

“Theologians engaging trauma” transcript

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Theology Today

68(3) 224–237

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DOI: 10.1177/0040573611416539

ttj.sagepub.com



Abstract

The following is a panel discussion between four theologians about their recent theological work at the intersection of trauma and Christian theology. This conversation highlights the ways in which current (or recent) studies in trauma have impacted and reshaped the classic questions of Christian faith: Where is God in the suffering? Does God will suffering?

Keywords

trauma, theology, suffering, feminist/womanist, panel

Where is God in suffering? Is suffering willed by God? Although theologians have always grappled with questions of human suffering, the rise of trauma studies in the last decades of the twentieth century has impacted theological work. These theological engagements have expanded the classical questions of theodicy in order to take into account the historical particularities of suffering, the planetary and non-anthropocentric dimensions of suffering, as well as the radically interdisciplinary research taking place in fields such as neuroscience and literature.

On February 28, 2011, four theologians gathered to discuss their recent theological work. Serene Jones's *Trauma and Grace* and Shelly Rambo's *Spirit and Trauma* directly position themselves at the intersection of trauma and Christian theology. M. Shawn Copeland's *Enfleshing Freedom* and Mayra Rivera Rivera's *The Touch of Transcendence* engage, more broadly, themes of suffering.

SR—We gather tonight for a conversation between scholars who are addressing the issues that matter most to persons of faith—theological responses to suffering. The panelists represented here share several commitments. First, our work emerges out of Christian theology and is committed to rethinking claims of the Christian faith. Second, our work is informed by feminist, womanist, mujerista, and Asian-feminist theologies. We draw from these resources and understand ourselves in

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relationship to these theological legacies. Third, we are responsive to, and shaped by, how people and communities are living their faith in the world. We are attuned to the question, What are people doing and how are they making sense of their faith? Fourth, our work shares an attention to aesthetics, to how language is used and how certain forms of theology function, or “dance.” We diverge in the ways we approach questions of trauma and suffering, and we hope that this conversation gathers us, as well, around these points of divergence. Mostly we aim to bring together our collective wisdom around the subjects of theology, suffering, and trauma.

Question: How and why did you enter the study of trauma?

SJ—The study of trauma was something I discovered I was in the center of after it had taken me awhile to get there. [Shelly] says it was through me, but [she] handed me a book by either Shoshana Felman or Cathy Caruth, and I was thinking “What is this?”¹ This was before trauma theory had any connection with systematic theology at all. What I found very helpful about it was that I was hovering in my own work fifteen to eighteen years ago as a systematic theologian between what I was learning from Luce Irigaray about the way in which language, in its patterns and disruptions, both holds relationships of power and constructs identities. And the way that [Irigaray] was then pointing towards my reading of John Calvin and my own way of finding the ways in which the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* held within its text resonances of the amount of social violence that was taking place in the midst of Calvin’s writing of it. That is something that doesn’t often enter the stage when one thinks about John Calvin. And then at the same time my theoretical framework was becoming more and more Gramscian. In particular, I was working with Fanon and trying to understand his conception of how violence lives in texts. It is very difficult to find a framework in which you can use social scientific materials but you can also use postmodern literary theory and then be boldly theological in your admission of the importance of the poetic and practical. Suddenly, there was this body of literature in which all of those things lived together and were moving together, though not comfortably. It was a relief to discover it, and then I couldn’t stop reading it. Then Shelly and I were reading it together. Then we were reading Karl Barth and figuring out all sorts of things about metaphors of intrusion and invasion, and then Shelly came onto the scene and started moving forward in leaps and bounds with the whole conversation.

SR—It was a directed study. I was trying to figure out the link between literature and theology—my two loves. At Yale University at that time, trauma theory was emerging at the intersection of post-Holocaust studies in the English department and the research and clinical studies at the Yale Psychiatric Institute.

1. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1995).

The co-authored book by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony*, was a pivotal work that initiated the interdisciplinary study of trauma. I remember as a master's student going to these brown-bag lunches hosted by the Yale Psychiatric Institute, at which Dori Laub and [other] clinicians were offering open sessions to the public to discuss their clinical work with Holocaust survivors. It was the late 1990s, and they were doing a lot of work on second generation trauma, also known as the intergenerational transmission of trauma. It was early in my theological education. Sitting in on their brown bag lunches at the Institute, I remember thinking that theology needed to pay attention to these dimensions of human experience. I was aware that there were two discourses trying to talk about similar things—in this case, the enigma of human suffering. It was curious how this psychological and psychoanalytic language drove me to theology. It seems so pertinent. It wasn't an abstract theological inquiry; I was listening to these clinicians speak about children manifesting symptoms of a parent's trauma that their parents never talked about. What does it mean that experiences somehow transmit without the cognitive narrative aspect to it? The issues of evil and suffering that I always sought after in literature and was always driven to in authors such as Dostoyevsky lifted off the page and had taken on flesh. I thought, "I have found the link between literature and theology." Serene and I were reading Karl Barth at that time. If you look at the history of trauma studies, that time at Yale University was very pivotal. The Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies was instituted. Trauma studies were expanding to include different mediums (clinical discourse, video), as well as different forms of writing (poetry, literature, theory).

Question: How do you use the theological tropes of cross and resurrection in your analysis of trauma?

SJ—Neither Shelly nor I do much with resurrection in our work. The closest that I come to the trauma of the resurrection is the end of Mark's Gospel where there is no more than a gesture of it. One of the things I wanted Shelly to talk about is that where I in my work on trauma have been focused on the cross and a little bit on Holy Saturday, Shelly, on the other hand, has actually engaged the topic and displaced it, in a sense. I have not even engaged the topic of resurrection. It's sort of the "thing that is to come." I could say that there are all kinds of things I haven't said yet that I'm still figuring out, but one of the things I've found interesting over the years as I've read Shelly's work is what happens to resurrection and what happens to cross in this middle space. Actually, neither one of those moments are half-moments. Are they presented this way in Shelly's development of the "middle day"? I know that is not the way it is being framed, but resurrection is resurrection in its fullness. I wonder if Shelly can talk about where you see resurrection going in all of this. Can you not have it?

SR—Since the publication of the book, people have pressed me on this issue, asking, "Where is the resurrection in your book?" And rightly so. I resisted articulating a theology of resurrection partly because I was resisting the triumphalistic

linear progression from death to life. And depictions of resurrection as being new and victorious are certainly at issue in the book. What that stopped me from doing is to think about how I would articulate resurrection given my non-triumphalistic presentation. It really is my next work; it will be on resurrection wounds. It takes up the other half of John 20. Here, I stopped before the Thomas scene, in which the resurrected Christ appears in an unusual way. The present question before me is “what does it mean that Jesus appears risen, but with wounds?” This image preserves a Holy Saturday move that I wanted to make, which was to say that life is not victorious and new, but it’s a *living-on*, a term I take from Jacques Derrida and give expression to through the biblical concept of remaining (*menein* in Greek). The imperative of Holy Saturday is one that I hand over to the disciples, that asks, “Will you witness resurrection?” At the end of the book, the question is transmitted and the possibility of resurrection is heavily dependent on our witnessing of not only death, but of resurrecting bodies. I place a lot of responsibility on whether or not we can witness not only the difficulty and the darkness of death, but enact (give form to) the resurrecting power of the Spirit. It is a tempered theology of the Spirit that I provide. I erred on that side because of the trauma stories, sources that inform us not to rush into resurrection, to not overlay triumphalistic narratives on persons and communities who experience trauma. The narrative of Christianity can function to tell people to “get over it” and to get to the good news. I think I have the seeds in the book to refigure resurrection, but I have to faithfully go back to the second half of the Johannine text and interpret this spectral and marked resurrection Jesus.

SJ—One thing that you come to see in the process of dealing with this material is that trauma is not something you really ever “get over,” but rather one develops the capacity to “bear it.” An account of trauma cannot ever be reduced to a happy narrative of redemption, but it leaves you hanging. I don’t know quite where it is, but in my thinking there’s a final moment of a jump to what I consider the ultimate truth of our lives, which is grace. It is almost this desire not to have trauma be the last word. In our daily living, it is Pollyanna-ish to think trauma can always be conquered, but there’s that continuing resistance to letting it be the final word. For so many, the lived experience of it in resurrection is never going to be the case.

SR—I don’t think I use “grace” even once in the book. Whereas Serene uses “grace” I use “love.” The terms that we use theologically are important, because they identify the promise; to me the hope lies in the witness to love remaining. I don’t call it “grace.” Part of that is the influence of Hans Urs von Balthasar and his pneumatological language as he draws it from the Johannine text. I was being consistent to his vision of love surviving a death. The promise is that love can never be extinguished. This love, figured in the Spirit, spans the full story of creation and redemption, and grace didn’t seem to speak to this cosmic picture. I don’t think it was just faithfulness to von Balthasar, because that wouldn’t have been enough. The question of the difference between grace and love, the promise of those two terms, would be something to explore.

Question: Mayra and Shawn, how do you *not* let trauma be the last word in your work?

MR—I've been thinking about this question of resurrection, specifically in relation to the Gospel of John and what we call the "post-resurrection narratives." I read those stories as more ambiguous and uncertain. You recall that in these stories Jesus is barely recognizable—and he apparently walks through walls! What if we accepted the strangeness of these stories? Could these narratives help us re-encounter the strange narratives of communities who have been oppressed, who have gone through severe and catastrophic events, stories that witness to the elusive presence of ancestors? And vice versa. Can those literatures teach us a way to re-read resurrection? Witnessing to the past is also an important theme in Shawn's book. Could we see these stories as witnessing to an ungraspable something from the past, perhaps telling something of what to do today?

MSC—Thinking of post-resurrection narratives as post-resurrection in particular, in some real way, the experiences of the disciples (looking at Acts) are really ambiguous and uncertain in the sense that they really do not know what to do. They come away from the crucifixion in a shattered way, so that this "experience," as New Testament scholars have named it for us, belongs to people who are perhaps not credible socially, but who come to subvert that, so it becomes something no one expects. I think, in common with Shelly's point about a body with wounds from its experiences, for me this is always a historical connection. It has to be. If the wounded body is not who was on the cross, then who is it? In this sense I'm very concerned about the wounds that are manifest in any post-resurrection narratives. I think they're very important.

The point about trauma (and I don't really write about trauma) is that the middle passage and all that it signifies is about profound trauma that reverberates for centuries throughout modern Western history and has a profound impact on non-Western history as well. This kind of trauma is a living-with-trauma. When [Shelly was] talking about how people receive this kind of sense from their parents, I was thinking about body memory and how it is that we parents behave toward our children or toward others that, in some ways, mediates trauma incarnately through our embodiment. I think Shelly is in a unique place to encounter those kinds of studies for theology, fortunately, and to get to think about these things in a distinctive way.

One last point: June Jordan has an important line from a poem, "mama help me turn the face of history to your face."² I want to turn history to take another look at history, not to exclude the suffering of other people and other bodies, but to focus on women's bodies and say "here's a story that is rarely told in this particular way." I think this is really very significant. When we're talking about social suffering, when we talk about social trauma and social suffering, we are thinking

2. June Jordan, "Gettin Down to Get Over," in *idem*, *New Days: Poems of Exile and Return* (New York: Emerson Hall, 1974), 75 (exact text: "hey / turn / my mother / turn / the face of history / to your own").

about the way this is mediated to whole peoples. This is occurring in Holocaust studies and the Bosnia Memory Project conducted out of Fontbonne University in St. Louis. Bosnians are really beginning to tell what happened to them there. I'm sure that eventually we'll hear more from people in Congo and Rwanda about what happened to them, without reducing their experiences that to something simplistic as if we are all traumatized.

SR—Adding something about trauma studies, I think the history of trauma studies is so interesting, because it is only about one hundred years old. Suffering has always been around. The question is how we attend to it. The discourse of trauma emerges in psychoanalytic theory in the nineteenth century and is connected to the study of war (much of the data grows from a study of combat victims and their symptoms). In the last few decades, it has expanded beyond a clinical, “on-the-couch,” analyst/analysand account of personal trauma, to an analysis of history and of communal violence. Given the levels of violence in our world, we are profoundly vulnerable. How do we make sense of that? The interdisciplinary analysis is quite fascinating to me. There are multiple literatures that speak to this vulnerability, whether it is narrated in slave literature or Latina memoirs. Psychoanalytic theory is one discourse with a distinctive vocabulary. There are limitations to this approach as well. Theology provides us with a basic vocabulary for speaking about human wounding and vulnerability, and theologians expand this vocabulary, suggesting, “Maybe we need to think about sin in this way.” There are multiple genres to talk about the phenomenon of trauma. That excites me. The interdisciplinary studies turn us not just to personal trauma but more broadly to collective, societal, and global trauma. Do wars, unresolved, come back in the form of other wars? Does unresolved violence in history re-emerge in different forms? I think slavery is a really good example; modern forms of racism are traces of this unresolved history.

MSC—The thing about theology, in terms of our vocabulary use, that struck a chord in me, is that we have a way of thinking about the human person where the human person is not reduced to a statistic, a problem, or a social fact. This is the issue of transcendence of the human person that isn't quite captured in psychoanalytic, sociological, or some other language. I think Shelly's entrée here is really an important one and Shelly's and Serene's work is a nice combination.

SA—Speak a little more about the connection between memory, trauma, and bodies. So, to whom does the resurrection happen? Why does memory depend on that kind of a body? It is a different kind of body than traumatized bodies. Is this theology's big contribution?

SR—It's a big question. This is the narrative we live into, the source of hope and promise and transformation. So, my anti-triumphalism also has a deeply rooted sense that this is “good news.” So, what is this good news for the kind of world that I'm seeing? Do I have an investment in this being a different kind of body? Yes.

MSC—The investment is in a different kind of future. First of all, to whom does it happen? It happens to Jesus of Nazareth. We don't yet have any experience of it that we've heard of except this one. For Christians, who believe that this is the definitive statement and manifestation of God's power in the world, it's pretty

important. The other thing that is coming to mind is that I'm working on this project on the prophets. I'm sitting in on a course with Christopher Frechette at the School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College, for which he keeps making this point about the meaning of the notion of "judge" in the New Testament, that it's not what we think. It's about the divine will bringing about justice. There's something here about God's judgment on Jesus, bringing about the divine will, and making justice out of what has happened. The thing that I'm learning, over and over again, in a new way, is that we are seeking justice. In some ways there is no justice for the victims of trauma—certainly not in this life. That's why I think resurrection opens us up to a whole other possibility of future. It is where I think theology, certainly Christian theology, makes a contribution and opens its arms to other people to consider this way. It may not be your way in the end, but here is a path we've taken. And there are other people who do this. Teilhard de Chardin says that because of the structures of the universe God doesn't interrupt the laws of the universe; we can't get to God, and God can't really get to us because of that. We haven't really reached a certain phase of human development, and planetary development. I was thinking about your book, Mayra, *Planetary Loves*, when I was thinking about this.³ We can't get it, but in the end, "end" as in "telos," where we're headed, that's what it is.

SR—Yes, Mayra's essay speaks about the spectral body of Jesus and the idea of ghosting and haunting that involves something productive. Avery Gordon refers to ghosts as returning to insist on a "something-to-be-done" in the present, suggesting an ethical demand.⁴ If this is an eschatological moment, then there really is a demand being made. Is there judgment in this appearance of the resurrected body? In this "ghosting," are you invoking a judgment scene?

MR—Judgment, perhaps. I would feel more comfortable calling it "the love that remains," seeing the particularity of the specter as intrinsic to a "ghostly encounter"; it is necessary to relate the encounter to a particular history of a particular people. But I wouldn't want to put that too far away from what really happens all around us. The places where despite terrible oppression, in situations that may seem completely hopeless, that impossible song is invented. A danger of "resurrection" talk is that it is often either-or: so if you have resurrection it is the end of trauma, oppression, and suffering. And I want to resist that dichotomy, if only because in the midst of the worst of suffering, there are experiences of what I would call relational transcendence. The examples I'm thinking about have to do with collectivities, and how collectivities engage their struggles and suffering. For example, in a situation as tragic as that of the families of the disappeared, the hope may emerge from a group of people still searching for a body to bury—searching

3. *Planetary Loves: Spivak, Postcoloniality, and Theology*, ed. Stephen Moore and Mayra Rivera (New York: Fordham, 2010).

4. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

together, accompanying one another. For them, just being able to be together in this quest *is* something that I wouldn't want to play down.

Question: How would you utilize Scripture to either explain this to religious communities or to think with religious communities about memory, about how God intervenes and encounters us in our world, and so on?

SJ—Maybe it's because I grew up in a community in which the Scripture just lived in everyone's imagination all the time, but as I began to sort through this material, it became plain to me in the stories that were told. As I began to pay attention to what it meant to understand the relationship of humanity to God, in terms of the fracturing of knowledge and the undoing of the self, it was stunning to me to start reading the New Testament and to go from seeing these disciples as these robust Western subjects that needed to be undone by the judgment of a God who calls them into question, to suddenly looking at the disciples as really confused, disoriented, cognitively fractured creatures. Then, in that context, Jesus began to look different as well. Listening to this conversation about resurrection and salvation I realized that, although most of my work has been in the Gospels, when it comes to the question of resurrection, I'm very Pauline. When I think about the resurrection, I think that, theologically, the important role that it plays is to confirm that it is God on the cross. So resurrection points back to the cross and is not a moment beyond the cross. In terms of this question, the resurrected body is the body on the cross. In that Pauline context, for me there's a gap between what we are able to finally expect to find in human history, and what in the most positive sense of the word God's "judgment" about our value is. It's the capacity to bridge that gap that keeps bringing me back to resurrection. So it's not a sense of continuation. That's why grace matters so much. It's not a prevenient grace, but it is a moment of an in-breaking that is not given to us in the texture of our daily lives. This is not in anyway to undermine seeing where it still springs up in communities, nor does it undermine the reality of communities persisting, but it is also a moment of a radical break where that story isn't going to get us to the ultimate moment, which is the judgment about our value.

MSC—The thing, though, I learned is that judgment isn't this or that; it's making it something new. What is really attractive to me is that the biblical notion of judgment is so different from our own sort of use of judgment. But I think your point, Mayra, about the love that remains, is that it's real love. And I think wounds are still there. The people are wounded because they're still looking. And the first Christians are wounded, too, in a real way. There's a profound sense of loss. But in coming together around the table in a certain way we are re-membered; we are put back together again in some way. So here's where, for me, it keeps being opened. As long as the wounds are there, I'm comfortable because it's not just a tidy little package. It really didn't turn out the way we thought it would turn out. But it still isn't turning out the way we thought it would turn out. In other words, it didn't turn out triumphantly, but it didn't turn out badly either. It turned

out that people were still searching for each other, for those who are disappeared, looking for the loved ones who are missing people, and not just looking physically but looking in their hearts where love is still there.

SR—Can I say something about the Bible? I was thinking about why the Bible is such a powerful resource for me. It has a dual character for me. I was raised on the biblical stories of David and Goliath, Peter walking on water, and the feeding the 5,000. Biblical instruction cultivated a wild imaginary into which everything could be placed and contained. These stories are our stories, and they're weird and they're epic. It is a huge gift that I was given by my evangelical tradition. The stories shaped my imagination. At the same time, the Bible was wielded to silence and to keep people from living into these visions. Theological education was so liberating for me, because it called me back to these texts that I loved so deeply, inviting me to re-inhabit them in ways that convinced me that the good news could never be exhausted in one interpretation. These stories are continually interpreted. The Johannine literature invites this continual interpretation in its ending (Jn 21:25)—“all the books in the world cannot contain the things that Jesus said.” There's something for me that's very subversively faithful about going back to those texts, that they were used in ways that were prohibitive. I never lost the sense that there was good news there. Especially when it came to issues of trauma, it was what was “between the lines” of the Gospel text that came to the fore in my theological readings. Inspired by Serene, I viewed the biblical narratives as speaking the story of our lives, both individually and collectively. They continue to speak the story of our lives. So, I think that the tension that I have in my relationship with the Bible gives a kind of energy to my theological work, an imaginative passion for reading and interpretation.

Question: How would you, interested in the practical skills of ministry, teach people, in Katie Cannon's words, to “metabolize suffering” in the face of a God who we know has the power to change, but requires of us something. What do we as teachers do?

SJ—One thing that was hard for me to come to grips with is that the answer to this question is not a didactic one. So, it's not an answer. There is no way to engage it from a systematic theological perspective. But this is why the notion of witness is so important. It's actually in the act of telling the story and its' retelling that a presence and a transformation begins to happen. And I think that's one of the problems of what's happened since the Enlightenment, for which our understanding of what constitutes a theological response is cognitive and doctrinal. I don't think that's right.

MSC—God doesn't do this; God doesn't inflict suffering. Bonhoeffer is in prison writing his letter; God is the suffering God. I think the best that we can come up with pastorally is that God is with you here—a close sufferer. Because, in fact, Jesus witnesses with his wounds; the witness extends, because those wounds don't go away.

SJ—One of the things that is so fascinating in reading trauma literature is how it affected my theology. I used to be much more insistent about not saying that

suffering was in any way God's will until I started digging into this literature and seeing, in fact, how people who are able to think that it's somehow controlled by God are oftentimes actually more likely to survive it. This is not always the case, but it can be a very important coping mechanism in terms of the world not being completely out of control. So, it shifts the way you existentially understand how these terms function. These terms are not always just a band-aid.

MSC—About that I'm not sure. I don't want to think that God is willing or controlling it in any way—whether its duration, extent, or depth. I cannot believe that. If that's the God that there is, then I don't want that God. I'm sure you [to Serene] have at some point in your life done pastoral work, which makes you so clear about the non-didactic character of this kind of response to people. But I think this is always the struggle to me. One of our questions tonight focused on God and solidarity. And I was thinking about that, that I wanted to make solidarity a predicate of God, not just a metaphor. So when Jesus is doing what he was doing, God is solidarity. So, I have to think a lot more about that, but I don't want it to be just a metaphor, in other words. I realize that everything we say about God is metaphorical. We can say nothing directly about God, but I don't want it to be that.

MR—I wonder about the effects that this has in the way we see our own responsibility toward others. If it is "God's plan," in some sense, where does that leave the community, and the community's responsibility to be God-present? I'm much more comfortable thinking of divine solidarity through others, others who are called to be there.

SJ—I reached a point in doing this trauma material where I was talking to a veteran about Vietnam and the notion of solidarity came up. He asked, "Do you think it helps one bit to know that someone is suffering with you? That does not help at all." It doesn't actually, you know. Why do we think that the calculus of expanding the number of people who are suffering together somehow has a good associated with it?

MR—But does solidarity mean that people are suffering with you, or just holding you? There might be no expectation that I'll "overcome" this crisis, but the experience is vastly different for everybody—for that person dying and for those who are around her—when she is accompanied and sustained by the love and courage of others.

SR—I returned to the questions of practical theology at the end of my book. I recall attending a church in New Orleans—a community that lost a lot of members to Hurricane Katrina. The theologies that I find problematic were being enacted in the Sunday morning service. All of the traditional language was being used, but something else was going on. They're singing "He gave me shelter from the storm" and I'm thinking, "No, God did not give you shelter from the storm!" And then this very thick atonement language emerged, and I imagined myself as a theologian saying, "This version of atonement is not going to be a helpful theology for you in the aftermath of trauma!" Yet, if, as I say, pneumatology has an improvisational

aspect to it, it does not allow us to operate with one account. Instead, I need to give account of the ways in which people witness to the complexities of human suffering, the ways they bring about life in the aftermath. I have to understand the ways in which I employ my own theology differently. And, so all of these seeming contradictions are present in that song, “He Gives Shelter from the Storm.” It was sung in that church where so many people had fled and so many people had not come back, and there wasn’t shelter. But there’s something about the oldest traditions of singing that song that was also evoked; it was as if the spirit of the ancestors, the communion of saints, was rising up. I was really challenged to think about the kind of practices that transgress our simple theological interpretations. Can’t this pneumatology really deal with the ways in which people are so complexly inhabiting the same theological language, that, on the surface, I could say “that’s just bad theology”? And that’s where I think practical theology came back at me, disrupting this assessment.

Question: Many of you have invoked doctrinal language (pneumatology, doctrine of God, Christology). How does doctrine play in each of your works?

MR—I think this perhaps relates to what Shelly was saying in relation to the Bible and how those stories, narratives, constitute in an unsystematic way the richness of materials that are part of what your culture, if one uses that word, is. And I think that the doctrinal language does that as well. There is an awareness of being part of discussions that go beyond one’s own ideas, narratives that evoke shared questions and concerns and bring our searches together. We’ve talked about Spirit and the ways it invites and helps us engage questions of trauma. We may confront trauma anywhere, we may talk about it with different language, but the Spirit offers us a shared space, with a certain familiarity that brings us to this conversation. Doctrines provide continuity with a tradition, but it’s also a sense of capaciousness for transformation and for speaking. I have, in my own thinking about memory, found the Spirit important, and in particular I’ve tried to read the Spirit as a Holy Ghost, perhaps against a lot of contemporary theologians. What if the Spirit is the Holy Ghost, and what if it is speaking to us about our relationships to the past? About the divine in our relationship to history?

SR—I see all of us as very doctrinally informed, and pretty stated about the doctrines that we develop. Shawn states in the opening of *Enfleshing Freedom* that she is doing theological anthropology. Serene is very christologically driven. Mayra and I are more pneumatological. Doctrines provide a way of organizing themes of Christian faith. I think we’re all suspicious of a grand systematics, in which all of the pieces of the puzzle are brought together by the theologian. Not everything can be accounted for systematically. But there is a common language we all want to inhabit and expand. And doctrines provide a way of speaking to theologians and our colleagues.

SJ—I often think of doctrine as a series of mimetic devices that remind me of certain plays of mind and are helpful for me to call up. When they take the

academic form they're stated in a certain way. I think as we live in communities of faith, we have a certain set of rules that mark how our imaginations work. For example, somewhere in here I'm thinking about God's will, but sin has to come back in sometime. How the whole thing got started has to come back in sometime. And I worry that the logic of the market is so contrary to these rules – and it may be at the interface of these rules – that the resistance to the commodity form is even greater than it is in Scripture.

SR—I have been thinking about this a lot. Am I just a cultural theorist or literary critic with a particular set of vocabulary? I am much more interested in saying, “I’m a theologian and I use certain kinds of language, and theologians do certain kinds of things. It’s not the same as literary critics. And I think our work is explicitly done for the sake of transformation. There are unique possibilities and contributions of our work. I was really convinced of this when I did a lot of work in comparative literature. The person I worked with most closely, Cathy Caruth, kept saying, “How do these texts speak about love? Tell me about that.” So, I found through another discourse that there was something unique in these sacred texts, and the fact that they are practiced. I told Cathy, “People read these texts when they’re burying their father—when they’re going through their deepest sadness and their greatest celebrations.” And that was a unique thing to someone who was in comparative literature; these sacred texts are read and interpreted in such close connection to life. There’s a lot of investment in that love language. Theology is often, unfortunately, in a defensive mode, as if apologetic for being in the academy. We transmit these postures to our students. We make them scared to go out and to be theologians. Theologians should be theologians everywhere, because we ask distinctive questions, contributing to education in unique ways.

SJ—Do you think that embedded in all this is that it’s important because it’s true? It’s not just a cultural practice that we should be particularly proud of, but that we actually believe this stuff?

SR—Yes, but I would need to know more about what you mean by belief. I live as if it were true. And that is important. It’s about life orientation rather than propositional claims.

SJ—That sort of also takes it to another level of thinking about why one does theology.

SR—There is power in believing it, and believing it communally. There is something unique about the practices of faith and about bodies gathering with other bodies.

Question: What was the best thing that you liked about writing or finishing the book? What did you encounter?

SJ—Interestingly, I think, by the end of the book I was a much more, though I hate to use this word, “religious” person. In a way it drew me much more back into my faith after having taken me all the way to the bottom like some sort of descent, where it looks like there’s absolutely nothing left.

SR—The best part *was* finishing the book, and this is because it's hard to write about trauma. It was hard to write this book. But the best thing about it was when Rev. Paul Womack, the minister whom I mention in the book who is a three-tour veteran in the U.S. military, said, "You've given me a place to put my experience that the church never gave me." That was powerful.

Question: Shawn and Mayra, you two push the boundaries of so much that we take for granted. Shawn, for example, you push the boundary of the body. Mayra, you push the boundary of the Spirit. How do you do this through language? How do you teach this? What do you say? What do you teach your students with regard to doing this? How do you push the boundaries?

MR—That's a hard question, because it's a question one keeps asking oneself every time and with each group of students it's different. One of the things I want to insist on is that tradition is shaped by people. The traditions we receive have been shaped by people trying to make sense of their experiences of the divine in relation to ethical questions that confront them. Then our task is to not be passive about this, but to really be part of that process of shaping traditions. And I think that if we switch from just receiving a tradition to living it and really taking responsibility for what it is, then we'll begin to change it.

MSC—I think Mayra is right that it's difficult. I wasn't thinking so much about traditions on the way here, in light of this conversation, but I think Serene's points about doctrinal language and what it does, and asking the question about belief and Shelly's response and, yes, I think we are in faith traditions and cultural traditions. And we're trying, each in our own way, to mediate that religious tradition and that faith tradition with in a cultural context. And that context shifts. It's not always the same. Sometimes all of our cultural contexts overlap and sometimes they spin out in different kinds of ways. I think the most important thing in a classroom, it seems to me, is witness. We are more or less good teachers. When I was a doctoral student at Boston College, I thought this was the theological Broadway. If you could be here, then you would just be everywhere. And in a certain way, everyone here on this theological Broadway is a person, a professor, a professional academic, highly trained, highly prepared. But I think witness in the classroom is extremely important in terms of quality, but also in terms of the very person who's in front of the classroom. That's the mediation of belief. That's the mediation of solidarity. That's the mediation of demand. So, I think that witness is tremendously important.

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The event was sponsored by the Center for Practical Theology at Boston University School of Theology. We wish to thank Susan Abraham, Assistant Professor of Ministry Studies at Harvard Divinity School, for moderating the panel.

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