Blood is a substance of power. It is what courses through our veins and whose vibrant rush is a sign of our livelihood. That which is powerful is often accompanied by social taboos and cultural concerns. A problem evident in theology is the status of menstruation and childbirth in the Christian tradition. The Old Testament and early Church communities make statements on how polluting they are against the normative and healthy image of a person: the man. This essay is written from a feminist theological perspective that holds female physical experience as a sight of knowledge. Many women suffer pains each month accompanied by bleeding, yet the dominant white-Christian North American culture has no positive or meaningful approach to empower women with why this happens and what the theological or sacred significance of their suffering is every month. This essay seeks to explore the places of feminine bleeding experience which Christian theology has much demeaned or been silent upon. How can one make theological sense of menstruation and childbirth? Some feminist theologians and scholars have argued that a literal reading of Genesis and a Christology focused on sacrifice do not empower women but rather demean the experiences of childbirth and menstruation. This essay intends to demonstrate that through readings of Genesis and Julian of Norwich’s revelations, the role of blood in Christianity, and reflection on embodied experiences, one can retain life-affirming notions of sacrifice and parts of Genesis, wherein Jesus Christ may be seen as a menstruator and mother.

**Suffering, Childbirth and Genesis**

Every child comes into this world through blood, pain, and ultimately, sacrifice. Scholar Colleen Carpenter Cullinan, in her article “In Pain and Sorrow: Childbirth, Incarnation, and the Suffering of Women,” addresses the problem that childbirth has traditionally been seen as
polluting and a punishment, through a rejection of the idea that Christ’s incarnation was in any way related to the sin and suffering of Eve. Ultimately, Cullinan seeks to reclaim childbirth from the negative darkness into which it has been traditionally cast. She writes that the way in which Christians understand and relate to their bodies is deeply rooted in their understanding of the incarnation. Attitudes towards the female body and childbirth are stained by the punishment of Eve, who disobeyed God in the utopian Garden of Eden. Childbirth is necessary, but why should it be so painful or even deadly? Her article outlines how in the creation narrative of Western religions, God created a perfect world in which humans lived in right relationship with God and did not suffer. Woman, however, disobeyed God and gave into sin; man followed. “In punishment for their crime, creation was changed dramatically: the Earth was no longer a garden, but yielded food only with sweat and labor; God no longer walked in the midst of creation; and women were condemned to pain in childbirth.” Cullinan argues that it “is perfectly possible to reject the mythological understanding of the origins of painful childbirth, and still celebrate the Good News of the Incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus.” In other words, Cullinan rejects the authority of the book of Genesis. However, she does compare childbirth to the crucifixion: “the image of a woman in labor, struggling to give birth to a child, can be placed alongside the image of Jesus on the cross, suffering to give birth to grace, divinized humanity.”

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2 Cullinan, 97.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Cullinan, 100.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Cullinan, 104.
Colleen Carpenter Cullinan’s article eloquently uses a rejection of Genesis and the use of Christology to argue for the dignity of childbirth, women’s bodies and a Mother’s suffering for the sake of love likened to the sacrifice of Christ.\textsuperscript{10} Engaging Cullinan’s interpretation of the pangs of labour as punishment could be the source of an entire essay; this paper, however, intends to reveal how a different focus on Eve within the Genesis story may allow one to see the Biblical account of the origin of women’s pain in a new way. Cullinan wrote that the life of Christ and his salvific action had “nothing to do with Eve.”\textsuperscript{11} Christologically she follows Karl Rahner, as she details evolution to be the cause for Christ.\textsuperscript{12} This framework allows her to dismiss the Genesis account, as she reveals labour pains to simply be a byproduct of our evolutionary biology.\textsuperscript{13} This paper offers another approach that may allow one to reclaim Genesis and a theological significance for labour pains so that, in our embodied being, spiritual truths may be found.

In the book of Genesis, when Adam and Eve sin against God, they are given the parameters of how the world into which they are exiled functions. The punishment for their sin does not fall on Eve alone, but also on Adam. Adam is told that fruits of creation will no longer yield their gifts to him, but he must toil and “by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread” (Genesis 3:19). Likewise, to Eve, God speaks: “in pain you shall bring forth children” (Genesis 3:16). From this perspective, the new, fallen, temporal realm into which Eve and Adam are exiled is a world wherein fruit and new life are brought through pain, sacrifice, sweat and labour. Is this not our experience? In this view, the monthly pains women experience in menstruation and childbirth are the sacrificial sufferings that are the gateway for new life. Through this lens,\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.\textsuperscript{11} Cullinan, 101.\textsuperscript{12} Cullinan, 102.\textsuperscript{13} Cullinan, 99.
Christ incarnated into the conditions of this world, and through the blood, sacrifice, and labour on the Cross, gave birth to a new humanity. In this way, the incarnation is not unrelated to the first woman as Cullinan details, but God takes solidarity with the pains of Eve to bring new life into the world. According to this reading, his blood is like her blood, as she bled to bear the first children. Christ is the menstruator and mother of the new life. In this way, menstruation and labour pains are the sacrifice of women and Christ for the hope of new life.

**Women, Blood and Sacrifice**

The concept of Christ as sacrifice has been discussed by feminist theologians, such as Schüssler Fiorena, Reid, Brown & Parker, as being harmful toward the spiritual and social advancement of women. Joanna Dewey, in “Sacrifice No More,” seeks to undermine the understanding of Christ’s death as being sacrificial, arguing that sacrifice is a “male-dominated hierarchical social order” that marginalizes women. Dewey argues that “sacrificial understandings of Christianity are harmful to people, legitimating hierarchy, encouraging violent behavior, and glorifying innocent victimhood.” Dewey writes that, despite overwhelming criticism from feminist and other theologians of a sacrificial understanding of Christ’s death, Anglicans, Lutherans and Roman Catholics still affirm the Eucharist as a sacrifice. Although early Christians rejected pagan blood-sacrifices, they have ultimately returned to them. “Sacrifice is not a gender-neutral practice.” Dewey argues that in order for women to assert their power and awesome ability have to give birth, men developed the rite of taking life and

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15 Dewey, 68.
16 Dewey, 68-69.
17 Dewey, 69.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
killing in ritual, sacrificial ways to subordinate women’s claim over the lives of their children.\textsuperscript{20}

The blood of a man’s sacrifice is purifying and holy, while the blood of a woman’s childbirth and menstruation is polluting, which she sites to be rooted in the Hebrew Bible.\textsuperscript{21} Dewey explains that connections have been made, both historically and in contemporary North America, that because women may be able to have children, they should not become priests.\textsuperscript{22} Dewey argues that these attitudes reveal a hegemonic yet ancient perspective, that a man’s sacrifice is superior to polluting childbirth.\textsuperscript{23} She sites Origen, who wrote that women in a state of menstruation would not “dare in such a condition either to approach the holy table or to touch the body and blood of Christ.”\textsuperscript{24} Thus, Dewey concludes that Christianity, though at its roots is opposed to the notion of sacrifice, became a sacrificial religion which marginalized women, as their blood sacrifice of birth was less holy than a priest’s.\textsuperscript{25} Dewey writes that understanding Christ’s crucifixion as a sacrifice leads to a glorification of victimhood, martyrdom and self-sacrifice, which marginalizes oppressed women.\textsuperscript{26} She concludes: “Let us indeed make Christianity a religion of life.”\textsuperscript{27}

For menstruation not to be condemned as polluting, for the male state not to be normative, and for patriarchal hierarchies to be transformed, must one do away with the concept of Christian sacrifice? Based on an appeal to experience, sacrifice is an innate part of life. Reaching back to Genesis, without toil, sweat, sacrifice of physical comfort and ease, new life – whether it be crops or children – cannot come into being. Dewey wrote that “the logic of

\textsuperscript{20} Dewey, 70.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Dewey, 73.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Dewey, 74.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
sacrifice, however, is that sin can be atoned only through sacrificial offerings.” However, sacrifice does not need to equate the blotting out of sin, but can be understood as the conditions of this fallen, temporal realm as the gateway to new life. Sacrifice does not necessitate male domination, but is part of our experience and reality in this world. Dewey seeks Christianity to be a religion of life, but life is not possible without sacrifice and blood. This is not glorification of self-sacrifice, but the reality of birth. In order for children to be born, the birth canal is split open, blood abounds and life is often risked, until the screams of the mother mingle with the cries of new life.

Within the Christian tradition, female writers have subverted patriarchal claims over male ownership of Christ’s sacrifice. Julian of Norwich was one such woman who identified female experiences of sacrificial suffering with Christ’s. “We know that all our mother’s bearing is [bearing of] us to pain and to dying; and what is this but that our Very Mother, Jesus” A vision of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion as the great birth of new humanity reveals that a theology of sacrificial blood does not necessitate patriarchal hierarchies; Julian of Norwich experienced such a vision of Christ. In this view Christ came as the menstruator, who bleeds for the potential that his people may be born again, and the mother whose suffering breaks in a new world. This perspective, without discrediting Genesis and sacrifice, subverts Christian sexist and androcentric notions that female blood is inferior or polluting. Thus, the female bleeding experience and creative power is not excluded from Christian theology, but can be the liberating, transformative heart of it.

28 Dewey, 72.
29 Ibid.
30 Dewey, 70.
Julian of Norwich’s vision of Christ is what inspires this claim. Julian experienced a vision of the Lord as a Mother, who sustains humanity in his womb, and suffers “the sharpest throes and most grievous pains that ever were or ever shall be” to give birth to a new humanity.32 In a time when the blood of a woman’s birth was considered dangerous pollution, Julian called Jesus Christ a mother. Female mystics were often concerned with the body as a means to access the divine, as medieval thinkers associated maleness with the mind and femaleness with the body.33 As women were forbidden to teach in the Christian world, reception of physical visions, experiences of Christ and the embodiment of the revelations justified Julian’s authority.34 In this lens, the body is the site of knowledge and divine expression.35 Many female mystics were burnt alive for teaching publicly.36 With courage, Julian committed her revelations that subtly subverted, complicated, and destabilized gender roles.37 Mystical revelation and visions provided an outlet for women to utter a voice within the Church, and seek that fine line between the visionary versus the condemned woman.38 Julian wrote of her revelations that “this vision was shown for all men.”39 Patriarchy internalized in men can be expressed in a fear of being considered effeminate.40 Thus, a female image or understanding of God challenges androcentrism, where the maleness of Christ has been historically used to exclude females from offices and positions of spiritual authority in Christianity.41

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34 Ibid., 95.
35 Ibid.
36 Hendry, 96.
37 Ibid., 97.
38 Ibid.
39 Hendry, 100.
41 Green, 9. See Green for more information of the maleness of Christ.
The bodily authority of a mystic’s vision brought an emphasis on Christ’s physical suffering, his water and blood that streamed form his wounds which ushered in salvation for humanity. Julian’s visions began during a great illness, wherein she experienced a union of Christ’s suffering body with her own. As scholar Petra Munro Hendry articulates: “For women mystics, the blood and wounding of Christ and the menstrual blood and blood of childbirth associated with women’s sexuality linked his blood and their blood, and signified their union.”

Blood however, was considered to be unclean, impure and polluting. Julian’s revelations challenged that taboo by associating a woman’s blood with healing, rejuvenation and the cleansing power of God almighty, incarnate. Through this lens, “women’s bodily experiences are reinscribed as precious.”

**Blood and Sacrifice in Medieval World**

In Julian of Norwich’s context, blood played a central role in medieval medicine, theology, and cultural imagination. Miracle stories were abound of blessed devotee’s receiving the Eucharist only to find it actually turn into blood in both substance and appearance. Blood was powerful, but ever gendered. The Fourth Lateran Council forbid clergy to come into contact with any blood, other than Christ’s in the Eucharist. The blood of women was considered a contaminant, inferior to the blood of a man. The dominant Aristotelian view asserted that, in conception, women’s menstrual blood gave only matter to the embryo, while the man’s semen

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42 Hendry, “Disrupting the Subject: Julian of Norwich and Embodied Knowing,” 100.
43 Hendry, 101.
44 Hendry, 103-104.
45 Hendry, 104.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
49 Bidhauer, 1049.
50 Bidhauer, 1051.
51 Ibid.
was what formed the child. Thus a woman’s blood was not even considered to be truly life or spirit giving. The blood of a woman’s womb was considered dangerous towards men, it could give them leprosy and other deadly diseases. Breast-milk was considered to be “processed menstrual blood.” Menstruation was considered “the curse of Eve” and a non-normative state of being, imperfect compared to the state of men. Yet the Church is considered to be united by the salvific blood of Christ, whose sacrifice brought humanity freedom and new life. Blood was thus both the most dangerous substance in society, if belonging to a woman, and the most sacred substance, when belonging to Christ: “Christ’s sacrifice is always paradigmatically imagined in this way as one blood paying for the other.” Likewise, the mother’s sacrifices her body in conception, childbirth, and breast-feeding, giving her own fluids for the life of the little one.

Julian of Norwich’s revelations on Christ as a Great Mother challenged medieval notions about the poison of menstrual, breast-milk and the fluids of birth. She called Christ the precious Mother, who like the mum that feeds her newborn with the milk of her breast, also feeds his people with his own body. Because only men had access to consecrating the Eucharist, facilitating its transubstantiation into Christ’s body and blood – which could be considered to be the most holy substance in the world – the priesthood can be considered the acme of male power, authority and sovereignty. Yet Julian experienced and boldly proclaimed this Eucharistic blood to be like that of a mother’s breast milk. This must have been deeply scandalous in a medieval world where a woman’s blood was considered Eve’s curse and poisonous to men.

52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Julian of Norwich, Revelations on Divine Love, 127.
59 Ibid.
60 Bidhauer, 1051.
Patricia Donohue-White, a feminist scholar, asserts that the maternal symbol of the divine can be positive, but should never “encompass or [exhaust] all female symbolizations of the divine.” All symbols that draw one into deeper understanding of God are limited and, with this perspective, Julian’s understanding of Christ as both Jesus the Lord and the Mother simultaneously destabilizes gender roles and heteronormative assumptions. “Our tender Mother, Jesus, He may gently lead us to His blessed breast, by His sweet open side, and show therein part of the Godhead and the joys of Heaven, with spiritual sureness of endless bliss.” This may invoke a feeling of utter dependence upon Christ’s body and blood, as a newborn relies utterly on the mother’s milk, milk that responds to the baby’s changing needs. Julian speaks of the wound on the side of Christ and considered how it was the mystical opening that drew believers deep into Jesus’ heart. The perspective of sacrifice understood as Christ’s holy, nourishing and transforming blood, is likened to the deeply stigmatized milk of the mother. Thus Julian of Norwich’s visions compare the most sacred in her society to that most marked by shame: the inner workings of the female body.

According to this interpretation, Christ emerges as the Mother, and the cross stands bravely as the sacred bleeding womb, bursting, breaking in the pains and sacrifice for new life. The cycles of women’s bodies can be validated, honored and given due reverence for their holy role in creation, while the androcentrism of Christianity is subverted. The blood of Jesus was shed to give everlasting life to others, as feminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung describes: “Like Jesus, women’s blood has been shed from eternity. Women’s menstruation is a holy

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62 Ibid.
63 Donohue-White, 19.
64 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations on Divine Love*, 127.
65 Donohue-White, 29.
Eucharist through which the renewal of life becomes possible. Jesus joins women in his life-giving bleeding.”

**Implications: The Cross**

The cross of Christ, his pain and suffering, which promises new life and Eucharist, are the crux of Christian practice and belief. From this perspective, these foundations of faith can be understood as Jesus the Mother undergoing pain, suffering and utter vulnerability to birth new humanity in salvation, and whose blood, like milk, sustains his children. Childbirth is a great risk, where one is pushed through pain for the sake of one unknown. The process of birth can be understood as love reaching beyond itself. When Jesus Christ is understood as the bleeding Mother, it places God in solidarity with the pain that women endure with menstruation, childbirth, and the demands of motherhood. It is an empowering vision because it also sanctifies the bloody, messy, painful, and stigmatized experiences of women that have been so assaulted by androcentric ideas of the body. It honors the womb, comparing it to something as sacred as the cross, which challenges patriarchal rape culture, where women’s bodies (especially their blessed sexual body parts, including breasts) in North American culture are dehumanized and objectified. This essay demonstrates that Christ can be understood as the Womb and Creator of all life: “For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created.” (Colossians 1:16) He is the gateway of new life that incarnated from heaven.

If the Kyrie Eleison was chanted in addition to “Jesus our Mother, have mercy on us!,” what would the status of women be? If along with Saviour, Redeemer, and Lord, Jesus were also

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67 Indeed, 51% of Canadian women have been victims of sexual or physical violence and one out of every four women have been sexually assaulted in their lifetime. For more information see: Toronto Police Service, “Sex Crimes Unit,” 2012, [http://www.torontopolice.on.ca/sexcrimes/sas/statistics.php](http://www.torontopolice.on.ca/sexcrimes/sas/statistics.php)
called Mother and Womb of life, what would our society look like? Would menstruation and childbirth still be a source of shame for women and girls? An understanding of Jesus in solidarity with the bleeding woman stresses the dignity and sanctity of menstruation and mothering, challenging oppressive patriarchal practices. When reproductive organs and breasts of women were analogized with the nature of Christ, as Julian of Norwich adored “His blessed breast,”68 the inviolability blessedness of women’s bodies is proclaimed. From this view, when one sees in Genesis that through sacrifice new life is created, and menstruation is analogized with the healing blood of Christ, androcentric notions of the inferiority of women’s bodies are subverted. One can see that female creative power and bleeding experiences are not a source of shame or excluded from Christian theology, but can be at the transformative heart of it. From this perspective, one is invited to meet a God, the great Womb, who takes solidarity with the womb carriers on earth. In a culture that stigmatizes, sanitizes, shames, and is silent on female blood, the great Womb on the cross bleeds, crying out for a new creation, pushing forth a new humanity, remade, where shame is no more and the broken are born anew.

68 Julian of Norwich, Revelationson Divine Love, 128.
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