The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology
Edited by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore


In beginning to offer a fair assessment of this volume, one fears falling into hyperbole. Yet there is no getting around the fact that there is no book that, in balancing comprehensiveness and concision, more effectively distills the current state of practical theology. Describing the origins of the ideas that structure the book, editor Bonnie Miller-McLemore notes something every practical theologian can sympathize with: “I tired of hearing colleagues and newly admitted students ask, ‘What is practical theology anyway?’” (5, emphasis original). Though it would not be good for practical theology if the question had a single, final answer, this Companion does a masterful job delineating most of the contours for what would presently qualify as a good answer and then collecting a large number of them from across the field.

What drives the Companion’s accomplishment is its structure, and that structure is based on an approach to defining practical theology that will be another of Miller-McLemore’s signal contributions to the field. The book opts for a descriptive and inclusive approach, gathering together what current scholars who identify or ally with practical theology do, rather than defining particular objects or manners of study relative to which one can exclude what is not practical theology. At the same time, the contributors’ consistent identification or alliance with a distinct pursuit called practical theology gives the volume an overall coherence. The Companion is not an argument for everything that could plausibly be considered practical theology, but a compelling survey of how and why present-day practical theologians understand their work as practical theology.

The book’s four parts correspond to Miller-McLemore’s schema of “four ways in which the term practical theology gets used,” namely, to denote a “way of life, method, curriculum, [and]
These four uses are distinguished by the primary activity each involves and the institutional context in which each mainly proceeds:

- **As way of life** (part I), practical theology is the activity of “believers seeking to sustain a life of reflective faith” in the context of daily life in home and society, through such practices as blessing and healing (5).

- **As method** (part II), practical theology seeks to understand or analyze theology in practice, in the context of library or fieldwork research, through approaches drawn from across the humanities and social sciences.

- **As curriculum** (part III), Christian practical theology educates people for religious leadership, in the context of classroom, congregation, and community and primarily through subspecialties confederated in or loosely associated with practical theology.

- **Finally, as discipline** (part IV), practical theology involves “a smaller subset of scholars” who “support and sustain these first three enterprises,” by defining the histories and contexts—social, national, and confessional—of the guild of practical theology (5–6).

The vast majority of confusion about what practical theology is arises from the assumption or the desire—sometimes proffered by practical theologians themselves—that one of these four uses must be the determinative one, while the others sit uneasily on its fringes or uncomfortably within its terms. The refusal to privilege one of these uses allows the Companion to accurately showcase a thirty-year renewal of practical theology that has expanded its epistemological and theoretical frameworks, its interpretive ambitions, its alliances with disciplines outside of religious and theological studies, its partnerships between those based in the academy and those based in the church, and its critical self-awareness as a field.

Because Miller-McLemore held to consistent limits on both the length of each chapter and level of specialization assumed in it, each chapter offers accessibility for a number of user-groups: ministry students as well as ministers (lay and ordained) looking to reflect more intentionally on their practices; theological educators needing succinct overviews for introductory courses or courses on multiple strands of practical theology; doctoral students in practical theology trying to comprehend the field as a whole; scholars outside of practical theology wanting a sense of the basic issues and approaches that animate it. Although the volume does not intend to engage non-Christian practical theology, many of its chapters can further conversations, in more descriptive or more normative modes, with scholars of non-Christian religious practices. The contributions themselves are uniformly clear and well written, and the vast majority come from internationally recognized practical theologians, along with some of the most exciting emerging voices in the field. Particularly impressive is how the contributors pay attention to developments outside of their
own niches in practical theology, thereby moving beyond the “silo” effect that has often impeded practical theology’s functioning as a field in its own right.

Each of the four parts, moreover, can stand on its own as a way of introducing how practical theology works. As one follows examples of one of the four uses, the other three uses are constantly threaded in: the various subspecialties of practical theology drawn on to understand the everyday practices of faith, or the shape of practices interpreted with a panoply of methods, and so forth. There are points in each part where one wishes for a more consistent balance between the goals of demonstrating practical-theological interpretation in action and meta-cognitively reflecting on how such interpretation is done and done well. This is especially true of parts II and III, on methods and curricular subspecialties. But this would be a minor improvement at best, and one certainly is given plenty of excellent examples of how the analytical and constructive tools of practical theology are put to each of the four uses.

One could quibble about specific topics that were not included in each of the four parts—it is not clear, for example, why the seven practices in part I were specifically selected, other than the availability of leading scholars to write excellently on them—but the only significant thing for which the Companion leaves one longing is head-on engagement with two sets of issues and questions that matter across all four uses of practical theology and are determinative for both the current state of the field, presented so well by this volume, and its future development qua scholarly field. That is, they are not matters of merely individual preference, but of general import to practical theology in all its uses.

The first set of issues consists of a number of meta-theoretical and meta-methodological tensions—that is, pertaining to one’s choices among competing theoretical paradigms and analytical methods—that are implicit throughout the book, meriting occasional explicit mention but largely churning in the background. The most easily discernible ones arise from practical theology’s engagements with methods and theories from the social sciences (and, to a lesser extent, from other humanities disciplines): What criteria, if any, presently guide practical theologians’ choices to work with or from particular social-scientific methods or theoretical paradigms? Are there criteria that should govern such choices, and if so, what are they? While a consensus on these questions is neither emerging nor necessarily desirable, explicit engagement with them is unavoidable, and indeed many contributors to the Companion have thought about them extensively.

Closely related to this, but much broader, is the question of what normative theological stance the practical theologian takes. After all, for all its engagement with social-scientific methods and theories, practical theology is still distinguished chiefly by being theology. For instance, in all four parts—and especially in the surveys of methods and curricular subspecialties—feminist/womanist, liberationist, and other counter-hegemonic theological discourses were regularly invoked or implied as authoritative. I myself affirm and uphold these theological commitments, both as a scholar and as a practitioner. But if one considers the wide multiplicity of Christian individuals and communities across the globe, one finds that such theological stances are bitterly contested.
more than universally confessed. The Companion would be on surer footing if it either offered an explicit argument as to why counter-hegemonic (with respect to race, gender, disability, and so on) or other theological stances ought to be a governing framework for practical theology or else explicitly examined the severely-fracturing contestation over such stances in both on-the-ground Christian practice worldwide and in the study of it.

A similar challenge is entailed by the question of whether social and political activities are as definitive for Christian life as individual and intra-ecclesial faith practices. Many of the contributors echo Miller-McLemore’s statement that most practical theologians “agree that at its best it functions as a kind of public theology sensitive to the individual but directed toward the wider social order” (14). How, then, to account for the fact that the content in the Companion predominantly pertains to individual and intra-ecclesial practices, and the public, extra-ecclesial dimension is far from equally represented? For instance, Christian practices of social ministry and political activism are ubiquitous and a defining focus of many Christian individuals and communities across the theo-political spectrum; yet proportionally they are greatly underrepresented in the Companion. This is a symptom of practical theology’s persisting comfort in thinking in the individual and intra-ecclesial frames more than the political, but the number of times “church and society” were invoked, with the implication of equal concern, calls for either fuller consideration of social-political practices or more explicit acknowledgment of practical theology’s needs to grow in these areas.

Space permits only the barest mention of the second set of issues, those that, unlike the ones I have just discussed, were more invisible than implied in the Companion. One must acknowledge that the Companion engages them inadequately, because (and to the degree that) practical theology itself has thus far not given them sufficient analytical and constructive attention. I have in mind especially the following: the spiritual lifeways of working- and poverty-class people (who, after all, constitute the majority of the US and world populations) as opposed to those of middle- and capitalist-class people; sex and desire, not only as mechanisms for oppression but even more so as forces with which, and domains in which, Christian faith is widely practiced; the continuing co-production, through Christian practices, of hegemonic identities such as whiteness or masculinity or able-bodiedness concurrent with marginalized identities—rather than merely the exclusion and oppression of those deemed “other”; and the “secular” formation of many Christians’ religious identities, powered as much or more by identity-practices from broader society as by identity-practices proper to Christianity. All of these are lacunae that practical theology as a whole must address better in the future. And both this set of issues and the prior one would have fit effectively in part IV, focused as it is on the multiple contexts of practical theology’s development. Indeed, precisely because Miller-McLemore has assembled authors for parts I–III who engage such a wide array of racial, gender, and national contexts, part IV at times feels redundant, rehearsing many ideas from the first three parts in a more historical narrative. It would have been more useful for the Companion’s likely audiences to prune part IV so that it focused on material not presented earlier in the volume and then included chapters on some of the topics mentioned here.

Although the Companion would have driven conversations in practical theology forward to an
even greater degree by addressing the issues I am pointing to, I must conclude by affirming how effectively it consolidates much of the best thinking in the field today, in a form that renders the field significantly more comprehensible to all who wish to engage it. In doing so, the Companion perhaps opens up the space necessary for practical theology to focus next on the kinds of issues that will extend its remarkable renewal into at least another decade.

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Notes

1 Two factors contribute to the gap between the Companion’s theological stances and those of the world’s total Christian population: (a) much of the cutting edge of theologically traditionalist practical theology emerges outside of seminaries and theology schools, while (b) theologically progressive practical theology may be overrepresented, relative to the global Christian population, in the Western theological academy.