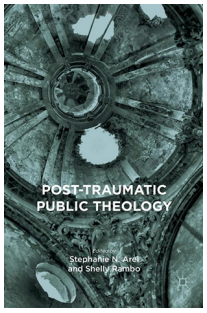
Book Review



Stephanie N. Arel, and Shelly Rambo, eds.
Post-Traumatic Public Theology.
London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. pp: xiv, 312; £74.95/$91.53 (hb)
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We live in an historical moment in which American political experience is frequently described as traumatic: not only are catastrophic disasters and terrorist attacks (such as 9/11 or the Charleston shooting) taking lives and damaging communities with gruesome regularity, but more quotidian experiences of racism and other forms of oppression are being shown to cause persistent negative psychological and physical effects. It is this kind of trauma, the "suffering that remains" and "overwhelm[s] human processes of adaptation" (Shelley Rambo 3, in the Introduction), that primarily concerns the contributors of *Post-Traumatic Public Theology*. With their wide-ranging essays, they hope to "unearth the resources within religious traditions to address the suffering of our times" (Rambo, 3), consider how trauma and theology might mutually address each other (Rambo, 18), and construct a "more responsive Christian theology" that better incorporates (in the fullest sense of the word) trauma and those who experience it into the life of faith (Rambo, 18).

While that goal (and the topic itself) might be too broad and complex for this one volume to adequately grasp, the book succeeds as a series of parallel case-studies in which trauma is applied as an interpretive lens to various contexts, highlighting concealed truths and generating promising ways forward. A few of the essays do this particularly well, such as Willie James Jennings' short, searing opening chapter in which he deftly reveals how the wounded bodies of American veterans become the site of competing public narratives, and asks what kind of communal practices of penance might free both soldiers and the general population from damaging myths that prevent meaningful healing. Sharon V. Betcher uses the 2013 Boston bombing (which was the catalyst for this project) to consider how the initial moment of "disabling" trauma persists through disabled peoples' daily experiences of humiliation, and how the public humiliation of Jesus lends dignity and priority to their lives. Dan Hague taps into American racism and the collective trauma of black communities (which includes having to endure the recurring demand that they must provide more and more "evidence" of their trauma) to advance a central idea of the book: that theologians must expand their understanding of trauma beyond discrete incidents to include the violence of prolonged exposure to dehumanizing narratives. And finally, Deanna A. Thompson provides perhaps the most intriguing constructive work with her deeply personal account of finding solidarity in online communities of people fighting cancer, asking what role the "virtual body of Christ" plays in a society where people are increasingly finding solace for their *embodied* trauma in *virtual* spaces.

Whereas the above chapters utilize the broader definition of trauma to explore theological frontiers with a thematically coherent precision, not every entry in *Post-Traumatic Public Theology* is as effective, and the book occasionally has a patchwork, ad hoc feel that can plague multi-author volumes. Just as "violence" has become an increasingly vague term in public theological discourse, "trauma," as employed in this book, is at risk of becoming too bloated for incisive theological use. For instance, in Mark Wallace's urgent (and still worthwhile) chapter on ecological devastation, the sheer effort spent attempting "to re-imagine Earth as an animate being, a living soul, who feels joy and suffers sorrow and loss [and trauma] just as we do," (Wallace, 138) due to both being "bearer[s] of God's presence," (Wallace, 142) makes one feel like the label of "trauma" was being sought after for its rhetorical effect rather than critically examined and developed.

Although this potentially problematic dynamic haunts the book, it does not, ultimately, derail the goals of the project. Despite the occasional lapse into generic diffusion, the authors effectively demonstrate theology's capacity to address trauma in its myriad, concrete forms. Additionally, the very existence of this book, its emergence from the traumatic aftermath of terrorism, embodies the complementary goal of challenging academics to consider how trauma addresses theology. It is in this mutual, dialectical space that a "more responsive Christian theology" might develop effective practices that acknowledge both discrete and systemic traumas, adapt to the various manifestations of those traumas over time, and function meaningfully and restoratively for each particular community and its diverse members.

Michelle A. Walsh, as she reflects on "material theopoetics" as a response to communal violence in the penultimate chapter, summarizes the promise of the project as whole when she says:

> As we open possibilities for a public theology of aesthetics and power in relation to trauma and prophetic pastoral care, we [theologians and practitioners] widen our own capacity to encompass the broadest intercultural range of relational and material theopoetic testimony. We witness more fully to our shared humanity as *imago Dei*… [supporting the] transfiguration and ultimate transformation of the world with a greater love, peace, and justice. (Walsh, 241)

Although *Post-Traumatic Public Theology* is not (and does not claim to be) the definitive exploration of the intersection of trauma, religion, and public life, Arel, Rambo, and the contributors have provided a timely and generative work of constructive theology that merits wider critical engagement. That traumatic violence will continually shape our communities is a given; what remains to be seen is whether churches will be able to counter that violence with informed and transformative practices. Thankfully, there is now a new resource in this perennial struggle.