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The moral roadwork of compassion

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COMPASSION: LOVING OUR NEIGHBOR IN AN AGE OF GLOBALIZATION
By Maureen H. O?Connell
Published by Orbis Books, $32

Reviewed by MICHELE SARACINO

In *Compassion*, Maureen H. O?Connell retrieves productive guilt. I have sometimes longed for the merits of this guilt that modern therapy has washed away. Not the guilt that ?paralyze[s] us with self-absorbed negativity,? rather the guilt that fosters compassionate perception, interpretation and transformation.

Hurricane Katrina: A man stands on top of his two-story home, water laps at the roof only inches from his feet; families struggle to reconnect with loved ones inside and outside New Orleans? Superdome -- these gut-wrenching images broadcast the hours and days after Katrina?s landfall in 2005 inspired compassion worldwide. Similarly, nonstop media attention to the catastrophic earthquake in Haiti this year inspired many of us to donate money and time to the rescue and relief efforts. Yet are these gestures of compassion enough, or even the right type of ?suffering with another?? O?Connell poignantly argues that after Katrina the demands of Christian discipleship have changed forever.

Compassion is complicated. For many of us, it entails feeling for another?s plight and being charitable by offering resources for relief efforts, such as time, money and even blood. Like Luke?s Samaritan on the road to Jericho, we stop and help the person beaten and left for dead in their time of dire need.

O?Connell rightly wonders if this extreme saving event is a full enough sense of Samaritanism and compassion to meet the needs of our global, racialized world. It is a world where the person in the ditch is more than one random individual. Rather, the person is representative of complex social inequities in which the ditch gets bigger and the relief seems more like a Band-Aid, not a solution. As if pulling someone out of a literal or metaphorical ditch is not difficult enough, especially someone we have been socialized to despise, O?Connell calls for a ?political compassion,? which involves a complete engineering overhaul of the road. It requires rethinking why the ditch is there, who if anyone has emotional ties to it, and what else can be created in its place.

Like any good engineer, O?Connell does her research. She excavates a myriad of philosophical and theological ethical perspectives on compassion. She culminates with Martha Nussbaum?s interpretation of compassion as ?upheaval,? and Johann Baptist Metz?s notion of ?interruption,? as pivotal moments in enacting political compassion. What at first glance might appear encyclopedic -- a complete list of interpretations of ?compassion? throughout the ages -- ultimately unfolds as an indispensable invitation, a responsibility even, to become aware of where our ideas about compassion come from. Does our sense of compassion have what it takes to deal with the global challenges to ?authentic Samaritanism,? to deal with barriers that include

individualism, consumerism and white privilege?

Most refreshing is O?Connell?s unapologetic embrace of emotion at this new engineering juncture. After all, what is compassion without the passion? Without the positive emotions of being moved to suffer for another? Without the negative ones that block us from perceiving their situation as unjust?

In keeping with the times, this book is as much about semiotics, about perceptions and what we do with them, as it is about reimagining compassion. How we interpret images of Katrina -- women carrying baby supplies, either as outlaws looting or as the powerless surviving -- and what we do with our interpretations -- either enact short-term charitable responses or embark on a lifetime commitment to compassion -- are, for O?Connell, integral to Christian ethics in the global landscape in the 21st century. Her insight about the power of visual image, along with her insistence on the role of emotion in engendering political compassion, is illustrative of her unique contribution to ethics today.

Make no mistake about it: O?Connell?s call for Christians to suffer with others is daunting. Moving beyond what she calls ?brand name? relief services, and embracing the Christian responsibility to transform the social inequities that create injustice in the first place is tough stuff, particularly when trying to integrate it into one?s everyday practices.

We need to be creative to balance our need to make ends meet in a global economy with our moral responsibility to change its oppressive structures. What?s more, we need to figure out if it is enough to work in a job that is oriented toward Christian ethics or if one must really suffer, and if so, we need to decipher what that suffering looks like, physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Advocating suffering is a risky proposition, especially when it seems like the same people, women and other others, are always, already suffering. Upon a closer read, this is precisely one of O?Connell?s main concerns. By taking Katrina as her point of departure for understanding our moral failure, she implies that no one can escape the need for compassion. Moreover, privileged white Christians in particular, or those benefiting from the suffering of others, are summoned to the road to Jericho, not in a one-time act of charity, but in a commitment to repaving it.

Pushing O?Connell?s argument further, I wonder if one could apply her political compassion to individual suffering. Even the privileged suffer, yes? Is our widespread epidemic-like dependence on antidepressants a sign of such suffering? Is there room for political compassion in this context? Or is this type of analysis too immersed in what she and others have referred to as bourgeois Christianity -- smoke and mirrors that deflect from the graver structural issues and human rights negligence related to West-driven globalization?

Books that linger with you are good. *Compassion* is a work that lingers. As labor-intensive and dangerous as it may be, O?Connell is convincing in her argument that participation in this type of roadwork is a moral necessity, making authentic Samaritanism potentially one of the most life-giving stimulus projects of the 21st century.

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