

PREFACE

This collection of writings titled *And God will wipe away all tears from their eyes – A Theological Approach to the Suffering and Hopes of Women* is based on lectures given at the Eighth Regional Conference of the European Society of Women in Theological Research (ESWTR) for Central and Eastern Europe (Split, 2nd – 5th September 2012).¹ The Conference was organised by the European Society of Women in Theological Research – Croatia Section (ESWTR-CS), the Ecumenical Women’s Initiative (EWI) based in Omiš and the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar – Regional Centre Split. This was the first major international women’s theological conference that was held in Croatia.² It was attended by about 70 registered participants from 11 European countries and one participant from the United States, not counting guests who participated in certain parts of the programme.³ The Conference had an interdisciplinary character and was designed as an active and constructive-critical exchange of knowledge and experiences of academic researchers and women active in NGOs. The Conference sought to highlight the themes of suffering and hope that touch one of the central mysteries of the Christian faith, and that is the paschal mystery of Christ’s passion, death and resurrection, focusing on phenomenology, history, theology and social background of the suffering and hopes of women particularly in the context of Central and Eastern Europe. The focus on women’s issues does not mean a denial or neglect of the suffering and hopes of men, rather this is a methodological approach that enables a better understanding of gender-marked forms and contexts of suffering and their theological foundation. Over the three-day Conference there were fifteen lectures, twelve mini-lectures, seven workshops and six grassroots community spaces. The official Conference languages were English and German with simultaneous translation into Croatian.

1 The Conference was titled: “*And God will wipe away all tears from their eyes*” (Is 25:8 and Rev. 21:4) – A Theological Approach to the Suffering and Hopes of Women

2 The Croatian section of the European Society of Women in Theological Research in cooperation with the Ecumenical Women’s Initiative from Omiš held a small conference for women theologians from 9th to 14th August 2010 on the island Galovac, near Zadar. The theme of this conference was “Women and theology,” and most presentations were in Croatian. Apart from Croatian women theologians, there were participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Serbia, Romania, and Austria.

3 Although the conference was primarily Christian-ecumenical, a few Muslim believers participated, which further marked the fruitfulness of the debate and reflections as well as the exchange of experiences and opinions.

The introductory lectures were followed by presentations which were divided into thematic sections: *Speaking Out about the Suffering of Victims*; *Contexts of Suffering: Socialist and Contemporary Society*; *Contexts of Suffering: Inclusion – Exclusion*; *Spirituality, Religious Pedagogy and Pastoral Theology*; *Suffering – Art – Media, Bible and Bible and Talmud*. As some of the presentations according to their author's discretion, were not intended for publication in this Conference collection, the following themes were chosen for each part of the collection: I. *God who Suffers and the Suffering of Women*; II. *Discourses about Suffering and Hope*; III. *The Contexts of Suffering and Hope of Women*; IV. *Spirituality in the Suffering and Hope of Women*; and V. *The Suffering and Hope of Women in the Media*.

In the first part *God who Suffers and the Suffering of Women* three authors reflect on the suffering of women from a theological standpoint. In the article *The Suffering God* Elżbieta Adamiak presents the history and current status of the systematic-theological debate on whether God can suffer and what meaning this has for women while Irmtraud Fischer in her article *How God relates to the Suffering of Women? The Interpretation of Old Testament Texts about God's Work towards Women with some Correlations to the Contemporary Croatian Life Context* shows the range of suffering which affected women in the Old Testament. Here, the author pays special attention to the suffering of women which is caused by patriarchal structures and warns that Holy Scripture gives a voice to victims but at the same time does not omit offenses committed against women. *Memoria Passionis* women, according to the author become a “dangerous memory” (J. B. Metz). Lisa Isherwood in her article *Women, Suffering & the Body of Christ* presents the way in which women from different parts of the world interpret their own suffering in the light of Christ's sufferings, and how their hopes are founded in Christ's resurrection forming theological questions which women ask in the context of their own suffering. The article also presents the ways in which women articulate their suffering in non-Christian traditions and asserts some issues of Christianity which come from these traditions.

The second part of this collection *Discourses about Suffering and Hope*, are works in which the authors emphasise the importance of talking about the victim's suffering and the related difficulties of doing this as well as discourses on the suffering and hopes in schools' mediation of the Christian faith. Maria Katharina Moser in her article *Naming Suffering. Why Discourses of Victimisation are Problematic* warns of pitfalls and the problematic effects of discourse on the victim. The author also emphasises society's responsibility to assist women affected by violence. The other article in this collection is entitled *How Religious Education Speaks of Suffering and Hope? Discourse Analysis and Gender Implications in Textbooks for Catholic Religious Education in Croatia*. In this article, Ana Thea Filipović analyses how the faces of suffering and hope are represented and mediated in the texts, illustrations and didactic incentives of particular religious education textbooks for primary and secondary schools. In addition, she shows how gender/sex-specific situations are linked with certain forms and aspects of suffering and hope as well as the theological emphasis on the Christian understanding of hope that are presented in their content.

The third part is entitled *The Contexts of Suffering and Hope of Women*. The first context in question is that of the early Christian communities. In the article, *Paroikos – Women’s Suffering in the Perspective of 1 P 3:1 ff*, Joanna Kiersztein analyses the Greek concept of *paroikos* from 1 Peter 3:1 which applies to expulsion, the stranger, one who is expelled from the community, to persons on the margins of society. The Author of the First Epistle of Peter sees the lives of his addressees as the lives of those who have been treated by society as *paroikos* because they were Christians. The author draws particular attention to women in this context, especially those whose husbands were not Christians, establishing parallels with the contemporary position of women in Poland. Socialist society as a context of women’s suffering is also thematised in different ways in the following three articles of this part. *The Contexts of Female Suffering and Hope* by Ksenija Magda and Julijana Mladenovska Tešija presents the suffering of women through an analysis of women’s issues and the concept of equality under socialism, in contemporary society and through the experience of women in the Baptist Church in Croatia. The authors devote special attention to the socio-historical and theological analysis of the *Women’s Group* within the Union of Baptist Churches in the period of democracy pointing to the transformation of this activism and the transformation of the fate of women affected by the altered theological settings. The suffering and hopes of women in the context of religious persecution and actions in socialist times is an issue addressed by Ligita Ryliškytė in her article titled *The Women of the Gulags and Nelson’s Paradigms of Evil: Becoming a Sign of Hope against All Hope* and by Márta Bodó in *The Memory of Suffering*. Ligita Ryliškytė analyses the experience of women in the Soviet Gulag. The author starts from the premise that the suffered pain and violence in Eastern Europe during the socialist period do not fit into the dominant paradigm with regard to the interpretation of suffering in the Christian tradition as God’s pedagogy or temptation. Instead she accepts four paradigms of the Protestant theologian, Susan Nelson which she considers to be more appropriate for understanding the suffering of the innocent. Based on the memoirs and documented narratives of three Lithuanian women who were imprisoned in the Gulag, the author shows how the experience of women “after the Gulag” can become a contribution to the theology of suffering and hope. On a similar note, the article by Márta Bodó based on the autobiography of two women from Transylvania shows all their sufferings under socialism because of their religious beliefs and activities. The author focuses specifically on the religious interpretation of their suffering and on this basis draws theological conclusions.

The final three articles in this part on the contexts of women’s suffering relate to contemporary society. Dubravka Petrović Štefanac in the article *Female Genius – The Compatibility of Work and Family in Croatia* writes about the difficulties of women in the labour market and of the difficulties of combining family obligations and employment. Lynette Šikić-Mićanović in the article *Hope in Homeless People through their Social Connectedness* cautions how hope as a descriptive and analytical category has received little attention in anthropology. Based on empirical research which was conducted in Croatia, she shows the role of hope in the life of homeless people, particularly homeless women. Marko Marinić in the article *Women with Disabilities and Loneliness* also based on empirical research conducted

in Croatia suggests that social exclusion affects the level of personal happiness and perceived quality of life among women with disabilities.

Part four, *Spirituality in the Suffering and Hope of Women*, contains five articles from different areas of spiritual understanding of the suffering and hopes of women. In the article “*If you find my beloved, what will you tell him? Tell him I am faint with love.*” (*Song of Songs 5:8*). *The Song of Songs as a Call on Women to Cross Social and Religious Boundaries* Rita Perintfalvi, in the case of a woman who loves in the *Songs of Solomon*, and who in the longing for her beloved crosses permissible boundaries, shows the mystical longing for a life that does not flee from death and of man’s quest for God who reveals and yet remains hidden. Lucreția Maria Paraschiva Vasilescu in her article *Suffering and Hope: The Gift of the Desert* presents the desert mothers who, as spiritual mothers were known and revered for their maturity, experience and wisdom. Heleen Zorgdrager in her article *Risk Takers in a World that Cries for Salvation. The Orthodox Theologian Elisabeth Behr-Sigel (1907-2005) and her View of Suffering and Kenosis* writes about the afore mentioned Orthodox theologian and her understanding of suffering and kenosis, of her spirituality as a spiritual being in Christ in a secular city. Ana Marija Raffai’s article *Between the “Cracks in Faith” and Seeking “More than Life”* analyses the concept of suffering in the theology of Dorothee Sölle, based particularly on her work *Leiden*. Lastly, Larissa Hrotkó in her article *Theological and Anthropological Interpretations of Birthing in Judaism* presents a theological and anthropological interpretation of the relationship between mothers and midwives in the Jewish tradition.

The last part, *The Suffering and Hope of Women in the Media* contains two articles. In the first, *The Suffering and Hope of Female Christ Figures in Films* Irena Sever analyses secular films whose protagonists implicitly resemble Jesus Christ. Although in most films the Christ-like figure is a man, there are a few in which the Christ-like characters are women. The author also analyses the female Christ-figure Jasmin in *Baghdad Café* (P. Adlon). According to the author’s opinion, female Christ-like characters are strong women who refuse to accept the patriarchal social system and suffer because of it, but their unconditional love still wins in the end. Suzana Vrhovski Peran in her article *The Place and Image of Women in the Croatian Catholic Media* analyses the state of the Croatian Catholic media particularly following democratic changes, and concludes that we cannot talk about the feminisation of the Catholic media. She also brings in foreign literature and research on women and the media.

This collection is richly illustrated by artist, Carolyn Boyd Tomasović with her work from *Ušutkani glasovi (Silenced Voices)*. Her drawings and paintings were created as a result of meetings and conversations with women and the impact their lives had on her. These works that draw directly on the conference theme were exhibited during the conference. The artist shows through symbols such as curtains, various geometric forms, jagged lines, birds perched in anticipation of flight, and similar motives the suffering of women caused by confinement in social, cultural and religious stereotypes as well as the breakage of these stereotypes, border crossings and open spaces of hope and life.

We believe that the review of topics and approaches covered, the international, ecumenical and interdisciplinary perspectives, in themselves say enough about the new approach presented in this collection. We hope that the importance of the topic, the breadth of access, interdisciplinary enlightenment, the ecumenical and international exchange of views will enrich theological, sociological and pedagogical thinking, historical research, discourse as well as communicative skills in seeking dialogue.

Editors