

Menstrual Blood: an icon of the kenotic atonement of Christ— A Better Way with Better Blood

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Abstract

For centuries, theologians have sought to understand the meaning and significance of Christ's death. However, the current motifs and interpretations of the atonement have constrained Christology by situating Christ within a paradigm of domination and subordination. I propose that the "inferior" porous and excessively moist female body—as presumed by Greco-Roman classicists and early Christian writers—expresses the unboundaried, mutual, self-giving relationality within the Godhead. Christ's blood, represented by menstrual blood, reveals divine love as "for" the empowerment and flourishing of others, bringing reconciliation to divine-human relationality, invoking the remembering of menstruating bodies, and supporting the healing of human-other relationships. Menstruation is an embodied icon of the kenotic atonement of Christ.

Introduction

In the course of researching and writing this essay, I have had my period multiple times. I will shed menstrual blood approximately four hundred and fifty times throughout my reproductive lifespan. I am well acquainted with my bleeding and all it brings; the accidental leakage, the hassle of buying supplies, and the wonder of life potentiality spilling out of me month after month. My menstruation is not something that can be ignored.

Lisa Isherwood notes the dualism within theology that claims "the flesh doesn't matter"¹ despite the Incarnation being central to the Christian tradition. Instead, she argues that to fully grasp the divine, we need to be in our bodies, which are "the living documents of an ongoing narrative."² Feminist and body theologians assert that the female body contains an expanse of knowledge worth theological examination, and as living documents, are meant to be read. Karen O'Donnell suggests that the ability "to reimagine doctrine" becomes available "when we take our bodies—the starting

¹ Lisa Isherwood, "The Embodiment of Feminist Liberation Theology: The Spiraling of Incarnation," *Feminist Theology* 12 (2004): 141.

² Isherwood, "The Embodiment of Feminist Liberation Theology," 150.

point of all theological discourse—seriously.”³ However, throughout history, female bodies have been dismissed; considered incomplete and weak.

Blood gendering has been a misogynistic tool that has upheld patriarchal ideals of male superiority and resulted in menstrual blood being perceived as a pollutant and dangerous to the social and religious order. Menstruating bodies are dismissed in “the multitude of androcentric christologies that erase the full dignity of women as christomorphic in the community of disciples.”⁴ Isherwood exhorts, “in an attempt to become truly embodied, we have had to challenge the Christ of traditional theology.”⁵

In this essay, I construct a Christology of kenotic atonement informed by the menstruating body. To do this, I center my argument on attributes ascribed to the female body by Greco-Roman Classicists— porosity, wetness, and an unboundaried nature— to build a paradigm where self-giving love and the unboundaried relationality within the Godhead frame the interpretation of Christ's atonement. Finally, I demonstrate that menstrual blood best represents the blood shed by Christ through whom God's kenotic, overflowing love is revealed.

This christological reconstruction is grounded in feminist and body theology, and wherever possible I have attempted to privilege the work of female theologians, whose voices historically have been suppressed due to androcentric cultural and religious norms. Since menstruation is a temporal experience shared by most, but not all women, and by persons who may not identify as women, I use the phrase *menstruating bodies or persons who menstruate*, to honour these distinctions. While discussing Greco-Roman attributes assigned to male and female bodies, I use the phrase *female body* for bodies containing female reproductive organs.

This re-imagined Christology rests outside of hierarchal, linear, boundaried, and divisive frameworks and instead is organized around themes of fluidity and expansiveness. I attempt to express this by including poetry. Using metaphor and imagery, poetry opens the mind and heart to experience our lives, the world, and God generously. Gaby Garcia compares poetry and periods: "And so, the cyclical, ritualistic nature of the period remains inherently poetic, following a rhyme scheme equal parts wild and steady, pushing the body onward and inward. . . In many ways, the period is a poem. All the signs are there, including a format, repetition, intense color, imagery that

³ Karen O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb: Re-conceiving Theology through Reproductive Loss* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2022), 4.

⁴ Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1992) 51. Quoted in Isherwood, “The Embodiment of Feminist Liberation Theology: 142.

⁵ Isherwood, *The Embodiment of Feminist Liberation Theology*, 142.

changes meaning over time, sensory power, ritual, and questions of time and mortality. . . Like the poem, we wait for the period to come through our bodies—to hit us in the gut and then purge forth.”⁶

This essay is an attempt to “re-member” the menstruating body in its role as part of the imago Dei. Marcia W. Mount Shoop writes, “In an Incarnational faith, the promise is both that bodies matter and that bodies can be redeemed . . . Re-membering is not simple recollection or memory. Re-membering is reconnecting body parts that have been severed, blocked, trivialized . . . Re-membering does more than recollect; re-membering re-collects bodies and their broken, ingenious, tenacious parts into the sphere of how we pay attention.”⁷ In the same way that the pervasive flow of monthly blood cannot be ignored, I purport that as an icon of Christ’s kenotic atonement, menstrual blood is the reminder that God’s love is pervasive, mysterious and abundant; spilling, leaking, invitational and welcoming all to come in.

Blood Gendering

I can imagine a world
Where periods are loved
Where we eagerly anticipate
The ideas and inspiration
Gathered from them
Where we talk about them
With affection and warmth
Where we set up our world
To accommodate and support them
I can imagine a world

⁶ Gaby Garcia, "The Poetry of Periods," *North American Review* 304 (2019), <https://northamericanreview.org/open-space/poetry-periods>.

⁷ Marcia W. Mount Shoop, *Let the Bones Dance: Embodiment and the Body of Christ* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2010), 48.

where it feels so good to bleed⁸

In its nature and function, blood is universal and gender-neutral. However, throughout history, blood has been interpreted through cultural and religious values and assigned various rules and regulations. Blood spilled outside the body is defined by *how* the blood is shed and *from whose* body the blood comes. Intentional blood loss is viewed differently than unintentional blood loss and male blood means something different than female blood.⁹ Traditionally, honour, respect, and power are conferred upon the “soldier, sacrificial priest, blood brother, and executioner,”¹⁰ whereas, Lawrence Hill writes, “since time began, we have found the most curious, inventive, and offensive ways to vilify women for shedding their monthly blood— the same blood that they have needed before or will need again to build the very beginning of a nest inside the body for the earliest promise of human life.”¹¹

In this section, I discuss the impact of gender mapping on blood, particularly how female blood throughout history is characterized as “dangerous, polluting, and a bleeding that shall not be seen.”¹² I argue that value-based gendering of blood—male blood perceived as “good” and female blood as “bad”—is a mechanism of misogyny that has expelled menstrual blood, and those who shed it, to the margins of male-dominated societies. I demonstrate that these views were expounded by Greek philosophists and adopted by early church writers who entwined misogynistic blood gendering into their theologies.

In the ancient world, boundaries between the sacred and the profane were important. Anything that crossed these boundaries was considered dangerous and a disruption to the cultural and religious order. Bodily fluids—particularly those associated with reproduction: semen, menstrual blood, vaginal secretions, and breastmilk—were highly symbolic because of their connection to the boundaries of life and death. Social anthropologist Mary Douglas proposed that ancient cultures sought to control this “matter outside of place” in one of three ways: concealment, ritual

⁸ Excerpt from Nikki Tajiri, *She Dreams When She Bleeds: Poems about Periods*, (Nikki Tajiri, 2019) 21.

⁹ Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender and Medieval Literature* Philadelphia, PN: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 1.

¹⁰ Grietje Dresen, “The Better Blood: On Sacrifice and the Churching of New Mothers in the Roman Catholic Tradition,” in *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood: A Feminist Critique of Purity and Impurity*, ed. Kristin De Troyer et al. (Harrisburg, PN: Trinity Press International, 2003), 143.

¹¹ Lawrence Hill, *Blood: The Stuff of Life* (Toronto, ON: Anansi, 2013), 30.

¹² McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero*, 116.

purification, or reclassification.¹³ The attachment of value to blood and the subsequent gendering of blood was not advanced until the Greco-Roman era, due to medical and philosophical views of the inferior female body.

The Greek classicists believed that the male body was hot, dry, and active and, therefore, able to create powerful and generative semen from the excess moisture obtained from food. Alternatively, the female body was viewed as cold, spongy, loose, and sedentary and as a result, could not transform excess moisture, but collected it in the bowl-like womb which would empty, involuntarily at regular intervals—as menstrual fluid—much like other waste products.¹⁴ “Menstruation was generally seen as a side-effect of the spongy wetness of the female body; it was a monthly excretion of the inevitable build-up of excess fluid precipitated by woman’s physical deficiency.”¹⁵ The inability to transform her excess moisture into something generative was considered a deformity, and the involuntary flow of blood meant that the female body lacked the physical integrity revered in the ancient world.¹⁶ Lesley Dean-Jones suggests that “the biological facts of menstruation and breasts were used to create a construct which upheld society’s characterization of a woman’s body as inherently inferior to that of a man. Underlying the characterization is a value judgment: ‘firm and compact’ is good, ‘loose and spongy’ are bad.”¹⁷ Blood gendering in the Greco-Roman era was used to justify the belief that menstrual blood—“disgusting, invasive, and even lethal” represented the “worst deficiencies of the female body, which leaked fluid and odor and constantly threatened to pollute and weaken the bodies of others, above all, the dry, rigid bodies of men”¹⁸

“Better Blood” in Early Christianity

Her blood is not refuse or excrement

Even though she flushes and washes it away

¹³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1966). 219.

¹⁴ Dean-Jones, “The Cultural Construct of the Female Body in Classical Greek Science,” *Women’s History and Ancient History*, ed. Sarah B. Pomeroy (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 122.

¹⁵ Thea Lawrence, “Breastmilk, Breastfeeding, and the Female Body in Early Imperial Rome,” *Bodily Fluids in Antiquity* ed. Mark Bradley et al. (London, UK: Routledge, 2021), 227.

¹⁶ For complete Classicist philosophical and medical views of the female body see *The Hippocratic Corpus* (students of Hippocrates), *Diseases of Women* (Aristotle), and *Gynaecology* (Soranus).

¹⁷ Dean-Jones, “The Cultural Construct”, 120.

¹⁸ Rebecca Flemming, “One-Seed, Two-Seed, Three-Seed? Reassessing the Fluid Economy of Ancient Generation,” *Bodily Fluids in Antiquity*, ed. Bradley et al. (London, UK: Routledge, 2021), 169.

Her blood is lava flowing

Her blood is holy water

Her blood is gold.¹⁹

Jennifer Schultz suggests that the early church writers “propagated and perpetuated an inherent androcentrism rooted in ancient Greco-Roman perceptions of the female somatic experience.”²⁰ This set a precedent for the negative view of menstruation throughout Christianity, despite “the gospels recording no incident of the loss of female blood being disparaged.”²¹ This culturally informed perception combined with Levitical blood purity laws led to the development of prohibitions in early Christian texts regarding persons who menstruate. In the *Apostolic Tradition* (215 BCE), Hippolytus of Rome denied baptism for the menstruant without any justification. Schultz notes that Hippolytus was likely influenced by Pliny the Elder, who believed that like menstrual blood would defile the pure, cleansing baptismal waters.²² Thea Lawrence summarizes Pliny’s perception of menstrual blood:

“The blood was repulsive to animals and plants, devastating vines and medicinal herbs, driving bees from their hives, killing other insects, and sending dogs into madness. The mere sight of a woman amid her first period, or the touch of any menstruating woman, could cause horses to miscarry spontaneously. Humans, too, were vulnerable to the harmful effects of menstrual blood: women, as Pliny says, were not safe from this plague of their sex, suffering miscarriage even from proximity to the substance. A man foolish enough to engage in sexual relations with a menstruating woman was risking his life. Pliny’s language emphasizes anxieties about pollution, infection, and disgust, suggesting menstruation’s destructive and even deadly potential. Menstrual blood was magical, monstrous, or strange. Much like a disease, it polluted on contact and altered the state of everything it touched, rendering things infected, stained, or spoiled. Its effects were destructive or deadly, pestilential, baleful, or noxious and incurable.”²³

¹⁹ Tajiri, *She Dreams When She Bleeds*, 32.

²⁰ Jennifer Schultz, “Doctors, Philosophers, and Christian Fathers on Menstrual Blood,” *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood*, ed. De Troyer et al. (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 97.

²¹ Dresen, Grietje, “The Better Blood: On Sacrifice and the Churcing of New Mothers in the Roman Catholic Tradition,” *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood*, ed. De Troyer et al. (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 150.

²² Jennifer Schultz, “Doctors, Philosophers, and Christian Fathers,” 97

²³ Thea Lawrence, “Breastmilk, Breastfeeding, and the Female Body,” 227.

A common belief of the time was that the unboundaried wet, spongy body affected a women's mental faculties. *Hysterema*/ English 'hysteria' (the root *hysterikos*- uterus) denoted deficiency or defect in various Christian and medical writings. Since the female body lacked physical integrity, as Plato asserted, a woman was believed to be irrational and thus sinful (as described by Clement of Alexandria (*Paedagogus*, 1.13)).²⁴ Dionysius' canon excluded menstruating women from receiving the Eucharist and entrance to the church. Dionysius' abstraction was that a woman's body could rule over her and thus prescribed "suitable" prohibitions and regulations which would protect her from her irrational mind and unboundaried body. Schultz summarizes, "biology determines the discourse that defines female interaction in the third-century church."²⁵

In the late fourth century, Jerome writes, "Nothing is more filthy, unclean than a menstruant; whatever she will have touched, she makes it unclean, and still of whose filth is cleansed by the baptism of Christ, through the cleansing of sins."²⁶ Nadja Furlan Štante notes that the negative view of menstruation continues into the late medieval era with the writings of Thomas of Aquinas "The menstrual blood, the flow of which is subject to monthly periods, has a certain natural impurity . . . (it is) infected with corruption and repudiated by nature."²⁷

Prohibitions have changed throughout the centuries, but the negative view of menstruation has stained the church regarding the role of women, and in theological history, menstrual blood—much like a used tampon— has been discarded. O'Donnell writes, "theology is dominated by men, particularly white men . . . [who] are the gatekeepers of what is considered 'proper' theology and what theology is worthy of respect. . . pregnancy, pregnancy loss, menstruation, and menopause are considered "women's interest" and are excluded from the male world of theology."²⁸

In the section above, I note how the value-based gendering of blood, adopted from Classical medicine, influenced the early church writers to reject menstrual blood and prescribe various prohibitions for menstruating persons. The following section will discuss how the high value on male

²⁴ Jennifer Schultz, "Doctors, Philosophers, and Christian Fathers," 97

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 97-99.

²⁶ Jerome, *Commentarii in Propheta Zachariam, S. Hieronymi preseyteri opera*. Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina. Turnhout, Belgium: Typographi Brepols Editores Pontifici, 1970. Quoted in Schultz, "Doctors, Philosophers, and Christian Fathers," 97.

²⁷ Nadja Furlan Štante, "Women's Impurity, Menstrual Blood and the Creation of Taboo: Perspectives from the Field of Christian Feminist Theology," *Retold Feminine Memoirs: Our Collective Past and Present* (Boston, MA: Brill 2013), 105.

²⁸ O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb*, 24.

blood, led to the mapping androcentric images, such as cultic sacrifice and circumcision, onto Christian blood symbolism.

Early Christian writers interpreted the symbol and meaning of Christ's shed blood through analogies and images from the Jewish tradition. Two important symbols associated with shed blood in cultic Judaism were covenantal circumcision and sacrifice. In the Jewish tradition, the shed *male* blood in these rituals was connected to birth and restoration. A male Levitical priest performed circumcision, which "rebirthed" the male newborn into the patrilineage of Abrahamic descent. Ritual sacrifice involved shedding the blood of a male animal, which "rebirthed" the community into purity

Circumcision and ritual sacrifice are male dominated rituals—"affirming kinship and patrilineal descent central to their function and meaning."²⁹ Despite its connection to re-birth, *male* bloodshed defied the uncontrolled, involuntary *female* blood shed during birth and menstruation because it was controlled and intentional. Leonie J. Archer suggests, "the blood of circumcision served as a symbolic surrogate for the blood of childbirth, and because it was shed voluntarily and in a controlled manner, it transcended the bounds of nature and the passive blood flow of the mother at delivery and during menstruation."³⁰ Male blood was considered "better blood" because it affirmed the social order and maintained the Judaic definitions of purity.³¹

Judith Johnson writes that in these Jewish rituals "men reserved for themselves sole power over killing and rebirthing, over shedding blood and extending bloodlines on the divine level," and as such, through sacrifice, male blood-shedding was promoted to a "divinely sanctioned . . . sacred art."³² As a result, the male guardians of the society achieved the authoritative role of priest-hero-warrior-king. For, "only in the role of high priest and warrior could the king (or leader/ chief) gain full control of Life and Death, with full right to sacrifice it, to shed human blood, to kill. Just as a woman (nonmale) could produce human (male) life, men could now turn human life into nonlife."³³ Johnson writes, "through the cleansing of male-controlled sacrificial rituals, a collective of fraternal heroes

²⁹ Melanie Bair, "Life is in the Blood: Envisioning Atonement with Regards to Levitical Theology," *Princeton Theological Review* 13 (2007): 69.

³⁰ Leonie J. Archer, "Bound by Blood: Circumcision and Menstrual Taboo in Post-Exilic Judaism," *After Eve: Women, Theology, and the Christian Traditions*, ed. J.M. Soskice (London, UK: Pickering, 1990), 39. Quoted in Dresen, "Better Blood," 149.

³¹ Dresen, "Better Blood," 155.

³² Judith Johnson, "Shedding Blood: The Sanctifying Rite of Heroes," *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood*, ed. Kristin De Troyer et al. (Harrisburg, PN: Trinity Press International, 2003), 221

³³ *Ibid.*, 221.

arises to share in the awesome powers of super masculinity—maybe even to become demi-gods and savior figures.”³⁴

This idealized “priest-hero-warrior-king” —the “fully masculine complement to the birthing, bleeding woman”³⁵— is the dominant trope through which Christ’s shed blood and atonement is interpreted. With this trope in mind, the interpretation of Christ’s atonement can be summarized: *In his resurrection, our hero, Christ, the high priest whose death appeases the judge and satisfies the king, obtains victory as warrior in a cosmic battle to save all humanity and re-birth them into their lineage as a divine community.* Birth and body fluids that are shed regularly for life, not included.

Traditional biblical atonement motifs constructed on androcentric images and metaphors uphold a relationality of dominance and subordination.³⁶ For example: male animal sacrifice performed by the male priest; a feudal system where a king or landowner must be satisfied; a cosmic battle likened to a war where male soldiers are deemed heroes; or a penal system which would involve a male judge presiding. Rosemary Radford Ruether suggests: “traditional Christian theology is fundamentally not neutral or universal but a perspectival product of patriarchal presuppositions and ideologies.”³⁷

The motifs have been critiqued by feminist and non-violent atonement theologians because they perpetuate and justify hierarchical domination, oppression, and violence. Ally Moder discusses four prominent atonement motifs: Ransom Theory, Christus Victor, Penal Substitutionary Model and Moral Influence, Moder comments on their inherent patriarchy and the distortions of sacrifice, obedience, submission, forgiveness and suffering that has led to the justification of violence against women.³⁸ Elaine Storkey argues that the “traditional motifs embody concepts of God that are reductionist and dangerous.”³⁹ Storkey notes that there is no “one-to-one” correlation between the biblical narrative and the development of atonement theology, but that theology has been developed throughout the centuries through male interpretation.⁴⁰ Joshua McNall discusses the problem of reductionism in theories of atonement and notes that in elevating single models of

³⁴ Ibid., 213.

³⁵ Ibid., 221.

³⁶ For a thorough examination of the biblical atonement motifs see Rutledge, Fleming. *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MS: W. Eerdmans Publishing, 2017).

³⁷ Miyon Chung, “Rosemary Radford Ruether’s Jesus: An Iconoclastic Liberator,” *Torch Trinity Journal* 11 (2008): 118.

³⁸ Ally Moder, “Women, Personhood, and the Male God: A Feminist Critique of Patriarchal Concepts of God in View of Domestic Abuse,” *Feminist Theology* 28 (2019): 85-103.

³⁹ Elaine Storkey, “Atonement and Feminism,” *Anvil* 11 (1994) 228.

⁴⁰ Chung, “Jesus: An Iconoclastic Liberator,” 221.

atonement over others, this “defensive hierarchy” reduces the multifaceted nature of the atonement. Further, he writes, “reductionism fails to account for the plurality of metaphors within the biblical canon and for the fact that Scripture gives no obvious reason for ranking one of these pieces as most important.”⁴¹ It seems fitting that within within the discussion of atonement motifs, competition and hierarchy is the norm.

Much like the early church writers whose culturally appropriated beliefs of female inferiority constrained their theology, I maintain that interpreting the blood of Christ through “super-masculine” symbols constrains Christology, by identifying Christ as the ultimate “priest-hero-warrior-king” who endorses relationships of dominance and submission. I propose female menstrual blood is the “better blood” to symbolize the atoning blood of Christ because it suggests an alternative paradigm for Christ’s ever-flowing, ever-abundant, “power-for”⁴² blood. Christ’s body shows us.

Christ’s “Better Blood”

Imagine I pulled out a used tampon
You just bring it and put it on the table at the Mass and just offer it all
It somehow becomes linked with Christ’s sacrifice
And there is something strange for me
Something meaningful to me celebrating Mass whilst I’m menstruating
The whole sense of sacrifice, suffering, blood
There is something quite powerful and female about that
Mass as menstruation envy⁴³

In the gospel narratives, we read about a woman who seeks Jesus to procure healing for her uncontrolled blood flow.⁴⁴ Whether her uterine dysfunction was due to endometriosis, fistula, hormonal imbalance, or physical injury, the gospel writers report that this unwell woman spent everything she had unsuccessfully obtaining help from numerous physicians. Aside from her physical suffering, the social ramifications of her illness would have left her isolated and vulnerable since her

⁴¹ Joshua McNall *The Mosaic of Atonement: An Integrated Approach to Christ’s Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 20.

⁴² Anna Mercedes, *Power-For: Feminism and Christ’s Self-Giving*, New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2011), 135.

⁴³ Sharon Jagger “Challenging the church’s menstrual shaming with poetry,” April 28, 2018. *The F-Word: Contemporary UK Feminism*. <https://thefword.org.uk/2018/04/challenging-the-churchs-menstrual-shaming-with-poetry/>

⁴⁴ Susan Haber, “A Woman’s Touch: Feminist Encounters with the Hemorrhaging Woman in Mark 5:24-34,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26 (2003): 171-192.

uncontrolled blood flow deemed her weak and at risk of polluting others. In the Markan account, the woman reaches out—unseen—to touch the hem of Jesus’s garment, and immediately her flow of blood halts. According to Mark, Jesus was “immediately aware that power had gone forth from him” and asked, “who touched my clothes?”⁴⁵

In this account, Jesus’s power “goes forth,” seemingly without his initiative. Candida Moss suggests: “the flow of power from Jesus mirrors the flow of blood from the woman. Like the woman, Jesus is unable to control the flow that emanates from his body. Like the flow of blood, the flow of power is something embodied and physical.”⁴⁶ Christ, like the woman, is a “leaky and porous creature.”⁴⁷ Moss notes that in Greek mythology, gods walked the earth disguised in human form yet often were unable to conceal their brilliance and glory; their bodies radiated light, and their faces shone. The inability of these beings to regulate boundaries (they leaked glory) displayed their divine power.⁴⁸ Christ’s porosity in this instance revealed him as divine and his divinity was recognized by the woman who with “fear and trembling . . . fell down before him.”⁴⁹ I argue that this revelation of divinity, through a perceived weak and inferior physical attribute (leaky) is a proclamation of the nature of God, who cannot and will not be boundaried by a social hierarchy of superiority and inferiority.

In *Revelations of Divine Love*, fourteenth-century anchorite Julian of Norwich notes the abundance of moisture connected with Christ. In Julian’s revelations, Christ’s “precious and plentiful blood” is abundant and unending; overflowing for salvation, purification and deliverance of all humankind.⁵⁰ While peering through the side wound of Christ, she envisions a womb-like place, “large enough for all mankind.”⁵¹ In Julian’s understanding, the blood and water that flowed from Christ’s side wound was Christ’s joy, Christ’s bliss, and Christ’s Passion, fulfilling his spiritual thirst—“this is His thirst and love-longing, to have us altogether whole in Him, to His bliss”⁵²— for complete union and communion and participation within the Godhead.

⁴⁵ Mark 5:30 (NRSV).

⁴⁶ Candida R. Moss, “The Man with the Flow of Power: Porous Bodies in Mark 5:25-34,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129 (2010): 516.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 516.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 518.

⁴⁹ Mark 5:33-34 (NRSV).

⁵⁰ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, ed. Grace Warrack, (London, UK: Methuen and Company, 190; Project Gutenberg, 2016), xlvi, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52958/52958-h/52958-h.htm#PART_II.

⁵¹ Kathryn Reinhard, “Joy to the Father, Bliss to the Son: Unity and the Motherhood Theology of Julian Norwich,” in *Anglican Theological Review* 89 (2007): 637

⁵² Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 62.

In his dying, Julian proclaims that moisture “fails” Christ; his “blessed flesh and bones” are left to dry out. Designed to be full of moisture: wet, spongy, leaking, and spilling blood; his drying out was “the most pain, and the last, of His Passion.”⁵³ In an inverse move, Julian glorifies in Christ the exact characteristics of the female body that were disdained by the religious culture of her time. Christ’s wet, moist body bleeds abundantly and regularly to bring “endless bliss” within the life of the Godhead. In his death, self-emptying, and his drying out, Christ fulfilled his Passion.

The wet nature Julian ascribes to Christ is also assigned to YHWH in the Hebrew scriptures. In Job 38, God challenges Job with a barrage of questions. God asks if Job was present at creation when the “sea burst out from the womb,” if he knows “from whose womb comes the ice?” and who “gives birth to the frost?”⁵⁴ T.C. Ham notes the connection of procreation images concerning modes of precipitation and suggests, “as the father and mother of moisture, God continues to provide the sustenance necessary for the ongoing cycle of life.”⁵⁵ The connection of YHWH’s involvement in procreation and precipitation creates an image of the womb of YHWH that holds the sea waters, rain, frost, ice, and dew. From the Greek medical perspective of the female body, this excess moisture within YHWH’s womb would be purged as menstrual blood. The wet womb of YHWH is brimming with, perhaps even spilling, menstrual blood. Julian’s wet Christ, bleeding as his Passion, reveals God.

In the respective works of Moss and Julian, these two theologians—living centuries apart—claim that the male Christ embodied porosity and excessive moisture. Christ’s blood, shed from his physically male body, was similar to menstrual blood in that it came from a porous, “leaky,” and excessively moist body. The assignment of values in blood gendering stems from *how* the blood was shed and *from whose body* the blood came. The prescribed social order claimed that “male” blood—shed intentionally and in a controlled manner (sacrifice and circumcision)—was good and that “female” blood—shed involuntarily and uncontrolled (menstruation and childbirth)—was a pollutant and danger to the social order. I propose that Christ disrupted this socio-normative understanding by crossing gendered boundaries within his own body.

Where the male guardians of society—the “collective of fraternal heroes” sought to maintain social order, Christ’s maleness operates as a “maleness against itself.”⁵⁶ Brittany Wilson notes that in the gospel stories, Jesus, as biologically male, “repeatedly crosses boundaries between

⁵³ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 37.

⁵⁴ Job 38:28-29, NRSV.

⁵⁵ T.C. Ham, “The Gentle Voice of God in Job 38,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123 (2013): 539.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Green, “More Musings on Maleness: The Maleness of Jesus Revisited,” *Feminist Theology* 7 (1999): 25.

male and female.”⁵⁷ For Wilson, these include his porous body,—as noted in Moss’s Markan account— his denial of patriarchal kinship in his conception, his redefinition of family, and in his death, Christ is depicted as lacking control over his own body by allowing others to control his body through beatings and bodily violations, including penetration—a sign of Christ’s emasculation since the protection of personal boundaries was essential to Greco-Roman masculinity.⁵⁸ Elizabeth Green adds that Christ’s boundary-crossing occurred in all “socio-religious and ecclesio-theological spheres” including anything “which separate men from women, Jew from Gentile, prophets from prostitutes, law-abiders and outlaws, sane from insane.”⁵⁹ These two authors agree with Rosemary Radford Ruether that Christ’s work was to “dismantle all relationships of dominance of submission.”⁶⁰

In crossing human-divine boundaries, and the prescribed gender boundaries in his physical body, life, death, and resurrection, Christ reveals his divine, porous and wet nature and confounds the prescribed gendering of blood. He denies the super-masculine label of ultimate “priest-hero-warrior-king” and subverts the patriarchal paradigm which interprets his atonement. Instead, Christ’s *better blood*, like menstrual blood, spills abundantly for the potential of new life for all.

Trinitarian Relationality And Atonement

We need a god who bleeds
 Spreads her lunar vulva and showers us in shades of scarlet
 Thick & warm like the breath of her
 ... i am
 Not wounded i am bleeding to life
 We need a god who bleeds now
 Whose wounds are not the end of anything.⁶¹

Linn Tonstad proposes that the life of God is characterized by abundance and overflow in mutual self-giving. Essential for Tonstad, is that trinitarian relationships are “for-other” because the life of God is characterized by abundance and overflow. God self-gives without loss: “As the

⁵⁷ Brittany Wilson, “Gender Disrupted: Jesus as a ‘Man’ in the Fourfold Gospel,” *Word & World*. 36 (2016): 25

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Green, “More Musings” 21..

⁶⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, MS: Beacon Press, 1993) Quoted in Green, “More Musings,” 25.

⁶¹ Excerpt from Ntozake Shange, “We Need a God Who Bleeds Now,” *A Daughter’s Geography* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), 61.

expression of God's love for material creation, the God who is already love within Godself, the Trinity unites Godself with humankind, giving humankind the only good of which there is always more than enough for any need or want."⁶² Metaphors and analogies that seek to interpret the atoning work of Christ must represent a trinitarian "for-other" relationality, since "at its heart, atonement speaks about the deep relationality of God and is a promise of a redemptive future for humanity."⁶³ Instead of a relationality of rigid order and control through domination and subordination, the abundant, mutual self-giving relationality within the Godhead is one of fluidity and flow.

According to Tonstad, this fluidity and flow extends to humankind, where the Trinity's porous, unboundaried persons assimilate—"the finite is taken into the infinite"—humanity into the life of the Godhead.⁶⁴ I liken this assimilation to a sponge that can absorb large volumes of water. The structure of the sponge changes as the fluid is absorbed, but neither is diminished or competes for space as the fluid is absorbed. This sponge-like imagery suggests an expansive relationality within the Trinity where, "we discover the possibility of bodies that do not crowd each other out, or penetrate each other in order to be in relation and to be in the same place at the same time . . . one need not move aside to make room for the other, for there is enough space for all."⁶⁵

God's action of unitive and assimilative love toward humanity echoes Julian of Norwich's understanding of humanity as wrapped and enclosed in the Goodness of God. "For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and the bones in the flesh, and the heart in the whole, so are we, soul and body, clad in the Goodness of God, and enclosed."⁶⁶ In this image, Kathryn Reinhard explores Julian's maternal theology and proposes that "in wrapping us, and completely enclosing us in love, Christ himself is depicted as being womb-like."⁶⁷ Christ desires intimacy with humanity much like the intimacy experienced between a mother and her child within her womb. Reinhard suggests: "because of our enclosure in Christ, we are brought into participation in the life of the Trinity, and to the bliss of communion with God . . . and are welcomed into the self-giving cycle that is the love of God."⁶⁸

⁶² Linn Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* [New York, NY: Routledge, 2016], 72.

⁶³ Storkey, "Atonement and Feminism," 234–35.

⁶⁴ Tonstad, *God and Difference*, 238.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁶⁶ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 14.

⁶⁷ Reinhard, "Joy to the Father" 636.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 641.

The metaphor that best expresses this relationality is contained within the female body. This assimilative, fluid, and flowing trinitarian relationality is likened to a spacious, spongy, welcoming womb from which the blood of Christ flows abundantly to unite humanity within the life and love of the Trinity. Divine love—self-emptying, regenerating, and abundantly giving for intimate union with creation—is imaged onto the bodies of persons who menstruate. Thus, I suggest that the kenotic atoning work of Christ is best represented by the moist, spongy bodies from whence blood flows—like Christ’s—for life.

Menstrual Blood As Revelatory

Menstrual blood, like water
just flows.
Its fountain existed long before knives or flint.
Menstruation is the original source of blood.
Menstrual is blood’s secret name.⁶⁹

In this christological reconstruction of atonement, I have attempted to access the body as a site of theological discourse. Isherwood notes that "in theology, we have begun more deductively than inductively. We have begun with propositions and attempted to move from the abstract to the concrete."⁷⁰ To avoid these trappings, I have centered this re-imagined Christology on sheet-staining, monthly present, messy menstrual blood.

Month after month, the womb self-empties and reveals the cyclical process of preparation, emptying, and regeneration. Menstrual blood is the "very blood that makes all life possible, and the very blood out of which all life comes."⁷¹ However, menstruation is not universal in experience. My "textbook" period—relatively pain-free, twenty-eight-day cycle, four to five days of bleeding—is not the case for many. Persons who menstruate may experience amenorrhea, excessive bleeding, erratic cycles, debilitating pain, inability to work, and early menopause. These symptoms may or may not be due to endometriosis, fibroids, polycystic ovarian syndrome, or hormone imbalances. Transgender

⁶⁹ An excerpt from Judy Grahn’s poem "All Blood is Menstrual Blood" in *Metaformia: A Journal of Menstruation and Culture*, ed. Judy Grahn (2007) Last accessed April 7, 2022. <http://metaformia.org/poetry/all-blood/>. For complete work see Judy Grahn, *Blood, Bread and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), xviii.

⁷⁰ Lisa Isherwood, *Introducing Body Theology*, (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing 1998), 42.

⁷¹ Kristin Largen, "Power in the (Menstrual) Blood," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 53 (2014): 9.

men, intersex, and non-binary individuals have the additional challenge of navigating their menstruation in a predominantly gender binary culture.

The meanings attached to menstruation are also not universal. For the person who does not want to become pregnant, a period is a welcome relief; for the anxious twelve-year-old, their first blood's arrival is something to be feared; for the person who has leaked through layers of tampons, pads and clothing, regular bleeding is a source of humiliation; for the person desperate to be pregnant, menstruation is disappointing and grievous; for the athlete whose amenorrhea has been distressing, their flow is a marker of well-being; and for the person whose endometriosis has left them in debilitating pain, excessive blood loss signals the body's betrayal. Menstruation can be a gift, a freedom, a liability, or a vulnerability. In both experience and meaning, menstrual blood cannot be categorically contained. It is unboundaried and inherently ambiguous.

Martha Mount Shoop proposes that ambiguity is "the fingerprint of the intricacy and genius of God's mysterious activity."⁷² I assert that the mystery of menstruation invites us to deepen our discovery of God. Historically, *female blood* was classified as a dangerous pollutant due to its unboundaried nature flowing from loose, spongy, moist bodies—its ambiguity was something to fear. Shoop suggests that when feared, ambiguity is the "root of idolatry," for it makes "us grasp for something that can stand apart from the flux of human life."⁷³ I suggest that in rejecting menstrual blood and dismissing the female body's experience, the Christian tradition has overlooked an opportunity to explore the wonder and mystery of God.

Menstrual blood is revelatory of the divine, and as such, is an embodied icon. Elizabeth Zelensky and Lela Gilbert describe the use of icons within the Eastern Orthodox tradition. They suggest that an icon represents three things: 1) An instrument through which the knowledge of God, in his mysterious human incarnation, becomes accessible to humankind; 2) the physical witness to the sanctification of matter; and 3) a means by which both the iconographer and worshipper can participate in the realm of eternity. The authors note that an icon is not a piece of art, but a piece of text, written in images with the intention of being "read" through the activity of prayer.⁷⁴ Menstruation is a sanctified piece of holy "text"—embodied poetry— that serves as a reminder that kenotic love overflows abundantly. It is a type of liturgy, directing us to the Godhead's unboundaried, porous, mutually-giving relationality. Bodies that bleed carry eschatological hope,

⁷² Mount Shoop, *Let the Bones Dance*, 118.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Zelensky and Lela Gilbert, *Windows to Heaven: Introducing Icons to Protestants and Catholics*, (Ada, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2005) 13-24.

bearing witness to the “God who bleeds now” and expresses the mystery of the God whose life-giving wounds were "not the end of anything."⁷⁵

Menstruation demonstrates that for life to occur, blood is shed. This is the mystery of the atonement. In God's "decisive action on behalf of a broken world,"⁷⁶ blood was shed, and as a result, "some kind of power shifted, some kind of healing was initiated, some ultimate kind of love was displayed, and some kind of dramatic rescue was effected."⁷⁷ This blood, however, need not be shed in violence, at the hands of an oppressor, or caught up in a paradigm of dominance and subordination. This blood is self-giving, offering itself for the benefit of others. As Kristin Largen suggests, there is "more than one way to offer one's blood for the life of another. . .perhaps this bleeding (menstrual) can serve as a reminder of Christ's great love for humanity—his whole ministry of life-giving love, and his bleeding for our sake—and in this way, we can begin to see that there is as much power in the blood that gives life as there is in blood that brings death."⁷⁸

Conclusion

If only it didn't take a life and a half to truly grasp
That the river that flows bright and blood red, is the font of life itself
That there is nothing more faithful and forgiving as this gush
Returning every month to the same body
Sometimes quiet and gentle, some others roaring and chaotic
For therein lies growing and living, for from it comes little ones, and life itself
To allow it to run its course in a surge of passion and pain
This wildness that changes and transforms young bodies into chalices of quiet strength,
with much to gain
Of blood that is rarely spoken, yet even more rarely seen
Blood that's so essential to us,
the absence of which can make millennia of existence cease.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Ntozake Shange, "We Need a God Who Bleeds Now," *A Daughter's Geography*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983)

⁷⁶ LeeAnne Van Dyke, "Do Theories of Atonement Foster Abuse?" *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 35 (1996): 28

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 28

⁷⁸ Kristin Largen, "Power in the (Menstrual) Blood," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 53 (2014): 9

⁷⁹ Urmila Chanam, "Celebrate Menstrual Hygiene Day With These Four Poems," (blog). An excerpt from Dr. Charmaine Kenita, "The Colour of Blood," Youth Ki Awaaz, May 29, 2021.

<https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2021/05/international-menstrual-hygiene-day-with-menstruation-poetry/>

Throughout this paper, I have argued that androcentric and patriarchal interpretations of Christ's atonement have constrained theology by presenting Christ as either as "priest-hero-warrior-king" or as obedient victim, implying hierarchy within the Godhead. These dominance-based interpretations misrepresent the relationality of the Trinity. Blood gendering has led to Christ's blood being interpreted as sacred "male blood", while menstruation "female blood" has been overlooked as a site for theological discourse and persons who menstruate stigmatized and marginalized.

Inga Winkler suggests that "menstruation matters more than most people in society are willing to recognize."⁸⁰ Winkler notes that menstruation is fundamental to global body politics, gender inequity, and human rights because it "unites the personal and the political, the intimate and the public, the physiological and socio-cultural."⁸¹ Menstruation, according to Winkler, is all about power relationships, for "menstrual blood is a symbol of power."⁸²

Within the church's history, menstrual blood has been a symbol of oppression and a site of discrimination and violence. Isherwood suggests that "empowering symbols are important to all marginalized groups" and that "there is a certain satisfaction in subverting a symbol that has been a part of historic oppression."⁸³ In this essay, my aim is to subvert this symbol, and bring menstrual blood from where it has been discarded, and explore how it liberates and transforms traditionally constrained Christologies. Menstrual blood is an "enfleshed icon"⁸⁴ of the reconciliatory, unending flow of kenotic love of God.

If, as Winkler proposes, menstruation unites the personal to the political, the private to the public, and the physiological to the socio-cultural, then I argue that a Christology constructed from the symbol of menstrual blood can bring reconciliation and healing to individuals, their relationships, and communities. In determining christological accuracy, Isherwood asks, "Does this interpretation of Christ result in our bodying forth more of God's reality now? Does it create more justice and peace and joyous fulfillment in bodily life? Do we experience more of the "resurrection of the body"

⁸⁰ Jen Lewis, "About the Cover: Beauty in Blood—A Macrophotographic Lens on Menstruation, Body Politics, and Visual Art," *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, eds. Chris Bobel et al. (London, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), viii.

⁸¹ Inga T. Winkler, "Introduction: Menstruation as Fundamental," *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, eds. Chris Bobel et al. (London, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 9.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸³ Lisa Isherwood, *Introducing Feminist Christologies*, (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 92.

⁸⁴ Mount Shoop, *Let the Bones Dance*, 4.

now—the gracious gift of fundamental trust in the present bodily reality of God, the Word made flesh?”⁸⁵

How does this re-imagined Christology enable us to bring more of God's justice, peace and joy to our? Perhaps Christ's atonement was not only an effort to bring humanity into reconciliation with God but to bring reconciliation with everything in the created order, beginning with our bodies.

At some point, a menstruating person will likely ask, "what is the point of all this bleeding?" Within our bleeding bodies, it can feel like we are engaged in a relationship of domination and submission; either our bodies dominate us—through debilitating pain, excessive blood, or humiliation—or we attempt to dominate our bodies by regulating our bleeding through hormonal control or concealment. In attempting to fit our unboundaried bodies into a prescribed and regulated social order, we either become victims to the body or seek to establish victory over our bodies. Could Christ's atonement—grounded in a paradigm of fluidity, flow and self-giving relationality—enable us to heal our relationship with our body? Could our "re-membering"—through celebrating the divinely imaged bleeding body as good—be the path towards reconciliation? Can we imagine a world where it “feels so good to bleed?”

What about our human-other relationships? As an icon of Christ's shed blood, menstrual blood invites us to contemplate a relationality where there is no hierarchy or competition. It evokes an expansive relationality of openness and mutual vulnerability, much like Christ's entrance into the world through a mess of blood and birth fluids. In his life and body, Christ crossed boundaries and disrupted traditional notions of power. He demonstrated divine “power-for”⁸⁶ the flourishing of others, showing us a "better way" through "better blood."

As an icon of this divine, unboundaried, self-giving love, menstrual blood is the key to liberating constrained patriarchal christologies. Instead of living within a rigid, boundaried, hierarchal relationality with oneself and others, followers of Christ are invited to be open to mutual self-giving love and for-other relationality. Together, we can participate in renewal, reconciliation, and regeneration and be carriers of healing, peace, and justice. This bleeding shows us the way.

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⁸⁶ Mercedes, *Power-For*, 135.

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