

*Spirit and Trauma*  
*A Theology of Remaining*  
by Shelly Rambo

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In *Spirit and Trauma*, Shelly Rambo applies a lens of trauma to challenge and realign traditional theological notions of redemption, death, the cross, and resurrection. She finds these ideas to be of questionable utility for persons who have experienced tragic life-altering events and for whom life will never be the same again. For Rambo, the traditional linear redemptive narrative of new life (resurrection) triumphing over death, dangerously “gloss[es] over difficulty, casting it within a larger framework in which the new replaces the old, and in which good inevitably wins out over evil” (6). This does not speak to the realities of those who are suffering through trauma or living in the aftermath of a traumatic experience. Rather than triumphing over certain forms of loss, survivors of trauma realize that life as it once was can never be retrieved and find it difficult to envision the promise of life ahead.

The inadequacy of traditional theology in addressing the needs of such trauma survivors provokes Rambo to seek to uncover a “middle discourse” that will “orient us differently to the death-life narrative at the heart of the Christian tradition” (8). To that end, she employs a lens of trauma to challenge the theology of radical redemptive suffering as traditionally understood in the cross-resurrection narrative.

Rambo situates her study in the frame of trauma studies calling the study of trauma “the study of what remains” (15) from an experience that is beyond one’s capability to explain, describe, or make sense of. Rambo posits a “lens of trauma” that negatively alters one’s relationship to time, body, and word (18). Trauma distorts time because the traumatized tend to relive the experience repeatedly without successfully integrating it into his or her life narrative, alters the body because

basic bodily functions often become impaired in response to the extreme levels of stress that accompany trauma, and often defies identification by preventing one from naming and interpreting the traumatic experience. Trauma's power to distort time, body, and word also increases the isolation of the one who suffers.

In response to this lens, Rambo invites us to bear "witness" to trauma, to see the complex relationship between death and life and to refuse to allow trauma and its aftermath to be covered up or ignored. By bearing witness to trauma, we can, according to Rambo, creatively reshape and rehabilitate theological concepts such as love, divine presence, and redemption through a lens of trauma making them more useful (26). Thus, Rambo's work is more interested in applying the lens of trauma to theology, rather than developing a practical theology for those suffering through trauma. The distinction is ever so slight, but enough to call into question the usefulness of Rambo's constructed theology.

Rambo engages Hans Urs von Balthasar's and Adrienne von Speyr's joint reflections on Holy Saturday as exemplary texts for a theology framed by trauma. Balthasar and Speyr believed that theology had not adequately attended to the day between Good Friday (the crucifixion of Jesus) and Easter Sunday (the resurrection of Christ). Rather than conceiving it as a day of smooth progression, Balthasar and Speyr, animated by Speyr's twenty-five year mystical participation in Christ's descent into hell on Holy Saturday, imagined it as the day a dead Jesus experienced the suffering of a tormented soul in hell. For Rambo, reflection on this suffering allows us to consider a logic of redemption rooted not in the passion or the resurrection, but in the space between the two (47). Balthasar and Speyr force us to witness to what is not easily discernible and to consider what it is like for survivors to live in the aftermath of death. Further, by imagining Holy Saturday to be the day in which God experienced the forsakenness of those in hell, Balthasar and Speyr intimate that Holy Saturday, rather than Easter Sunday, is the moment of redemption for humanity, the event by which God is in complete solidarity with us. If God was willing to suffer in hell for humanity, then divine love knows no boundaries. Rambo builds on Balthasar and Speyr by suggesting that the connection between Father and Son, rendered fragile and tenuous on Holy Saturday, is secured by the Holy Spirit, who witnesses the "death of God" and extends the relationship beyond death (71).

Next, Rambo engages the Johannine text to "unearth a pneumatology of witness" she finds missing in traditional theological interpretations of the passion and resurrection (82). Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple are the two primary characters that exemplify this "spirit" of witnessing that Rambo sees as key to addressing the liminality of trauma. Mary Magdalene is the first witness of Jesus' resurrection, but what is interesting to Rambo is how much of Mary's first encounters with the resurrection are obstructed. All of Mary's senses are, for one reason or another, interrupted during her post-resurrection encounters with Jesus. Many of these interruptions can be attributed to her traumatic experience of Jesus' crucifixion. Mary is a survivor, struggling to make sense of a senseless situation. For Rambo, Mary's elided witness "points to a different kind of presence, whose form cannot be readily identified or can only be received through multiple ex-

periences of misrecognitions” (91). Rambo gives the Beloved Disciple’s witness similar treatment when she juxtaposes his actions with those of Peter. Both Peter and the Beloved Disciple rush to the tomb after Mary’s testimony. Neither understand what has happened, but only the Beloved Disciple believes. Later, while fishing on a boat in the sea, the Beloved Disciple recognizes the resurrected Christ from a distance, but Peter does not. Peter jumps into the sea and swims to Jesus, but the Beloved Disciple draws in the fishing net and steers the boat ashore. Jesus intimates that Peter will die a martyr, but that the Beloved Disciple would remain if the Lord wanted him to. Rambo suggests that this text actually presents two very valid forms of love: love in the form of a martyr’s death and love as a figure of survival (95). It is the latter that has been ignored in traditional theology, and it is to this that Rambo develops her theology of remaining.

I will leave it to the reader to dive into the details of Rambo’s theology. In it, she posits a “middle spirit,” indicative of trauma placing people in-between life and death, that can provide a vision of God’s presence in the abyss (113). The promise of this spirit is a love that remains, rather than a love that triumphs or dies trying. There is a certain poetic beauty in Rambo’s work. She rightfully understands, in my opinion, that a theology that insists on victory for the believer does not help when one is faced with a situation that cannot be won. Instead it pushes others to insist that the one existing in trauma’s aftermath simply get over it and move on. Rambo’s theology of remaining insists that we be willing to remain with those who are struggling and lovingly hear their witness, as muddled, as interrupted, as shattered as it may be.

Yet, I question the utility of Rambo’s message for those suffering through trauma’s aftermath. Superficially, her message to these persons is “hang in there.” She cannot offer the hopeful promise of “things will get better.” Instead, she insists that for those suffering through trauma, hope must be paired with imagination such that, “the practice of imagining life in new ways and in new forms [becomes] an essential aspect of witness” (168). We are accustomed to the idea that redemption means better, but life newly imagined after traumatic loss is rarely a better life. Rambo’s theology of remaining acknowledges that the sense of loss will always be there, but it does not offer much in the way of *how* to remain with that sense of loss besides acknowledging it and sharing the story of it with others.

Nevertheless, I heartily recommend Shelly Rambo’s book because it assigns value to survival, not by way of conquering or overcoming, but by way of refusing to succumb. By her witness in this book, one can imagine that in the midst of trauma and the shadow between life and death, there remains simply love.

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