Theology

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Hearing Blood into Speech:

Menstruation, Stigma, and Theology

Abstract

This thesis argues that menstruation is a productive site for doing theology. Chapter 1 shows that pervasive social stigmas attach to the lived experience of menstruation. These stigmas have characterised women's bleeding as a barrier to human flourishing and a threat to the sacred. Chapter 2 turns to the indecent theology of Marcella Althaus-Reid, and the constructive theology of Karen O'Donnell. Both Althaus-Reid and O'Donnell take the body— and human embodiment—as a central focus for their theological work. This chapter interrogates and counters the underlying basis for negative attitudes towards the menstrual body in theology. Finally, Chapter 3 affirms menstruation as a site for creative theological work, and constructs a positive dialogue between theology and menstrual blood. This includes a tentative suggestion for an appreciative recognition of menstruation in liturgical tradition. My primary intention throughout the thesis is to let the lived experience of menstruation speak for itself, particularly of its ambiguity and inherent goodness.

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Thanks to my friends, colleagues, and family who have indulged my increasing proclivity for 'seeing red' over this season, especially anyone who took an interest in bouncing around reflections and new insights with me. It has been incredibly affirming to receive such positive feedback on my pursuit of this subject. Thank you also to the AWESOME wāhine who helped review my work. It meant so much to me to be able to entrust this precious creation into your diligent hands! Finally, a big hug to my husband Aidan, for offering me his maximum support, maximum love, and maximum faith in all times, and every time.

Introduction

"I am a woman

and my blood

cries out".[1]

In 2023, Emma Pallant-Browne was photographed competing during the Professional Triathletes Organisation European (PTO) Open triathlon with a period stain on her swimsuit. When this photo was included among those posted on PTO's Instagram, one user commented that the image really ought to have been cropped "a bit better" to preserve the athlete's dignity.[2] In response, Pallant-Browne proudly reposted the photo, commenting, "If you wrote to me saying 99% of the women you know would be mortified at this then that is exactly why I am sharing" it.[3] She later reflected that though she wanted the photo to "make people feel more comfortable" with the reality of female bleeding in sport, the practical and affirming responses she received from other women also made *her* feel empowered, "like this was a community."[4]

Menstrual stigmas continue to circulate in Western culture, and periods have seldom been considered within theology. I have chosen menstruation as my focus despite the social challenges that writing on this subject will inevitably involve. I argue that menstruation can be a productive site for doing theology, and hope that doing so contributes to a theologically rich mode of embodiment for menstruators. Along the way, I also want to creatively counter the narrative that, in order to retain decency and dignity, women should distance themselves from their menstrual bleeding. Our bodies are telling God's story, and I believe that allowing this speech to emerge will help subvert the fragmentation that has characterised our

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[1] "Blood of a Woman" by Gabriele Dietrich, written as reproduced in Hyun Kyung Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1990), 66–70.
[2] Anna Medaris, "A Pro Triathlete Who Bled Through Her Race Suit While on Her Period Was Criticized Online. She Shared the 'Beautiful' Photo, Calling It 'The Reality of Females in Sport,'" Insider, June 1, 2023, https://www.insider.com/pro-triathlete-emma-pallant-brown-photographed-racing-period-says-beautiful-2023-5.
[3] Medaris.
[4] Rachel Brady, "Emma Pallant-Browne Reflects on Viral Triathlon Photo: 'A Period Is a Normal Thing, and I Don't Want Anyone to Feel Ashamed of It,'" The Globe and Mail, June 2, 2023, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/sports/olympics/article-emma-pallant-brown-triathlon-photo/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CIt%20took%20four%20or%20so,have%20got%20the%20right%20guidance.%E2%80%9D.

experiences of our bodyselves. To this end, this thesis makes an exercise of theologising *through* the menstrual body.

This work is confronting, and may be viewed by some as indecent and unnecessary to the theological endeavour. There may be those who object to my emphasis on menstruation as a meaningful theological reality, and not just a bodily function. Those who are dismissive of the topic may have given little thought to it previously, perhaps never questioning how theological subjects of interest are decided and who decides them. They might struggle to consider the invitation of this work, because they have simply never considered menstruation in the dimensions I suggest. I understand this response, but I desire to challenge it. Why might this topic be 'indecent' or 'excessive'?

An initial answer to why menstruation commonly evokes a negative response can be gleaned from the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas. Douglas has said that "where there is dirt there is system".[5] Her point is that the meaning of what is called 'dirt' is not a self-evident and given fact, but is socially constructed according to what people value. Likewise, in every society there is likely to be a construction of menstruation which shapes how it is talked about and by who. Yet, when that construction undergirds the lived stigmatisation and slicing of women's bodies, we cannot permit it to continue unchallenged. I strongly believe that theology should be explorative and interrogative because God is as expansive as the human is limited. At times, 'unfaithfulness' to the road walked before may be a way to press deeper into faithfulness.[6] The time is long overdue for a positive dialogue between menstruation and theology that becomes normative in the Church community.

In Chapter 1 I discuss that pervasive social stigmas attach to the lived experience of menstruation. These stigmas are recognisable in Western culture and the Judeo-Christian tradition, and suggest menstruation as barrier to human flourishing and threat to the sacred. To avoid these negative outcomes, menstruators have been recommended to containing and disidentifying with their menstrual bodies. However, the Christian belief in the goodness of

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[5] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Mary Douglas Collected Works 2 (London: Routledge, 2003), 36.
[6] Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Doing a Theology from Disappeared Bodies: Theology, Sexuality, and the Excluded Bodies of the Discourses of Latin America", in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology,* ed. S. Briggs and M. M. Fulkerson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 450, cited in Thia Cooper, *Queer and Indecent: An Introduction to the Theology of Marcella Althaus-Reid* (London: SCM Press, 2021), 102.

creation, the incarnation, and humankind as bearing the *imago dei* suggest that the body is intrinsically caught up in God's redemptive work, and thus can be a site of God's revelation.[7] In this light, Chapter 2 turns to the indecent theology of Marcella Althaus-Reid, and the constructive theology of Karen O'Donnell, to explore the inclusion of embodiment in theological discourse. Both Althaus-Reid and O'Donnell make the body a central focus of their theological work. Throughout this chapter, I interrogate the underlying basis for negative attitudes towards the menstrual body in theology. Finally, Chapter 3 affirms menstruation as a site for creative theological work, and constructs a positive dialogue between theology and menstrual blood. This includes a tentative suggestion for a positive recognition of menstruation in liturgical tradition.

My approach to this topic has been informed by the methods and concerns of body theology, indecent theology, and constructive theology. Each of these include viewing the body as a significant locus of theologising. They share a commitment to exploring beyond the conventional limits of theological discourse, and an embrace a desire to construct theologies which do not draw conclusions for conclusions sake, but genuinely bridge to the lived experiences of people.[8] Each of these frameworks displays a commitment to the feminist hermeneutic of suspicion, valuing women's speech in acknowledgement that this has historically gone unheard. There is also a shared longing to "see anew the glory and goodness of all of creation", which affirms the subjectivity of all human persons.[9] Further, though I argue for the legitimacy of wide participation in this menstrual conversation, I do not posit my specific theological conclusions as applicable for everyone. That I have used menstruation as a lens for this project is deeply motivated by my personal struggle to locate my menstruating body within the swirling ocean of taboos which suggest that I am dirty and unclean. This struggle may not be shared in the same way by others, or they may affirm a different theological approach to me. This work is personal and claims to be neither 'neutral' nor 'universal', and recognising as such rightly indicates that all theologising is done from a lens.[10]

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[7] *Imago dei* means 'image of God' and refers to how God created humankind to reflect God. See Gen 1:26-27.
[8] Cooper, *Queer and Indecent*, 102; Karen O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb: Re-Conceiving Theology Through Reproductive Loss* (London: SCM Press, 2022), 5; Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, Introductions in Feminist Theology 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 50–51.
[9] Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 33.
[10] Cooper, *Queer and Indecent*, 14.

In this work I am choosing to employ gender neutral language whenever fair and possible in my writing, such as 'menstruator' or 'menstruant'. In the course of researching for this project I have become aware of the limitations of considering the conversation around menstruation as being exclusively a feminine or women's matter. This is simply not true. Menstruation is the lived experience of women, and also of some trans men, but it is not the experience of all women, but as an issue it applies to everyone. Furthermore, referring to 'menstruators' allows me to deliberately call to mind a picture of the human person as an embodied soul/ensouled body. For half the population, the experience of menstruating is bound up in the experience of being human. I assume that all who menstruate or who are expected to do so (such as those born female) will at some point align themselves with an understanding of what menstruation signifies and how it is to be treated. This may be favourable or unfavourable, conscious or unconscious. The existence and prevalence of menstrual stigmas serves to weigh this meaning-making enterprise towards the negative. This will likely impact the relationship a menstruator has with themselves, and their body, though this may not be the case for everyone.

At times, however, I will use 'woman' or 'women' interchangeably with 'menstruator', or cite research which employs gendered language. Though there is an expansive community present in this conversation, it is important to refer to 'women' specifically to retain connection with "the historical roots of misogynistic oppression", which in places has targeted women *explicitly* because of their menstrual status.[11] It is important also to note that it is possible for menstruation to be both connected and disconnected with a person's experience of their sexuality. 'Menstrual body' is another prevalent term in my work, which I use as synonymous with previous terms. Menstruation is an experience intrinsically connected to bodies, and having this body "is not a solitary practice but one that brings me into communion with all … other embodied souls."[12] My menstrual body is with me wherever I go, whether I come to the text, come to church, or come to the attention of those around me in my cyclically cramping, bleeding, state. Finally, the term 'bodyself' is my preferred way to refer to the whole person. The term is "not hyphenated" because this would "imply some kind of distinction between the two things … Rather this is presented as one

[11] Chris Bobel and Breanne Fahs, "From Bloodless Respectability to Radical Menstrual Embodiment: Shifting Menstrual Politics from Private to Public," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45, no. 4 (2020): 973.
[12] Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, 1st HarperCollins paperback ed (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 42.

complete word that encompasses the whole person within it."[13] For all of us, being a human person is intrinsically connected to having a body. 'Bodyself' reinforces the fact of the body being both the location and incarnation of the self. It is an intentional drawing in of the often-unacknowledged half. For me it has also been the language of gentle reconciliation, a cooing to she whom has remained in the corner of my vision unless being scrutinised for her undesirability. 'Bodyself' is a way to say, 'you, body, you are me. I see it now.' This close, and in fact, inseparable relationship within the bodyself is an important tenet of my work.

[13] O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb*, 148.

Chapter 1 | The Contours of Menstrual Stigma

Prevailing cultural and religious menstrual stigmas reinforce a fragmented understanding of bodyself for those who menstruate. In the West, menstruation has historically been stigmatized as an obstacle to human flourishing on both the personal and public level. This stigma has been further corroborated by religious taboos from the Judeo-Christian tradition which posit menstruation as a threat to the sacred.[1] The combination of these results in a negative interpretive framework by which to understand menstruation in the Western world. This chapter will survey the development, and key ideas of such stigmas, and conclude by sketching the impact which stigmatisation has on a menstruator's relationship to their body. It will be argued that stigma reinforces a fragmented understanding of bodyself by motivating disidentification with menstrual blood

Menstruation in Cultural Construction

Menstruation has historically been stigmatised in the West as an obstacle to human flourishing.[2] Before the medicalisation of menstruation, its cultural construction was primarily devised as a barrier to the wellbeing of the public 'other', whereafter the discourse shifts to how menstruation could inhibit a women's own health and quality of life. This resulted in a pathological prognosis for menstruators that necessitated medical, social, and commercial intervention. Surveying the construction in this way is admittedly an oversimplification, but it exhibits the distribution of concerns throughout the literature. Notably, menstruation has remained a 'curse' and a 'pollutant' and is stigmatised as complexifying access to the 'good life' proposed by Western culture.[3]

An Obstacle to Public Flourishing

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[1] Christy Angelle Bauman, *Theology of the Womb: Knowing God Through the Body of a Woman* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019), 28.

[2] This project is limited from offering a survey of menstruation in non-Western contexts, but interested readers could see Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb, eds., *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). A further reason for considering one cultural perspective over many – and particularly my own over other's – is that menstrual taboos are "culturally variable and specific" and if present at all, function differently across contexts (14). For the purposes of my project, a thoroughly multi-cultural approach would over-complexify discussion and limit clarity of application.

[3] Although in this section I will be predominantly surveying the cultural treatment of menstruation, at times these perspectives are inextricably linked to shifting religious worldviews.

The earliest written records from the Greek and Roman era betray a hostile view of the female body, in which “blood hydraulics” becomes the lynch pin for concluding that women were not just distinct, but inferior to men.[4] The polluting potential of menstrual blood towards the ‘other’ is a central concern here. The view of the menstrual cycle at this time was influenced by a paradigm shift in the religious sphere, displacing naturalist religions with patriarchal ones in which “only male gods could give birth to female deities.”[5] Glenda Hufnagel explains that this shift in belief coincided with a shift in the understanding of “societal relationships”, impacting the roles men and women were thought to have in life, and in reproduction. Men were widely associated by philosophers with the faculties of the mind and spirit, while women “were confined to the realm of flesh and earthly delight.”[6] Popular medical theory suggested that menses was formless matter, whereas sperm was form itself. If a sperm cell could not completely align menstrual matter to itself, then the menstrual waves gradually accumulating in the womb would either result in a period, or distort conception, producing a deformed foetus or a female child.[7] Women were in fact viewed by Aristotle as *defective* males, having been corrupted by the excessive ‘moisture’ of the female reproductive system.[8] This moisture had the potential to negate the procreative heat provided by the male’s sperm, resulting in an unperfected creature with inverted physiology. In this way menstrual blood was seen as hostile to the male seed, and perhaps by extension, male children. It was also suspected that the general environment was vulnerable to the potency of menstrual pollution. The following comment from Pliny the Elder has been notably cited throughout secondary literature,

> Contact with it turns new wine sour, crops touched by it become barren, grafts die, seeds in gardens are dried up, the fruits of trees falloff, the bright surface of mirrors in which it is merely reflected is dimmed, the edge of steel and the gleam of ivory are dulled, hives of bees die, even bronze and iron are at once seized by rust, and a horrible smell fills the air.[9]

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[4] Glenda Lewin Hufnagel, *A History of Women’s Menstruation from Ancient Greece to the Twenty-First Century: Psychological, Social, Medical, Religious, and Educational Issues* (Lewiston, N.Y: Edwin Mellen Press, 2012), 16.

[5] Hufnagel, 17.

[6] Charles T. Wood, “The Doctor’s Dilemma: Sin, Salvation, and the Menstrual Cycle in Medieval Thought,” *Speculum* 56, no. 4 (1981): 715.

[7] Wood, 715–16.

[8] G. Carroll, “Subversion, Substance, & Soteriology: The Redeeming Womb in Julian of Norwich’s Revelations,” *Lumen Et Vita* 7, no. 1 (2017), https://doi.org/10.6017/lv.v7i1.9854.

[9] Pliny, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham, reprinted ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 549, cited in Hufnagel, *A History of Women’s Menstruation from Ancient Greece to the Twenty-First Century*, 21.

The cultural construction of menstruation in negative terms was further undergirded by Judeo-Christian beliefs during the medieval period. This is illustrated by the drawing together of menstruation as both biochemical pollutant and marker of sin.[10] Menstruation was believed to be the result of the divine curse on women, a monthly affliction by which "Eve paid for her sins" (see Gen 3:16).[11] Fear of women's bodies and blood therefore manifested in Medieval Europe as strategic avoidance and overt loathing for the sake of piety and health. Fertility advice circulating at the time continued to have an Aristotelian bent: citizens desiring the conception of a male child should take care to engage in sexual intercourse promptly after menstruation had concluded to minimise the corruption of sperm.[12] The uterus "was sometimes compared to a sewer or toilet", suggesting an analogous relationship between menstruation and defecation.[13] Medical texts from as late as the eighteenth century even supposed that contact with menstrual blood would cause a man's penis to be excoriated, or, in extreme cases, be fatal to the man himself.[14]

Concerns for the toxicity of menstrual blood were further buttressed by medieval humoral theory which understood the human body as "a vessel for the containment of fluids."[15] Despite recognition that the absolute containment of human fluids was a "wishful fiction", this nonetheless "led to anxiety over bodily margins".[16] Alanna Nissen writes that viewing women as inherently leaky creatures because of menstrual flow became a way for men to "displace their anxiety over their own lack of bodily control … onto women."[17] Humoral theory therefore interpreted menstruation as evidence of women's affinity for discord, qualifying male bodies as the comparatively stable models of the social body.[18] And yet, concerns for 'leakiness' were not without their ambiguities. Failure to experience a menstrual flow was of concern to some physicians, who believed blood stored in the womb would putrefy and gain a venomous quality which could poison a woman's mind.[19] Girls approaching menarche were recommended to regular exertion so that their fluids might

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[10] Wood, "The Doctor's Dilemma," 713.
[11] Lara Owen, *Her Blood Is Gold: Awakening to the Wisdom of Menstruation* (England: Archive Publishing, 2022), 10. Alanna Nissen, "Transgression, Pollution, Deformity, Bewitchment: Menstruation and Supernatural Threat in Late Medieval and Early Modern England, 1250 – 1750" (Masters diss., New York, Empire State College, 2017), 10.
[12] Wood, "The Doctor's Dilemma," 716.
[13] Nissen, "Transgression, Pollution, Deformity, Bewitchment," 8.
[14] Hufnagel, *A History of Women's Menstruation from Ancient Greece to the Twenty-First Century*, 31.
[15] Nissen, "Transgression, Pollution, Deformity, Bewitchment," 11.
[16] Nissen, 11.
[17] Nissen, 12.
[18] Nissen, 13.
[19] Hufnagel, *A History of Women's Menstruation from Ancient Greece to the Twenty-First Century*, 29.

remain in circulation, beating back "irritability" and "disease".[20] The purgative quality of menstruation was even theorised as being the reason women's life expectancy was greater than that of men during the medieval period, for the female body could cleanse itself of 'poisons' regularly.[21] However, as advantageous as menstrual flow may have been for women's longevity of life, its ties to the genesis of humankind's "sinful predicament" were explicitly secured by the Judeo-Christian faith, and so menstruation continued to be the "vehicle for blaming women for all that was believed to be evil" and chaotic in the world."[22] Ultimately, the Church's abhorrence of feminine evil led to the execution of thousands of women across Europe who were suspected of being witches.[23]

To conclude, from the ancient world to the Middle Ages, menstrual blood – flowing or not – was vilified as foul and seen as an obstacle for the flourishing of the public other. Medieval writers viewed menstrual blood as evidence that women were marked with the proclivity to pollute and propagate sin, which warranted strategic avoidance and ecclesial intervention. The female body then, unless resisted and subdued by male power, was interpreted as having the potential to cause disaster for the community and the environment.

An Obstacle to Personal Flourishing

From the nineteenth century, the focal point of menstrual stigma shifted, making personal wellbeing its primary focus for what was threatened. This stigma, however, was initially applied on class divides, privileging the wealthy. Within the middle and upper classes, because women's labour was essentially "superfluous to the survival of the family", menstruation became pathologised as an illness, constituting female health as regularly contingent upon medical intervention.[24] Physicians espoused that the body had a finite

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[20] Hufnagel, 32.
[21] Wood, "The Doctor's Dilemma," 723–24.
[22] Wood, 724; Hufnagel, *A History of Women's Menstruation from Ancient Greece to the Twenty-First Century*, 27.
[23] In the fifteenth century, the *Malleus Maleficarum* ("Hammer of Witches") was commissioned as a research project to answer why women were more taken with witchcraft than men. Heinrich Kramer and Jakobus Sprenger, the two German priests tasked with this project, aetiologically explained women's proclivity for chaos, writing, "[a woman] is more given to fleshly lusts than a man, as is clear from her many acts of carnal filthiness. One notices this weakness in the way the first woman was moulded, because she was formed from a curved rib... which is bent… in the opposite direction from [that in] a man". Heinrich Kramer and Jakobus Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum,* ed and trans., Montague Sommers, reprinted ed. (London: Folio Society, 1968), 75-77, cited in Hufnagel, *A History of Women's Menstruation from Ancient Greece to the Twenty-First Century*, 22.
[24] Hufnagel, 54.

amount of energy, and because of this menstruators were strongly encouraged to remain at home so that education, exercise, and the elements would not disturb their delicate bodily functions.[25] This contrasted with the lower classes, whose labor was essential, thus, conveniently, the menstrual cycles of poor and working-class women continued to be viewed as natural. Employers afforded workers no leave for menstrual pains, let alone natal or post-natal care, even as their own wives were in bed under the same circumstances.[26] For the "sickly" wealthy woman, "becoming an invalid was a mark of privilege and class status", while poor women, who were subject to constant illness and exhaustion, were "sickening" to the upper classes.[27] Across all socio-economic levels however, menstruation was seldom spoken or written about by women except in veiled terms.[28] Due to this silence, it was not unlikely for young women to feel "traumatized at the onset of menses", believing it to be an unexpected haemorrhage.[29]

The medicalisation of menstruation secured long-term sources of income for physicians, but did little to counter menstrual shame. Menstruation became widely considered as a determining factor of women's psychological health; thus, its presence, absence, or early onset was indicative of a wide range of disorders which could infiltrate the female mind and body.[30] Urban habitats, stimulating diets, and sexual immorality were cited among the reasons a woman might experience menstrual irregularity or early menarche.[31] This shamed and sexualised women's bodies. Menstruation was even thought by some to incite masturbation and insanity; hence the surgical removal of the clitoris and ovaries became a recommended practice for preserving the rectitude of the Victorian woman.[32] As the desire for inclusive education grew into the twentieth century, menstruation was frequently cited as evidence of women's diminished mental capacities, which made them unfit for advanced schooling.[33] Moreover, much anxiety was shed over the damage which would be done to a woman's reproductive system and maternal sensibilities if her energy were concentrated in the faculties of the mind, over the body. Again, this argument did not apply to the working

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[25] Hufnagel, 40.
[26] Hufnagel, 42.
[27] Hufnagel, 42.
[28] Nissen, "Transgression, Pollution, Deformity, Bewitchment," 18.
[29] Hufnagel, *A History of Women's Menstruation from Ancient Greece to the Twenty-First Century*, 35–36.
[30] Hufnagel, 45.
[31] Hufnagel, 36–37.
[32] Hufnagel, 43–45.
[33] Menarche is a term which refers to a person's first menstrual period. Hufnagel, 65.

class, as it was assumed the repetitive manual labour which women undertook did not require mental skill, and thus their reproductive systems would not be adversely affected.[34]

The introduction of "commercially manufactured menstrual products" following the first World War was a positive development for menstrual health, however, menstruation continued to be pathologised in the marketing of those products.[35] Societal concerns regarding hygiene and germs became ideal collateral for menstrual product marketers, who posited "contemporary women as … threatened by menstruation."[36] Commercialisation invited menstruators to participate in a perpetual cycle in which control and consumerism were indefinitely required to sustain femininity. Women were encouraged to "hide the fact that they menstruate" in order to sustain their own "happiness", as stated by a 1925 sanitary napkin advert; "To be fresh and charming every day, to live every day unhandicapped, to wear sheerest frocks without a second thought … you can now do all".[37] Anita Diamant suggests that language such as this "suggests a covert war against a shrewd opponent. The word 'fresh' on a box of pads implies a battle against 'foul. 'Sanitary' counters the threat of 'soiled.' 'Carefree' responds to 'distress,' and 'hygiene' holds the line against 'disease.'"[38] Even as menstruation becomes increasingly resourced, menstruators continue to be encouraged to secure high quality products which will enable them to effectively *disidentify* with their menstrual cycle. Disidentification is imaged in adverts by use of "white clothing, swimsuits, leotards, tight-fitting jeans, and silky lingerie", demonstrating the ability of the right product to absorb worry, as well as blood.[39] Hearts, flowers, and blue coloured liquid are also used to "euphemistically … promote secrecy and delicacy" in visual representations of menstrual regulation, establishing distance between the 'feminine' woman and the bloody reality of menstruation.[40] Furthermore, advertisements commonly employ the threat of shame to motivate the buyer, pitting the social and physical consequences of discovery against the freedoms of effective management and hiddenness. For example, a woman found leaking might be portrayed as forfeiting recreational or sexual opportunities, while her leakproof

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[34] Hufnagel, 61–65.
[35] Hufnagel, 66.
[36] Hufnagel, 67–68.
[37] Hufnagel, 68. Sanitary napkin advert for Cellucotton Products, titled "Woman's Happiness". Originally published in the New York Journal American, 1925. View: https://repository.duke.edu/dc/adaccess/BH0009.
[38] Anita Diamant, *Period. End of Sentence: A New Chapter in the Fight for Menstrual Justice* (New York: Scribner, 2021), 22.
[39] Hufnagel, *A History of Women's Menstruation from Ancient Greece to the Twenty-First Century*, 69–70.
[40] Joan C. Chrisler and Ingrid Johnston-Robledo, "The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma," *Sex Roles* 68 (2013): 11, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-0614-7_17.

sister swims, dances, and flirts.[41] In many ways, the stigma surrounding menstruation has become "so commonplace, it barely registers", aided by the construction of menstruation as a condition which can and should be successfully managed by commercial products.[42]

Heading into the twenty-first century, women's reproductive health is gaining traction in public discourse and research, yet in many places a thinly veiled menstrual stigma continues to circulate.[43] Herein the emphasis rests on how menstruators might be liberated from the erratic and undignified nature of uterine blood, either for business or for pleasure. Notably, the market for oral contraceptives thrives on prevailing negative attitudes towards menstruation.[44] A month's course of 'the pill' is made up of twenty-one hormone pills, and seven placebo pills which induce a withdrawal bleed.[45] Placebo pills can be skipped to supress this bleeding, a strategy "originally recommended for women with menstrual health problems like endometriosis" or heavy periods, but in the last fifty years medical research has increasingly sanctioned this approach for pure convenience.[46] Though this enables menstruators to strategically avoid periods and related discomfort all together, maximising their attendance at work, school, or social events, this does little to undermine the persistence of menstrual stigmas. For example, total menstrual suppression leaves us unable to challenge society's favour of a 'care-less' worker who "is disembodied" and can 'run' "according to clock time".[47] Moreover, scholars continue to be divided over whether we have dispatched of menstruation more readily than we have researched its full complexity.[48] Considering the numerous adverse effects with which hormonal contraception is associated, it begs the

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[41] Hufnagel, *A History of Women's Menstruation from Ancient Greece to the Twenty-First Century*, 68–69.

[42] Diamant, *Period. End of Sentence*, 22.

[43] Diamant, 99.

[44] Ingrid Johnston-Robledo, Jessica Barnack, and Stephanie Wares, "'Kiss Your Period Good-Bye': Menstrual Suppression in the Popular Press," *Sex Roles* 54 (2006): 358, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-006-9007-1.

[45] This rhythm was proposed by its creators to mimic the natural menstrual cycle in the hope that it would be received as morally permissible by patients, practitioners, and the Catholic Church, which already approved the contraceptive method of fertility awareness. M. A. Schaumberg, "It's OK to Skip Your Period While on the Pill," *The Conversation*, May 17, 2018, https://theconversation.com/its-ok-to-skip-your-period-while-on-the-pill-87591.

[46] Johnston-Robledo, Barnack, and Wares, "'Kiss Your Period Good-Bye,'" 353. Schaumberg, "It's OK to Skip Your Period While on the Pill."

[47] Janet Grace Sayers and Deborah Jones, "Truth Scribbled in Blood: Women's Work, Menstruation and Poetry," *Gender, Work and Organization* 22, no. 2 (2015): 106, https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12059.

[48] Virginia Sole-Smith, "The Point of a Period," *Scientific American* 320, no. 5 (2019): 35–38. Menstrual health researchers Johnston-Robledo, Barnack and Wares exhibit how marketing for menstrual suppression more commonly draws on negative cultural attitudes towards menstruation over "definitive research supporting the safety of or women's positive attitudes toward this option". Johnston-Robledo, Barnack, and Wares, "'Kiss Your Period Good-Bye,'" 358.

question of whether offering the pill to 'treat' pre-menstrual or menstrual symptoms is in fact a satisfactory approach.[49]

Largely, menstruation is constructed in the West as a negative experience which women need to contain. Many who menstruate will actively avoid acknowledging their menstrual status while at work due to a fear of looking like an "unreliable employee" or of being a case-in-point for why "women are biologically less suited to participating in the workforce."[50] Popular English euphemisms such as "the curse", "Aunt Flo", "on the rag", or "code red" emphasise how a period is an unfortunate event worth speaking about in covert terms.[51] Gender segregated school presentations or family conversations paint menstruation as an issue that only women need to know about.[52] In humour, menstruators are described and describe themselves as "as violent, irrational, emotionally labile, out-of-control, and physically or mentally ill", wielding knives to threaten those that irritate them.[53] This is not surprising when the negative aspects of menstruation, such as cramps, leaking, and mood swings, are widely accentuated in information booklets.[54] It is also not surprising that women often bitterly resent "the physical pains of menstruation and the accompanying mental depression", after all, as Phyllis Blanchard observes, "at one time or another almost every girl has been heard to exclaim in passionate protest, her desire to be a man."[55] The combination of these narratives reinforces menstruation as a stigmatised reality, causing menstrual management to become motivated by shame and secrecy. Chris Bobel and Breanne Fahs critique the contemporary menstrual activism movement for reinforcing this same prerogative.[56] In their view, using "the language of dignity to discuss menstrual health" continues to reinforce that menstruation is a potentially 'undignified' affair which requires

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[49] Sole-Smith, "The Point of a Period," 35. One only has to read the enclosed brochure of health warnings to receive an overwhelming sense of the possibilities, including an increased risk of "breast cancer, blood clots and stroke" for users (35).
[50] Diamant, *Period. End of Sentence*, 64. This is what makes the conversation regarding menstrual leave so contentious, as some are concerned its provision will undercut women's striving for equal opportunity (71-2).
[51] Roisin O'Connor, "Menstruation Study Finds Over 5,000 Slang Terms for 'Period,'" Independent, March 1, 2016, https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/menstruation-study-finds-over-5-000-slang-terms-for-period-a6905021.html.
[52] Chrisler and Johnston-Robledo, "The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma," 12.
[53] Chrisler and Johnston-Robledo, 11. A common image is the pre-menstrual woman who needs to be placated by their partner with junk food and chocolate.
[54] Chrisler and Johnston-Robledo, 12.
[55] Phyllis Blanchard, *The Care of the Adolescent Girl* (London: Kegan Paul, 1921), 67, cited in Hufnagel, *A History of Women's Menstruation from Ancient Greece to the Twenty-First Century*, 64.
[56] Bobel and Fahs, "From Bloodless Respectability to Radical Menstrual Embodiment: Shifting Menstrual Politics from Private to Public," 956.

"'upgraded' menstrual care materials" to reinstate personal respectability.[57] "To be an empowered menstruator, it seems, one must keep menstruation private".[58]

In conclusion, the medicalisation which took root in the nineteenth century has had an influence on the cultural construction of menstruation, problematising it as an obstacle to personal wellness. New commercial menstrual products and contraceptives brought a measure of agency for women but threatened shame and proposed freedom continue to be the categories by which these resources are marketed. Accordingly, women are encouraged to disidentify with their menstrual cycle, whereby having attained menstrual hiddenness, a woman paradoxically becomes her most feminine *and* most able to be accommodated by a system which favours the male body. A significant focus of the discourse continues to be how menstruation is an undignified and negative experience.

Menstruation in Religious Construction

Within the Judeo-Christian worldview, menstruation has primarily been stigmatised as a threat to the sacred. Menstrual taboos from the biblical tradition markedly owe their character to the Levitical purity laws, which established a tradition of separating menstruators from the sanctuary where God dwelled. This was done because menstruation was cited as having the ability to incur and transmit ritual impurity, which could contaminate the sanctuary if not regulated. Though commentators remain divided on what qualified menstruation as unclean, influential suggestions circulate around how it may have been conceived as antithetical to divine nature. This tension was reflected by later biblical writers who employed menstruation as a metaphor for moral depravation. Menstruants continued to be segregated from sacred space in the New Testament era, and unease remained for the early church about the interaction between menstrual and sacramental blood, despite attempts at positive reconstruction.

A Threat to the Sacred

[57] Bobel and Fahs, 968.
[58] Bobel and Fahs, 956.

The purity regulations of Leviticus were designed to help the Israelites "maintain the holiness of the sancta" where the spirit of God dwelled.[59] Failure to do so risked causing the presence of God to withdraw from the dwelling place. Menstruation was one such event that incurred an impurity which needed to be addressed before contact with the sacred could be resumed. The text of Leviticus 15:19-30 "serves as the basis for the Jewish menstrual laws" and is from the priestly (P) writings of Leviticus.[60] The Hebrew word for menstruation is נִדָּה *niddâh,* of which the root (*ndh*) means 'separation', reflecting "the physical separation of women during their menstrual periods from physical contact" or regular activities.[61] Separation has both private and public connotations, because though impurity is temporary, it is also contagious, and so the text prescribes the actions which the menstruant and the community around her must take to avoid the transmission of her impurity to the sanctuary.[62] A woman with an irregular flow of blood which either exceeds the typical seven days of menstruation or is because of some other condition, is *zava*¸ and that woman must count an additional seven days from when her discharge ceases to be ritually pure again. After such time she must supply sacrifices for both a purification (sin) offering and a burnt offering to atone for her uncleanness. Jacob Milgrom explains the *zava's* "prolonged impurity is considered to have developed enough power not just to contaminate by contact but to pollute the sanctuary from afar", hence the purification (sin) offering is made to purge incurred pollution.[63] It is also possible this offering serves to atone for possible transgressions associated with the abnormality of the discharge, as "Biblical and rabbinic theology often attributed illness to divine retribution for sins."[64] While verses 19-30 have to do with (B) normal and (A) abnormal vaginal bleeding, the wider chapter addresses the purity regulations regarding (A) abnormal and (B) normal seminal emissions, as well as (C) intercourse between a man and a woman, arranged in a chiastic structure (ABCBA). Commentators note that this positions the menstrual laws in equal tone with seminal ones, whereby differences

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[59] Sarah Harris, "The Bleeding Woman: A Journey from the Fringes," *Feminist Theology* 29, no. 2 (2021): 119, https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735020965177.
[60] Tirzah Meacham, "An Abbreviated History of the Development of the Jewish Menstrual Laws," in *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, ed. Rahel R. Wasserfall, Brandeis Series on Jewish Women (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1999), 23.
[61] Meacham, 23.
[62] Michael Rosenberg, "The Conflation of Purity and Prohibition: An Interpretation of Leviticus 18:19," *The Harvard Theological Review* 107, no. 4 (2014): 453. Bathing is interestingly not prescribed to the menstruator in this Levitical text, merely a waiting period for blood to have run its course. It may of course have been assumed as standard practice. Meacham, "An Abbreviated History," 24.
[63] Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, Continental Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 41.
[64] Meacham, "An Abbreviated History," 27.

have largely to do with the time it takes the fluid to come from the body.[65]

Leviticus 15 positions menstruation as a threat to sacred space, albeit a normal one. Why then did menstrual blood make a person unclean? Milgrom argues the Levitical blood taboo can be traced to Genesis 9:3-6, where the consumption or spilling of blood is first prohibited. He suggests that this is because "Blood is the essence of life and belongs not to humans but to God", and so the eschewing of blood is deeply indebted to a reverence of YHWH and a commitment to perpetuating life.[66] This would cause the flowing of blood to be a sign of death and a witness to that which is antithetical to God's law.[67] Milgrom believes specifically menstrual blood and seminal emissions were taboo in this sense, as fluids associated with life creation, as opposed to blood from general injury which was not considered polluting.[68] Richard Whitekettle goes one step further to suggest an analogous relationship between human and sacred bodies/spaces, which necessitates the purity regulations. According to Whitekettle, being in a state of טֻמְאָה *ṭum'âh* (uncleanness) relegated the individual to the periphery because entering divine space was conditional upon being with the "fullness of life", which ultimately images the vivific nature of God.[69] Consequently, because the female body/space was understood to cyclically move in and out of this state of fullness, impurity was transmitted to the woman when her uterus was unable to sustain life, and thus had moved out of analogical alignment with the body/space of an everbearing Creator God. Douglas concurs, perceiving a link between holiness and wholeness in the biblical text, requiring that all persons or animals entering sacred space need also be an embodied reflection of that wholeness.[70] This would implicate liminal states of the body – such as menstruation or after birth – as polluting to the sacred. Additionally, because the God of Israel was thought to have

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[65] Harris, "The Bleeding Woman," 119–20. Meacham, "An Abbreviated History," 26. Of course, as Meacham points out, though exclusion is not the primary goal of the law, women's "ritually pure time is greatly limited" overall compared with that of men, due to the impurity contracted from semen during intercourse (Lev 15:18) in addition to menstrual and parturient bleeding (see Lev 12:1-8) (26).
[66] Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 105.
[67] This might also explain why Leviticus prescribes extended measures to purify a woman's body after giving birth to a girl, because here we have a womb begetting a womb, multiplying the chance for life and death potential.
[68] Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 123. Menstruation was considered as the female seed. Meacham explains, "The idea itself is an attempt to explain female physiology on the basis of a male paradigm. Males ejaculate seed. Females menstruate when they are not pregnant but not during pregnancy. Menstrual blood must therefore be the female contribution to conception." Meacham, "An Abbreviated History," 25.
[69] Richard Whitekettle, "Levitical Thought and the Female Reproductive Cycle: Wombs, Wellsprings, and the Primeval World," *Vetus Testamentum* 46, no. 3 (1996): 379.
[70] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 52–53. Saul M. Olyan, "Mary Douglas's Holiness/Wholeness Paradigm: Its Potential for Insight and Its Limitations," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 8 (2008): 1–9, https://doi.org/10.5508/jhs.2008.v8.a10.

brought order to the world, disorderly bodies, such as those breached by bodily fluids, might have been considered counter to the creative activity of God.[71]

As Douglas has written, wherever a society recognises pollutants it does so because of a governing symbolic system which suggests the correct location of matter, making pollutants "matter out of place".[72] Whatever the explanation for impurity status, what is unmistakable is the construing of menstrual blood as unfit for contact with the sacred. This tension seems amplified by the literary choices of later biblical writers. By equating menstrual blood and menstruating women with "abominable acts, objects, or status", they fixed menstruation as a visual image of sinfulness, conflating ritual and moral impurity.[73] This was likely influenced by a change in understanding "about the 'moral' repercussions of coming into contact with menstrual blood," introduced in the Holiness (H) writings of Leviticus.[74] According to Leviticus 15:24 (P), although coitus with a menstruant will cause the time of impurity to pass to her partner, this does *not* amount to a prohibition on intercourse. Leviticus 18:19 (H), however, makes an *explicit* prohibition against sexual relations with a menstruant, with 20:18 threatening that the intimate pair will be כָּרַת *kârath* – cast out from the people.[75] This indicates that menstruation has begun to be implicated in religious wrongdoing, causing contact with it during intercourse to constitute a "violation of YHWH's code of Holiness."[76] Of all the sexual unions which should be avoided in Leviticus 20, sex during menstruation is the only coupling which might be committed accidently, yet its location in the chapter places it "on par" with those who intentionally commit "bestiality and incest".[77] Further still, the use of *niddâh* to describe an act of adultery in Leviticus 20:21 ("it is an act of *niddâh* [impurity]") extends "the meaning of the word to include a clearly forbidden sexual act", strengthening the association of menstruation with moral transgression.[78] The extension of menstruation as

[71] Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 190. For example, the separation of pure and impure things echoes the separation of the waters in Genesis 1:7-10. It may also have been that the Levitical purity laws were designed to maintain the integrity of Israel's national body. This would be an example of the political being mapped onto the personal. See Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 125.
[72] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 36.
[73] Meacham, "An Abbreviated History," 27.
[74] Elizabeth W. Goldstein, *Impurity and Gender in the Hebrew Bible* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 63.
[75] Meacham, "An Abbreviated History," 24.
[76] Goldstein, *Impurity and Gender in the Hebrew Bible*, 52.
[77] Goldstein, 54.
[78] Meacham, "An Abbreviated History," 27. Given the anomalous usage of *niddâh* in Lev 20:21 to explicitly describe an act of sin, Goldstein has argued it is possible this is an error in transcription committed by a later Qumran scribe, injecting a contemporary usage to the text. In the Second Temple period it was more common to use terms like *niddâh* (unclean) and *tôw'êbah* (morally disgusting – see Lev 20:13) interchangeably to refer to sin. This would not have been the case for the Holiness code writer. Goldstein, *Impurity and Gender in the Hebrew Bible*, 58–59.

"a metaphorical expression for sin and impurity" is seen in other texts such as Lamentations 1:17, Isaiah 30:22, and Ezra 9:11, in which figurative menstrual status undergirds the rejection of Jerusalem, the abhorrence of false idols, and the extent of a land polluted.[79] Elizabeth Goldstein has demonstrated how the prophet Ezekiel "explicitly equates female blood with immorality" by making menstrual emissions a symbol of Jerusalem's prolific guilt and unfaithfulness.[80] A possible reason for this metaphor might be found in the fact that women of the ancient world menstruated more infrequently than their modern counterparts, whereby menstrual blood would have been an overt indicator of a failed conception.[81] The implication becomes that so long as Israel is corrupt ('menstruous'), no intimacy or fruit will be borne of their partnership.[82]

Temple buildings were also structured according to analogous proximity with the holy. The Second Temple (516 BCE – 70 CE) was divided into courtyards which "clearly distinguished the genre of substances and people allowed into them."[83] The outer courts, known as the 'Court of the Gentiles', was the realm open to all non-Jews. Towards the center was the 'Court of Women' where "Jewish men and women worshipped together", yet as the name suggests, this court also represented the "spatial limit of women's participation" in Temple activity.[84] Jewish men alone could proceed from this courtyard into the Court of the Israelites, and "only a select caste of priests could … approach the altar located in the Court of the Priests."[85] Beyond this lay the Holy of Holies, the dwelling place of God's presence. Contact between divine and human persons ultimately took place at the altar and within the inner sanctum, both of which were off limits to women. Further limitations applied to menstruants, as described by Josephus, "The outer court was open to all, foreigners included … *women*

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[79] Meacham, "An Abbreviated History," 27.
[80] Goldstein, *Impurity and Gender in the Hebrew Bible*, 66.
[81] Rahel Wasserfall, "Introduction: Menstrual Blood into Jewish Blood" in *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, ed. Rahel Wasserfall (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1999), 11, cited in Goldstein, 74. Sole-Smith refers to research from anthropologist Beverly Strassman, who conducted research in the 1980's on the menstrual lives of the Dogon people, an ethnic group of Mali, West Africa. The Dogon women were found to have as little as 100 periods in their lifetime, compared with the average 400 of American women. Sole-Smith summarises, "Dogon women's experience is closer to what all women would have experienced throughout history before the development of the pill." Sole-Smith, "The Point of a Period," 36. For more information, see Beverly I. Strassmann, "The Function of Menstrual Taboos Among the Dogon", *Human Nature* 3 (1992): 89-131, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02692249.
[82] Goldstein, *Impurity and Gender in the Hebrew Bible*, 74.
[83] Joan R. Branham, "Bloody Women and Bloody Spaces: Menses and the Eucharist in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 30, no. 4 (2002): 16. This temple was also called Herod's Temple, due to refurbishments and expansions being made during his reign.
[84] Branham, 16.
[85] Branham, 16.

during their impurity were alone refused admission."[86] This reflects a telling selectivity if "Women associated with reproductive blood … were *alone* singled out as carriers of a taboo substance".[87]

In the rabbinic period, the beginning of which was marked by the destruction of the Second Temple, menstrual laws became increasingly more stringent. This was to account for the fact that sacrifices could no longer be made by Israel's priests if ritual purity were mistakenly compromised.[88] Of additional concern in the rabbinic conversation was "The internal and hidden aspect of the woman", which complicated the ease of recognising when blood was present, "as opposed to the external and visible understanding for a male emission".[89] Greater efforts were taken overall to minimise contact with menstruation, with extended regulations requiring prolonged separation from one's spouse, and immersion in water to mark the return to purity status.[90] New causes for self-examination were also devised, as well clarifications on the visual appearance of impure blood.[91] Some commentators note that while revisions of menstrual law in rabbinic and post-rabbinic Judaism reflect a desire to uphold the law, corresponding iterations were not made with regard to male impurities.[92] Moreover, the determination to prevent accidental contact with menstrual blood had the effect of recasting all uterine bleeding as abnormal bleeding.[93]

The early Christian church shared Jewish concern for the interaction between menstruation and the sacred. Most directly this implicated the sacraments, as it was believed contact with menstrual blood would pollute the purifying powers of Christ's blood or the waters of baptism.[94] The synoptic gospels' account of the haemorrhaging woman (Matt 9:20-22; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48) further complexified this tension. Joan Branham explains,

> All three gospel texts make clear that she touched only the extremities of his clothing,

[86] Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.8, 103, cited in Branham, 16. Emphasis added by Branham.
[87] Branham, 16. Emphasis original. This is striking given that the Temple was called the "house of prayer for all nations" by Jesus and the prophet Isaiah (Mark 11:17; cc Isa 56:7). See William E. Phipps, "The Menstrual Taboo in the Judeo-Christian Tradition," *Journal of Religion and Health* 19, no. 4 (1980): 299.
[88] Meacham, "An Abbreviated History," 31.
[89] Harris, "The Bleeding Woman," 121.
[90] Meacham, "An Abbreviated History," 29–30.
[91] Meacham, 29–30.
[92] Rachel Adler, "In Your Blood, Live: Re-Visions of a Theology of Purity," *Tikkun* 8, no. 1 (1993), https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=otago&id=GALE|A13904162&v=2.1&it=r&sid=bookmark-AONE&asid=5e6fa20b. Judith G. Martin, "Why Women Need a Feminist Spirituality," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 21, no. 1/2 (1993): 112.
[93] Meacham, "An Abbreviated History," 31.
[94] Branham, "Bloody Women and Bloody Spaces," 19.

> not his body, despite Christ's line of attestations: 'Who touched *me*? Someone touched *me*. Power has gone forth from *me*.' This small detail will become a critical one to theologians in their efforts to address the problem of menstruants handling the Eucharist.[95]

For some, contrary to the equivalence Branham suggests here, touching Jesus's garments was hardly on par with touching his person. Dionysus stressed therefore that it remained appropriate for a menstruant to abstain from interacting with the eucharistic elements, just as the Haemorrhoïssa did not dare to touch Jesus *directly*, only his outer fringes.[96] For others, the healing account itself was evidence enough that a bleeding body could approach the sacred without defiling it, as Gregory the Great argued in the sixth century, "if that woman who, in her infirmity, touched our Lord's garment was justified in her boldness, why is it that what was permitted to one was not permitted to all women who are afflicted…?"[97] This attempted revision by Gregory was later reversed by the Bishop of Canterbury, Theodore of Tarsus, in the seventh century, who prohibited menstruants from communion or entering the church at all.[98] The discourse continued in this way throughout the medieval period, motivated by a concern to protect the purity of sacred spaces and objects. Byzantine scholar Theodore Balsamon not only believed that menstruation was cause enough to disestablish the appointment of deaconesses, but he also advocated for the separation of menstruants via an erected divider in the church building.[99] Though much of the Christian concern for purity has since shifted from menstruation to virginity, within the Eastern Orthodox church today it remains taboo for a menstruant to receive communion, or for women to be ordained because of their monthly bloodshed.[100]

In summary, menstruation has been stigmatised as a threat to the sacred within a Judeo-Christian worldview. The writers of Leviticus believed that menstruation perpetuated *ṭum'âh* and thus devised ritual conditions to regulate the possible transmission of pollution to the sanctuary. Vaginal bleeding of any sort required a woman to separate from divine space and

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[95] Branham, 17.
[96] Branham, 19–20.
[97] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and tr. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 92-3, cited in Wood, "The Doctor's Dilemma," 714.
[98] Branham, "Bloody Women and Bloody Spaces," 20.
[99] Phipps, "The Menstrual Taboo in the Judeo-Christian Tradition," 300. Branham, "Bloody Women and Bloody Spaces," 21. Curiously, by this logic, such is the polluting power of reproductive blood that it *"actually carves out alternative spaces* in ecclesiastical architecture", intensifying the stigma of menstruation as a threat to sacred space (21). Emphasis original.
[100] Buckley and Gottlieb, *Blood Magic*, 22; Doris M. Kieser, "The Female Body in Catholic Theology: Menstruation, Reproduction, and Autonomy," *Horizons* 44, no. 1 (2017): 13, https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2017.51. Phipps, "The Menstrual Taboo in the Judeo-Christian Tradition," 300.

limit her sphere of activity until the flow had passed. Though suggestions for how the Israelite purity system was organised are inconclusive, the regulations generally appear to seek the containment of that which is in tension with divine nature. This stigma was further extended by later biblical writers who associated menstruation with sin. Ultimately, the conflation of menstruation as ritually and morally defiling was influential for the continued separation of menstruants from sacred space into the temple era and beyond.

The Impact of Stigma on the Menstruant

Throughout the Western world, menstruation has been stigmatised as a barrier to the flourishing of the community and the self, as well as a threat to the sacred. The stigma is highly pervasive throughout the spheres of church and world, producing a negative interpretive framework for menstruators. I would now like to consider the impact these stigmas have on the menstruant, in particular how they shape identity-formation and by extension the relationship the individual has with their menses and their wider body. I conclude that stigmatisation reinforces a fragmented understanding of bodyself for those who menstruate.

The sociologist Erving Goffman has called stigma "the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance."[101] Stigma is built upon societally determined categories which reflect what is believed to be normal and expected of persons in a given setting. If an individual is discovered to have fallen short of those expectations, stigmatisation results; they become "reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" in which there is a discrepancy between who we perceive them to be (their virtual identity) and who they actually are (their social identity).[102] Furthermore, in so far as the attribute is considered discrediting, so too will the person and associated people be discredited.[103] Goffman names three types of stigmas, "abominations of the body" (physical deformities), "blemishes of individual character" (poor life choices or behaviours), and "tribal" identities (attributes associated with marginalised people groups).[104] Joan Chrisler

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[101] Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Touchstone ed (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), 4.
[102] Goffman, 11.
[103] Those who are socially connected with the stigmatised individual will also often be impacted by a discrediting process. An example of this is the romantic partners cited in Leviticus 18:19 and 20:18, in which stigmatisation affects both the one who touches menstrual blood, and the one who produces it. Goffman, 38.
[104] Goffman, 12.

and Ingrid Johnston-Robledo have argued that menstruation fits all three categorisations.[105] Firstly, menstruation has been reviled by culture and religion as evidence of women's inferiority and proclivity for sin and sickness, even considered by some as a penal deformity of nature. This is despite threads of recognition throughout the literature that menstruation is a natural part of life and reproduction. Secondly, an emphasis on hiddenness causes menstrual visibility to constitute a 'blemish' on one's character. A woman who leaks blood in public may be judged as being 'unhygienic', 'unclean', 'unorganised', or 'un-ladylike'. A woman who discloses menstrual status may also be discredited as 'vulgar' and guilty of 'oversharing', depending on the present company. In a work setting honesty about menstrual cramps or related symptoms may cause an employee to be labelled as incompetent, weak, or see as making excuses for poor performance.[106] Finally, because menstruation is linked with the female experience of puberty, it is assumed to be the shared reality of all women.[107] That this is attached to a collective stigma is reflected in the common retort that it must be that 'time of the month' if any woman appears to be grumpy or impatient. Viewing menstruation as a collective female reality also has implications for *who* receives menstrual education, and often influences how the shelves containing menstrual products are labelled in the supermarket.[108]

Because the attribute of menstruation is discreditable, so too becomes menstruator, with knowledge being the turning point by which stigma can shape a person's identity in the mind of the community.[109] One who leaks in public is likely to feel shame at the visibility of their blood, but shame can also be internalised, leading an individual to believe that it is *them* who is shameful for menstruating at all.[110] If menstruation is supposed to be hidden, so too should the menstruant be, "When we are taught that something is hidden, we naturally believe that it contains an element that is not acceptable to other people. If menstruation were considered

[105] Chrisler and Johnston-Robledo, "The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma," 10.
[106] Sayers and Jones, "Truth Scribbled in Blood."
[107] Chrisler and Johnston-Robledo, "The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma," 10.
[108] Signs such as 'feminine hygiene' indicate that it is *women* who should be found in those aisles, and this can make those who are actively transitioning feel awkward. This was reflected in a comment made by Arlen, a *Flex* interviewee (Flex is a menstrual product brand), who said "your initial thought is, what is someone gonna think of me being in this space at all?" Furthermore, the packaging of period products often reflects that expected consumers are 'feminine women', which makes those who do not want to be that type of women feel pigeon holed, "the pinks, and the purples, and the flowers … you're being forced into a lane that says 'pretty, pink, and dresses.'" Flex, "We Asked a Trans Man and a Nonbinary Person How They Feel About Their Period," Flex, YouTube, July 14, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5pp4_5UYOs.
[109] Goffman, *Stigma*, 27.
[110] Chrisler and Johnston-Robledo, "The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma," 12–13.

'clean' and … 'decent', everyone would admit to [its] existence."[111] This internalised shame may also fuel a cognitive dissonance within the individual, causing the menstrual body to be interpreted as the potential 'betrayer' of the self, resulting in "profound implications for a woman's moral relation[ship]" with her body.[112] Penelope Washbourn and Janet Lee suspect that the disconnect between the menstrual body and the self originates for many women in puberty. Onset changes to the body, including menarche and breast-development, can induce a sense of identity disruption, necessitating a cognitive re-organisation of the self.[113] Yet, because cultural discourses exhibit an intense preoccupation with the body, stressing negative regard for female flesh and blood, this process of redefinition has the potential to become informed by the prerogatives of stigma.[114] Lee observes that "Like menarche ... breast development seems to be experienced to some extent as something that *happens* to girls outside their control, rather than being an intrinsic bodily experience that is a part of them."[115] This supposed distance between personhood and menstruation complexifies the relationship with the bodyself.

The presence of stigma affirms a definition of the 'good life' which the stigmatised individual will be unable to access. This reinforces disidentification with the menstrual body because it is stigmatised. In order to access the good life, or at least sustain the illusion of doing so, menstrual experience must be ignored or rejected. A desire to be perceived as 'feminine' may be one reason a menstruator obscures their blood. Another might have to do with the construction of female sexuality that the menstruator subscribes to. Doris Kieser identifies two extremes which are sustained in the Western imagination: either women are sexually self-defining (encouraged to embrace their desires) or sexually circumscribed (encouraged to regulate their desires for the spiritual and moral benefit of the community).[116]

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[111] Paula Weideger, *Menstruation and Menopause The Physiology and Psychology the Myth and the Reality*, rev. ed (New York: NY Dell Publishing, 1977), 34, cited in Leslie Smith Kendrick, "A Woman Bleeding: Integrating Female Embodiment Into Pastoral Theology and Practice," *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 48, no. 2 (1994): 146.
[112] Sarah Clark Miller, "The Moral Meanings of Miscarriage," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 46, 1 (March 2015): 149, cited in O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb*, 70.
[113] Penelope Washbourn, "Becoming Woman: Menstruation as Spiritual Struggle," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 247; Janet Lee, "Never Innocent: Breasted Experiences in Women's Bodily Narratives of Puberty," *Feminism & Psychology* 7, no. 4 (1997): 457. This is not helped by the fact that "young girls who develop secondary sex characteristics at an early age are often considered to be precociously sexual or promiscuous, and [therefore] tend to cause adults to feel discomfort." Lee, 465.
[114] Washbourn would prefer to see the creation of community "rites of passage" which can pastorally care for an individual as they undergo their adjustment to menstruant status. More on this in Chapter 3. See Washbourn, "Becoming Woman: Menstruation as Spiritual Struggle," 251–53.
[115] Lee, "Never Innocent," 463. Emphasis added.
[116] Kieser, "The Female Body in Catholic Society," 7–8.

Both of these constructions describe the contours of a 'good life' for women as sexual beings, yet the realities of the menstrual body remain partially obscured in each.[117] Where female sexuality is self-defined, women are encouraged to access "the variety of menstrual and reproductive products available as a means of controlling [their] own body", yet this emphasis on autonomy and 'empowerment' masks "prevailing social norms" which valorise the constant availability of the female sex.[118] Individuals who internalise this sexual objectification are therefore "motivated to distance themselves or dissociate from bodily functions … that are deemed incompatible with their sexual desirability."[119] This would cause the unexpected arrival of menstruation to be viewed with disdain, both by the menstruant and/or their sexual partner. Where female sexuality is circumscribed, women might be encouraged to abstain from intellectual and physical exploration of their body's reproductive system until such time as they are married, and even then, only do so in private with their spouse. Therefore, desiring to talk openly about the menstrual cycle or learn more about sex may be viewed with critique or suspicion, especially in circles where sexual purity is a communal responsibility.[120] Both of these constructions fail to positively engage the reality of menstruation, and instead urge women to disconnect from a holistic relationship with their body in pursuit of the 'good life'.

Encountering menstrual stigmas such as these ultimately promotes self-consciousness about the body. For a menstruant this is either due to anticipating adverse reactions from others, or because they do not wish to be identified with attributes of the stigma. A variety of strategies may be employed to establish distance between menstrual reality and the life a woman wishes to embody. An individual might suppress their periods using the pill, display hypervigilance with menstrual secrecy, or self-police their behaviour to emphasise that what 'happens' to them periodically can be separated from who they are ('oh, it's just my PMS').[121] Humour is observably used to establish this distance, comedically imaged by portrayals of the uterus as a sentient entity who inflicts menses on the subject when they fail

[117] Kieser, 9. Kieser also points out that within both schools of thought female bodies remain "consumers … and consumed" (8).
[118] Kieser, 9.
[119] Chrisler and Johnston-Robledo, "The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma," 13.
[120] Lee, "Never Innocent," 465. Kieser, "The Female Body in Catholic Society," 15.
[121] Chrisler and Johnston-Robledo, "The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma," 13. These authors paraphrase J. M. Ussher, who has argued that women's "tendency to pathologize premenstrual experiences" and "apply the PMS label to themselves" is "a form of behavioral self-policing" that allows them to establish disidentification (13) See J. M. Ussher, "Premenstrual Syndrome and Self-policing: Ruptures in Self-silencing Leading to Increased Self-surveillance and Blaming of the Body", *Social Theory & Health* 2 (2004): 254–272, doi:10.1057/palgrave.sth.8700032.

to conceive.[122] Some may also self-isolate during their period to keep themselves from being stigmatised by others.[123] These behaviours reinforce self-consciousness about the menstrual process, and keep stigma alive.

While here I have surveyed the negative impacts of menstrual stigma, I do not wish to suggest that menstruation be alternatively considered with unconditional positive regard.[124] The reality is that our perspectives on menstrual blood are as slippery as its substance. Its meaning in our lives can be positive and negative, constantly able to diverge and polarise.[125] This is because menstruators are not a homogenous community. The sight of blood might be a relief for some, or merely a neutral event, yet for others heralds a time of extreme pain or chronic traumatisation. This is certainly a reality for those for whom menstrual blood induces body dysmorphia, or who feel nauseous at the sight of it. Menstrual blood can also accompany grief, vividly betraying the lived presence of death for those experiencing reproductive loss.[126] Furthermore, I do not wish to condemn the use of menstrual or contraceptive products to live harmoniously with menstruation. The practical good which these products do should not be disregarded. Rather, I want to highlight that stigma has the potential to negatively impact a menstruator's view of self, and in particular, the relationship they have with their body. I also want us to recognise that the tools we are offered to regulate menstruation are not offered neutrally. Lee writes that "While bodies are biophysical entities, the meanings attached to bodies are directly related to the historical and sociocultural spaces they occupy. As such, the body is a cultural artifact that cannot be conceptualized as a priori of culture".[127] The social discourse associated with the menstrual body is etched into the

[122] One example is comic strips from Sarah C. Anderson of "Sarah's Scribbles", collated for quick reference in this article, Julija Nėjė, "13 Comics about Periods by Sarah's Scribbles That Only Women Will Understand," Bored Panda, September 6, 2016, https://www.boredpanda.com/period-comics-sarah-andersen/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic.
[123] Isolation may also be sought to reclaim menstruation as a time of rest. Melissa Raphael, *Thealogy and Embodiment: The Post-Patriarchal Reconstruction of Female Sacrality* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 195–98.
[124] Though I do discuss that we need positive explorations of menstruating to counter stigma (Chapter 2 and 3), I do not want to overemphasise this point. Even if, hypothetically, menstrual stigma was a thing of the past, menstruation could still be a negative experience for some. Stigma suggests a 'mode' of menstruating that frames it as negative. We need to strip this back to allow positive perspectives to surface, but ultimately people should be to free decide for themselves.
[125] Julia Kristeva called blood a "semantic crossroads". Julia Kristeva, "The Semiotics of Biblical Abomination," in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, Columbia University Press, 1982) 96, cited in Janet Martin Soskice, "Blood and Defilement," in *Feminism and Theology*, ed. Janet Martin Soskice and Diana Lipton, Oxford Readings in Feminism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 340–41.
[126] O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb*, 51.
[127] Lee, "Never Innocent," 456.

experience of those who menstruate; we never encounter our bloody reality in a vacuum.[128] In the Western world, from the moment it arrives menstruation is conditioned upon an interpretive framework which pronounces it as a threat to human flourishing, and plainly, an inconvenience,

> To be limited by our bodies, whether in sickness or death, or particularly by the female body process, is considered weakness and threatens our 'normal' forms of mastery and self-control ... To regard menstruation primarily as an unfortunate nuisance that now can be handled largely through better sanitary products is to treat female sexuality as an unfortunate burden or weakness which can to a large extent be overcome and thus ignored.[129]

Washbourn believes this narrative implies a general "inability to integrate the female body structure into the process of identity formation" in the West.[130] And in fact, as we have seen, menstrual stigmas promote active and urgent *disidentification* with the body, using language of shame and uncleanness to motivate fragmentation. It is easy to see how this disidentification is further corroborated by menstrual taboos arising from the Judeo-Christian tradition, concurring that menstruation is a pollutant to God.[131] Regardless of how the biblical tradition is interpreted, I believe it would be a mistake to overlook the harm and confusion which the hermeneutics of such texts have inflicted on the individuals and communities who read them. In her essay, "In Your Blood, Live", Rachel Adler reflects on her evolving encounter with Jewish teachings and perspectives on menstruation. She states, "Existing theological justifications of menstrual impurity did not help me to make sense of myself as a God-created creature. They treated me … as a means to someone else's end, rather than as an end in myself."[132] What we seek then, is "the erosion of a mandate of any kind" which dictates the 'correct' way to menstruate.[133] Further, we need to grapple with our "issue of blood" in order to remedy "the split between blood and being" that is secured by stigmatisation.[134] We need to reimagine how the menstrual body can exist as a part of an integrated self as affirmed by Creator God.[135]

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[128] Kieser, "The Female Body in Catholic Society," 17–18.
[129] Washbourn, "Becoming Woman: Menstruation as Spiritual Struggle," 254.
[130] Washbourn, 254.
[131] Cohabitation with a menstruant was said by one medieval Jewish text to drive "the divine presence from this world." Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), 115, cited in Martin, "Why Women Need a Feminist Spirituality," 112.
[132] Adler, "In Your Blood, Live."
[133] Bobel and Fahs, "From Bloodless Respectability to Radical Menstrual Embodiment: Shifting Menstrual Politics from Private to Public," 974.
[134] Sarit Gayle Moas, "The Value of Menstruation: Positive Meanings of the Female Lived-Body Experience" (Masters diss., Ramat-Gan, Bar-Ilan University, 2010), 88.
[135] Adler, "In Your Blood, Live."

Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed menstrual stigmas from both a Western and Judeo-Christian perspective. In the West, menstruation has been primarily stigmatised as an obstacle to human flourishing, whether for the ‘other’, or the menstruant themselves and the life they should embody. The commercialisation of menstrual products largely gave rise to this tension, pitting the feminine woman and her trusty tampon against the wily waves of menstrual blood. Within a Judeo-Christian framework menstruation has been characterised as a threat to the integrity of scared space, and by extension, God. Metaphors throughout the biblical literature emphasise menstrual blood as the antitheses of God’s holiness, and the visceral embodiment of humankind’s fallen nature. Concerns throughout subsequent Jewish and Christian traditions about menstrual blood and sacred space find their continuity in these texts, treading cautiously around the implications of touch and presence. From this we can see that menstrual stigma pervasively intersects culture and the church, coalescing in a predominantly negative interpretive framework for menstruators. I have concluded that the reality of stigma motivates disidentification with menstruation and fragments the bodyself, a concern for which I will unpack more fully in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 | Body Theologies

How do we think about the menstrual body in the light of believing that God made creation good? How do we reconceive of menstruation in *this* framework? Body theology chooses to intentionally recognise the body as a site of God's revelation and conducts theology in a way that incorporates embodied experience. As a discourse, it arises in direct challenge to the ambivalent, if not negative, view that traditional theology and culture have sustained towards the body. This is a productive avenue for engaging menstrual stigmas and their impact on the menstruant. Pointedly, the bodies of Jesus and Mary exhibit just how much God is willing to draw embodiment into redemption. However, as Althaus-Reid charges, traditional theology has also made these bodies participate in codes of female 'decency' that are problematic for real women, relegating sexuality and menstruation to the realm of the 'indecent' and 'profane'. We will need to reimagine the relationship between these sacred bodies and the menstruant in order to affirm menstruation as a site of theological work. To that end, I offer O'Donnell's discussion of the Eucharist as the mode by which ruptures in the ecclesial community are healed.

Body Theology

Body theology emphasises the significance of the body for theologising, making embodiment its locus of theological discovery.[1] Body theology is not so much theology *about* the body, rather it is more a way of doing theology *through* the body. It take "bodily experience seriously in conversation with and in the reshaping of our theological perceptions and categories."[2] When we encounter God, theologise, and work out our reality as people of faith, we do so as embodied people. As Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart state, the body is "both the site and the recipient of revelation" about God.[3] We are perhaps willing enough to accept that the body is implicated as a recipient of revelation, but perhaps less inclined to recognise the body as a site of that revelation.[4] And yet, as O'Donnell writes, "Birthed in the wake of the embodied experiences of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, Christianity

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[1] Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 11.
[2] James Nelson, "On Doing Body Theology," *Theology & Sexuality* 2 (1995): 46, https://doi.org/10.1177/135583589500100203.
[3] Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 11.
[4] O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb*, 149.

has always been a religion of the body."[5] Ours is an embodied story, which begins with fleshy creatures pronounced as made in God's image, and climaxes with the eschatological resurrection of the body. As James Nelson put it, this salvation is sexual; it is addressed to the embodied and ensouled selves we were uniquely made by God to be, connecting with our particularities, affirming them, and transforming them into the fullness of Christ.[6]

If the central tenet of body theology is that the body has theological significance, what evidence do we have that this is the case? First, ours is an incarnational tradition, as John's gospel writes, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:1:14). This was an immediately difficult claim to accept, and the heretics of the early Church conceived a multitude of ways in which Jesus' flesh could evade harbouring his divinity.[7] The early church rejected all these notions, claiming one Jesus with two natures, divine and human, "without confusion, without change, without division, [and] without separation".[8] This is pointedly a redemption that could not "be wished or just thought"; *bodies* were needed. Without the physical bodies of Mary and Jesus, salvation would not have been possible.[9] As Nikos Kazantzakis wrote, "The Word, in order to touch me, must become warm flesh."[10] For body theologians, our incarnational tradition has an immediate bearing on our own embodiment, begging us to consider that bodies are a "divine gift, so pronounced in incarnation".[11]

Second, human creatures are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27). As Karl Barth reminds us, the very fact of humankind being made in God's image presupposes that the image has "its ground and possibility" in Godself first and foremost.[12] Given the biblical tradition of God having no physical form (Deut 4:12-24), theories regarding the *imago dei* as

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[5] Karen O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies: The Eucharist, Mary and the Body in Trauma Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2019), 1.
[6] James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 70.
[7] Such as Jesus' humanity being an illusion, composite, or blended so thoroughly with his divine essence that it could not be considered human nature at all. Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 235–41.
[8] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 666.
[9] Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 32.
[10] Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, trans. P. A. Bien (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1965), 43, cited in Nelson, "On Doing Body Theology," 47. O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 66.
[11] Julia Baudzej, "Re-Telling the Story of Jesus: The Concept of Embodiment and Recent Feminist Reflections on the Maleness of Chris," *Feminist Theology* 17, no. 1 (2008): 84, https://doi.org/10.1177/096673500809564.
[12] That "in God's own sphere and being, there exists a divine and therefore self-grounded prototype to which this being can correspond". Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, vol. III/1 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 183.

an abstract or cerebral quality have received wide attention in Christian thinking.[13] However, body theologians posit that the image need not *exclude* embodiment, pointing to anthropomorphic descriptions of God's body in scripture that suggest the possibility of embodiment transposing something of God (Exod 24:9-11; 33:17, 23; 1 Kgs 22:19; Amos 9:1, Isa 6:1, Eze 1:26-28; Dan 7:9).[14] At the very least, the image should be said to encompass the entire human person, as J. W. Van Huyssteen affirms*, "the image of God is not found in humans, but is the human"*.[15] To Alistair McFayden, the image is more fittingly described as "performative"; something dynamically enacted when we work towards the redemption of ourselves and others, "imaging God by seeking the human as sought by God".[16] In either case, 'imaging' becomes intrinsically linked to our embodiment, whether that be in who we are as bodily individuals or what we choose to do with those bodies.[17] In this sense we might consider our bodies as sacramental, being able to embody "the divine presence on earth" (1 Cor 6:19-20).[18] The image of God ultimately secures that our whole person reveals something of God to creation, irrespective of what bodies we have.

As we have discussed, no theologising can be divorced from the body, and yet, bodies have been viewed in an ambiguous light throughout Christian history. Body theologians largely attribute this to the influence of the Hellenistic period on the early church, pointing out how traditional theology has long viewed the thought patterns of Greek philosophy as being congruent with a Christian worldview. As Deborah Creamer describes, "It is perhaps Plato's division of mind and body and Aristotle's division of normal and abnormal that set up an inescapable groundwork for Christian interpretations of embodiment and difference."[19] These

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[13] Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 55.
[14] Isherwood and Stuart, 55.
[15] J. W. Van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology*, *the Gifford Lecture*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2006), 320, cited in Jacob Meiring and Julian C. Müller, "Deconstructing the Body: Body Theology, Embodied Pastoral Anthropology and Body Mapping," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 31, no. 1 (2010): 3, https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v31i1.367. Emphasis original.
[16] Alistair McFadyen, "Redeeming the Image," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 16, no. 2 (2016): 120, https://doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2016.1196539.
[17] Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 48. Such as the "tender and urgent touching" which Heyward advocates will cultivate both our Christ-like love for others and our anger at where exploitation still persists. See Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God*, 1st ed (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).
[18] Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 148. Sacraments are "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual … grace". J. C. Goudy, "The Sacraments", in *The A-Z of Feminist Theology,* eds. Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 209, cited in Isherwood and Stuart, 147.
[19] Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 41, cited in Myrick C. Shinall, Jr., "Dismemberment, Dualism, and Theology of the Body in the Gospel of Matthew," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 44, no. 4 (2014): 186, https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107914552229.

ideas established a higher opinion of the soul over the body; the former seen as being able to transcend reality, the latter more prone to sin. This implicated that theology "had to spring from reason and the spirit if it were to hold any credibility", and subsequently, the body was seen as "something to be overcome in order to receive the joys of heaven".[20]

The influence of mind/body dualism on the Western world has led to the subordination of the body along gendered lines. In a paradigm where the cerebral is closer to holiness than the physical, God has been emphasised as pure masculine Spirit, who speaks life and order into existence as a disembodied entity, lacking eroticism, changeability, and weakness.[21] Women's 'innate' disorder, seen for example in her eating the apple and having menstrual 'flux', positions her furthest from God, thoroughly entwined with nature and chaos, while that sex whose nature most "obviously" reflects divine attributes is secured as God's representative.[22] This has positioned the male body as the 'seen' body in Christian thought and praxis, while women, nature, and physicality, are demarcated "to act as … the outsider, to the holy Trinity of man, God and church."[23] The mind/body paradigm further imprints itself upon a multitude of racial, social, and sexual boundaries, dictated by the dominant voices within theology and philosophy.[24] For example, in the history of the West some bodies have been rejected as 'savage' or 'disordered' when compared with the bodies of 'civilised' and 'rational' white people. Bodies have also been rejected from conceptions of personhood, reflected in the popular belief that the body is a mere vessel for the 'real me' hidden inside.[25] Ultimately, concluding that 'bodies' can be separated from 'people' has ethical implications, supporting objectification in the pornography industry, a "medical system [and aesthetic culture] that focuses on manipulating the body", and "an economy that exploits the labor of bodies by making the control of bodies normative."[26] Body theologians are determined to

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[20] Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 33; Isherwood and Stuart, 15. Given the centrality of the incarnation for the Christian tradition, this seems a perplexing claim!
[21] Nelson, "On Doing Body Theology," 49.
[22] Raphael, *Thealogy and Embodiment*, 174. Women's association with nature is made chillingly explicit by Sir Francis Bacon (Nelson paraphrasing), who spoke of man "wresting new knowledge from nature's womb … seizing her (nature) by the hair of her head … penetrating her mysteries … [and] having the power to conquer and subdue her." Nelson, "On Doing Body Theology," 45. Henry Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis*, trans. David G. Preston (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 104. Blocher writes that male suitability for divine representation is seen in their "active transcendency, in keeping an objective distance, in leadership and in work" (104).
[23] Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 15.
[24] Nelson, "On Doing Body Theology," 43–44.
[25] Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 39.
[26] Shinall, Jr., "Dismemberment, Dualism, and Theology of the Body in the Gospel of Matthew," 185.

establish the problematic ramifications of allowing these dualistic assumptions to continue unchecked. They challenge "traditional theology to look again at the way in which the human person is understood and to overcome the dualism that carries … a large dose of negativity about the way in which we express our humanness through our flesh."[27]

Body theology is a dialogical theology. O'Donnell employs the term "theo-logic" to describe the woodenness of traditional or systematic theologies in the way they facilitate a one-way conversation between theology and life, often positing conclusions which have no meaningful resonance in experience, or in some cases are likely to be destructive.[28] What can it mean to say to a survivor of reproductive loss that God is in control? Body theologians instead vouch for theologies which are attentive to embodied experience. Nelson writes,

> To be sure, it [body theology] attends to the sexual and body concepts given to us in Scripture and our theological traditions. But it does not rest with one-way speech, with only theology doing the talking. It insists on a genuine conversation. It presses us to move not only from theology to sexuality but, at the same time, to move from our sexuality to theology.[29]

Three movements in the theological sphere have been significant for the conceptualisation and construction of body theology. These are process thought (seeing the world as unfolding and God as relationally involved in the embodied history of that becoming), liberation theology (God's justice intervening in the lives of the poor and oppressed for the sake of a co-creative future), and feminist theology (theological work steeped in the fullness of human experience).[30] Isherwood and Stuart write that together these three shifts have "destabilized the dualistic hierarchy that is at the heart of patriarchal thinking and its body-subordinating attitudes … [and] critiqued the dominant notion that it is thinking alone that legitimizes and confirms man as the pinnacle of creation."[31] For some critics, contextual theologies such as these irrevocably err on the side of relativism, unable to make any claim to objectivity.

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[27] Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, eds., *Controversies in Body Theology*, Controversies in Contextual Theology Series (London: SCM Press, 2008), 3. It is important to note that while some Christian writers have exhibited deeply dualistic notions of the human person, much more characteristic of the tradition as a whole "is an uneasy acceptance of embodiment: uneasy because the body is liable to decay, excess, instability, and distraction". Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 73. From this we can see why self-mastery of the body has been frequently promoted as the key to living a holy life. The medieval women mystics in particular exhibited extreme control over their bodies so as to participate in the life and sufferings of Christ, practicing fasting, celibacy, and self-mortification to the extent that many of them achieved amenorrhea. Nissen, "Transgression, Pollution, Deformity, Bewitchment."
[28] O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb*, 1.
[29] Nelson, "On Doing Body Theology," 46.
[30] Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 34–38.
[31] Isherwood and Stuart, 33.

However, body theologians seek the inclusion of subjective experience out of a recognition that so-called 'universally applicable' theologies can sustain power imbalances in communities.[32] Althaus-Reid has claimed that "all theology is sexual theology" because it is worked out in the lives of people who process the world through their embodied specificity.[33] Consequently, she has charged traditional theology with being "in the closet about its true sexual nature", considering itself neutral, normative, and universal while being androcentric and heterosexual.[34] Body theology's commitment to "Working through" a multiplicity of bodies ensures that "theories do not get written on the bodies of 'others' who then become marginalized and objects of control."[35] Particular attention is paid to queer, female, and environmental bodies, as these have frequently been ignored and distained.

What I now wish to establish is the relevance of body theology for engaging menstrual stigmas. In our culture, menstruators are actively encouraged to disidentify with their menstrual blood in order to preserve femininity. This reinforces a split between body and being. The existence of a biblical and theological blood taboo has added gravity to this construction, seldom revoked by the tradition itself. In fact, as Isherwood and Althaus-Reid are at pains to make clear, Christian culture has historically incited physical and spiritual violence against the bodies of women, continuing to "slice" them "through acts of theological dismemberment that begin with the fundamental split of mind from body".[36] These authors point to examples of where female bodies and experiences have been remodelled, co-opted, severed, and even self/mutilated within the societal and ecclesiastical sphere, motivated by the mind/body dualism which "sustains patriarchal ideologies" outside of and within theology.[37] Anorexia, dieting, self-harm, toning, dissociation, domestic abuse, oppressive gender roles; these experiences are a "violent hermeneutical clue" that we are living in a cultural schema which refuses to tolerate the full, authentic reality of all a woman is and can be.[38] Isherwood expresses her disquiet that religious 'transvestites' (male priests in skirts) have co-opted female experience into "the male/divine manifestation", asserting that

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[32] Isherwood and Stuart, 40.
[33] Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Outing Theology: Thinking Christianity out of the Church Closet," *Feminist Theology* 27 (2001): 60.
[34] Althaus-Reid, 60. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), 19.
[35] Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 22.
[36] Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, *Controversies in Body Theology*, 2.
[37] Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, 2.
[38] Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, 1. The 'burning' of flesh that occurs in weight loss schemes for example might be seen in parallel with the European witchburnings "where female flesh was burnt off to liberate and redeem the soul." Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 83. See Raphael, *Thealogy and Embodiment*, 90.

"the feminine is present" all the while excluding women from offering genuinely of themselves *as* themselves.[39] An additional rhetoric of control is expressed in the categorisation of female body-parts into decent and indecent. In some ways even modesty codes amount to a kind of slicing, "the fact that women cover different parts of their bodies during mass has constituted a sign of the cosmetic cutting and reassembling of female bodies required in the separation of the scared from the profane".[40] I believe the stigmatised construction of menstruation and its consequences for the bodyself illustrates one more way in which the female body experience is being sliced. The Christian tradition has not been blameless in this.[41] Body theology can be uniquely fruitful for resisting this fragmentation, due to its emphasis on the significance of the *whole* body for theologising. Reconceiving theology through menstruation can resist and transform this stigmatised reality.[42]

There remains, however, a difficulty. Body theology takes the doctrines of incarnation and the *imago dei* as cause to promote that human bodies are intrinsically bound up in God's vision for salvation. Therefore, at the foundation of the body theology schema are the bodies of Christ and Mary – forever intertwined in the outpouring of God's redemptive work. Yet, these bodies are problematic conversation partners because of how Christ and Mary have been used to construct codes of female 'decency', which disconnect women from what is considered indecent about their lives and bodies. This problematises the incarnational resources that a body theology might draw on to affirm the goodness of menstruation. How can Christ's body, as male and therefore without a womb, but also who is exhibited to us in scripture as an 'asexual' Messiah, enter conversation with the menstrual body? How can Mary, when her body is so abstracted by Christian history and employed to oppress other women? In considering these questions, I will first survey insights from Althaus-Reid who

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[39] Lisa Isherwood, "Indecent Theology: What F–Ing Difference Does It Make?" *Feminist Theology* 11, no. 2 (2003): 143.
[40] Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Mutilations and Restorations: Cometic Surgery in Christianity," in *Controversies in Body Theology*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, Controversies in Contextual Theology Series (London: SCM Press, 2008), 77.
[41] Ashlie Juarbe, "My Period Made Me an Atheist," The New School Free Press, May 28, 2018, https://www.newschoolfreepress.com/2018/05/28/my-period-made-me-an-atheist/. In this blog article, Juarbe recounts the humiliation and shame of being called to the front of class to pray in her Catholic all-girls school, despite her strangled protests to her male teacher that she was experiencing the first cramps of menstruation. When Juarbe stood up, her seat was stained with blood. Her assessment of her situation is poignant, "For a normal phenomenon … [menstruation] was never talked about in public without hushed tones and uncomfortable faces. Going to an all girls religious high school was worse. Talking about anything below your waist was blasphemy. If it wasn't virtuous, it wasn't taught." For Juarbe, this experience was instrumental in her abandoning the Christian faith.
[42] Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 84.

interrogates the theological characterisation of the male-Messiah and his mother Mary. Following that discussion, I will consider O'Donnell's construction of the Eucharist as a mode of regathering the theological community. What I hope to demonstrate is that though discontinuities do and will always persist, the bodies of Christ and Mary remain productive for promoting menstruation as a site of theological reflection.

Marcella Althaus-Reid: Problematising Sacred Bodies

Althaus-Reid was a feminist liberation theologian whose literary context was the outworking of Liberation Theology in Latin America. Throughout her life she was critical of both liberation and feminist theologies for only operating at the centre of their discourse rather than broadening their field of application to marginalised peoples. She desired a theology which could be called sufficiently feminist and sufficiently liberating, searching "for the sacred in the female and in the indigenous, using a post-colonial and sexual analysis."[43] Althaus-Reid "writes her theology consciously out of the background of the *Conquista,* the conquest of Latin America by militant Catholic Spanish conquerors" who repressed native culture and shaped "codes of 'decency' as a sexual, class, and racial system."[44] Among other marginalised bodies, this implicated the female body, viewed as perverse and 'indecent' unless conformed to the example of Christ and *La Vírgen*. Althaus-Reid therefore considered her theological method as 'indecent' and 'queer' because it sought to push beyond these hegemonic categories. She interrogated why only 'decent' and hetero-normative aspects of life and sexuality could be permitted into theological imagining.[45] She also called for theology to recognise itself as a sexed activity (overwhelmingly male and heterosexual) and come out of the closet to embrace the other at the fringes of society. That, she believed, is where God would be found. As the following discussion will exhibit, Althaus-Reid gave attention to the bodies of real, sexual, poor, and oppressed women as her hermeneutical clue when considering scripture and theology. Reading from below in this way problematises the bodies of Christ and Mary, but "Until normative theology is shaken, Christian theology has

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[43] Cooper, *Queer and Indecent*, 1.

[44] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Talking Dirty, Speaking Truth: Indecenting Theology," in *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots: Essays in Honour of Marcella Althaus-Reid*, ed. Lisa Isherwood and Mark D. Jordan (London: SCM Press, 2010), 256.

[45] Afterall, she writes, "The excluded, by their very nature, are in confrontation with hegemonic systems … the excluded are the ones in the unique position to surpass the colonial trimmings of Christianity in a way that churches cannot do." Marcella Althaus-Reid, "The Hermeneutics of Transgression," in *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds: A Clash of Socio-Economic and Cultural Paradigms*, ed. G. D. Schrijver (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 255, cited in Cooper, *Queer and Indecent*, 31.

nothing to say about women, because it needs to reflect real women."[46]

Christ

To begin, we cannot ignore that present in Christology is a 'sexed discourse' which has the capacity to inform theological statements drawn about the nature of God and the body. A mere glance at the history of the Christian tradition exhibits a prevalent emphasis on the maleness of Jesus.[47] This has contributed to the divinisation of the male body within theology, often excluding female stories and experiences. However, a dimension of theology that is perhaps overlooked is that Christ as a representative and embodiment of humanity is equally gendered, sexed, and partial. Althaus-Reid points out that Christology is "made from the body of a young *man*" including "*his* experiences of pain and pleasure, of love and dissatisfaction and also of his ignorance of the feminine beyond the cultural constructions of gender of his time and society."[48] On the one hand, the body of Jesus Christ is a "body crossed by a divine madness and a sense of mission", distilled in the context of an oppressed people in need of liberation.[49] Yet, on the other hand, the body of the Messiah is a sexed one, incarnating a man "who interpreted the world from a phallocentric perspective, who did not *experience* the objectified lives of the women of his era" regardless of how much he may have empathised with them.[50] Jesus lived a specifically male, human life. He was fully human and should be understood as limited in the same way as others. He did not experience those aspects of embodiment that were beyond his particular body. Jesus was also a product of cultural conditioning, which to Althaus-Reid suggests that he could not reasonably be expected to be enlightened about women's needs beyond what his male peers could perceive or what those women could articulate to him.[51] As Althaus-Reid reminds us, "Beyond the few metaphors of Jesus concerning the Motherhood of God, Jesus as God incarnate never gave birth, suckled a child, nor suffered the pains of menstruation."[52]

In her view this would make Jesus unable to convey the full transformation needed by the

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[46] Cooper, 75.
[47] SueAnn Johnson, "How Is the Body of Christ a Meaningful Symbol for the Contemporary Christian Community?" *Feminist Theology* 17, no. 2 (2009): 211, https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735008098724.
[48] Marcella Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology: Readings on Poverty, Sexual Identity and God* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 45. Emphasis added.
[49] Althaus-Reid, 45.
[50] Althaus-Reid, 45. Emphasis added.
[51] Althaus-Reid, 86.
[52] Althaus-Reid, 45.

human community *by himself*. She points to the story of the haemorrhaging woman in the synoptic gospels (Matt 9:20-22; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48) to develop this tension. Does Jesus go far enough by merely stopping the flow of blood? Althaus-Reid points out that by simply resolving the women's impurity and not addressing the structures that caused that flow to be considered impure in the first place, Jesus appears to symbolically accept that menstrual blood is an "occasion requiring laws of oppression and discrimination."[53] The limits in Jesus' response may stem from the fact that he did not know what would be sufficiently transformative for the woman and the community in this case. This is not surprising. These limitations are to be expected in the thoughts and actions of a male-Messiah. As Beverley Clack writes "A deity which corresponds to the normative power of the male body in patriarchal society will have little to say to a woman's experience of her own body."[54] If theology is in a large way, Christology, we can see the complexity of drawing an affirming association between Christ's body and the menstrual body, because menstruation is an embodied reality distinctive from those which Jesus experienced.

A further difficulty Althaus-Reid identifies relates to Christ's sexuality. Richard Beck has written how categories of disgust influence theologising, and consequently sexuality has been a dimension of Christ's full humanity that theologians have struggled to accept. He writes,

> There is something illicit and vulgar about imagining Jesus participating in the metabolic life of the body, or pulled by the sexual desires associated with human reproduction. Consequently, at various times and places throughout Christian history, there have been attempts to quarantine Jesus from the life of the body, to embrace a super-human Jesus.[55]

In the Latin American context, Althaus-Reid observes how the construction of Christ by classical theologians as being effectively 'asexual' has had problematic implications for how sexuality is understood in the Christian community. This is particularly significant for the lives of women. Christ is "not represented [in theology] as a mature, sexually active man".[56] Althaus-Reid is not surprised by his. That "God has sex with young Mary without a

[53] Althaus-Reid, 51. She does not question whether the flow is menstrual.
[54] Beverley Clack, "Human Sexuality and the Concept of God/Ess," in *The Good News of the Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism*, ed. Lisa Isherwood (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 120. This exact difficulty caused Rosemary Radford Ruether to question if a male saviour could save women. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).
[55] Richard Beck, *Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality, and Mortality* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2012), 182.
[56] Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, 88.

meaningful relationship", conceiving Christ "by male and not female desire", demonstrates to her that the patriarchal God is an 'immature' sexual partner.[57] She expects that this would have consequences for the sexual expression Jesus can develop, "That sexual immaturity attributed to the Big God called 'the father' is extended to the construction of a Christ unable to understand or develop human sexuality".[58] Whether for reasons of origin or religious 'purity', Christ surfaces in theology as an asexual figure. Yet, Althaus-Reid points out, despite being a man, he is seldom seen as a model of sexuality for men. Rather, he more frequently comes to represent "the female sexual categories of renunciation of sexual desires which are at the base of the female identity".[59] Here she is describing how Christian women in Latin America are held to a high standard of moral and sexual purity, expected to transcend their sexual desires to the level of disinterest as modelled in the life of Christ (or of *La Vírgen*). In this schema, being ignorant about the body exemplifies Christlikeness, "Perhaps *putas* [prostitutes] masturbate and know their bodies, but not decent women".[60] She further observes that "the theological construction of Christ" as one who contributes an affective labour force to society "has made Christ participate" in the female concept of sexuality because women "*feel* a connection between the affectivity of Christ and their own".[61] For women in Latin America, Christianity becomes associated "with love but not with sexuality".[62] This "conveys a powerfully distorted sexual message" which contributes to the alienation of women from their embodiment.[63]

If at the center of our gospel is an 'asexual' Messiah, whose conduct reinforces categories of feminine 'decency', this problematises affirming 'indecent' facets of women's sexuality (including menstruation) as a locus for theology. As Althaus-Reid points out, it is difficult to undertake "the process of doing a Feminist Theology which may deal with issues of embodiment (incarnation) from a community of women who do not know their bodies or feel that their bodies are good" [64] Furthermore, if Christ can be equated with a decent woman – who willingly sacrifices her livelihood, body, and desires to put others first – then this Christ

[57] Althaus-Reid, 85.
[58] Althaus-Reid, 85.
[59] Althaus-Reid, 89–90.
[60] Althaus-Reid, 91.
[61] Althaus-Reid, 88–89.
[62] Althaus-Reid, 88–89. Ultimately, Althaus-Reid believes an indecent theology is needed "to disentangle women from the sufferings produced by the theological confusion … which makes love more important for women's fulfilment than sex".
[63] Althaus-Reid, 90.
[64] Althaus-Reid, 91.

can hardly challenge forms of "ritual prostitution" that still effect Christian women today.[65] Here, the term 'prostitution' is being used to reflect how a person with "a lack of options" might give their body in order to survive.[66] Althaus-Reid sees that where religion gives women no other option than to dimmish their bodies/sexuality and willingly serve an institution which "speaks in terms of universal male experiences" – i.e., be 'decent' – then this amounts to a kind of prostitution.[67] She points to the widow of Luke 21:1-4 to illustrate this point. The widow is praised by Jesus for giving selflessly to support the Temple cult, but in reality, she has sacrificed her body.[68] To Althaus-Reid, this would be an example of where the expectation to be decent becomes destructive.

For Althaus-Reid, it is vital that we go beyond "the limitations of Jesus' historical consciousness" when constructing Christology.[69] In her mind, Christ must be considered as a Messiah of "dialogical construction" both in his time and across time, because he alone could not be expected to flesh out every dimension of the transformed community.[70] Rather, this is an ongoing process that believers participate in with Christ, continuing to work out the implications of divine revelation in theology and in the life of faith. Pointedly, if Christ was and is "the product of interactions among messianic expectations and needs in a community", the contributions of his women followers can be seen as having legitimate opportunity in the development of his ministry, both then and now.[71] This is an important notion for affirming the place of bodies and women in theology. As Althaus-Reid maintains, Christology has the potential to be the launch point for a "de-patriarchalization of Christianity" only if it acknowledges "its own process of dialogical construction" in which women participate "in the 'making of a Christ' process."[72] She concludes,

> This is crucial for the coming out of the closet of women's spirituality, even if that public discourse will threaten at the end what is today called Christ and Christianity. Christology from an Indecent Feminist Body Theology ('without underwear') needs to be understood as an ongoing task in which Christ as a personalized Messiah cannot

[65] Althaus-Reid, 91.
[66] Althaus-Reid, 90.
[67] Althaus-Reid, 91. For some people, adherence to monogamy or heterosexuality may be a sacrifice made to the norms of decency that actually minimises their well-being, say if a partner wishes to leave their abusive spouse but feels they cannot for religious reasons (93).
[68] Althaus-Reid, 90.
[69] Althaus-Reid, 92.
[70] Althaus-Reid, 53.
[71] Althaus-Reid, 86.
[72] Althaus-Reid, 86.

> undervalue the historical community of women surviving the web of cultural, racial, political, sexual and theological oppressions.[73]

Mary

Althaus-Reid also expresses her concerns over the figure of Mary as an access point for women's theologising. She points out that Mary has undergone extensive abstraction as a result of patriarchal control, scripture, and colonisation. As a character defined by a male-centric lens, Mary has been a "*familiar alien*" for many women.[74] In her experiences of pregnancy, parenthood, and suffering women recognise themselves, but ultimately, they are unable to draw near to Mary due to how she is "too clean, too high, and too holy … too sweet, too passive, and too forgiving."[75] Yet, to Althaus-Reid this apparent 'excess' of qualities does not reflect a woman remembered substantially in the text itself. She sees that the account of Mary's pregnancy, birth, and movements is limited to "short, domestic, women's time", while words spent on "political time", such as Herod's judicium, and "cosmic time", i.e., the coming of the Word made flesh, are significantly more prolific in the gospels.[76] Thus, Althaus-Reid exclaims, "The time of our [women's] everydayness … does not take many pages in historical accounts"![77] Beyond the birth narratives, Mary in fact "disappears in the process of Christology by the appropriation of her unpaid messianic reproductive work by the male religious community", even though she was the one who

[73] Althaus-Reid, 86–87.
[74] Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, 76.
[75] Chung, 76.
[76] Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, 22. Bauckham offers a counter to this reading, or at least, a caveat. He describes how Luke 1:5-80 – the narrative concerning the conception and eventual birth of John the Baptist, and the annunciation of Jesus – is structured chiastically, with the exchange of joy between Elizabeth and Mary at the center of the story. Components of this passage told from the female perspective (a total of 548 words) are equal in measure to those components told from the male perspective (594 words). Bauckham points out that though John the Baptist's "preparatory role" for the coming of Christ "is expressed structurally in the way his story frames that of Jesus", the privileged center of the passage (verses 39-45) is the women's time together (51). Notably, Mary and Elizabeth gather to discuss their situations without the presence of any male character. Bauckham would also have us not overlook the significance of the angel's appearance to Mary – an event that happens only for an individual woman two other times in the Hebrew Bible – and the inclusion of the Magnificat in the text, where Mary celebrates in song "the great act of salvation of which God has graciously commissioned her to be the agent" (54). Therefore, Bauckham argues that "structure and theme conspire" in Luke 1:5-80 to shape the story primarily from a female perspective (54). As the mothers of John and Jesus, Mary and Elizabeth are privileged in this text because "they are the responsible and acting subjects of the events" surrounding the birth narratives of the two boys (54). Their role is not forgotten. While Althaus-Reid's above argument may yet stand (as there does remain an overwhelmingly disproportionate number of words spent on political and cosmic time overall in the gospels, even if balance is present here), Bauckham demonstrates how stories told in domestic time can be typologically linked to stories told in political/cosmic time, and in fact may sometimes form the privileged center of them. Without annunciation there is no incarnation, even if incarnation fully realises the significance of annunciation. See Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 54.
[77] Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, 22.

carried God in the womb (*Theotokos)*.[78] When viewed with this lens, the domestication of Mary has ontological consequences for women in the church, "because it means that when we read the story, we elaborate our being in the world, excluded from the perspective of participation in cosmic time".[79]

Mary's participation in the annunciation of Christ is a significant theological event, yet her very pregnancy is abstracted from her body. As Althaus-Reid argues, "To start with Mary" as a launch point for feminist reflection, "is to start with an idea, a gas-like substance, a myth of a woman without a vagina" who is "the icon of a no-body".[80] Mary conceives without orgasm, without incident, and without reference to her menstrual cycle, and no mention is made of labour pains in birth or other difficulties during the pregnancy.[81] How much of this may be explained by the supernatural conditions of said pregnancy, permitting that Christ can be a child carried in the womb without complications; conceived 'the first try' due to his extraordinary patrilineage? Althaus-Reid is disturbed that the birth narrative of Christ does not preserve a feminine genealogy, rather it remembers that "a woman provided her body as a 'biological laboratory' to reproduce a human being engendered by God" in which "God assumes the masculine role biologically".[82] Yet, as the Church Fathers were eager to emphasise, anything less than a full formation from the flesh of Mary would surely cause Christ to be less than truly human.[83] We might therefore consider that if Jesus needed to be fed by Mary's breasts, it stands to reason conditions *in utero* would have been similarly subject to nature, but the dependant, derivative, and biologically fragile dynamic between mother and son only seems to come into theological focus once the babe is born. Further,

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[78] Althaus-Reid, 22. See also 88. O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 60.
[79] Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, 22.
[80] Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 39.
[81] Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, 53–54.
[82] Althaus-Reid, 53. It is understandable that Mary's portrayal in the text as mother first and foremost is disappointing compared to other female characters in the biblical text (Deborah for example). Bauckham wonders if "Some feminist critics are inclined to see motherhood in the Bible solely in patriarchal terms", failing to recognise where motherhood is constructed differently, either by the woman herself, or the text (66). Bauckham writes, "while this is valid as a heuristic suspicion, to impose it woodenly or dogmatically is to rule out in advance the possibility that there are texts that reflect women's own independent sense of the importance of motherhood" (66). Mary for example does not bear a son for or with her husband's biological participation, though some have critiqued that "Elizabeth and Mary merely become instrumental in the desires and designs of the divine Patriarch, in place of an earthly husband" (66). Bauckham argues that to conclude this is to "equate subservience to another human with obedience to God in a crassly literalistic way, neglecting one of the central insights of biblical spirituality: that the service of God is the true liberation and fulfilment of the self" (66). See Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, 66.
[83] O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 44–45. See Tertullian, "On the Flesh of Christ", trans. Peter Holmes, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers,* vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885), chapter 20.

because Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary's uterus without the presence of a biological father, this characterises the landscape of Mary's body with an impossible dualism: she is both *mother* and *virgin*. While this is indeed a biological miracle, this dichotomy of states has come to be associated with the dissonance between Mary and real women.[84] Real women cannot be mothers and virgins.[85] Thus, Althaus-Reid writes, Mary is a "product of men's imagination"; she is a woman who can represent all the traits of 'decency' yet also access the fruits of 'indecency' and not suffer the consequences for being both.[86] She is every-woman, and none of them; familiar, yet unknown.

The Christian tradition valorises Mary for her submission and obedience to the Lord, yet has applied these virtues disproportionately in the construction of feminine identity, making servanthood the prime constituent of women's moral character. Mary's ascension, "I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38) metamorphosises to become the highest conduct a woman can possess.[87] In particular, Althaus-Reid is critical of how Mariology has perpetuated *hembrismo* in Latin America since the Spanish colonisation of the Americas.[88] *Hembrismo* refers to the cultural norms which sacralise and dictate women's moral superiority in society, expecting them to be of exemplary character and virtue like Mary.[89] However, these expectations obscure the real lives of women and the poor who struggle with the injustice of this social order. For them, Mary is not a woman who stands in solidarity with other women, rather she is a tool for sustaining their oppression: traitorous, rich, and devoutly pious, "exuding asexuality even after giving birth to a son".[90] She operates more like a god, or a mouthpiece of God, who communicates a code of Christian decency to women from her privileged position in society.[91] She is also not a women who can identify with or speak for the poor, because she "has a powerful son from a powerful father" and is respected by men for this and her piety.[92] Thus Althaus-Reid has written, "While in Europe it can be said that Mary is a woman 'who is not a woman'… in Latin America we must say that 'she is a God and a woman who

[84] Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, 75.
[85] I think of how it is especially desirable in society if a woman's vaginal canal remains 'tight' after birth.
[86] Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, 41.
[87] Althaus-Reid, 23. Catholic Public Domain Version.
[88] Althaus-Reid, 30–31. Also 40.
[89] This unfortunately also has implications for men.
[90] Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, 41.
[91] Althaus-Reid, 32.
[92] Althaus-Reid, 32.

oppresses women'."[93] In this context, it is difficult to imagine how Mary's body can affirm the 'indecent' menstrual body, given the abstract, uniquely favoured nature of her own body and the stigma and reproach associated with menstruation.[94] For Althaus-Reid, liberation for *María* might only be possible if first her voice was able to be found, speaking at last for herself and identifying with her sisters in Latin America; "Perhaps only then will God … become God among us women".[95]

Althaus-Reid boldly problematises Christ and Mary to demonstrate how insufficiently their bodies bridge to the embodied experiences of real, everyday women who menstruate, birth, work, and suffer in Latin America. She suggests that we need to uncover a Christ of dialogical construction, and a Mary who resonates with the bodies of women in order to make waves for women's theological ontology. For the purposes of this project, her work illustrates the difficulties of locating the menstrual body within a body theology framework, especially as the menstrual body has been characterised by impurity and indecency; qualities that place it in conflict with the pure and decent bodies of an asexual Christ, and a virgin Mother. In searching for the place of the menstrual body here, we will need to reimagine these bodies in dialogue with one another. I now turn to O'Donnell's re-conception of the Eucharist as one way we might theologically envisage the formation of a dialogical ecclesial community.[96] As Gavin D'Costa has written, if there is anything partial about the body of Christ, that body "is coming to completion primarily in those who eat his body and drink his blood, in the bodies of men and women, by the power of the Holy Spirit".[97]

Karen O'Donnell: The Eucharist as Gathering Space

O'Donnell sees that an indwelling of persons occurs in the Eucharist that heals ruptures between and within bodies. Working through the lens of trauma, she broadens the scope of what is included in the "somatic memory" at the heart of the Christian faith.[98] Doing so

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[93] Althaus-Reid, 41.

[94] Althaus-Reid's comments on the treatment of politically active woman "during the dictatorships in Latin America" exemplify this. She writes, "women's traditional magazines reinforced the idea of politically aware women as prostitutes, who had departed from the … model of the church shown by the Vírgen María." Althaus-Reid, 42.

[95] Althaus-Reid, *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology*, 43.

[96] Other possible paths of discussion might be considering the ambiguity of Christ's maleness, as Baudzej has done. See Baudzej, "Re-Telling the Story of Jesus." For my own work I am more interested in legitimising an opportunity for menstruation to speak for itself.

[97] Gavin D'Costa, *Sexing the Trinity: Gender, Culture and the Divine* (London: SCM Press, 2000), 49.

[98] O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 19.

reveals that implicated in the Eucharist is a re-membering of the entire Annunciation-Incarnation event, and in particular, the embodied experience of Mary, which O'Donnell names as traumatic. For her, recognition of this trauma lends language for expressing how becoming the Body of Christ is a corporeal transformation, strange, and intrusive on the selves we have previously been. However, as we come to share in the somatic memory of Christ-incarnate, we are also invited, as Mary was, into a post-traumatic remaking that legitimates our becoming Christ's Body in the world. It is further through this eucharistic "re-membering" that ruptures in relationship are healed within the life of the ecclesia, and embodied experience is rehabilitated to theological discourse. For the purposes of my work, O'Donnell's argument suggests a way in which we might regather the bodies of Mary, Christ, and menstruating women, resisting divisions between them and find a place of resonance. Embodied experience, even if 'indecent', *can* be a site of revelation that is recognised by the Body, not just because we are made in God's image, but also because this is the character of our being *one* Body. Two central ideas need initial discussion; the concept of the Eucharist as non-identical remembering, and trauma and rupture as found in the somatic memory of the Christian faith.

Non-Identical Re-membering

The Eucharist invites the ecclesial community to commemorate the memory of Jesus, a tradition established because of the gospel accounts of Jesus eating a final meal with his disciples before his betrayal and arrest (Matt 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-20; cc John 13:1-2). At that meal, Luke's gospel records Jesus as breaking bread and asking his followers to "do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19), but what is he asking them to remember? Liturgically, the elements of bread and wine are often associated with the broken body and poured out blood of the crucified Messiah. The priest therefore reminds her parishioner, "the body of Christ, broken for you ... the blood of Christ, shed".[99] This would suggest that the memory is about Jesus' death, and perhaps his resurrection. However, O'Donnell believes that wider interpretations of what this remembering entails are possible. It seems unlikely that the words "do this to remember me" amount to an instruction to the disciples to remember an event that has not yet taken place.[100] O'Donnell submits that what is being remembered in the Eucharist is the entire Annunciation-Incarnation event, which for

[99] *A New Zealand Prayer Book, He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa* (The Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia, 1998), 427, https://anglicanprayerbook.nz/.
[100] O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 19.

her includes the pronouncement to Mary of her pregnancy, the subsequent birth of Christ, and his life, death, and resurrection.[101] Thus, when Christ instructs his followers to make a practice of remembering him through the eucharistic meal, he is asking them to make their memory of his *whole* life the memory which underpins the identity and action of the witnessing community – a much more significant memory than his death alone.[102] In support of her argument she surveys the "strong tradition of viewing the Annunciation-Incarnation event with the same theological imagination that one considers the Eucharist," including associations between the eucharistic cup and breast milk.[103]

O'Donnell borrows from Catherine Pickstock to suggest that this remembering is a "non-identical repetition" of the Eucharist's source event.[104] Here, non-identical refers to the analogous quality characteristic of all repetition; even where the context differs, something can be said to have stayed the same.[105] Thus, the concept of non-identical repetition describes how the Eucharist can genuinely correspond to the original event and reproduce it meaningfully in the life of the church. For O'Donnell, if the memory is the entire Annunciation-Incarnation event, this extends what the Eucharist can be said to non-identically repeat. Thus she posits that our sacramental practice of remembering Jesus in the Eucharist non-identically repeats the last supper, the body and blood Christ gained and gave for our salvation, *and* the nourishment offered from Mary's body to his.[106] This memory is pointedly "somatic" because it stems from the embodied experiences of Jesus and Mary, yet as believers are made into the Body of Christ through the ordinances of bread and wine, it also becomes *their* shared somatic memory. In this way, the witnessing community is drawn

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[101] O'Donnell, 16–58.
[102] O'Donnell, 58.
[103] O'Donnell, 57. Breastfeeding is an "important element in the formation of identity" in the biblical narrative (44). This is seen in how figures such as Isaac, Moses, and Obed, are nursed by women who have tribal membership in the nation of Israel. Isaac and Moses are nursed by their biological mothers (Sarah and Jochebed), while Obed is nursed by his grandmother Naomi, who is descended from the tribe of Judah, over Ruth who is a Moabite. Here, breastfeeding is associated with a transmission of identity which preserves the child's legitimacy as a member of the nation. Breast milk was also viewed in ancient cultures to possess the ability to transmit essential characteristics of the mother, therefore, "To drink of the eucharistic cup full of the milk provided through the flesh of Jesus is to consume milk that is full of the essential characteristics of Christ" which in turn conforms us to the likeness of Christ" (45-6). O'Donnell observes that, "Those who suckled as the same breast were, in ancient cultures, considered to be milk siblings ... For the early Christians, who associated the eucharistic chalice with a mother's milk, to share this nourishment from the same breast ... was to forge strong, familiar bonds and enabled them to look upon one another as true siblings" (45).
[104] Catherine Pickstock, Repetition and Identity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 177, cited in O'Donnell, 19.
[105] O'Donnell, 19.
[106] For just as "Mary nourished Christ with the flesh and blood of her womb and the milk of her breasts, so now does Christ nourish all of humankind with his own flesh and blood." O'Donnell, 31.

into transformative *re-membering* of the past, as well as enabled to generate a new identity drawn from the embodied memory of God-with-us, which is transposed to the Body by participation in the Eucharist. Importantly for O'Donnell's argument, understanding the Eucharist as a somatic, non-identical re-membering of the Annunciation-Incarnation event opens the possibility to consider the traumatic dimension of the sacrament, for it involves bodies ruptured in the act of making and becoming, both then, and now.

Trauma and Rupture

If we take the view that the bread and wine of the Eucharist non-identically repeats the body and blood of the entire Annunciation-Incarnation event, this re-membering can incorporate the embodied experience of Mary. O'Donnell specifically sees a traumatic dimension in Mary's pregnancy.[107] Trauma is defined by O'Donnell as an event which overwhelms an individual's coping mechanisms, causing a disruption in a person's sense of bodily integrity, experience of time, language, and cognition.[108] Trauma is therefore an experience which impacts the whole person. Even though Mary gives her assent to the angel of the Lord, O'Donnell writes that in becoming suddenly pregnant Mary's bodily integrity is ruptured, "The enfleshing of the Divine Son in her womb is a physical rupturing of her flesh to make way for the flesh of another."[109] By experiencing a pregnancy outside of sexual intercourse, her experience of time is ruptured as *effect* is preceded before *cause*.[110] Finally, as a result of this trauma, words fail Mary: she asks, "How can this be?" (Luke 1:34). Reading the account of the annunciation through a trauma lens therefore shows that Mary's experience can be considered as traumatic. This has implications for O'Donnell's interpretation of what is happening in the eucharistic meal for the church community.

If the somatic memory at the heart of the Eucharist is a traumatic one, this signals to O'Donnell that the Body of Christ is a traumatised body on account of *taking* the Eucharist.

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[107] Elsewhere O'Donnell has written on the crucifixion witnesses as trauma survivors. See Karen O'Donnell, "Surviving Trauma at the Foot of the Cross," in *When Did We See You Naked? Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse*, ed. Jayme R. Reaves, David Tombs, and Rocio Figueroa (London: SCM Press, 2021). She is yet to write a sustained treatment of Christ's trauma.
[108] O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb*, 37.
[109] O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 168. So soon after engaging in Althaus-Reid's critique of events, we might question how a traumatic pregnancy such as this might escape the charge of rape, but O'Donnell is clear, "To name such an event as 'trauma' does not imply that this was rape. Rather, to name Mary's experience as trauma is to recognise the somatic effect of her experience". O'Donnell, 198.
[110] O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 168. Mary's experience of ruptured time might even be said to be paradigmatic of the rupture in the very fabric of time that happens as a result of the incarnation, "an event where the eternal constitutes a dramatic disturbance in the temporal order" (168).

She writes, "If the Eucharist is the non-identical repetition of this traumatic event, then the Eucharist must be traumatic as well."[111] In taking the Eucharist participants are receiving the Body of Christ into theirs, which disrupts the integrity of their separate, individual bodies.[112] The participants also experience a rupture in time and space as "ancient events" of the incarnate past and eschatological future "press into present day and make their presence felt".[113] This is also an event which escapes comprehension and language – the mystery of bodies broken and blood shed for the sake of salvation – that we approach only by faith.[114] The rupture that we experience, however, is paradoxical, for the eucharistic table is both a place of being "born and reborn" in which, like Mary, though "we receive the Body of Christ within us" we are also being made into that Body.[115] We are breached in order that the birth of a new identity might take place in us; we consume and are consumed.[116] Furthermore, because the memory in which we are partaking is somatic and traumatic, there is a sense in which we all come to share in the trauma that the Eucharist re-members.[117] O'Donnell sees that this also applies to the trauma which individual members bring with them into the ecclesial body, writing, "like a blunt force trauma to a lower limb, the impact of trauma is felt throughout the body".[118] As we are joined together in fellowship, we come to deeply empathise and ache for the traumas our fellow members carry (Eph 4:2). There is a sense in which pain becomes shared by the whole community as we partake in each other's lives, and collectively long for restoration. Thus, when we say that we are the *Body of Christ*, we mean that we have been made into something new which transcends and disrupts the identity we had before. The sacraments become our sites of holy rupture,

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[111] O'Donnell, 169. It is worth noting that, here, the language of trauma gets tricky, as it immediately conjures up images of an individual's personhood being violated. I do not believe this is the sense in which O'Donnell uses the word. It seems to me that she employs the language of trauma to indicate the gravity of being and becoming the Body of Christ in the world, that the Eucharist connects with embodied experience. In *Broken Bodies,* she goes on to explain how each of the sacraments are traumatic in the sense of rupturing a person's/community's/couple's bodily integrity, sense of time, and cognition. Of these, she cites the Eucharist as the most 'traumatic' of all, for it necessitates a bodily rupture in consuming the body and blood of Christ.

[112] Here O'Donnell assumes the doctrine of Real Presence, that the elements of bread and wine really transmit the presence of Christ to the church. This is important, because "When it comes to extending this eucharistic presence beyond the doorways of the Church, then the physical, fleshly presence matters" as only this will translate an encounter to other fleshly bodies. O'Donnell, 155. This same point of 'disruption' is made by Andrew Shepard, who describes the Holy Spirit as a 'disturbing' presence. He sees that it is only by being disturbed out of our old patterns of being that we can be shaped into new ones. Andrew Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas, Derrida, and a Theology of Hospitality* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2014), 177.

[113] O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 11.

[114] O'Donnell, 171.

[115] O'Donnell, 56; O'Donnell, 175.

[116] O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 169.

[117] O'Donnell, 200.

[118] O'Donnell, 11.

> Sacraments are … an exchange between divinity and humanity … Our bodies are the only way of experiencing, participating in and receiving the sacraments. It is in our bodies that memory occurs. The offering we make back to the Triune God is of our own embodied being … If sacraments are an exchange between humanity and divinity, then they are both the places where we lose ourselves and the places where we find ourselves – they are sites of both trauma and trauma recovery.[119]

From a trauma theology lens, O'Donnell articulates the Eucharist as a sacrament which non-identically re-members a traumatic event. This allows her to reflect on the gravity and materiality of being and becoming the Body of Christ. Central to our becoming is the somatic memory of Jesus's incarnate existence, which includes Mary's experience of bearing him in her womb. Already present in the Eucharist then, is the memory of a community which the individual is drawn into participation with.

The Indwelling Body of Christ

O'Donnell posits that the notion of *perichorēsis* 'mutual indwelling' is our model for understanding the Eucharist. Perichorēsis indicates the sense in which the life of each of the three Trinitarian persons "flows through each of the others, so each sustains … [and] has direct access to the consciousness of the others."[120] It is precisely because they are three that the divine persons be said to be in perichoretic relationship with one another, forming "their own unity by themselves in the circulation of the divine life."[121] The "reciprocity and exchange" of a perichoretic relationship was also observed by Gregory of Nazianzus as being present in the hypostatic union of the dual natures of Christ.[122] Therefore, the mutual indwelling of the Trinitarian persons and the dual natures of Christ can serve as a model for understanding the presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements, and the sense in which believers come to share in Christ's Body.[123] As O'Donnell comments, "Sacraments ... while being intimately connected to bodies, are access points into this *perichorēsis*."[124]

In the Eucharist, the material elements of bread and wine are genuinely present and retain their material status in the sacrament even as they are "indwelt by the Real Presence of Christ

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[119] O'Donnell, 185.
[120] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 312.
[121] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God,* trans., Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1981), 175, cited in O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 137.
[122] O'Donnell, 137–38.
[123] O'Donnell, 136–40.
[124] O'Donnell, 140. Emphasis original.

that makes them His body and blood."[125] So too is the embodied reality of the human participant retained even as they are indwelt by the corporeal Body of Christ. That our bodies can participate with integrity in the Eucharist is secured by the integrity of the hypostatic union, that is, that the dual natures of Christ were genuinely present and mutually partook in a shared life.[126] O'Donnell concludes that "the Trinity, the hypostasis of Christ, and the Real Presence in the Eucharist" have a lineal relationship, as "Each body is informed by the memory of the bodies that have gone before it".[127] However, this indwelling is pointedly "not one-way" because the material elements of the Eucharist – both the bread and the wine, but also the embodied persons who participate – become a real part of Christ even as he becomes a part of them.[128] In this two-way sacramental mystery, O'Donnell sees that "the goodness of the material world is affirmed" as the material is taken up and becomes a genuine part of the divine life.[129]

A trauma theology lens enables O'Donnell to explore the indwelling dimension of the Eucharist, as a constitutional liturgy for the Body of Christ. She goes on to suggest that the Eucharist can become a site of healing for additional ruptures that exist within the life of the Church.[130] Of these, she names the rupture in relationship that exists between God and us, brought about by human fallenness, and the rupture in relationship that has persisted throughout Christian history between the body and theology.[131] She writes, "Both of these ruptures are healed in the reception of the Eucharist. The consumption of the Divine Body bridges that rupture between human and Divine and the gap between the theological body and the real. All these bodies are brought into one real body in the reception of the

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[125] O'Donnell, 139.

[126] O'Donnell, 68. In response to the Nestorian controversy, Cyril of Alexandria emphasised that Christ's dual natures must be in genuine union, for it is their union which makes human redemption and thus the generation of the eucharistic bread and wine possible. Cyril writes, "he was become man, though being Life by nature, and begotten of the life that is by nature, that is, of God the Father, so that having united himself with the flesh which perishes according to the law of its own nature ... he might restore it to his own Life ... And he wears our nature, refashioning it to his own Life." See Thomas G. Weinandy, "Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation", in *The Theology of St Cyril of Alexandria: A Critical Appreciation*, ed. Thomas G. Weinandy and Daniel A. Keating (London & New York: T & T Clark, 2003), 23-54, at 24-5, cited in O'Donnell, 67.

[127] O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 139.

[128] O'Donnell, 139.

[129] O'Donnell, 139.

[130] She also discusses the fruitfulness of the Eucharist in aiding trauma survivors in the process of post-traumatic remaking, but this essay does not have the scope to survey this. Karen O'Donnell, "Surviving Trauma at the Foot of the Cross," in *When Did We See You Naked? Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse*, ed. Jayme R. Reaves, David Tombs, and Rocio Figueroa (London: SCM Press, 2021).

[131] O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 12. This second rupture is in the sense that the theological endeavour has abstracted the physical body from its reflections, preferring to intellectually consider the "bodies of theology", such as the Trinity and the Body of Christ, in disconnection from the corporeal bodies of human believers.

Eucharist."[132] If, as O'Donnell concludes, the Eucharist constitutes the Body of Christ, this dramatically gathers all bodies, whether they be sacred or profane, human or divine, together in the formation of a unified Body of Christ. Paul's assertion that there are no divisions in the body then (Gal 3:28), could be read to describe the sense in which we who are one body come to share in the particularities of each other.[133] That we will do so seems obvious: the sharing in the Eucharist's somatic memory imparts to us the unity of being one body (Rom 12:5), but each body 'part' brings its own memories which other members of the body will encounter. We rub-up against one another, in ways wanted and not, and our task is to view the other as part of my *body* – a feat that only becomes easier when we choose to look upon each other with the eyes of Christ.[134] Furthermore, if we are one body, what is true of one part might be said to resonate with the whole. O'Donnell writes, "If the ecclesial body is traumatized because the bodies that constitute it are traumatised, then is the ecclesial body also disabled, also gay, also intersex?"[135] This is a challenging idea. What would it mean to say that the Body of Christ is a menstrual body?

In conclusion, O'Donnell's exploration of the indwelling nature of the Eucharist illuminates the identity of the Christian community, suggesting the mode by which the ruptures between us can be healed, but also the deep participation which this Body is built on. For the sake of this work, viewing the Eucharist in this way allows the three bleeding bodies – the body of Jesus, the body of Mary, and the body of the menstruant – to be re-gathered in community. They are no longer held apart by conceptions of decency or indecency and can now be united. The Eucharist thereby encourages healing within our bodyselves, permitting the reconnection of blood and being within God's vision of human wholeness. To me, this suggests that menstruation may be affirmed as a site of theological reflection that can speak to the whole Body.

[132] O'Donnell, 180.
[133] John Swinton, "The Body of Christ Has Down's Syndrome: Theological Reflections on Vulnerability, Disability, and Graceful Communities," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 13, no. 2 (2003): 77.
[134] James K. A. Smith, "Healing the Imagination: Art Lessons from James Baldwin," *Image: Art, Faith, Mystery* 107 (2020), https://imagejournal.org/article/healing-the-imagination-art-lessons-from-james-baldwin/.
[135] O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 199.

Conclusion

In Chapter 1 I posited that menstrual stigmas promote a disconnect within the bodyself, impacting the relationship a menstruant has with their body. In this chapter I have introduced a framework for reimagining menstruation though a theological and eucharisitic lens, specifically drawing on insights from body theology. Body theology advocates for the significance of the body for theologising, positing that we may do theology *through* the body, and not merely about it. Theologians point to the doctrine of the *imago dei*, and our incarnational tradition to argue for the validity of doing this. This promotes a more unified view of the bodyself and resists the body/soul dualism of Greek philosophy which has been so closely entwined with the Christian tradition. In particular, the bodies of Jesus and Mary evidence that embodiment is a part of God's redemptive action, however, as Althaus-Reid argues, traditional theology has problematised this fact by emphasising the 'decency' of these bodies. An all-consuming quest for decency has disconnected Jesus and Mary from bodies labelled 'indecent' within theology and society. The exaggerated fear of indecency complicates the task of affirming menstruation as a site of theological work. Althaus-Reid is adamant these traditional constructions of Jesus and Mary will need to be reimagined if theology is to say anything about the lives and bodies of real women.

In the work of reimagining, one way we might reconceive of the relationship between the bodies of Jesus, Mary, and the menstruant is through O'Donnell's treatment of the Eucharist. By considering the traumatic and somatic dimensions of the Eucharist, O'Donnell posits the eucharisitic meal as a central event in constituting the Body of Christ. Through participation in the Eucharist, believers come to share in the somatic memory of the Annunciation-Incarnation event; a participation which both disturbs who we are and draws us together into a new identity. She claims that there is an indwelling of bodies present in the sacrament, modelled after the notion of divine *perichorēsis*, in which members of the body, both divine and human, come to indwell one another in such a way that secures their unity, while retaining their plurality. In this way she believes the Eucharist can function as a site of genuine healing and remaking for the ruptures in relationship that exist within the life of the church. Her reimagination suggests a way in which we might gather the estranged bodies of Jesus and Mary with the menstruant; subverting their theoretical separation by affirming that the Body of Christ radically invites believers into a perichorētic union with Christ, re-membering his and Mary's bodies in their own through the Eucharist so that the Church can

truly become a living Body. Furthermore, O'Donnell sees that the Eucharist can be a place of healing for our relationship with our embodied selves. If the Eucharist facilitates a perichorētic relationship between the material and the immaterial, any absolute disconnects that we might sustain within or between us must be shattered. The 'decent' and 'indecent'; the 'body' and 'soul'; the 'God' and 'us'; the 'you' and 'me', are drawn together in the sacrament of the Eucharist. If we accept that the body is a site of revelation, and that the Body of Christ is built dialogically, what theological speech can we hear coming from the menstrual body? I turn to this question in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 | Hearing Menstruation Speak

We have surveyed how menstruation is constructed as a stigmatised reality within the spheres of Western societies and the church. Stigma can impact the relationship a menstruant has with their body by reinforcing dualistic lines between the body and the self. Stigma reinforces a view of the body as something to disidentify with in order to be perceived as feminine, morally upright, or dignified. In opposition to this narrative, body theology emphasises the positive significance of the body for understanding God and recognising oneself as a God-created creature. Though this affirming conversation between bodies is not without difficulties from within the Christian tradition itself, especially for women, the sacrament of the Eucharist illustrates that God's redemptive work includes the knitting together of the human-divine community in such a way that draws us back from permitting the ruptures of relationship within and between us to continue. We are embodied members of the Body of Christ and all of what and who we are is drawn into this reality. We are all needed to form "the shape and texture" of this Body as it lives in the world. [1]

Danu Stinson, Elysia Desgrosseilliers, and Jessica Camerson have written that recovering from a stigmatised identity involves "reconstructing the self within the embrace of safe and welcoming relationships".[2] Individuals on this journey will need to reinstate their bodily integrity and discover new ways to speak about their story. Menstrual activist Chella Quint has championed her resistance to stigma by using joy and humour, sharing open stories with others about the reality of menstruation and encouraging period positivity.[3] Likewise, for those within the Christian community, I suggest we need to affirm new ways of speaking that boldly reinstate our menstrual bodies to the embrace of God's creative action. This will help us resist menstrual stigmas which recommend our bleeding bodies to silence and shame. As Althaus-Reid reflected, oppression of the 'indecent' thrives in Christian communities unless we craft "a theology without underwear" where our menstrual realities are not excluded from

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[1] Swinton, "The Body of Christ Has Down's Syndrome," 77.

[2] Danu Anthony Stinson, Elysia Desgrosseilliers, and Jessica J. Cameron, "Homeostasis, Interrupted: Living with and Recovering from a Stigmatized Identity," *Psychological Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (2021): 257, https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2021.2004822.

[3] Chella Quint, *Be Period Positive: Reframe Your Thinking and Reshape the Future of Menstruation* (New York: DK Publishing, 2021); Chella Quint, "From Embodied Shame to Reclaiming the Stain: Reflections on a Career in Menstrual Activism," *The Sociological Review Monographs* 67, no. 4 (2019): 927–42, https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119854275.

theological praxis.[4] In this chapter, I affirm menstruation as a site of creative theological work. This includes framing menstrual bodies as a hermeneutical tool, an application of that hermeneutic to our liturgical understanding of blood sacrifice, and an imagination of further ways that the 'openness' of menstruation might facilitate communion and witness to the goodness of creation. To support this discussion, I begin with Althaus-Reid's concept of 'excessive sex', which argues that bodies which reside outside of normative theological conversation should become all the more significant for theological reflection.

Menstrual Body Presiding

If we can affirm that the body is significant for theologising, then this includes the menstrual body as a legitimate site of theological work. Menstrual bodies are included in the lived reality of the Body of Christ, and so this body cannot be dismembered and hidden away. Althaus-Reid posits that the lives and bodies of women are uniquely able to disrupt hegemonic categories within theology due to how they exist as the excessive 'other' to that discourse. She believes excessive bodies can be employed as a hermeneutical tool in theological thought and action, exposing blind spots and illuminating fresh perspectives.[5] Women are 'excessive' to a society that views the male body as neutral, representative, and necessary.[6] Women are also 'excessive' to theology where God is constructed according to masculine categories of identity and power. As Althaus-Reid summarises, in societies and spheres of thought that privilege male bias, a woman becomes a "conceptual frame" that exceeds the perimeters of what fits within that framework, and therefore cannot illuminate anything additional of God or reality.[7] From the inside of this, theologising from the experiences of women will be a 'queer' endeavour, but this may also expose that which "has been made sacred for the sake of ideological interests."[8]

If we are tempted to overlook this charge, Althaus-Reid points out that many people cannot

[4] Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 28.
[5] Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Indecent Exposures: Excessive Sex and the Crisis of Theological Representation," in *The Good News of the Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism*, ed. Lisa Isherwood (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 214. This is important because excessiveness is afterall, "the pattern of God's transcendence … God … is always 'more'" (214).
[6] We might consider how most crash-dummies are based on the average Caucasian male form, or a myriad of other examples which predominantly make male bodies representative. Caroline Criado Perez, "The Deadly Truth About a World Built for Men – From Stab Vests to Car Crashes," The Guardian, February 23, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/feb/23/truth-world-built-for-men-car-crashes.
[7] Althaus-Reid, "Indecent Exposures," 214.
[8] Althaus-Reid, "Outing Theology," 58.

imagine a 'Jesus-Woman' "washing her menstrual towels", or find God in the face of a prostitute who is lavish with her sensuality.[9] Our difficulty in approaching these images reveals our fidelity to a "theological method of discernment and representation embodied in the ideals" of a symbolic system defined by male categories.[10] Yet the God-Woman pointedly draws our attention to just how bodily this incarnation is, while exposing "the connections or lack thereof between women's poverty and God" in androcentric theology.[11] Put another way, we might consider just how much more palatable an indigenous Peruvian man is to us as an image of the crucified Christ, compared with Xena, the warrior princess, who hangs crucified in her leather garb next to her girlfriend.[12] One of these images is theologically digestible, while the other is not, even though both are ahistorical and represent a Christ-like image from the margins. What is the difference? One embodies a recognisable image of Christ according to the normative gender and sexual codes that tell us what is "real" within theological insight, while the other image is excessive and resists re-casting. This is what Althaus-Reid describes as "outing theology" or "queering method": what is strange to normative theology "proves, by its own existence, that an alternative exists, and therefore, can be thought."[13] Menstruation can participate in theological reflection, and the value of this speech lies precisely in its excessive nature.

Women's experiences of their lives and bodies are invaluable for their ability to interrogate that which is theologically normative. Ali Green perceives that one place this can happen is when a woman presides over the Eucharist. She argues that female priests develop tension with "traditional phallocentric Christian rites", particularly regarding the notion of blood and sacrifice, because their bodies are "freighted" with a different philosophical dimension of meaning than that of men.[14] Distinct bodies are not wholly interchangeable because they bear and communicate different ideas, as Green points out, "She [who is presiding] cannot be

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[9] Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Re-Writing God by Cancelling the Sex Debt in Theology: A Response to Clare Herbert's 'Who Is God for You?'" *Feminist Theology* 8, no. 23 (2000): 33–34, https://doi.org/10.1177/096673500000002306; Althaus-Reid, "Indecent Exposures," 206–7.
[10] Althaus-Reid, "Indecent Exposures," 208.
[11] Cooper, *Queer and Indecent*, 80.
[12] Althaus-Reid, "Outing Theology," 58. Here Althaus-Reid references the comic, John Wagner, Joyce Chin, Walden Wong, *Xena: Warrior Princess* 1 (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Comics, September 1999). Interested parties could also refer to the television adaptation, *Xena: Warrior Princess,* Season 4, episode 21, "The Ides of March," directed by Ken Girotti, aired 10 May 1999.
[13] Althaus-Reid, 58.
[14] Ali Green, "Priest, Blood, Sacrifice: Re-Membering the Maternal Divine," *Feminist Theology* 18, no. 1 (2009): 11, https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735009105870.

regarded simply as an 'honorary man', whose gender is of no import".[15] Green sees that the introduction of the female body to sacred space invites and necessitates the expansion of eucharistic symbolism. Althaus-Reid concurs, because "A woman by her mere existence exceeds systematic theologies and destabilizes orthodoxies … language, method and interpretation *need* to be continuously exceeded in order to create space" for her.[16] Attention to what this expansion might entail for the Eucharist exposes dimensions of blood and sacrifice that are predominantly unrepresented by the liturgy.

The notion of sacrifice in the Eucharist "is linked to the shedding of blood", but this bloodshed has been historically placed within a liturgical frame that excludes women's bodies.[17] Because the Christian "narrative of faith has been embedded … in a patriarchal culture", the "concepts and language that we use [often] spring from and centre around the male imagination."[18] This is generally reflected in the prevalence of male titles and names of God, and the belief in the male as God's choice representative because he was created first and tempted second.[19] Eve's crime in "marring" humankind has made female bodies and blood the prey of "suspicion and anxiety" in the Church, often regarded as having defiling properties for sacred objects and space.[20]

As discussed in Chapter 1, the Judeo-Christian sacrificial system has pointedly attempted to regulate the threat of female bodies and blood on a myriad of fronts. Reviewing analysis from Nancy Jay, Green points out that the purification rites of Leviticus 12 significantly require *male* sacrifice to neutralise the impurity of giving birth.[21] According to the text, the new mother must provide the resources for both a burnt offering and a sin offering which the priest will conduct on her behalf (Lev 6:24-30). The exclusivity of Israel's male priesthood indicates to Green that this sacrifice has the double function of overcoming "the consequences of having been born of woman" while also sustaining "the eternal patrilineage" which characterises the Israelite national identity.[22] This suggests male blood as purifying, and female blood as polluting. An echo of this dualism is seen in the medieval era, where

[15] Green, 14. The same might be said for ethnicity, or even age.
[16] Althaus-Reid, "Indecent Exposures," 219. Emphasis added.
[17] Green, "Priest, Blood, Sacrifice," 15.
[18] Green, 12.
[19] Green, 16.
[20] Green, 15–16.
[21] Green, 17–18. See Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion and Paternity* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
[22] Green, 18.

male bloodshed was positively received "as public, voluntary, and sacrificial, while women's bloodshed was private and involuntary," defined in relation to menstruation.[23] As Barbara Baert summarises, there emerges in religious tradition a paradigm of "sacrificial versus procreative blood … good versus bad blood", in which female bloodshed is not seen as having value.[24] O'Donnell is additionally concerned that if Christ is viewed within our theology as the substance of a new 'sin offering', then this can problematically transpose the Old Testament need for a celibate male priest into modern practice.[25] For some groups, this has reinforced male symbolism as a necessary constituent of the Eucharist.[26] The woman presider could be seen as developing tension with these traditions because of the body and blood she brings with her.[27]

In popular imagination, sacrifice is commonly linked with death. Kristin Largen points out that much of the language used in war time both glorifies and justifies the ultimate good of human death by focussing on how it secures the triumph of "truth, freedom and democracy … over evil and injustice."[28] In much the same way, our liturgies of the Eucharist speak of our lives being saved and preserved by the sacrifice of Jesus, as the New Zealand Prayer Book states, "By his death on the cross, he made the one perfect sacrifice for the sin of the world, and freed us from the bondage of sin."[29] This pointedly reproduces an Old Testament framing of sacrifice, in which "the death of a victim" is needed "to placate a higher power" (see Leviticus 4:1-35).[30] And yet, the gospels witness that our salvation is secured not just by Christ's death and punishment, but by his entire *life*. There is power not just in the blood spilled at the cross, but also in the blood that flowed through Jesus's veins, and was 'sweated' from his body in agony over the death he would experience for our sake. Blood speaks of Jesus' being *truly* incarnate; his life becoming manifest so that death could be overcome.

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[23] Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, The Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature*, Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 1-2, cited in Nissen, "Transgression, Pollution, Deformity, Bewitchment," 36.
[24] Barbara Baert, "'Who Touched My Clothes?': The Healing of the Woman with the Haemorrhage (Mark 5: 24–34; Luke 8: 42–48 and Matthew 9: 19–22) in Early Medieval Visual Culture," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 79, no. 2 (2010): 65, https://doi.org/10.1080/00233601003698630.
[25] O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 111. The sin offering was performed by the priests to petition for the cleansing of sin. If Christ becomes this sacrifice in a sense which evokes the Old Testament, then the Eucharist requires a male priest to make the re-performance of this sacrifice legitimate.
[26] O'Donnell, 111–18. This is especially evident in traditions where it is believed the Real Presence of Christ cannot dwell in the eucharisitic elements without an unbroken line of male succession (112).
[27] Green, "Priest, Blood, Sacrifice," 14.
[28] Kristin Johnston Largen, "Power in the (Menstrual) Blood," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 53, no. 1 (2014): 9, https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12082.
[29] *A New Zealand Prayer Book, He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*, 421.
[30] O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 110.

Beyond just the imagery of death, Green sees that the woman priest brings "to the notion of sacrifice some very powerful and transformative symbolism connected with the maternal, with birthing, nurture, flourishing and sensuality".[31] Under normal circumstances, blood contained within the body signifies life, while blood found outside of the body signifies death. Unlike the bloodshed of war or animal sacrifice however, where blood is violently spilled and causes life to ebb away, menstrual blood is shed by the female body in an intentional regeneration of the womb's ability to host life, or in the process of birthing it. Flowing outside of the body, this blood does not *necessarily* symbolise death, though it can. In this way too Jesus' bloodshed is deeply ambiguous because it evokes both death and life.[32] The women priest is able to illuminate the ambiguity of Christ's blood "by being herself a visible symbol of bloodshed in connection not only with violent death but also with bringing forth new life".[33] This draws us into an expanded picture of sacrifice that emphasises life and death in equal measure, but also recognises the totality of the incarnation. As Christy Bauman reminds us, "the *two greatest rituals of sacrifice and worship in the Bible are the birth and death of Christ*. In both of these events, there is a body broken to the point that blood and water are shed".[34] Isherwood and Stuart concur, "The young woman in labour and the man on the cross are part of the same process of salvation".[35]

Janet Soskice points out that the blood flow from Christ's side has been depicted in medieval religious art as having a distinctly feminine edge. The church might be portrayed as literally birthed from Jesus's wounded side, or his blood depicted as flowing "into chalices borne by angels or … directly into the mouths of the faithful."[36] In this latter sense, Christ's blood flow becomes "the eucharistic blood on which believers feed", akin to breastmilk, "by which feeding they become one with the body of Christ."[37] Soskice reflects, "The symbolics of blood and the cross, it would seem, are by no means restricted to punitive and penal readings", but can also be meaningfully connected to the symbolics of life and women.[38] It is possible that these dimensions can be evoked when a woman presides over the Eucharist.

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[31] Green, "Priest, Blood, Sacrifice," 21.
[32] Soskice, "Blood and Defilement," 334.
[33] Green, "Priest, Blood, Sacrifice," 22.
[34] Bauman, *Theology of the Womb*, 11. Emphasis original. For Julian of Norwich, Mary's sacrifice even had soteriological dimensions, because the Messiah passed through her body in order to enter the world. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (Mineola: Ixia Press, 2019), 105.
[35] Isherwood and Stuart, *Introducing Body Theology*, 61–62. Indeed, we continue to participate in the blood and water of Mary and Jesus' bodies in the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist.
[36] Soskice, "Blood and Defilement," 334.
[37] Soskice, 334.
[38] Soskice, 336.

Life and death deeply intermingle at the cross, as do birth and sacrifice.[39] Much like menstruation, the death that pours from the body of the broken Christ generates the opportunity for the new life of a restored divine-human community to flow. His blood, however, is only salvific because it is connected with full incarnation. Christ's blood then continues to 'flow' to re-nourish the Body each time we celebrate the Eucharist. Just as menstruation is often viewed as an isolated event, but it is in fact a part of a wider *cycle* that constitutes a significant vital sign of health for women's bodies, so too is the Eucharist a part of a wider cycle of liturgical engagement with the story of the Christian faith.[40] The church community needs to regularly journey through this cycle of death to life to be sustained in their witness. The menstrual body pointedly echoes this rhythm, and may even be considered as "profoundly eucharistic" because of its regular offering of flesh and blood to support the health of the overall body.[41]

Menstruation is a deeply ambiguous blood flow, inhabiting a liminal space with simultaneous tendrils to both life and death in its substance and symbolism. This blood can be revelatory of the deep ambiguity present in the salvific blood of Christ, as this blood is also blood shed through death for life. There is another mystery in our faith that menstrual bodies might be revelatory of: how it is that the death of Jesus can be held within the eternality of the Triune God's divine life. L. Serene Jones and O'Donnell have considered this in relation to the miscarrying body, but I think their insights are at least partially applicable to the menstrual body, or uterine blood in a general sense. Jones' phrases the question,

> What transpires in the Godhead when one of its members bleeds away? Theologians like Moltmann and Luther have urged us to affirm that on the cross, God takes this death into the depths of Godself … But how can the living Godhead hold death within it? The tradition has told us that at this point in the story, our language breaks down, and we must simply ponder the cross and its mysteries.[42]

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[39] O'Donnell believes that in the Eucharist the priest is, in fact "re-birthing … the Body of Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist". O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 118.

[40] Bobel and Fahs, "From Bloodless Respectability to Radical Menstrual Embodiment: Shifting Menstrual Politics from Private to Public," 966. These authors cite a scientific forum, "The Menstrual Cycle Is a Vital Sign," held at the New York Academy of Sciences in 2004. At that event, Paula Hillard, a professor of obstetrics, gynaecology, paediatrics, said "The menstrual cycle is a window into the general health and well-being of women, and not just a reproductive event … It can indicate the status of bone health, heart disease, and ovarian failure, as well as long-term fertility." American Associations for the Advancement of Science, "Scientific Forum Addresses Menstrual Cycle as Vital Sign," EurekAlert Archive, September 21, 2004, https://ekaprdweb01.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2004-09/lti-sfa092004.php.

[41] O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb*, 155.

[42] L. Serene Jones, "Hope Deferred: Theological Reflections on Reproductive Loss (Infertility, Miscarriage, Stillbirth)," *Modern Theology* 17, no. 2 (2001): 242.

Jones, and with her O'Donnell, have perceived the potential of the miscarrying body to be an image of this startling, grief-stricken event where the borders between life and death become intermingled in God. Menstruation can thematically bridge to this place if it does not also become it in some contexts. Jones continues,

> Perhaps the tradition is right, but perhaps its imaginative resources have been limited by the … imaginations of its mostly male theologians. Perhaps what we find in this space of silence is the image of the woman who, in the grips of a stillbirth, has death inside her and yet does not die … In this dying, the borders of divine identity are also confused and made fluid as the One who is the source of life eternal bears now the stamp of complete, full death.[43]

The body that remains even as death passes through it is an image of the Triune God who bears within Godself the total death of Christ and yet does not die.[44] Menstruation as "the ritual of a woman's body holding an egg and releasing it when it dies" forms an image of this paradox.[45] It is not just that the symbolism of menstrual blood confuses the boundary between life and death, it is also that I am *alive* even as death passes through my body. This is shown all the more strongly in the experience of miscarriage, where grief and remaining in the presence of death are graphically intertwined.[46] O'Donnell suggests that experiences which conduct themselves in these deep places of liminality can be sites of theological revelation.[47] In the paradox of reproductive loss, there is an image of the "the Trinitarian Mother God experiencing death in her divine womb".[48]

To conclude, a hermeneutic of excess opens the possibility for our framing of Christ's sacrifice to be expanded by menstrual blood. Therefore, when a woman presides over the Eucharist, she can offer a "double-reading" of the sacrament because her blood resonates with what is said within the liturgical tradition, and what has gone unsaid.[49] Affirming the menstrual body as a site of revelation also allows blood to give us visceral language by which to consider the deep mysteries of our faith, including how the life of the Body of Christ is sustained by the ritual flowing of blood, and the paradoxical nature of a God who bears the totality of death and yet remains.[50]

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[43] Jones, 242.
[44] O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb*, 49–50.
[45] Bauman, *Theology of the Womb*, 11.
[46] O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb*, 51.
[47] O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 164.
[48] O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb*, 48.
[49] Green, "Priest, Blood, Sacrifice," 21.
[50] O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb*, 49–50.

Openness as Communion

In the above discussion, it was argued that the ambiguity of menstrual blood's symbolism makes it a productive hermeneutic for how blood sacrifice in our liturgical tradition is represented. Menstrual blood's meaning is as fluid as its substance, and this resonates with the blood of the cross. I now want to reflect on other ways menstrual 'openness' might lead to theological reflection.

The menstrual body is an open body in the sense that "that which is contained within it cannot be contained".[51] Blood flows beyond the boundaries of ourselves, sometimes interrupting, staining, or catching us unawares. The stigmatised nature of 'leaky' bodies would have us believe that this is always a negative experience, but this is not the case. Rather, the openness of the menstrual body can establish an affirming communion between bodies that resists the impact of stigma. This communion witnesses to the inherent goodness of creation, speaking of the body's wisdom, common grace, and hospitality. Openness is an intriguing avenue for framing menstruation as a site of theological work.

Before I go any further, openness, with regard to the female body, admittedly has a difficult conceptual history. The patriarchal demarcation of female bodies has commonly visualised and treated women as 'vessels.'[52] These vessels have been seen as having nothing of their own to give, only becoming useful when filled.[53] This thinking has buttressed belief that a woman's ultimate destiny is childbearing; to be 'filled' with the procreative seed of the male. If women are vessels, this necessitates their remaining passively 'open' in order to receive what makes them valuable, rendering them no subjectivity of their own. Why should women remain perpetually open, and always sharing what they have with others? However, it strikes me that the alternative of 'closedness' is an equally dissatisfying outcome. Take for example the female lover of Song of Songs, who is praised for being "a sealed fountain" (Song 4:12). While this descriptor is likely intended to indicate her fidelity to her beloved (if not also her virginity), and does suggest that she has something of her own source to share in this relationship, her personhood continues to remain associated with a vessel, whereby *selective*

[51] O'Donnell, 150. Raphael has also written that menstruation is "at once a closure and an opening of possibility." Raphael, *Thealogy and Embodiment*, 178. Here I just want to focus on the physical and spiritual quality of openness.
[52] Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body: New Ways of Embodiment* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 80.
[53] Recall Aristotle's assertion in Chapter 1 that menses was formless matter, whereas sperm contained form.

openness is her commendable quality.[54] Here again we see an echo of the polar extremes of women's sexuality; either she is open or closed with her body, but always a vessel. In response to this difficulty, Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel sees a way to reframe openness through the story of the Samaritan woman (John 4). In conversation with this woman, Jesus reveals his intentions to pour out a living water to humankind that "will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14). To Moltmann-Wendel, this indicates that Jesus is planning to establish women and men as 'springs' of his creative and spiritual life, which will overflow to the world. She continues,

> And then as the story goes … we are told that the woman leaves her jar, her vessel, her symbol as a woman, and runs off to tell her fellow-countrymen what she has experienced. She leaves behind her old female symbol … because she may [now] be something different: a source from which ever new, independent and living things can proceed.[55]

This is the sense in which I want to envisage menstrual openness. To claim the menstrual body as open does not mean that it remains to be filled, only holds a finite amount, or must be contained. Claiming the menstrual body as open acknowledges its generative nature, which is connected to our essence as God's creation. When we reframe ourselves as springs of creative life, instead of vessels holding stale waters that can run dry, we are not daunted by openness. Affirming menstruation as a site of theological discourse means affirming that there is something which wells up authentically from this body. I, like the Samaritan woman, am excited to explore these waters.

The openness of the menstrual body becomes for spiritual feminists a locus of communion with the self.[56] Spiritual feminists believe that menstruation can have cathartic dimensions when menstruators reclaim their bodies as sacral.[57] They agree that menstrual stigmas are appropriate, but only because menstrual blood contains a creative power which must be wielded respectfully.[58] Melissa Raphael notes that advertisements for menstrual products often want to portray women as "especially energetic" during menstruation.[59] Spiritual feminists seek the same, but here "menstrual energies" are not channelled into sports (for

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[54] Robert W. Jenson, *Song of Songs*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2005), 50.
[55] Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body*, 83.
[56] Spiritual feminists make the 'Goddess' the center of their reflection, reclaiming matriarchal divinity in spiritual thought and practice.
[57] Raphael, *Thealogy and Embodiment*, 170.
[58] In this sense, the belief that the female body space may be divided into "zones of purity/impurity, poisonous/nourishing, life/death" is rejected. Raphael, 177.
[59] Raphael, 197.

example) but put "to heightening spiritual awareness and to the rigours of creativity, [and] introspection".[60] Intentionally choosing to commune with menstrual flow gives space for 'negative' aspects of menstruating to be reclaimed as useful and wise. For example, the irritability typically associated with pre-menstrual syndrome becomes an oracle in which the body reflects what tensions of "political or spiritual otherness" the woman may have experienced that month.[61] This might be related to the suppression of 'unladylike' emotions.[62] When menstruation begins, the negative energy which this accumulates is purged from the bodyself, allowing the individual to start afresh each cycle with new vigour for engaging her world. Being constantly in a state of change of flux is therefore not a source of fear, but of comfort. Activist and musician Lucy Peach praises this regenerative dimension of menstruation in her song "Feel It":

> Coming home from a heroine's quest
> Make me new again
> …
> It's in my blood
> Magic.[63]

Spiritual feminists believe that when female bodies are in the 'wrong hands' (patriarchal), the power of menstrual blood turns to destruction, but in the right hands (women's own), it can cause things to flourish.[64] This makes menstrual blood a "biological ally" of ecological restoration.[65] For example, the pilgrims of Goddess Wood make a eucharisitic offering of menstrual blood to the earth, affirming that a positive, feminine energy resides within its substance. The Goddess Wood pilgrims are a group of Spanish and Catalan descent, who regularly travel throughout France visiting shrines to Mary Magdalene.[66] In their spirituality they conduct rituals which seek the re-sacralisation of the body and the earth.[67] The pilgrims

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[60] Raphael, 197.
[61] Raphael, 197.
[62] Owen, *Her Blood Is Gold*, 60–61.
[63] Lucy Peach, "Feel It" *Blood Magic* © Lucy Peach, 2020.
[64] Raphael, *Thealogy and Embodiment*, 178.
[65] Raphael, 179.
[66] They desire to repossess the power in these sites by positively embracing Mary Magdalene as the guardian of the menstrual cycle. According to the pilgrims, Mary Magdalene is "the woman who dissociated sexuality and maternity and was therefore linked to the process of menstruation" (27). They accept the tradition of Magdalene being a prostitute in order to reclaim her as a spiritual guide for sexuality. Anna Fedele explains, "The woman who was sexually active without being married and/or with no children [is] no longer seen as the Christian sinner or the mother who failed to fulfill her duties as child bearer, but as the sacred lover who was able to offer her blood to nurture Mother Earth, much as Christ had offered his blood for humanity". Anna Fedele, "Reversing Eve's Curse: Mary Magdalene, Mother Earth and the Creative Ritualization of Menstruation," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 28, no. 2 (2014): 27–28.
[67] Fedele, 24.

are critical of how humankind has destroyed and alienated themselves from creation with regular pollution, subjugation, and hate. By offering their blood to the earth, they aim to address this imbalance, helping the planet heal by lending her their positive energy and affirmation. In return, they believe the earth lovingly absorbs the negative energy present in their own bodies, allowing both parties to be mutually revitalised. One pilgrim describes, "When you offer your blood to the Earth, it is as if you lower your blood inside a vessel down to the earth … you lower it to the well to draw some water from it, but at the same time you leave your water. Then you pull up the container again and the energy is so powerful…"[68] Their offering of blood is intentionally eucharisitic because they see that the blood of the cross has more in association with the blood of the womb than the blood of the wound.[69] Because menstrual blood flows non-violently, it can be openly given as an ongoing salvific resource for creation care that does not cost more life.[70] This is a radical celebration of openness in which menstruation participates in the restoration of the cosmological community.

Menstrual openness also becomes an intentional communion in the menstrual rituals of the Māori people. The Māori are a native people group to Aotearoa, New Zealand. Their culture has historically revered menstrual blood as a sacred connector of family and land, and this tikanga/practice is being rebirthed through authors such as Ngāhuia Murphy, and the period underwear brand AWWA, to help wāhine/women reconnect with their cycle.[71] Within Māori tradition, menstrual blood is upheld as a symbol of whakapapa/genealogy because it promises "the continuation of the whānau [family] and hāpū [sub-tribe]" and links those living now to those that have gone before.[72] As it flows, menstrual blood speaks of the possibility to continue creating life, but also connects a menstruator to their tīpuna/ancestors, whose own bleeding and life creation provided that this individual may also now bleed and create. In this sense menstruation is like an "ancient river" with somatic memory, flowing along familial

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[68] Fedele, 27.
[69] Fedele, 28–29. Fedele points out that interpreting menstrual blood in this way has a "historical continuity" within theological thought (32). In this light Bynum reminds us that the blood of the cross was frequently viewed by medieval theologians as "analogous to menstrual blood or to breast milk" due to a medical tradition which considered "all human exudings – menstruation, sweating, lactation, emission of semen and so on … as bleedings; and all bleedings … were taken to be analogous". See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 109–14.
[70] Fedele, "Reversing Eve's Curse," 29.
[71] AWWA, "How to Reconnect to Your Cycle," AWWA, October 1, 2021, https://awwaperiodcare.com/blogs/reconnecting-you-to-your-cycle.
[72] Ngāhuia Murphy, *Waiwhero: He Whakahirahiratanga o te ira Wahine* (Ngaruawahia: He Puna Manawa, 2014), 9.

lines.[73] Some wāhine make a practice of offering the blood of their period back to the earth, burying it in the soil as a gift to honour Paptūānuku, “the mother of all things”, from whom the ability to birth comes.[74] Communities may also gather to commemorate a young’s woman’s first period, giving gifts, a new name, sharing hākari/a feast, or offering karakia/prayer.[75]

The reality of menstrual openness is notably in tension with the individualistic philosophy which characterises menstrual stigmas in the West. Cultural values of control and isolated regulation becomes for menstruators a directive to *personally* succeed in keeping their blood secret and contained. Doing so almost amounts to a sort of ‘key performance indicator’, in which a menstruator’s success is seen by some as directly correlating to their perceived moral standing and quality of life.[76] Failure to observe this ‘body-in-control’ rhetoric, by which “bodies are free of odors” and “their clothes free of tears and stains” means risking stigmatisation and feelings of shame.[77] All of this suggests that “To be an empowered menstruator … one must keep menstruation private.”[78] Yet, our bodies, by nature, resist this absolute construction. We are inherently porous creatures, and our bodies remain “open to the world” even as we try to confine them.[79] Despite the prerogatives of stigma, menstrual blood plays by its own rules. It flows and seeps with no discretion for where we are or who we are with. Menstrual blood is a regular reminder that our boundaries are “holey”, but in this ‘holiness’ we can witness a common grace.[80]

Many who menstruate will have at one time or another found themselves unprepared for the arrival of their period. Other times it is not blood but the deep aching in our uterus that catches us off guard. In these leaky moments, our open bodies led us into openness with others. As O’Donnell has written, “To menstruate is to know the complex, chaotic, and achy nature of being open to the other”.[81] We might ask for a tampon, excuse ourselves to go to the

[73] Murphy, 11.
[74] Murphy, *Waiwhero*, 25.
[75] Murphy, 9.
[76] Bobel and Fahs, “From Bloodless Respectability to Radical Menstrual Embodiment: Shifting Menstrual Politics from Private to Public,” 969.
[77] Bobel and Fahs, 969.
[78] Bobel and Fahs, 956.
[79] O’Donnell, *The Dark Womb*, 150.
[80] Catherine Keller, “The Cloud of the Impossible: Embodiment and Apophasis”, in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, ed. Chris Boesel (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 43, cited in O’Donnell, 152.
[81] O’Donnell, 152.

bathroom, express our need for a seat, or for a painkiller to ease the pain of cramps. Though these exchanges are often conducted with discretion, the shared reality of menstruation cultivates an easy hospitality between those who know the blood.[82] This is perhaps most clearly seen among groups of women whose menstrual cycles have synchronised. In these times, empathy, understanding, and provision where possible are richly present, as poet Dominique Christina muses, "everybody I love knows how to bleed with me. Hold on to that, there's a metaphor in it".[83] The cyclical openness of our bodies invites others to respond with mutual openness. When faced with menstrual flowing, it has often been my experience that what there is to share – back up pads, Panadol, a car ride to the supermarket – is done so with an open hand. Intriguingly, I do not think it is accurate to interpret this response of hospitality and accommodation as being motivated by pity or the risk of stigma. If a friend asks me for a pad, my immediate thought is not that I must jump to her rescue, the only thought is *'of course, I more than understand, it has happened to me too, let me see how I can help.'* In the common grace of menstrual hospitality, stigma can be resisted practically, and lovingly in communion with others.

When we are mutually open to being-with others in blood, something beautiful is witnessed. Creation is affirmed as a partner, our bodies are cherished, and we refine in ourselves a posture of hospitality that can heal the wounds of shame. It is possible this is rich ground for reflecting on communion within the Body of Christ. Certainly here I see an echo of the kind of community the church is meant to be. The church is an inherently messy place, but as our bodies reach for each other in need, in vulnerability, in embarrassment, and in mess – of the spiritual and physical kind – we must be present to each other and not turn away. Menstrual openness may also evoke reflection on the divine nature. O'Donnell reflects that her experience of miscarriage made an all-powerful and all-knowing God seem increasingly absent. In all their knowledge and power, this God could not explain the meaning of her loss, nor do anything about it. What she found instead was a God who could be present to the mess of her grief and trauma. She writes, "In the absence of this powerful, victorious God I thought I knew, I found God who loved me and comforted me, who Mothered me when I lost my

[82] This can extend to our partners and families! I teared up reading a story about a father who after supporting his daughter through a blood leak at school, now intentionally keeps the glove box of his car stocked up with spare pads. This story was shared by his now adult daughter online. Diamant, *Period. End of Sentence*, 94–95.
[83] Dominique Christina, "The Period Poem," Slam Find, YouTube, May 21, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vu2BsePvoIv.

chance to be a mother."[84] For her, reproductive loss became a lens through which to reconceive theology, enabling her to reject the God of 'theo-logic' and affirm God who "is not alarmed or disgusted at the blood that flows … rather she fetches a towel, throws sheets in the washer, sources clean pyjamas and comforts".[85] Stigmas in our religious and cultural histories have reinforced that God cannot be present to female bleeding. How can this be if this same God claimed our bodies were created good? I do not believe menstrual blood is a threat to God, rather I believe the lived experience and the substance of menstrual blood can be profoundly revelatory of the divine life. Our bodies are telling God's story, and the menstrual body is no different.

Liturgies from Blood

Repetition and ritual is one way to strengthen new ways of speaking. In light of all that has been discussed, I believe more work could be done to develop meaningful liturgies for the experience of menstruation. This may not a comfortable notion for some people, and that is understandable. However, individuals who are open to exploring new ways to frame and connect with their period could adapt existing menstrual rituals for personal use, or devise their own.

I have written a liturgy that could be used as a personal karakia/prayer during menstruation.[86] The liturgy takes what blood 'speaks' of in our world, different meanings, people, and situations, and turns this into a source of reflection. The words of the liturgy flow from one meaning of blood to another, illustrating blood's plurality. By 'hearing' this speech, the user has the opportunity to be present with their own body, and also notice in spirit where blood is flowing in other contexts. This might shape a personal meditation, and/or lead the individual into intercession for events of extreme violence, reproductive grief, etc. Blood by nature can bridge between multiple realities because its meaning is as fluid and open as our menstrual bodies are. It is also a profound reframing to view our menstrual experience as the occasion for prayerful openness to others, as opposed to simply a time of separation and secrecy.

The liturgy connects with several examples of blood 'speaking' in the Christian tradition. In the first verse, the liturgy identifies "flesh and blood" as being God's "words since the

[84] O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb*, 153.
[85] O'Donnell, 155.
[86] This liturgy is loosely inspired by prayer #6 of "Night Prayer" from *A New Zealand Prayer Book, He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa*, 167–86. Here, 184.

beginning." This is a reference to John 1, where the text describes the *Logos,* God's Word, Jesus Christ, becoming embodied for our redemption. "Flesh and blood" is also how God ordained to create humans, calling us "very good" in this form (Gen 1:31). In stanza I, the "cup" (or reality/experience) of menstruation and the "cup" of the Eucharist (and its constituents, Mary and Jesus) are likened because both bloods speak of regeneration for the person. Blood crying "from the land" in stanza III evokes the story of Cain killing his brother, Abel (Gen 4). The text describes how God hears the blood of this first murder crying from the land (Gen 4:10-11).

Finally, this liturgy has been intentionally structured into numbered stanzas. The user is free to decide what prayer they have in them each time they use it, and may combine or select any number of stanzas to suit. Repetitions of words or phrases might be made as desired. I have also left the beginning of the liturgy open for each person to insert their preferred address for God, such as 'Lord', 'Divine Spirit', 'Mother/Father', 'Queen of Heaven', etc.

A Liturgy for Days of Blood

[Divine name]
This is a day of blood.

This day invites stillness.
Let me be still in your presence.

As the openness of blood weaves its story,
I notice what you notice and
I listen.

I hear my blood speak of being.
My womb remembers my bleeding foremothers,
My river reaching back to theirs.
In this blood,
I trace
The profound love you have for your world.

I am caught up in it.

Flesh and blood,

Your words since the beginning.

I I hear my blood speak of giving.

As my waters part, I let this flow, flow because

This cup

Is the cup

Of my regeneration.

This cup echoes another: your humble stage in Bethlehem.

The young woman, bleeding,

The small child, ruddy –

Their bodies transcend time and space to touch me.

Over and over I am being made new.

II I hear my blood speak of living.

Singing through my limbs

To your music

Of vitality.

Steadily my soul finds the position of ease.

Here in the life of blood,

I breathe.

The person pauses to take three deep breaths

III I hear my blood speak of taking.

In our world blood is spilled and drawn in tides and cries from the land.

My being aches, Jesus.

You were spilled once.

Where the embrace of empathy and prayer stretches,

Help me ache,

Help me listen.

Where hands can touch,

Help me be your Body.

IV I hear my blood speak of dying.

As death passes through me,

I think of others for whom

Blood is ebbing and gushing from wombs and bodies and hearts.

Though these wounds

May not heal,

And may not resurrect,

Please, weave your peace in our pain

Until that day of lavish joy.

I hear my blood speak of becoming.

I do not yet know where these tides will take me but

In this blood,

I pray

That we who have it on our hands,

Between our thighs

And in our veins,

Might each day

Begin anew our communion

Of love.

Amen.

Liturgies such as this might be practised by individuals during their period to deepen connection with the bodyself. If willing and interested, *groups* might also want to explore rituals for menstruation. The advent of menarche for example is a poignant opportunity for families to devise a "rite of passage" for a young person.[87] With Washbourn I concur that rites for this purpose should acknowledge the distressing nature of the changes in puberty, as

[87] Washbourn, "Becoming Woman: Menstruation as Spiritual Struggle," 251.

well as affirm the beauty which the menstrual experience can contain.[88] It would be unwise to make fertility the *main* focus, because this can frame menstruation as an inevitable road to pregnancy. More constructive would be to affirm menstruation's inherent good for the bodyself, and its wealth for theological reflection.

Parish groups who want to journey deeper with the ideas presented in this work should do so gradually. Interested clergy or lay people could share resources for personal meditation amongst themselves, such as the liturgy presented here, or get together to write their own. If this garnered positive response and became widely familiar, parishes could explore further ways to incorporate feminine symbolism in communal worship. This should of course be done sensitively, and as appropriate. One possibility to consider might be a liturgy for the Eucharist that specifically acknowledges a broader range of blood symbolism.

It *would* be powerful to see ecclesial groups participating in rituals that affirm solidarity or celebration of where blood is flowing in the lives of parishioners. This could be a beautiful, grounded expression of "bearing with one another in love" (Eph 4:2). Menstruation is not the only embodied experience that the church could engage with more deeply. It also be valuable to continue exploring rites for menopause, pregnancy, and childbirth, as others have done. O'Donnell has notably written several prayers and liturgies to support occasions of reproductive loss, some of which could be used to shape optional remembrance services, or prayed over a miscarrying person.[89] Resources such as these, which grapple with grief and affirm God's love, can help us form pastoral responses that affirm embodied experience.

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[88] Washbourn, 253.
[89] O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb*, 167–85.

Conclusion

This chapter affirmed the menstrual body as a site of creative theological reflection. I have surveyed ways in which menstruation might participate in a positive dialogue with theological thought and action. Menstrual bodies often exist as an excessive 'other' to the normative bodies within theology. Typically this leads to the rejection or marginalisation of menstruation as an opportunity for theological reflection. However, as Althaus-Reid has shown, the marginalisation of the supposedly 'indecent' can become a hermeneutical tool for assessing theological norms and reconsidering theological concerns. Blind spots remain in our understanding if we only interpret theology through a set lens.

This point is applied by Green who suggests that when a woman presides over the Eucharist, her body brings an additional symbolism which enriches the meaning of blood sacrifice in our tradition. The cross is not just a place of dying, but also a place of birthing. The menstrual body can image deeper mysteries within our faith, such as the impossibility of life and death residing within the same body, be that divine or human. This theme of 'openness' also connects with the nature of the menstrual body. As much as we might try to contain it, menstrual blood often gets out and draws us into communion with others. However, communing through menstrual blood becomes a mode of resistance to social stigma, affirming a positive, even revelatory, side of menstrual experience. This dimension is celebrated in menstrual rituals such as those of the Māori people or the Goddess Wood pilgrims, who use blood to connect with self, community, and the earth. It is worth exploring further how menstrual blood might be appreciatively recognised in personal and communal liturgies such as these.

Conclusion

This thesis has suggested that menstruation is a productive site for doing theology. In Chapter 1 I discussed that pervasive social stigmas often attach to the lived experience of menstruation. The presence of these stigmas in both the cultural and religious spheres reinforces a fragmented understanding of bodyself for those who menstruate, constructing female blood as an obstacle to human flourishing and as a threat to the sacred.

Chapter 2 made the turn to body theologies, including the indecent theology of Marcella Althaus-Reid, and the constructive theology of Karen O'Donnell. By emphasising the positive significance of the body for theologising, body theology challenges the body/soul dualism that remains linked with the Western imagination. The incarnation and the *imago dei* are important indicators that the body participates in God's revelation and action. Body theologians therefore seek a two-way conversation between theology and the body, seeing this as a productive avenue for overcoming the stigma of bodies both within and outside of theological discourse. Traditional theology has, however, problematised the resources which body theology might draw on to affirm menstruation as a site of theological reflection. Althaus-Reid offers her concern for the bodies of Mary and Jesus, which have been employed to reinforce female categories of purity. Here, both Jesus and Mary become models for how women are meant to conduct themselves as 'decent', which sustains women's oppression and alienation from their bodies, and continue to legitimise the scorn of the menstrual body. At this point I turned to the work of O'Donnell, who envisages the Eucharist as a powerful mode of healing for the 'ruptures' within the body of the church. By reconceiving of the Eucharist as a meal of somatic memory, which non-identically re-members the entire Annunciation/Incarnation event (including the trauma of Mary's bodily sacrifice), O'Donnell claims that the Body of Christ enters into a dramatic indwelling of persons in the sacrament. In this indwelling, divine and human bodies enter into a perichorētic communion where unity and plurality are mutually affirmed. This suggests that the menstrual body can be a legitimate site of revelation for the Christian community, because even this body is drawn into membership in the Body of Christ. If menstrual blood has something to say, the whole Body can listen.

Finally, Chapter 3 affirmed menstruation as a site for creative theological work, and attempted to construct a positive dialogue between theology and menstrual blood. Menstrual bodies have been historically 'excessive' to the theological endeavour, and therefore can be a

valuable hermeneutic for theological ideas. In light of this I explored how blood sacrifice in our liturgical tradition might be enriched by female bleeding. A key idea here was menstrual blood's symbolic 'openness' or ambiguity, which is also a way to frame on how this body operates in the world. The openness of the menstrual body can inspire creative rituals that affirm the goodness of creation and communion with others. It is possible this is rich ground for reflecting on divine/human communion. Finally, I offered an original liturgy for menstruation that makes blood a gateway into prayer and intercession.

I concur with Bobel and Fahs that menstruators need more than just "something to bleed on."[1] If menstruation is a part of God's world created good, then we must boldly craft new theologies through our blood that resist and transform the negative impacts of stigmatisation. It is my hope that the discussion I have provided can be a small contribution on the road to resisting fragmentation within the bodyself. Choosing to hear menstrual blood into speech permits the emergence of a mode of menstrual embodiment that is revelatory of God. Bauman writes, "When I push past the embarrassment, I am in awe of how God is telling a story through the body of a woman".[2] This is not just women's work; we all need to affirm this speech.

[1] Bobel and Fahs, "From Bloodless Respectability to Radical Menstrual Embodiment: Shifting Menstrual Politics from Private to Public," 971.
[2] Bauman, *Theology of the Womb*, 4.

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