

## Turning the Wheel in Religious Practices and Practical Theology

Cara Curtis

Issue 12 Editor, Practical Matters Journal

*Practical Matters* is proud to publish Issue 12, *Revolutions and Re-Imaginations: New Directions in Religious Practices and Practical Theology*. We are grateful to the authors, peer reviewers, and supportive colleagues who helped us bring this extraordinarily rich conversation to life.

In their introduction to *Practical Matters*' inaugural issue in 2009, founding editors Letitia M. Campbell and Donna S. Mote wrote of the excitement and interest in conversations at the intersection of religious practice and practical theology that were "bubbling up" among scholars. In particular, they noted that this energy seemed to be coming most enthusiastically from doctoral programs—the places that theologians and religious studies scholars of the future were meeting and being trained. Ten years after the initial discussions that resulted in that first issue, *Practical Matters* staff wondered: how had things changed? Scholarship in religious practices and practical theology had clearly blossomed in the decade since our first issue, but we found ourselves curious about the methodological innovations, theoretical problems, and practical questions that animated those in the field today.

These questions arose, too, because *Practical Matters* is at a crossroads in its life as a publication. Funded since 2007 as part of a Lilly Foundation partnership with Emory University's Initiative in Religious Practices and Practical Theology, the Journal is moving into a new phase following the conclusion of this grant in 2018. Our Editorial Board and staff are hard at work preparing for this next chapter, and we expect to share news of our plans in the upcoming months. In the meantime, this issue offers a chance to reflect on our first ten years, in anticipation of what is to come.

Five pieces in this issue engage directly with how work on religious practices and practical theology has evolved at Emory University specifically, all recorded during the "Practical Matters" conference at Emory on the same topic. In a series of brief and engaging video lectures, Jennifer Ayres, Greg Ellison, Amy Leivad, and Brendan Ozawa-de Silva each share a key "big idea" about what the study of religious practices has meant to them. To complement these videos, David Messner's review of the conference captures a high-level snapshot of the rich discussions that took place. The energy of the conference, evident in Messner's review, shows that the field of religious practices continues to grow and mature—not only at Emory, but as a conversation

among increasing numbers of scholars worldwide.

This growth is also signaled by the many pieces in Issue 12 that speak to our core theme. In reviewing submissions, we were pleased to see developments in both methodology and interdisciplinary conversations. Mary Clark Moschella's review on themes of reflexivity in three recent works in practical theology makes clear that ethnographic methods are not only becoming more common in work on religion, but that scholars are deepening and nuancing their technique in this area. Concurrently, writing about Jewish communities in the United States from the 1960s forward, Marc Dollinger offers an example of using historical methods in order to pursue questions about religious identity and social justice.

In addition to these methodological developments, two pieces in this issue propose cross-disciplinary partnerships for practical theology. In her article, "Bridging the Divide Between the Bible and Pastoral Theology in 2 Kings 5," Denise Dombkowski Hopkins shows how the methods and approach of pastoral theology can be fruitfully combined with biblical interpretation in order to better support survivors of trauma. In a different though allied vein, Kathryn Common proposes design thinking as an ideal conversation partner for practical theology. The two fields have distinct yet complementary strengths, Common argues, and both seek to address "wicked problems" facing the world. *Practical Matters* has always advocated for interdisciplinary partnerships, and these scholars lead the way toward new and rewarding conversations.

Also notable are the ways that religious landscapes themselves are changing, and the ways that scholars and practitioners are beginning to respond. Two pieces speak directly to this theme in Issue 12, both highlighting the ways that digital media can reanimate longstanding religious practices in new ways. In her auto-ethnographic essay "Going Live: The Making of Digital Griots and Cyber Assemblies," scholar-practitioner Melva Sampson explores possibilities for disruption and freedom in the community of her weekly Facebook worship livestream, *Pink Robe Chronicles*. In our interview with Harry Potter and the Sacred Text co-host Vanessa Zoltan, we discuss the practical and ethical considerations that arise from bringing ancient sacred reading practices to life in a podcast largely followed by non-religious millennials.

The authors in this issue are not only thinking about innovations in practice and scholarship, however; indeed, a concern for teaching and university life stretches across several articles. Tom Beaudoin's essay "Faith in Music" offers a critical reflection on the author's experience teaching a free, open online course on popular music through a theological lens. Thinking about the undergraduate religious studies classroom, Elaine Penagos argues for place-based pedagogy, particularly when teaching African heritage religions, as an alternative to more traditional comparative approaches. Finally, Todd Whitmore reviews the many demands placed on faculty at R1 universities and asks whether it is possible to live faithfully as a Christian committed to serving the poor and outcast while working in such an environment.

Stepping back to look at these works as a whole, it is clear that the field of religious practices has not only grown but deepened in its work over the past decade. It is no longer a question of *whether* religious practices will be considered in theological or religious studies scholarship, but of how to do so most productively—how to keep deepening and enriching the conversation. The scholars and practitioners who share their work in this issue do a tremendous job of pointing towards several avenues for further research and development. The only question that remains is how these conversations will continue to evolve, revolve, and be re-imagined over the next decade of thought and practice.

As Issue Editor, I would be remiss not to close with words of thanks for the exceptional work of the *Practical Matters* staff who labored with this issue at every stage of development. Former Managing Editors Layla Karst and Lisa Hoelle Portilla encouraged and shepherded this issue from its very beginning, creating a productive space for staff members to brainstorm and support one another. Reviews Editor Keith Menhinick did an exceptional job soliciting and editing the book reviews for this year's issue. Furthermore, Assistant Editors Palak Taneja and Chelsea Mak dove in enthusiastically to editorial work alongside the rest of the *Practical Matters* staff. Finally, I extend a heartfelt thanks to Don Seeman for lending his wisdom as Faculty Advisor to this issue. Without each of these capable and kind colleagues, this issue would not have been possible.

ENDNOTES

---

**1** Indeed, a "turn to practice" had been building within practical theology and religious studies for some time. See Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Theology and the Lure of the Practical: An Overview," *Religion Compass* 1/2 (2007): 294-304; and Ted Smith, "Theories of Practice," in Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 244-254.

**2** Letitia M. Campell and Donna S. Mote, "A Transdisciplinary Multimedia Journal of Religious Practices and Practical Theology: Introducing *Practical Matters*," *Practical Matters* 1 (2009): 2.