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BOOK REVIEW

Karen O'Donnell. *The Dark Womb: Re-Conceiving Theology through Reproductive Loss*. London: SCM, 2022. Pbk. xiv + 210 pp. ISBN 978-0-334-06093-2. $40.22.

Theology re-conceived in the midst of traumatic loss gives birth to costly, experiential knowledge and beneficial insight for the church. Bringing her signature feminist and constructive methods of theological enquiry to bear on her own experience of miscarriage and eventual infertility, current Lecturer and Academic Dean at Westcott House, Cambridge, Karen O'Donnell turns to an autoethnographic approach to practical theology in *The Dark Womb: Re-Conceiving Theology through Reproductive Loss*. In this authentically visceral work, O'Donnell offers a theology of witness in response to the sustained silence that historically surrounds miscarriage. Confronting *toxic theo-logic* that often gives shape to harmful, or at best, unhelpful responses to a once pregnant person, O'Donnell's concern is how the church speaks about God in the context of reproductive loss. Drawing on trauma theory and the apophatic tradition, O'Donnell endeavours to create theological space for a re-conception of encountered doctrines that she finds indefensible in the wake of miscarriage. The goal is that Christian faith and ecclesial practice might better sustain those who carry in their bodies the often-traumatic experience of *death in utero*.

O'Donnell's argument takes shape in nine chapters. The introduction and first three chapters provide an underlying framework of language and context that underpins O'Donnell's constructive reimagining of doctrine that follows. Chapter 1 ("The [Theological] Silence Surrounding Reproductive Loss") launches the theological endeavour with a poignant, personal narrative of miscarriage and the alienating silence that ensues,

establishing the context in and for which the work is undertaken. Historical, cultural, medical, and theological origins of the silence surrounding miscarriage are considered. The remainder of the chapter includes a brief survey of theological writing on reproductive loss that forms the trajectory from which the argument flows. Significant for O'Donnell are Serene Jones's trauma theology, language of deferred hope, and imagery of the Triune God, who holds within its life the death of Christ. Chapter 2 ("Reproductive Loss as Trauma") considers the nature of trauma and its disorienting impact, framing the experience of reproductive loss as a traumatic rupture of the self. O'Donnell rejects theological language of *healing* and argues instead for a post-traumatic *remaking of the self*. Five characteristics of post-traumatic remaking are identified: finding safety; reconnecting with self through narrative construction; being witnessed; attending to embodiment; and socially reconnecting. Although O'Donnell rejects theological language of healing, chapter 3 ("Reimagining Miscarriage: Embodied Agents and Moral Failures") draws on Jones's characterization of doing theology in the context of trauma as a task of *healing imagination*. Reproductive loss is *reimagined* in relational rather than objective terms. Rejecting objectification of embryo and foetus, O'Donnell rightly claims that it is only in embodied relationship with the pregnant person that these terms have meaning. Moreover, what is lost is not a mere cluster of cells, but rather an integral part of self, an identity in process, and an anticipated future. Three characteristic principles for reimagining pregnancy loss are considered, including: conceptualization of pregnancy and miscarriage as embodied experiences, as liminal states, and as relational interdependencies.

Chapter 4 ("Providence, Petitionary Prayer and Pregnancy Loss") is the first of two chapters that form the core argument. This chapter is concerned with notions of divine providence that foster unhealthy, premature, and unquestioned acceptance of the experience of trauma, including miscarriage. Traditional doctrines of providence are shown to have their roots, not in Scripture, but in the Stoic understanding of fate as an accepted principle of Hellenistic culture in the early church. Characterizations of divine providence by Aquinas and Julian of Norwich are ex-

amined. Karl Barth's view of God's sovereign relationship with the world, which includes an invitation to human partnership, is recommended on the basis that it does not deny human agency. Seeking to do justice both to the nature of God and to human experience, the chapter reimagines divine providence through liberative lenses, including Feminist, Liberation, Black, and Process theologies. Elizabeth Johnson's Neo-Thomist perspective is also examined, although Johnson's turn to divine solidarity is found wanting on the basis that redemptive narratives of the cross often make too quick a turn to resurrection. Shelly Rambo's discussion of Holy Saturday offers space in the midst of death where there is not yet the hope of resurrection. Consideration of solidarity leads to a discussion of petitionary prayer as the place where solidarity in suffering finds its strongest expression. The concern is that seemingly unanswered prayer in miscarriage poses questions that remain unanswered. Nicola Slee's apophatic practical theology of faith informs O'Donnell's decision to embrace an unknowing that allows for paradoxical statements of both experience and faith. O'Donnell settles on a God who is not involved in biological processes, who is not in providential control of the universe, and one who has limited capacity to answer prayers.

Chapter 5 ("Miss-Carried Hopes") explores how trauma disrupts the human capacity to hope. The intent is to deconstruct doctrines of triumphal hope that are considered toxic from the perspective of the miscarrying person, as is the imposition of hope that denies the experience of despair. The chapter begins with a heartrending account of unfulfilled hopes that attend miscarriage, suggesting the breadth and depth of loss it portends. Understandings of hope in Christian tradition as developed in the Pauline writings, in Aquinas, and in the work of Jürgen Moltmann are presented, and their eschatological orientation emphasized. The concern is that theological responses focused optimistically on future resolution lead to forms of escapism that risk diminishment of the traumatic impact of reproductive loss in the present. Miguel de la Torre's embrace of hopelessness is considered as a justifiable response. Practicing *hope against hope* while at the same time remaining *hope-less* is recommended as a praxis of resistance. As in the previous chapter, O'Donnell defers to an

apophatic approach, holding in tension that which remains unresolved. Yet, in the absence of resolution, what is certain for O'Donnell is that God remains.

Following the central argument, chapter 6 ("What about Hannah?") makes a brief move to Scripture as biblical narratives of infertility are held up against early conclusions. The stories of five once-barren matriarchs, including Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, the mother of Samson, and Hannah, are considered. Hannah's story is taken up as a case study. In contrast to theological perspectives presented in previous chapters, the implication is that God is explicitly identified as having direct involvement in each eventual pregnancy and live birth, usually in response to a specific prayer. The concern is twofold: that no explicit, alternative narrative of miscarriage or unresolved infertility is found in the biblical text, and that these narratives offer little comfort for the miscarrying person when imposed by the church as instructive to hope. The outcome is that the biblical narratives are seen to have little to offer the contemporary audience.

Chapter 7 ("Body Theologies") weaves together previously introduced threads to articulate an apophatic, trauma-informed, feminist theology of reproductive loss that situates the body of the miscarrying person at the centre of theological discourse. The intent is to inform meaningful spiritual practices in response to reproductive loss. Attempts to prematurely identify meaning, cite Bible verses, and offer hopeful narratives by those who minister to the miscarrying person are flatly rejected in favour of compassionately *remaining with* in the sorrow, unknowing, and language-bereft space of abandonment by God. Whereas *apophasis* has traditionally focused on antimaterial metaphysics, the term "bodymind" is proposed to suggest the holistic nature of the porous body that opens to the inward and outward flow of Spirit, flesh, and blood—movement both welcomed and not. "Indeed, in this porosity we see the miscarrying bodymind stretch across the boundaries between self and other, between life and death, between hope and hopelessness" (150). The maternal Spirit is recognized as one who remains both as witness and comfort in this liminal space.

Drawing the theological endeavour to a close, the final two

chapters offer constructive statements that emerge with integrity from the theological argument that precedes. Recognizing that passage from pregnancy to parenthood remains hazardously incomplete for the miscarrying bodymind, chapter 8 ("Teach Us How to Pray") suggests meaningful practices of transition. The three phases of Arnold van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage* (separation, liminality, and incorporation) provides a foothold for a discussion of the physical, psychological/emotional, and spiritual impact experienced when reproduction as a rite of passage remains incomplete. Original prayers, rituals, and liturgies offer a significant resource to help those who experience reproductive loss to transition from the alienating liminality of miscarriage (being neither childless, nor parent) toward incorporation into the wholeness of community. The book concludes ("Aftermath: The Post-Traumatic Remaking of My Self") with an account of O'Donnell's own experience of *remaking* in the wake of reproductive loss that circles back to flesh out the five characteristics of post-traumatic remaking of the self identified in chapter 2. The volume ends with a courageous statement of self-disclosure from one who has experienced the dark space "where both death and life . . . co-mingle in the womb" (154). The full argument is fronted by a correspondingly courageous testimony to loss in a critically sympathetic foreword by Heather Walton.

Although O'Donnell has explicitly undertaken to write a constructive, practical theology rather than a pastoral book on how best to support those who have experienced reproductive loss, the great strength of this treatment is that she has accomplished both. The integrity of knowledge that emerges from embodied experience offers invaluable insight for the church to better understand the experience of reproductive loss, and, hence, to better care for the once-pregnant person and those who grieve with them. Moreover, the work offers a much needed and called-for, authentic witness to the nature and experience of reproductive loss. Also to be commended is the faithful act of wrestling theological understanding, particularly where traditional doctrine appears incongruent with lived experience. Resisting the overwhelming forces of death, such wrestling is itself a tenacious practice of hope. This is indeed a work of faith seeking under-

standing, even if at points experience seeking understanding overreaches.

Other areas for further consideration should also be noted. For example, focus on human agency in the *remaking of the self* leaves little scope for the activity of the Spirit in the work of "healing"—a term that O'Donnell casts off primarily because she incorrectly conflates healing with "cure," where, in the experience of trauma, notions of cure may possibly be challenged. Disappointingly, the God this volume portrays is a meaningfully present, but hopelessly inactive God. Furthermore, in critique of Old Testament narratives of infertility, O'Donnell misses the opportunity to consider the story of Naomi, whose own voice acknowledges the providence of God even in the midst of unresolved barrenness, only to find unexpected opportunities for motherhood within covenant community. However, this suggestion is intended merely for the strengthening of the argument. It is not in any way intended to diminish the sorrow and trauma of reproductive loss. To do so would be to dismiss the valuable lesson this volume offers for a vital ministry of consolation.

This volume will be appreciated by those interested in feminist and trauma theologies. Moreover, it avails much needed insight for practical and pastoral theologians, particularly those shaping the next generation of church leaders.

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