

The Dark Womb

Reviewed by Karen Symonds

In *The Dark Womb*, Karen O'Donnell follows the theme of trauma and draws on her own personal experiences of pregnancy loss and her subsequent struggles with the teachings and responses from the church she belonged to at the time.

Although the subject dominating the book is that of miscarriage and ectopic pregnancy (due to that being an integral part of her own personal history), Karen acknowledges that trauma of all kinds can be reviewed through the same theological thinking and 'lens', which she implies is not what is usually the norm in churches in our (her) Western culture.

Her study 'often focuses on trauma, in a feminist and constructive mode of theology that is open to interdisciplinary approaches to theological questions'. With a deluge of writers searching for the truth of God's providence towards his people amidst the unfairness of life's traumas and challenges, the book explores not only feminist theology but O'Donnell's research into black, liberation and apophatic theologies and more. Thus, theological concerns are examined thoroughly and fairly. This treatment of relevant theology is fitting, although, as a theologian and an academic, Karen writes in a fluently learned style that may not be for everyone, perhaps especially some of those caught in the middle of traumatic events or people experiencing the immediate aftermath of miscarriage or loss.

However, her frustrations with a theology that speaks of miracles granted to those who pray hard enough and who then appear to be 'rewarded' is strongly and refreshingly aired. Though she acknowledges that some of the caring prayers and visits of which she was the beneficiary were

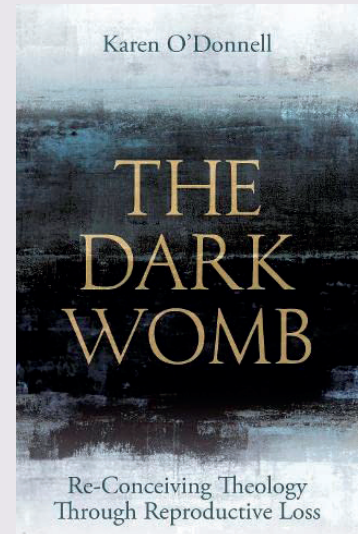
initially helpful, she also speaks for many when she states that (Christian) platitudes often don't provide the peace and assurance that those who offer them hope to impart. In fact, they can even, sometimes, albeit inadvertently, introduce harm and hurt to vulnerable people.

This message of this book is helpful for those who, like Karen, were never presented with a child at the end of the pregnancy rainbow, as it validates the feelings they share. Such findings are poignantly described as the theology of hopelessness.

When Karen O'Donnell first mentions hopelessness, it hits hard against the usual Christian message of hope in Christ. However, in the unpacking of her theology and reasoning, one comes to understand that she does indeed find comfort from Christ himself within the recognition of the stark fact that, for her, all hope of being a mother has gone, failed to materialise, yet in the midst of such pain, she realises that Jesus Christ is still her God and that he still loves her.

Instead of the traditional picture of a God who offers miracles to some and leaves others without (on purpose), or who sends trials and traumas to test and strengthen his people, Karen paints an alternative picture of a loving God who stands beside; not dishing out struggles or answers but holding on to those who are either 'receiving' or 'losing' due to the nature of our sinful, fallen world. He is in control, but he is limited in his operations by the very gift of freewill he has given to humanity, which patently has a knock-on effect within that world.

Karen describes how she personally feels particularly affiliated to the Holy Trinity and the message of Easter Saturday, as she believes her body to be a grave (inhabited, though temporarily, by a corpse). During the time Jesus was physically in his tomb, the Trinity was alive but nevertheless partook of and included



death, just as a miscarrying woman's body is alive but carries death within. The theological (and pastoral) difficulty arises, though, when, due to unsuccessful pregnancies, that woman doesn't get to experience the resurrection joy of Easter Sunday and new life within her.

The devotions and prayers at the end of this book are helpful and could be used by those who have lived through trauma (of various kinds), or indeed as content for a memorial service for those who have suffered pregnancy loss.

The Dark Womb provides a great depth of understanding of the author's pain and her relationship with God. It also offers a welcome abundance of research material on the topic of pregnancy-related trauma.

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***Re-Conceiving Theology through Reproductive Loss* by Karen O'Donnell.**

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