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Rendering Christian Symbols Fluid: Regarding the Anti-Oppressive Practices of the Feminist Collective L'autre Parole

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Article abstract

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Rendering Christian Symbols Fluid: Regarding the Anti-Oppressive Practices of the Feminist Collective L'autre Parole

DENISE COUTURE

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this text is to establish connections between the anti-oppressive practices of the feminist and Christian collective L'autre Parole ("the Other Word"), based in Quebec (Canada), and the orientations of liberation theologies on the global stage. The text highlights how Christian feminists from a local community bend, forge, change and rewrite the symbols of domination within the Christian tradition to restore their liberating thread. In this text, we study, in particular, the symbols of Dieu and of Christa. L'autre Parole's feminism unfolds as a way of living. It posits the hypothesis of a systemic subordination of women to men as a group and it is encapsulated by two key slogans: "The personal is political" and "A woman will not be liberated until all women are liberated." The article emphasises how the group can challenge its own complicity with forces of domination or collaboration. While possessing a local and temporary character, the anti-oppressive (re)interpretations of Christian symbols proposed by a local group contribute to a global momentum, hence, the interest in analysing such local creations in order to consider the process of global solidarity in action regarding liberation theologies.

KEYWORDS: feminist theology; Christian symbols; anti-oppressive practices; the collective L'autre Parole; incarnation

Liberation approaches challenge the claim of neutrality in academic or civic discourses. Instead, we suppose that each position is situated and marked by our location and political choices.

According to the Botswanan theologian Musa Dube, liberation theologies centre their analysis on subjectivities that struggle for justice, considering each subjective stance as paradoxical.¹ Each one is influenced by lines of domination, collaboration or liberation. Collaboration corresponds to the position that claims to be apolitical or unaffected by the logics of domination or liberation; thus, it implicitly reinforces, according to Musa Dube, the domination. An important point to consider is that no stance is neutral, nor pure, so those of liberation strive to deconstruct their own participation in domination and collaboration. Liberation approaches thus engage in an ongoing process of self-awareness and transformation, both individually and within their belonging groups.

1. Musa Dube, "Postcoloniality, Feminist Spaces," in *Postcolonialism, Feminism & Religious Discourse*, ed. Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan (New York: Routledge, 2002), 100-120.

From this perspective, religious traditions appear as complex sites composed of different lines of domination, collaboration and liberation. These lines intersect with subjectivities, thus bending, shaping and transforming them through their life impulses within a continuous movement of transformation.²

The purpose of this text is to establish connections between the anti-oppressive practices of the feminist and Christian collective *L'autre Parole* ("the Other Word"), based in Quebec (Canada), and the orientations of liberation theologies on the global stage.³ These two spaces of oppression critique and justice creation have contributed to shaping my own theological frameworks for several decades. I aim in this text to highlight how Christian feminists from a local community, *L'autre Parole*, bend, forge, change and rewrite the symbols of domination within the Christian tradition to restore their liberating thread. I will also emphasise how the group can challenge its own complicity with forces of domination or collaboration.

While possessing a local and temporary character, the anti-oppressive (re)interpretations of Christian symbols proposed by *L'autre Parole* (the Other Word) contribute to a global momentum, hence, the interest and, in my view, the necessity to analyse such local creations in order to consider the process of global solidarity in action regarding liberation theologies.

Presentation of *L'autre Parole*: Orientations and actions

L'autre Parole was brought to life in 1976 at the invitation of Monique Dumais (1939-2017), an Ursuline nun who had just completed her doctoral studies in theology in New York. Upon her return to Quebec, she invited other women to create a group to exchange and analyse, among women, the context of their strong exclusion within the Roman Catholic Church. Nearly 50 years later, both the exclusion and the group *L'autre Parole*, consisting of around forty participants, persist.

In terms of organisation, the women of *L'autre Parole* gather in small cells following the model of feminist consciousness-raising groups and Christian grassroots communities. The method consists of putting value on the words and experiences of each woman, thereby deconstructing lines of domination to construct a liberating spirituality.⁴ The group brings together a diverse group of women in terms of their

2. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

3. "Féminisme, théologie et libération," *L'autre Parole*, no. 115 (2007); World Forum on Theology and Liberation (website), <https://www.wftlofficial.org>.

4. Christine Lemaire, "Quarante ans en cinq temps," *L'autre Parole*, no. 146 (2017): 6-14, <https://www.lautreparole.org/quarante-ans-en-cinq-temps/>.

level of education, their employment, their age, their living status, their subjective connection with institutional churches, etc.

With a radically democratic structure, decisions in the collective are made in a discussion circle. A coordinating committee (coco), formed by participants from the small cells, connects the cells to one another. The collective holds an annual two-day conference on a chosen theme. Since its inception, it has published a homonymous magazine, *L'autre Parole*, which is not subsidised and was created by the activists themselves, expressing the life, creations and analyses of the group.⁵

L'autre Parole defines itself as a feminist and Christian collective. Both dimensions — feminist and Christian — hold equal importance. The collective provides, on the one hand, a space for feminist political engagement and, on the other hand, a zone for the creation of a free spirituality for women,⁶ a spirituality with a political and anti-oppressive character.

A feminist collective

As a feminist collective, *L'autre Parole* actively participates in the women's movement in Quebec, which itself is part of the broader transnational women's movements. It follows the themes, struggles, shifts, consciousness-raising, questioning and debates within the movement. This feminism posits the hypothesis of a systemic subordination of women to men as a group. It is encapsulated by two key slogans: "The personal is political" and "A woman will not be liberated until all women are liberated." These phrases establish a connection between the fate of each individual woman and that of all women. It assumes a collective of all women, recognising the fabulous heterogeneity of women's lives and how they define and understand themselves.⁷

This feminism primarily unfolds as a way of living.⁸ For women, it involves deconstructing the oppressions they face, forging self-esteem and creative individualisation in freedom, outside the fixed and ideal femininity norms imposed by patriarchal systems.

As we know it today, this feminism would be inconceivable without its anchoring in organised women's movements themselves forming unstable and moving coalitions. Numerous debates run through these movements and also resonate within the collective *L'autre Parole*. The intersectionality approach dominates the contemporary

5. "Revues," *L'autre Parole*, last modified March 2024, www.lautreparole.org/revues.

6. Pierrette Daviau, "Les spiritualités féministes. Redonner souffle et vie," *Théologiques* 18, no. 2 (2010): 103-120. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1007482ar>

7. Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021).

8. Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

period,⁹ an idea originally proposed by African American scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. She demonstrated how the oppressions of racism, sexism and classism not only coexist or add up, but also intertwine in different ways depending on the context, creating specific situations of oppression that require specific analyses and forms of resistance. This approach highlights the inadequacy of considering sexism independently of other forms of oppression. Intersectional feminism thus fights against all intertwined forms of oppression experienced by women.

The feminist posture assumes remarkable radicality. In a now-classic formulation, Christine Delphy wrote that the feminist struggle “[...] consists *as much* in discovering unknown oppressions, in seeing oppression where it was not seen, as in fighting against known oppressions” (emphasis original)¹⁰. It involves a continuous process of defamiliarising the unquestioned assumptions that support lines of domination or collaboration. In solidarity with others, it encourages each woman to construct a life focused on creatively deconstructing oppressions in freedom.¹¹

A Christian collective

Regarding the Christian dimension, *L'autre Parole* defines itself as ecumenical and open to inter-spirituality. As a Francophone collective within the Anglophone ocean of North America, the majority of the members of the collective remain baptised Roman Catholic women, as this confession holds historical significance for the Québécois people.

Following the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s and a collective rejection of Roman Catholic authorities and their centuries-old authoritarianism, an anti-religious atmosphere has persisted in Quebec to this day. A segment of the Quebec population has come to associate Christianity, and indeed all forms of religion, necessarily with domination. They no longer perceive the liberating aspects of the Christian tradition.

The feminists of *L'autre Parole* do not identify with the Catholicism espoused by the current leaders of the Vatican, who persist in their path of authoritarianism and exclude women from the governance of the Church. These leaders propagate an exemplary patriarchal political theology using contemporary language: they consider God to have inscribed the principle of help in a woman's nature, they assign women the

9. Sirma Bilge and Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionnalité: une introduction* (Paris: Amsterdam, 2023).

10. “[...] consiste *autant* à découvrir les oppressions inconnues, à voir l'oppression là où on ne la voyait pas, qu'à lutter contre les oppressions connues.” My translation. Christine Delphy, “Nos amis et nous. Les fondements cachés de quelques discours pseudo-féministes,” *Questions féministes* 1 (1977): 30.

11. Diane Lamoureux, *Les possibles du féminisme: agir sans “nous”* (Montréal: Remue-Ménage, 2016).

roles of physical or spiritual mothers in the service of families and communities and they universally prohibit contraception (other than abstinence) and abortion. This policy prescribes a marked separation of qualities and functions between men and women, as well as compulsory heterosexuality that denies rights for LGBTQ+ individuals. Due to the extensive political influence of the Vatican, this religious patriarchy has a detrimental effect not only on Catholics but on all people.

From the perspective of a feminist critique of religions and the stance of *L'autre Parole*, it is evident that the Vatican receives too little criticism regarding its religious patriarchy, both internally and externally within the Church.¹² In collaboration with feminists and social organisations, *L'autre Parole* analyses, deconstructs and critiques it in the public sphere.¹³

Some women of *L'autre Parole*, including myself, identify as Catholics in the sense that the Catholics “are us,” while considering the men of today’s Vatican as unfaithful to the Christian tradition due to their political theology of domination.

As Christians, the women of *L'autre Parole* form a grassroots community guided by the statement, “we are the Church” (*nous sommes l'Église*). Aligning with the transnational movement of the *Wo-men Church* (where the feminine includes the masculine), they understand themselves as an *ekklèsia* of equal disciples.¹⁴ It is important for them to include dissent within their ranks, to avoid unanimity and to support the creative individualisation of each participant.

Feminist rewritings of Christian symbols

A male theologian colleague asked me to explain why Catholic feminist theologies attach so much importance to ecclesiology. The question initially surprised me, but it turns out that they do indeed give a determining place to discourses on the Church. They do so because the conditions for the possibility and exercise of feminist theology involve women engaging in theological discourse and fully participating in the life of the Church, which is denied to them by the current leaders of the Roman Church.

12. Johanne Philipps, “Comment le projet de laïcité de l’État québécois est défavorable aux femmes: l’urgence de briser une évidence” (PhD diss., Université de Montréal, 2019), <https://hdl.handle.net/1866/24791>; Johanne Philipps, “Liberté de religion et liberté de discriminer les femmes et les personnes homosexuelles: des aménagements à revoir,” *L'autre Parole*, no. 140 (2014): 35-39. <https://www.lautreparole.org/liberte-de-religion-et-liberte-de-discriminer-les-femmes-et-les-personnes-homosexuelles-des-amenagements-a-revoir/>.

13. “Autoritarisme et machisme du Saint-Siège,” *L'autre Parole*, no. 131 (2011), <https://www.lautreparole.org/revues/no-131-autoritarisme-et-machisme-du-saint-siege/>; Marie-Andrée Roy, “La tentation totalitaire,” *L'autre Parole*, no. 131 (2011): 65-76, <https://www.lautreparole.org/la-tentation-totalitaire/>.

14. “Une *ekklèsia* manifeste. Colloque du 20^e anniversaire,” *L'autre Parole*, no. 72 (1997); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Congress of Wo/men: Religion, Gender, and Kyriarchal Power* (Cambridge: Feminist Studies in Religion Books, 2016).

Feminist ecclesiology places the development of theological discourses within the community of equal disciples. The women of the *ekklèsia* translate the grammar of the Christian tradition into words that carry their deconstructions of domination-based theologies and their constructions of liberating practices. Thus, a close connection is established between feminist ecclesiology and the understanding of Christian symbols.¹⁵ *L'autre Parole*, for instance, implements circles of dialogue, from which emerged their reconstructions of Christian symbols.

The Christian Dieu

In August 1987, the women of *L'autre Parole* gathered for their annual colloquium on "The Images of God in the Feminine." Sitting in a circle, they took turns sharing their experiences of spiritual hindrance caused by patriarchal images of God and expressed their own images of God with which they felt a sense of connection, without having to rely on masculine mediation. The conversation flowed freely, interspersed with prepared presentations on feminine images of God in the Bible and discussions on the challenges of feminising the symbol of God in Christian feminist literature, including the Anglo-Saxon tradition. I was one of the participants in this colloquium. After two days, a consensus emerged on a name that surprised us all. From then on, *L'autre Parole* would use and pray to *Dieue* in the feminine, the *Dieue* with an "e," a term coined by the collective.

In the introduction to the issue of the *L'autre Parole* journal, prepared following the colloquium, the editorial secretary presented this approach as a method offered to other groups to find their own way of referring to the divine as *Dieue*.¹⁶ Some authors in the journal emphasised that the chosen appellation expressed a local and contextual choice, one truth among many.¹⁷ It was a possible expression, one that emerged from the collective's heartfelt impulse at that moment.

The theological significance of feminising the symbol of the *Dieue* corresponded to the concerns of Christian feminist theology in the 1980s: the need to free the symbol of *Dieu* (God) from its centuries-old patriarchal content, the presence of a feminine image in the Bible representing the entirety of the divine, Sophia (Wisdom) and the liberating nature of feminising the symbol from a feminist perspective.¹⁸ A common Anglo-Saxon practice is to write "she God." The feminine form *Dieue*, coined by adding the letter "e" (mark of the feminine in French), is unique and original, made possible by the French language. The women of *L'autre Parole*

15. "Elles construisent l'Église," *L'autre Parole*, no. 39 (1988).

16. Monique Hamelin, "Quand les femmes disent Dieu: Guide de réflexion," *L'autre Parole*, no. 40 (1988): 4

17. "Dieue au féminin," *L'autre Parole*, no. 40 (1988).

18. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Dieu au-delà du masculin et du féminin. Celui / Celle qui est*, trans. Pierrot Lambert (Montréal: Paulines, 1999).

developed it within the context of Quebec French, which includes up to 15% of Quebec-specific vocabulary. Quebec French encourages the use of the letter “e” to feminise words of all kinds, a practice that has gained momentum, especially in the 1980s.

Interpretations of the meaning of the symbol of the Christian *Dieue* in Quebec feminist theology followed.¹⁹ The one that caught my attention is as follows: the vowel “e” does not primarily refer to the gender of the divine entity, but rather to the stance of the speakers. The “e” signifies the feminist stance of those who speak about *Dieue*. It represents the feminist approach, the approach of liberation or the anti-oppressive approach, which can manifest in diverse ways. The naming of the Christian *Dieue* is a way of dismantling the kyriarchal God with a “u,” the one that legitimises the hierarchical systems upon which dominations are based.²⁰

After an initial shock where the symbol of the *Dieue chrétienne* was deemed unserious, several Christian and theological circles in Quebec have integrated it and occasionally use terms such as *Dieu-e*, *Dieu/e*, *DieuE*, *Dieue*, or *Dieue*.²¹ However, the term did not gain acceptance in European Christian theology, as the French language there carries a different kind of rigidity compared to Quebec French. Regarding the symbol of the *Dieue*, a theologian from Paris once hostilely exclaimed to me in an angry tone, “Madam, one does not butcher the language!” (Madame, on ne charcute pas la langue !). This linguistic anecdote attests to the contextual nature of naming religious symbols. While the term was embraced in Quebec and became part of the language, it was met with resistance by that Parisian. It highlights the question of linguistic culture, which itself evolves over time. Two young women in France, Alice Peyrol-Viale and Sinatou Saka, hosted a feminist and believer podcast from 2019 to 2021 called “Dieu.e.”²² For them, the term represents a faithful (*Dieu*) and feminist (*.e*) stance.

The contextual nature of the divine symbol’s naming is further supported by anti-racist and decolonial approaches. An interracial collective of American theologians, the Mud Flower Collective, argued in 1980 that before criticising the gender of

19. Monique Dumais, ed., *Franchir le miroir patriarcal. Pour une théologie des genres* (Montréal: Fides, 2007), 291-298; Louise Melançon, “Je crois en *Dieue*... La théologie féministe et la question du pouvoir,” *Théologiques* 8, no. 2 (2000): 77-97, <https://doi.org/10.7202/005016ar>.

20. Couture, Denise, “La transcendance de *Dieue*,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 62, no. 3 (2006): 465-478, <https://doi.org/10.7202/015750ar>.

21. Lise Baroni, “Dieu, itinérance infinie,” in *Itinérances spirituelles. Ils racontent ce qui leur est arrivé en chemin*, ed. Richard Bergeron, Guy Lapointe et Jean-Claude Petit (Montréal: Médiaspaul, 2002), 137-151.

22. Alice Peyrol-Viale and Sinatou Saka, *DIEU.E*, produced by Ausha, podcast, <https://podcast.ausha.co/dieu-e>.

God, it is more urgent to critique God's whiteness.²³ Theologian Kwok Pui-lan offered a postcolonial critique of the feminisation of God in that direction. She writes that it does not question "an imperialist construction of God as a benefactor and patron of white people."²⁴ It constructs "a warm spiritual figure intended to provide comfort and solace to all."²⁵ It makes white women comfortable and risks exempting them from engaging in decolonial and anti-racist approaches.

Seen as a temporary practice, the act of naming and praying to the Christian *Dieue* remains relevant for the women of L'autre Parole to this day. As I previously emphasised with Musa Dube, no subjective, cultural or political stance is pure, as each is shaped by legacies of domination, collaboration and liberation. The goal is not to eliminate or preserve the appellation of the Christian *Dieue* pronounced by the collective L'autre Parole but to understand its paradoxical position. The symbol represents a powerful feminist and anti-oppressive practice for the collective's women, but, as highlighted by interracial colleagues' critique, it also covers up the whiteness of the divine.

The Christa

Ten years after the colloquium that gave birth to the feminised symbol of *Dieue*, in August 1997, the women of L'autre Parole gathered in a colloquium on the theme of Christ. How to name this Christian symbol from an anti-oppressive feminist standpoint? The colloquium marked the culmination of a year of research, exploration and dialogue circles on the theme of Christ. Drawing on the successful experience of feminising *Dieue*, the collective opted for a similar operation, this time by adding the vowel "a" and constructing the term *Christa*, which has since become part of the collective's symbolic lexicon.

Just as with the feminisation of the Christian *Dieue*, the women of L'autre Parole positioned themselves in relation to the state of the question of Christology in feminist theology, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon context. The term *Christa* also circulates in the English corpus, primarily associated with the image of crucified women, suffering women. In Anglo-Saxon feminist theology, the appellation *Christa* was not retained because it was deemed to not include the dimension of resurrection and risked reinforcing the victimisation, dolorism or sacrifice of women.²⁶

23. Katie Geneva Cannon and Mud Flower Collective, *God's Fierce Whimsy: Christian Feminism and Theological Education* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1985), 171.

24. Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 131.

25. Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 131.

26. Lisa Isherwood, *Introducing Feminist Christologies* (Cleveland: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

L'autre Parole took a different path and gave it a broader meaning than that of a suffering woman. The drawing of the Christa on the cover page of the *L'autre Parole* journal issue reporting the 1997 colloquium, created by Jacqueline Roy, depicts a naked woman, portrayed from the lower abdomen, with her arms wide open in a fluid motion of undulations. Indecent, she eliminates sacrifice. The gesture of the arms carries a dual significance, either of the cross (suffering) or of a free movement of cosmic dance (liberation, enjoyment of existence). Behind the foreground Christa, others evolve in the same posture.²⁷ For the collective, *Christa* refers to divine incarnation and its counterpart, the divinisation of each person in all their dimensions. It encompasses suffering and enjoyment, abuse, their recognition and movements of liberation.²⁸

The feminist theologian Monique Dumais emphasised the idea that Christianity is the religion of incarnation. However, a characteristic trait of patriarchal Christianity consists precisely in its lack of incarnation. This Christianity has devalued the flesh and matter to impose a vision of a purely spiritual God.²⁹ The symbol of the Christa signifies that the divine is incarnated in the body and life of every woman. Hence, the collective's flagship phrase: "We are all Christas" (*Nous sommes toutes des christas*).³⁰ This operation positions the embodied subjectivity of each woman at the centre of theological questions. Incarnation occurs. The divine body is understood as the materiality of anti-oppressive practices of excluded embodied subjects,³¹ a perspective which has the force to challenge certain practices of the group *L'autre Parole*.

The symbol of the *Christa* induces a similar movement to that of the *Dieue*. The participants in the circle of life express their desire to deconstruct the image of a distant and inaccessible Christ, which obliges women to pass through the mediation of the masculine to touch the divine dimension. Some have described *Christa* as an energy within each woman or as energy circulating among women. It urges audacity. It leads to the recognition of abuse, its refusal and engagement in liberation struggles. It gives birth to self. The symbol of the *Christa* expresses the anti-oppressive posture of its speakers.

27. "Christa en devenir," *L'autre Parole*, no. 76 (1998): 1.

28. Louise Melançon, "Ouverture du colloque: Christa en devenir," *L'autre Parole*, no. 76 (1998): 4.

29. Monique Dumais, "Femme et Église catholique: un corps à corps," in *Le christianisme d'ici a-t-il un avenir?*, ed. Jean-Claude Petit and Jean-Claude Breton (Montréal: Fides, 1988), 141-150; "La Sagesse incarnée," *L'autre Parole*, no. 150 (2019-2020).

30. "Christa en devenir."

31. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003).

Conclusion

In Christianity, we talk about God (the *Absolute*). This has the effect of leading one to acquiesce to the idea that theological discourses themselves possess an absolute character. Not only does this perspective lead us astray, but it also reinforces patriarchal or colonial religious authorities. From a liberation perspective, theological discourses, including those about the Divine, are considered situated, localised, limited and temporary. They are fluid discourses that can and do change according to contexts of liberation, in order to foster struggles against oppressions.³²

Base communities that embrace a liberation perspective thus make Christian symbols fluid. Occupying diverse localities, they have formed local, temporary Christological symbols linked to their contextualised struggle, such as Christ Sophia, Black Man Christ, Indigenous Christ, Child Prostitute Christ, Lesbian Christ, African Healer Christ, Asian Shaman Christ and so forth.³³ In Canada, following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) on mandatory residential schools for Indigenous peoples, decolonial Christian approaches have been particularly emphasised.³⁴

Liberation-based grassroots communities rewrite Christian symbols within anti-oppressive struggles. These symbols name a Passover of excluded people, a Passover understood as a passage from death to life, a Passover situated at the centre of Christian grammar.³⁵

The symbols of *Dieue* and *Christa* of *L'autre Parole* express an incarnation of the divine within the bodies of women. The feminisation refers to the speakers, signifying a theological discourse held from a diverse feminist standpoint. The name of the collective, *L'autre Parole*, denotes the action of producing a different discourse from the one inscribed in the structure of domination, one that neither justifies nor consolidates exclusions. The word is made flesh in the bodies of women. Theology is crafted from the experiences of liberation and resistance of women. *L'autre Parole* is a place of freedom and liberation for women, a site of feminist political engagement and a space where hope is enacted. For its participants, it is the church of today.

32. Serene Jones, "Feminist Theology and the Global Imagination," in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology*, ed. Sheila Briggs and Mary McClintock Fulkerson, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 23-50; Althaus-Reid, *Queer God*.

33. Lisa Isherwood, "Jesus Post the Posts: An Enquiry into Post-metaphysical Christology," in *Post-Christian Feminisms: A Critical Approach*, ed. Lisa Isherwood and Kathleen McPhillips, digital ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016): 201-210.

34. Denise Nadeau, *Unsettling Spirit: A Journey into Decolonization* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020).

35. Anne Fortin, *Comment vivre ? Naître à la suite de Jésus* (Paris: Médiaspaul, 2016).

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