

Module TRDL7110: Study Skills for Biblical Interpretation, Islamic Studies, Study of Religions and Christian Theology.

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Trauma is “the suffering that remains”.¹ It is “the story of a wound that cries out”.² It is “primarily concerned with *rupture*”.³ There is no universally accepted definition of trauma but these are some of the images with which trauma theologians are engaging.

Trauma theology is rather a new area of study. 9/11 seems to be the point after which theologians really begin to engage with trauma as distinct from suffering. Karen O'Donnell suggests the “first recognisable piece of trauma theology” to be Serene Jones' 2001 article on the trauma of reproductive loss,⁴ although the article does not use the word “trauma”. 8 years later, this article was included as a chapter in Jones' monograph, *Trauma + Grace*, something of a classic in trauma theology.⁵ In the intervening years, others had begun to engage with the questions that trauma posed to theology. Jennifer Beste addressed the issue of an individuals' freedom to respond to God's grace, re-thinking Karl Rahners' theology of freedom based on the experiences of trauma survivors, specifically those who experienced sexual abuse as children.⁶ She argued that, in light of the experience of trauma survivors, it was necessary to re-read this area of theology. The ‘rupturing’ image of trauma is an important one. Central to the work of the majority of trauma theologians is an understanding that trauma ruptures and destabilises theology, forcing, or perhaps better, allowing things to be considered afresh. Indeed, trauma is often referred to as a ‘lens’. Viewed through the lens of trauma, theology necessarily looks different. Serene Jones' monograph is another example of this rupturing. In the second chapter, she identifies trauma with the disordering of the theological imagination and in chapters 5 and 6, she examines the cross anew through the lens of trauma. The original 2001 article reconsiders theologies of the cross and the Trinity through the experience of reproductive loss. Shelly Rambo, another key name in trauma theology, is more explicit about the rupturing potential which trauma holds for

¹ Shelly Rambo, “Introduction,” in *Post-Traumatic Public Theology* (ed. Stephanie N. Arel and Shelly Rambo: New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 3.

² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

³ Karen O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies: The Eucharist, Mary, and the Body in Trauma Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 2019), 6.

⁴ Karen O'Donnell, “Somatic Memory: Trauma and the (Eucharistic) Body” (Ph.D. diss., The University of Exeter, 2016), 18, referencing Serene Jones, “Hope Deferred: Theological Reflections on Reproductive Loss (Infertility, Miscarriage, Stillbirth),” *Modern Theology* 17, no. 2, (2001): 227-245.

⁵ Serene Jones, *Trauma + Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, (2nd ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019).

⁶ Jennifer Erin Beste, *God and the Victim: Traumatic Intrusions on Grace, and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

theology. In her 2010 monograph, *Spirit and Trauma*, she considers the post-crucifixion events through the lens of trauma, forging a new theology of witness and remaining which resists the triumphant, and potentially harmful, rush from crucifixion to resurrection.⁷ Her more recent work, *Resurrecting Wounds*, she reconsiders the post-resurrection encounter between Jesus and Thomas in the Upper Room, searching for what this encounter has to say to the experience of life after trauma, in which the wounds are not erased.⁸

What these works have in common is a commitment to take seriously the embodied experience of trauma as a foundation for the work of theology as well as the use of trauma as a 'lens' through which theology is disrupted, allowing it to be reconceived in new ways. Building on the work of these trauma theologians, and taking seriously the importance of somatic memory in trauma theory, Karen O'Donnell offers a new perspective on the rupturing and reorienting potential of viewing theology through the lens of trauma.⁹ While Rambo shifted focus from the resurrection to the "middle" space of Holy Saturday, O'Donnell shifts her focus away from the events of the cross completely, turning instead to what she terms the Annunciation-Incarnation event as the "somatic memory at the heart of trauma theology".¹⁰ Taking this seriously results in a rupturing of traditional theological narratives which makes space for fresh narratives of priesthood, sacrifice, and Real Presence to be constructed, one which takes bodily experience, particularly Mary's body, seriously.

It is this recognition of the importance of bodily experience which is notably absent in the work of other trauma theologians. Similar to O'Donnell, Marcus Pound considers the Incarnation and the Eucharist in relation to trauma theory, but in a very different way. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis theory, he posits the Eucharist as *the* traumatic experience, the "paradigm for psychoanalytic accounts of trauma".¹¹ However, he does

⁷ Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

⁸ Shelly Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017).

⁹ Karen O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies: The Eucharist, Mary, and the Body in Trauma Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2019). This is a revised version of her doctoral thesis: "Somatic Memory: Trauma and the (Eucharistic) Body," (Ph.D. diss., The University of Exeter, 2016).

¹⁰ Ibid. 14.

¹¹ Marcus Pound, "Eucharist and Trauma," *New Blackfriars* 88, no. 1014 (2007): 187-194 (188).

not engage at all with the embodied experience, either of trauma or of receiving the Eucharist.

O'Donnell critiques Pound for his "reliance on theory and language [which] is given at the expense of, and removed from, the bodily experience of trauma".¹² Very recently, Shelly Rambo has critiqued what she sees as an over-emphasis on the somatic dimension of healing from trauma that has minimised the role of words and narrative in healing.¹³ She points to the fact that sensations in the body are often kept locked in there by the meanings which are attached to them: "how shame, stored in the body, is quickly attached to the message, 'I am unworthy of love'. The message becomes inseparable from the sensation."¹⁴ These emotions which are "interred" into the body cannot be released by a focus on the sensations alone. She proposes that the field of theopoetics holds potential here: "Words alone cannot heal. But they can, in certain positions, facilitate a release that cannot be enacted by the body alone. Theopoetics can work in this way, by staying with the senses...To enact a pause *before* meaning is layered onto the senses...opens the canvas of healing to create space for new paths of response".¹⁵ This is an area where trauma theology could benefit from further research. What could it look like to take seriously both the embodied experience of trauma and the mode and senses with which the experience is narrated and re-narrated?

¹² O'Donnell, "Somatic Memory," 31.

¹³ Shelly Rambo, "The Posture of Words," *Literature & Theology* 33, no. 3 (2019): 255–261.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 256.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 259.

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