE).[381] A bhakti devotee, a bhakta, believes in a chosen personal deity, an ishta devata. In worshipping a deity, the bhakta understands a relationality with the divine as either parent-child, lover-beloved, or guru-disciple, where they are ever eager to please the deity and to receive their grace. Like in tantrism, low-caste people were included instead of forbidden to participate, and many poems, songs, and texts were written in vernacular languages and not only Sanskrit. The bhakti traditions of Kali developed from the seventeenth century on, and here we see constant references to her as the Mother of all life, particularly in the Bengali Sakti devotionals.

Temples for Kali began to be constructed around the beginning of the eighteenth century, further broadening her visibility and relationships with devotees and others.

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[378] Monier-Williams. *The Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary.* New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1899.
[379] Doniger, Wendy. *The Hindus: An Alternative History.* New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2009. 338
[380] *Ibid*, 341.
[381] *Ibid*, 343.

McDermott highlights the Kali Puja in the fall, which started around the middle of the eighteenth century, as another key way that Kali became a prominent figure in the world. "This Kali of the public pujas," she argues, "was a newly externalized representation of the Sanskrit deity of ritual practice, who had emerged into a more specifically Bengali, nonelite milieu in answer to theological and sociopolitical need."[382] Kali "is now a familiar vehicle for social and political commentary," although she retains her Tantric roots that include sexuality, blood, and fear.[383] McDermott's exploration of Kali through public festivals highlights the intense accessibility associated with the Goddess, and the visibility of her complex and multi-faceted identity. As Kali evolves and is depicted in various spaces throughout the centuries, her identity visibly complexifies in a way that other Goddesses do not and she is worshipped in both her gruesomeness and her maternal availability to the devotee.

Ramprasad (1718-1775) of West Bengal and Ramakrishna (1836-1886), also Bengali, are two of the most prolific devotees in this bhakti tradition, and their poems and hymns show the complicated nature of a god who is to them Mother and also who is cruel and fearsome. Their theologies incorporate tantric associations of Kali as wielding power over death, and death as a way to access the Mother and therefore liberation. At the same time, she is their benevolent Mother, and they understood her to be the Mother of all creation. These two Kali bhaktas identify the goddess as *Brahman* or the transcendent ultimate reality, who reveals to the devotee their mortality and encourages them to enter into transformation and liberation from the starting point of death. Love and devotion to Kali is primary above all other types of rituals and religious practices for devotees of the

[382] McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddess of Bengal*. 173
[383] *Idem*.

goddess, though their writings and theologies incorporate various aspects of tantra and bhakti, and Ramprasad and Ramakrishna continue to influence bhaktas today. The Hindu bhakti tradition is, in Dan Sheridan's words, a catalyst for Christian to rediscover Jesus's first commandment, to love of God.[384] Though Sheridan does not treat the Kali tradition, this project does engage love of Kali as a catalyst for Christians to enlarge their own understanding and practice of loving God.

3.6 SCHOLARSHIP

Over the years, Kali has captivated the attention of academics across the disciplinary spectrum, including religious studies scholars, sociologists, feminist researchers, software publishers, and others. Her appeal is broad, and often her presence is one that inspires a kind of transformation or conversion in the life of the one to whom she appears. David Kinsley (1939-2000), who most of the other scholars are explicitly indebted to, offers the earliest comprehensive academic overview of the goddess and her tradition. He also was ahead of his time, and portrayed Kali's complex identity in a nuanced way, instead of omitting her ferocity as in the case of Avalon, for example. He wrote about the ways in which Kali challenges gender norms for Hindus and for Westerners alike. He articulated a comprehensive view of the goddess, and what it means to be one of her devotees with an attentiveness to the centrality of death that he traced throughout each aspect of Kali. Kinsley argued that the Kali tradition highlights the central truth of the goddess tradition, where one can only truly know the self and Kali

[384] Sheridan, Daniel P. *Loving God: Krishna and Christ. A Christian Commentary on the Narada Sutras.* Leuven: Peeters, 2007.

through death. Kinsley is particularly attentive to this theological truth, and even incorporated it into reconciling his own death in a powerful way. He thus serves as an example of the potentiality inherent in prolonged contemplation of the goddess. When faced with his own impending death, he opened his home and heart to anyone who wished to spend time with him before he died. He attributed this opening and understanding to his careful study of Kali.

In Suchitra Samanta's 2021 book, *Kali in Bengali Lives: Narratives of Religious Experience*, she articulates Kinsley's incorporation of the phenomenological meaning of Kali and her role in texts and myths throughout the years, as well as "what she means, but to her contemporary devotees-in their own words and stories, and how they experience her in their lives."[385] Kinsley was remarkable in this way, as he avoided being an armchair Indologist and instead immersed himself in the traditions he studied and in the lives of those who participated in them in the 1970s through the 1990s, when this was not the primary trend. He inspired countless others to follow in his footsteps, like Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey Kripal. His complicated and rich work on Kali nuanced her identity and was groundbreaking in academia, and this project is among the many that continue his lines of thinking and seek to highlight and preserve the multi-faceted nature of the goddess.

In 1972, two years after earning his doctorate from the University of Chicago, Kinsley published one of his first articles, "'The Taming of the Shrew:' On the history of the goddess Kali."[386] Here he traced the history of Kali, throughout mythology, and also

[385] Samanta, Suchitra. *Kali in Bengali Lives: Narratives of Religious Experience.* Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2021. *15*
[386] Kinsley, David R. "The Taming of the Shrew: On the History of the Goddess Kali." *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses,* March 1, 1972 Volume 1 Issue 4 pages 328-338.

incorporated worship of the Goddess throughout Bengal by highlighting the Kali-puja festival and events at the Kalighat Temple in Calcutta, including offerings of goats to the Black Goddess. Already he pointed out the complex nature of Kali, who may at first glance appear to be an oddity of Indian religion, yet upon closer inspection her mythology is rich and diverse and she is intensely popular in Bengal in particular. Kinsley situated the terrifying and scandalous aspects of the Goddess with the understanding that this vision of the divine can "appear to us as human possibilities, as human options."[387] In the beginning of his scholarly work, Kinsley already produced a more complex approach to the Goddess Kali, who so often was and is treated as peripheral to the Hindu tradition.

Kinsley's first major book, *The Sword and the Flute* (1975), explicitly did not focus on accumulating and deciphering historical data about Kali and Krsna, but instead he tried to "discern in the "presences" of these two beings, as revealed in history to be sure, hints of the transcendently real in the Hindu spiritual tradition."[388] In other words, he was attempting to "understand Krsna and Kali by trying to glimpse Kali's sword and hear Krsna's flute."[389] After a thorough account of her textual, Tantric, and devotional histories, Kinsley articulated Kali as "both the embodiment or mistress of this ephemeral, magically created world and the stimulus to resolve to transcend it."[390] Her wildness "represents the possibility of a world completely overcome by intoxication with the sensual and the physical."[391] Death was the primary association of Kali, according to Kinsley, and he advocated for any meaningful analyses of the Goddess to center death as

[387] Kinsley, David R. "The Taming of the Shrew: On the History of the Goddess Kali." 328.
[388] Kinsley*, The Sword and the Flute.* 6
[389] *Idem*.
[390] *Ibid*, 136.
[391] *Ibid*, 137.

primary.[392] In worshipping Kali, meditating upon her presence, invoking her name in cremation grounds, one "[confronts] the painful, sorrowful, dimensions of the world that are summed up in death."[393]

Through centering on death, Kinsley opened up ways of seeing Kali that are more nuanced and complex than those who see the goddess as only terrible or only benign.[394] In doing so, he also deepens an understanding of death itself, where "To the [one] who has discovered [their] eternal destiny, the cremation ground represents the gateway to complete liberation, the final episode in a journey that has, perhaps, encompassed thousands of lives."[395] Once one is freed, the cremation ground means "the end of a cycle of bondage to grasping and becoming, the gateway to the final transcendence of a way of being that is limited and grounded in not-knowing."[396] From here, Kali's overarching identity is benign. She raises her bloody sword, which means the death of ignorance. Her wild hair embodies the freedom of release from cycles of bondage, as does her skirt of severed limbs. In her two right hands, Kali makes the mudras for "fear not" and granting boons, showing "the knowledge that death is only the passing away of the non-essential and the gateway to ultimate freedom."[397]

The devotee, after confronting and accepting death, is granted the boon of freedom by Kali, and becomes "flexible, open, and naïve like a child."[398] Here, the Goddess is the Mother to her devotees as "she reveals to them their mortality and thus

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[392] Kinsley, *The sword and the flute*. 142
[393] *Idem*.
[394] Kinsley notes that even renowned Bengali literary figures, including Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and Bankim Chatterjee (1838-1894), were "highly suspicious" of Kali and "tended to interpret her negatively." (p. 81 in *The Sword and the Flute*) Both Tagore's drama *Sacrifice* and Chatterjee's *Kopal-kundala* are denunciatory of Kali traditions and relegate her to the margins of society.
[395] *Ibid*, 143.
[396] *Idem*.
[397] *Idem*.
[398] Kinsley, *The sword and the flute*. 145

releases them to act fully and freely, [releasing] them from the incredibly, binding web of "adult" pretense, practicality, and rationality."[399] She embodies "the throb of life," which necessitates "an unending stream of life energy to go on, that death and decay form the only fertile ground for the hungry pulse of life."[400] Kali both gives life, fully and unceasingly, granting fertility and birth, and she also requires constant streams of blood to sustain her in her never ending maternal labors. She can and does incite her devotees, inviting them to join her in frenzied dancing of the cremation grounds, inviting the devotee to "make of *himself* a cremation ground so that she may dance there, releasing him to participate in his true destiny, which lies beyond this whirligig of samsara in transcendent release."[401] Kinsely posits that Kali places this world and dharma in the perspective, for Hindus, that "certain aspects of reality are untamable, unpurifiable, unpredictable, and always a threat to society's feeble attempts to order what is essentially disorderly: life itself."[402] Thus Kinsley emphasizes that it is she, who is death and salvation from the continuous life cycle, who helps us understand everything. In Gebara's theology, this dynamic tension is located in the Trinity, and in comparison between the two traditions we will see the possibilities inherent in ecofeminist deep contemplation of death's interconnectedness with life.

In his final major work, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: The Ten Mahavidyas,* Kinsley again highlights death as a main theme in Mahavidya iconography and worship, where Kali is usually identified as the first of the Mahavidyas and the one who reveals the ultimate truth completely. He refers to this group of goddesses as

[399] Kinsley, *The sword and the flute*, 146.
[400] *Ibid*, 156.
[401] *Ibid*, 159.
[402] Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*. 129

"antimodels," as earlier mentioned, and he highlights the liberating power of these antimodels as one way of appreciating the Mahavidyas. Though not operating explicitly within a feminist framework, Kinsley's insights are indeed feminist. By appreciating Kali in her own right, and not only as an emanation of one Great Goddess, and exploring her particularities, Kinsley takes seriously this often-maligned deity and the tradition of worshipping her, through his studies and his encounters with priests and devotees. All the complexities of the Kali tradition, and the focus on death as transformative liberation, provide the reader with a multi-dimensional portrayal of this powerful goddess. He even went so far as to hope that "female-authored Hindu tantric texts will come to light in the near future."[403] While he did not position himself as a feminist or ecofeminist scholar, Kinsley's work certainly fits into the framework of these perspectives. The category of antimodel in particular is one that can be explored in Christian ecofeminist theology in chapter 5.

In January 2000, Kinsley was faced with his own immanent death in a tragic way, through a diagnosis of inoperable lung cancer. He decided to spend his last few months being present to his life thus far, and invited his friends and family to come and say goodbye with him, turning his home into "a veritable pilgrimage site" as people from all aspects of his life visited for a final time.[404] Rachel Fell McDermott, a fellow Kali scholar who visited him in his last months, noted that he was unafraid to speak about his death, "although he told [her] that he was afraid of dying…the loneliness of the unknown frightened him."[405] In speaking about the afterlife, however, he was clear that "he was part of the great cosmic cycle" and that "his ashes, mixed with earth and water, would

[403] Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*. 250
[404] McDermott, *Encountering Kali.* 1
[405] *Idem.*

become new life."[406] This understanding and vision that he had was "primarily inspired" by the goddess Kali, and his work studying her, as she "represents the totality of life and death."[407] Here we see a clear and compelling example of the goddess Kali and her ability to transform those who spend much of their life immersed in a deep understanding of the goddess, particularly on the point of death. We turn next to the work of Rachel Fell McDermott, who presented *Encountering Kali* in tribute to Kinsley's life and work.

McDermott and Jeffrey J. Kripal edited *Encountering Kali: in the margins, at the center, in the west*, a collection of articles from a 1996 conference on Kali that they organized, as two modern key scholars in Hinduism and particularly Kali, both inspired by David Kinsley as noted earlier. In their introduction, McDermott and Kripal contextualize the conference and this volume within the broader interest in goddesses in Western culture that began in the 1970s. *Encountering Kali,* then, "[addresses] some of these broad cultural issues by focusing on the complexities, promises, and problems involved in meeting and interpreting a specific Hindu deity, the goddess Kali, both in her indigenous South Asian settings and in her more recent Western reincarnations."[408] Their goal in doing this work is to "awaken people to both the difficulties and the potential benefits inherent in every act of cross-cultural understanding, including and especially a transforming encounter-cultural, intellectual, artistic, or mystical-with Kali." [409] McDermott and Kripal argue that Kali reflects most of the themes that come up in modern goddess appropriation, as a figure who is both warrior and mother to her

[406] McDermott, *Encountering Kali.* 1
[407] *Idem*.
[408] *Ibid*, 3.
[409] *Idem*.

devotees.[410] In compiling this volume, and in their work, they note that "many bridges…still remain to be built or at least imagined" as Kali becomes more recognized within Western culture and "her worlds become less and less bifurcated."[411]

McDermott and Kripal note that Kali has not always been identified in the fullness of her complex identity, not only in textual translation but also in popular media. They note the 1984 *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, where the Indians and priests who worshipped Kali appear crazed and rip the hearts out of victims who are then thrown into a pit, as sacrifices to the goddess. Over a decade prior, in 1970, artist John Pasche created the Rolling Stones logo, inspired by Mick Jagger's desire to include the goddess Kali and her mouth in the design.[412] Their highly recognizable logo, still emblazoned on clothing and all manner of merchandise, is one of the most popular band logos in existence. While this may be a more positive association with the goddess than the Indiana Jones movie, it still reduces the goddess to one body part, and does not articulate this tie to Kali and her complexity. McDermott and Kripal argue that it is through "her very multivalency" that "Kali expresses transformative power (Sakti)."[413] Thus, to limit Kali to only one facet, either in a band logo or in scholarship, is to fail to attempt a deeper understanding of the goddess.

McDermott and Kripal also trace the late seventeenth century writings from British merchants through the missionaries and tourists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which westerners came into contact with the Kalighat temple "which came

[410] For example, in Sanjukta Gupta's chapter of *Encountering Kali,* "The Domestication of a Goddess," she highlights the tension held between Kali's fierce appearance and her life-giving and life-protecting characteristics as a Mother Goddess, whose very breast milk sustains and regenerates the world as the cycle of life and death continues.
[411] McDermott, *Encountering Kali.* 3
[412] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/13/arts/design/rolling-stones-logo-anniversary.html
[413] McDermott, *Encountering Kali.* 5

to symbolize for such writers the idolatry, barbarism, and sheer otherness of non-Christian religiosity."[414] They attacked Kali's association with criminals, eroticism, and animal sacrifice, sparking both defense and debate among Hindus as well whether she was as fierce as she seemed to these outsiders. From 1829 on, there are documented debates between the British and Hindus about Kali in various news publications.[415] Thus, Kali's identity as a multi-valent deity has a rich and contested history, through up until today. This project takes these many facets into account, and theologically engages the Kali tradition and the Christian ecofeminist tradition, where comparative theology through this dialogue inspires insights that challenge and deepen Christianity.

Sarah Caldwell traces the marginalization of Kali that Urban, Humes, and others identify in *Encountering Kali*, and notes that the line of thinking where Kali is consistently seen as "extreme" comes out of "a dominant Sanskritic and North Indian text-based critical tradition that is not being called into question."[416] Through engaging this history of Kali, Caldwell examines Kali in the context of Kerala, focuses on gender and caste, and "[comes] to see her as the embodiment of core cultural values that were marginalized over time, but have begun to reassert themselves," where eventually "Kali is neither marginal nor extreme in all the places where she is worshipped," and instead "She is right at the center, the very source of life."[417] By examining South Indian goddess worship, including Tantric, low-caste, and village practices and traditions, Caldwell points out that "these nonelite traditions often center around conflictual models of

[414] McDermott, *Encountering Kali.* 5.
[415] *Ibid*, 5-6.
[416] Caldwell, Sarah. "Margins at the center: tracing Kali through time, space, and culture" in McDermott, Rachel Fell and Kripal, Jeffrey. *Encountering Kali; In the Margins, At the Center, In the West.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003. 249-250
[417] *Ibid*, 250.

divinity, immanent embodied powers and a deep concern with death and sexuality" where "intense, engaged physical and emotional experience, rather than detachment and ordered ritual purification, are their characteristic mode."[418] Here Kali is the opposite of marginal, and instead she "represents the essential and central values of the nonelite religious traditions" where blood sacrifice, possession by the deity, self-mutilation, and ritualized sexuality can be seen throughout traditions of the aboriginal, Tantric, low-caste, and villages.[419] The ability of Kali to symbolize, at the same time, central and marginalized traditions is rare.

Suchitra Samanta, a sociologist at Virginia Tech, completed field research and publications on the goddess Kali in Kolkata India. In her book *Kali in Bengali Lives* she had the goal of "observing Kali's devotees at temple and home and inquiring into the symbolic meaning of her rituals and their contexts."[420] Time after time, however, the participants did not respond fully to this line of inquiry and instead "turned the conversation around to what their Mother Kali "really meant" to them."[421] Typically, they described themselves as *bhaktas* or devotees, where only some came from a familial lineage of worshiping Kali. They also disclosed to Samanta that "their experiences of Kali took priority over exegetical discourse or analysis, and that a different kind of "knowing" was involved. In other words, her "meaning" in text and ritual became through personal experience of her, meaningful and real."[422] Samanta includes an overview of Kali and her roots in the Hindu tradition broadly, and also focuses on the worship and experience of devotees. She argues that Kali is never really 'tamed' but

[418] Caldwell, Sarah. "Margins at the center: tracing Kali through time, space, and culture" 257.
[419] *Idem*.
[420] Samanta, *Kali in Bengali Live*s. xi
[421] *Ibid,* xii.
[422] *Idem*.

always remains a 'force' for devotees, in contrast to the 'softening' and 'taming' that some scholars of Kali assert.[423]

The participants in Samanta's research discuss Sakti as "uncontainable and inexplicable," where just like Kali, who is Sakti embodied, "gives life, and deals death, for its own reasons, beyond human comprehension."[424] Samanta utilizes an "*indigenous* epistemological paradigm that draws from different discourses" as she speaks to the devotees and their understanding of the human-divine relationship, reality, and truth.[425] The term *anubhuti* or "intuitive experience" is a concept that describes this experiential understanding of Kali that Samanta's participants have, and "it is related to the verb phrase, "to experience," *anubhab kara*, which can include perception, realization, and intuition, but also "feeling.""[426] This type of knowledge is "transcendent of book learning or logic, an ineffable experience, as many Kali devotees asserted."[427] Samanta also discusses the relationship devotees have with their gurus in a section of her book, and how even after the guru's death, the connection with the disciple is not severed. Thus, she points us to the ability for devotees of Kali to transcend all kinds of polarities, from immanence and transcendence to death and life.

As a concluding example of the way in which Kali captivates and transforms even the most unsuspecting researcher, this chapter turns to Elizabeth U. Harding. She was the International Editor and West Coast Correspondent for *Software Magazine*, and she visited Calcutta while on an assignment in the 1990s. She went to the Dakshineswar Temple and became fascinated with Kali, which prompted her to write *Kali: The Black*

[423] Samanta, *Kali in Bengali Live*s, 20.
[424] *Ibid*, 19.
[425] *Ibid*, 21.
[426] *Ibid,* 27.
[427] *Idem.*

Goddess of Dakshineswar.[428] She completed ethnographic research at the temple and worked with swamis and priests there to include scripture and writings of Ramakrishna and Ramprasad, though she included more from the former. Harding also included references to Kinsley, Mookerjee, and Woodroffe as academic sources. In her preface, she began by highlighting the "largely misunderstood" reception of the Goddess in the West, where she is seen "as something evil rather than a source for joy," and asserted that her book will "clarify who Kali is" and "make the reader feel what it is like to be in India and experience Kali."[429] She offered the comparative example of Christians eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ as a similarly surprising religious practice from afar, and her preface insinuated that both Kali and the Eucharistic feast (which does not actually include cannibalism) need to be fully understood and experienced to get beyond this cursory view. In her second chapter, Harding again articulated the Western perception of Kali as misunderstanding, and described Kali as "the Universal Power" who "creates and nourishes" and "kills and destroys," as she transcends the dualities of good and bad.[430]

Harding included a chapter that described the grounds of the Temple, the life of Rani Rasmani[431] who built the temple, and those who have taken care of the space

[428] Harding, Elizabeth. *Kali: The Black Goddess of Dakshineswar. Delhi:* Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1998.
[429] Harding, *Kali.* xi
[430] Harding, *Kali.* 39
[431] Rani Rasmani, also known as Rani Rashmoni, was a widow and a shudra, which made her doubly inauspicious across Hindu society. This did not stop her from exerting power and influence through her inherited fortune with her husband and also after his death. They focused on various social causes like providing clean drinking water, protecting rivers, building soup kitchens, and advocating for the ability of widows to remarry. See articles such as: https://www.thehindu.com/society/the-shudra-queen-rashmoni-and-a-sacred-river/article34847554.ece and https://www.thebetterindia.com/265787/rani-rashmoni-dakshineshwar-kali-temple-kolkata-east-india-company-women-history-india/ See also: Bharadwaj, Tapati. *Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) and a Nineteenth Century Subaltern : Rani Rashmoni (1793-1861). Creating Our Feminist Genealogies.* India: Lies and Big Feet, 2014.

throughout the years. Her final chapter of the book is about the "God-intoxicated mystics" who were devoted to Kali, including Ramprasad, Kamalakanta, Raja Ramakrishna, Sri Ramakrishna, Bamakhepa (who primarily worshipped Tara but is included because of his devotion to the Mother), Sri Sarada Devi (Ramakrishna's wife and spiritual counterpart, often referred to as "Holy Mother"), and Swami Viviekananda. She then concluded her book discussing the lives of holy saints, and how we can spend time with holy people in this lifetime, and not only learn about them long after they die.[432] The point here is about discernment and presence, of saints and God, where

> "nobody can define Kali. If it looks attractive and strikes a special chord within your heart, dear reader, you will have to make an effort yourself to experience her. Then, you will be the saint that still needs to be recorded in this book. And once your soul is burning with a desire to know the Great Mother Goddess, the rest will take care of itself."[433]

She then concluded the book without a conclusion, as the Divine Mother's love for all people is "too much to put into words."[434] Harding's text is an example of the powerful nature of Kali's multi-faceted identity, where love of the goddess is primary amidst the creation and destruction, the ferocity and maternal love. The next chapter will explore these insights of bhakti or deep love and devotion to Kali, and how bhakti can catalyze Christianity in its own contemplation of loving God.

[432] Harding, *Kali,* 298.
[433] *Ibid,* 298-299.
[434] *Ibid,* 299.

3.7 SOCIAL LIBERATION

The goddess Kali is invoked during many periods of difficulty, for Indians and those who worshipped her already, and for those searching for a patron of their liberation. Wendy Doniger notes that in 1750 to 1755, two years without monsoon led to a tragic famine in Bengal.[435] A third of the population died, almost ten million people. Simultaneously, there was a surge in worship and devotion to the goddess Kali. In the face of drought, starvation, and death, the people of Bengal turned to the goddess. This devastating famine and loss of life also meant a surge in popularity of faith in Kali, as she became (and still is) the primary goddess in Bengal. In around the year 1890, in Bengal, there is a desire to return to the pre-Islamic religious reality of India, with the start of religious nationalism.[436] Then by 1905 Kali and Durga were known as the goddesses of revolution and they were worshipped by those who wanted to increase their force in fighting British rulers. Devotees began secret revolutionary groups, "who laid their weapons at the altars of Kali temples, and between the years of 1908 and 1917 over one hundred British officials were killed or wounded by members of such societies."[437]

Urban notes the paradox where it is Kali's image that "was singled out as the most extreme example of the dangerous immortality and depravity that were running rampant in the subcontinent" by missionaries and British rulers.[438] "Yet for the radical leaders of the revolutionary movement in Bengal, this same image…[transformed] the Tantric goddess into a symbol of Mother India in violent revolt against her colonial

[435] Doniger, *The Hindus.* 583
[436] McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*. 181
[437] *Idem*.
[438] Urban, *Tantra.* 17

masters."[439] Kali was chosen as the epitome of violence against evil and what needs to be repressed or removed, and at the same time she was the image of freedom and justice. Kali, as a folk goddess, takes on this identity for the whole of India.[440] She protects her children, and also encourages "protest, war, revolution, or other political actions" in or order "to rescue her when the land is in trouble."[441] Though this was most visible in the fight for Indian independence, there are nationalist parties throughout India who resurrect the use of her image.

Feminist movements also turn to Kali as their revolutionary patron. For example, Kali for Women was the first Indian feminist publisher dedicated to publishing by women, about women (it has since expanded and become Zubaan books).[442] The name of the goddess is invoked in a landmark project that centers on women, and partners with organizations that work toward female empowerment and social justice for women. There are also modern Western women who look to Kali in her "union of opposites, combining within herself the poles of creation and destruction, love and fear," to embody aspects that the patriarchy erases, and as a model for "[learning] to recover and reclaim this wholeness in themselves."[443] Women across cultural and religious divides see Kali as a liberator, protector, guide, and example of their validation as flourishing members of society. Just as Kali destroys ignorance and fear in the devotee's pursuit of liberation, here we see the goddess destroying misogyny and bias as women work toward freedom from patriarchy. It is important to note, however, that this meaning behind Kali and her identity is novel, as the articulation of feminism was not present in Kali's folk, Puranic,

[439] Urban, *Tantra*, 18-19.
[440] McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*. 12
[441] *Idem*.
[442] https://zubaanbooks.com/about-zubaan/
[443] McDermott, *Encountering Kali.* 275

tantric, or bhakti origins. This project does not suggest, for example, that Christians employ Kali as a symbol for ecofeminism because of the many incongruencies between the traditions and the careful inclusion of Kali's vast particularities. Kali's appearance in these various locations does suggest that there is resonance in feminist perspectives. Thus, comparative theology between Kali devotion and Christian ecofeminism in chapter 5 will highlight how she can cultivate comparative insights for further Christian theological thought.

3.8 CONCLUSION

Throughout the various Kali traditions and their developments, the central truth of her relationality with death and life, as well as ultimate liberation, is clear. Kali originates in an overabundance of emotions, including anger, grief, shame, and then death is always a prominent feature of these narratives. Once on the scene, she continues to embody and inspire various emotions across the spectrum while also remaining identified as the flow of death and life. Her development as Mother and as death and destruction continue throughout her traditions, and beyond Hinduism into scholarship and social liberation. This project argues that to take seriously the Kali tradition, all of these various facets need to be held in tension. The implicit theologies of the goddess raised here in chapter 3 and the various resonances that are part of a Hindu-Christian comparative ecofeminism will be addressed in chapter 5.

The next chapter focuses on the implied theologies of Ramprasad and Ramakrishna, as they were the two earliest prominent devotees of Kali, and they both

received tantric training, participated in skull and corpse rituals, practiced bhakti, and made comments related to questions of social liberation. Central to their words is the idea of death, how it is frightening and also inevitable, and Kali as the source of ultimate liberation from death. The complexity of Kali's identity is important, and while some devotees or scholars emphasize only one of her facets, Ramprasad and Ramakrishna articulated implicit theologies of the goddess that maintained the fullness of her features. Their devotion to Kali embodied many aspects of the various traditions of the goddess. They also understood loving Kali as their mother to be primary to all other actions in their lives, as ideal bhaktas. It is this love of God that they maintained above all else that offers insights to catalyze the Christian tradition's deepening of Jesus's first commandment. Although there is not as much information available about Ramprasad as there is for Ramakrishna, we do know that Ramakrishna embodied many aspects of social liberation in terms of caste and identity, where his love of God spilled over into love of others and the world (to use Sheridan's language). These earliest public devotees of Kali continue to inspire worshippers through their words and hymns, permeating various Kali traditions, and it is to these accounts of their devotion to the Mother that we attend to in the next chapter.

4.0 CHAPTER 4:

LOVE OF KALI: RAMPRASAD AND RAMAKRISHNA

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on Ramprasad Sen and Ramakrishna, two key devotees of Kali. Love of Kali and devotion to the goddess were at the center of their lives, and this primary relationship with the divine was articulated in many poems and words throughout their lives. Their implied theologies bhakti, loving God, are the source of comparative theological reflection with the command to love God in Matthew 22:37. The Christian tradition needs catalysts to pursue more deeply this love of God, and Kali's devotees offer rich comparative insights. The theme of death and life was also present throughout their hymns and poems to the goddess. They both discussed various dynamics, including the inevitable death of the body in this lifetime, the cycle of one's eternal self being continually reborn in the cycle of samsara, escaping this cycle, and the ultimate destruction of all the worlds before they are re-created through the goddess and her womb. Death was something both devotees were afraid of in some way, and they both had the burning desire to avoid another rebirth, death, and continuation of samsara. At the core of their words was intense devotion to Kali, and belief in her power and grace that can liberate them from their embodiment in this world after they die. The goddess

was not only portrayed as generous and merciful, however, as Ramprasad and Ramakrishna criticized her appearance and fickle nature. They also lamented their own shortcomings as devotees who were tempted by this world, wavered in their faith, and were still afraid of death.

The way death was discussed mirrors that of Kali herself. Much of the imagery around death was weaponized, where death was an enemy to be fought and conquered. Kali is of course a wild warrior goddess who kills and drinks blood, who cannot be defeated by anyone. Her violence is directed toward the demons and evils of this world, and she can remove the fear of death in her devotee. Death is the great equalizer, where everyone experiences death and rebirth in the cycle of samsara before final liberation, except of course divinities. Devotion to Kali is available to all, no matter one's caste, creed, gender, etc. Both Ramprasad and Ramakrishna let go of social norms in prayer and worship, and articulated that caste and other categories do not apply to the eternal Atman. They both stated a desire to have the name of Kali on their lips and in their hearts at the time of their bodily death, hence their desire to maintain a life of devotion and worship with their last moments of life in mind. Their hope for death and liberation deeply influenced the way they lived their lives. The Kali tradition does understand the death of both saints to have resulted in their liberations, and Ramprasad and Ramakrishna continue to influence and guide Kali devotees today in their poems and hymns.

4.2 RAMPRASAD SEN

Ramprasad Sen was born in 1718 near Hālisahar, West Bengal. He was fairly well educated, learned Sanskrit, Persian, and Hindi before becoming an accountant. Instead of keeping perfect accounts, however, he often wrote hymns to the goddess and when his employer read them in his ledger, he became Ramprasad's patron and paid him a modest salary to be able to keep writing his devotional poetry.[444] The first poem he wrote is as follows, where he calls himself a "wageless servant" whose only desire was for refuge from all dangers in the feet of the goddess:

> Appoint me your treasurer, Mother, and trust me. I am not one who forgets the salt he has eaten.
> Everyone loots your storehouse of gems, I cannot endure it. You have left it in charge of the Demon's Bane, Siva the Forgetful. He is swift to give, easy in complaisance, yet you let him keep your treasury! Half of you he has received as a fief; then why pay him salary as well, and *such* salary? I, your wageless servant, possess but the dust of your Feet. If you be like your father, I am lost. But if you be like mine, I shall grow wealthy.
> Prasad says: Let me die in the saving grace of those Feet that spurn aside all forms of curse. If I may clasp those Feet, all danger leaves me.[445]

Ramprasad had other patrons, too, as his reputation spread, and he had some popularity in his lifetime before his death in 1775. The legend is that he died while singing to the goddess Kālī and was released from the cycle of samsara, in the Tantric style of leaving his body through the top of his head.[446] Thompson compares his fame in the 1900s to that of Rabindranath Tagore's, where he recounts the ability of teenage boys to more reliably recall a poem of Ramprasad than of Tagore. Peasants and pandits alike

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[444] Thompson, Edward J. *Sakta songs: Bengali religious lyrics.* New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 2004. 17
[445] *Ibid*, 39.
[446] Thompson, *Sakta songs* page 18 and McDermott, Rachel Fell. *Mother of my heart, daughter of my dreams: Kali and Uma in the devotional poetry of Bengal.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 56

enjoy his songs and poems, which are often grounded in the life of agricultural society, and people in their last moments of life ask for Ramprasad's songs.[447]

His attention to agricultural themes demonstrated his own closeness with the earth and growing cycles, evident throughout his poems. For example:

> What's more to fear around this place?
> My body is Tara's field in which the God of Gods like a good farmer
> sows His seed with a great mantra.
> Around this body, faith is set like a fence without patience for posts.
> With Shiva watching what can the thieves of time hope to do?
> He oversees the Six Oxen driving them out of the barn.
> He mows the grass of sin with the honed blade of Kali's name.
> Love rains down and Devotion night and day.
> Prasad says: on Kali's tree goodness, wealth, love, and release can be had for the picking.[448]

Ramprasad referenced Tara here, another way of addressing Kali. Siva, the "God of Gods" was tending the field of the goddess, which is Ramprasad's body. Siva's mantra was responsible for cultivating his own seed, and Ramprasad's faith constructed a fence around his body, the field. Siva watched over the growing process, and removed the six passions or vices from Ramprasad. He also cut down or removed Ramprasad's sin, through Kali, and it is love and devotion that rained down, nourishing Siva's seed as grew. The tree of the goddess thus brought forth "goodness, wealth, love, and release." These fruits were available "for the picking," and Ramprasad could attain them. The agricultural imagery here was very common for Ramprasad, as he lived closely with nature and often referenced Kali and his theology through farming motifs. To grow fruit on a tree requires a tremendous amount of time, care, and attention. Ramprasad

[447] Thompson, *Sakta songs. 20*
[448] Sena, Ramaprasada, Leonard Nathan, and Clinton B Seely. *Grace and Mercy in Her Wild Hair : Selected Poems to the Mother Goddess*. Prescott, Ariz.: Hohm Press, 1999. 54

maintained the same dynamic in faith where he expressed full and constant devotion to Kali as required for full liberation.

Ramprasad's own history and life details are not entirely known, as he did not have disciples recording his life and words, like in in the case of Ramakrishna. Ramprasad did practice the tantric corpse ritual and Śākta-yōga, and inspired Śākta poetry even after his time.[449] Over 150 Bengalis composed poetry in his style between the mid-eighteenth and end of the nineteenth centuries.[450] McDaniel notes some of Ramprasad's Tantric experiences that center around death and the dead. For example, his performance of the corpse ritual on a funeral pyre included a *mala* or rosary of human bone. Ramprasad performed the corpse ritual "under a bilva tree, on a seat made of the skulls of five animals, including humans," resulting in his experience of a vision of Kali.[451]

Kinsley posits that Ramprasad was the reason why Kālī worship became "public," instead of only taking place at the individual level and within small secretive Tantric groups.[452] Ramprasad was able to reveal an efficacious devotional way to worship Kālī that was accessible to everyone through his songs. "Kālī was strange, terrible, frightening, and clearly mad, but she was, for all that, "Mother." She might be fickle, indifferent, and unpredictable, but if petitioned openly, stubbornly-as a child petitions its mother-she might become the grantor of comfort and peace to her suffering child."[453] As a devotee, Ramprasad's songs were poetic accounts of "praise, petition, complaint, self-

[449] McDaniel, *Offering flowers*, *Feeding Skulls.* 130
[450] McDermott, *Mother of my Heart, Daughter of my Dreams.* 5
[451] McDaniel, in *Offering flowers*, *Feeding Skulls,* page 130, references *Principles of Tantra* which was edited by Sir John Woodroffe and originally *Tantra-Tattva* by Sriyukta Siva Candra Vidyarnava Bhattacarya (Madres: Ganesh, 1978).
[452] Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute.* 120
[453] Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute.* 120

exhortation, and meditative contemplation" and he "set the standard for the genre" of "Syama Sangit," or hymns to Kālī.[454] He inspired others to be public in their devotion to the goddess, and his worship through songs continues to impact and make the Kali tradition more accessible. Ramprasad's songs included both Tantric elements that focused on Kali's ferocious qualities, and bhakti devotional worship of her beautiful and maternal elements.

Ramprasad articulated a dynamic tension in Kali's appearance, where he described her as beautiful and lovely to behold, and then also criticized her inappropriate behavior of not wearing clothes. In one poem he asked a series of questions:

> Kali, why are You naked again?
> Good grief, haven't You any shame?
> Mother, don't You have clothes?
> Where is the pride of a king's daughter?
> And, Mother, is this some family duty-
> This standing on the chest of Your man?
> You're naked, He's naked,
> You hang around the burning grounds.
> O, Mother, we are dying of shame.
> Now put on Your woman's clothes
> Mother, Your necklace gleams,
> Those human heads shine at Your throat.
> Prasad says: Even Shiva fears You
> When You're like this.[455]

Throughout Ramprasad's writing, Kālī's appearance oscillated between attractive and terrifying, though more often she was described as beautiful with lotus feet, with a complexion of dark flowers, various body parts seen as "comparable to the sun, moon, lightning, and sparkling jewels."[456] He borrowed Sanskrit phrases from other goddess

[454] McDermott, Rachel Fell. "Raising snakes in Bengal: the use of Tantric imagery in Sakta poetry contests" in *Tantra in Practice* by David Gordon White. 168
[455] Sena, *Grace and Mercy in her Wild Hair*. 40
[456] McDermott, *Mother of my Heart.* 180

hymns to incorporate with Tantric dhyānas.[457] In her more ferocious state, Ramprasad described her as naked with messy hair, wearing body parts as jewelry and clothing, dripping with blood, intoxicated on wine or blood, acting destructively and surrounded by ghouls and corpses on the battlefield.[458] He also depicted a combination of the two perceptions, where he refers to Kālī as the "Happy One" who is "in [his] heart" and always playing while "garlanded with heads of men."[459] Her appearance reflected her association with both death and mother, incorporating morbid themes as well as more traditional motherly goddess's beauty and perfection.

Ramprasad desperately longed to be close to, and united with, his Mother, and he often articulated a tension where he also felt abandoned and mistreated by her. In many poems he said she was neglectful, "a stony-hearted girl, a harmful delusion" who makes him pass through much trouble.[460] He asked her if she thinks "motherhood is child's play? One child doesn't make a mother if she's cruel."[461] Kali also "[watches] Death come at [him] with murder in His heart" while Kali "[turns] away yawning," at which point he asked her "Who taught You to be so cold? If You want to be like Your father-Stone-don't call Yourself The Mother."[462] Here Ramprasad maintained the child-parent dynamic of bhakti, even while he lamented her terrible, ferocious aspects, to also approach her as a nurturing maternal Mother who contains this seemingly paradoxical binary.

> I'm sick of living, Mother, sick.
> Life and money have run out

[457] *Ibid,* 183.
[458] McDermott, *Mother of my Heart,* 180-181.
[459] Thompson, *Bengali Religious Lyrics*. 48
[460] *Ibid*, 37.
[461] Sena, *Grace and Mercy in her Wild Hair*. 21
[462] Sena, *Grace and Mercy in her Wild Hair*. 21

But I go on crying "Tara, Tara,"
Hoping. You are the mother of all
And our nurse. You carry the Three Worlds
In Your belly.
So am I some orphan fallen out
Of the sky? And if You think I'm bad,
Remember, You're the cord connecting
Every good and evil
And I'm a tool tied to illusion.
Your name can blot out the fear of Death-so Shiva said,
But, Terrible One, You forget all that,
Absorbed in Shiva, Death, and Time.
Prasad says: Your games, Mother,
Are mysteries. You make and break.
You've broken me in this life.[463]

In this poem, Ramprasad articulated this tension between life and death, where he lamented his life and said he's "sick of living," as he told Kali "You've broken me in this life," as part of her games of making and breaking.[464] He also maintained hope in her as he told her "You are the mother of all and our nurse. You carry the Three Worlds in Your belly."[465] Kali's connection with both life and death was clear, where she can embody death and cause destruction, and also ultimately her womb is the ground and creation of all. Kali is sometimes responsible for suffering, or perhaps it is more that she is not separate from suffering or death and she does not remove all suffering, even from her most devoted worshippers. Ramprasad reminded Kali that she is the "cord connecting every good and evil," and also said her "name can blot out the fear of Death."[466]

The idea that Kali's name can eliminate fear and provide protection against death recurred often in Ramprasad's words:

All right, Death, here I am.
I've drawn a circle around me with Kali's name.

[463] Sena, *Grace and Mercy in her Wild Hair*, 16.
[464] Sena, *Grace and Mercy in her Wild Hair*. 16
[465] *Idem.*
[466] *Idem.*

The Great Death, Kali on His chest, has taken Her feet to His heart.
Remembering that Her feet cancel all fear, who needs to fear Death?[467]

Ramprasad continually addressed Death, or Siva, who is often depicted beneath Kali's feet as she stands on his chest. Here Ramprasad called Siva's attention to himself as he now had a protective barrier surrounding him in Kali's name. Many of Ramprasad's poems concluded with an expression of faith in the defensive properties of Kali and her name against Death. Because of his faith in the goddess, and her mercy, he was able to confront the inevitability of death and be freed from his fear. He had faith in Kali's ability to 'cancel all fear,' and relied on his faith in her being enough to be protected from the death and destruction that Siva represents, so that he would be liberated from samsara and enjoy unity with Kali.

This fear persisted, however, throughout his writings, and he was conscious of the ridiculousness this presented.

My Mind, why so fretful, like a motherless child?
Coming into the world you sit brooding, shivering in the dread of death.
Yet there is a Death that conquers death, the Mightiest Death, which lies beneath the Mother's Feet. You, a serpent, fearing frogs!
How amazing!
What terror of death is this in you, the child of the Mother-Heart of all?
What folly is this, what utter madness?
Child of that Mother-Heart, what will you dread? Wherefore brood in vain sorrow?
Utter without ceasing Durga's name, as terror vanishes with waking, so will it be with you.[468]

Ramprasad often asked himself, his mind, why he was scared or upset, when he knew that the goddess's mercy was present. Here we see him wonder why his mind seemed like a "motherless child," when he was the child of Kali. He denounced his tendency to be too much "into the world," sitting and ruminating on his fear of death.

[467] Sena, *Grace and Mercy in her Wild Hair*. 53
[468] Thompson, *Bengali Religious Lyrics*. 9

Again, he pointed out that Siva, or 'the Mightiest Death,' is underneath Kali's feet and therefore Ramprasad has nothing to fear in bodily death. It was 'utter madness' that death was still a scary reality to worry about, when the goddess's name offered a release from all fear. He likened this existential situation to the absurdity of a snake that is scared of frogs. Even a prominent devotee of Kali wrestled with his fear of death and his ability to trust that death is defeated through worship of the goddess, who herself is united with Siva and part of the ultimate destruction of all in the cycle of destruction-creation-preservation.

Before his death, Ramprasad experienced what he calls a loss of caste through the mercy of Kali:

> You'd better not touch me Death-I've just lost caste
> on the very day the kind Mother was kind to me.
> Listen, Death, and I'll tell you how I lost it:
> I was a family man and that Dark Destroyer made me a beggar.
> My heart and tongue joined forces to sing Kali's name,
> And the six passions, hearing that, jumped overboard and swam off.
> The power that made me an outcaste is still wholly here.
> Prasad says: when an outcast dies, let Death not come too near.[469]

Kali bestowed her grace upon him, and he immediately "loses caste," and identified himself in the lowliest way, whether he meant this as a literal or metaphorical reference. He told Siva not to touch him in an almost threatening way, because now he identified as a polluting person without caste standing. Later, he referred to himself as an "outcaste," meaning that he saw himself as no longer part of the caste system of popular society. His devotion to, and grace from, the goddess meant that he no longer had to be beholden to this world. The six passions include anger, lust, greed, etc. and they had left him, as he was profoundly humbled. In contrast, Kali, the one who made him an outcaste that is not

[469] Sena, *Grace and Mercy in her Wild Hair*. 52

subject to vices, is "wholly here." Thus, she is not interconnected with caste or status distinctions, and is present when they are not. He concluded with his constant supplication for liberation after death. Kali's grace disrupted his status in this world, his experience of this world, and even his very self. He was wholly focused on worshipping her, and she was completely present to him.

Ramprasad described the ability of faith in Kali to eclipse all other manners of attempting to secure one's salvation:

> Why should I go to Kashi?
> At Her feet you will find it all-Gaya, the Ganges, Kashi.
> Meditating on my lotus heart I float on blissful waters.
> Her feet are red lotuses crammed with shrines and Her name spoken consumes evil like a fire in a pile of dry cotton.
> If there is no head to worry, you can't have a headache.
> Everytime I hear about Gaya, the offerings there, the good deeds recited, I laugh.
> I know Shiva has said that dying at Kashi saves.
> But I know too that salvation always follows worship around like a slave,
> And what's this salvation if it swallows the saved like water in water?
> Sugar I love but haven't the slightest desire to merge with sugar.
> Ramprasad says in amazement:
> Grace and mercy in her wild hair-
> Think of that and all good things are yours.[470]

Ramprasad acknowledged the potential for various ways of attaining salvation, like dying at Kashi. However, he maintained that it is really through worship to Kali, at her feet, that "you will find it all." The holiest and more liberating aspects of the earth are in fact found through devotion to the goddess. Ramprasad was able to "float on meditative waters" without journeying to holy places like the Ganges or physically dying in Kashi (Varanasi), through meditation and worship. At her feet also are shrines and holy worship sites, meaning that wherever one goes, or wherever one dies, does not matter as much as surrender to Kali. Her name devours and destroys evil like a flame burns up dry cotton.

[470] Sena, *Grace and Mercy in her Wild Hair*. 57

Thus, one does not need the purificatory measures of bathing in the Ganges or dying in Kashi. Meditating on the goddess, and speaking her name, disperses evil and liberates.

Ramprasad was clear that this world is rife with temptations and delusions that cause one to stray from a path of complete devotion.

> Mind, worship her who saves on the other side of the Ocean of the World.
> Know once for all what worth is in the trash of wealth. Vain is hope in men or money, this was said of old time. Where wast thou, whence hast thou come, and whither, O whither, wilt thou go?
> The world is glass, and ever amid its snares delusion makes men dance.
> Thou art in the lap of an enchantress, held fast in thy prison. Pride, malice, anger, attachment to thy lovers, by what wisdom of judgement was it that thou didst divide the kingdom of thy body among these? The day is nearly done: think therefore in thy heart, the resting-place of Kali, that island filled with jewels, think upon the things that day has brought thee.
> Prasad says: The name of Durga is my promised Land of Salvation, fields flowing with nectar. Tell thy tongue evermore to utter her name.[471]

Ramprasad ended this poem with his signature line reminding himself of the primary importance the name of Kali took in his worship of the goddess. Her name is liberation, she is the "promised land" where nectar flows over fields and he is free from the rebirth of samsara. He emphasized the uselessness of this world with its temptations to be focused on material wealth and attachment to people and things. Instead, he wanted to have the 'resting-place of Kali' at the forefront of his mind and heart, as this life and world is fleeting. He imagined himself in a prison of this world, where he faced the challenges of devoting himself to 'pride, malice, anger, attachment' to lovers, versus a worship of only Kali. The material world's temptations do not offer liberation after all. It is through Kali and love of the goddess that helped him avoid the snares of attachment and reach salvation.

[471] Thompson, *Bengali Religious Lyrics*. 60

Kali is the constant refuge from temptation, death, and all fear. When Ramprasad asked what we will do, bound as we are by death, he answered "Call the Mother, She can handle Death."[472] Anticipating his own passing, he asked Kali to "Let life…shoot rejoicing up out of my head like a rocket," which aligned with the legends told about him in his final moments, that his life did rise out of his head.[473] Kali is liberative, and present in the ultimate liberation, just as she is present to us now in this life.

> You'll find Mother in any house.
> Do I dare say it in public?
> She is Bhairavi with Shiva,
> Durga with Her children,
> Sita with Lakshmana.
> She's mother, daughter, wife, sister-
> Every woman close to you.
> What more can Ramprasad say?
> You work the rest out from these hints.[474]

Ramprasad understood Kali to be every goddess, and divinity. She is Brahman and thus includes all understanding of the divine. She is the erotic partner and goddess of destruction Bhairavi to the male deity Siva, the mother Durga to Ganesha, Kartik, Lakshmi, and Saraswati, and the sister deity Sita to her brother-in-law Lakshmana. She is also, in this same poem, "every woman close to you," and she is found "in any house." Kali not only pervades all dynamic divine understandings of goddesses, but she also pervades each aspect of human women. These words of Ramprasad show the interconnectedness between woman and the feminine divine precisely through the goddess. There is a non-duality between the women in our lives in this world, and the goddess herself. It seems that Ramprasad was hinting at seeing the divine feminine in all

[472] Sena, *Grace and Mercy in her Wild Hair*. 7
[473] *Ibid*, 12.
[474] *Ibid*, 55.

women, and offered a potential resource to argue for treating human women with respect and dignity, perhaps even devotion and worship.

Overall, Ramprasad "helped initiate a genre in which older textual and ritual traditions were fused, so that the Goddess…could be approached in a vernacular context of intimacy."[475] He made Tantrism and the Kali tradition in particular more visible, in its complicated incorporation of fear, admiration, love, and disgust in goddess worship. Ramprasad's focus on death and the goddess's interconnectedness to the life-death cycle paralleled many of the ecofeminist insights of Christian theology and Ivone Gebara's Trinitarian emphasis on divinity incorporating death. His hymns and theology inspired Ramakrishna, who also discussed polarities like life and death, nurturing and cruel, immanent and transcendent, and how Kali embodies and ultimately transcends them. The most important factor for both devotees, however, was the love of Kali that they articulated. This bhakti is a catalyst for Christian theology in deepening reflection on love of God, where Ramprasad and Ramakrishna demonstrated their identities as bhaktas in relationship with a goddess who embodies life and death, as well as transcends the dynamic altogether. Ramakrishna's life was meticulously documented by his disciples, so there are more resources to articulate his theology of loving Kali, and his life and devotion to Kali inspired the Ramakrishna Mission which is still active today. It is to his life and theology that this chapter now turns.

[475] McDermott, *Mother of my Heart.* 203

4.3 RAMAKRISHNA

Ramakrishna (1836-1886) was a prominent devotee of Kālī, and often sang or quoted Ramprasad Sen's words in his own devotional praise for Kali. He also served as the temple priest at the Dakshineshwar temple near Calcutta until his death from throat cancer at the age of fifty. He inspired countless devotees of Kālī, and remained available to all who wished to learn from him even while suffering in terrible pain at the end of his life. Perhaps the most famous disciple is Vivekananda (1863-1902) who went on to found the Ramakrishna Mission, which is still globally active today.[476] Both Ramprasad and Ramakrishna came to Kālī as their Mother, referring to her often in this way, and they also referred to the wild and chaotic nature of Kālī as well.[477]

Ramakrishna's parents, Khudiram Chattopadhyaya and Chandra Devi, were married in 1799 and they lived in Khudiram's ancestral village. Their first two children were born there, but then they were forced to leave over a legal dispute where Khudiram refused to give false witness in court against a neighbor, and was ousted from their land.[478] He was invited by another landlord to "the quiet village of Kāmārpukur," where they lived on an acre of land and grew their own food.[479] Ramakrishna was conceived after Khudiram made a pilgrimage to a Vishnu temple, and had a dream where Vishnu himself promised to be born as his son. When he was born on February 18, 1836, Ramakrishna was given the name Gadadhar, "Bearer of the Mace," in homage to Vishnu. He grew up learning hymns and stories of gods and goddesses from his father, an

[476] Their headquarters is in West Bengal: https://belurmath.org
[477] Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*. 121
[478] Gupta, Mahendra Natha. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna.* New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1942. 3
[479] *Idem*.

orthodox brāhmin, and at the age of six or seven he had an ecstatic spiritual experience. It began as he was walking on a path, looking at the sky, and marveling at a "beautiful, dark thunder-cloud…rapidly enveloping the whole sky" when "a flight of snow-white cranes passed in front of it" and he was overwhelmed by "the beauty of the contrast."[480] He fell down unconscious and afterwards said that he was feeling incredible joy in the moment. Throughout his life, he had these ecstatic experiences, and those around him would tend to his physical body as his consciousness was elsewhere.

This joy that he was immersed in contrasted sharply with the death of Ramakrishna's father shortly thereafter, when he was only seven years old, and which devastated him. By the age of nine, he was given the sacred thread and he began to worship the family deity and take over his father's disciplines. At around the age of thirteen, his oldest brother Ramkumar went to Calcutta to help his family financially. Ramkumar sent for Ramakrishna when he was sixteen, to come to Calcutta to help him with priestly responsibilities. Ramkumar tried to guide Ramakrishna to education and preparation for house-holder life, but instead he was more interested in priestly duties and serving families in Calcutta. Three years later, Ramkumar was appointed priest at the newly constructed Kali temple, to the disapproval of Ramakrishna. Ramkumar tried to convince Ramakrishna to pray to Kali, but at first he could not fathom breaking the purity laws and eating food prepared in a temple built by Rani Rasmani, a śudra woman.[481] After his brother died at a young age, Ramakrishna did meditate on Kali and was

[480] Gupta, Mahendra Natha. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 4.
[481] Sherma, Rita D. "Sri Ramakrishna: The Flavors of Bhakti." In *Beacons of Dharma*, edited by Christopher Miller, Jeffery D. Long, & Michael Reading. London: Rowman & Littlefield Lexington Books, 2020. 41-61.

converted and initiated into the Kali tradition. Ultimately, he took on his brother's role as temple priest and served in that capacity until his own death at the age of fifty.

Raised in a Vaisnava household, his family worshipped the family Deity Raghuvīr (an avatar of Vishnu) on a daily basis, as well as Siva. Upon becoming the Kali temple priest in 1855, where Rani Rasmani built adjacent temples to Siva and Krishna, Ramakrishna was similarly immersed in an open understanding of potential harmony across religious understandings.[482] As a Kali devotee and priest he practiced Tantrism, Advaita, Bhakti, Yoga, and even Christianity and Islam (for a few days each). At no point did he proclaim that only one form of religious practice or theology is legitimate. Instead, he continually articulated the availability of the grace of the Mother for all, through various paths. Ramakrishna's participation in various strands of Hinduism and other faiths while maintaining complete devotion to Kali demonstrated a deep openness to revelation and the mystery of divinity.

In 1861 Ramakrishna experienced healing, from the feeling that he was constantly on fire, at the hands of Bhairavi Brahmini who was a female brahmin monk with extensive knowledge of yoga, Gaudiya Vaishnava, and Tantrika texts and practices.[483] She then began to instruct Ramakrishna on reciting complex mantra, pranayama (yogic breathing), Patanjali's yoga, and tantric rituals. In 1863, he completed his *sadhanas* or initiation, under her direction.[484] The following year, Ramakrishna learned Advaitic philosophy under a male Advaitin monk named Totapuri for two years and he attained

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[482] Maharaj, Ayon. *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality : Sri Ramakrishna and Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018.
[483] Sherma, Rita D. "Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and the Flavors of Bhakti" in Miller, Christopher Patrick, Jeffery D. Long, Michael Reading, eds. *Beacons of Dharma: Spiritual Exemplars for the Modern Age.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020. 49
[484] *Idem*.

samadhi or the highest knowledge of nondual Brahman.[485] Then in 1866, Ramakrishna practiced Islamic *sadhana* under Govinda Rāy, a Muslim guru, and in 1874 Ramakrishna heard Bible passages read and had an experience of Jesus merging into him. Throughout the accounts of his life, Ramakrishna seamlessly wove all of these theologies together, from mentioning Tantric corpse meditation as part of the path to realizing one's ishta devata or ideal deity, to discussing Jesus and how he merged into his body.[486] These encounters with gurus and religious traditions led to Ramakrishna's expression of God's ability to come to people in the way that they will best understand. He used an analogy, how a mother prepares fish in various ways to suit the stomachs of her children.[487]

Ramakrishna "insisted upon" the "wild, bizarre nature" of Kālī the Mother, yet he approached her as her child.[488] She is powerful, maternal, creative, mad, and lovely:

> All creation is the sport of my mad Mother Kali;
> By Her maya the three worlds are bewitched.
> Mad is She and mad is Her Husband; mad are Her two disciples!
> None can describe Her loveliness, Her glories, gestures, moods;
> Siva, with the agony of the poison in His throat,
> Chants Her name again and again.
> The Personal does She oppose to the Impersonal,
> Breaking one stone with another;
> Though to all else She is agreeable,
> Where duties are concerned She will not yield.
> Keep your raft, says Ramprasad, afloat on the sea of life,
> Drifting up with the flood-tide, drifting down with the ebb.[489]

Ramakrishna himself was seen by others to be a bit bizarre and wild, as for example he would meditate without his sacred thread, to remember he was not superior to others, he interacted with the statue of Kālī as if she was real, and he would slip into states of semi-

[485] Maharaj, *Infinite Paths.*
[486] Gupta, Mahendra Natha. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna.* New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1942. 843 and 826
[487] Gupta, Mahendra Nath. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna.* New York, NY: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1958. 486
[488] Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute*. 123
[489] *The Gospel,* 619.

consciousness and neglect his bodily existence for hours or days.[490] As he began his intense devotional life to Kālī, he so longed for a vision of Her that he has the idea to end his life out of desperation, and grabbed a sword from the temple. To stop him, Kali revealed herself and he was able to experience the presence of the Divine Mother, "my Mother," as he often referred to her.[491] So, he was a devotee who had experienced the death of most of his nuclear family, and then contemplated causing his own death, before he encountered the divine and spends the rest of his time in and out of *samādhi* and helping encourage others along this path as well.

Although the experiences of the death of his father and brother are not discussed in a major way throughout the accounts of his life, it bears keeping them in mind as his hymns and writings are read and experienced. These narrative details are meaningful theologically, which is obvious in the *Gospel of Ramakrishna*, an account of his life and words written down by disciple Mahendra Nath Gupta and edited and translated by disciple Swami Nikhilananda. These disciples were inspired by Ramakrishna to continue in their devotion to Kali, and to enact social change through their own transformative relationships with the goddess even after his death at the age of fifty. Along with Vivekananda, they began the Ramakrishna Mission, which is still active today and has over two hundred global outposts that are focused on living out and sharing Ramakrishna's philosophy and theology, including "Seeing God in All."[492]

This section engages particular events in Ramakrishna's life, and certain hymns, to understand the kind of transformative changes that took place as he devoted his life to

[490] Gupta, Mahendra Nath. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna.* New York, NY: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1958, Abridged ed. 19-20
[491] Gupta, Mahendra Nath. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,* 19.
[492] https://ramakrishna.org/ut.html

Kali. He was, and is still, a highly regarded saint of the Hindu Bhakti tradition, so there is a lot of recorded data about him that many continue to read today. Throughout reflecting on his life and devotion in comparison with the Christian ecofeminist tradition, key resonances emerge in chapter five. Though he did not systematically discuss dualisms, Ramakrishna did address the relationship between good and evil, creation and destruction, male and female, body and spirit, social engagement and spiritual realization, life and death. This section will explore Ramakrishna's treatment of these topics, and how he reconciles the polarities. The next and final chapter will dialogue between the Kali tradition and Christian ecofeminism, and how each resolves the tensions of these binaries.

After the tragic death of Ramakrishna's father when he was young, he grew up spending most of his time with his mother and the women of their village. He had "natural feminine grace" and was beloved by these women.[493] Later in his life, as he was worshipping the Divine Child, he was known to take on feminine gestures and speech, even regarding himself as a woman.[494] Clearly, he implicitly understood a fluidity of genders, instead of a starkly separated binary. As he grew and matured, he continued this expression of femininity in his worship, saying, "I am the handmaid of Brahmamayi, the Blissful Mother…make me the Mother's handmaid!"[495] He advised devotees to adopt an attitude of relationality with God, as is popular in bhakti worship, either "the attitude of a 'hero' or a friend or a handmaid or a child."[496] Ramakrishna would also regard "himself as one of the gopis of Vrindavan, mad with longing for her divine Sweetheart. At his request, Mathur provided him with woman's dress and jewelry… Day and night he wept

[493] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing. 5
[494] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (1958) 41
[495] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing. 483
[496] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing. 483

bitterly for the vision of Sri Krishna…"[497] He was comfortable displaying masculine and feminine attributes, and in most cases understood a womanly identity to be his way of being in relationship with the divine.

Ramakrishna also understood Kali to challenge the gender binary, where she is not like other mother goddesses who are always proper, calm, beautiful, and serving their divine husbands and children. One of his hymns in fact said she makes a "strange wife" for Siva:

> Is Mother only Śiva's wife? To Her must needs bow down
> The all-destroying King of Death!
> Naked She roams about the world, slaying Her demon foes,
> Or stands erect on Śiva's breast.
> Her feet upon Her Husband's form! What a strange wife She makes!
> My Mother's play, declares Prasād, shatters all rules and laws:
> Strive hard for purity, o mind,
> And understand my Mother's ways.[498]

Not only did Ramakrishna challenge gender normativity in his own life and devotion, but he was devoted to a goddess who roamed naked killing enemies, putting her feet on her husband (a highly inauspicious or polluting act), and 'shattering all rules and laws' of purity and femininity. She is thus not 'only' a wife of Siva, but in fact is the one to whom he bows. Death was portrayed as a force to be conquered, as an enemy, and was feared:

> To arms! To arms, O man! Death storms your house in battle array!
> Bearing the quiver of knowledge, mount the chariot of devotion;
> Bend the bow of your tongue with the bow-string of love,
> And aim at him the shaft of Mother Kali's holy name.
> Here is a ruse for the fray: You need no chariot or charioteer;
> Fight your foe from the Ganges' bank, and he is easily slain.[499]

Kali here was the force that would violently vanquish death and liberate the devotee. Through her name, and meditation upon her name, 'he is easily slain.' While death is

[497] *Ibid*, 486.
[498] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing. 474.
[499] *Ibid*, 209.

aggressive and violent, one only needs the holy name of the goddess to have a weapon strong enough to defeat death. This aggression and weaponization of Kali and her name is striking in Hindu goddess theology.

Ramakrishna saw his wife, and in fact all women, as manifestations of the Divine Mother.[500] He also paid special attention to the spiritual needs of women in a way that was not common. When his disciples were fielding requests from women to see Ramakrishna and learn from him, they tried to deny them access and even resorted to beating one woman.[501] When the Master heard this, he said "No, no! Let her come and go away."[502] Although he did not articulate his reasoning, this was one example of Ramakrishna's ability to live as if the goddess Kali is manifest in all, without exception. His disciples followed societal normativity in denying women access to their guru, and Ramakrishna instead sent his faithful disciples away and spent time with this particular woman who was trying so desperately to access him. In the same week, women arrive to celebrate the first day of the Bengali year and saluted Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother, even bringing their children along, which demonstrated a welcoming community the Master had created. In another instance, Ramakrishna invited the wife of a devotee to come visit the temple and stay with her baby, have her meals, and live in the garden house for a few days as she was mourning the loss of an older child. Thus, for Ramakrishna women are not to be despised and ignored, though his understanding of women and their pursuit of liberation is left unexplored by his songs.

Ramakrishna seemed to address women overall when he speaks about 'woman and gold' as two potential distractions from the spiritual path, saying "When a man rids

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[500] *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (1958), 27
[501] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing. 952
[502] *Idem*.

himself entirely of his love for 'woman and gold,' then he clearly perceives that the body is one thing and the Self another."[503] However, he did not mean that all women and all money were evil or irreconcilable with spiritual pursuits. If someone or something makes one forget God, this is where he took issue. When Dr. Sarkar, who treated Ramakrishna throughout his throat cancer until his death, pushed him to articulate that both gold and women are necessary in life, Ramakrishna said that "there is no harm in spending money to lead a spiritual life…in the worship of God and the service of holy men and devotees."[504] Thus, the 'gold' that Ramakrishna advised was poison, that should be avoided, meant gold or money that is not related to living spiritually.[505] Money spent on material extravagances is that which is poison or deathly, where one may be lead into a life of temptation and attachment and ultimately rebirth. Ramakrishna did not ever pursue material luxuries for himself, and he did allow his disciples to provide for the services of Dr. Sarkar and his basic needs of food and housing. Thus, not all gold or money is to be avoided, but detachment must be practiced.

When Dr. Sarkar challenged Ramakrishna's remarks about women and gold, the disciple Rajendra pointed out that Ramakrishna's wife was cooking all his meals. This was the extent of their typical marriage traits, however. Ramakrishna's family required him to marry, out of concern for his mental state and as a way to make him come to terms with responsibilities in life.[506] Thus he was married to Saradamani when she was five years old. She continued living with her parents until she was eighteen, at which point she joined Ramakrishna at the Kali temple where he was serving as priest. Their marriage

[503] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing. 870
[504] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing, 874.
[505] *Idem*.
[506] Sherma, Rita D. "Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and the Flavors of Bhakti," 48.

was never consummated because Ramakrishna had already taken a vow of celibacy at this point. She became known as Sarada Devi, and he claimed that she was a goddess incarnate. She was very respected among his disciples at the temple and continued to guide them after Ramakrishna's death. Ramakrishna's relationship with Sarada Devi demonstrated dissonance with cultural norms around marriage. His pursuit of love and devotion to Kali overcame every aspect of his being, including bodily awareness, and so his contemplation of Kali also eclipsed any other relationship, including his marriage.

Ramakrishna, when pressed, told Dr. Sarkar that the "Mother of the Universe…has assumed the form of maya, the form of woman. One who knows this rightly does not feel like leading the life of maya in the world. But he who truly realizes that all women are manifestations of the Divine Mother may lead a spiritual life in the world."[507] Thus, Ramakrishna made the point that "Without realizing God one cannot truly know what a woman is."[508] He advised his disciples to keep their minds focused on God, and said from experience that "He who is a hero lives with a woman but does not indulge in physical pleasures," he told them to follow his example and "talk to your wife only about God."[509] Ramakrishna was not entirely clear about his ideas around women and spiritual liberation, but he was clear that sexuality is a distraction for everyone on the path to liberation. He did not offer commentary of the roles of women in society, or gender dynamics. He understood a clear interconnectedness between Kali and human women, and advised against sexual relationships with women. It is not entirely clear how Ramakrishna understood the relationship between men, women, and Kali, and at times he acted in contradictory ways.

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[507] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing. 965
[508] *Idem*.
[509] *Ibid*, 966.

During one conversation, when Ramakrishna heard that a disciple was renouncing the world, he first asked the question of who would feed his wife and children?[510] He went on to say that true realization of God can only happen if one carries out their worldly duties in a "detached spirit, if one lives in the world after realizing that everything is illusory."[511] Thus, he understood that renunciation was not the only or highest path to liberation, but instead living in the world without your spirit being completely attached to materiality. He referenced the Gita and Krishna's articulation of bhakti, or loving devotion to God, as the highest path for spiritual enlightenment. Both in the Gita and in Ramakrishna's life accounts, the world is where God is manifest, and the transcendent Brahman is present in all immanent aspects of this world. However, God is not entirely contained or limited by materiality, so the focus of devotees should always be on love for God first, and not materiality in itself. Ramakrishna's panentheism orients his theology and encounters with Kali, where she is manifest in all things, and he sees no stark separation between this Mother and the world, even in himself. The Christian ecotheological tradition, and Gebara in particular, also articulates a panentheism. Here the similarities between the traditions allow for rich dialogue in addressing the interconnectedness of the world and the divine, the body and spirit, that will be addressed in the next chapter.

Ramakrishna did not always regard all people as equal, however. Some social and cultural norms persisted in his thought, as when two girls aged nine and ten, from a disciple's family, arrived to sing songs about Kali for Ramakrishna. After they sang for him, he was at first pleased by their music. But when they left to go sing for other

[510] *Ibid*, 956.
[511] *Idem*.

disciples downstairs, Ramakrishna told their father "Don't teach the girls any more songs. It is different if they sing spontaneously. But they will lose their modesty by singing before anyone and everyone. It is very necessary for women to be modest."[512] Thus, he did internalize some of the gendered biases that are normative across many cultures and centuries, in this case for women to be modest. Here we see where the love of Kali, which these girls were demonstrating through their music, was not primary to the need for the girls to fulfill their gendered roles. He did not explain his comment here, so there is no way to definitively understand his motives.

Ramakrishna acknowledged an interconnected relationship between good and evil, through the presence of the divine in all.

> Dharma means good actions, like giving in charity. If you accept dharma, then you have to accept adharma too. If you accept virtue, then you have to accept sin. If you accept knowledge, then you have to accept ignorance. If you accept holiness, you have to accept unholiness. It is like a man's being aware of light, in which case he is aware of darkness too. If a man is aware of one, he is aware of many too. If he is aware of good, he is aware of evil too.[513]

Interconnectedness is the truth, where good cannot exist without evil, light cannot exist without darkness, holiness cannot exist without unholiness, and so on. Kali is a deity who embodies both aspects of each of these polarities, where Ramprasad and Ramakrishna criticized her association with evil, nakedness, death, etc. just as they also praised her benevolence, life giving nature, beautiful form, etc. Kali is the one who dwells within all. This resolution of the good-evil dynamic by locating it in the divine parallels the theology of Ivone Gebara, with her understanding that good and evil are not separate, and both constantly exist as possibilities within humans and the divine. Further elaboration on this dynamic is in the next chapter.

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[512] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing. 959
[513] *Ibid*, 902.

Ramakrishna prayed to Kali with flowers in his hand, and told her to take "Thy good…take Thy bad. I don't want any of Thy good or bad; give me only real bhakti. Here, mother, take Thy dharma; here, take Thy adharma. I don't want any of Thy dharma or adharma; give me only real bhakti…"[514] While good and bad, dharma and adharma, knowledge and ignorance, purity and impurity, and other dualities exist in the world, he acknowledged that true bhakti with Kali transcends all. The Divine Mother is never affected by good or evil, purity or impurity, etc., though she is understood to be present within everything as the ground of all creation and "She is the supreme Mistress of the cosmic play; and all objects, animate and inanimate, dance by Her will."[515] Kali is immanently part of the world and all that occurs, and yet in her transcendence she is beyond any of our concepts of good and evil, dharma and adharma, etc.

Just as Kali is at once part of and beyond all good and evil, she was also understood to be responsible for the process that contains creation and destruction. Ramakrishna said that creation belonged to Kali, and that "Creation, preservation, and destruction are the waves of Her sportive pleasure."[516] Kali's womb holds the entire universe. In this hymn he even attributed Siva's survival while ingesting poison to Kali:

> The Master was in ecstaty. He began to sing in his melodious voice:
>
> Who is there that can understand what Mother Kali is?
> Even the six darsanas are powerless to reveal Her…
>
> He went on:
>
> Is Mother merely a simple woman, born as others are born?
> Only by chanting Her holy name
> Does Śiva survive the deadly poison.
> She it is who creates the worlds, She who preserves and destroys,
> With a mere wink of Her wondrous eyes;
> She holds the universe in Her womb.
> Seeking a shelter at Her feet, the gods themselves feel safe;

[514] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing, 817.
[515] *Gospel of Ramakrishna* (1958) 51
[516] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing. 818

And Mahādeva, God of Gods,
Lies prostrate underneath Her feet.[517]

Kali is responsible for all creation, for protection and security even for the gods, and for destruction where these are not separate forces but all part of a dynamic process. The interconnectedness of creation and destruction is grounded in the goddess. Ramakrishna said it plainly: "God is engaged in three kinds of activity: creation, preservation, and destruction."[518] In "the time of dissolution" where "all will be destroyed" and "nothing will remain," it is here that Kali "will gather up the seeds for the future creation" and take them out "at the time of the new creation."[519] Kali will be the one who is prepared to start anew when the times comes. Thus, her participation in creation and destruction, where she engages in violence as well as gestation, has an overall hopeful tone. Kali's presence in death, evil, and ultimate dissolution is striking. Ramakrishna said:

> The Divine Mother is full of bliss.
> Creation, preservation, and destruction are the waves of Her sportive pleasure.
> Innumerable are the living beings.
> Only one or two among them obtain liberation. And that makes Her happy.
> Out of a hundred thousand kites, at best but one or two break free;
> And Thou dost laugh and clap Thy hands, O Mother, watching them!
> Some are being entangled in the world and some are being liberated from it.
> How many are the boats, O mind,
> That float on the ocean of this world!
> How many are those that sink![520]

He freely acknowledged the reality that some will attain liberation in this lifetime, and some will not, where Kali delights in those who are freed but does not at any point free everyone or remove all possibilities for temptation or entanglement in the world. The liberation of the few makes Kali laugh and clap, and those that sink into samsara will be

[517] *Ibid*, 473.
[518] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing, 209.
[519] *Idem*.
[520] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing. 818

reborn again and perhaps be liberated in the next death, as no one is denied this ultimate freedom.

Ramakrishna was asked by a few devotees about death and what happens afterwards. He repeatedly responded that in the Gita "one becomes afterwards what one thinks of at the time of death… If a man thinks of God day and night, he will have the same thought in the hour of his death."[521] Thus, it is the realization of God that leads to liberation, otherwise one will continue to be reborn. When Nanda asked about the afterlife and punishment for our sins, Ramakrishna asked "Why not enjoy your mangoes? What need have you to calculate about the after-life and what happens then, and things like that? Eat your mangoes. You need mangoes. You need devotion to God"[522] Nanda cut him off and asked where the mango tree is, and how to get mangoes, to which Ramakrishna responded:

> Tree? God is the eternal and infinite Brahman. He *does* exist; there is no doubt about it. He is eternal. But you must remember this, that He is the Kalpataru.
> 'Come, let us go for a walk, O mind, to Kali, the Wish-fulfilling Tree,
> And there beneath It father the four fruits of life.'
> You must go to the Kalpataru and pray. Only then will you obtain the fruits. Only then will the fruits fall from the tree. Only then will you be able to gather them. There are four fruits: dharma, artha, kama, and moksha. The jnanis seek the fruit of liberation; and the bhaktas, love of God, love without any motive behind it. They seek neither dharma nor artha nor kama.[523]

The Kalpataru, or wish-fulfilling tree, is the banyan tree with its abundance of long leafy branches that is often also referred to as the Tree of Life and it represents eternal life. Ramakrishna identified Kali as the Wish-fulfilling Tree, the Tree of Life itself, and the mangoes from the tree of life that are liberation are to be eaten in devotion to the goddess. Later, after his throat cancer diagnosis, Ramakrishna was again asked about the afterlife

[521] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing, 583.
[522] *Ibid*, 820.
[523] *Idem*.

and whether rebirth is real. He gave the same response he had given before about what the Gita teaches, and when he was pressed further he said:

> I cannot cure my own illness, and you ask me to tell you what happens after death!... You are born as a human being only to attain divine love. You have come to the orchard to eat mangoes; what need is there of knowing how many thousands of branches and millions of leaves there are in the orchard? To bother about what happens after death! How silly![524]

Ramakrishna used the imagery of trees, orchards, and fruits to articulate the reality that love of God, or the mangoes to be eaten should be the primary focus of all, and that only through the love and knowledge of God can one attain liberation, and not through interrogating the orchard's details. The details of the afterlife retain mystery that Ramakrishna did not see value in continually interrogating. In fact, it is "silly" to spend time and energy on this line of investigation when the attainment of fruits, of divine love, is the most important part of a spiritual life. Detachment was key for Ramakrishna, where love of God needs to be "without any motive behind it." When he was asked about doing compassionate works for those in need, he was clear that:

> If a householder gives in charity in a spirit of detachment, he is really doing good to himself and not to others. It is God alone that he serves-God, who dwells in all beings; and when he serves God, he is really doing good to himself and not to others. If a man thus serves God through all beings, not through men alone but through animals and other living beings as well; if he doesn't seek name and fame, or heaven after death; if he doesn't seek any return from those he serves; if he can carry on his work of service in the spirit-then he performs truly selfless work, work without attachment… This is called karmayoga. This too is a way to realize God. But it is very difficult, and not suited to the Kaliyuga.[525]

Love of God clearly needs to come first in any type of compassion or generosity, and not thought of as part of one's path toward liberation. This seems to contrast with the Christian tradition as it is practiced, where love of God is less emphasized. Here

[524] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing. 841
[525] *Ibid*, 671.

Ramakrishna articulated the necessity of serving God through living beings-not only people, which adds a dimension from which to consider Jesus's second commandment, and who should fall into the category of 'neighbor' in our common home. The comparative theology of this project will address this aspect in more depth. For Ramakrishna, it was God's love for the world alone that generates goodness and compassion, where:

> Helping others, doing good to others-this is the work of God alone, who for men has created the sun and moon, father and mother, fruits, flowers, and corn. The love that you see in parents is God's love: He has given it to them to preserve His creation. The compassion that you see in the kind-hearted is God's compassion: He has given it to them to protect the helpless. Whether you are charitable or not, He will have His work done somehow or other. Nothing can stop His work.[526]

Thus, attention to the needs of others and the world is possible only after realizing true love of God and living with true detachment to one's self. This is incredibly challenging to carry out in such times of deterioration of the kaliyuga, or the period of time before the dissolution of the worlds and then the re-creation of everything. While Ramakrishna lived in a way that would often put the needs of others above his own, he was able to embody this focus on love of God, and he encouraged and helped others to have this same perfect knowledge.

Ramakrishna identified Kali as "identical with the Brahman of Vedanta and with the Atman of Yoga."[527] He described that "Brahman is without taint. The three gunas are in Brahman, but It is Itself untainted by them. You may find both good and bad smells in the air; but the air itself is unaffected."[528] Kali ultimately thus transcends polarities and qualities altogether. This understanding of Kali correlated with Ramakrishna's

[526] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing. 671
[527] *Gospel of Ramakrishna* (1958) 51
[528] *Ibid*, 939.

understanding of Atman to be without caste or creed, as he told a brahmin who asks him why he threw away his sacred Brahmanical thread.[529] He used his hair to clean dirty and impure places, like "a pariah's house," "to root out of his mind the idea of caste superiority."[530] Ramakrishna's experience of unity with the Divine Mother was one where he was transformed from first being skeptical of a temple built by a sudra woman and refusing to eat food prepared there, because of its impure and taboo nature, to living in the temple, teaching that Kali did not recognize caste distinctions, and removing his thread while he prayed to God. As brahman is not impacted by social, gender, caste, or other divisions, Ramakrishna demonstrated efforts to similarly refrain from these dualisms.

In 1868, Ramakrishna was traveling between Calcutta and Kasi with an entourage of disciples and care staff, and they passed through the village of Deoghar and stopped there to rest.[531] His heart was so filled with compassion at the sight of the poor and hungry villagers there that he told Mathur to feed them and give some basic supplies like cloth to each of them. When Mathur balked at the expense, Ramakrishna said that he would not move from the place until he distributed everything, and he sat down with some of the villagers. He was attentive to the needs of others in a way that did not follow typical societal norms, and often confounding his disciples and those close to him. He was independent in these moments, and did not explicitly articulate his theological reasoning for taking these actions. His focus was on love of Kali, and helping others

[529] *Gospel of Ramakrishna* (1958)*,* 95.
[530] *Ibid,* 27.
[531] Swami Jagadananda, *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master*. Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1952. 2.18 The Master's Pilgrimage and the story of Hridayram

attain this knowledge, and not on his own material needs or well-being, but then he was very attentive to the bodily needs of others.

Ramakrishna articulated a strict division between the atman or eternal self and the body. He found "that the body is quite separate from the Self," though this did not negate the body's use as he also said that "as long as there is the body, one should take care of it."[532] After detaching from one's love for "woman and gold," Ramakrishna said that clear perception of the separate nature of the body and Self follows. He compared their relationship to a sword and its sheath, or a dried kernel of a coconut rattling around inside of the shell.[533] When he was afflicted with throat cancer, he could not speak to Kali about this illness of body, since it was so divided from his eternal atman.[534] Throughout his illness, he philosophized about his cancer and his relationship with devotees. In one instance, he attributed his long suffering to the need of the devotees for him to stay alive, saying "I have gone on suffering so much for fear of making you all weep. But if you say: 'Oh, there is so much suffering! Let the body die,' then I may give up the body."[535] Ramakrishna was sure that the illness he suffered was in his body only. His disciples made the intuitive comparison between their guru and Jesus Christ, who also suffered and died in his body where his eternal soul lives on.[536]

The name of Kali, and the goal of focusing on the goddess's name at his time of death recurs throughout Ramakrishna's words and writings.

> If only I can pass away repeating Durga's name,
> How canst Thou then, O Blessed One,

[532] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing. 870
[533] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing. 870
[534] *Idem*.
[535] *Ibid*, 939.
[536] Clooney, Francis X. "God's suffering in the Hindu-Christian gaze" in Cornille, Catherine, ed. *Atonement and Comparative Theology: The Cross in Dialogue with Other Religions.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2021.

Withhold from me deliverance,
Wretched though I may be?
I may have stolen a drink of wine, or killed a child unborn,
Or slain a woman or a cow,
Or even cause a brāhmin's death;
But, though it all be true,
Nothing of this can make me feel the least uneasiness;
For through the power of Thy sweet name
My wretched soul may still aspire
Even to Brahmanhood.[537]

He understood devotion to Kali to be primary in one's carrying out benevolent and compassionate acts, and here he articulated that devotion to the name of the goddess can overwhelm evil acts, too. The love and worship of Kali, and detachment in all one's actions, is the only goal. If this is the case, then one's works do not matter. Only the name in your heart can affect your liberation and unity with God after this life.

Ramakrishna saw Kali as the mover of all movable bodies. To him, "men and other living beings are made of leather, and that it is God Himself who, dwelling inside these leather cases, moved the hands, the feet, the heads."[538] Every life is ultimately a material body imbued with the presence of God. He did not see his cancer as something completely rare, since "suffering is inevitable when one assumes a human body."[539] Ramakrishna did show tenderness with physical touch and his disciples, and making sure they had enough to eat, somewhere to sleep, and their bodily needs were met. Just as he described pain when coming into contact with 'woman and gold,' he also was bodily affected when encountering and uniting with God. In samadhi, he often would be so completely one with divinity that he would neglect his body, seemingly not conscious of it at all, or even appearing to be dead. "Birds would perch on his head and peck in his

[537] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing. 88
[538] *Ibid*, 941-942.
[539] *Ibid*, 943.

hair for grains of food. Snakes would crawl over his body," and so on.[540] Later in his life, he would often spend his time without any clothing, asking his disciples "Will you take me for an uncivilized person if I don't cover my body with my cloth?"[541] One disciple, Hirananda, responds, "What difference does that make with you? You are but a child."[542] Because Ramakrishna's body was seen as untouched by sin, he was not held to the same standards as other bodies. Even though he insisted that the divine is not equated with his body, he was worshipped as divinity by many in his embodied form. In fact, as Ramakrishna's body deteriorated from throat cancer, "the more it revealed the presence of the Divine Spirit."[543]

Ramakrishna consistently entered into states of samadhi in the later years of his life, and others would witness his face beaming with joy when this would happen, even when he was suffering in the later stages of throat cancer.[544] He articulated that a spiritual current would rise within his body, and he would then feel like a child while also realizing that the divine was inside of him, where his body was a vessel for God. In these states of samadhi, he also "left aside" the "suffering of the body" because of this unity of his mind and God.[545] His devotees were understandably upset by his bouts of extreme pain, and would lament his cancer and his suffering, asking "why a devotee of God suffers?"[546] Ramakrishna was clear that "It is the body that suffers," meaning that the eternal self does not.[547] He made himself as available as possible to devotees and

[540] *Gospel of Ramakrishna* (1958) 27
[541] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing. 971
[542] *Idem*.
[543] *Gospel of Ramakrishna (*1958) p. 108
[544] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing. 969
[545] *Idem*.
[546] *Idem*.
[547] *Ibid*, 970.

disciples, and believed that he was able to help others attain love of God and therefore ultimate liberation.

Ramakrishna reflected toward the end of his life on the beginning of his spirituality, that he would "meditate on God with [his] eyes closed," but that later he would look around with open eyes and "see that God dwells in all beings. He is the Indwelling Spirit of all-men, animals and other living beings, trees and plants, sun and moon, land and water."[548]

> Mother, Thou art our sole Redeemer,
> Thou the Support of the three gunas,
> Higher than the most high.
> Thou art compassionate, I know,
> Who takest away our bitter grief.
> (224) Sandhyā art Thou, and Gāyatri:
> Thou dost sustain this universe.
> Mother, the Help art Thou
> Of those that have no help but Thee,
> O Eternal Beloved of Siva!
> Thou art in earth, in water Thou;
> Thou liest at the root of all.
> In me, in every creature,
> Thou hast Thy home: though clothed with form,
> Yet art Thou formless Reality.[549]

Not only is Kali present in every person and life, but the Mother is also in the earth, water, all creatures, everything in this world. Here she is the help for those that have none other, taking away the bitter grief of all, where her clear compassion and protection of 'those who have no help' is highlighted. Kali is present in Ramakrishna, 'in every creature,' and is both 'clothed with form' and 'formless Reality.' The goddess as located in all aspects of materiality is a rich point of comparison with Gebara's ecofeminism,

[548] https://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/gospel/volume_2/31_advice_to_ishan.htm Friday September 26 1884 The Durga Puja Festival
[549] *The Gospel,* 1942 seventh printing. 223

which addresses the Trinitarian life-death process as inherent in all the cosmos. This comparative analysis will be delved into in the next chapter.

4.4 CONCLUSION

The words and lives of the two saints Ramprasad and Ramakrishna continue to live on in Kali devotees today, as goddess worship continues.[550] They were the earliest devotees of their Mother to be public about their worship and theologies, and thus they have and continue to influence the Kali tradition in a primary way. Both in their lives and in the lives of devotees today, there are many themes that are resonant with the Christian ecofeminist tradition of Ivone Gebara and others. The overarching dynamic of resolving various dualisms, like life and death, body and spirit, good and evil, creation and destruction, is resonant for both traditions. In the next chapter, these themes will be compared across the Hindu and Christian traditions, focusing through the perspective of life and death. Kali is the remover of fear of death, she who takes and gives life, the destroyer who also gestates the worlds in her womb, the Mother and the terrifyingly wild one, and she is also an often-overlooked dialogue partner for Christians. Her complex identity allows Christians to reconsider the Trinitarian god in the context of our chaotic and messy world. The love and devotion of Ramprasad and Ramakrishna provides Christian contemplation with lovers of Kali, who hold her complexities in their devotion. It is to this dialogue about God, and loving God, and the rich comparative insights that we now turn.

[550] Samanta, *Bengali Lives.*

5.0 CHAPTER 5:

RECONSIDERING DUALISMS ACROSS KALI AND CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

5.1 GOOD AND EVIL

While both Christianity and Hinduism acknowledge the existence of good and evil, Christian theology has a longer history of debating and analyzing these particular concepts in a systematic way than the Hindu tradition. In Christianity, the two terms are opposed to each other, and are typically understood to be separate.[551] Cosmologically, following the creation story in Genesis 1-2, the biblical origin myth, God is identified as pure goodness. The archangel Satan, in the Abrahamic traditions, is in competitive and combative tension with God and is ultimately cast out of heaven. He is the enemy of God and of goodness, and is understood as evil and also referred to as the Devil. The concept of evil traditionally includes moral evil, which humans choose, and also natural evil of earthquakes, pandemics, floods, and all destruction. Christian theology interrogates the problem of evil and how to resolve the tension between an all-powerful and good God, and the presence of moral and natural evils in the world. Anthropologically, human beings and creation were good in the beginning, but then humans gave into the

[551] See Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q. 6 a. 2 co. "Deus est summum bonum," God is the highest or ultimate good where evil is the absence of good. See also Augustine's *The Confessions* Book VII and *City of God*, Book IX.

temptation of envy and desiring to be like God. Their original sin resulted in the Fall, and the entrance of evil into the world, which came with consequences including death, pains of childbirth, a life of hard work and painful experiences starting with the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Soteriologically, there is hope for redemption and a return to the original goodness, in the fullness of time, and ecotheology includes creation in this ultimate transformation of a new heaven and new earth in a particular way.[552]

In Hinduism, cosmically, gods are understood to uphold dharma or cosmic harmony, where demons threaten dharma and most of the popular goddesses like Lakshmi or Parvati are only associated with the good or perfect nature of divinity. Anthropologically, good and bad karma function in a parallel way to the Christian dynamic of good and evil, in that they are opposed to one another. One's choices and actions accumulate either good or bad karma, and the goal is to have more good karma than bad. Ultimately, however, liberation is a release from the karmic system entirely, and a transcendence of both good and bad karma. Kali is understood to be more complicated than some other deities in the dynamic between sacred and profrane, pure and impure, etc. Ever since she sprang out of Durga's forehead and vanquished a terrible demon by drinking its blood, Kali has been immersed in the flow of good and evil.

In Tantrism, Kali is related to both good and evil in the same way, where there is no interrogation of moral evil and creation-destruction, as in Christianity. The Tantric practitioner focuses on the transformative journey of the self, and hopes to join her and ultimately transcend the world of good and evil. The Tantric tradition challenges the orderly, perfect, and pure Brahmanical ritual world of Hinduism, where practitioners offer blood sacrifices, bodily fluids, and partake in impurities that typically defile oneself.

[552] See chapter 1 for more detail on ecotheology.

The relatedness of good and evil, pure and impure, sacred and profane, is emphasized and experienced as part of the path to liberation and transcendence. In Bhakti, Kali's immanence and presence in the daily life of the devotee is central, and Ramprasad called Kali the "cord connecting every good and evil."[553] He and Ramakrishna questioned her motherly qualities and nurturing capabilities, while they also acknowledged her ability to destroy sin and suffering, and her unfailing availability of love and unity with the devotee. Ramprasad chastised her often, and questioned her ability as a mother to be nurturing and not cruel. Ramakrishna sang to Kali, as a wretched soul, and wanted to die while reciting her name, confident that the Mother would not withhold liberation from him if he had committed evil acts, like consuming alcohol, or even murder. He saw the Mother in the world around him, and in all people and life he encounters, even in his throat cancer and those who are evil (though he did wrestle with the meaning of his cancer and he recommended keeping evil people at a distance).[554] Overall, there is not a clear distinction between creation-destruction and moral evil in the Kali tradition, as there is in Christianity, and so there is room for mutual interrogation and enhancement of the categories.

Gebara's scathing critique of dualistic Christian conceptions of good and evil is rooted in her resistance to the tendency within the Christian tradition to separate the two and fail to see the interactive dynamic between them that is constitutive of the human condition. She asserts that the idea of an all good God, who is powerful, perfect, and who is distant and relationally unaffected and entirely separate from evil is a God with whom humanity cannot identify because it is an image of God who is far from the reality of

[553] Sena, *Grace and Mercy in Her Wild Hair*. 16
[554] See chapter 5 for details on Ramakrishna's experience with cancer and dialogue about the end of life.

those created in this God's same image and likeness, and whose lives are lived at the intersection of good and evil. She argues that this dynamic does not give us hope in working toward justice in our world. In questioning the traditional Christian understanding of God and the devil, she points out the interplay between the two, for example where God and Jesus engage the devil, fight him, talk with him, and Jesus is tempted in the wilderness by him before Jesus defeats him. Gebara identifies the ways in which over the course of centuries Christianity has distanced God and Jesus from a direct engagement with the forces of evil, and its personification, and that because of this there exists a dualism between a transcendent world of perfection and goodness that is not part of our material world. Our world is chaotic, and often there is disorder, evil, justice, good, injustice, and it is here where old dualisms have to be overcome to reconcile immanent and transcendent realities. Good is not possible or real if evil is not possible or real, where 'real' for Gebara is the *mixture* of all-substance, beings, humans, passions, emotions, actions.[555] Her articulation of good and evil blurs the lines here, where the boundaries between even moral evil, creation-destruction, and good are left unclear. Gebara's theology does not focus or fully expand upon this area, however, as it is not a key thesis of her theological works.

Gebara's attempt to shift the understanding of natural evil, cosmic evil, or destruction-creation is articulated in various places throughout her corpus of work, and needs further engagement to be fully understood. She continues to use the term 'evil' while also seeking to differentiate between multiple usages and differentiated meanings. For example, when she says that in a certain way we celebrate evil as part of the Trinity,

[555] Gebara in *T & T Clark Handbook of Christian theology and climate change*. 470

she does not mean the concept of evil as defined by the Christian tradition broadly. She identifies the destruction-creation process as part of the Trinity, where both destruction and creation are part of one vital process.[556] This process is often referred to as 'natural evil' in Christian theology, where Gebara refers to it as cosmic "evil" or creation-destruction and locates it within the Trinity. She makes the move to separate creation-destruction from evil as traditionally understood, and instead asserts that as part of the Trinity it is the negative aspect or emptiness that is found everywhere. This emptiness, or destruction-creation process, is an opening, for both destruction and creativity, and the opening of our inner selves to all that is transcendent. It is when we suffer from the effects of this one process that it can seem like evil, and Gebara is separating this from moral or effective evil. Connecting the Trinity with destruction-creation and only using 'evil' to refer to effective evil or that which humans choose among other options is Gebara's goal.

To clarify how to carry out this change in Christian theology, more thought is needed to determine which sufferings are a result of destruction-creation and which are consequences of effective evil. Gebara does not offer concrete ways to envision and understand the Trinitarian God as related to the process of creation-destruction and natural death, and here the turn to Kali can catalyze a deepening of Gebara's thought. Kali is referred to in Tantric and Bhakti texts as creator-preserver-destroyer, and this is her understood identity.[557] She bears the worlds in her womb, births them, and then is

[556] See Catherine LaCugna's Trinitarian theology, where she also articulates a need for Christian theology to renew its trinitarian foundation, especially regarding the inseparability between theology and soteriology. She argues that the doctrine of the Trinity is a practical one, that has radical consequences for the lives of Christians. LaCugna, Catherine. *God For Us: the Trinity and Christian Life.* San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.

[557] Kali is not the only deity to be referred to in this way, as the creation-preservation-destruction dynamic is found throughout Hindu theology.

part of the endless cosmic cycle of dissolution and creation. It is understood that Kali alone is responsible for activating the cycle. The goddess has been linked to violence, or what could definitely be interpreted as moral evil, and the question of this relationship would benefit from deeper analysis. The Kali tradition does not have a history of engaging the idea of moral evil, and interrogating its causes, and here is where the Hindu tradition could potentially be enriched by Christian theology. In mutual dialogue, both traditions can more precisely reflect on and articulate the boundaries, and if they are porous or not, between creation-destruction and moral evil.

Anthropologically, Gebara abandons the language of talking about human beings 'before the fall,' and instead wants to create a theological anthropology where humans are understood as free to choose good or evil, just like the relatedness of the creative-destructive process. She argues that the possibility of good and evil resides within all humans, that it always has, and she begins to develop an interrogation of evil in her theological anthropology. She identifies many evils that are hidden, especially where men and women have different relationships here and women have been understood as vulnerable to evil and Catholicism has not done enough to denounce the evil that victimizes women.[558] In her interrogation, she discusses evil as both immanent, in our bodies, and transcendent, while it is also interconnected with good. The two cannot exist without each other, she says. As humans are ecological creatures and part of the web of creation, this dynamic also affects the environment and Gebara incorporates ecological concerns in her work as well. What is needed is a fine-tuning of where she sees moral evil originating, and how humans are related to it and to creation-destruction, as she leaves these details open and in need of clarity.

[558] Gebara in *Popular Catholicism in a World Church,* 262.

In the Tantric tradition, as in most Hindu traditions, there was no fall from goodness, as in Christianity. Communion with the divine in this body and this world is found in practices that enact the interconnection between good and evil, sacred and profane, pure and impure. Tantrism focuses more on efforts of liberation for the self through engagement with and then transcendence of these polarities, however, and does not explicitly address the social justice aspect of liberation from moral evil that is found in Christianity. The Bhakti tradition, particularly Ramakrishna, does at times implicitly address social inequalities. He insisted that the Mother was present in all, even those who are evil, for example, though he did not talk about dismantling oppressive structures as Gebara advocates, as he was a completely different person. For those in the Bhakti tradition, the immanence of the Mother and her mercy is key, no matter their participation in good or evil, so long as they engage in bhakti. Ramakrishna specifically acknowledged the ability of bhakti, of loving relationship with the goddess, to transcend dualities as he offers Kali sin and virtue, good and bad, dharma and adharma, seeking only real bhakti. Ramprasad, Ramakrishna, and others still refer to the Mother as the destroyer of all sins, and the one who can ease suffering, even though she is also addressed as fierce and unpredictable. Thus, the relationship between good and evil, and creation-destruction is not interrogated in the Kali tradition. Perhaps in mutual dialogue, the Hindu and Christian traditions here can reflect more deeply on these categories and the implications of their interpretations for believers.

Gebara does want us to confront the complexity of good and evil within Christianity, and bring this understanding to our interpretation of scripture and theology. Her critique of current Christian cosmology and anthropology is stronger than her

reconstruction of the tradition, however, so the comparative turn to Hinduism offers a necessary catalyst for Christian ecofeminism. In contrast to early Christian missionaries who encountered Kali and claimed they met the devil, that she was evil, and she further mired her devotees in evil, this project asserts that Kali is a deity who is present to the tantric hero and bhakti devotee in the midst of good and evil, and then ultimately in the transcendence of the world. Cosmologically, Kali does attend to the *mixture*, the *real*, that Gebara seeks to recover in Christianity. She is known as the destroyer, protector, and creator all at once, in a way that resonates with Gebara's incorporation of destruction-creation in the Trinity. Gebara's primary focus is relatedness, which she argues is the primary category of being a human being as well as for the Trinity. It is the immanence of this *real mixture*, the connection between polarities that Gebara identifies as primary, and not its transcendence, which contrast with Kali makes clear. Kali is not only good, or love, or justice, as the Christian tradition often refers to God in this one-sided way. She is the destroyer-protector-creator of the worlds, the one whose mercy is liberative, who is present in all aspects of the world. She is also, then, an example to Christian theology of how to avoid the stark separations between creation and destruction, the world and the divine, evil and good.

5.2 CREATION AND DESTRUCTION

The Christian ecotheological tradition explores creation more deeply than destruction or death, and calls for a renewed engagement with death and resurrection. Typically, Christian discussion of creation involves *creation ex nihilo*, where God

generates out of nothing. Notably absent from dialogue about creation is the idea of destruction, except where humans sin and ruin the perfect goodness and creativity of God.[559] Gebara, as noted, does not find the fall helpful and instead puts forth a theological anthropology where good and evil are constant possibilities. She also uses the phrase "the creative-destructive process," instead of discussing creation and destruction as if they were separate. Gebara asserts the earth itself as Trinitarian, where there is constant creation and destruction, as part of this one and vital process. Thus, according to Gebara destruction-creation is explicitly incorporated in the Trinity, and not understood as natural evil. She offers examples, like the birth of our solar system simultaneously destroying others in the Big Bang, or the creation of deserts often necessitating the destruction of a body of water, or consuming fish by other life forms leading to a depletion of schools of fish. Destruction and creation are constantly in tension, in a "communion of multiplicity and unity" within our body.[560] Gebara defines our body as the universe, the earth, as various human groups, all of which is constantly in a process of evolution.

In Hindu thought, the cyclical nature of creation-preservation-destruction is understood throughout various sects and worldviews. Kali and Śakta thought maintains that the Divine Mother creates from her Being, not out of nothing, so she *is* the universe and not only the creator.[561] Kali is also fiercely destructive, in direct opposition to the preferred Christian theology of God as primarily creative and good that Gebara critiques. While the first chapters of Genesis are typically the focus in theology of Christian

[559] As in Noah and the flood in Genesis 6-19, Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18-19
[560] Gebara, *Longing for Running Water.* 156
[561] Sherma, "Sa Ham: I am She, Woman as Goddess" in Hiltebeitel, Alf and Kathleen Erndl eds. *Is the Goddess a Feminist?* New York: University of New York Press, 2000.

theology of creation, there are many resources that point toward the connection between creation-destruction, and the relatedness to the divine. In scripture, the story of Noah's ark and the flood before God's new covenant, the escape of Moses and his people through the parted Red Sea that then engulfs the Egyptians, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, etc. all interconnect the destruction-creation process with the divine. In the person of Jesus, God destroys temple space that is being misused, devastates an unproductive fig tree, and God's own earthly body is destroyed before being assumed. Gebara does not lift up these moments in scripture and tradition, nor does she offer concrete ways forward to incorporate the creative-destructive process into our Trinitarian theology. Thus, to enact the changes she advocates for, the Kali tradition offers a way to explore Gebara's lines of thinking further.

In the goddess's imagery, the Kali yantra contains triangles pointing downward, symbolizing destruction, where Siva's contain triangles pointing in both directions to signify creation and destruction.[562] In the Sakti-samgama Tantra, Kali dances to end the cosmos, thus creating empty space, and then she begins sexual union with Siva to end destruction, produce a fetus, and begin the creation of the worlds again.[563] In Kali there is destruction and creation, and Siva is so passive through it all that he is described as a corpse. The association of Kali with destruction, death, and cremation is an ancient one, and it connects to the use of the name Kali in early literature, like the *Mundaka Upanisad* 1.2.4 where Kali is a name given to one of the seven tongues of Agni, the fire deity of the

[562] Joshi, M.C. "Historical and iconographic aspects of Sakta Tantrism" in Harper, Katherine Anne and Robert L. Brown, eds. *The Roots of Tantra. Albany: State University of New York Press,* 2002. 53

[563] Gupta, Sanjukta. "The worship of Kali according to the Todala Tantra" in White, David Gordon ed. *Tantra in practice.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Vedas.[564] The overt connection between creation and destruction is clear with Kali, where destruction is emphasized even more at times, and this can catalyze Christian reflection around this topic, to move away from the binary and toward an understanding of the interconnectedness between creation and destruction and the divine.

Ramprasad and Ramakrishna also depicted bipolar versions of Kali, where she could be both creative and destructive. Ramprasad lamented his life in his poetry, as Kali had broken him in this life during her playful making and breaking. Later in the same poem, however, he still had hope in the goddess as she is the mother and nurse of all, carrying the three worlds in her belly. He depicted Kali both as beautiful, and comparable to the moon, stars, and jewels as well as naked with messy hair, wearing severed limbs, dripping with blood, and surrounded by dead bodies on a battlefield. Similarly, Ramakrishna depicted Kali as both creative and destructive, and called her the "Destroyer of Suffering." He described her wearing a garland of skulls, he questioned her nakedness, yet he also compared her splendor to the sun and moon. He spoke of her taking pleasure in creating, preserving, and destroying in her playfulness. When he discussed the end of times, of complete dissolution of the worlds, he said that there will be nothing. Then, after complete destruction, and when it is time, the Mother will take out seeds of new creation. Both saints included many facets of Kali in their understanding of her identity with the creative-destructive process, and both emphasized her creative properties. Clearly Kali is intimately connected to the cycle of creation-preservation-destruction, with varying degrees of emphasis on each facet, where all are inherently interrelated to each other. The obvious link between creation, preservation, and destruction is clearer in the Hindu tradition and this is where Gebara's theology is very similar. This

[564] Kinsley, *The sword and the flute*. 88

connectedness mirrors her Trinitarian understanding of the universe and the divine as interwoven with the inseparable creation-destruction, life-death process.

Gebara's brief mention of fear as part of our inability to understand the difference between evil and destruction is further elaborated by the Kali tradition, where the Tantric practitioner and the bhakti devotee experience fear of death and aspects of life, as well as fear of the fierce goddess herself. Through practice and belief, the goddess is transformed by the believer into a vehicle for liberation, and the believer can accept the fear-inducing chaos, destruction, and death of this world.[565] Kali herself never dies and she is not destroyed, she is always the one who deals death and destroys. Christians also articulate a fear of death, where it is an enemy to be destroyed in 1 Corinthians 15:26, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death."[566] In contrast to Kali, however it is Jesus who is himself destroyed through intense suffering before his death and resurrection. The marks of Jesus's crucifixion remain in the resurrection, where Kali is a figure of death who does not seem to suffer.[567] She instead bears severed heads and limbs of other beings. When Christians depict Noah's ark, it is always through the rainbow and not a sea of corpses of the human and animal life God drowned.[568] Jesus and the cursed fig tree are similarly rarely depicted.[569] By failing to continually incorporate all of the destruction and its connection to creation, the Christian tradition is limited in its understanding of the entire process of transformation, which includes destruction.

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[565] Kinsley*, The sword and the flute*. 112

[566] See also Isaiah 25:8, "He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces," Hebrews 2:14-15, "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery." And 2 Timothy 1:8-10, "…our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."

[567] John 20:24-29

[568] Genesis 9:12-17

[569] Mark 11:12-14

5.3 MALE AND FEMALE (GENDER)

Christian ecofeminist theology is grounded in the critique of a gender dualism, where male and female are understood as separate, males are hierarchically valued above females, and only females are interconnected with creation. This theological development is more systematically formed in Christianity than in Hinduism, though Rita Sherma is developing it further in Tantric Shakta traditions. Both Gebara and Sherma argue against current patriarchal norms, that cloud Christian and Hindu theology and impede the just treatment of women and the earth. Gebara specifically critiques the Christian interpretation, inherited from Greek philosophy and biology where males are normative, and the savior is male, and she instead lifts up the experiences of women and their experiences of life and death, good and evil, human and divine, etc. She does not fully flesh out into what it means for Trinitarian theology, however, and here is where the goddess Kali can provide insight. Kali complicates the gender binary, where she is fierce and terrifying and also nurturing and motherly. This multi-faceted identity is not normally allowed for women across Hinduism and Christianity. Most of the Hindu goddesses are calm, loving, kind mothers who serve their husbands as lords perfectly. Similarly, Mary and Christian saints, the minority of whom are women, are typically virgins and calm, loving, perfect obedient servants of the Lord. Feminist theologies thus question the ability for these holy women to serve as liberative figures for women in the Christian tradition and at the same time, feminist historians endeavor to correct male misrepresentations of women's history. Sherma, too, critiques the rich Hindu goddess tradition and its failure to inspire a faith that values women as much as men. For all their female figures, neither Christianity nor Hinduism has the answers for how to include

women in the full scope of humanity, so continuing this interrogation is pressing and necessary.

Gebara critiques the Christian focus on Christ's maleness, the shortcomings of the Catholic Church in dismantling patriarchal and oppressive structures, and the problems of Christianity in its insistence on a hierarchical gender binary. She does not construct a clear way out of this problem of gender dualism, however. Francis Clooney turns to Hinduism for insight into gender and the divine in *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*. His work resonates with Gebara's insistence on the necessary and interrelated nature of male and female, and divinity, where this is not emphasized enough in Christianity. He argues the Christian tradition can learn from Hinduism where the male and female aspects of divinity are understood as interrelated parts of a whole. He articulates potential for hope in the figure of Mary, to overcome the binaries and mutual exclusivity within the Christian tradition across categories like life and death, human and divine, and "perhaps even female and male ways of salvation."[570]

One of these particularly harmful binaries is the denigration of the physical body, and the association of the physical realm of experiences with women, that is inherent in patriarchal worldviews. Clooney offers the Hindu goddess hymns as examples that affirm the body, materiality, and sensorial experiences, and value them positively more than in Marian or other Christian hymns and practices.[571] In fact, Clooney critiques the Marian hymns for continuing and deepening a binary between the divine and all that is not divine. The concluding insights from reading between the Christian and Hindu hymns include increasing awareness for Christians of "the choices made in moving between a

[570] Clooney, Francis X. *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 184
[571] *Ibid*, 222.

God who transcends all matter and is not gendered and a Mary who, though not God, seems to resemble and stand in for the divine female, even as she is declared not divine."[572] Thus, he calls into question the binaries in Christian theology that starkly separate material and spiritual, female and male, human and divine. Although he does not discuss the goddess Kali, here also there are resources the Christian tradition can learn from in contemplating Mary and Kali.

In Gebara's book on Mary, she also begins with a critique of the Christian dualism with gender as it relates to human and divine. Instead, she articulates an egalitarian anthropology that is not male-centered, but instead human-centered. She argues that God becoming human and being birthed by a woman directly contradicts any male-centeredness or dualism. The Word becoming flesh through man and woman indicates a theologically significant identification of God within humankind. Gebara notes the Magnificat and its liberative and dynamic upheaval of human societal norms. By casting down the powerful from seats of honor while raising up those who are lowly, the hungry being filled and the rich being empty, the Lord explicitly reverses continued dualisms in a display of strength. Mary proclaims these words while pregnant with Jesus and visiting Elizabeth as she is pregnant with John, two mothers intimately joined with their prophetic sons. Powerfully, through male and female, vulnerable humanity and ineffable divinity, the Trinitarian God can be experienced, known, and worshipped by all Christians. Gebara points to Isaiah 42:14, 49:15, and 66:13, where God experiences labor pains, nurses a baby, and comforts a child to illustrate God's face made present in every woman of the world. Mary's identity as Mother of God similarly means acknowledging and recognizing every woman's capacity to bear the divine. Gebara does not continue the

[572] Clooney, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary*. 230.

idea of Mary as a resource throughout her works, or elaborate on ideas raised in her book, but I argue that in dialogue with the Kali tradition, Mary can be a more helpful figure for ecofeminist theology in her embodied interrelatedness of humanity and divinity, life and death, male and female.

In the Bhakti tradition, Ramakrishna and Ramprasad in particular did identify all women as the Mother. While the Bhakti tradition does not overtly critique patriarchal systems, there is an implied challenge to the gender hierarchy where women can be, and are worshipped as manifestations of Kali, as divinely favored, or as superior to the men. While Mary is not the divine Mother in the same way, reflection on the practice of worshipping women as intimately related to the divine offers Christianity an example of acknowledging the intimacy women share in their embodiment with the divine. Ramakrishna did also acknowledge the reality of women as humans, and discussed often the temptation of lust and a need to avoid seeking sexual relationships with women to stay focused on Kali. At the same time, he was able to understand the presence of the divine in all women. Christianity can learn from this where women radically do not need an intermediary to access the divine. All humans are created in the image and likeness of God, and the entirety of human flesh is connected with the flesh of Jesus Christ. Then, in the figure of Mary, the capacity of women to bear divinity in their very being is made visible through her strength and openness. Too often Mary is disassociated from the human experience through her virginity and assumption, but this does not need to be the case.[573]

[573] See Johnson, Elizabeth A. *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*. New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc. 2003

Gebara re-reads Mary's virginal motherhood as one of possibility, where anything is possible in her seemingly impossible pregnant virginity. Mary is open, available in her virginity, and reminds all humans of our own vast vocational abilities. Her perpetual virginity denotes the perpetual possibility of Mary as a location and temple for the Spirit. Her virginity and immaculate conception also validate this world and creation as connected with the Kingdom of God, where the body and soul, including the female body, are able to experience relationality with the Spirit. Mary's assumption then interconnects anthropology and eschatology, which can "rescue" the female body from the Christian tradition's "humiliation" of it.[574] The human female body thus shares with the human male body in the Trinitarian mystery that is the ground of all creation. The immanence of the goddess Kali in Bhakti is a catalyst for Christians to interrogate the embodied quality of Mary's relatedness with the divine in the incarnation of Jesus and her bodily assumption. In theology of deep incarnation, the significance of Mary and her materiality as necessarily interrelated with that of Christ is lacking. Kali's presence, in Ramakrishna's understanding as the Indwelling Spirit in all humans and aspects of creation, highlights this gap in Christian theology. Christians can thus look to the goddess Kali, who herself is the ground and process of all materiality, to envision an incarnational view of the world that is inherently male-female.

Gebara's point about a biocentric understanding of salvation, and abandoning an anthropocentric understanding of salvation entirely, is mentioned in *Longing* and then is not entirely developed in the rest of her work. In overcoming the male/female polarity, while emphasizing the relatedness of genders as primary, Gebara seems to be pointing toward a transcendence of human gender in relation to salvation, where neither gender

[574] Gebara, *Mary Mother of God Mother of the Poor*. 199

nor humanness is primary. Instead, life is. This point needs more development to be clear. Through emphasis on the incarnation, where the relatedness of Jesus and Mary to all flesh and materiality is primary, the world in its ecological entirety can indeed be included in the message of salvation. Male and female are thus necessary parts of the Trinitarian fullness of life, death, and resurrection. In contrast, Ramakrishna only discussed male and female humans briefly, and did not give much attention to anthropological or eschatological differences between the two. He was a poet and not a systematician, and focused on the presence of the Mother in all animate and inanimate life, the relationality between Kali and Siva, Rama and Sita, Krishna and his maids, in a potential demonstration of the inherent relatedness of genders.

As a young boy, Ramakrishna spent much more time with his mother after his father's death, and in the company of her women friends. He also would dress like a woman and regard himself as a woman, as part of his worship life. While he did marry, he did not live as a married man and instead worshipped his wife as the Mother, while she remained close to him and his disciples in devotion to Kali and Ramakrishna. He saw that women made Kali manifest in their beings more than men, and only women were worshipped as manifestations of the goddess. Though he often cautioned people against "woman and gold," he did so to advocate for a complete avoidance of sexual activity in order to maintain focus on the divine. His closest disciples were men, where they all worshipped Sarada Devi, Ramakrishna's wife, as the Mother. He did thus treat men and women differently in this way, though he did not articulate an uneven relationship between genders and divine grace or liberation. His experiences of revelation did transform and enable him to see Kali in all life, animate and inanimate, male and female,

without distinction. Her grace and mercy are available to all, and he understood it to be a mystery who achieved unity with Kali, and one not based in gender.[575]

Ramakrishna saw male and female as inherently related, and incorporated in divinity, where females were understood to be particular embodiments of Kali. He welcomed female devotees of Kali, even when his disciples resorted to physical violence to keep women away from him. Ramakrishna was attentive to the needs of his disciples' wives, as in the example of the grieving mother who was invited to stay on the temple grounds and spend time with Ramakrishna. He also spent time learning tantrism from Bhairavi Brahmani, and being healed from afflictions be her, again against the desires of his disciples. Ramakrishna both recognized the religious and spiritual authority of women, and also the ability of women to be in a loving relationship with Kali. Recognizing the female identity of the divine Kali as inherently related to the male Siva, where god dwells within all humans and in fact all life and creation, Ramakrishna demonstrated how faith in a particular female divinity does not lead to a devaluation of maleness. The relationality and union of both Kali and Siva is at the core of his implicit theology, where Siva's divinity is affirmed, even though Kali is the primary deity.[576] Ramakrishna's life and example thus pushes Christian theology to more deeply contemplate the interconnectedness of male and female, and transcendence of the gender duality.

[575] Deities within the bhakti tradition offer grace for all; this is not limited to the Kali tradition.
[576] It is common throughout Hindu theologies to understand the union between god and goddess to be essential, not only in the Kali tradition.

5.4 BODY AND SPIRIT

Ecofeminism calls attention to how the earth and women are connected, and women are associated with physicality more than men, who are linked to the intellectual and spiritual realms through problematic dualisms. Patriarchal normativity values the intellectual and spiritual over the physical, and draws strict boundaries between the spheres. Gebara, Sherma, and others are working to recover a more holistic understanding of the body-spirit relationship, that does not value one over the other. Gebara's emphasis on the *body* as precisely where ecological salvation can be addressed is inspired by McFague's theology, where the Universe is God's body. Gebara thus emphasizes the earth as both subject and object of salvation, where in abandoning an anthropocentric Christianity we can understand salvation to be biocentric.[577] Holistic ecofeminism advocates for seeing creation, including humanity, as part of God's body, and addressing theological concerns from this starting point. According to Gebara, it is not a static body, but one that is constantly in the midst of the creative-destructive process found in the Trinity. This biocentrism needs further explanation, however, as Gebara only mentions this idea and does not fully elaborate throughout her work.

Tantrism is one sect of Hinduism that has been comparatively engaged with Christianity and the body, as the world and the body are in essence understood to be divine. Everything, good and bad, is part of the sport or play of divinity. Kali is the ground of all, and thus she resolves all tensions and polarities as the underlying unity. Through Tantric discipline in the physical and subtle human body, the hero can affirm this unity of materiality, that is grounded in Kali. However, Dupuche points out the

[577] Gebara, *Longing.* 183

unresolved tension where Tantrism maintains transcendence of the body and world as integral to liberation, where in Christianity it is the body and world that participate in resurrection. Comparison with Tantrism does allow for a recovery of Christian emphasis on the body, however, and an emphasis on embodied rituals on the path to liberation. Tantrism is also able to include the sexuality of the practitioner, instead of avoid or exclude this facet of human bodies altogether, as too often is the case in the Christian tradition. Gebara advocates for a shift here, where sexuality can be foundational in theological discourse. It is precisely through mudras, mantras, mapping, etc. that the Tantric practitioner can transcend the world and the body. Unlike Hindu traditions based more in wisdom and knowledge, the embodied nature of Tantrism can rehydrate Christian practices that emphasize embodied affirmation and transformation of what is typically degraded as part of the path to liberation: the bodies of women and the earth itself.

This affirmation and transformation in Tantrism is related to *lo cotidiano* and its connectedness to eschatology.[578] Gebara believes it is necessary to be able to identify and then proclaim signs of life, the resurrection, in daily life. This includes the resurrection of the body where women are empowered to advocate for themselves and others in the face of oppression and expectations of submissiveness. Resurrecting woman's body is thus a communal activity that springs forth into all areas of life as we know it, and makes real the divine in human flesh.[579] Suffering, death, and resurrection occur in the body, and especially in the body of women where Mary is the only human body that is not also fully divine to be assumed with Jesus. As the Christian tradition does not always emphasize

[578] Isasi-Díaz, Ada María. "Lo Cotidiano: A Key Element of Mujerista Theology," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology*, 10:1 (August 2002) 5-17.
[579] Gebara, *Levántate y anda*. 17

the relatedness of women's bodies and the resurrection, Gebara recovers the daily transformative resurrections to demonstrate the interconnected nature of death and life. Here again, however, she does not pursue this line of thought to its fullness. She recovers and affirms the experiences of women and their full participation in the resurrection and eschatology, however she does not fully address the biocentric salvation that is mentioned.

In turning to Bhakti, Ramakrishna and his Tantric roots are visible in his emphasis on Kali as the Indwelling Spirit of all life and creation. Ramakrishna discussed his own transformation of at first looking inward for the divine and worshipping with his eyes closed before beginning to understand that with his eyes open and looking outward he could see the Mother in all people, life, and the world. Kali has a playful, sportive relationship with the world where she delights in playing with her creation and the beings residing there. She births the three worlds from herself, and then delights in engaging with creation. Ramakrishna emphasized her presence in creation as the Indwelling Spirit of all life, not only humans, which demonstrates the possibility of a biocentric understanding of divine immanence. Kali is the ground and process of the creation, and also dissolution, of materiality and the universe. The explicit question of the universe and its inclusion in liberation was not addressed in Ramprasad's or Ramakrishna's life, as they were not attempting an ecofeminism theology like that of Gebara's work. What is clear, however, is that through Ramakrishna's Tantric theology he understood there to be no stark separation between Kali and all life forms, creation, and materiality. Kali is intimately related to all, and is present within all aspects of life and the world.

In recognizing Kali as the indwelling Spirit of all people, earth, animals, water, trees, etc. Ramakrishna articulated a panentheism where there is also a universal salvation. The universe is entirely imbued with the spirit of the goddess, and all life will be liberated, in one birth or another in the cycle of samsara, and attain final unity with the divine.[580] For Ramakrishna, Kali was both the indwelling Spirit and also Brahman, the impersonal divine reality that is not connected to creation. She is immediately immanent, and also abstract transcendence. Similarly, Gebara articulates a new understanding of transcendence that is inside the human heart, the planet, and all life forms. Gebara challenges traditional Christian understanding of God's transcendence, and does not separate God from materiality and creation. Here again there is the need for further elaboration, where the question of God's presence within all remains. Ramakrishna is clear, for example, that Kali is present in evil people and all creation-destruction and life-death processes. Gebara is stretching Christian understanding of good and evil, and she includes the vital creation-destruction, life-death process in the Trinity. She also discusses the interrelated nature of good and evil, and does not explicitly state how this reconciles with a theology where God is good. She points to the inefficiency of current Trinitarian theology to solve issues of justice, patriarchy, misogyny, etc. and seeks to contribute to a more interrelated way of seeing the world. Ramakrishna, on the other hand, clearly implicates the divine in all, including what is for Christians the opposite of good. He literally sees "God in all things," where Christians do not see God in evil.

[580] Swami Medhananda. "Continuing the Philosophical Conversation on Sri Ramakrishna: A Response" *International Journal of Hindu Studies, 25.* 2021. 162

Gebara advocates for seeing the Trinitarian God in the destruction-creation process, though not in effective evil.[581]

Ramakrishna recognized the divine as embodied in women, ignored the caste system and its discrimination, articulated and demonstrated the importance of being generous, and worked to alleviate the suffering of those who were tormented by hunger. His embodied practices show how his faith in Kali and resulting theology formed his ethics, how he lived his life, and encouraged others to do the same. Swami Vivekananda's work in establishing the Ramakrishna Mission, founded in Ramakrishna's ideals and example, believes in worldly service as service to God. Thus, the panentheism of Ramakrishna's theology implicitly leads to an interconnected and intimate understanding of the world and God. While the social justice tradition is explicitly Christian in its development, here the Kali tradition is a catalyst to deepen our understanding of the relatedness of God and human and all materiality. The concept of a bodily resurrection, essential to Christianity, is not part of the Tantric or Bhakti traditions of Kali. This distinction, where Mary and Jesus are bodily assumed and Christians articulate a resurrection of the world to come, sharply and explicitly indicates a foundation for the interconnectedness of body and spirit in the Christian tradition.[582]

[581] See chapter 1 for a thorough analysis.

[582] See Cristiano Guilherme Borro Barbosa's STD Dissertation titled "Speaking Rightly about Christian hope and the Resurrection of the Body: Popular Religiosity, the Evolution of Church Teachings on the Soul and the Limits of Eschatological Assertions," submitted to the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry in 2019. He interrogates the potential ambiguity in the doctrines of body-soul unity and problematic interpretations of Scriptures and liturgical prayers, particularly around death. He argues that thoughtful and informed ministries around death will enable believers to better understand and hold as central the Christian hope in the resurrection of Jesus and of the body. Barbosa underscores the necessity of metaphorical language and theological imagination when discussing eschatology, to avoid unhelpful dualisms. Spiritual and material unity of the whole human person, as well as everything associated with embodied reality within this life, is rooted in Jesus's death and resurrection.

Ramakrishna's experience of ecstatic unity with Kali caused him to fall into a trance state, unable to tend to his body. Those around him tended to him, keeping the bugs and rats from biting him as he could not do so for himself. He also, toward the end of his life after his cancer diagnosis, articulated the separate reality of body and Self, just as a sword and sheath are two separate things. While Kali is the ground of all materiality, and the indwelling Spirit, there is an ambiguity of the relationship with the body and the divine in liberation. In comparison with Christianity, it is a stark contrast where the body and the world are explicitly linked to the resurrection, though the terms of their inclusion are an unresolved topic of theological discourse. Ramakrishna lived a life that valued the embodied reality of others, and it was through his embodied practices that he was able to have a relationship with Kali and his disciples. However, he also would engage Kali in a state where he seemingly ignored his body, and spoke of the separateness of the body and self. Gebara's emphasis on embodied experiences of the divine, through daily sufferings and joys that are linked to the crucifixion and resurrection, also highlights the body as a place for divine encounter and presence. I argue that in order to reclaim a holistic and related anthropology and then a biocentric understanding of salvation, sexuality is one category of embodiment that needs to be further addressed. Through Kali we see the potential for sexuality to be included, even where the divine can express sexuality, though Gebara would not want to leave the body and materiality out of the concept of ultimate liberation. For Gebara's essential category of humanity to be relatedness, including in the embodied sense, and in her critique of the maltreatment of women, addressing sexuality is necessary.

Gebara critiques the Catholic Church and its inability to incorporate the fulness of sexuality, especially that of women. From Adam and Eve, where women are interpreted to be temptresses and sexually beguiling (even though Trible points out that linguistically this does not appear in Genesis), to Mary who is ever-virgin, and then female saints whose virginity is emphasized more than that of males, the Catholic tradition most often makes invisible the sexual nature of women.[583] Gebara critiques this interpretation of Catholic theology, and wants to reclaim women's full scope of embodiment, including sexuality, though to what end she does not fully articulate. Kali's sexuality is obvious in a way that Christians do not experience, where she is even depicted astride Siva in sexual union. In contrast Eve, Mary, and Christian saints are rarely depicted in a sexual state unless it is of Eve as seductive temptress. Teresa of Avila is one example where she is shown in ecstasy while experiencing divine revelation through a mystical encounter with Christ, though she is fully clothed where Kali is typically naked even when she is not sexually engaged. In the Tantric tradition, sexuality is part of scripture and ritual life, though it is certainly not central. Ramprasad and Ramakrishna do not advocate for sex to be included theologically in Bhakti, and they even chastise Kali for being scandalously naked and astride Siva.

In Gebara's co-authored book on Mary, she re-reads virginity as Mary's virginal relation to injustice and unethical practices.[584] Thus the nature of re-reading Gebara also expands the meaning of perpetual virginity to be the constant possibility of Mary's body as dwelling place for the divine. In the Tantric Kali tradition, for example, we see an

[583] Trible, Phyllis. "Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 reread" Elizabeth Carroll series: *Women's Ordination Conference* 1983.
[584] Gebara, Ivone, and Maria Bingemer. *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989.

incorporation of sexuality where it is not intended to be the focus (and indeed it is typically the outsider who emphasizes this aspect of Tantric, particularly the Western outsider). The sexual nature of the body is related to the creation-destruction process of divinity in Tantrism, and in dialogue with Gebara's thought the Christian reclamation of sexuality can understand the possibility of pursuing sexuality's inclusion in a holistic understanding of the body, and in particular the female body, where it does not become central or distort theological truths.

5.5 SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT AND SPIRITUAL REALIZATION

Ivone Gebara's theology developed within the Latin American liberation theology tradition of Catholic systematic theology after the Second Vatican Council. At its core, liberation theology inextricably links Catholic faith and identity with the pursuit of social justice and liberation for the oppressed. Thus, Gebara's academic engagement with theology is in the hopes of inspiring others across traditions to work toward the liberation of all through their spirituality. Pope Francis makes a similar move in *Laudato Si'* when he calls for 'ecological conversion,' and seeing the face of God in a dewdrop and the face of a poor person. The Catholic tradition systematically links morality and justice with practicing a faith that does justice, and the ecofeminist tradition focuses on the plight of women and the poor (though Gebara also advocates for including other vulnerable and excluded voices, like children for example). When the vulnerable and oppressed are liberated, all are able to fully flourish.

The Kali tradition does not emphasize social justice and the moral implications of participating in liberation of the oppressed. Kali herself is a figure who accentuates the interconnectedness of divinity and those on the margins of society, and Tantric texts even instruct for her temple to be built near the low caste outskirts of town, preferably near the polluting cremation grounds. So, while there is no explicit understanding of social justice, she is a deity who is close to those who society deems less valuable and less human than others. Thus, she offers an implicit challenge to social norms of exclusion and bias, and encourages her devotees to understand that all people are her children, without ever articulating an exclusion based on caste, gender, socioeconomic status, etc. Ramakrishna and Ramprasad articulated the challenges of the Mother's destructive capabilities and her gruesome or sexually explicit nature, but they did not understand her to be conditionally available to some of her children. Kali's presence and grace are all-pervading.

Also pervasive in the Kali tradition is death, and its inevitability for all as well as the possibility of transformation through death. Kali embodies death and destruction as well as creation, and thus she connects life and death on the path to transcendence of the life-death process. Although Gebara's emphasis on the interconnectedness of life and death does not include transcendence of the life cycle, Kali offers Christian theology a reaffirmation of the connected nature of death and life and the necessary and transformative nature of this realization. Ramakrishna's cancer diagnosis meant that he was faced with his own mortality and the finite nature of this body and life, and yet he did not forsake the world to focus only on Kali. His spirituality and intimacy with the Mother were interconnected with his relationships with disciples and with those around him, as he saw all others and creation as manifestations of the goddess. Faced with his

own death, and a deity who embodies death, Ramakrishna made himself available and present to the lives of others. Ramakrishna's example can inspire Christian theology to re-emphasize the interconnection of life and death and the potential for this reaffirmation to include a lived dimension of liberative social engagement.

While we do not have access to much about Ramprasad's life and how he treated others, we do know that Ramakrishna lived a life that at times was implicitly concerned with justice, and that his life inspired the Ramakrishna Mission, which is a socially active spirituality based in his inspiration of Swami Vivekananda's ideology. Ramakrishna did not understand caste to be important or relevant in his relationship with Kali, and he went out of his way to physically demonstrate this as he also encouraged others to engage in practices of care and concern for the vulnerable. His implied theology was grounded in an understanding that the Mother is available to all since all are her children, and his devotion had a bhakti foundation where ultimately all actions in life are to be undertaken in perfect devotion to Kali. When he was dying of cancer, he never limited his disciples and other Kali devotees in their access to him, and pushed himself to his own physical limits in the hopes that the Mother as present to him could be accessed more easily by others. Thus, his actions and life demonstrated the interrelatedness between his spirituality, theology, and social engagement.

Gebara's ecofeminist theology of liberation contrasts with the Kali tradition, which does not explicitly critique or deconstruct problematic structural issues in society. In comparing the two traditions, the necessity of Catholic liberation theology is reaffirmed and ecofeminism emerges as a locus for further theological engagement in the continual pursuit of justice. In working toward a comparative ecofeminist framework,

Ramakrishna's life and example is a compelling resource to inspire a Hindu liberation theology. The image of Kali herself as liberator has already been employed in various situations. Indians in the quest for freedom from British rule used Kali as their icon, and she continues to be part of feminist imagery in modern movements. Kali's name is also invoked in publications devoted to spreading the truth about various communities, including women and lower castes that are often rendered invisible or oppressed through media. The wild, destructive parts of Kali's identity represent struggles for freedom and independence, as her murderous tendencies are always understood to be in the service of ultimate cosmic harmony. The Kali tradition is well aware that destruction is often part of the path to harmonious creation. Thus, the Kali tradition finds similarity in early liberation theology with its emphasis on destruction and even in some cases violence, in order to liberate the most oppressed.

There are icons of Jesus cradling an unhoused person, destroying a firearm in the aftermath of yet another American mass shooting, and of Mary holding George Floyd as he called out for his mother while being choked to death by a police officer. Jesus is often depicted as black, as a Dalit, and Julian of Norwich called him 'Mother.' Jesus himself is destroyed by systemic political systems of violence, identifying him with all oppressed communities. Kali, while she is not described as violently murdered, is similarly identified with those who are impure and her temples are in cremation grounds. In the Christian tradition, God mass murders the Egyptians while liberating Moses and the Israelites, levels the whole of creation because of humanity's mistreatment of each other and the world, and destroys cities and their inhabitants because of their wickedness. Jesus knew of his impending suffering and death and did not avoid it, and God caused suffering

and death, all as part of the greater cosmic arc of salvation. Kali highlights this relationship between death and destruction and the transformative liberation that is possible through the chaos. Neither tradition indicates death and suffering as a necessary prerequisite to liberation or salvation, however, they both demonstrate that liberation and salvation are often results of death, suffering, and chaos. This helpful and necessary emphasis allows for more hope in the dark times of oppression, climate crisis, wars, and the devastation of our world.

While Jesus does not end all suffering and unjust death, God is located in violent, unjust murder in a particular way through the crucifixion. Jesus does not end the unrelenting cycle of justice and injustice, not even for himself. Instead, Jesus dies with other convicted criminals where we do not know the circumstances of their own thorough and fair trail, or lack thereof. The Christian tradition thus emphasizes the presence of God, even up to and including heinous acts of effective or moral evil. The stark truth of God's presence on the cross at the hands of human choice reveal the constant human temptation to act against social liberation, and the Christian message that God is there, too, embodying hope even and especially in the face of murder. Both the Kali tradition and Christianity profess theologies where the divine is imbued in all, however the uniqueness of Jesus is in his own experience of unjust torture and death, and his resurrection three days later. Belief in this Easter message thus entails confronting the cycles of unjust death, and identifying suffering bodies who are at once also potential sites of resurrection. The Christian God is particularly and explicitly present to deaths that fall outside of the Trinitarian life-death process, in a way that is not addressed in the Kali tradition. This reaffirms the central Christian attentiveness to deaths that are not of

the divine, but are specifically sites of divine presence where there is always hope for resurrection in this life and in the life that is to come, even and especially when the death in question is effective evil and not divine. The mystery of belief in the resurrection is the powerful and active hope for renewed life and a glorified body when it does not seem at all humanly possible.

Gebara's theology pursues a theological re-centering of death in the Trinity, and further contemplation of death as present throughout the Christian tradition, which allows more attentiveness to the discrepancies between just and unjust death.[585] She does not provide clear details on this process, however. Looking to the Kali tradition reminds Christian ecofeminism of the obvious interconnectedness of life and death, where contemplation of death is part of divine contemplation and, ultimately, the path to freedom. In the Kali tradition, there is no explicit demand for engaging in pursuits of justice, though, which is highlighted in comparison with Gebara's theology. Ramakrishna's life could provide a foundation here, for interrogation and articulation of a theology of ethics and justice. Questions of social engagement toward liberation are central to Christianity in a way that is not (yet) emphasized in the Kali tradition.

5.6 LIFE AND DEATH

The Christian tradition professes belief in the afterlife of the immortal soul, and also the resurrection of the body. Ecotheologians like Elizabeth Johnson are working to

[585] Gebara, Ivone. "A Feminist Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Perspective with a View toward the Future" in Segovia, Fernando F. *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003.

determine the openness of this doctrine and possibilities for the inclusion of non-human flesh.[586] The ultimate understanding of the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come is that it is a mystery. Jesus did experience resurrection, though it was not his earthly life and body but a glorious, spiritual one, as death transformed him. In baptism and through the eucharist, Christians participate in this resurrection, where they both participate already in some way, in addition to the fullness of the Kingdom of God. As our bodies are already part of Christ, Catholics in particular understand that we should pursue good works, especially for the poor, in enacting our unity with Christ. In death, where the soul and body are separated, this too is unification with Christ in his own suffering and death. It is part of the path to participation in the resurrection. In remembering our death, the Christian tradition does have a history of contemplating our final moments in order to understand the vulnerability of life and remind us of our finitude, so as to shape our actions and lives. While the Church interprets death as a consequence for sin, Gebara is emphasizing the natural life and death process where there was no original sin or fall from immortality and grace.[587] The possibility for good and evil, life and death, is part of the ontological reality of humanity. Thus, in Gebara's thinking death is not an enemy to be fought or conquered, as it is in traditional Catholic theology.

The suffering and death of Jesus, which he foretold and accepted, was not free of anguish or lament. His participation in pain, suffering, crying out for his Father, and death, is understood to transform death itself. It is through Christ that death, as dying with

[586] See chapter 1 for this discourse and further references.
[587] The Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1011, says that in death, God calls us to Him. In #1010, is because of Christ that death has a positive meaning. In #1008 and #1018, the Church outlines death as a consequence of sin.

Christ, is a positively valued transformation that is completed through the Holy Trinity. Dying with Christ means that we live with him, too. When we were baptized, we sacramentally died with Christ in order to live a new life and through bodily death we are incorporated into redemption. Death is the process by which one enters into life with God in an ultimate way. There is no option for reincarnation, no wheel of samsara, however, as it is one singular earthly life and death that leads to eternal life with God. The litany of saints, the Hail Mary, the Ignatian examen, Memento Mori, and other prayers and rituals all include contemplation of the hour of our death. The Kali tradition allows for a recovery of these Catholic exercises and how we center death in them, in order to more fully understand the fullness of the Trinitarian life-death process.

The question of the 'new earth' receives more attention from the field of ecotheology than in traditional Christian theology and doctrine. The focus historically has been on the meaning of salvation and resurrection for the individual human soul. Ecofeminism challenges this understanding, and Gebara contemplates the question of resurrection for women and other oppressed communities of people, expanding beyond an anthropocentric vision to include the whole of our ecological reality. The communal visions of heaven offer fertile ground for ecological imagination, where heaven is a wedding feast, a new Jerusalem, a new heaven and a new earth, the Kingdom. The beatific vision makes direct experience of God possible without mediation. We will be united with God, though also retain our individuality. Before this unification, however, purification is necessary so that one can be made holy and only then can enter heaven. In purgatory, the Church suggests that a cleansing fire is one way to contemplate the

purificatory nature of this initial step in the post-mortem transformation.[588] Without repentance and acceptance of God's love, we exclude ourselves from the communion of heaven and instead live eternally in hell, separate from God. The ultimate hope of a new heaven and a new earth, that will come at the end of time, is based upon an understanding of separation between polarities of life and death, creation and decay, peace and grief, selfishness and communion, etc. The world, creation, is longing for redemption along with us, for the final process of transformation. All of humanity will be redeemed, and the cosmos will also share in this destiny, united in the risen Christ. This hope of the resurrection of creation and a better ordered human society is thus interconnected, and will be fully revealed in the final transformation.[589]

Visualizing Kali and her womb that bears and births the three worlds, her full breasts that nourish life, even as she wears severed limbs and blood trickles from her mouth is certainly distinct from Christian images of the Trinity in many ways. What Kali reminds us of here, in her many rich depictions over the centuries, is the creative-destructive process of life and death that she embodies and enacts. Christians can be attentive to this as well when they visualize Jesus, who is creatively born of the Father to Mary, a human mother, and then is destroyed by humans and Jesus's own blood is spilled. His body that is birthed, beaten, and killed is assumed into unity with God in heaven and the Spirit emanates. While Jesus, in his death, and Mary, in giving birth, shed their own blood to nourish creation, Kali accepts blood offerings to nourish herself as the ground and process of all. Kali makes visible the chaos and disorder that is prevalent in our world, as does Jesus in the death he endures, that Mary tragically witnesses. Kali does

[588] *Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1030*
[589] Revelation 21:1-4, 22:1-5, 2 Corinthians 5:1-8, Isaiah 65:17-25

not, however, offer herself to be destroyed and killed in the way Jesus does. Contemplating Kali thus aids a recovery of the particular kind of death that is part of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, and what it means for the world.

Kali, though she is understood to be protecting cosmic order in her destructive actions, at times becomes frenzied by killing on the battlefield and is seemingly out of control. She is also associated with criminals which furthers her potentially dangerous identity. Kali also takes life and feeds on blood, though she takes life from demons or others who threaten cosmic harmony and she requires blood sacrifices to nourish herself as she is the ground and process of all creation-destruction, life-death dynamics. She makes palpable the reality that death and life are inextricably linked and that all things disintegrate. If the devotee can accept their fear and anxiety about death and decay, it can be transformed into wisdom that has the power to liberate through the goddess. Kali makes present and real the chaotic nature of life and dharma, where life and death, dharma and adharma or chaos, are all interconnected. In the Kali tradition, realization, acceptance, and transformation through death is part of the journey to liberation from samsara. Comparatively, Jesus accepts his own death, and is crucified as a criminal and with other criminals. In stark contrast to Kali, Jesus thus partakes in the ultimate suffering and unjust death of humanity. Then, the resurrection of the crucified body of Christ makes visible and palpable the interconnectedness of the polarities of life and death and the body, where they are not transcended altogether as in the Kali tradition. Jesus participates in life, death, and the afterlife in an embodied way and demonstrates the

possibility of life to continue after death in a transformational way, where body and wounds are included in the glorified body instead of left behind entirely.[590]

Gebara's Trinitarian theology is one that includes the natural destruction-creation process and the natural death-life dynamic in the Trinity, instead of the tendency to relegate destruction and death as separate from life, creation, and the divine. The Trinitarian God does not transcend death and life, but is intimately participating in birth, life, suffering, death, and the afterlife. Our cosmos, earth, and all of humanity, also share in this trinitarian structure. She thus provides a new focus to complement deep incarnation and deep resurrection theologies, where it is precisely in the dynamic process of life and death that the Trinity relates to this world and the next. Gebara highlights the interconnected nature of life-death, creation-destruction, and their location in the Trinity, where unjust deaths or murders are distinct from these Trinitarian processes. Kali does not participate in the life-death-afterlife cycle as Jesus does, but instead she transcends it altogether and frees her devotees to do the same, through her grace. Death becomes the vehicle or way to reach liberation and unity with the goddess. In a way, both traditions present acceptance of death as part of the path to liberation. In Gebara's thought, death is part of life, afterlife, and Trinity and for in the Kali tradition (and indeed across Hinduism) death is part of the journey of transformation and liberation. Where Kali is encouraging a transcendence of life and death altogether, Gebara emphasizes a grounding in life and death, where we can experience the fullness of the Trinitarian life-death process in this life and in the next without a strict separation between the two.

Jesus raises people from the dead, enters into the life-death-afterlife process in an embodied way, is born to a human woman, lives a life of ministry and healing, dies an

[590] John 20: 24-29

unjust and public death in Roman capital punishment, is buried in a tomb by his followers and mother, and his body-wounds included-is glorified and resurrected three days later. Kali is a divinity who also raises people from the dead, though she herself does not enter the world of life-death-afterlife, and instead transcends it altogether. Where the incarnation focuses our attention on the interconnected nature of life-death-afterlife, Kali focuses attention on the transcendence of samsara, and in the release and unity of liberation. This comparison intensifies Gebara's emphasis on the daily experience of life, death, and resurrection where we laugh in joy and cry in sorrow on a daily basis. Our lives are not separate from our deaths and afterlife, and neither is the divine. In Christianity, the presence of God in suffering, death, and injustice is consistently emphasized throughout liberation theologies.

The distinct nature of Christian theology can be seen in a new light in the presence of Kali, where Jesus's life, suffering, death, and resurrection do point to the presence of the life-death cycle in the Trinity. Christians are called to live and die with Christ, where Kali devotees are called to live with devotion to the goddess and die with focus on her, to transcend the cycle of samsara. In their interconnection of death and life, Kali and Jesus are both "antimodels," to use Kinsley's term. Jesus challenges the horrible and unjust systems of death that we maintain throughout societies, and Kali subverts gender and divinity norms. They each establish flipped expectations and norms, where Jesus is a king and a slave, treats men and women equally, prioritizes the needs of outcasts, and Kali as Mother and death is not always the ideal woman or spouse, displays her sexuality openly, and is present in polluting spaces among people who are polluting. Ramakrishna's life highlights aspects of social justice and liberation values in his

constant availability for his devotees, even the women who his disciples do not welcome, and his desire to feed the hungry. Although this is not worked out like in Christian liberation theology, Kali as an antimodel and Ramakrishna's example are potential starting points to an ecofeminist theology.

At one point, Ramakrishna was ashamed to talk to Kali about his throat cancer. He tells devotees that he cannot cure himself, and that wondering about the afterlife is not relevant, as we are in this life as humans 'only to attain divine love.'[591] Ramakrishna also understood the reality of embodied life to necessarily include suffering. Everything will be destroyed, and Kali will be the one involved both in the destruction as well as providing her seeds for new creation. Resurrection and rebirth in the work of Gebara are directly linked to social justice and embodying the values Jesus taught us, including solidarity with the poor and working toward liberation for all the oppressed lives in creation. Rebirth in Gebara's theology is not the same as the concrete rebirth in a different life form of this world, as in the cycle of samsara, but she does accentuate the possibility of resurrection in this lifetime.

Gebara's theology is grounded in her own proximity to death, residing and working in an urban slum in the northeast of Brazil. Her latest book addresses her own proximity to the end of her life, as she is now in her seventies and inhabiting old age. Gebara's witness of multiple deaths and resurrections over the years allows her to be attentive to the interconnected dynamic of life and death in a particular way. She criticizes the academic world for maintaining a gap between those who are oppressed and dehumanized and the academy, and would like to see this gap close. Gebara points out the discomfort of Western societies in seeing and being present to the elderly or anyone

[591] See section on Ramakrishna in chapter 4 for detail.

that is close to death or reminds us of death. Aging and death are not always popularly embraced aspects of life. By shifting our understanding of life and death to an interconnected one, Gebara posits that we will be able to open ourselves up to those who are elderly and otherwise seen as close to death, and thus transformation of our own lives and the life of society.

As examples of presence and witness to death, in Jesus's own crucifixion and death there are three women who remain present to his final moments of life, and visit his tomb after he is dead. Mary his mother, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene are the women who stay at the Friday crucifixion.[592] On Saturday, Mary Magdalene is the one who goes to Jesus's tomb, where she believes his corpse is, and while the male disciples are in a locked room. She is thus the first to discover that the tomb is empty, and there is no corpse, then tells the male disciples the news of the resurrection. In the biblical portrayal of the women named Mary, it is clear that women are inextricably linked to the birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection of the divine. These women are responsible for the incarnation of Jesus as well as the news of the resurrection, in a mirroring of the truths of life and death that Gebara points out, that in the lives of women are moments of daily resurrection. In a truth that is not always highlighted in Christian practice and faith, without women the Christian message would not exist. While the tantric corpse, blood, and skull ritual practices shocked and scandalized many outsiders, here we see the corpse of Jesus as necessary to liberation for Christians and we remember the scandalized outsiders of the Catholic eucharist. In comparison with veneration of the crucifixion and practices like Eucharistic adoration, the Kali tradition heightens our sensitivities to the

[592] See the following verses to begin with the women witnessing Jesus's death before going home to prepare spices for Jesus's body: John 19:25-27, Matthew 27:55-56, Mark 15:21-41, and Luke 23:49.

reality of Jesus's corpse, and encourages us to be present to death as it is embodied by others in this world.

CONCLUSION

"Stretch out your hand to the poor, so that your blessing may be complete.
Give graciously to all the living; do not withhold kindness even from the dead.
Do not avoid those who weep, but mourn with those who mourn.
Do not hesitate to visit the sick, because for such deeds you will be loved.
In all you do, remember the end of your life, and then you will never sin."[593]

The interrelatedness of good and evil, life and death, creation and destruction are central to Gebara's understanding of God in the Christian tradition. She challenges the idea of a world of perfect divinity that is separate from a disordered material world, and instead highlights the possibility of evil that is always part of good, where death and destruction create life and life can-and often does- create death and destruction. She argues that the dogmatic emphasis of the goodness and perfection of God, Jesus, and Mary, are not sufficient to give us hope or solutions in today's challenges. While her treatment of good and evil needs further reflection, Gebara is clear when she identifies problematic dualisms that hinder a Christian integral ecology, in an echo of *Laudato Si'*. Her primary goal is to continue the interrogation of Christian ethics, and renew the field through ecofeminist insights. She reconsiders the command of loving our neighbors as ourselves in light of a Trinitarian understanding of the universe, earth, humanity, as our body where everything comes from the explosive ruptures of the Big Bang. Our body is thus a Trinitarian one that is constantly evolving through destruction, creation, life, death,

[593] Sirach 7:32-36

and resurrection. Gebara's ecofeminist approach articulates the necessity of dialogue across religious and cultural boundaries, to lift up the experiences of women and the earth as we work toward a better articulation of moral evil, creation-destruction, and justice for all life.

Gebara calls for new language around death and grief in Christian communities, since there is inherent and problematic dualism about this life and the afterlife, where the understanding of a strict separation between this life and the afterlife relegates suffering to this world, and peace to the next. This project contributes to the pursuit of contemplating death and life and the non-hierarchical dynamic she locates in the Trinity. Her primary concern is that of unjust deaths, and their continued possibility, and how to work toward ending injustice. Gebara does theology from the women and the poor with whom she has lived, in an approach grounded in her own experiences. She calls our attention to vast disparities of life expectancies across the world, and advocates for an inclusion of the elderly and aging in theological anthropology, and all those who are closer to the inevitability of death. The cycle of life, death, and the afterlife that humans, the world, and the Trinity partake in is precisely where Gebara sees potential for a reconciliation of dualisms and embracing relationality. Thus, contemplating our own death allows us to recognize our interconnectedness with not only the elderly and others who are close to death but the whole of creation, drawing us closer to God. To ignore death and its inevitability, is then to alienate oneself from God and refuse to participate in the fullness of Trinitarian life.

This is where the Kali tradition of Hinduism offers a helpful alternative and source of inspiration to overcome Christian dualisms. Kali's identity as death and Mother

allows Christians to contemplate the Trinitarian process of life and death, creation and destruction, in a new light. Devotees of Kali identify her as *Brahman* or the transcendent reality who ultimately transcends all form and qualities, however she is depicted and approached in her embodied form as Mother who is typically naked, wearing severed limbs for jewelry or clothing, standing on the body of her spouse Siva. She is fierce and destructive, a nurturing Mother, and she does not shield her children from the chaotic and messy reality of the world. She reveals to the devotee their mortality and encourages them to enter into transformation and liberation through immersion in the chaotic cycle of life and death. Tantric practices include praying in cremation grounds, with bones or skulls of humans and animals, and participating in corpse rituals. Devotees in the bhakti tradition also undertake these tantric ritual practices, where death is central for all who worship Kali. With her help, the worshipper can welcome Kali into their heart, accept their own death and the impermanence of this world, and transcend all boundaries to liberation after death. The goddess thus reminds Christians of the necessary interrelatedness of death and life, and that the death-life process is grounded in God.

Ultimately, Kali is transcendent to the life and death process, however, and she does not live and die like Jesus. Christian understanding of Jesus's participation in the process of life, death, and afterlife, is thus reaffirmed in comparison with the Kali tradition. While Kali is understood to be immanent in the world in that she inhabits all creation and also births the worlds from her womb, she is not incarnate as a human person, or other life form, and she does not experience samsara or death in an embodied way. The meaning of Jesus's embodiment of death, then, is deepened in tension with Kali's identity of death and Mother. Ecotheologians articulate a gap in theology, where in

addition to the wealth of resources on creation a further reflection on the resurrection is needed. This comparative project also highlights this need to pursue the meaning of death and resurrection in ecotheology. The Christian tradition gains new insight into deep incarnation and deep resurrection theologies, where Jesus's material death is connected with his life, and the entirety of the cosmos that participates in life and death, creation and destruction. Thus, it is not only the incarnation or the resurrection that is materially present in every atom of the world, but the death of Christ too. Life and death are ultimately not separate here, and are part of the same process and all particles of this world. God is present in all life and death, creation and destruction, demonstrating the interconnectedness between this life, death, and the afterlife. Both the Kali tradition and Christianity involve an acceptance of death, where for Kali devotees samsara is ideally escaped and transcended altogether, for Christians a deepened understanding of the interconnectedness of life, death, and the afterlife can occur.

The life and work of the two prominent devotees of Kali, Ramprasad and Ramakrishna, can also inspire Christianity. They discuss various creative and destructive dynamics of life and death, including the inevitable death of the body in this lifetime, the cycle of one's eternal self being continually reborn in the cycle of samsara, escaping this cycle and enjoying eternal unity with Kali, and the ultimate destruction of all the worlds before they are re-created through the goddess and her womb. Death is something both devotees are afraid of in some way, as they both have the burning desire to avoid another rebirth, death, and continuation of samsara. At the core of their words is intense devotion to Kali, and belief in her power and grace that can liberate them from embodiment in this world after they die. They want to have the name of Kali on their lips and in their hearts

at the time of their bodily death, hence their desire to maintain a life of devotion and worship with their last moments of life constantly in their minds. Ramakrishna's phrase of "woman and gold" constantly reminds devotees that this life in this world is full of distractions, when ultimately only love of the Mother is worthwhile. Her devotees understand the goddess to dwell within all people, animals, life, and even the earth and its elements, and in a particular way, they recognize the presence of Kali particularly in the bodies of women. Kali's identity as a goddess, present in human women and the earth, challenges gender norms for Christian theology and offers a feminist sacramental view of the world to consider.

Ramprasad and Ramakrishna thus highlight for Christians further reflection on the female body as a site for divine presence. They worship women as Kali and refer to them as the goddess, in a way that is incompatible with Christianity. However, contemplation of this contrast also provides insight for Christians. In comparison with Mary the Mother of God and the incarnation, where Mary is not divine, her consent and body are highlighted as part of the incarnation of Christ. Mary's presence throughout Jesus's life, and then her witness of Jesus's death, where she and the other women were the ones to return to Jesus's corpse and proclaim the resurrection, demonstrates the inextricable link between women's bodies and the cycle of Jesus's conception, birth, life, death, and resurrection. The interconnected dynamic of life and death means that Mary is connected with Jesus's life, death, and resurrection in an embodied way, which her bodily assumption highlights. My personal experiences with birth and miscarriage, and resulting community with others who have also experienced this fullness of life and death in their own bodies, demonstrates the rich knowledge an ecofeminist theology has to offer. The

contemplation of death and women's experiences expands our understanding of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ and the interconnectedness of his life and death cycle to that of human women and all of materiality.

Kali's embodiment of death and life, creation and destruction, allows Christians to reconsider the Trinitarian God's many facets. So often, Christians focus only on the creation and life aspect of God, and do not incorporate the interconnected reality of death and life, creation and destruction. Ramprasad and Ramakrishna understand the many facets of Kali to be dynamic and necessary, though they also lament her ferocity and question her nakedness. They know all this about Kali, and yet they love her completely and devote their lives to loving her, being devoted to her, and sharing their hymns to their Mother so that others may know this love, too. To know Kali in all her complexity, and ultimate mystery, is part of loving the goddess. Ramprasad and Ramakrishna emphasize the true love and devotion to the divine, when the divine encompasses creation and destruction, good and evil, body and spirit, and all dualities and then transcends all. Christians and their love of God can be enriched by these devotees and their love of Kali. This comparative project thus builds upon Dan Sheridan's, where he proposes Hindu bhakti as a catalyst for the Christian tradition to recover theology and practices of loving God.[594]

For Christians, the first commandant Jesus gives us is to love God, where the second is to love each other. Sheridan points out that Catholics are much more comfortable with the second commandment and its social justice lens, where the idea of loving God is a bit uncomfortable and unpopular. Thus, Christian love of God can be

[594] Sheridan, Daniel P. *Loving God: Krishna and Christ. A Christian Commentary on the Narada Sutras.* Leuven: Peeters, 2007. The Hindu bhakti tradition Sheridan engages in this text is the Vaisnava tradition, and he does not mention Kali or her traditions.

reconsidered in light of Kali bhaktas. Ramprasad and Ramakrishna are clear that love of Kali is primary, above all else in life. They are able to express this love in the midst of their fears of death and the unknown, and offer their laments and complaints to Kali as well as their praise. In comparison, Christians are inspired to rediscover God's destructive, death-dealing actions throughout the Hebrew Bible as well as God's maternal features like those depicted in Isaiah of laboring, nursing, and comforting a baby. The location of the death-life, creative-destructive process in the divine allows for a Christian love of God that is complex, and that recognizes the divine in places of death and in places of life. Sheridan articulates that the love of God, when deepened and expanded, flows out into the world as God's love and compassion for all. We thus become lovers of each other and lovers of the world as a result of our primary love of God. Effective or moral evil, in the form of the murder of others and violence toward creation, is then a sign of our failure to love God.

Ramprasad and Ramakrishna, through their constant love of Kali and contemplation of their own deaths, inspire a recovery of the Christian tradition of remembering our own deaths, as in the above passage from Sirach and the memento mori tradition, with the goal of increasing our love of God. In keeping death at the forefront of our practice, we can be attuned to the life-death process in ourselves, others, and the world. Our love of God can inspire attentiveness to suffering and death, as we consider more deeply the complexity of the divine. The Christian ecotheological tradition, as well as my personal encounters with and embodiment of death, grief, and the process of life and death highlight the need for continued deep contemplation and theological reflection on death. Instead of avoiding death, grief, and suffering, as so often our society does, the

words from Sirach tell us to be in solidarity with those who are mourning, to be kind to all the living, to properly mourn the dead, and to remember our own death. Christian practices of Holy Saturday can be reconsidered, where contemplating Jesus's body in the tomb can be meaningful and not only as time to prepare for the resurrection. Re-centering death, in our personal practices, as a body of Christian believers, and in theological reflection, provides for a renewal of our love of God who is manifest in the life-death process of the cosmos, and thus the extension of our love to all.

"In all you do, remember the end of your life, and then you will never sin."[595]

[595] Sirach 7:36

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