Christian Theologies of Suffering across the Centuries: An Examination of Suffering and Grief in the works of Gregory the Great, Julian of Norwich, Jeremy Taylor, C.S. Lewis and Ivone Gebara

Submitted by Molly Field James, to the University of Exeter as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theology, September 2010.

This dissertation is available for Library use on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.

I certify that all material in this dissertation which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

(Signature)
ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores theologies of suffering through engagement with five theologians from across fifteen centuries of the Christian tradition: Gregory the Great, Julian of Norwich, Jeremy Taylor, C.S. Lewis and Ivone Gebara. It uses a typological method to examine the types of responses that are advocated by each theologian, and the relation of their responses to five theological touchstones: Humanity, Sin and Evil; God’s Providence; Salvation; Christ; and Eternal Life. The Introductory Chapter provides an exploration of the definitions and etymologies of suffering and grief; a description of the typological method; an examination of notable relevant literature; and an introduction to the five thinkers. Chapter One is an examination of the life and writings of the 6th century pope Gregory the Great, with particular focus on The Book of the Pastoral Rule and Moralia. Gregory understands suffering to be a discipline sent by God to the faithful. Chapter Two is an examination of the life and Revelations text of the 13th century English mystic Julian of Norwich, who focuses on the reward God desires to give those who suffer. Chapter Three is an examination of the life and writings of 17th century Anglican bishop Jeremy Taylor, with particular focus on Holy Living and Holy Dying. Taylor places an emphasis on the lifelong practice of faithfulness in preparation for death. Chapter Four is an examination of the life and writings of 20th century Anglican theologian and author C. S. Lewis, with particular attention to The Problem of Pain, The Chronicles of Narnia, A Grief Observed, and Letters to Malcom. Lewis offers the example of one who is willing to engage with the depth of his grief and to question God on his road to acceptance. Chapter Five is an examination of the life and writings of contemporary Brazilian, feminist and liberation theologian Ivone Gebara, with particular focus on her book Out of the Depths and her engagement with Latin American author Isabel Allende. Gebara questions traditional
understandings of suffering, as well as when suffering is to be accepted and when suffering is unjust and should be combated. The Concluding Chapter constructs a contemporary theology of suffering drawing on the insights and wrestling with the challenges raised by the varying perspectives of the five theologians. The goal is to provide a hopeful and nuanced way of thinking theologically about suffering for contemporary Christians. The contemporary theology affirms the importance of the call, found in Gebara, to combat unjust suffering through acts of love and mercy, while also affirming that acceptance of the reality of endemic suffering, found in all five theologians, can provide one with opportunities to grow spiritually, live more faithfully and to experience the blessings in the midst of suffering that are a foretaste of heavenly bliss.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface ................................................................................................................................5

Introduction: Methodology of Christian Theologies of Suffering across the Centuries.....7

Chapter 1:  
Gregory on Grief: “The Great Teacher”.................................................................39

Chapter 2:  
Faith through Suffering: An Examination of Julian of Norwich and Her Showings........77

Chapter 3:  
Jeremy Taylor’s Rigorous, Life-long Approach to Living with Suffering and Grief.....127

Chapter 4:  
Permission to Grieve: C.S. Lewis and a Personal History of Sorrow.........................171

Chapter 5:  
Transforming and Reframing Tradition:  
A Theology of Suffering and Loss in the Work of Ivone Gebara.................................210

Conclusion: A Contemporary Theology of Suffering.....................................................249

Bibliography...................................................................................................................271