

## *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*

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Building on the growing body of work examining the intersection of trauma, affect, memory, and theology, Shelly Rambo contributes *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* in which she makes the case for rethinking the Easter event in terms of the middle day, Holy Saturday, and the acts of witnessing and remaining. The book is both complex and well thought-out in its clear presentation as Rambo first introduces Trauma Studies and its history within psychology and literary studies, then moves through and expands the idea of witness, and finally brings the theology she wishes to present into focus with a pneumatological reimagining of Holy Saturday and love as theological norms.

Rambo begins by situating us within the larger conversation in Trauma studies, positing that life-negating experiences of trauma issue a challenge to theology “to account for what exceeds death yet cannot be interpreted as new life. The challenge is to account for what remains – the shattering of familiar frameworks by which persons and communities have oriented themselves in the world” (8). Trauma, as Rambo describes it, is that which results in remaining that is yet not life, a liminal space between life and death where one inhabits a new view of the world, which she denotes the “lens of trauma.” The lens of trauma confronts the fundamental shifts in time, body, and word that occur in the wake of traumatic experience: the past no longer stays in the past but invades the present, the body copes with an invasion of its own limits and the unreliability of experience and memory, and narrative language fails to account for or ascribe meaning to the event. The theological response, for Rambo, is to draw upon a category that is historically organic to theology: witness.

In the remaining four chapters, Rambo details an approach to theology that is both intellectually rich and full of liturgical and salutary potential. She draws on sources as varied as the literary-mystical theology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar, the Gospel of John, traditional liturgy, and of course, contemporary memory theory, especially as it arises in literary studies. Working painstakingly through Balthasar’s vivid theology of Holy Saturday as experienced through a meditation of the ecstasies of Adreienne von Speyr and the presence of Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple at the event of the cross, Rambo offers witness to trauma that discovers a theological pneumatology that she calls “Middle Spirit”:

A unique pneumatology arises. I call this the ‘middle Spirit.’ This understanding of Spirit is not so clearly aligned with life. Instead, this Spirit occupies a more tenuous position between death and life. The Spirit remains and persists where death and life defy ordinary expression; death is neither completed nor in the past, and life is neither new nor directed toward the future. This middle Spirit is often elided in the association of the Spirit with new life and resurrection. I am to retrieve it, developing

the contours of this Spirit by reviving biblical concepts that speak to pneumatology in this different key. (114)

Middle Spirit both witnesses to trauma and provides the “capacity to imagine beyond an ending.” Trauma studies has outlined a concept of trauma that is not continued life, but rather death remaining in life and vice versa. The middle day of tension after the death of Christ is too easily elided in favor of the triumph of the resurrection; the ecstatic visions of Speyr are powerful for their witness to the reality of hell that is neither life nor death; victims of trauma are too often told to embrace “life” rather than grappling with the new frame with respect to time and memory that trauma leaves in its wake. The middle spirit, the remaining of God’s presence in the liminal space that is neither fully life nor fully death, is Rambo’s theological response.

In the end, Rambo evokes the theological norm of love, a choice that could come across as banal if it weren’t for Rambo’s novel situation of this firmly Christian category in a pneumatological theology of trauma. Indeed, it’s a credit to Rambo that she avoids the sentimental trappings such a historically loaded word as love can bring along with it: “The commandment to love is tied to the imperative to remain: Remain in me. Remain in my love... The new rhetoric of love is a language that acknowledges the complex dynamics of the death-event: the absence of knowledge, the failure of sight, and the impossibility of directly accessing the event as it occurs” (132-3). Love entails remaining in the space between life and death, the Holy Saturday, the space of the dwelling paraclete, and witnessing to the trauma of others. It’s not a superficial triumphalism, sentimentalism, or ignorance with respect to the haunting reality of trauma. Love isn’t only realized in the presence in life before the crucifixion, nor in the reanimated post-resurrection of Christ, but in the very moment of the liminality between life and death.

Altogether, Rambo’s book is a great addition to the burgeoning body of work dedicated to the intersection of theology and trauma studies. One can appreciate both its novel sensitive readings of disparate sources that span the gambit of useful texts from the gospels to contemporary theory as well as its use of traditional categories, liturgy, and vocabulary. Rambo’s theology resists the easy urge to cast off loaded and burdensome traditional vocabulary and instead chooses to wrestle with it, re-envision it, and correct and update it when necessary. It deserves praise for being both intellectually rigorous and remarkably useful pastorally. Christianity, after all, began in a moment of crisis and trauma in the wake of the crucifixion. What, then, are we to make of the faith if it can’t meaningfully respond to continued experiences of trauma today? Rambo’s fresh reading of old and new sources coupled with her clear writing style and clarity of thought makes *Spirit and Trauma* a book that lifts up this important issue and further opens an important and growing theological field.

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