

WOMEN'S SEMINAR IN CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

EVIL AND HOPE: WOMANIST/FEMINIST CONTRIBUTIONS

Panelists: Christine Firer Hinze, Marquette University
Cynthia Crysdale, Catholic University of America
Susan St. Ville, St. Lawrence University
Morny Joy, University of Calgary

The purpose of this seminar is to study together the ways in which women are shaping the theological tradition through discussion of the method and content of recent constructive contributions to the discipline. Among several new texts by women on evil and hope, the seminar steering committee chose two, Emily M. Townes, ed., *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, and Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*. These were chosen both for their intrinsic value, and because the seminar has been quite intentional about our pursuit of conversation among diverse women.

Discussion began with the Townes book with Christine Firer Hinze and Cynthia Crysdale offering a sense of their readings of the text. Both women were clear about their own starting places as white middle class women and how that social location both shapes and limits their engagement with the essays, affirming at the same time the importance of the dialogue itself. Both also pointed out the richness of the experiential, narrative ground of the womanist essays. Hinze asked us as an ethical and theological concern to think about how to conceptualize what divides us, to also ask what unites us, and to search out how to cross the divide. Crysdale described her initial frustration with the text, as it did not respond to her questions about theodicy. She also discovered the social location of privilege that shapes her own questions. The concrete sufferings of black women led her toward questions in three areas: the meaning of being both a victim and a sinner, the rendering of the resurrection within the situation of suffering to give meaning to the cross even when it does not restore justice, and the meaning of the servant symbol when servitude is rejected but servanthood as a way of discipleship may hold a value.

The Farley book, an effort at a phenomenology of a tragic creation met by divine compassion, generated further insights and questions. Susan St. Ville raised a key question about the practical results of any theodicy which we

construct. Will it move us to resistance and transformation of the conditions of suffering, or will it allow us to remain passive or even complicit with the plight of victims? Morny Joy asked whether this book is theodicy from below or a liberation theology. Here the categories of divine love as the eros that creates, as tragic compassion that meets the finite, tragic otherness of creation, as the depths of radical suffering in this creation, and as a compassion that gives people their own power in history—all these obviate any simple reduction of the surd of evil or the mere announcement of the rulership of God. Yet it is a phenomenology that still requires a hermeneutics of suspicion, particularly when confronted with the outcry of systemic injustice posed by the Townes book.

Discussion ensued about doing theodicy at all, how to hear and name suffering, and simply how to hear what disconcerts us. There was also discussion of power, ours and God's, in relation to compassion and resistance. Ultimately, however, there was substantive conversation between feminist and womanist perspectives on these issues, which may be the critical contribution of this session.

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