

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

Name: Kirsty Eirinn Zsofi Parratt

Student No: 1903025

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***Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining.* By Shelly Rambo. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010. Pp xiv + 186. £17.99. ISBN 978-0-664-23503-1.**

“Perhaps the divine story is neither a tragic one nor a triumphant one but, in fact, a story of divine remaining, the story of love that survives. It is a cry arising from the abyss. The question is: can we witness it?” (172).

In these, her closing sentences, Rambo artfully draws together several of the key ideas and questions with which she grapples in her first book, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*. She anchors her exploration of trauma and its inherent “ongoing experience of death in life” (p3) in the lived experiences of two individuals: a deacon from the hurricane-ravaged Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans and a U.S. military veteran. Noting the failure of traditional theology, in particular the linear redemptive interpretation of cross and resurrection in which death is definitively defeated by victorious new life, to speak, or witness, to the experiences of such individuals, she takes the post-trauma space where death and life intermingle, which she terms the “middle”, as the stand-point from which she develops an alternative theology of the Spirit, of witness and ultimately, cautiously, of redemption: “what if we began to see the work of witnessing, the work of the Spirit between death and life, as redemptive?” (p14)

She begins by situating her work within the realm of trauma studies and introducing what she terms the “lens of trauma”: the alterations in time, body and word which take place following a traumatic experience. Because the events of trauma are not fully integrated, they continue to return: the past does not stay in the past. Due to the extreme levels of stress experienced, basic bodily functions are often impaired and the ability to convey what has happened through spoken language is often lost. Rambo then turns to consider the concept of witness, both in relation to trauma theory and theological understandings of the term. The resonance between the discourses of theology and trauma is important for Rambo as each hears itself differently through the language of the other, unearthing, at this point, a new understanding of what it means to witness. Rather than proclamation-based witness or the sacrificial witness of the martyr, she posits a witness from the middle, from the “territory of remaining” (40) where death and life mingle.

In the following two chapters, Rambo reads selected theological and biblical texts through the lens of trauma to discover how witness is represented there. She turns first to the theology of

Holy Saturday, “the middle day”, in the writings of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr, particularly *Heart of the World*, finding there evidence of a witness “in the aftermath of death” (47). For Balthasar and Speyr, Holy Saturday is the site of redemption, as the crucified Jesus descends into hell. This is, however, no triumphant harrowing of hell but rather Christ identifying with the forsaken ones. He is “Dead with the dead in hell” (64), revealing the depths of the divine love. For Balthasar and Speyr, the Spirit functions here as the bond of love between the Father and the Son. Rambo sees evidence of a pneumatological witness of remaining in *Heart of the World* which, she points out, is elided in their later more systematic account of Holy Saturday: “Looking through the lens of trauma, it is important to revisit the Spirit not as a figure who secures love between death and life but rather as one who witnesses to what remains – what persists – between them” (79).

Rambo then turns to the Gospel of John, considering the witness of Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple. She notes the ways in which their witnessing is obstructed in such a way that the content of their witness becomes less significant than their presence as witnesses who remain in the middle. The “living wound” of John 19:34 in which fluids of death and life mix together, and the testimony that follows (John 19:35), become for Rambo the image of what it means for witness to be birthed in the middle space between death and life. Tracing the Greek terms *paradidonai* and *menein* in the Farewell Discourse and beyond, she finds a witness of the middle Spirit in the Johannine text, a witness that remains, perhaps even survives, and is handed over in and through the witness of the disciples.

In chapter 4, Rambo considers this middle Spirit in more detail, drawing particularly on Catherine Keller’s *tehomitic* Spirit. The middle Spirit “provides a vision God’s presence in the abyss” (113). She moves then to consider what the witness of this middle Spirit reveals about the nature of love: it is not a sacrificial love embodied in suffering and self-emptying and death but a love that survives, that remains, in the middle where death and life intermingle, and that “recasts redemption” (141). Finally she considers the stories of individuals and communities living in the aftermath of trauma in light of this theology of the middle Spirit, where she sees the witnessing work of the Spirit to be two-fold: tracking the undertow of death in life, and sensing or imagining life where it cannot yet be recognised as such. This is not only the work of the Spirit but also of the witnesses who are called into the abyss, the middle. She suggests here a new understanding of redemption, while indeed also questioning if the language of redemption has perhaps run its course: “This transformation, this redemption in the abyss of

hell, is not about deliverance from the depths but, instead, about a way of being in the depths, a practice of witnessing that senses life arising amid what remains" (172).

Rambo writes with a poetic clarity that is impressive given the complexity of her subject matter and the fact that trauma, by its very nature, resists being put into words. Her use of a community of Katrina survivors as an illustration to give form to her arguments in an area where words are often insufficient is particularly apt. Her contribution to the field of trauma theology is significant in that she considers trauma not as a problem or challenge for theology to answer but as the "lens" through which a new understanding of central Christian concepts such as witnessing and redemption can be uncovered. She engages well with an impressive range of sources from various disciplines and her stunning close rereading of the Johannine text is particularly engaging. It is however interesting, given the extent to which she emphasises witness from the middle space and the inevitable intermingling of life and death post-trauma, that she does not consider Thomas' encounter with the risen Christ, clearly still bearing the wounds of death in his resurrected body. She takes precisely this encounter as the central image of her second book, *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma*, but it would have been interesting to see what contribution a consideration of this encounter could have made to her understanding of redemption viewed from the middle. Overall though, her aim is clear and there can be no doubt that she succeeds in achieving it: "The work of this book is to uncover this middle discourse – to resist the redemptive gloss that can often be placed, harmfully, over the experiences of suffering and to orient us differently to the death-life narrative at the heart of the Christian tradition" (8).