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**CHAPTER 5**

***THEOLOGICAL THEMES AND REFLEXIVITY***

This chapter demonstrates the practice of theological reflexivity with a case study, putting flesh to the bones of our theory of change, using the artistry of a film to bring these ideas alive for readers while trying to simulate *how* people change through respectful, compassionate, and trustworthy caregiving relationships. The compassion of caregivers reveals the goodness of creation, humanity, and God. When care seekers take in this goodness, the blinders of habitual life-limiting embedded values and beliefs begin to fall away when they experience the goodness, beauty, and mystery of life that connects all of creation. Theologies change as people assess which values and beliefs connect them with the goodness of life.

Identifying life-giving values and beliefs will not, in and of itself, sustain ongoing change. Meaning-making at an intellectual level does not get rid of embedded theologies associated with emotions like fear, shame, and guilt, as illustrated in chapter 1. These embedded, emotionally based theologies formed in childhood by family and social systems arise over and over again under stress and will continue to be experienced in spite of the intentional theologies people intellectually adopt. Spiritual integration at an embodied, emotional level comes about through spiritual practices that foster compassion, especially self-compassion. Grace, hope, trust, and love need to be experienced physiologically through personal and communal spiritual practices that help people compassionately embrace their automatic fear, guilt, and shame, with their attendant embodied theologies. Theological reflexivity is part of spiritual integration—a means for compassionately understanding how embodied theologies of fear, guilt, shame, rage, and despair are internalized through interacting social systems of privilege and disadvantage. Such deeply embodied spiritual integration is at the heart of the *why* of change that fosters grace-filled sustenance and transformation amidst suffering for persons, families, communities, and the world.

*Who* changes? Care seekers as well caregivers change, and the ripple effects of change move back and forth throughout their lives. Given the central role that caregivers play in caregiving relationships, it is vital to look more closely at the process of self-reflexivity and theological reflexivity, first in terms of the caregiver’s lived theology.

 In order to be self-reflexive, caregivers need to understand how aspects of their social identity shape their stories. We explored questions about social identity in chapter 3 when reflecting on embedded social values that shape body language. In chapter 7 we will use a systems perspective on spiritual care to look at how aspects of social identity influence prejudgments of care seekers. Self-reflexivity involves reflection on the ways that values and beliefs arise out of one’s story and one’s social identity, and have the potential to limit and/or enhance a caregiver’s compassion and respect for particular care seekers ([Nussbaum, 2001, pp. 342-350](#_ENREF_36)).

In order for self-reflexivity to become theological, caregivers need to do their own integrative work within relationships of support and accountability. They need to be able to assess their embedded beliefs and values, especially when empathic distress makes them judge the other and/or foreclose meanings. Caregivers also need to compassionately understand the habitual ways they cope with stress, both in terms of benefits and liabilities. They need to know how to care for themselves with spiritual practices that connect them with goodness. They also need to be in spiritual care relationships and theologically reflexive communities that help them explore when and how values, beliefs, and practices are life-giving. They need to use spiritual practices fostering compassion in order to make the spiritual discipline of radical compassion an authentic part of their identity. Without such theological self-knowledge, exploration, discipline, and accountability they are likely to harm care seekers by imposing their own unexamined beliefs and values on them, and/or judging them in ways that are self-affirming and self-protective. Given the power differential that usually inflates caregivers’ agential power, it is imperative that caregivers are accountable for finding relational ways of tracking what’s going on in their lived theology, assessing when theologies are life-giving and life-limiting, and integrating liberative compassion into their practice of care.

Becoming theologically reflexive is especially challenging if one’s theological education does not connect second-order ways of thinking theologically with life experiences and practices of care. When abstract knowledge is simply applied to practice, it is like a sewing pattern pinned upon a tapestry telling a story. When scissors snip around the pattern, cutting the cloth of the tapestry to fit the pattern, the story depicted in the tapestry is sheared off. Take, for example, an empathically distressed pastoral caregiver who jumps to religious doctrines or diagnostic checklists when questioning the care seeker’s salvation or mental health. Applying ideas—whether religious or psychological—can easily make care seekers feel like a specimen made to fit the portrait of an unbeliever or clinical patient. In other words, when theological thinking remains abstract—as in systematic theologies that seem hermetically sealed within deductive reasoning—then it will be challenging to connect the dots between the abstract ideas of theology and the first-order language people use to talk about their beliefs, practices, and values.

The contextual knowledge of pastoral theologians has an authenticity that comes from personal and professional integration. Pastoral theologians are caregivers and educators as well as scholars. In order for them to be credible, they need to be able to “walk the talk” by modeling intercultural care in the ways they teach, write, and interact.[[1]](#footnote-1) They often have a finely honed sensitivity for when they themselves are being cared for. Indeed, they need to be able to practice self-care and receive care. They are like musicians who regularly perform in ensembles, teach music theory and performance, compose music, and enjoy listening to music. Given this integration of different kinds of knowledge—self-knowledge, knowledge about the practice and teaching of care, and pastoral theological knowledge—pastoral theologians often write and teach in personable, authentic, and integrated ways. In other words, it’s easy to hear and get to know their voices in reading their work.

In illustrating the process of theological reflexivity, we will focus as much on the caregiver as the care seeker in our case study, in order to highlight how and why caregivers need to be able to identify aspects of their lived theology that might enhance or limit their caregiving and the cocreated meanings generated out of the caregiving relationship. In the second half of the chapter we will look at several ways of thinking theologically that might be relevant and meaningful for readers as they identify their beliefs and values, particularly about suffering and evil.

***A Case Study***

The best way to explain how to become theologically reflexive is with a detailed illustration. I will begin with a care seeker’s narrative—what Anton Boisen ([1936](#_ENREF_3)) called “the living human document”—using a film to construct a case study. The art of film—its scriptwriter, producer, cinematographer, actors, and musicians—often opens viewers to the mystery and ambiguity of ordinary human suffering. Stepping into artistically portrayed suffering can foster compassion. Art often moves viewers beyond empathic distress to empathic concern by tapping into positive emotions, like love, associated with helping others. In a sense, the artist’s compassionate rendering of suffering helps viewers maintain a compassionate attitude instead of reacting with empathic distress. Often the compassion that viewers feel for characters in the film washes back over themselves, as the film’s narrative becomes interwoven with their own.

I have chosen Kenneth Lonergan’s ([2000](#_ENREF_29)) film *You Can Count on Me* for several reasons. Neither sentimental or melodramatic, the film has “such intense *realness* about it, the way people really talk, the way lives are actually lived, that [it is] unlike anything else on screen, radical almost, in its attention to the genuine messiness of human lives” ([Lovell, 2012](#_ENREF_30)). *New York Times* film critic Stephen Holden describes this film as belonging to “a handful of small, hardy North American films . . . whose flinty-eyed realism cuts against prevailing Hollywood froth. As small as their audiences may be, these are the films that stand the best chance of one day being regarded as classics” ([2001](#_ENREF_25)). The film’s most germane feature for my purpose is its depiction of a Methodist minister’s pastoral care conversations at turning points in the story. The role of the minister is played by Lonergan, the movie’s director and screen writer, whose limited facial expressions and tone of voice make him come across as though he is not a professional actor, lending a sense of verisimilitude to the role.

The opening scenes of *You Can Count on Me* depict Samantha (Sammy) Prescott and Terry Prescott as children—12 and 8 respectively—when a car accident killed their parents. Sammy grew up to become a responsible single mother. She had some wild years in her late adolescence that resulted in the birth of her son Rudy Jr. Becoming a mother, it seems, was sobering for Sammy. She settled down, cutting herself off from her son’s father, Rudy Sr., and the world he represented. Now her life centers on the kind of responsibilities that shaped her parents’ lives before they were tragically killed: Rudy’s well-being, her livelihood, and making a home in the house where she grew up.

When the movie opens, Sammy is adjusting to her new boss at the bank, where she has worked her way up to being a loan officer. Brian Everett is about 10 years her junior and fresh out of management training. He has relocated to the small town of Scottsville with his pregnant wife to become the new manager. His way of establishing authority at the bank is to impose rules. In his first conversation with Sammy, Brian tells her she cannot take a 15-minute break in midafternoon to pick up Rudy Jr., who is 8, at the bus stop and drop him off at after-school care. Sammy argues with him. She has seen bank managers come and go. She is not about to change her routine, nor is she going to relate to Brian as though she is a junior, compliant employee.

Returning home from work that day, she finds a letter from her brother, Terry, who has been out of touch for six months. She’s delighted to hear that he is coming to see her. He arrives a few days later and they stop in town for lunch at a restaurant. Terry tells her that he needs money so that his girlfriend can get an abortion. He also discloses why he’s been out of touch: he was in jail for disorderly conduct when intoxicated. Sammy is shocked.[[2]](#footnote-2) Her immediate response is to longingly wish for Mom because, “No one knows what to do with you.” Sammy’s next move is to question Terry about whether he ever goes to church. He quickly rejects her question about church—a topic he labels “that shit”—suggesting they’ve had this conversation before. When she persists, he rejects church teachings and practices as “ridiculous,” “primitive,” and a “fairytale.” Sammy forges on, proposing that his lack of religious faith is what makes things so difficult for Terry. She says he has no anchor, which is why he drifts around so much.

If Sammy were doing sisterly intercultural care, she would stay with or return to the emotions of longing and helplessness they both feel in their mother’s absence. This is no doubt a painful relational space to share; her distress makes her reach for values and beliefs that have helped her. She wishes Terry would go to church and rediscover family values from childhood, which have been an anchor for her. Sammy offers spiritual advice to Terry by fervently trying to convince him to reclaim values and beliefs from childhood. Terry rejects Sammy’s advice, in the process sharing a glimpse of his existential views that their childhood religion now seems primitive and like a fairytale.

Watching this scene, viewers might well hearken back to an opening scene, where the young Sammy and Terry sit side by side in church at their parents’ funeral, clutching each other’s hands while a somber-looking yet kindly female minister speaks to them from the pulpit. While Sammy has returned to this congregation and found support and guidance as a single mother, Terry has cast aside these beliefs and ways of coping. What they hold in common, however, is a longing for their mother.

**Exploring Lived Theologies**

Everyone who has grappled with deep losses, like Sammy’s and Terry’s loss of their parents, has faced the challenge of making sense of such suffering. “Suffering is the starting point for all pastoral and practical theology,” Cooper-White ([2012, p. 23](#_ENREF_6)) notes, describing suffering in Jürgen Moltmann’s ([1993, p. 49](#_ENREF_32)) words as “the open wound of life in this world.”[[3]](#footnote-3) People in crisis initially raise questions and make laments like “Why is this happening to me?” Their first attempts at answers come out of their embedded theology—the theological presuppositions that shape their lives and practices. Embedded theology is “what devoted Christians have in mind when they say things like ‘My faith and my church mean a lot to me’” ([Stone & Duke, 2006, p. 15](#_ENREF_41)). Sammy gives voice to her embedded theology when she questions Terry about his beliefs and spiritual practices. After asking whether he ever goes to church anymore she gives her diagnosis: that his difficulties and drifting result from not having an anchor. “Wrapped up in such [questions] is a host of associated elements—memories, beliefs, feelings, values, and hopes—not necessarily stated, and perhaps not at all clear” ([Stone & Duke, 2006, p. 15](#_ENREF_41)). In contrast, deliberative theologies are intentionally thought out; the “host of associated elements” is sorted out—the memories unpacked, the beliefs appraised, the feelings, values, and hopes identified and evaluated.

When people become aware of their embedded theology in the midst of a crisis, they often go through a process of evaluating their beliefs, conserving life-giving values and beliefs, setting aside those that are life-limiting, sometimes claiming new values and beliefs. Sammy and Terry’s conversation challenges each of them to think more about their embedded theologies. If they are able to do this, they will engage in deliberative or what I call intentional theology.

Often care seekers’ actions are influenced by embedded theologies—values and beliefs formed through significant relationships and experiences. This influence may be more or less outside of care seekers’ awareness until they begin a process of identifying and deciding whether such values and beliefs are still relevant. How do embedded values and beliefs influence care seekers’ *lived* theology—that is, the values and beliefs they put into practice? Do enacted beliefs and values represent their embedded beliefs and values from childhood or their espoused beliefs and values (what they say they believe)? Together, caregivers and care seekers can explore whether care seekers’ lived theology is congruent with their espoused theology and whether their lived theology is helping or hindering them in the context of the crisis or transition that compels them to seek care.

As we turn to the question of what makes one’s lived theology life-giving or life-limiting, we will draw upon Pargament’s ([2006](#_ENREF_37)) description of spiritual orienting systems as “the habits, values, relationships, beliefs that express one’s spirituality or sense of the sacred” ([Pargament, et al., 2006, p. 130](#_ENREF_37)). Orienting systems contain embedded beliefs and values, perhaps outside of one’s awareness but enacted in one’s practices, especially under stress. Orienting systems also include deliberative beliefs and values that may be espoused but not always enacted. Pargament outlines four ways of assessing spiritual orienting systems:

Differentiated meaning-making complex enough to bear the weight of suffering

Integration of one’s values, beliefs, and practices

Flexibility in how one spiritually copes with stress

Beliefs and spiritual practices related to the goodness of life/God’s goodness that foster self-compassion and compassion

His selection of these criteria is based on extensive research on spiritual coping. It is easy to use Pargament’s four criteria while staying close to an unfolding conversation because it doesn’t feel like a checklist or diagnostic assessment tool. Perhaps the usefulness of Pargament’s assessment criteria comes in part from his work as both clinician and researcher. Like that of the pastoral theologians described earlier in this chapter, Pargament’s combination of clinical work, research, and teaching gives his writing a high degree of contextual meaningfulness, along with a sense of authenticity.

**Differentiation of meaning-making**

The first criterion for life-giving spiritual orienting systems has to do with *differentiation*: whether religious and theological meanings have been fully articulated and made one’s own. Have care seekers been able to identify and explore the embedded beliefs, values, and spiritual coping from their childhood that still exert an influence on them? Has this embedded theology been evaluated in terms of whether it is life-giving or life-limiting in the current crisis? Have care seekers aligned their embedded beliefs and values with what they currently espouse to be true for them? Is their deliberative meaning-making complex enough to bear the weight of suffering—not only their own suffering but also the suffering of the world? Will their meaning-making help them regulate empathic distress and shift into empathic concern and compassion where love propels care seekers to reach out rather than withdraw ([Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007](#_ENREF_1); [Klimecki, Leiberg, Lamm, & Singer, 2013](#_ENREF_27))?

At first glance, the conversation from *You Can Count on Me* suggests that Sammy and Terry are not in a space to cocreate complex meanings that will help them bear the weight of suffering. There is Sammy’s shock and sense of helplessness when she takes in the news about her brother’s arrest. There is Terry’s defensiveness—blaming the other guy and the system rather than taking responsibility for his drinking and violence. There is also the suffering of his pregnant girlfriend, along with Sammy’s feeling used by Terry; perhaps also memories of her pregnancy with Rudy Jr. There is the weight of the sudden death of their parents, illustrated in the conversation by the poignant moment of acutely missing their mother. In the face of such multilayered suffering, Sammy turns to religious values and practices, suggesting to Terry that if he went to church he might find anchoring values, beliefs, and practices, as she has. The way Sammy uses these beliefs—applying them like a Band-Aid to a gaping wound—makes viewers wonder whether she has fully explored these beliefs and practices in terms of her past suffering and whether she has the capacity in this moment to explore these beliefs in the face of current suffering. Neither is able to use their meaning-making to move beyond empathic distress that mires them in emotions of anger, fear, and helpless expressed so eloquently in their body language and vocal tones. They don’t have meanings that take them beyond distress to empathic concern for each other that fully expresses their love.

**Integration and flexibility**

These questions about whether Sammy’s and Terry’s beliefs are differentiated or complex enough to bear the weight of their suffering lead into Pargament’s second and third criteria for assessing meaning-making and coping: integration vs. fragmentation or compartmentalization and flexibility vs. inflexibility. Flexibility includes how one understands and responds to suffering. Research on compassion has demonstrated that spiritual practices fostering positive emotions like contentment, love, and joy broaden one’s repertoire of thoughts and actions when faced with suffering, unlike negative emotions like fear ([Cohn & Fredrickson, 2009](#_ENREF_5); [Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008](#_ENREF_18)). This research has interesting implications for understanding someone like Sammy in our case study: especially her reaction to Terry’s news about his arrest.

Sammy appears to have returned to and integrated childhood values when she became a parent and turned her life around. She has enacted core values related to being a responsible single working mother in establishing a home for Rudy Jr., and working her way up at her local bank to becoming a loan officer. Re-establishing her childhood home for herself and her son is also related to being a good sister. She keeps a file with all of Terry’s letters. She worries about him and tries to keep track of him. He, in turns, counts on her to help him out with his girlfriend’s pregnancy.

In the shock of hearing Terry’s news about his arrest, Sammy seems unable in the moment to engage in active and flexible meaning-making. Her distress makes her, at least momentarily, inflexible in how she copes, by returning to the values, beliefs, and practices that seem to have “saved” her when she became a mother. By grasping a ready-made spiritual orienting system of lived theology and imposing it on Terry, Sammy seems unable to explore new meanings and practices that could emerge in the jarring revelation of his troubled past and their longing for their mother. The inflexibility is part of empathic distress that mires her in anger, sadness, and blame. Terry’s response, equally inflexible, escalates the cycle of blame. Neither can draw upon spiritual orientating systems capable of moving them beyond distress to compassion. And so they miss an opportunity to step into the mystery of each other’s spiritual worlds. Such inflexibility and compartmentalization (returning to past ways of coping that don’t fit the current situation) are understandable responses to the shock of Terry’s disclosure and their re-experiencing of grief. The next days and weeks will reveal whether Sammy and Terry have compassionate support systems that can help them explore new meanings and possibilities for their relationship.

**Beliefs and spiritual practices related to benevolence and goodness**

Pargament’s first three criteria concerning differentiated meaning-making, integration, and flexibility reveal aspects of Sammy and Terry’s lived theology or spiritual orienting system and the possibilities of *what* could change for each of them and their relationship if they seek spiritual care. His last criterion explores not only the *what* but the *how* of change: whether these two characters can experience respect, trust, and compassion. Do their spiritual practices help them experience goodness: God’s goodness (if that is part of their religious world), self-goodness, and the goodness of humanity and creation? Or do they judge themselves and blame each other harshly and feel cut off from the love of God and those around them? I wonder, for example, whether Sammy’s longing for her mother in the midst of this crisis is more particularly a longing for her mother’s compassion.

Longing as an adult for the compassionate presence that her mother provided, Sammy has difficulty expressing compassion for Terry in the face of his revelation. While her tone of advising him about religious faith is calm, it is also instructional and implies judgment. Terry, in turn, feels misunderstood. Later that night, however, when Terry cries while telling Sammy about his girlfriend’s suicide attempt, she puts her arms around him and comforts him. Such moments of compassion are signs of a life-giving lived theology, along with openness to exploring new meanings and spiritual practices that connect them with goodness (their own inherent goodness and the goodness of their relationship). Such compassion will be necessary if their respective lived theologies are going to become more integrated, flexible, and differentiated. How, we might wonder, do Sammy and Terry experience goodness in their daily lives? Do they have spiritual practices that foster compassion? Let us return to the case study with these questions in mind.

The next workday after Terry’s return, Sammy has another argument with her boss Brian. When Brian’s pregnant wife visits the bank, it’s obvious that she is unhappy with her husband. At the end of the day, Sammy notices how tired and forlorn he looks. She asks sympathetically about his wife and her pregnancy. Brian alludes to marital tensions. In an effort to reach out, she invites him for a beer. In the next scene, they are eating at a restaurant and obviously enjoying each other’s company. In the following scene they are laughing about their arguments at work and then passionately kissing in his car.

This shift from work conflict to sympathy to playful humor about their arguments to sexual intimacy suggests that Sammy and Brian are being propelled into a sexual relationship by undercurrents in their power struggles. Brian seems overwhelmed by his new job, marital tensions, and impending fatherhood; the false intimacy of becoming sexual with a subordinate is a hazardous way of coping. Sammy is confused about her boyfriend Bob’s recent marriage proposal and angry about Brian’s rules. Her sympathy and the ensuing sexual interaction with him represent a false peer relationship that temporarily “resolves” their power struggles and distracts Sammy from questions about Bob’s proposal. She seems unaware of the risks she is taking in crossing professional boundaries with her boss. While Brian is the one ultimately responsible for maintaining these boundaries, she has a lot to lose if she is blamed—a likely scenario if the bank does not have clear misconduct policies and procedures.

The exuberant enjoyment of their initial sexual encounter gives way to Sammy’s moral distress about compromising her core values. She turns to her minister, Ron, for help. He likely has had an ongoing pastoral relationship with her as the minister of her congregation. As the conversation begins, her courage fails her. Instead of talking about herself, Sammy tells Ron about her brother and his problems. In a subsequent scene, Ron has come to Sammy’s house on a Saturday morning when brother and sister are at home. He initiates a conversation with Terry about the purpose of his life while Sammy looks on. Terry feels ambushed by the visit, all the more startled that the minister is directing attention at him when Terry knows that Sammy is feeling guilty over her sexual relationship with her boss. He finds her assumption that he needs spiritual guidance insulting because she has made no effort to step into Terry’s world, to find out what his values and beliefs are. Ron tries to clarify his approach, which is not to convert to a set of beliefs but to be a model in the way he or Sammy lives out their beliefs. Terry grins in response to this, knowing Sammy’s guilt. Ron describes how his own life is made meaningful when people come to him with life and death problems. He feels “connected with the real center of people’s lives.” Without this sense of purpose he would “feel like a negligible little scrap floating around in some kind of empty void with no sense of connectedness to anything around me except by virtue of whatever little philosophies I can scrape together on my own.”

Viewing the conversation up to this point through the lens of an intercultural approach to care, we might well critique Ron’s spiritual care because he imposes his values onto Terry in the same way that Sammy did, albeit with a little more sophistication. He appears to make premature judgments about Terry’s existential world, in his reference to the “little philosophies” that are “scraped together” on his own. Terry questions what all of this has to do with him—a good question. Ron can’t help but become more direct, trying to draw some sort of connection between the significance he finds in his life and Terry’s existential world. He asks Terry what makes his life important. Terry takes the question seriously and begins to hesitantly answer. Ron pushes him to think beyond himself, to why his life is important in the larger “scheme of things.”

Ron’s series of questions about what is important obviously come from his religious world. He uses his values to direct the conversation in the same way Sammy referenced her values in advising Terry in their conversation about his girlfriend’s pregnancy. Neither shows respect for Terry’s existential world, although Ron is more disclosive of where his values and beliefs come from. Terry seems interested and responds by saying something about his own values and beliefs. He admits that he finds Ron’s questions about meaning appealing but he finds his childhood religion just makes him feel bad, and he wants beliefs that feel true to him. Ron encourages him in this exploration of beliefs, saying he doesn’t need to necessarily believe in God or religion if he finds those terms problematic.

This closing exchange seems promising. Terry acknowledges that there are embedded childhood beliefs that still appeal to him but he doesn’t want to “feel bad.” He appreciates that Ron offers a more deliberative theology based on ultimate concerns rather than adherence to doctrine. Ron doesn’t explore Terry’s reasons for rejecting precritical childhood beliefs and values. Instead, he offers Terry a way to formulate beliefs without adherence to doctrine. They seem to be on the edge of entering a cocreative space to deliberate further. Viewers don’t hear how this conversation ends.

Peering through a lens of intercultural care, I would describe Ron as short-circuiting the first step of establishing a contract of care. Who is the care seeker? It is Sammy who has expressed concerns about her brother. Instead of focusing on her, Ron stages an intervention of sorts with Terry. He uses agential power inappropriately by surprising Terry with this visit and then pursuing a conversation with him as if he is the care seeker, without negotiating a contract of care. Ron imposes his values and beliefs on Terry, pushing Terry into his religious world by talking about the significance of his work. He prejudges Terry’s existential world, implying that it is an (R5) “empty void with no sense of connectedness to anything around [him] except by virtue of whatever little philosophies [he] can scrape together on [his] own.” One wonders whether Sammy’s misplaced spiritual struggle (transferring concerns about her spiritual well-being onto her brother) have tapped into a kind of missionary zeal in Ron that short-circuits a respectful, compassionate and cocreative process of pastoral care.

In spite of Ron’s inappropriate use of power, Terry begins to receive some of what he is saying, finding this conversation about the meaning of one’s life appealing. He lets Ron glimpse his existential world, in which he doesn’t want beliefs that make him feel bad; he want beliefs that are true for him. There is an attempt at cocreating meaning as Terry begins to braid Ron’s language about being “connected to something important” into his description of his existential world. This language, however, is Ron’s language; Terry’s language centers around beliefs that make him feel bad. Ron should be following the language Terry uses to describe his existential struggles with self-blame and judgment. It will be difficult to sustain the tenuous moment of cocreation of meaning much beyond this interaction because of a lack of trust and a basic contract of care. One might wonder from this conversation whether Ron has peer or supervisory relationships that help him understand these complex power dynamics. How does he hold himself accountable for his use of agential power? Does his spiritual life include practices that foster compassion in ways that access more flexible differentiated meaning systems?

Any insights that Terry, Ron, and Sammy might gain through this conversation into their respective worlds seem to be lost after Ron has left, when Terry becomes angry with Sammy. It is understandable but unfortunate that he is not able to express his anger directly at her for her disrespect of his beliefs. Instead he punishes her by reneging on a planned fishing trip with Rudy Jr. Sammy becomes furious with him. That night she is unable to sleep, overcome with guilt over her hypocrisy. Ron’s pastoral visit and her argument with Terry create a crisis of conscience for her.

After Sunday worship on the following day Sammy greets Ron at the door of the church as her boss and his pregnant wife exit behind her. She watches them leave. She then asks Ron if she can speak with him, and Ron invites her to his office.[[4]](#footnote-4) They sit across from each other with his desk in between them. Sammy begins by admitting that she was hypocritical by refraining from telling him about her sexual relationship with her boss. She then shifts the conversation to questions of doctrine, asking hesitantly what the church’s official position is on fornication and adultery. Ron gently responds that adultery is a sin. Sammy energetically responds that it should be. Ron suggests that talk about sin may not be the best place to start their conversation and Sammy protests, saying she wants to be told that she is endangering her immortal soul and that if she doesn’t stop she will “burn in hell.” Ron again protests this way of tackling the problem and Sammy in turn mocks a psychological approach that explores why she’s in this situation. Ron takes up the question and puts it to her. Abashed, she asks which of the three men—brother, boss, or boyfriend—his questions concerns and he says all of them. Hesitantly he says she feels sorry for them and then questions how ridiculous this sounds. Ron’s softened facial features express compassion and a quiet moment follows.

This conversation, likely an excerpt of a longer conversation, is a rich illustration of intercultural care and its potential for theological meaning-making. Watching the scene will help viewers appreciate how much body language is used to convey values and beliefs. Sammy uses an aggressive tone in her initial focus on the church’s official position on fornication and adultery. Her body language and words suggest that she has been judging her behavior as sinful—a judgment heightened no doubt by being in worship that morning with her boss and his pregnant wife. She takes the bull by the horns theologically in her strident opening question, no doubt acutely experiencing the judgment of God and the congregation now that she has confessed her sin. What seems to be missing in her spiritual orienting system—both in her words and body language—at this moment is self-understanding and compassion for how this sexual relationship came about. She turns to doctrine on adultery instead of God’s compassion.

We might wonder how Sammy understands Ron’s lived theology. His sermons, along with his liturgical and pastoral leadership, have likely disclosed some of his lived theology, if his earlier conversation with Terry is typical. He seems to practice an existentially oriented theology of ultimate concerns. We might have guessed from his conversation with Terry that he espouses a more clinical approach to pastoral care, perhaps correlating Paul Tillich’s existential theology of “ultimate concerns” with Carl Rogers’s counseling strategy of “unconditional positive regard.” His espoused clinical approach does not seem to match the process of pastoral care, though, at least in his conversation with Terry. Ironically, Ron used agential power by imposing his beliefs on Terry. His tone of voice seems disengaged; his facial expressions more often convey judgment rather than compassion. This use of power suggests more of a clerical or classical paradigm of care: he tried to “save” Terry with beliefs about ultimate purposes. Sammy, meanwhile, expects a classical or clerical approach to pastoral care in which Ron guides her by invoking the church’s official position, as a way of saving her soul from eternal damnation. She seems to have responded to the clerical way he uses power rather than his clinically oriented existential theology.

By taking the lead in this conversation Sammy invites Ron into her religious world, providing opportunities for him to assess whether her lived theology *connects her with goodness*, is *flexible* and *integrated*, and whether her *meaning-making is differentiated* enough to bear the weight of her suffering. It is immediately apparent that she anticipates *judgment of her sinfulness* rather than benevolence or compassion (aspects of her religious world that link with Pargament’s four criteria are italicized). Her moral distress has prompted her to retrieve embedded theologies of judgment and a spiritual practice of seeking repentance. Her way of coping seems *inflexible*, at least in the face of Ron’s initial responses. This *attempt at integration* is motivated by a desire to bring her embedded beliefs into alignment with her actions. Integration will not work if she continues to rely on precritical doctrines about judgment and eternal damnation. These doctrines and practices of repentance are *too simple* for the complex relational dynamics that have resulted in crossing professional boundaries with her boss. Such doctrines keep her mired in self-blame and isolated suffering. Sammy’s meaning-making is *not differentiated*—not complex enough to bear the weight of her sinfulness, and its connections with suffering in her life. She seeks pastoral care to use her spiritual orienting system and lived theology to cope with spiritual struggle and moral distress over her sexual relationship with her boss. Pargament’s four criteria—compassion vs. condemnation, flexibility vs. inflexibility, integration vs. dis-integration, and differentiation vs. simplicity of meaning-making—can be used to appreciate what is life-limiting theologically and psychologically about Sammy’s religious coping. The same criteria provide a pathway for Ron to proceed in his spiritual care in that he begins with compassionate meaning-making.

Ron counters Sammy’s expectation that he will judge and instruct her using a classical paradigm of pastoral care. Instead, he shifts into a clinical paradigm, even after Sammy’s disparagement of such “psychological bullshit.” Ron holds his ground, albeit in a gentle, tentative way, with sympathetic body language and a softened facial expression that seems to reflect her pain. He invites her to explore the relational dynamics that got her into this situation. She seems surprised by her response—that she feels sorry for them. Her self-judgment is again evident, when she says how ridiculous that is. We don’t hear the rest of their conversation. Perhaps they explore these relational dynamics in ways that foster self-compassion. Perhaps Ron comes back to Sammy’s beliefs about eternal damnation and her need to know the church’s official position on fornication. Perhaps they talk about what to do next: how to live out her values in the midst of this complex crisis. It’s clear that whatever happens, Sammy leaves resolved to take action. She seems to have gone through some sort of process of evaluating her beliefs and integrating them into an action plan.

That afternoon Sammy visits Bob. Realizing that she can’t accept his proposal just because she feels sorry for him, she asks if they can go back to being friends. When he struggles to understand her reasons, she seems at a loss for words and almost initiates physical intimacy. This move suggests that it’s hard for her to talk through complex relational dynamics with Bob. It’s easier to be physically intimate, perhaps because she feels sorry for him once again and doesn’t know how to sort out and express these emotions. She wants to take care of him with physical intimacy; such desire may reflect her embodied social values about what it means to be a woman.

After this conversation with Bob Sammy meets Brian at a motel for a sexual encounter (all in the same afternoon as her visit with Ron). What has happened to her resolve? Viewers may wonder whether sex with Brian is a “consolation” for the impending breakup she has resolved to initiate. When they are getting ready to leave, she tells him they have to end their sexual relationship.

At home, Sammy reveals to Terry that she feels it is no longer safe for Terry to live with her and her son. Prior to this conversation, we see that Terry has taken it upon himself to show Rudy Jr., the ways of the world. Without consulting Sammy he takes Rudy Jr., to meet his father, who has not seen his son for many years. When Terry verbally challenges Rudy Sr., to come out of his trailer and meet his son, the latter begins shouting at them to leave and soon shoves Terry. Terry, in return, throws a punch and doesn’t stop until the neighbors pull him off. The police are called. Terry and the young Rudy are taken away in police cars. After a period of intense worrying when her brother and son don’t come home, Sammy eventually learns of all that has happened. She belatedly realizes how dangerous Terry can be when he is impulsive and enraged. She kicks him out and he stays with a friend for the rest of his visit to Scottsville.

A few days later, when Terry is getting ready to leave town without seeing either Sammy or Rudy Jr. again, Sammy convinces him to meet one last time. In the final scene, brother and sister seem to connect in a new way, with Terry assuming his part in maintaining an ongoing connection with her and Rudy Jr. Terry alludes to some of his core values—a sense of adventure and a spiritual connection with the beauty of nature. Sammy tearfully expresses her worries about him. He reassures her, reminding her of the promise they made as children that they could count on each other. They seem to move in a small but important way toward a more mutual, adult relationship in which the intensity of their love and shared tragic loss of their parents can be acknowledged.

In going through the spiritual care conversations in this film, we have looked at aspects of intercultural care in a hands-on way:

Establishing trust and the contract of care

Monitoring power dynamics by being receptive to the care seeker’s story

Drawing upon spiritual practices that integrate compassion into one’s practice of care

Exploring embedded theologies in ways that foster compassion

Assessing lived theologies (values, beliefs and spiritual practices) using Pargament’s criteria

Deliberating over embedded theologies by aligning espoused values with enacted values

Now let us step back from the immediacy of these spiritual care conversations and use several second-order ways of theologically understanding Terry, Sammy, and their conversations with each other and with Ron. First we will review the metaphor of the trifocal lenses that can be applied to pastoral and spiritual care. Then, in reflecting further on these spiritual care conversations, we will turn to several theologians whom I find meaningful and relevant for reasons I will elaborate.

**Using Trifocal Lenses**

As caregivers listen for the existential questions and laments arising from the embedded theologies of people in crisis, they can be attuned to a care seeker’s need at times for theological certainty. In the initial shock accompanying acute moments of crisis, people often function out of a precritical mode, appealing directly to God to intervene in their crisis. In our case study Sammy expresses embedded beliefs about adultery and fornication. She wants Ron to help her use spiritual ways of coping that involve confession and repentance, as though these would literally save her soul. In a similar way, Terry seems to rely on embedded beliefs in his conversation with his sister about their childhood religion as primitive and fairy-tale-like. His rejection of childhood beliefs may have occurred in his teenage years when he left home. One wonders whether there was further deliberation of his beliefs after he left home.

At this moment in the crisis pastoral caregivers can do their own deliberative theological reflections on whether the embedded theologies being expressed are life-giving or destructive. If they were caregivers to Sammy and Terry they can ask questions such as these, following Pargament’s description of what makes spiritual orienting systems life-giving:

— Does Sammy’s theology connect her with a compassionate loving God, especially in moments when she condemns herself?

— Does Terry’s theology call him to account for the ways in which he has hurt others?

— Do their theologies keep them so focused on their own suffering that they lose sight of the needs of others?

— Does her theology help her live out the promises she made when she joined a community of faith and, presumably, had her son baptized?

— Do their theologies help them apprehend the mystery of God’s presence in the midst of their crises?

As shock and denial give way to fuller awareness, people often shift into a more modern mode, sometimes relying upon medical and psychological knowledge for definitive explanations based on science and technology. In our case study, Sammy turns to her religious beliefs and seeks out pastoral care, rather than turning to psychological perspectives and therapy. It is surprising that in her conversation with Terry Sammy reaches for religious beliefs and practices. In her shoes I would think first about Terry’s behavior in terms of second-order psychological perspectives on alcohol abuse and anger. I wonder whether Sammy thinks in religious terms because this is what might have “saved” her at some point in her past. I’m guessing that she returned to her childhood church and re-established her family home in order to raise her son as a single mother. She turns to religious values, beliefs, and ways of coping in reacting to her brother and in the midst of her own spiritual struggle. She seeks out help from her minister twice, persevering in spite of self-condemnation that could easily shame and silence her. How might Sammy’s religious coping, especially the meaning-making process she begins with her minister, help her in the long run?

Care seekers like Sammy may be ready to engage in more deliberative theologizing about how they are experiencing God, what God wants for them, and how to understand their suffering. As pastoral caregivers engage in this deliberative theology with care seekers, they should assess the extent to which the emerging deliberative theology of the person in crisis reflects the fullness and mystery of God’s being. In making such assessments, caregivers draw upon their theological education. Christian and Jewish pastoral caregivers use Biblical critical methods to interpret what biblical texts tell them about the care seeker’s experience of God; they draw upon theological perspectives on evil and suffering to understand the care seeker’s pain. Using these sources and norms of authority, they engage in a process of co-constructing a deliberative theology with the care seeker. The more care seekers are able to tolerate the complexity and ambiguity of their suffering and God’s presence, the more their deliberative theologies may include more radical reconstructions that take into account postmodern approaches to knowledge. Such reconstructions will become the basis for an enduring relationship with God, others, and self that can withstand the complexities and ambiguities of life in the twenty-first century.

**Cocreating Postmodern Lived Theologies**

How can a pastoral caregiver and care seeker engage in deliberative theological reflection based upon postmodern approaches to knowledge? How might Sammy, and perhaps Terry as well, deliberate over embedded beliefs, and build a compassionate, flexible, integrated theology/spiritual orienting system that can bear the weight of their suffering? For example, when Ron invites Sammy to think about how she got into difficulties with the men in her life—brother, boyfriend, and boss— he invites her to create a more complex understanding of her narrative. The embedded theology she draws upon to cope with this crisis uses doctrines on adultery and confession of sin that will save her soul from eternal damnation. Caregivers engage theological empathy in order to stand in the shoes of those theologically different from them and appreciate how their lived theology can be a home for them in troubled, challenging times ([Doehring, 2002](#_ENREF_9)). Caregivers draw upon theological reflexivity to assess the way this lived theology simplistically addresses her agential capacity to sin and repent. What is left out of Sammy’s precritical religious narrative is the complex ways that she has been shaped by her past. Ron invites her to co-construct a more complex narrative about how she got herself into this situation. Her response—that she feels sorry for them—opens up a much more comprehensive understanding of both her agency and her past. Getting into trouble with men because she feels sorry for them could well be a rich narrative theme to explore. This theme also suggests a way ahead: what kinds of relationships does Sammy want with the men in her life? What actions can she take to create relationships that are good for her and each of them? The goal of liberative integration weaves together the complex ways history shapes care seekers like Sammy and the myriad possibilities for self-agency, generating an integrated theology that sustains goodness, and leading to healing and justice. Thus we turn now to describing how caregivers can employ particular theological perspectives as they approach the step of engaging the care seeker in deliberative theology. In this chapter we will use two theological perspectives: Neville’s ([1996](#_ENREF_35)) theology of broken symbols and Nelson’s ([2003](#_ENREF_34)) five paradigms for thinking theologically about suffering and evil. I’ve chosen these theologians for three reasons.

First, Neville’s theology of broken symbols elaborates the way narratives as well as religious worlds rely on symbols to convey ineffable mystery on the border between the known and the unknown. A theology of broken symbols provides many rich ways of understanding (1) how people internalize and construct religious/existential symbols such that those symbols become an embedded theology, (2) the extent to which those symbols may break and potentially be reconstructed when people go through crises or transitions, and (3) the way broken symbols can become integrated into flexible and differentiated religious expressions of compassion, goodness, and benevolence. A potential liability of using Neville’s theology is the theology’s focus on the individual rather than on that individual’s social context. To offset this liability, we will also use theological perspectives that take into account social identity and oppression: Nelson’s ways of understanding suffering and evil.

Second, these theologies are capable of staying close to the meanings generated by a care seeker’s narrative while also engaging in a lively dialogue with biopsychosocial second-order perspectives. They can expand meanings inherent in a care seeker’s narrative and religious world, and they can broaden meanings by interfacing with psychological and cultural ways of understanding these narratives. They can generate contextual theologies that help us understand the intricacies of a care seeker’s narrative and religious world as well as the broader family and social dynamics that shape these stories.

Third, these theological perspectives can be used to enhance the goal of spiritual integration that leads toward liberative action. Integration that aligns enacted beliefs/values with espoused beliefs/values motivates care seekers to protest and interrogate suffering and/or make right the wrongs in their lives and/or in the world, seeking healing and justice for themselves, humanity, and creation.

**A Theology of Broken Symbols**

A central premise of Robert Neville’s theology is that the first-order language of religious beliefs and experiences is expressed and understood with symbolic language. According to Neville, religious symbols are constructed on the boundary between finite creation and the infinite, and have to do with contrasts between the known and the unknown ([Neville, 1996, p. 47](#_ENREF_35)). Religious symbols arise out of the contexts of people’s cultures and lives—“the biological, cultural, semiotic, and purposive nature of the interpreters” ([Neville, 1996, p. 241](#_ENREF_35)). Consider, for example, a sculpture entitled *Christa*, by Edwina Sandys, which drew public attention in the late 1970s. It is in the form of a naked woman whose arms are outstretched as if she were nailed to a cross. This sculpture was created in a time when violence against women was receiving more and more public attention. Feminist and womanist theologies inspired people to take action by creating crisis centers for survivors of sexual and intimate partner violence. The religious symbolism of *Christa* arose out of all of those interpretations. Describing how such symbols function, Neville says, “When the symbols of a particular religious tradition are fresh and living, people see through them to the divine. They do not notice the symbols as such any more than they notice the glass in a window or think about columns of mercury when hearing the temperature from the TV weather announcer” ([Neville, 1996, p. 29](#_ENREF_35)). *Christa* became a powerful symbol through which some women saw their own stories of violence and God’s compassionate presence with them.

The more a symbol reflects the changing contexts and lives of persons and communities, the more likely it will change over time. Symbols no longer central to the faith experience of persons and/or communities may be set aside or dramatically restructured so that they can convey new revelations of God. It takes a kind of radical courage, as pastoral theologian Ryan LaMothe notes, to recognize that one’s religious symbols are “fundamentally limited, partial: they are not the whole truth” ([2012, p. 460](#_ENREF_28)). People and communities may cling to symbols that are irrelevant or so rigidly cast that they can never be broken by new revelations. When symbols are part of systems of social advantages—like patriarchal symbols of God as father that religiously endorse sexism—there can be a great cost to allowing such symbols to break. Such symbols could, upon further analysis, be described as dead, like the shell that remains when its living inhabitant is long gone. Trying to use dead symbols to describe new revelations is like trying to store new wine in old wineskins; the fermentation of the new wine breaks the cracked, dried wineskin.

For example, Sammy in *You Can Count on Me* uses the symbolism of eternal damnation as the threat needed to save her soul. Her precritical use of this symbol is like a dried, cracked wineskin. Yes, the church does indeed deem adultery and fornication as sinful in that such behaviors break one of the Ten Commandments and compromise marital vows. When such covenants are broken, repentance is a life-giving ritual that can “save souls” if the ritual conveys God’s grace. What makes the symbols of eternal damnation and salvation dead for Sammy is their implicit portrayal of the church and God as wholly condemning. Where is the compassion and love? Repentance without the experience of grace and love is a dead ritual whose purpose is to punish and scare sinners back onto the straight and narrow.

A pastoral caregiver using Neville’s theology will listen for the symbols inherent in the care seeker’s narrative and religious world. Although crises often propel people into that boundary territory between the known and unknown, people may want to deny the existential and religious nature of a crisis. Terry, for example, rejects Sammy’s religious interpretation of why he gets into trouble. This is understandable, given the way Sammy imposes her beliefs and values on him. His rejection reveals something of his existential world: that their childhood religion is, for him, primitive and fairytale-like. Rejecting this kind of religion seems to be a way of rejecting the guilt Terry associates with religion. His rejection of anything associated with religion limits him from being morally responsible for his actions. At the end of his conversation with Ron, however, Terry begins to appreciate the ways his existential world could be expanded. It is unfortunate that this cocreation of meaning is undermined by Ron’s initial lack of respect, and the resulting lack of trust.

Once a caregiver has started to identify the care seeker’s religious symbols, the caregiver may want to invite deliberation by asking three questions raised by Neville. First, to what extent are care seekers able to interpret the symbols they use? Are they able to shift from using an embedded theology to becoming intentional about their theology? Second, what are the practical consequences of the care seeker’s religious symbols? “Religious symbols deal with such basic matters as how we ought to live” ([Neville, 1996, p. 64](#_ENREF_35)), and this question concerns how symbols function in people’s lives. The caregiver must ask, how does the use of particular religious symbols help care seekers cope in the midst of a crisis? Do these symbols help people connect with goodness and the love of God in themselves, in others, and the world around them? Do these symbols help people construct long-term meanings that take into account not only their own suffering but also everyone else who suffered? Do these symbols confront people, hold them accountable, and call for reparation? Will these religious symbols help them bear the weight of their suffering, like a well-constructed knapsack that holds provisions needed for a long trek? These kinds of questions test the immediate and long-term consequences of symbols. Take the sculpture *Christa*, which for many survivors of violence conveyed a sense of God’s presence when they felt utterly alone. This symbol has the potential to connect survivors with the God who suffers with them. It calls perpetrators to account for the suffering they cause. The symbol does not leave people in empathic distress but moves them into compassion and the desire to help, propelling some survivors to action by, for example, being part of a crisis response that brought God’s presence into the lives of those who had experienced violence.

Third, what is the state of the care seeker’s soul? In order to discern a person’s soul, the caregiver must listen for how care seekers refer to the sacred parts of their life. For one person, for example, soul may be the sense of connection to ancestors who spiritually inhabit the world. For another person, soul may be the experience of transcendence in which one and the world around oneself are transfigured with a divine presence. For others, soul may be the sense of oneness that comes when they worship with their religious community or when they commune with nature. In the film, *You Can Count on Me,* Terry talked with a sense of wonder about the beauty of Alaska, suggesting that this was a sacred place for him where he had experienced a sense of soul.

Neville’s theology of broken symbols helps caregivers understand their embedded and intentional theologies. Some symbols that appear to be dead—like patriarchal images of God as the punitive disengaged father—may continue to influence caregivers. For example, tracking the role of shame in spiritual struggle can help caregivers become aware of how they are blaming themselves for suffering, invoking a punitive shaming God the Father. Intentionally using spiritual practices that foster self-compassion may help caregivers set aside symbols that are no longer life-giving. In order to deliberate over their own embedded theologies, caregivers need to understand the range of historical ways their religious tradition has understood pain and made sense of suffering. I turn now to consider such theologies of suffering.

**Thinking about Suffering and Evil**

Many people seek pastoral care because of morally and spiritually distressing pain. Suffering is the meaning given to pain. Pastoral care is uniquely equipped to help people explore how they are making sense of their suffering. Like suffering, evil has to do with religious ways pain is understood and experienced.[[5]](#footnote-5) When pain is named as evil, religious symbols and second-order ways of thinking become necessary, as psychologist Judith Herman notes: “The traumatic event challenges an ordinary person to become a theologian. . . . The survivor . . . stands mute before the emptiness of evil, feeling the insufficiency of any known system of explanation” ([Herman, 1992, p. 179](#_ENREF_24)). Christian religious language, for example, juxtaposes evil with goodness.[[6]](#footnote-6) The Abrahamic religious traditions are based on beliefs in a God who is good, knowing, and has power. The symbol of God comes into question when innocent people suffer. Theodicies are theological arguments for how suffering can exist in a world created by an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving God. Religious traditions that don’t contrast evil with goodness don’t have the same need for elaborate definitions of evil and symbols for it.

In more common Christian parlance, pain is labeled as evil when survivors experience a malevolent action or intent to harm or destroy. Some theologians make distinctions between natural evil (like tornados, floods, and earthquakes) and moral evil (like assault, murder, and abuse). Natural and moral evil are often intertwined, as when neglect follows a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina. The process theological definition of evil, as outlined by Larry Kent Graham, is most relevant to understanding suffering encountered in spiritual and pastoral care:

The term evil as I am using it comes from process theology. . . . Catastrophic disasters [for example] are by definition genuinely evil since they bring about both discord and triviality and accordingly make the world a poorer place than it otherwise would have been. Evil, in this view, is not a matter of malevolent intentions or negligent actions; it is entirely measured by outcomes or consequences. Hence, the consequences of a hurricane may be evil without intentionality toward harm by a hurricane. Sin is the theological category that most describes the intentionality of evil and is more appropriately ascribed to human agency, both individual and collective. ([Graham, 2013a](#_ENREF_22))

Suffering is theologically interpreted as morally evil when it dehumanizes and desecrates that which is sacred and threatens to separate survivors from the goodness and sacredness within them, the world, and God. Evil makes suffering radical because the soul is so wounded that it can no longer resist evil by making suffering meaningful in ways that reconnect survivors with goodness ([Farley, 1990](#_ENREF_14)). “Radical suffering is the incurable wound of despair that annihilates the future, severs relationship, and withholds from suffering any possible meaning” ([Farley, 1990, pp. 58-59](#_ENREF_14)).

Theologians explore existential questions about why suffering happens, who is responsible, and the theological and spiritual impact of moral and natural evil on survivors. Feminist theologians ([Farley, 1990](#_ENREF_14); [Sands, 1994](#_ENREF_40)) along with pastoral theologian Larry Kent Graham have explored how artistic renderings of tragedy can help us make meaning out of suffering. Graham ([2013b](#_ENREF_23)) defines tragedy as suffering that is “unwanted, undeserved, and unexpected . . . in which something precious is permanently lost, and which requires of those who are left a deep questioning engagement with personal and corporate belief systems, moral orientations, and purposes in life.”

Practical and pastoral theologians are often less concerned with arguments for understanding God in relation to evil and more concerned with how to respond compassionately:

Theodicy cannot explain away evil or make evil into any good. It can only hope to illuminate the radical love of God that is not overcome by evil. . . . In seeing and tasting this love, human beings . . . come to burn with the incandescent compassion for the world, to feel the grief of the world without being destroyed by it. ([Farley, 1990, p. 133](#_ENREF_14))

Spiritual caregivers draw on theological and psychological perspectives to explore the impact of suffering and evil on beliefs, values, and ways of coping that may help or hinder survivors, bystanders, and perpetrators as they grapple with the immediate and long-term effects of suffering and evil.

Care seekers, like caregivers, often initially make sense of overwhelming life experiences using precritical ways of understanding suffering from childhood. These embedded theologies are woven into their habitual ways of viewing and understanding themselves and the world and often are outside of their awareness unless they have learned to identify embedded beliefs and think critically about them. As illustrated in this chapter, the process of examining embedded beliefs helps both caregivers and care seekers assess whether beliefs are life-enhancing or life-limiting for them right now. These deliberations help caregivers and care seekers intentionally use life-giving theologies that are cocreated in care conversations. Caregivers need to be adept at using a deliberative process to examine their own embedded theologies and need to have an array of theologies of suffering and evil as they reflect on their embedded theologies and listen to care seekers’ stories.

***Nelson’s Paradigms for Understanding Suffering and Evil***

Feminist theologian Susan Nelson provides an overview of various theological ways of understanding suffering and evil, which she categorizes into five paradigms: moral theologies, redemptive theologies, eschatologies of hope, theologies of lament, and theologies of ambiguous suffering. These paradigms can be used to *identify* embedded life-limiting beliefs about suffering, *deliberate* over and claim life-giving beliefs and values, and *put into practice* more complex life-giving beliefs. They provide a starting place for talking about embedded theologies of suffering, especially for caregivers learning to explore their own religious worlds self-reflexively. These paradigms can be used in teaching self- and theological reflexivity. Readers may wonder how five theological paradigms of suffering can summarize the varieties of theologies articulated within diverse historical contexts across twenty-five centuries of Christian and Jewish religious traditions. Rather than categorically reduce theological meanings, the paradigms provide a starting place that opens up inherent embedded meanings as students reflect on their own stories as well as care seekers’ stories. They can also compare and contrast deliberative theologies that are life-giving for them, weaving together strands from each paradigm that resonate with their own stories and religious worlds. I use Nelson’s paradigms to help students think reflexively. I don’t use these paradigms in a historical way to survey Christian and Jewish thought about suffering and evil. Students often feel overwhelmed by the vast array of theological approaches to the problems of suffering and evil. Nelson’s paradigms help to orient them to embedded beliefs and values that are part of their lived and intentional theologies, especially in relation to specific traumatic experiences.

Acknowledging that these paradigms are most relevant for Christian care conversations, I invite Buddhist and atheist students to think further about how their paradigms for understanding suffering compare with Nelson’s five paradigms. So far, my students have not felt constrained by my use of these paradigms in their own self-reflections. I encourage readers to read Nelson’s article alongside my summaries of each paradigm, which reflect how each is potentially life-giving or life-limiting depending on the context and particularities of trauma narratives.

**Moral theologies**

Moral theologies are the most common theistic embedded theology of suffering used by those in Abrahamic traditions. God is usually seen as all-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing; human beings are responsible for sin because of their free will. Sin is often attributed to individuals in this paradigm and is not understood collectively in terms of social injustice.[[7]](#footnote-7) Moral theologies function in life-giving ways when people need to be held accountable for suffering and when they need a clear map of right and wrong to guide their behavior. Such theologies could help people with life-limiting ways of coping with stress (like addictions) articulate beliefs and values that they need to put into action, especially when they have caused harm to themselves or others. This kind of moral theology is implicit in the fourth step of 12-step groups that require people to begin to make amends for the suffering caused by addiction. The mantras provided by such programs (such as, “One day at a time”) often function as a spiritual lifeline when cravings are intense. Cravings trigger the foretaste of the false highs provided by addictive substances and compulsive behaviors that temporarily offset punitive and shaming moral theologies. Twelve-step mantras provide an intentional theology that disarms shame-inducing life-limiting moral theologies. Moral theologies are life-limiting when people inappropriately blame themselves,[[8]](#footnote-8) believing that trauma and suffering are a consequence of their personal sin and a punishment from God.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In our case study from *You Can Count on Me* Sammy uses a moral approach to understand her sexual behavior with her boss. While she needs to hold herself accountable for the life-limiting consequences of her behavior, the problem with her embedded moral theology is that in it, God is wholly condemning. The missing ingredient is God’s compassion. If Sammy could compassionately hold herself accountable, her moral theology could be life-giving, especially in helping her end her sexual relationship. Her brother Terry could also benefit from compassionately understanding the suffering arising from the way he expresses his anger and his use of alcohol. He needs a systemic moral perspective on the intensity of his anger and his alcohol abuse that takes into account the death of his parents, his teenage rebellion and use of alcohol that subsequently limited his ability to cope. Both Sammy and Terry would benefit from moral theologies that help them compassionately understand sin in systemically complex ways. Pastor Ron invites Sammy to consider her sexual transgressions more systemically, beginning with her relationships with the men. While he begins with psychological deliberation, he could easily move into theological deliberation that expands her simplistic moral theology of adultery and damnation.

**Redemptive theologies**

Theologies of redemption are another common way of understanding suffering. They are especially helpful in the long-term meaning-making process of spiritual care when care seekers look back retrospectively and see that in spite of the horror of suffering, they survived[[10]](#footnote-10) ([Jones, 2009](#_ENREF_26); [Rambo, 2010](#_ENREF_39); [Swain, 2011](#_ENREF_42)). Redemptive theology is life-giving when care seekers experience God’s compassion with them in their suffering. For Christians the cross represents this “suffering with” presence: “The *imago Dei* includes pierced hands and feet and side” ([Creamer, 2009, pp. 85-86](#_ENREF_7)). As such, the cross can invoke a sense of solidarity in the midst of suffering and its immediate aftermath. The sculpture *Christa,* for example, can reassure survivors of violence that God/Jesus knows what their pain is like. Similarly, images of the Mother of God holding the crucified body of her son can evoke a spiritual sense of being held in God’s love in the midst of suffering.[[11]](#footnote-11) In both examples, God is not experienced as a distant father demanding suffering; rather, God suffers with humanity and is not ultimately destroyed by it ([Thornton, 2002](#_ENREF_44)). Spiritual practices that help people experience God’s compassion can induce self-compassion, opening up a deeper comprehension of one’s vulnerability and pain, and in turn deepening one’s own capacity for compassion. Interestingly, when God is imagined as self-sufficient and invulnerable, God is often not experienced as compassionate ([Nussbaum, 2001, p. 318](#_ENREF_36)).

Redemptive theologies are not helpful when they negate suffering or justify it as soul-making. Imagining that God sends suffering upon us to teach us lessons is a distortion of God as loving parent. Redemptive theologies are life-limiting when used to make people endure suffering that ought to be protested. Often theologies that advocate the endurance of inexcusable pain bolster social systems of privilege. Take, for example, racist theologies used to justify white supremacy with doctrines about creation’s ordering in racist and sexist hierarchies. These racist and sexist theologies demand that suffering arising from one’s “station in life” must simply be endured.

In another problematic use of this paradigm, partners of people with problematic behaviors, like addiction or violence, may believe that it is their personal responsibility to redeem the suffering caused by their partner. They may believe that if they can just have enough faith to carry the cross of living with an addicted or violent partner, their faith will redeem their partner and save the relationship and/or family. Symbols of redemption like the cross are dangerous when used to sanctify sufferings: “Rather than *sanctification of suffering* Jesus’ crucifixion remains a witness to the horror of violence. It is not a model of how *suffering should be borne*, but a witness to God’s desire that no one should suffer such violence again” ([Fortune, 2005, p. 140](#_ENREF_16)). Spiritual practices that induce self-compassion often break up life-limiting symbols of a punitive God, releasing a sense of God’s grace and the goodness and mystery of life. While personal theologies of redemption are often narrowly focused on individuals, redemption is collectively understood in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament and is linked with social justice and liberation in many redemptive theologies.

Another potential misuse of this paradigm is when it is universally used to understand suffering. Redemptive theologies often go hand-in-hand with goals of transformation. When transformation may not be possible or fully realized, redemptive theologies could impose goals of transformation in idealistic or unrealistic or christocentric ways. Recent feminist elaborations of redemptive theologies of trauma ([Jones, 2009](#_ENREF_26); [Rambo, 2010](#_ENREF_39); [Swain, 2011](#_ENREF_42)) can be deeply meaningful to Christian care seekers but may be premature if transformation is not in the foreseeable future. Redemption’s implicit goal of transformation needs to be acknowledged and not imposed. In addition, redemptive theologies will likely have less relevance for care seekers from other religious traditions like Buddhism ([Doehring & Arora, 2013](#_ENREF_10)) in which transformation may not part of one’s religious vision for the future.

The challenges of making redemptive theologies meaningful is illustrated in *You Can Count on Me.* Sammy is mired in relational pain: how to experience intimacy and commitment with Bob, how to sever her sexual relationship with Brian and still be able to work with him, how to stay connected with Terry, and how her son will cope with his encounter with his father and Terry’s physical violence toward his father. It is too soon for her to know what good, if any, will come out of all of this suffering. Her pastor is compassionately present with her. He gently invites her to explore her suffering, to elaborate what is painful in her relationships with men. He stays with her, representing how God/Jesus stays with people in the midst of their pain. Caregivers who have not examined their embedded theologies could wriggle out of the vicarious experience of Sammy’s pain by prematurely suggesting that goodness will eventually come out of her suffering. Such reassurance meets their own needs, not hers.

**Eschatologies of hope**

A less common but historically significant way of understanding suffering is eschatological. Traditional eschatology includes symbols of the last judgment, heaven, and hell, describing how suffering will be redeemed in the afterlife. An obvious danger of traditional eschatology is it can make believers endure suffering in the present in the hope of future reward and retribution, when such suffering should be protested. Another danger is the chronic spiritual struggle of getting lost in the dark night of the soul. Yet another danger is literalizing symbols of the battle of good and evil or Satan, and in the process demonizing individuals or groups. This way of understanding suffering is implied when care seekers tell their stories in an apocalyptic genre in which “characters are polarised [sic] and action moves inexorably toward a final confrontation between good and evil” ([Frank, 2013, p. 24](#_ENREF_17)). When stories become apocalyptic, symbolic language easily becomes literal, sometimes in an effort is to scare people into changing their behaviors. Sammy, for example, invokes literalized apocalyptic symbols when she confesses her sin and seeks to change her behavior—“Maybe it was better if you told me I was endangering my immortal soul and that if I don’t quit I’m going to burn in hell.”

In her description of eschatology Nelson transposes future visions of the afterlife into present moments of hope that pierce the gloom of suffering. Her examples include human kindness in the worst experiences of suffering, like sharing meager amounts of bread among those starving in the concentration camps. Such moments of goodness and compassion offer hope that there will be a time when the weight and darkness of suffering is lightened. While such moments do not usually offer the kind of comprehensive meaning-making that comes with time and deliberation, there is a tangible in-breaking of beauty, goodness, and peace that offers a respite from pain. The documentary *Following the Ninth: In the Footsteps of Beethoven’s Final Symphony* ([Candaele, 2013](#_ENREF_4)) recounts how Chilean demonstrators sang Ode to Joy during the Pinochet dictatorship outside of a prison where political prisoners were tortured. One former prisoner recalled how much hope he experienced when he heard it during his imprisonment. “Beauty can draw us home,” as theologian James Nelson wrote of his own struggles with addiction ([J. B. Nelson, 2004, p. 168](#_ENREF_33)).

Life-giving spiritual practices induce eschatological moments of hope, shifting people out of isolated suffering and negative emotions into compassion for self and others. Chapter 3 noted that a discipline of such spiritual practices goes hand in hand with the discipline of radical compassion. When used regularly, spiritual practices can become integrated into our physical, emotional, and relational lives. If, for example, one’s spiritual practices use mindfulness breathing, then taking a moment to breath in a mindful way can have a cascading effect. Breathing in a mindful way focuses attention on the here and now, relaxes muscular tension, and fosters compassion.

In our opening case study, Terry speaks of the beauty of Alaska; perhaps this is where he finds hope and a sense of the sacredness of life. The beauty of nature seems to be part of Sammy’s spiritual practice of visiting her parents’ grave, set in verdant rolling hills. Terry also makes a graveside visit, sitting on the grave and leaning back against the gravestone while he surveys the hills. The music accompanying these scenes (a Bach cello sonata) conveys the in-breaking of beauty.

**Theologies of lament and protest**

Radical suffering is so unbearable that it can only be protested. “Evil is tragic, awful, painful, and personal, and it should be acknowledged as such” ([Swinton, 2007, p. 21](#_ENREF_43)). Theologies of lament have been part of Jewish and Christian traditions since biblical times (see, for example, the book of Lamentations, psalms of lament, the book of Job, and the cry of Jesus from the cross). The suffering of the Holocaust has given rise to protest theodicies. Such theologies acknowledge the horror of suffering that can never be explained or justified. “Tragic speech is about irrecoverable loss and irresolvable contradiction” ([Sands, 1994, p. 2](#_ENREF_40)). Protest theologies refuse to let God off the hook by only blaming humanity for suffering. Instead, they interrogate God, as portrayed in a television play entitled *God on Trial (*[de Emmony, 2008](#_ENREF_8)) written by Frank Cottrell Boyce about Jews in Auschwitz who hold a court, appoint a judge and lawyers, and then put God on trial.

Theologies of lament are especially meaningful for those who are sinned against, and are most relevant in the immediacy of loss ([Billman & Migliore, 1999](#_ENREF_2)). They allow people who have been sinned against to express lament and rage, especially in community with others ([Park & Nelson, 2001](#_ENREF_38)). In the meaning-making process, this perspective opens up room for lots of questions, allowing people to interrogate experiences of suffering. Such theologies are life-giving when they connect people with the compassion and goodness of humanity and/or God. “God suffers loss when the world suffers . . . and laments human and ecological destructiveness” ([Graham, 2006, p. 12](#_ENREF_21)).

Religious traditions and communities, as well as vigils and memorials, offer symbolic communal ways to remember and protest such suffering. Art also can be used to lament. Many examples of great works of art come to mind: Picasso’s painting *Guernica*, for instance, or requiems like Benjamin Britten’s *War Requiem*. Art can be a way to express the inexpressible, as the art of veterans, those who endure mental illness, prisoners, children, and teenagers illustrate. Art also offers ways for those who have never experienced particular kinds of pain to enter compassionately into the pain of those who seem to be strangers ([Nussbaum, 2001, pp. 238-248](#_ENREF_36)). Entering into artistic portrayals of suffering, as I noted earlier in this chapter, can deepen compassion, especially for those different from us. Indeed, engaging art in this way can go hand in hand with spiritual practices as part of a discipline of practicing radical compassion in the ways LaMothe ([2012](#_ENREF_28)) describes. As I noted before, the danger of lament is getting stuck in isolated chronic spiritual struggle without experiencing compassion, hope, and communal support. Self and theological reflexivity, along with regular spiritual practices, can help people shift out of empathic distress into empathic concern and compassion.

**Theologies of ambiguous suffering**

The most theologically complex approach Nelson describes is ambiguous suffering. God’s power is understood as “persuasive and relational rather than unilateral; ordered by love and compassionate judgment” ([Graham, 2006, pp. 11-12](#_ENREF_21)). Creation is finite and diverse. Human beings are embedded in relational webs that inevitably result in limits and conflicted choices. “In the postmodern moment, tragic conflicts do not just mark the borders of our lives but riddle them through and through” ([Sands, 1994, p. 6](#_ENREF_40)). “Actions sow their consequences interminably in the most unforeseeable spots, rippling out like radio waves in the galaxy; but they can never be recalled to course, so that the moment of free decision . . . is also a kind of irreversible fate” ([Eagleton, 2003, pp. 110-111](#_ENREF_12)).

Although ambiguous suffering has been most fully articulated in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with, for example, process theologies, ambiguous suffering has been portrayed since the fifth century BCE in tragedies as an art form. Tragedy often depicts suffering as both radical and ambiguous, as literary critic Terry Eagleton describes: “The essential tragic experience is irreparable human loss” ([Eagleton, 2003, p. 4](#_ENREF_12)). “Tragedy can be, among other things, a symbolic coming to terms with our own finitude and fragility” ([Eagleton, 2003, p. xv](#_ENREF_12)). Theologies of ambiguous suffering encompass the collective conditions that give rise to sin and suffering. They are most helpful in the long-term meaning-making process and also in the immediacy of the crisis when facile answers and advice arising for embedded theologies are not life-giving and need to be interrogated.

The danger of theologies of ambiguity is that their complexity can easily overwhelm sufferers, keeping them mired in spiritual struggle, or making them disengage and intellectualize in compartmentalized and not integrated theologies. Using such theologies to experience compassion is the key and the challenge. For example, how can one pray to the kind of God represented in process theologies? What kinds of hymns truly express the ambiguity of suffering? Often prayers and hymns use traditional symbols and doctrines that express a kind of certainty that eclipses ambiguity. Musical settings often convey more complexity and ambiguity than the texts themselves. For example, I prefer to sing musical settings of the Apostles’ Creed in the Episcopal choral tradition as a way of expressing lyrical communal yearning for meaning rather than doctrinal compliance. Sacred music with settings of poetic texts often allow for more ambiguity. Experiences of beauty in art and nature, as well as religious rituals, can open up a space for tolerating the ambiguity of suffering while reclaiming the goodness of life with all of its limits. “Limits are an *unsurprising* characteristic of humanity, . . . an *intrinsic* aspect of human existence . . . [and] *good*, or, at the very least, not evil” ([Creamer, 2009, pp. 94-95](#_ENREF_7)).

We have discussed in detail the potential for life-giving and life-limiting embedded and deliberative theologies across these five paradigms, at different phases of meaning-making. These elaborations are meant to be suggestive rather than conclusive. It is hoped that readers will explore these paradigms in understanding and expanding their lived theologies, and will find this self-reflexive theological work meaningful for liberative spiritual integration in their own lives and in their practices of care.

***Conclusion***

In this chapter we have entered more deeply into the process of theological reflexivity. Using a case study, I have tried to simulate *how* people change through respectful compassionate caregiving conversations. I have illustrated *what* it is that changes in intercultural spiritual care. The theologies of care seekers and caregivers become more flexible and integrated, with differentiated meaning-making that reveals and connects them to the goodness of God and humanity, helping them bear the weight of ambiguous suffering in a compassionate web of being. Focusing on theological reflexivity at the heart of meaning-making, I have demonstrated the *why* of change: spiritual integration that liberates persons, families, and communities.

Having demonstrated the process of theological reflexivity at the heart of intercultural pastoral and spiritual care, we turn in the next chapter to exploring three common narrative themes in the stories of care seekers.

**Exercise 5: Theological Reflection**

Review your verbatim and highlight anything the care seeker says or implies about the seeker’s religious or existential world, especially core values, foundational beliefs, and spiritual practices. Review the highlighted material several times and see if you can identify the themes around which these statements cluster. Examples of such themes are suffering—especially grief and anger, images/experiences of God or that which is experienced as sacred (like nature, beauty, art), sin/guilt/shame, despair/hope concerning what is happening now and what will happen in the future, and death and the afterlife (ultimate separation, spiritual connections with those who have died). Consider also any theme that might be relevant to the care seeker’s experience, even though such themes were not part of the verbatim.

1. Describe each theme by identifying the statements that the care seeker makes that explicitly or implicitly refer to this theme.

2. Theologically assess the care seeker’s beliefs, practices, and experiences of God/the sacred by answering the following questions that make use of Neville’s theology of religious symbols:

— Does the care seeker seem to have the capacity to deliberate or reflect critically upon these religious beliefs, practices, experiences, and symbols of God?

— What are the practical consequences of the care seeker’s religious beliefs, practices, experiences, and symbols of God? How do these beliefs, practices, experiences, and symbols of God help the care seeker cope in the midst of a crisis? How do they help with long-term meaning-making? Will these religious beliefs, practices, experiences, and symbols of God help the care seeker bear the weight of his or her suffering?

— What is the state of the care seeker’s soul? Think about how you understand the term “soul” contextually in terms of the care seeker’s story and tradition. Listen for how the care seeker refers to the sacred part of life and whether those spiritual practices connect the seeker with goodness.

3. Use Nelson’s ways of understanding suffering and evil to:

—Identify the care seeker’s embedded beliefs using Nelson’s paradigms; to what extent do these beliefs enhance or limit the care seeker’s lived theology in terms of its flexibility, integration, complexity of meaning, and connection with goodness/compassion/beauty?

—Identify any moments when deliberative theology appears and describe these emerging theologies in terms of Nelson’s paradigms; to what extent do these beliefs/values enhance or limit the care seeker’s meaning-making and coping in terms of flexibility, integration, complexity of meaning, and connection with goodness/compassion/beauty?

—Identify the embedded beliefs/values from your own religious world that emerge as you listen to the care seeker. Using Nelson’s paradigms, reflect on the extent to which these beliefs/values enhance or limit the ways your theology emerges in this conversation, in terms of its flexibility, integration, complexity of meaning, and connection with goodness/compassion/beauty.

—Identify any deliberative beliefs/values that emerge for you as you engage in this conversation and your reflections on it. Using Nelson’s paradigms, reflect on the extent to which these deliberative beliefs/values enhance or limit your theology in terms of its flexibility, integration, complexity of meaning, and connection with goodness/compassion/beauty. How might life-giving beliefs and values be integrated into your spiritual practices, enhancing a discipline of radical compassion?

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1. They need to embody “theological know-how” ([Miller-McLemore, 2008](#_ENREF_31)). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This conversation can be found at 25 minutes in the DVD of the movie. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mary McClintock Fulkerson describes theology as a response to a wound: “Like a wound, theological thinking is generated by a sometimes inchoate sense that something *must* be addressed. . . . More precisely, transformation is inherent in the image of the wound, for it invokes a sense of something wrong—of a fracture in things that should be joined or whole. The very sense of harm implies an impulse toward remedy—a kind of longing for it to be otherwise” ([2007, pp. 13-14](#_ENREF_19)). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This conversation can be found at 1 hour and 16 minutes in the DVD of the movie. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Evil is the experience of suffering, misery, death, *and* the accompanying fear that such suffering undermines any hope of meaning and order in the world or of a God who exercises providential care” ([S. L. Nelson, 2003, p. 399](#_ENREF_34)). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Evil is everything that stands against God and God’s intentions for the well-being and transformation of human beings and God’s creation” ([Swinton, 2007, p. 55](#_ENREF_43)). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This emphasis on individual rather than collective sin dates back to the medieval church: “The focus of the medieval church’s confessional guides and of the manuals of moral theology after the Council of Trent was almost exclusively on individual sinful acts—not on what one should do but what one should not do. Acts analysis does not attend to situations or admit ambiguity or allow for moral complexity” ([Wiley, 2010, p. 107](#_ENREF_45)). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Duke describes this kind of moral theology as a theodicy of accountability and calculation. “There is a certain ‘comfort’ in being able to lay blame or assign responsibility for evil. . . . Thus the matter of accountability is often coupled with calculation since identifying the source of evil (accountability) enables one to figure out how to control or mitigate evil (calculation)” ([Duke, 1999, p. 244](#_ENREF_11)). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Fairbairn, a Scottish psychoanalyst writing about war neuroses in 1952, astutely described what he called the moral defense against traumatic experiences.

It is better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God than to live in a world ruled by the Devil. A sinner in a world ruled by God may be bad; but there is always as a certain security to be derived from the fact that the world around is good—‘God’s in His heaven—All’s right with the world!’; and in any case there is always the hope of redemption. In a world ruled by the Devil the individual may escape the badness of being a sinner but he is bad because the world around him is bad. Further, he can have no sense of security and no hope of redemption. The only prospect is one of death and destruction. ([Fairbairn, 1952, pp. 66-67](#_ENREF_13)) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “God did not send Jesus to the cross as a test of his faith, as punishment for his sin, or to build his character. The Romans crucified Jesus and made him a victim of overt and deadly violence. . . . The resurrection and subsequent events were the surprising realization that in the midst of profound suffering, God is present and new life is possible. The retrospective realization in no way justified the suffering; it redeemed it” ([Fortune, 1983, pp. 197-198](#_ENREF_15)). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Historians have commented on the emergence in the Middle Ages of a radically new form of piety centered on the compassion of Mary, the Mother of God, as she beholds Jesus’ suffering at the foot of the cross and/or holds her son’s suffering body ([Fulton, 2002](#_ENREF_20)). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)