Introduction

For about two weeks following the birth of my first child, I experienced what is commonly referred to as the "baby blues." This phenomenon, common to many new mothers, is induced by a combination of hormonal changes, physical exhaustion, and the enormity of the life and identity transformations that a woman undergoes after the arrival of her first baby. Mothers report experiencing anything from a vague feeling of melancholy to full-blown post-partum depression. My own bout with the baby blues went something like this: In general, I was riding high on the joys of new motherhood and the miraculous presence of my mind-blowingly beautiful daughter. But every evening at precisely seven o'clock, I would have to excuse myself from the dinner table or conversation with visiting family members to go lie in bed and weep.

Some mothers are blue without being able to identify a reason for their sadness. I, however, was overwhelmed with deep sorrow for very specific reasons. I grieved first of all because I was so in love with this tiny creature, who I knew would not forever remain so tiny and perfect, and who would one day grow up and leave me. But my body was wracked with sobs most of all because I could not bear the thought of anything bad ever happening to my precious child. Since life in this world necessarily entails all kinds of suffering,

I wept not only because of the possibility that harm could come to her, but because of the certainty that some kind of harm will come to her. At the very least, she will one day, like all the rest of us mortals, depart from this life. It pains me to even set those words to the page. Thankfully the baby blues only lasted about two weeks for me, and they did not return with the same intensity after the birth of my subsequent children. But I still feel a penetrating ache of sorrow, especially while nursing my youngest son or holding my older children close to read them a story or soothe a hurt. As I cradle my children in my arms, or press my lips to their foreheads, I am often painfully and viscerally aware of their vulnerability, the vulnerability of our relationship, and by extension, the vulnerability of my own happiness.

Looking back on this experience, some important insights about the human condition, suffering, and divine love have emerged from my bout with the baby blues. First, I now not only know in my mind but intimately feel in my body the fleeting nature and inherent vulnerability of the human condition and the contingency of human happiness. But I also have come to understand the power of love, beauty, and connection that is only available in vulnerability. Indeed, as I argue in this book, the redemptive power of divine love itself comes to human beings not in a blaze of glory, but in solidarity with our vulnerable condition. Furthermore, from the maternal perspective I now inhabit, I am more viscerally aware than ever that the radical suffering caused by the violation of vulnerable beings in situations of poverty, abuse, and violence is absolutely intolerable. The life of every human being—each one "some mother's child"[1]—is

1. Cf. Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 23ff. Kittay reflects on the universal condition of being a mother's child as a basis for claims to entitlement, equality, and empathy. Her argument rests not on the affection of mothers for their children (though this is certainly an element of her ethical reflection), but on the fact of dependency and vulnerability in human life.

as precious and beautiful as the lives of my own children. And the lives of two-thirds of our world's population are far more vulnerable, far less protected by privilege than they. Finally, I have come to realize that as beautiful and fulfilling as human love—in this case, maternal love—can be, it can also contribute to debilitating anxiety, complicity in systems of privilege and violence, and moral blindness to the vulnerability and suffering of other human beings.

It is largely these insights that provided the original impetus for me to root this constructive work of theological anthropology in the fertile soil of women's diverse experiences of motherhood. The anthropological insights that emerge from these maternal experiences are not unavailable elsewhere, but they do emerge in a particular configuration and with particular intensity when considered from the standpoint of maternal experience and practice. Women's diverse experiences of maternity and natality reveal that vulnerability is a fundamental dimension of the human condition. Vulnerability is central to who we are as human beings—it is the milieu in which we experience both suffering and redemption. Vulnerability not only exposes human beings to harm, it is also the condition for the possibility of healing, health, and wholeness. The maternal narratives on which my arguments rest demonstrate that the redemptive human encounter with divine love—experienced here as resilience in the face of harm and resistance to violence and oppression—takes place within the vulnerable human conditions of embodied, relational existence.

Vulnerability, Resilience, and Resistance: Theological Anthropology in a New Key

I define vulnerability as the universal, though diversely experienced and often exacerbated, risk of harm in human life.[2] The theological

2. A new field of interdisciplinary inquiry, Vulnerability Studies, has recently emerged from the global situation of heightened vulnerability. Emory University hosts an interdisciplinary

anthropology that I construct in these pages uncovers the givenness of vulnerability as an inevitable dimension of the human condition. Maternal narratives and analyses provide this lens of "natural" vulnerability, which contrasts sharply with dominant strands of the Christian tradition in which vulnerability and the suffering to which it exposes us are the punitive response of divine justice to human sin. The biblical account of the Fall in the third chapter of Genesis attributes human vulnerability to a curse meted out by God on the human race as punishment for Adam and Eve's transgression. Women's pains in childbearing, human dependence on the land for sustenance, the difficulty of attaining that sustenance, and perhaps even mortality itself—in the biblical narrative, these are all vulnerabilities that are not natural to the human condition, but can be traced back to the Original Sin of our first parents.

Augustine of Hippo's influential appropriation of this narrative places the blame for human suffering and death squarely on the shoulders of human beings themselves.[3] Although his intention is to preserve the original goodness of creation and the human body,

and international "Vulnerability and the Human Condition Initiative," which encourages collaboration among scholars working in this burgeoning field. The Initiative's website is located at http://web.gs.emory.edu/vulnerability/. Theological works on vulnerability *per se* are scarce, although it could be argued that most of Christian theology is an attempt to grapple with vulnerability (human and divine) in one way or another. In contemporary theological literature that addresses vulnerability explicitly, William Placher's *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) explores the vulnerable depths of divine love and Christian discipleship, while Kristine Culp's *Vulnerability and Glory: A Theological Account* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) identifies vulnerability as the basic openness of the human condition to both harm and transformation. Perhaps the most famous recent treatment of vulnerability is Sarah Coakley's article, "Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of 'Vulnerability' in Christian Feminist Writing," which originally appeared in *Swallowing a Fishbone: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, ed. Daphne Hampson (London: SPCK, 1996), 82–111. Academic research and discourse on vulnerability has been popularized by social work professor Brené Brown's widely disseminated audio and print books, as well as her lectures, which are available online. See her website, http://www.brenebrown.com. Her twenty-minute TED talk, "The Power of Vulnerability," has been viewed over fourteen million times on the www.ted.com website.

3. See, e.g., Book XIII of Augustine's *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London and New York: Penguin, 1972).

the result is a vitiation of real human embodiment in a finite and relational world. In Augustine's view, the vulnerable body is not natural to human beings, but rather represents the unnatural state of affairs that results from sin and that must be overcome to experience salvation. Indeed, for him, "it is not necessary for the achievement of bliss to avoid every kind of body, but only bodies which are corruptible, burdensome, oppressive, and in a dying state; not such bodies as the goodness of God created for the first human beings, but bodies in the condition which the punishment for sin forced upon them."[4] In a laudable attempt to affirm the goodness of the body against philosophical blame of the body for the sins of the soul, Augustine unfortunately denigrates the body as equally as Platonists when he identifies bodily corruption not as the cause of the first sin, but as its punishment.[5] For this influential figure in the history of the Christian tradition, the vulnerability of human beings to bodily harm, relational conflict, temporal perishing, moral ambiguity, and ultimately death is not natural to the human condition. Rather, vulnerability is God's just punishment for sin. Divine redemption, then, involves liberation from enslavement to sin and removal of vulnerability in the world to come.

The maternal narratives and analyses that inform my own theological anthropology offer an alternative framework. Drawing on their practical wisdom, I argue a) that vulnerability is indeed our original condition, b) that vulnerability does play a significant causal role in what the Christian tradition has named sin, and c) that the human experience of redemption—at least in this lifetime—takes place within the vulnerability of the human condition. In this framework, sin is not central to my analysis of the human problem; vulnerability is. This alternative understanding of that which ails

4. Ibid., Book XIII.17, 528–29.
5. Ibid., Book XIV.3, 551.

humanity requires an alternative model of human flourishing and redemption. Therefore, I claim that the redemptive response of divine power to that which ails humanity is not primarily rectification of human sinfulness and removal of vulnerability after death (much less condemnation to eternal suffering). Rather, divine love responds to human vulnerability here and now, within our vulnerable condition, with existential and practical resources for resilience to harm and resistance to violence. These redemptive resources can empower human beings to face our frightening condition with courage, peace, and compassion, rather than egocentrism, anxiety, and violence. Sin is not categorically banished from this alternative framework, but it does take a backseat to the deeper reality of vulnerability as the defining characteristic of the human condition.

The theological framework I propose in this book also offers an alternative—or rather, a complement—to contemporary feminist, political, and liberation theologies in which sin is recast as a social problem that cries out for divine justice enacted through emancipatory human action. These theologies, which have been my primary inspiration for becoming a theologian myself, typically approach human suffering with the tools of social, cultural, economic, and political analysis in order to uncover and dismantle the structural causes of injustice and oppression. For example, feminist thinkers seek to eliminate forms of vulnerability that render women subject to patriarchal domination and abuse. In liberation theologies, suffering and vulnerability are protested as unjust consequences of social (and individual) sin. Political theologians doing God-talk "after Auschwitz" have made great strides toward absolving God of responsibility for suffering by pinning the blame on humanity. Such contributions are invaluable for the progress of Christian theology and practice toward greater authenticity and faithfulness to the gospel. What these approaches can tend to overlook (or can seem

to overlook), however, are the root causes of suffering located deep within the vulnerability of the human condition itself. Beverly Lanzetta has apt words to describe this oversight, with specific reference to feminist thought: "While feminism has awakened women to the structural components that generate violence, it has been less successful in analyzing the deeper spiritual causes and consequences that underlie dominating behaviors and subjugating forms of consciousness."[6] To get at the root causes and damaging consequences of the radical suffering inflicted through the violation of vulnerable beings, we must first ask: What is it about our fundamental structure and condition as human beings that makes us capable and even desirous of inflicting terrible suffering on others (and ourselves)? If human beings—not God—are the cause of evils such as extreme poverty, violence, and oppression, it is imperative that we probe the depths of the human heart to uncover why we, who are made in the image of Divine Eros, fail so miserably to love. I locate the key to investigating these questions in vulnerability—a dimension of human existence that causes us great anxiety, which in turn sets in motion tragic attempts by individuals and interest groups to eliminate, or at least mitigate, their own vulnerability at the cost of vulnerable others.

Feminist, liberation, and political theologies also can tend to overlook theoretical and practical resources for countering the spiritual dimensions of this vicious cycle—that is, existential resources for resilience and resistance in the face of vulnerability, suffering, and violence. In addition to a spirituality of prophetic denunciation of oppression and annunciation of a more just and peaceful world, or rather in order to *nourish and sustain* prophetic praxis, human beings need spiritual assets for living courageously, peacefully, and

6. Beverly Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 1.

compassionately both with the pain of the past and with present forms of vulnerability and suffering that cannot be changed. It is important to make a distinction between vulnerability as a fundamental and unavoidable feature of the human condition and the violation of human vulnerability in situations of injustice, poverty, oppression, and violence (though, admittedly, this distinction is not always unambiguous). Our basic human condition is one that exposes us to great suffering, but it is not the condition itself that we ought to reject; rather, it is the exploitation, abuse, mismanagement, and neglect of our condition that ought to be resisted. Therefore, I worry that we run the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater if we reject vulnerability in all of its forms. While social protest of injustice and oppression is indispensible in a world wracked by violent conflict, debilitating poverty, and social oppression, it often lacks the spiritual practices necessary for coping courageously, peacefully, and compassionately with vulnerability and the anxiety it brings. Keeping the focus on vulnerability is itself a helpful spiritual practice, especially in a religious tradition that advocates love of enemies. Unlike prophetic condemnation of oppression (again, very important!), vulnerability points to the universality of human frailty and thus might serve to instill a sense of compassion for even the perpetrators of crimes against vulnerable others. Within this alternative theological framework, neither socio-political self-righteousness nor condemnation to eternal punishment are options. Rather, the vulnerability of each individual is recognized and understood as a factor in his or her moral demise. Such understanding does not offer perpetrators the permission to violate vulnerable others; rather, it seeks to break the cycle of violation through the practice of compassion.

A Few Words on Theological Method

The primary task of theological anthropology is to plumb the depths of human experience in order to better understand the human condition, its ailments, and its openness to a redemptive encounter with the divine. Major figures in twentieth-century theological anthropology such as Paul Tillich and Karl Rahner employed the tools of philosophy and psychology to "turn to the subject" and to uncover the basic structures of the human condition that dispose humanity to sin and guilt, as well as to revelation and grace. More recently, political, liberation, and feminist theologians have built upon this "turn to the subject" but have also challenged the abstract, bourgeois conception of the subject found in liberal theology. These "theologies from the margins" have concretely refocused Christianity's attention on the threatened, yet persistent, subjectivity of the world's poor and marginalized populations. While these and other "contextual" theologies are often less well accepted within the academic discipline of systematic theology, they nonetheless share a methodological goal with more traditional theological anthropology: to understand the dimensions of human experience that a) open human beings to redemptive encounter with the divine and b) threaten the human flourishing offered by this divine-human encounter. In order to pursue these goals, both groups have turned to human experience as the starting point for understanding the human condition, what ails it, and how humanity is transformed by God's loving response.

I take methodological inspiration from both traditional and explicitly contextual approaches to theological anthropology. On the contextual side, I explore the human condition and its disposition to both vulnerability and redemption in light of women's experiences of motherhood, especially maternal suffering. In doing so, I am

following the recommendation of Johann Baptist Metz, who advocates for constructive theology that would remember, narrate, and stand in solidarity with suffering humanity. Such theology, he argues, takes place in conversation with actual narratives present in biography, imagination, visions, prayers, and collected experiences.[7] I follow Metz's suggestion, weaving together a theological anthropology from the diverse strands of maternal narratives and practices of vulnerability, suffering, and redemption. The concreteness of these narratives offers a corrective complement to the abstract universalism of much twentieth-century theological anthropology.

On the other hand, I deliberately attend to the core elements that have endured as areas of concern for theological anthropology—namely the topics of creation, fall, and redemption. Attention to these basic theological categories helps to deepen the work of political, liberation, and feminist theologies by pushing beyond social analysis to the root causes of suffering and destruction located deep within the vulnerability of the human condition itself. To get at the root causes of suffering and violence, we must ask the questions of social context but we must also ask a more profound theological question: What is it about human nature fundamentally that makes us capable of inflicting suffering on others and on ourselves? This, therefore, is the question around which this book is organized.

Seeking wisdom about this "universal" anthropological question, however, can never be done abstractly and thus requires a redoubled commitment to engaging the contemporary human situation at the site of particular wounds[8]—not just for the sake of heightened

7. See chapter 12, "Narrative," in Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Towards a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 2007), especially 198ff.

understanding, but for the sake of contributing to the healing, transformation, and full flourishing of human beings and all of creation. Casting my lot with feminist, political, and liberation theologies, then, I seek to describe and interpret reality with critical and practical intent. As such, this book as a whole and each section within it contain descriptive, interpretive, and practical elements. Investigating women's experiences of maternity and natality, especially maternal experiences of suffering, provides fertile ground for both interpreting reality as a whole and suggesting practices of compassion and transformation.

Sources

The starting point and primary resource for this theology of the human condition is the diverse and multifaceted experiences and practices of mothers—especially their experiences and practices of vulnerability, resilience, and resistance.[9] Motherhood is an experience

8. Cf. Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13.
9. Since the 1980s, popular and academic writing on motherhood has exploded, leading to the birth of the interdisciplinary field of motherhood studies. Many academic edited volumes have been published recently on motherhood, and an entire book publisher (Demeter Press) has recently been founded for the purpose of focusing solely on motherhood. While secular academic writings on motherhood offer an incredible amount of diversity and scholarly sophistication in their approaches to analyzing the institution and experience of motherhood, they include very little analysis of religious meanings of motherhood that go beyond critiquing the religiously sanctioned institution of patriarchal motherhood. Aside from conservative missives on women's God-given vocation to motherhood, Christian theology has been rather slow to catch on to this upsurge in scholarship on maternity. Nevertheless, momentum is gaining. Notable exceptions to the relative silence on mothering in mainline and progressive Christian theologies include the following: Margaret Hebblethwaite's *Motherhood and God* (London: Cassell, 1984) explores motherhood and its place in a woman's relationship with God from the perspective of personal narrative. Bonnie Miller-McLemore's groundbreaking work, *Also a Mother: Work and Family as a Theological Dilemma* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) develops a feminist maternal theology that rethinks human generativity from the perspective of maternal caregiving labor. In the area of God-talk, both Sallie McFague's *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) and Elizabeth A. Johnson's *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) provide extended reflections on imaging God as mother. In *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), Delores Williams draws on the experience

both of the self as woman and mother, and of another person as a dependent extension of the self and a growing, changing, distancing other. Therefore, I find it impossible to separate out women's experiences of maternity from their experiences of natality, and I find fruitful insights and empowering resources in both categories of thought and practice. The maternal perspective that I describe and from which I argue unavoidably reflects my own socially situated standpoint as a white, middle-class, heterosexual, academic woman and stay-at-home mother of four small children. As my opening reflections indicate, my experience as a mother has impacted me with a visceral awareness of my children's vulnerability and, by extension, my own. Though disaster could strike at any moment, our family's inherited position of privilege offers my children a substantial amount of protection from the violation of their vulnerability. The maternal standpoint that I claim in my writing, however, is not limited to my own socially privileged perspective. In my accounts of motherhood, I rely heavily on the narratives and analyses of other mothers, especially mothers who have experienced radical suffering due to the violation of their own and/or their children's vulnerability. I employ a patchwork of diverse theoretical and imaginative resources for

of black maternal surrogacy and black mothers' God-dependency to provide a foundation for womanist theology. Ethicist Cristina Traina lays out the contours of maternal eroticism, analyzes the phenomenon of child abuse, and offers a full-bodied Christian ethic for selectively cultivating passion as erotic attunement between parents and children in *Erotic Attunement: Parenthood and the Ethics of Sensuality between Unequals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). In the area of theological anthropology, four recent works stand out: Marcia Mount Shoop employs pregnancy and motherhood as metaphors for the relationality and ambiguity of the human condition in *Let the Bones Dance: Embodiment and the Body of Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010). Michele Saracino offers motherhood as an example of incarnating hybridity in human life on a personal level in *Being About Borders: A Christian Anthropology of Difference* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2011). Cristina Grenholm's *Motherhood and Love: Beyond the Gendered Stereotypes of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) critiques and reimagines Christian approaches to gender, maternity, and maternal love. Finally, and most recently, Jeannine Hill Fletcher's *Motherhood as Metaphor: Engendering Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013) draws on women's experiences, especially their experiences of motherhood, as a resource for thinking about interfaith encounters and the dynamic relationality of human existence.

speaking about motherhood, including personal testimony and narrative, memoir, literature, poetry, Scripture, historical theology, feminist philosophy and theology, care ethics, and interdisciplinary work in the burgeoning fields of both vulnerability studies and motherhood studies.

Methodological Dangers

Drawing on maternal experience and practice comes with the dangers inherent to saying anything universal about the nature of humanity and divinity, and also with some particular dangers of its own. These dangers make this anthropological project itself vulnerable to certain pitfalls, but they do not doom it to failure. Rather, the rewards are well worth the risks.

First, it is important to note that the insights that arise from mothering are not necessarily unique to mothers or even other nurturers of children. For example, an ethic of care is not distinctively women's territory, nor do mothers have an exclusive claim to its heritage.[10] Indeed, research has shown that African and African American moral traditions give rise to similar patterns of moral reasoning.[11] My aim is not to romanticize mothers, alienate women who are not mothers, exclude fathers, or place mothers at the summit

10. In fact, most care ethicists are averse to using the mother-child relationship as the paradigm of care.
11. Take, for example, the research of Carol Stack, who found no gender difference when she tested Carol Gilligan's "Different Voice" theory in an African American community. Cf. Stack, "Different Voices, Different Visions: Gender, Culture, and Moral Reasoning," in *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture*, ed. Faye Ginsburg and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (Boston: Beacon, 1990), 19–27. See also Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 83. African American feminist and womanist scholars, such as Patricia Hill Collins, Katie G. Cannon, and Emilie M. Townes have also written about the prominence of an ethic of care in African American communities. Cf. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2000); Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988); Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006).