

Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

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In *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline*, Bonnie Miller-McLemore offers a collection of her work in the fields of practical and pastoral theology that spans twenty years (1992-2010). With attendant introductions that “situate each chapter, provide connective tissue and allow for reassessment and rebuttal,” she attempts to move “the discussion of the nature of Christian theology just a little bit,” writing to the academic community, “for the sake of our wider publics” (14, 8).

In offering this collection, Miller-McLemore seeks to challenge the ways academic theology, both systematic and practical, has “underestimated the intelligence involved in practice and overlooked the limitations of merely academic knowledge” (172). To do so, she draws upon scholars in practical and pastoral theology who have “disrupted conventional theological boundaries” and prompted these guilds to attend more closely to the realities of people’s lives (1). Miller-McLemore calls for a rhizomatic approach that moves from hierarchical theological approaches to “a more organic, ecological reading.” Such a reading would encourage “circular and mutually interdependent movement” while also calling for a “multiplicity of ways of knowing” (3, 162). This project of “discovering a discipline” involves three elements for Miller-McLemore, which are reflected in the text’s organization into three parts: “the *living web* as theological subject matter, *practical wisdom* as a way of theological knowing, and *gender* as a critical category for understanding human situations” (1).

In Part I, Miller-McLemore explores this “living web” that she defines as the subject matter of theology in the first chapter. She then amends this basic metaphor in the second chapter, in light of its “widely varied meanings,” to “the human document *within* the web” (46; 48, emphasis mine). This emphasis on the human document within the web acknowledges that humans can only be understood within their broader context, but does not “get lost in the forest for all the trees” (47). It is through this metaphor that Miller-McLemore locates the importance of public theology and the “theological engagement of public issues of significant practical and pastoral consequence, such as child welfare and economic justice” (75). Concomitantly, it explains her reasoning in articulating pastoral theology alongside practical theology, as both share an investment in practice and experience, and “the interlocking, continually evolving threads of which reality is woven” demands “a multilayered analysis of human strife” (37, 45). She concludes the section by offering a four-part definition of practical theology, explaining its distinctive enterprise as “a *discipline* among scholars and an *activity of faith* among believers,” as well as “a *method* for studying theology in practice [...] and a *curricular area* of subdisciplines in the seminary” (101).

In the second part of *Christian Theology in Practice*, Miller-McLemore turns her attention to (or, rather, curates her previous essays attending to) the importance of multiple forms of knowing and the role of practical theology in moving beyond both the clerical and the academic paradigm (chapter 7). She explains that practical theology's historical attempts to be identified as intellectually rigorous has restricted it to the "highly cognitive nature of Western twentieth-century theology," which has dismissed bodily (and ostensibly, other forms of) knowing and resulted in a diminishment of the field and its ability to help people live out, to practice, their faith (138). Building on her assertion that knowledge "is seldom singular, 'separative' universal, or uniform," Miller-McLemore calls for "a maternal feminist epistemology" that unites knowledge and action (chapter 5). She describes such an epistemology as "a mode of circular bodily reasoning that interweaves physical sensation, momentary cognition, behavioral reaction, and a physical sensing and intellectual reading of the results" (130). Miller-McLemore continues in this section to build upon this call for varied forms of knowing through attending to pedagogy and theological know how (chapter 8), and highlighting the subversive, liberative impacts of practical theology on and in theological education (chapter 7).

Finally, building on this maternal feminist epistemology, in the third and final part of the text, Miller-McLemore turns to gender as a key category of analysis. She explores how feminist theory's attention to context, commitment to parity and justice, and sensitivity to power dynamics has shaped pastoral (and, by extension, practical?) theology, engendering a shift in how the field looks at women and families. Throughout the chapters in this section—exploring feminist theory's influence (chapter 9), the effects of that influence (chapter 10), and its role in psychology (chapter 11)—Miller-McLemore examines how feminist theory and gender studies have "sparked a shift in focus from the individual to the community, from personal distress to social injustice, from personal fulfillment to the common good, from an ontology of separative selfhood to an open web of relationality" (307). This has enabled pastoral theology to attend to its aims of both supporting individuals in crisis as well as of "breaking silences, urging prophetic action, and liberating the oppressed" (250).

As a Ph.D. candidate in theological studies, reading *Christian Theology in Practice* was somewhat outside of my realm. Its topics were particularly directed to the discipline of practical theology—perhaps more suited to my colleagues in the homiletics and liturgics or the religion, psychology, and culture areas. Yet it is precisely its place outside my field of "theological studies" that speaks to its importance both *in* my field as well as *to* the broader enterprise that is "theological education" of which our respective fields/areas/disciplines/guilds are a part. Miller-McLemore's compendium of essays serves as an immeasurably helpful reminder of the importance to remain aware of the tendencies in my work and in my guild towards hierarchical ordering of knowing (think: theology's historical referral to itself as "queen of the sciences") and to be open to different epistemological frames shaping scholarship. At the same time, this text also affirms the need for practical theology *as* a field. It can attend specifically to "the human document" and call us, who are in other fields but hold similar commitments, to keep in mind the importance of this "living document within the web" as we pursue our respective scholarship, perhaps even compelling us to attend to the practical ourselves in various ways and to various degrees.

While the text was outside of the general purview of my field, as a feminist theologian (in training), I was particularly appreciative of Miller-McLemore's attention to gender—as a category of analysis and also as a resource *for* analysis and constructive theological and practical work. However, it was precisely (somewhat ironically, perhaps) here where I hoped for more. In the first two-thirds of the text, Miller-McLemore almost always situates pastoral theology alongside or as a part of practical theology (with Chapter 6 seemingly being the only exception, and even here, the scope is broader). This makes sense given her arguments in the first section about the significance of the two in tandem, highlighting their shared investments (in practice/experience) and the heft of their combined contribution: “whereas practical theology is integrative,” she explains, “concerned with the broader issues of ministry, discipleship, and formation, pastoral theology is person- and pathos-centered” (10). Yet in the third and final part of the text, Miller-McLemore's focus turns almost entirely to “pastoral theology.” This is understandable, given her own training/expertise (as well as the context in which the essays were originally written), but especially given her insights from the beginning of the text, it would have been useful if she would have drawn the same connections between pastoral and practical theology as they both are shaped by and shape gender and feminist studies. As someone in theology who benefitted from her insights about practice throughout the book, I longed for more reflection on precisely how gender and how feminist theory shaped and could continue to shape practical theological reflection.

Relatedly, in addition to wanting to hear more about feminism and practical theology, I wanted to hear more in general—which is to say, I found that the book ended rather abruptly. In the introduction, Miller-McLemore explains her reasoning behind the format of the text, particularly explaining her choice to leave the essays in their original form and preface each with an introduction. She writes that “something compelled me to proceed first with this collection to what I had said and what needs saying” (5). Throughout the text, Miller-McLemore offers a number of insights about “what needs saying,” but perhaps it would have been beneficial for her readers to know more broadly, what (now, still) needs saying, after this articulating of—discovering of—a discipline? What work is now to be done?

Despite these longings for more from her text at various points, I nevertheless found *Christian Theology in Practice* to be an exceptionally thorough and erudite collection of reflections on key insights, both of and for “Christian theology in practice” in our contemporary milieu. For anyone teaching and/or writing in theological education (as well as anyone training to one day do so), Miller-McLemore's work is an invaluable resource on a number of fronts. It should be required reading for those who seek to not only “sustain a life of reflective faith in the everyday” in their own lives, but train and teach those who will lead others in that task in their roles as pastors and priests, educators and non-profit workers.

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