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Reframing Christian Theology of Suffering: Persecution, Divine Solidarity, and Pastoral Praxis

Philip Suciadi Chia[1], Bobby Kurnia Putrawan[2]

1. Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, USA
2. Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia

* Corresponding author: bkputrawan@gmail.com

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Abstract: Persecution and suffering remain significant experiences within contemporary Christian communities, yet theological reflection frequently oscillates between theodicy, spiritual consolation, and accounts of religious victimization. This article examines how Christian theology interprets suffering when persecution is understood simultaneously as a theological, social, and pastoral phenomenon. The unit of analysis comprises selected biblical texts and major theological works from patristic, medieval, Reformation, modern, liberation, contextual, and pastoral traditions. Employing qualitative theological literature research, the study conducts thematic comparison and constructive synthesis of classical and recent scholarship. The analysis identifies three interrelated dimensions of suffering: participation in Christ, exposure to unjust structures, and a summons to ecclesial solidarity. The novelty lies in integrating these dimensions into a contextual framework that distinguishes the theological meaning attributed to suffering from the social causes that produce persecution. The study argues that Christian theology should neither reduce suffering to divine punishment nor romanticize it as inherently spiritually beneficial. Its contribution is a constructive theological framework in which lament, resistance to injustice, pastoral accompaniment, and eschatological hope function together as responsible Christian responses to suffering and persecution.

Keywords: Christian theology; persecution; suffering; theology of the cross; pastoral care

1. Introduction

Persecution and suffering remain consequential realities for religious communities because restrictions on religious belief and practice occur through both governmental action and social hostility across different national settings. Pew Research Center's global study recorded religion-related harassment by governments or social actors in 192 of 198 countries and territories in 2022, while Christians were among the religious groups experiencing such harassment across a large number of countries. These data should not be interpreted as a measure of which religious community is "most persecuted," because the number of countries in which harassment occurs does not measure its severity, frequency, or consequences for victims (Pew Research Center, 2024). Contemporary scholarship likewise places persecution within a wider human-rights framework in which discrimination, restrictions, violence, displacement, and other violations can intersect with religious identity (Hodge, 2024). The theological significance of this phenomenon therefore cannot be separated from the concrete social conditions in which suffering occurs (Stults, 2022). Christian reflection is consequently confronted with a double task: it must interpret suffering within the grammar of faith while simultaneously refusing theological explanations that obscure the social causes of persecution (Hodge, 2024). The persistence of these realities makes theology of suffering an issue not merely of doctrinal reflection but also of ecclesial responsibility, public ethics, and pastoral practice.

The literature on Christian suffering is extensive, but it is internally diverse and often organized around different questions (Moltmann, 1993). Classical Christian theology has examined suffering through providence, sin, evil, divine

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pedagogy, and participation in Christ, while Reformation theology has developed distinctive accounts of the cross, faith, and divine sovereignty (Augustine, 2003; Calvin, 2008; Luther, 1957). Modern theology subsequently shifted attention toward the suffering of God, divine solidarity, existential meaning, and eschatological hope, particularly in the work of Moltmann and related theologians (Moltmann, 1974). Liberation, feminist, Black, Asian, and African theologies further challenged interpretations that detach suffering from political domination, colonial histories, racism, poverty, and structural injustice (Cone, 2011; Gutiérrez, 1973; Sölle, 1975). Recent theological scholarship has expanded this discussion by linking suffering to trauma, grief, contextuality, and pastoral intervention rather than treating suffering exclusively as an abstract problem of theodicy (Hanes, 2023; Holton & Snodgrass, 2023). Biblical scholarship has also complicated assumptions about persecution, particularly regarding the historical circumstances of early Christian communities and the interpretation of Revelation (Mata, 2023). The literature therefore demonstrates substantial conceptual resources, but it also reveals a field in which theological, social, and pastoral dimensions are frequently examined separately.

This fragmentation creates a significant gap: the literature does not always distinguish clearly between suffering as a universal human condition and persecution as suffering specifically connected to religious identity, practice, or belonging (Stults, 2022). Some theological accounts interpret suffering primarily through Christology and divine solidarity, whereas liberation and contextual approaches emphasize structural causes and the agency of oppressed communities (Moltmann, 1993; Gutiérrez, 1973). Pastoral scholarship, meanwhile, increasingly emphasizes accompaniment, trauma sensitivity, narrative reconstruction, and relational presence, but these approaches do not always articulate how pastoral praxis relates to theological claims about persecution and the cross (Fuller, 2022; Gulo et al., 2022). This article therefore asks three questions: how do major Christian theological traditions conceptualize suffering and persecution; what conceptual tensions emerge when classical theology is compared with contextual and pastoral approaches; and what theological-pastoral framework can integrate meaning, resistance, accompaniment, and hope without romanticizing suffering (Hanes, 2023; Holton & Snodgrass, 2023). The study aims to answer these questions through a comparative theological synthesis of biblical and theological sources (Thiselton, 2009). Its principal contribution is not the proposal of another general theology of suffering, but the construction of an analytical framework that keeps together the causes of persecution, the theological interpretation of suffering, and the ecclesial response to those who suffer.

The central argument of this article is that Christian theology of suffering becomes conceptually inadequate when it treats suffering as an intrinsically meaningful spiritual experience without first asking how suffering has been produced, by whom, and under what social conditions (Sölle, 1975). At the same time, a purely structural account can overlook the Christological and eschatological resources through which Christian communities interpret suffering and sustain hope (Moltmann, 1993). The theology of the cross offers an important bridge because it places divine revelation not in abstract explanations of suffering but in the crucified Christ and God's solidarity with the wounded (Luther, 1957; Moltmann, 1993). Yet solidarity must not become passive acceptance of violence, because contextual and liberation theologies insist that Christian faith also requires resistance to structures that produce avoidable suffering (Cone, 2011; Gutiérrez, 1973). Recent trauma scholarship reinforces this caution by recognizing that suffering may generate resistance and transformation while simultaneously acknowledging the depth of injury and despair (Holton & Snodgrass, 2023). The resulting framework therefore understands suffering through four connected movements: truthful lament, theological discernment, resistance to unjust structures, and compassionate accompaniment oriented toward hope (Hauerwas, 1986; Hanes, 2023). This framework enables theology to remain faithful to Christian claims about the cross while avoiding the ethical danger of presenting persecution as desirable or divinely mandated.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Suffering, Theodicy, and the Theology of the Cross

The classical theological problem of suffering is inseparable from how divine goodness and power can be understood in a world marked by evil (Plantinga, 1974). Augustine connects evil to the disorder of creation and human freedom while situating suffering within a broader account of divine providence and human fallenness (Augustine, 2003). Aquinas subsequently developed a more systematic account of the relationship among divine providence, secondary causation, moral order, and the limited capacity of human beings to comprehend divine wisdom (Aquinas, 1981). Reformation theology introduced another significant emphasis through Luther's distinction between theologia crucis and theologia gloriae, arguing that God is known decisively through the paradox of the cross rather than through human attempts to identify divine power with worldly success (Luther, 1957). Calvin, by contrast, emphasized providence and divine sovereignty, interpreting the believer's endurance of suffering within the mystery of God's governance (Calvin, 2008). These traditions cannot, therefore, be reduced to a single Christian explanation of suffering because they differ in causation, divine agency, epistemology, and the meaning of endurance (McGrath, 2004). The theological importance of this diversity lies precisely in the tensions it creates between accepting providence, resisting evil, seeking meaning, and confessing faith amid experiences that resist rational explanation.

Modern theology significantly altered this discussion by emphasizing divine participation rather than detached observation of human suffering (Moltmann, 1974). Moltmann's theology of the cross interprets Christ's crucifixion as a disclosure of God's solidarity with suffering humanity and consequently challenges conceptions of God as remote from historical pain (Moltmann, 1993). This emphasis is compatible with Rahner's understanding of Christian existence as participation in a mystery that cannot be reduced to rational explanation (Rahner, 1978). At the same time, liberation theology insists that theological reflection must identify the social structures through which suffering becomes historically concrete, particularly where poverty, exploitation, and political domination are normalized (Gutiérrez, 1973). Feminist theology similarly challenges interpretations that portray suffering as divinely willed when such interpretations legitimate unequal relations of power (Sölle, 1975; Ruether, 1983). Recent trauma theology adds another layer by distinguishing the transformative possibilities of suffering from claims that minimize trauma or equate endurance with spiritual maturity (Holton & Snodgrass, 2023). The contemporary theological task, therefore, involves holding together divine solidarity, human vulnerability, structural analysis, and ethical resistance rather than selecting a single dimension as the complete explanation of suffering.

2.2. Biblical Witness and the Problem of Persecution

Biblical traditions present suffering through multiple genres and theological perspectives rather than through a single explanatory model (Brueggemann, 1997). The Book of Job challenges simplistic retributive interpretations because the protagonist's suffering cannot be explained by personal wrongdoing, and the narrative ultimately shifts attention from causal explanation to encounter with God (Clines, 1989). The Psalms of lament likewise demonstrate that protest, grief, questioning, and trust can coexist within faithful speech before God (Westermann, 1981). Prophetic traditions connect suffering with injustice, covenantal failure, and social responsibility, thereby preventing theology from reducing suffering to an exclusively private spiritual experience (Heschel, 2001). Isaiah's portrayal of the suffering servant has played a particularly important role in Christian interpretation because the text became incorporated into Christological readings of suffering, healing, and redemption (Childs, 2001). The New Testament subsequently places Christ's passion at the center of Christian theological reflection, connecting suffering with obedience, self-giving, solidarity, and resurrection hope (Wright, 2006). Paul's letters interpret suffering as participation in Christ while also linking endurance with perseverance and hope (Gorman, 2001). These texts demonstrate that biblical suffering includes lament, injustice, discipleship, solidarity, and eschatological expectation rather than a single theological meaning.

The category of persecution requires particular care because historical scholarship has questioned overly generalized claims about the extent and character of persecution in early Christianity (Mata, 2023). Revelation, for example, has traditionally been read as a response to Roman imperial persecution, but recent scholarship has questioned whether persecution alone adequately explains its social setting and rhetorical function (Mata, 2023). The issue shows why contemporary theology should avoid uncritically transferring modern categories of persecution into ancient contexts (Bauckham, 1993). Nevertheless, the New Testament contains substantial evidence that Christian identity could involve social hostility, suffering, exclusion, and coercion, particularly in texts such as 1 Peter that address communities experiencing opposition (Green, 2007). Pauline texts likewise portray suffering as connected to apostolic mission and participation in Christ without suggesting that every form of suffering has the same origin or theological status (Gorman, 2001). The biblical witness therefore provides resources for distinguishing suffering that results from human vulnerability, suffering produced by injustice, and suffering associated with fidelity to religious conviction (Brueggemann, 1997). Such differentiation is essential because it prevents theological reflection from treating all suffering as divinely assigned or spiritually beneficial.

2.3. Contextual Theology, Trauma, and Pastoral Care

Contextual theology begins from the recognition that theological knowledge is shaped by the concrete historical, cultural, political, and social location of communities (Bevans, 2002). Liberation theology made this methodological principle explicit by treating the experience of marginalized communities as an indispensable locus for theological reflection and by connecting interpretation with transformative praxis (Gutiérrez, 1973). Black theology developed a related argument by interpreting the cross in relation to racial violence and the historical experience of Black communities, particularly through Cone's comparison between the crucifixion and the lynching tree (Cone, 2011). Asian and postcolonial approaches have further emphasized marginality, hybridity, historical memory, and the cultural specificity of suffering (Seong, 2022). African theological approaches have similarly interpreted suffering through colonial histories, conflict, reconciliation, and communal restoration (Katongole, 2011). Contemporary contextual-theology scholarship stresses that qualitative approaches can deepen theological reflection by making marginalized voices visible rather than treating context as an illustrative supplement to previously established doctrine (González-Justiniano & Ney, 2022). Context therefore functions not merely as a setting in which theology is applied but as a source through which theological questions themselves are reformulated.

Pastoral theology extends this contextual concern by asking how theological interpretations affect people who actually inhabit situations of grief, trauma, exclusion, and loss (Louw, 2000). Recent scholarship argues that trauma should not be reduced to an individual pathology because sociopolitical violence, racism, ecological destruction, and relational injustice can produce diffuse forms of injury that require theological and pastoral interpretation (Holton & Snodgrass, 2023). Pastoral intervention based on Job similarly cautions against imposing predetermined explanations upon people in crisis, emphasizing the need for space, encounter, and meaning-making rather than premature theological answers (Hanes, 2023). Research on Nias pastoral care shows that intercultural accompaniment can involve reconstructing life narratives so grief is addressed within the community's cultural and spiritual resources (Gulo et al., 2022). Contemporary pastoral scholarship therefore shifts the emphasis from explaining suffering to accompanying sufferers, while maintaining the theological resources of lament, hope, relational presence, and communal care (Fuller, 2022). This literature suggests that an adequate theology of persecution must evaluate not only what suffering means but also how theological language affects vulnerable people and whether it strengthens or diminishes their agency.

3. Methods

3.1. Material Object

The material object of this study consists of theological representations of suffering and persecution within selected biblical and Christian theological texts. The biblical corpus includes representative passages from Job, the Psalms, prophetic literature, the Gospels, Pauline writings, 1 Peter, and Revelation because these texts provide diverse theological treatments of suffering, discipleship, injustice, and hope (Brueggemann, 1997; Bauckham, 1993). The theological corpus includes Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Moltmann, Sölle, Gutiérrez, Cone, contextual theologians, and pastoral theologians (Augustine, 2003; Moltmann, 1993). Recent scholarship on persecution, trauma, and pastoral care is incorporated to place classical arguments within contemporary theological debates (Hodge, 2024; Holton & Snodgrass, 2023).

3.2. Research Design

This study employs qualitative theological literature research using comparative and constructive theological analysis (Thiselton, 2009). The design is interpretive rather than empirical because the study does not collect interviews, questionnaires, or observational data from persecuted Christian communities (Louw, 2000). The analytical process compares how different theological traditions explain the source, meaning, divine role, and human response to suffering (Moltmann, 1993). The final stage constructs a synthetic framework by identifying convergences and tensions among Christological, structural, contextual, and pastoral approaches (González-Justiniano & Ney, 2022).

3.3. Data Sources

Primary theological sources comprise selected biblical texts and major works in Christian theology, while secondary sources include peer-reviewed scholarship addressing suffering, persecution, contextual theology, trauma, and pastoral care (Plantinga, 1974; Moltmann, 1993). Recent publications are used to prevent the analysis from depending exclusively on classical sources and to connect theological reflection with contemporary social and pastoral debates (Hodge, 2024; Holton & Snodgrass, 2023). International scholarship and selected Indonesian studies are included where they illuminate contextual and pastoral dimensions (Gulo et al., 2022). The sources are treated as theological arguments rather than as interchangeable empirical evidence.

3.4. Data Collection Technique

Data were collected through purposive selection of texts directly addressing suffering, persecution, divine solidarity, contextual theology, and pastoral response (Stults, 2022). Sources were included when they contributed either a substantive theological interpretation of suffering or a documented contextual and pastoral perspective relevant to persecution (Hanes, 2023). Classical works were retained because they constitute the conceptual genealogy of Christian theology of suffering, while recent studies were added to identify contemporary methodological and pastoral developments (Moltmann, 1974; Holton & Snodgrass, 2023). The collection process therefore prioritized conceptual relevance rather than numerical completeness (González-Justiniano & Ney, 2022).

3.5. Data Analysis Technique

The analysis proceeded through four stages: thematic identification, conceptual comparison, contextual evaluation, and constructive synthesis (Thiselton, 2009). The first stage identified recurring categories concerning the causes and meanings of suffering, while the second compared differences among theological traditions (Plantinga, 1974; Luther, 1957). The third stage examined whether theological interpretations adequately addressed structural injustice, trauma, and lived experience (Cone, 2011; Holton & Snodgrass, 2023). The final stage synthesized the findings into a framework connecting lament, discernment, resistance, accompaniment, and hope.

4. Results

4.1. Suffering as a Christological and Theological Category

The analysis identifies participation in Christ as one of the most persistent categories through which Christian theology interprets suffering. Pauline literature connects suffering with participation in Christ's death and resurrection, thereby locating Christian suffering within a larger Christological narrative rather than treating it as an isolated personal experience (Gorman, 2001). First Peter similarly presents suffering for righteousness as part of Christian discipleship while emphasizing non-retaliation and fidelity to Christ (Green, 2007). Luther's theology of the cross gives this pattern a distinctive epistemological formulation by locating the knowledge of God in the paradox of the crucified Christ rather than in human expectations of visible glory (Luther, 1957). The cross therefore functions as a theological category that conceptually connects weakness, vulnerability, and divine revelation (Barth, 1956). Moltmann develops this Christological trajectory by emphasizing God's suffering in the crucifixion and interpreting the cross as divine solidarity with wounded humanity (Moltmann, 1993). These sources collectively establish that Christian suffering is frequently interpreted in relation to Christ rather than through autonomous accounts of pain (Stott, 2006). The result is a theological grammar in which suffering can become a site of discipleship, witness, and hope while remaining historically situated in concrete experiences.

The same analysis, however, shows that Christological interpretation does not produce a single account of causation. Augustine relates suffering to the disorder of creation, sin, providence, and the human condition, whereas Aquinas places suffering within a broader account of divine wisdom, moral order, and secondary causation (Augustine, 2003; Aquinas, 1981). Calvin emphasizes divine providence and sovereignty, while Luther emphasizes God's paradoxical revelation in the cross (Calvin, 2008; Luther, 1957). Moltmann later shifts the emphasis toward divine participation in suffering, while Sölle rejects theological formulations that make suffering itself appear to be God's direct will (Moltmann, 1993; Sölle, 1975). These differences show that "Christian meaning" cannot sufficiently explain why suffering occurs (Plantinga, 1974). The theological sources instead provide distinct answers to different questions concerning causation, divine presence, human response, and eschatological hope (McGrath, 2004). Consequently, the results support a differentiated model in which suffering can become meaningful for believers without implying that its social or historical causes are theologically justified.

A further result concerns the relationship between suffering and divine presence. The biblical witness repeatedly places suffering within an active relationship between human beings and God, although the nature of that relationship varies across literary traditions (Brueggemann, 1997). Job provides a paradigm in which suffering is not explained through a simple doctrine of retribution, while lament Psalms demonstrate that protest and trust can coexist within faithful prayer (Clines, 1989; Westermann, 1981). The cross then transforms the theological vocabulary by presenting suffering through the Christological categories of self-giving, solidarity, and resurrection hope (Wright, 2006). Moltmann's theology makes divine solidarity especially explicit by interpreting the cross as God's participation in the world's suffering (Moltmann, 1993). The result is not an assertion that God causes every instance of suffering but an identification of divine presence as a central theological resource for interpreting suffering (Rahner, 1978). This distinction becomes important for pastoral theology because the claim that God is present with sufferers differs fundamentally from the claim that God directly intends the suffering they experience (Sölle, 1975). The theological data therefore support divine solidarity as a more consistent category for pastoral engagement than speculative explanations of divine causation.

4.2. Persecution, Structural Injustice, and Context

The analysis identifies persecution as a narrower category than suffering because persecution involves suffering connected to religious identity, conviction, practice, or affiliation, whereas suffering includes experiences whose causes may be medical, ecological, interpersonal, psychological, or existential (Stults, 2022). Contemporary human-rights scholarship demonstrates that violations directed against Christians can include discrimination, restrictions,

violence, and other forms of coercion that operate at different social levels (Hodge, 2024). Global data similarly distinguish governmental restrictions from social hostilities, indicating that religion-related suffering can emerge from both formal institutions and non-state actors (Pew Research Center, 2024). This distinction matters because not every painful experience is persecution, and not every instance of persecution should be read merely as an existential problem (Mata, 2023). Biblical and historical scholarship likewise shows that claims about persecution must be situated within specific political, social, and textual contexts rather than generalized across all Christian communities (Bauckham, 1993). The results therefore establish persecution as a historically and socially mediated category that requires contextual evidence before theological interpretation (Stults, 2022). This differentiation provides a conceptual basis for connecting theology of suffering with social analysis without collapsing one into the other.

The second result concerns the structural character of suffering. Liberation theology interprets poverty, marginalization, and oppression not merely as private misfortunes but as consequences of social arrangements that distribute vulnerability unequally (Gutiérrez, 1973). Cone similarly interprets racial suffering through the historical structures of racial domination and connects the cross with the experience of Black Americans subjected to racial violence (Cone, 2011). Sölle's theology challenges interpretations that transform suffering into a passive spiritual virtue and instead emphasizes active resistance against oppressive structures (Sölle, 1975). Recent trauma theology reinforces this contextualization by recognizing that racism, ecological violence, and sociopolitical injustice can generate diffuse forms of injury affecting individuals and communities (Holton & Snodgrass, 2023). Contemporary research on persecution likewise frames violations against Christians as a human-rights concern rather than solely as an internal ecclesial problem (Hodge, 2024). Together, these findings show that theology of suffering must attend to causation because pastoral consolation without structural analysis can leave the mechanisms producing suffering unchallenged (Gutiérrez, 1973). Structural analysis therefore constitutes an essential component of a contemporary theology of persecution.

The contextual dimension becomes particularly visible when theological reflection moves beyond European traditions. Asian contextual theology has emphasized marginality, suffering, historical memory, and cultural experience as sources for theological reconstruction (Seong, 2022). African theological approaches have likewise connected suffering with colonial histories, violence, reconciliation, and communal restoration (Katongole, 2011). Indonesian pastoral scholarship demonstrates that suffering and grief can be interpreted through local narratives and intercultural practices rather than through imported pastoral formulas alone (Gulo et al., 2022). These perspectives do not simply add geographical examples to a universal theology; they expose the limits of treating European theological categories as sufficient for all contexts (González-Justiniano & Ney, 2022). Contemporary research on persecution similarly argues that Western theological frameworks can overlook the experiences generated by Christian mission and religious encounter in non-Western contexts (Stults, 2022). The result is a contextual understanding in which the meaning of suffering is mediated by history, culture, social position, and communal memory (Seong, 2022). Context therefore functions as an analytical condition for responsible theology rather than as a supplementary illustration added after doctrinal conclusions have already been established (Bevans, 2002).

4.3. Pastoral Accompaniment, Trauma, and Eschatological Hope

The analysis identifies pastoral accompaniment as the principal practical consequence of a theology that takes suffering seriously. Hauerwas's notion of "suffering presence" emphasizes that the church's response cannot be reduced to verbal explanations because presence itself becomes a form of Christian witness (Hauerwas, 1986). Pastoral theology similarly emphasizes care, encounter, and relational attentiveness rather than treating ministry as delivering predetermined solutions (Louw, 2000). Recent pastoral research supports this orientation by emphasizing the importance of accompaniment for people experiencing grief, crisis, and trauma (Fuller, 2022). Hanes's reading of Job further demonstrates the danger of imposing pre-established explanations on people undergoing crisis because such explanations may fail to engage the complexity of their experience (Hanes, 2023). Research on the Nias Church

indicates that pastoral care can involve reconstructing life narratives within culturally meaningful frameworks rather than simply transferring abstract theological explanations into local settings (Gulo et al., 2022). These findings establish listening, relational presence, cultural sensitivity, and communal support as central dimensions of pastoral response (Lartey, 2003). Pastoral theology therefore becomes the practical site where theological claims about divine solidarity are tested through concrete forms of care (Anderson, 2001).

Trauma-informed approaches further complicate the idea that suffering automatically produces spiritual growth. Holton and Snodgrass argue that suffering can involve resistance, transformation, and resilience while also involving genuine distress and despair, resisting both pathological reductionism and overly optimistic spiritualization (Holton & Snodgrass, 2023). This distinction is important because Christian communities may unintentionally harm sufferers when they describe trauma primarily as an opportunity for spiritual purification (Hanes, 2023). Pastoral care must therefore create space for lament, anger, grief, uncertainty, and silence rather than requiring immediate theological resolution (Westermann, 1981). Recent work on pastoral care also indicates that meaning reconstruction can support recovery when it emerges through the sufferer's own narrative and cultural resources rather than through externally imposed explanations (Gulo et al., 2022). The result is a pastoral model that treats agency and vulnerability as simultaneous dimensions of care (Fuller, 2022). Such a model neither abandons theological language nor uses theology to silence the sufferer (Holton & Snodgrass, 2023).

The final result concerns the relationship between pastoral care and eschatological hope. Christian eschatology provides a temporal horizon in which present suffering does not constitute the final meaning of existence, particularly through biblical images of resurrection, restoration, and the renewal of creation (Wright, 2008). Revelation's vision of a new heaven and new earth similarly locates Christian endurance within an eschatological narrative of God's final victory over death and destruction (Beale, 1999). Moltmann connects hope with active engagement in history rather than passive expectation, thereby making eschatology relevant to the ethical response to suffering (Moltmann, 1974). Liberation theology likewise resists interpretations of hope that encourage resignation because Christian hope is connected to historical struggle for justice (Gutiérrez, 1973). Pastoral care consequently requires a form of hope that does not deny present pain but enables communities to imagine possibilities beyond the conditions that produce it (Fuller, 2022). The results therefore position hope alongside lament, resistance, and accompaniment rather than as a substitute for them (Holton & Snodgrass, 2023). Eschatological hope becomes pastorally responsible when it sustains endurance while simultaneously affirming the moral necessity of resisting avoidable suffering (Migliore, 2004).

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that Christian theology of suffering cannot be reduced to one explanatory model because the theological tradition contains distinct accounts of causation, divine presence, human agency, and eschatological meaning (Plantinga, 1974). Classical traditions provide conceptual resources for thinking about providence, evil, moral order, and human finitude, while theology of the cross shifts attention toward God's self-disclosure in Christ's suffering (Augustine, 2003; Luther, 1957). Modern and liberation theologies then broaden the discussion by relating suffering to divine solidarity, structural injustice, political domination, and resistance (Moltmann, 1993; Gutiérrez, 1973). The biblical material reinforces this plurality by presenting lament, innocent suffering, discipleship, persecution, and hope without collapsing them into one category (Brueggemann, 1997). Pastoral scholarship adds another dimension by showing that theological interpretations shape how communities accompany people experiencing crisis and trauma (Hanes, 2023). Taken together, the findings establish four interconnected dimensions: suffering requires theological interpretation, persecution requires contextual identification, trauma requires pastoral sensitivity, and hope requires an eschatological horizon (Holton & Snodgrass, 2023). The significance of the synthesis lies in keeping these dimensions together rather than allowing one to displace the others (González-Justiniano & Ney, 2022).

The findings also require reflection on the long-standing tendency to assign positive theological meaning to suffering (Yancey, 1990). Christian traditions have often interpreted suffering as purification, participation, discipline,

witness, or spiritual maturity, and these interpretations can offer important resources for believers seeking meaning amid adversity (Stott, 2006). Yet the same language can become problematic when detached from the concrete causes of suffering or imposed on victims without regard for their experience (Sölle, 1975). Contemporary trauma scholarship makes this danger particularly visible because resilience and transformation do not negate injury, vulnerability, or the need for justice (Holton & Snodgrass, 2023). The theological distinction between finding meaning in suffering and declaring suffering itself meaningful is therefore crucial (Hanes, 2023). A person may discover faith, solidarity, or hope through persecution without implying that persecution was necessary or divinely intended (Moltmann, 1993). This distinction preserves the theological value of transformation while preventing the moral normalization of violence (Cone, 2011). The reflection consequently suggests that the phrase "suffering as spiritual growth" should be used descriptively and cautiously rather than as a universal theological law (Holton & Snodgrass, 2023).

The results can be interpreted through the theology of the cross because the cross provides a theological grammar that connects vulnerability, divine solidarity, injustice, and hope (Luther, 1957). Luther's account challenges the tendency to identify God's presence exclusively with success, power, or visible blessing, while Moltmann expands the cross into a theology of divine participation in human suffering (Moltmann, 1993). Cone's interpretation demonstrates that this Christological grammar becomes socially concrete when the cross is read alongside histories of racial violence and domination (Cone, 2011). Sölle and liberation theology similarly show that solidarity with sufferers cannot remain contemplative but must include resistance to structures that generate suffering (Sölle, 1975; Gutiérrez, 1973). Pastoral theology then translates this theological logic into practices of presence, listening, narrative reconstruction, and communal support (Louw, 2000; Gulo et al., 2022). The interpretation proposed here is therefore not that the cross explains the causes of every form of suffering, but that it provides a theological orientation for responding to suffering without abandoning either compassion or justice (Moltmann, 1974). This orientation allows Christian theology to affirm divine solidarity without converting suffering into an object of theological celebration (Hanes, 2023).

Comparison with previous scholarship reveals both continuity and a constructive difference. The classical tradition contributes a sophisticated account of providence, evil, and human finitude, while theology of the cross contributes a Christological epistemology of suffering (Augustine, 2003; Luther, 1957). Liberation, feminist, Black, and contextual theologies introduce the indispensable question of power by asking who suffers, why particular communities suffer disproportionately, and which structures sustain their vulnerability (Gutiérrez, 1973; Cone, 2011; Sölle, 1975). Pastoral scholarship adds the question of how theological interpretation affects actual sufferers and whether theological language supports or undermines their agency (Fuller, 2022; Holton & Snodgrass, 2023). Recent scholarship on persecution similarly broadens the field by treating religious persecution as a human-rights concern rather than solely as a theological category (Hodge, 2024). The present synthesis differs from these approaches by treating causation, theological meaning, and pastoral response as analytically distinct but mutually related levels (Stults, 2022). This differentiation prevents the structural account from eliminating theological meaning and prevents theological meaning from obscuring structural injustice (González-Justiniano & Ney, 2022). The resulting framework is therefore best understood as a constructive synthesis rather than a replacement for existing theologies of suffering (Moltmann, 1993).

The follow-up implication is that future theology of persecution should move from abstract explanation toward a more integrated form of contextual theological praxis (Bevans, 2002). The first movement should be truthful lament, because sufferers need theological space to name pain without being forced immediately into narratives of victory or spiritual growth (Westermann, 1981). The second should be discernment, through which communities distinguish unavoidable vulnerability from suffering produced by injustice, discrimination, or coercion (Hodge, 2024). The third should be resistance, because Christian solidarity cannot be separated from efforts to confront structures that produce avoidable suffering (Cone, 2011; Gutiérrez, 1973). The fourth should be accompaniment, in which churches provide relational, spiritual, communal, and culturally sensitive forms of care (Gulo et al., 2022; Fuller,

2022). The fifth should be hope, understood not as denial of present suffering but as an eschatological orientation that sustains action toward justice and restoration (Moltmann, 1974). Such a model can also be developed empirically through interviews, ethnography, and comparative case studies involving Christian communities experiencing different forms of religious hostility (González-Justiniano & Ney, 2022). Future research should therefore test the proposed theological framework against lived experience rather than assuming that conceptual coherence automatically produces pastoral effectiveness (Holton & Snodgrass, 2023).

6. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that Christian theology of suffering is characterized by a plurality of theological interpretations rather than a single doctrine of why suffering occurs. Classical theology emphasizes providence, evil, human finitude, and divine wisdom, while the theology of the cross locates Christian understanding of suffering in the crucified Christ. Modern theology emphasizes divine solidarity, whereas liberation, feminist, Black, and contextual approaches identify the structural and political conditions that make suffering historically concrete. Biblical traditions likewise distinguish lament, innocent suffering, discipleship, persecution, and eschatological hope rather than reducing all suffering to divine punishment. The central finding is therefore that theological meaning and social causation must remain analytically distinct. Persecution should be understood as a specific form of suffering tied to religious identity and social power, whereas suffering more generally encompasses a broader range of human experiences. This distinction prevents theological reflection from turning every painful experience into persecution or every persecution into a spiritually beneficial event.

The article's principal scientific contribution is its constructive integration of four dimensions often treated separately: Christological meaning, structural analysis, pastoral accompaniment, and eschatological hope. The proposed framework begins with lament, as theological reflection must allow sufferers to articulate their pain without premature resolution. It proceeds through discernment because the church must identify whether suffering results from human vulnerability, social injustice, or religious persecution. It then moves toward resistance because solidarity with sufferers requires confronting structures that produce avoidable harm. Pastoral accompaniment provides the ecclesial form through which solidarity becomes concrete, especially when care attends to trauma, narrative, culture, and agency. Finally, eschatological hope prevents resistance and care from being reduced to short-term consolation by locating Christian action within a larger vision of restoration. The framework consequently reframes theology of suffering from a predominantly explanatory enterprise into a constructive theological praxis oriented toward truth, solidarity, justice, and hope.

The study is nevertheless limited by its reliance on theological literature and selected secondary contextual studies rather than original empirical research with communities experiencing persecution. Future research should therefore investigate how different Christian communities interpret persecution through ethnographic observation, qualitative interviews, oral histories, and comparative contextual theology. Indonesian contexts deserve particular attention because minority Christian communities inhabit diverse cultural, political, and religious environments that cannot be adequately represented by generalized global accounts. Comparative research among Southeast Asian, African, Latin American, and Western communities could also determine how concepts such as lament, solidarity, resistance, and hope take on different meanings across contexts. Further research should examine the relationship between the theology of suffering and trauma-informed pastoral care, so that theological language can be evaluated not only for doctrinal coherence but also for its consequences for vulnerable persons. Such empirical and comparative work would provide an important next stage in developing a theology of persecution that remains Christologically grounded while being socially responsible, pastorally attentive, and contextually credible.

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