When considering the doctrines of the various feminist christologies across cultures, one notices a certain unity of these feminist theologians with regards to their cultural identity. There is an Asian feminist christology, an African feminist christology, but what about an American feminist christology? This situation presents a certain confusion as there is not really a united “American” culture as there is a united “African” culture. This is because the United States is made up of a vast multitude of cultures due to our population of immigrants and the descendants of these immigrants. Interestingly, there have been a number of feminist christologies that have sprung from this “melting pot” of cultures that is the United States. There is the christology of Latin-American women or Latinas, there is the christology of African-American women called “womanist,” and there is even a christology of “North American” or “Anglo-American” women. While many feminist christologies in general are liberation-based, each culture has had its own plight which has influenced each christology and which leads to different roles that “suffering” plays. Anglo-American women, such as Elizabeth Johnson and Rosemary Radford Reuther, for example, focus on asserting dominance and using Christ to propose a more woman-centered Christology, yet Latina and Womanist christologies, such as those of Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Jacquelyn Grant, focus more on comfort and freedom from suffering. How, then, does this difference influence the creation of an American feminist Christology? In response to this challenge, this paper will be a comparative study and analysis on the experience and subsequent role of suffering in feminist christologies present in the United States and how this influences the creation of a truly “American” christology.

While the term “Latina” can signify women physically living in Latin American countries or women of Latin American descent living in the United States, for the purposes of this analysis,
I will focus on the plight of Latin American women living in the United States. The Latina culture is centered on suffering and sorrow as it is a group of individuals struggling to find a place and a home in an unfamiliar land. While many are born in the United States, there are still cultural barriers such as skin color, language, and ethnicity that make it difficult for Latin Americans to fully assimilate and feel at home in the United States. Alicia Vargas describes the unique plight of Latinas and Latinos in her discourse entitled, “The Construction of Latina Christology” and describes this plight as a “struggle for self-identification and societal localization”\(^1\) The Hispanic community in the United States is caught between cultures and often struggles to find an identity and a place in this strange world. Latinas and Latinos often live in poverty, work backbreaking jobs, and receive little education which leads to an overall sense of struggle and strife in their culture. Nelly Ritchie points out the unique plight of Latinas specifically by explaining that they suffer a “double exploitation”\(^2\) which Vargas elaborates on excellently in her statement that, “Latinas suffer, struggle with, and survive the oppressive socioeconomic conditions, the constant attack of sexism in our environments, and the perennial ambiguity of our own identity at the same time.”\(^3\) This sacrifice and subjugation is therefore a core element of the Latina culture but this pain is acknowledged by such theologians as Alicia Vargas. From this constant plight of Latinas emerges a distinct christology focused not only on suffering but also on comfort in this suffering. The *mujerista* christology, innovated by Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, “seeks to elaborate a theology that does not ignore the political and social


\(^{3}\) Vargas, 273
realities of our life as a marginalized community within the United States.”\textsuperscript{4} This christology is unique to Latinas because it focuses specifically on their plight as both women and Latin Americans. Because of the constant oppression that Latinas endure, through familial obligations, cultural establishment, poverty and even discrimination, this subjugation gives way to a christology that accepts and acknowledges this plight while finding a comforting companion to give them the strength to get through their days. Vargas states that “Jesus Christ is the constant companion of Latinas in our struggles”\textsuperscript{5} This Jesucristo, according to Isasi-Diaz, “cajoles, begs, encourages, demands, and cheers us on in our daily struggles for liberation.”\textsuperscript{6} Through this particular christology, therefore, Latinas have created both a religious and cultural identity centered on their inherent suffering and subjugation which would essentially affect their experience in the United States.

Another important minority culture in the United States to consider is that of African-American women. For these women, with a history of both slavery and gender-based discrimination, their experience in the United States is also unique and based in suffering. Historically, black women were made to believe that they were inferior, both as women and as African-Americans. Jacquelyn Grant, one of the leading innovators of “womanist” christology details three main struggles that have historically faced African American women: slavery, patriarchy, and white supremacy and how Jesus Christ was used to justify each. According to

\begin{itemize}
  \item[5] Vargas, 273
  \item[6] Isasi-Diaz, 170
\end{itemize}
Grant, “women have been denied humanity, personhood, leadership and equality in the church.”\(^7\) because of the “overemphasis on the maleness of Jesus”\(^8\) Because Jesus took a male human form, women were removed from Jesus’s doctrine because of this issue in appearance. In addition to gender discrimination, African American women also faced racial discrimination. Jesus is normally portrayed as a white man, thus excluding those of other races. This emphasis that has been placed on Jesus as “white” has, according to Grant, “deified ‘whiteness’”\(^9\) Thus, African Americans in general were seen as inferior to the God-like qualities given to those belonging to the white race. As if this weren’t enough, there is also the problem of slavery. For centuries, African individuals were forced into slavery in the United States but this was justified through the Christian idea of servant and master. Thus, slaves “were given to believe that it was not only their civil duty, but their Christian or heavenly duty to obey”\(^10\) All elements of Jesus as a Jewish man living under Roman domination was ignored and Jesus became a master of these African slaves. What, then, has this tri-fold experience of oppression of African American women done for their interpretation of Jesus Christ, even after slavery has ended? There has emerged a distinct christology for African American women called “womanist” christology that emphasizes Jesus as one who not only suffers but who also equalizes and liberates those who suffer or are oppressed. They see Jesus as one who undeservedly suffered, but whose suffering gave way for salvation of both men and women and both white and black individuals. Through

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\(^7\) Jacquelyn Grant, “Come to my Help, Lord, For I’m in Trouble” Womanist Jesus and the Mutual Struggle for Liberation in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology*, Maryanne Stevens, ed. Paulist, 1993: 58

\(^8\) Grant, 58

\(^9\) Grant, 61

\(^10\) Grant, 63
this salvation, African American women are free. In spite of all of the ways the image of Jesus has been used to justify their subjugation, African American women have both acknowledged and broken through this suffering to create a liberating of this Jesus that will justify their cause. Black women are still not entirely free, however, as there is an inherent prejudice that they must endure. While Jesus is no longer being used to justify their captivity, there still remains an unspoken tendency towards Jesus as a white man which unconsciously excludes black women. The womanist christology accepts this suffering as an important component of its message. Thus, while Jesus is seen as someone who liberates through womanist christology, African American women struggle right alongside Latinas in their inherent plight and see Jesus as both their companion in this suffering and their liberator.

In considering the suffering and oppression of Latin American and African American women, one must ask, what is the real plight of Anglo-American women? Anglo-American or North American women certainly have created their own christology, but this christology focuses more on asserting strength and power and using Jesus as a tool in the strength of women in Christianity. Throughout American history, women have faced such challenges as the right to vote, gender bias in college admissions and in the workplace, and the idea of what a woman’s “role” really is. There were even biblical justifications for women as “lower-class citizens.” Megan Walker, in her essay entitled “The Challenge of Feminism to the Christian Concept of God” quotes Paul in his statement that, “the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man...he is the reflection of God’s glory; but woman is the reflection of men’s glory”\footnote{Megan Walker, “The Challenge of Feminism to the Christian Concept of God” Journal of Theology for South Africa 66 (1989): 8} This, and the insistence that Jesus was a man, has been used to prevent women from achieving ordination
in the Catholic Church. Thus, the struggle of North American women has been one of patriarchy and women’s role in a male-dominated society. North American feminist theologians bring up such issues as whether or not a “male” Jesus can truly provide salvation for women. Elizabeth Johnson, in her piece, “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” even argues for a female-centered christology. She, ironically, cites Paul who calls Jesus “the Wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24).”¹² Johnson points out that, in Greek, Wisdom is “Sophia” which is a feminine term. She argues that “Wisdom is a complex female figure who personifies God’s presence and creative action in the world.”¹³ Because of this, both she and Rosemary Radford Reuther assert that women, indeed, image Christ through Sophia and are thus eligible for salvation. Anglo-American women have faced other issues in Christianity and this patriarchal nature has been used to keep women in their place. Susan M. Shaw cites Southern Baptist men who “saw suffrage as the antithesis of the meekness and submissiveness of the godly, Christian Southern woman...”¹⁴

Interestingly, though, this use of Jesus as a man to keep women “in their place” and prevent ordination has not give way to a christology of suffering and companionship in this suffering. Rather, the North American or Anglo-American feminist christology focuses more on asserting dominance and equality, rather than seeking the help and comfort that Jesus provides. One questions, then, how this dichotomy between the christologies of Anglo American women and Latinas and African American women came to be? This then brings up the question of whether or not Anglo-American women have truly “suffered” as Latinas and African American

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¹³ Johnson, 121

¹⁴ Susan Shaw, “I am Woman: Southern Baptist Women and Feminism,” Baptist History and Heritage 48 no.2 (2010): 9
women have. Latinas and African American women have faced slavery, cultural assimilation, and discrimination which has led to an inherent feeling of pain and being beaten down day after day through repeated and constant suffering and oppression. Have white women experienced suffering to this degree? White women were facing issues such as gender discrimination in the workplace and college admissions and the philosophical question of what it means to be a woman. Some would believe this to be rather mild suffering in comparison to what their minority contemporaries have faced. White women haven’t faced slavery and the pain of cultural ambiguity, therefore they are quicker to assert their equality with such terms as “Sophia Christology” and with such beliefs that Jesus himself was a feminist because of his association with women. George Lilburne points out this difference in saying that, “In the theologies of Latin America and Asia there can be no optimistic passing over the complexity of evil and no naive vision of salvation.”15 Latin American and African American women have not been afforded this “luxury” that white women have been afforded which leads to an acceptance of Lilburne’s “complexity of evil.” While Anglo-American women have suffered in their own way, they still had their race on their side which lends a sort of optimism to their christology.

This difference in experience has led many minority women to reject the feminist christology of white women which presents a problem in the creation of a united American feminist christology. Jacquelyn Grant in her book, “White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus,” cites Brenda Eichelberger’s reasons for this rejection. One of them is that, “Class differences mean that while Black women are dealing with ‘survival’ issues, White women are

This leads to a sense of scorn towards white women because their “struggles” toward fulfillment are seen as mild in comparison to the struggle of survival that African-American women and Latinas face every day. According to Eichelberger, black women are also uninterested in the christologies of white women because they believe “White feminists to be racists who are interested in them only in order to accomplish the White women’s agenda.” There is almost a certain sentiment of bitterness in that white women don’t really know what true suffering is because they, even as women, have still been able to say that they are white women which lends to a sort of privilege that has been reflected in their christology. Jacquelyn Grant bluntly states that, “put succinctly, women of the dominant culture are perceived as the enemy.” This even stems from the days of slavery when black women served the domestic needs of white women. Thus, white women were, in a sense, the oppressors, which could also account for this “dominant” christology they have created because white women knew some sort of power, whereas African-American and Latina women knew none. Even today, a vast majority of domestic servants in the blue collar labor force are African American and Latin American women, while white women enjoy many privileges of white collar labor and as those who often employ these domestic servants. Granted, these women are being paid and are not “slaves” in the historical sense, but there is a strong class divide that presents itself in the dichotomy of feminist christology in the United States. These three christologies must find a

\[16\] Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989) 200

\[17\] Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus* 200

\[18\] Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus* 201
way to reconcile with one another if we are to ever determine what it means to be an American Christian woman.

If Anglo-American, African-American, and Latin-American women are to come together and unite, we must find some unifying element in each of their christologies. Can these women come together as purely women with inherent shared natures to identify with each other? Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, in her essay entitled, “The Passion of the Womb: Women Re-living the Eucharist,” discusses how the female experience is one in solidarity with Jesus. She compares the life-giving experience of women through gestation, childbirth, and child-rearing with the life-giving experience of Jesus through the Eucharist. In taking the Host, we are consuming the body of Jesus which gives us life. Gajiwala states that, “in women, this Eucharistic bonding is crystallised in the ever-present maternal instinct...”19 Women’s bodies are essentially “broken” as they give birth to a child and across cultures, women are deeply devoted to careers, families, relationships, or children, and thus experience a shared sense of sacrifice even if they don’t physically give birth. Gajiwala even mentions women’s inherent spirituality and the plight of Christian women everywhere. They are not fully included in the Church and “this exclusion is a shadowy presence at the Eucharist, setting limits to women’s participation in this community meal.”20 She unites Christian women around the world and states that, “women religious the world over experience the hurt and anger of this exclusion most acutely.”21 Thus, there are


20 Gajiwala, 94

21 Gajiwala, 95
shared natures and experiences that women have that can unite them, despite the difference of earthly history.

Now that we have established a shared “feminine experience” of Christian women, we must mold this to fit American society. The United States is a pluralistic society, thus our identity as Americans is that of pluralism. The women living in the United States come from a multitude of backgrounds and while each has suffered in its own way, there are bonds that can link these christologies together. In addition to the aforementioned “feminine experience” American women are thus linked by their differences. While American women are not link in terms of ethnicity and types of suffering, they can still find some common ground in that each is trying to find a way to move past the injustices that has been done on each and that each has perhaps done on each other and looking to Jesus Christ as one who links seemingly diverse people. Wasn’t it Jesus who gathered a following of people from all aspects of society? He brought together prostitutes, lepers, fishermen, and other individuals who seemed to have nothing in common, just as African American, Anglo-American, and Latin-American women all do. Yet each has suffered in their own way and is struggling to find a bond and link with other women through the inherent female experience. This, then, is the American feminist christology: a bond between women who acknowledge their inherent link, sentiments, as well as their differences while using the teachings of Jesus and their own unique interpretations to become more unified and to move past past wrongdoings. It acknowledges the pain of cultural ambiguity, slavery and use of Jesus to promote racial and gender-discrimination as well as class discrimination, and socio-political patriarchy in what is a unique bond between diverse, but still Christian, women.
I have detailed the three main feminist christologies that reside in the United States: the *mujerista* christology of Latinas that views Jesus as comfort throughout daily struggles, the womanist christology of African-American women who interpret Jesus’ life and teachings as a means of liberation from trifolds injustices in the past, and the Sophia christologies of Anglo-American women who are working to establish a strong role in society as individuals who are equal in God’s and Jesus’s eyes. Each christology seeks to remedy the suffering each has endured and this suffering plays an important role. Latinas, African American women, and Anglo-American women can unite first by their inherent experience as Christian women, but then use their differences to establish a unique, pluralistic experience of Jesus who recognized differences, yet still believed that every individual could be united through Christianity. Thus, it is entirely possible for American women to establish an American feminist christology that recognizes the important role of suffering as well as differing experiences to detail the unique, pluralistic experience of American women.
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