

Let the Bones Dance: Embodiment and the Body of Christ,
 by Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox
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In *Let the Bones Dance*, ordained theologian-in-residence at University Presbyterian Church (Chapel Hill, North Carolina) Marcia Shoop produces a constructive theology (revised from her dissertation submitted to Emory University under the supervision of Professor Wendy Farley). The project is constructive in several respects. First, Shoop recovers the Schleiermacherian paradigm mostly ignored in conservative circles since Barth's devastating critique of Schleiermacher's use of feelings in theology. In Shoop's recovery, she combines the mapping of feelings with subjectivity, physicality (of the body) and consciousness for the purposes of articulating a theology of the redemption of bodies. Second, Shoop reflects on how she dealt with her personal experiences of sexual trauma, pregnancy and motherhood. Her goal is twofold: to explore the relationship of the feminine body and theology, and to show where existing theological models of conceiving post-traumatic disorder, pregnancy and motherhood in the church fall short of what these experiences can potentially become – a witness for the healing of bodies and for reconceiving a theology of redemption and a theology of the church. Third, Shoop's project cuts an interdisciplinary edge when she brings her feelings and experience of tragic bodies, relational bodies and ambiguous bodies to bear in proposing a theology of embodied redemption, ecclesiology and worship. Fourth, Shoop's project corresponds with political concepts, such as egalitarianism, equality, and liminality, and may be read as a test-case for the applicability of some political theories to a sub-culture in Christianity.

Reflecting on her experience as a woman who has survived trauma, lived through pregnancy and overcame the ambiguities of motherhood, Shoop proposes to see feelings as “a grammar of our body language” (p.11). Through feelings, one understands one's body. Feelings are not limited to emotions and sensations. Rather, feelings as a mode of experience are the ground of all primal and embodied experiences. Feelings define, shape and condition us in ways that also beyond the realms of consciousness. Shoop's notion of feelings

differs from Schleiermacher's *gefühl* (of God-consciousness) and Whitehead's conception (as universe's structure/function) in that she conceives of feeling as the mechanism for the redemption of the bodies. The redemption of the body entails attending to feelings and bodily functions and responding to the body. The redemption of the body occurs also by paying attention to how relationships build up through simple feelings and consciousness.

Shoop reminds her readers how impossible it is to retell one's story fully; a narrative is by its nature an activity that both conceals and reveals. The limits of language, thought, memory, analysis, listening and speaking all point to this reality that no narrative can ever be exhaustive.

- a. For instance, the experience of trauma makes it difficult for the victim to synthesize and articulate the event clearly. Sexual assault carries a sense of loss, of harm and of grief, which are impossible to report objectively. As a result of tragic events, the body instinctively produces mechanisms for the rejuvenation of bodily health: feelings become the body's mechanism for surviving the tragedy and for the redemption of the body especially in the aftermath of trauma.
- b. In another instance, pregnancy becomes the ground for connecting God's promises of life with the reality of our bodily finitude within the relational web of "contorted subjectivity" and "entangled subjectivity" (p.79). Feelings connect the woman with God (and God's creativity) and with others in the midst of labor pains, thereby demonstrating the capacity of pregnancy to function as an icon for connectivity (p.90). During the course of pregnancy, the woman responds to bodily changes even as she discovers her entangled relations with the baby in her womb.
- c. And in the third instance of motherhood, a woman encounters ambiguity with promises and perils lurking at its door. Motherhood is not just about nurture and self-sacrifice (roles commonly associated with good mothers) but motherhood entails also the prospect of negotiating open spaces and possibilities for cultivating hope amidst ambiguity, indeterminacy and multiple other roles mothers play in a relational web. The "intense rhythm

of mothering” (p.103) includes sensitivity to the layers of meanings behind frenetic activities dealing with the “everydayness of human life” (p.103) – the fusion of the sacred with the mundane in the embodied functions of motherhood.

But what has trauma, pregnancy and motherhood to do with redemption, ecclesiology and Christian worship? In Part II, Shoop proposes the value of embodying redemption through a theological rethinking of body language. One discovers God’s redemptive power in a number of ways. By encountering dissonance and ambiguity, one learns compassion. To deal with the tragedy of sexual assault, one learns interdependence and adventure. From pregnancy and motherhood, she learns relationality and how to cope with ambiguity in relationships. In other words, through compassion, interdependence and relationality, one discovers how redemption works in the bodies to bring about sanctification. How do these languages of the body connect with ecclesiology? The church then becomes a “connectional church” in interdependence (p.135) and overcomes moral relativism, structural chaos, and erosion of identity. The challenge for ecclesial formation then entails a re-conceiving of holy habits and sacred wounds; we revitalize the body, overcome the wounds of intellectualism, and create opportunities for learning about mystery and surrender when we encounter the strangers in ourselves, seek out differences, and embrace diversity. She calls this challenge “in-forming the Body of Christ” (p.141). Finally, for “re-membering the Body of Christ” (p.161), Shoop proposes enlivening modes of worship by examining the heart of Christian identity in connecting, integrating and joining with those who were harmed, severed, maimed, mutilated, and displaced. By becoming open to the bodies and feelings, the church frees people to worship with rhythms, music and their bodies, as if in a dance before the Lord!

Shoop’s proposal that the Body of Christ is an embodiment reality (which means that relationships in the church are more central to the church’s mission than a theology of church mission itself) is central to Shoop’s trumpet call. Shoop’s constructive retrieval of psychological experience of women bodies clearly has significance for the practical mission of the Church towards the wounded. She urges the Church to step-up to its role as a healing agent for women in distressed. She challenges the conventional pastoral approach of counseling church members too quickly towards forgiveness. Without

undermining the validity of forgiveness, Shoop suggests that journeying through the experience of trauma entails the necessary step of allowing the bodies to discover its coping mechanisms without moving quickly towards the goal of forgiveness: she argues that to expedite forgiveness does not really heal the wound. She also calls churches to support pregnant women more intentionally. Women have much to teach the church about interdependency and relationality. Against the presupposition that mothers are self-sacrificing nurturers, Shoop recommends that motherhood teach the church about the embrace of different opportunities amidst ambiguity. *Let The Bones Dance* is however not a proposal in ecclesiology proper but in practical missional ecclesiology.

For the rest of this review, I propose to take Shoop's theme of embodied theological reflection seriously in an egalitarian spirit. In today's climate, egalitarianism is typically approached from the perspective of elevating female experiences (which is a much needed and much to be celebrated orientation for any discussion). Politically, egalitarianism evolves as a social movement against the suppression of marginalized voices; from the decry of equal dignity, value, and rights of all humanity, colored or not, to that of embracing the disinherited in a multicultural society, egalitarian activists have enlarged their borders of inclusivity from the love for colored people, to the embrace of the disabled, the oppressed women in a paternalistic culture, and so forth. It is in this broader landscape that we can properly appreciate Shoop's contribution, especially in her efforts to correct a misnomer in the church (as a subculture of the larger society), to de-marginalize the disinherited, and to argue for the paramount importance of women in the churches and in society at large. Otherwise, we would fail to locate the significance of Shoop's proposal, and read her work only as a liberationist project of womanism in ecclesial context.

Here, I would like to ask Shoop and others in the field, how would males relate to their embodied experience? While it is not Shoop's intention to ignore male embodiment in her pursuit of female embodiment in ecclesiology, what does masculinity contribute to an embodied theology of and for the church? Does Shoop already have a sequel in mind? Would such a trajectory result in a resurgence of interest in social/gender equality? And if so, how would Shoop deal with the present, confusing culture of embracing plurality, which sometimes could work to its own detriment: put more pointedly, when does

diversity become a social and political problem, especially when recognizing diversity could stir unrest (contrary to its role as facilitator of peaceful co-existence and its function as a harbinger for development)?

Men are often perceived as initiators of relationships, supporters of pregnant spouses and sharers in the parental role. Psychological studies typically claim that men operate more readily with their left-brain, and that men have been culturated to suppress most of their feelings (Beth Erickson, 1993; Fredric Rabinowitz and Sam Cochran, 2002). Apart from aggression and anger, men have difficulty expressing their emotions through the language of feelings. Nevertheless, as psychologist Babette Rothschild claims, that it is not just that *The Body Remembers* (2000) [its trauma] but that the body rehabilitates as it overcomes the experience of relational estrangement (which sums up the thrust of Shoop's proposal): Babette asserts that this bodily function operates in male and female bodies. Given the dynamics of male-socialization, how would the roles men play in their embodied experience be a factor for ecclesial reflection on redemption, ecclesial formation and worship? How would it differ from Shoop's proposed outcome? Would we then need to moderate Shoop's original proposal for a churchwide theology that plays exclusive attention to women sensibilities in the areas of redemption, ministry and worship?

What does all these have to say to the socialization of women and of men today? In many contemporary and especially Euro-western societies, women are no longer the subjugated; although the converse is also true that woman continues to receive subtle and indirect discrimination personally and professionally, at many levels, and across many industries and sectors of life in the contemporary world. One may enlarge the scope of Shoop's recommendation as to the 'gifts' women bring with their experience from that of only in the church to that of the larger society. Realistically though, how would such a canvass look like? No, I am not fearful of the femininity entering personal, social, and public spaces (in many ways, women's contribution to society as an active member across multiple spaces existed even before the rise of feminism); rather, I am ambivalent about the present society's ability to fully and integratively facilitate the mutual flourishing of all people – can the normal 'us' and 'them' of social-psychological exclusivity witnessed in daily life be turned around to a normativity that sees the 'us' in light of the greater us that would include the 'them' as part of 'us'? In the progress of

civility, our world is far more tolerant than archaic cultures that subjugated the contribution of woman in society. However, scholarships in the areas of liminality and hybridity would continue to show that our civility is far from giving adequate voice to the under-represented in our society. Maybe the question is not whether the disinherited are given a voice, but whether the disinherited are now being regarded as equally-worthy companions of inheriting the civilization we are still imagining. In other words, if we can imagine the future of mutually-intersubjective spaces, what would it be like – would the dialectic of male-female relationality become a complementarity, and if so, how does it look like?

In the final analysis (despite the one-sided orientation of the book towards female voices), Shoop certainly offers a good read for pastors, theologians, and church leaders in the urban contexts seeking a psychological and ecclesial theology of human experience from and for a women's perspective. What is now needed is a sequel dealing with male embodied experience for an ecclesial theology of human experience. We may even postulate a third sequel for proposing a reprogrammed sociality of complementarity in our collective social spaces. At this point, a caveat is in order: Shoop's insightful interdisciplinary exploration may pose difficulties, especially for readers uncomfortable with approaching theology from feminist and interdisciplinary perspectives. Still, I would recommend Shoop to pastors and church leaders who desire their church to reach the majority of their congregants. I would further recommend Shoop to social and political theorists who are reimagining a new age of embracing a society of complementarity and human flourishing. We may be on our way to mobilizing women in the churches towards God's purposes that the churches have yet to encounter if Shoop's ideas are taken seriously! In that sense, while the book is academic in nature, the implication of the book is more than academic. Hence, I recommend a wider readership.

References Cited:

Beth M. Erickson, *Helping Men Change: The Role of the Female Therapist* (Newsbury Park, SAGE Pub., 1993).

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Babette Rothschild, *The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment* (New York: Norton, 2000).