

Compassion: Loving Our Neighbor in and Age of Globalization by
Maureen H. O'Connell; Maryknoll; Orbis Books, 2009 242 pp. Paper
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This is not a beach book; each sentence demands a reader's full attention. As with any great labor, however, the reward is great.

In exploring the Good Samaritan parable for our time, O'Connell cautions us that Christian compassion "is not comfortable and private but rather dangerous and political."

She defines the wounded travelers on the road to Jericho as those who experience "dehumanizing suffering and increasingly gross inequality," and she challenges Christians to a compassion that addresses the unjust systems that create the suffering and inequality. She further reminds those of us who do not experience dehumanizing suffering that we benefit from the suffering; willingly or not, we are complicit in the unjust systems.

To a large extent, O'Connell bases her thesis on works by Martha C. Nussbaum and Johann Baptist Metz. In the first chapter, for example, she introduces the term "bourgeois Christianity," a term originated by Johann Baptist Metz. Bourgeois Christianity focuses on personal sin, individual salvation, and "perpetuates the comfort of those who benefit from the status quo." O'Connell's exegesis of Metz stresses his insistence that we "meet the gaze" of the sufferer; that is, that we enter into a relationship of equals, not as paternalistic helpers or distant voyeurs of others' suffering.

Nussbaum, too, emphasizes the values of "vulnerability and relationality," as well as "self-reflective social responsibility, and an appreciation for the non-material aspects of human flourishing." Human flourishing is a key concept in this study. Basically, it involves "not what a

person has or what a person is able to choose, but rather, what a person is able to do and to be.” O’Connell points out Nussbaum’s Aristotelian context for this description of flourishing: Aristotle’s location of “livable life” in the capacity for practical reason, for affiliation, for health, and for play.

Humans who are denied these capacities are the wounded travelers on the road to Jericho. Christian compassion calls us to lie in the ditch with them, always mindful, however, that “the goal of suffering with others ought to be empowerment.”

O’Connell precedes her analysis of Metz and Nussbaum with summaries of the treatment of compassion in philosophical ethics--including the thought of ancient Greek philosophers, as well as Kant, Aquinas, Rousseau, and Schopenhauer. She follows this review with a similar inquiry into the role of compassion in theological ethic, relying on Diane Bergant and PHEME Perkins for insight into the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

One of my favorite aspects of O’Connell’s writing is her frequent use of the phrase “for example.” Virtually every principle and concept is followed by an illustration from contemporary reality--everyday or not. She devotes one entire chapter analyzing the tragedy of Katrina from the perspective of political compassion.

Do not read this book unless you are prepared to be challenged.

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