

From the Bookshelf: A Fragile and Resilient Community?

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May I have your attention please? This book-review may seem out of place in a journal like IJCP but indulge me for a few minutes. Most of us share an interest or perhaps even a commitment to the ideas that inspire this journal. That would also describe the Rev. Dr. Bill Blaine-Wallace whose book represents an integration of social constructionist themes into his vision of a different kind of religious community. The tone of that kind of community might appeal even to those of us who consider ourselves secular or humanist or post-religious. Because I lived in Bill's world in an earlier life, I feel comfortable giving you a sense of the language in the book. See if he has not done a remarkable job combining the ancient and the contemporary as well as the language of faith and the language of collaborative-constructive psychotherapy approaches. (also see the chapter by Duane Bidwell, "Social Construction, Practical Theology, and the Practices of Religious Communities," in the newly published, *The Sage Handbook of Social Constructionist Practice*.)

Blaine-Wallace's book, *When Tears Sing: The Art of Lament in Christian Community* (2020) combines the prophetic baritone of John the Baptist crying in the wilderness with the joyful noise of the gospel choir of Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta, Georgia. Both are prophetic in their own ways. Bill outlines a radical ecclesiology which he calls "lamentational," but his vision of Christian community is far from the sadness of a funeral. It calls for a boldly unapologetic singing engagement in the suffering of human beings. One hears a chorus of celebration around those who minister as God's instruments in the face of AIDS, homelessness, discrimination, and the suffering of Americans looking for meaning despite the advantages of class, race, education and wealth.

The author describes the religious community as "a society of the fragile and resilient" by which he connects the brokenness and suffering of the community to the presence of the same in the world. One is reminded of poet laureate Amanda Gorman's description of America as "a battered and beautiful people" in her poem, "The Hill We Climb," delivered at the inauguration of Joe Biden (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wz4YuEvJ3y4>). Faithful engagement with the world follows from the example and ethical message of the Founder of the Faith. This engagement, the author argues, ought to be a celebratory and singing engagement which brings a kind of miraculously hopeful joy to the ministry of comfort and care.

Beginning with the ever-present fact of sadness, the author takes us through a brief biblical and theological reminder that the divine presence expresses itself most powerfully and most meaningfully in moments of lamentation, the expression of human weariness with carrying the burden of suffering alone. But we are not alone. And grief is not only human, but sacred. The community of faith is bound together in its courageous embrace of suffering. The author suggests that "lament is conversation between those who are broken" (p. 21) as he insists on the relational and conversational nature of lament. The theological home of the community of fragile and resilient people is in fact a Christological home in which one is reminded of the message and example of the Love of Christ who did not fear to move among the sick and sorrowful in his own time. The God who is present in Christ is a suffering God, a theological paradox requiring one with the deft touch of Bill Blaine-Wallace who can share from his own personal witness that God

works among those who need God most. There is a great deal of the theology of the cross in Bill's vision, but there is innovation in his attempt to move toward a theology of hope with the ethical obligation of engagement and participation in human suffering.

Readers would be impressed by the depth of creative theological integration modeled and encouraged by the author. I will discuss a couple of impressions in this section. First, Dr. Blaine-Wallace reveals an appreciation for the philosophical ethics of the late Emmanuel Levinas which fits well with the author's theological argument throughout the book. Levinas famously argues that ethics is first philosophy. Ethics precede ontology and epistemology. We are confronted by the face of the other/Other to whom we are unavoidably drawn and for whom we are inescapably responsible. Levinas privileges Saying over the Said, pointing to the reality-constructing power of living conversation.

Second, the author reveals throughout the book his indebtedness to ideas inspired by social constructionism and the practical application of those ideas in the collaborative-constructive psychotherapies. In part two of the book, the author confronts many examples of senseless and tragic human suffering including how it poses difficult questions for members of the society of the fragile and resilient. Despite the darkness, Bill urges a deeper understanding of prayer as faithful presence in the midst of the darkness. It is, in fact, a singing presence as he discusses in chapter 6, "Choir Rehearsal," in which he discusses seven elements of lamentational relation: silence, listening, alterity, hospitality, reiteration, marking absence, and curiosity. For Bill, this kind of presence in the midst of suffering is always a conversation, an authentic engagement which is peppered with references to the ideas and practices of Harlene Anderson and the late Tom Andersen as well as several other well-known therapists.

Thank you for your attention. Books like this function as invitations to consider different ways to think about faith and religious community. Perhaps it might even challenge the ethical commitments of other kinds of communities.

References

Blaine-Wallace, W. (2020). *When tears sing: The art of lament in Christian community*. Orbis Books.

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