

### *The Wiley Blackwell Reader in Practical Theology*

Edited by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

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Describing one's area of interest as "practical theology" can often elicit the follow-up retort, ". . . as opposed to *impractical* theology?" The recent release of this exceptional enchiridion points to how profound this wordplay might be.

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore's stature in the field of practical theology (and specifically its subdomain of pastoral theology) is recognized and respected the world over. Her many important contributions since the discipline's 1980–1990s renaissance—including several notable interventions in the literature just this past decade<sup>1</sup>—make a clear case for why she is the right person to undertake compilation of this *Reader*, for the present moment.

And if *kairos* is at hand, it would be indebted to both i) a maturation of practical theology as academic, educational, and professional field marked by insurgences pushing beyond the clergy- and credential-paradigms; and ii) the field's related and ongoing reckoning with diversity and representational issues continuing to mark those who would (or ought to) be thought-leaders in the field. Yet for any disciplinary literature, the process of canonizing its "landmark" contributions points fundamentally to dynamics of authority (read: power) and legitimation; after all, these are what the metaphor of "field" calls to mind. Such proximal procedures smack of what border philosopher Thomas Nail has in recent years dubbed the "kinopolitics" of marking territory and rerouting movement.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, a key way this *Reader* will influence the field of practical theology is in its dogged insistence upon broadening such theological conversations to more plural voices, views, and frames. Forwarding these trajectories gets at what Miller-McLemore describes elsewhere as the task of "knowing and loving the divine," which necessarily redraws the boundaries of what is *theological*—expressly by recirculating the motion (to include the communal "movements") thereof.<sup>3</sup>

Onward, to the text itself. Although a "first edition" in the technical sense, this volume intends to supersede James Woodward and Stephen Pattison's *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, published in 2000.<sup>4</sup> That earlier *Reader* became a relic compilation of mostly commissioned essays, functioning more like a *companion* than a true *reader*.<sup>5</sup> While her collection does share one entry in common with Woodward and Pattison's anthology—viz Seward Hiltner's "operation-centered" proposal—Miller-McLemore's 26-chapter *Reader* is completely comprised of previously published writings. These have been abstracted and/or edited, for the benefit of the aspiring student and the field expert alike who always have more to learn (and unlearn, and relearn differently). How else to dislodge the dominant ways of being

and knowing (read: racism, classism, patriarchy, among other instantiations of oppressive normativity) than to insist upon plural knowledges, experiences, narratives, and instantiations of embodiedness (5–6)? Ergo, this *Reader* abets a deep “epistemological provocation” (4).

In her tone-setting introductory chapter, Miller-McLemore points to the three breaches in disciplinary decorum that make her primer timely. First, “theology”—as recognized by the North Atlantic world—was challenged by “a steady epistemological insurgency” over the last century; second, sociopolitical discourse has devolved to the point now that “white supremacy and misogyny” (re)join U.S. jingoism as publicly viable positions; finally, the hegemony of the West continues to be humbled (and humiliated) by the critical, liberative, decolonial, postcolonial, and indogenous perspectives that bespeak variegated ways of knowing, being, and doing (1–2).

To populate the volume, Miller-McLemore relies upon a wide range of periodical articles (13), chapters from other anthologies (10), as well as portions of lengthier monographs (3). She provides rationale for their selection, acknowledging unavoidable limitations in criteria and execution (4–7, 11–13). Following her editorial overture, Miller-McLemore as orchestrator arranges her largely U.S.-centric anthology into two major parts, with the first movement comprising a state-of-the-field appraisal (through 2017). As forerunners for these twenty-first century pieces (i.e., Part I), the older compositions (i.e., Part II) can be regarded as Miller-McLemore’s deliberate reevaluation of the field’s earlier landmarks.<sup>6</sup>

Taken together, then, both parts—16 essays in Part I, 10 essays in Part II—function as a kind of canonical spiral, as the editor herself intends (376). Each part divides into sections that are sorted either by theme (Part I) or by threshold (Part II), as it were, with each of these sections internally ordered chronologically. Miller-McLemore’s division and arrangement of parts and sections demonstrates a preferential option for spotlighting more recent (read: increasingly diverse) perspectives, as a clear exercise of her editorial authority (again, read: power).

Part I’s convening themes—including “places,” “bodies,” and “practical know-how”—comprise the majority (about three-fifths) of the book’s content. The first section (“Places”) opens with Dale Andrews’ (ch. 1) metaphor of “bridging” Black theology and Black religious folk life; his composition serves as a remarkably apt entrée into this collection’s conversations, which mostly reference faith-life in the “United” States. Inclusions of Allan Figueroa Deck (ch. 2) and Faustino M. Cruz (ch. 3) underscore the urgency of considering the situations, experiences, and epistemes of Catholic Latinx migrants, in particular. Loida I. Martell (ch. 4) discusses global subject-positionality as a vital sociocultural intelligence for theology done (and understood) peripatetically. Finally, Carmen Nanko-Fernández (ch. 5) complicates language and other cultural values, to attend to the legitimacy and pervasiveness of “popular” religious practice.

In the second section, “Bodies,” Mary McClintock Fulkerson (ch. 6) indicts the situational obliviousness, ambiguous commitments, and hapless myopia of “color blindness” (*inter alia*) that are embodied by the privilege of dominance. Cláudio Carvalhaes (ch. 7) calls for/out the in/decency of liturgy, to loosen “the metaphysical arrogance” of a doxology stifled (and stiffened) by monocultural, heteronormative regulatory power. Not totally unrelated, material desire instigates for Heather Walton (ch. 8) a poetically enchanting counter against mainstream theology’s more docetic infatuations that neglect the base profundity of human creatureliness. Regarding the teacher’s body as “site/sight of struggle,” Mai-Anh Le Tran (ch. 9)

reads carefully the sexualized, racial formation that continues to dictate (though not without dissent!) U.S. theological/religious education. Phillis Isabella Sheppard (ch. 10) shows—literally, in the original<sup>7</sup>—the intractability of practical theological efforts that must acknowledge race, even as these laborings effectively also reify racism; she works to reverse the analytic gaze, however, to that of raced and gendered bodies now as subjects with demands to make upon the enterprise of practical theology. Finally, Emmanuel Y. Lartey (ch. 11) retrieves helpfully the proprioceptive insights of traditional African healers whose mobilities and wisdoms remain ever illegible to the colonialist opticon.

For the third section, “Practical Know-How,” the earlier insistence upon *embodying knowledge* (pun intended) modulates toward *pluralizing knowledges* (pun also intended), beginning with Nancy Pineda-Madrid’s (ch. 12) ChicanaFeminist [sic] frame for pursuing humanization and critical (dis-/re-)engagement amid realities transcendent and immanent. Similarly, practical wisdom in the African American context tethers directly to the Black community and, in specific, Black church life, which according to Robert L. Smith, Jr (ch. 13) already insists upon a teleological-ethical vision that must not dissipate into the universalities purported by white approaches to practical theology (particularly those oriented toward Kantian deontology). Michel Elias Andraos (ch. 14) blasts the seemingly ineluctable “coloniality” that pervades pedagogical norms in North American theological education. Likewise, by borrowing and extending the notion of mis-education, Almeda M. Wright (ch. 15) posits the indispensability of local faith communities for sustaining theological praxis, specifically the crucial experiences and vantages of those who become minoritized and marginalized by the academic industrial complex. Researchers and practitioners: beware!—Courtney T. Goto (ch. 16) puts on a show (in five acts) revealing how practical theological reflection can often co-opt the agency of those studied, thereby vacating the particularity of the objectified subjects who are “performed” ambitiously like dummies in both the lap and voice of the ventriloquistic practitioner-researcher. Thus ends the recent—and immediately outdated (cf., 12–13)—retrospective that is Part I, even as it gestures forward to where practical theology can (and can no longer) go in the future.

Circling back to past thresholds, both segments in Part II cover breakthroughs in the epistemological-moral claims that thereby establish the discipline (“Section I: 1950–1980s . . .”) and in the reconceiving of being, doing, and knowing for theology (“Section II: The 1990s . . .”), respectively. Hiltner’s (ch. 17) provocative call for an “operation-centered” theology lays the groundwork apropos Part II. Defying the field’s lingering liberal Protestant bias, Miller-McLemore features contributions by Karl Rahner (ch. 18) and Juan Luis Segundo (ch. 19) that demonstrate longtime Roman Catholic engagement, particularly in light of Vatican II, with allure both ecumenical and emancipatory. As Rodney J. Hunter (ch. 20) and Rebecca S. Chopp (ch. 21) show, by the 1980s disciplinary concepts further coalesce in ways that demand more methodological sophistication for pastoral and practical theology, respectively. The theologized life, as it were, undergoes profound conceptual renovation in the 1990s to include: “practice” as participation understood institutionally, per Craig Dykstra (ch. 22); “theology” as fundamentally practical, as Don S. Browning (ch. 23) argues; “learning” as resourcing psychosocial wellbeing, in Teresa L. Fry Brown’s (ch. 24) view, and “wisdom” as infrarational/suprarational quest beset by fear, according to Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore (ch. 25); the final selection (Elaine Graham, ch. 26) references sexist, ableist, and

abstractionist preoccupations within theology in general, making that essay emblematic of the trajectories and turns which have prompted practical theological work in the contemporary millennium.

It is with a sense of irony that the 2019 *Reader* redefines the canon of (U.S.) practical theology, reconfiguring it to include those who once were far off, as it were. As fresh voices who have engaged the classics now push past them, these become classics in their own rights (7–11). To reiterate, the overall strength of the volume is in the ways it extends the discipline and its literature. Miller-McLemore briefly yet deftly introduces each chapter both by framing the essay's initial context and by underscoring the ongoing significance of that particular contribution. Each entry is abstracted for sake of clarity and density; a rare instance finds the essay slightly revised by the original author (viz Nanko-Fernández). In addition to including authors who are not seen formally in the guild as practical theologians (i.e., diversity as interdisciplinarity), each of the editor's introductory annotations and references for further reading comprise overt attempts at bypassing "biases in the discipline" (10).

The collection is not without its limitations (what abstraction of an entire segment of literature ever is?). Some issues are minor. For instance, full correspondence between the print and ebook versions lacks in certain locations (original publication details were missing for one ebook chapter). Also, most chapters contain typographical errors; while certain errata undoubtedly come from original sources (e.g., the editor is unlikely to misspell her own name, in one place), other mistakes probably occurred in the electronic transfer process (optical character recognition/OCR? copy/paste?). Not every footnote finds context, owing perhaps to the redacting process.

Other concerns are more serious, as the editor readily notes (11–13). The scope of the book inevitably reifies the publication dominance of the U.S. context—and the dearth of indigenous North American perspectives is deeply troubling. Glimpses of translocal engagements, peppered throughout the volume, whet an appetite for locating practical theology vis-à-vis World Christianity, missiology, and intercultural studies, yet such longings for a contemporary crossroads go largely unsatisfied. Even when staying within the establishment of U.S. (Christian) practical theology, then it is the Pentecostals and Evangelicals who suffer short shrift (see index for 3 and 1 reference(s), respectively). On the other hand, do such thoroughgoing efforts to include "as many women as men" authors simply end up reinforcing binary assumptions of gender/sex (9)? As well, might the concerted attenuation of white/male voices reinforce insidious biases concerning who can or should do what (intellectual/activist) labor (11–13)? "Diversity" can afford, it seems, to be diversified.

To be clear, I applaud the instinct to feature "more people of color than white" in a collection like this, if only because it reflects our global realities, but also because it attends to life outside ivory towers (9). Holding on-the-ground commitments binds the guild to the theologically significant experiences of all—suffering and thriving, dying and living, within and outside the city gates. While the granting of "epistemological privilege" is a commendable editorial task, it also trades on the authoritative structures that vest *this* editor—as distinguished and respected as she is!—with the requisite clout to curate (and cut) voices for her showcasing (cf, ix).

So, the operative question is whether such liabilities can be eclipsed "enough" by the benefits of this

collection. To close, I want to revisit the notion of an “impractical” theology as that kind of theology per se that needs no qualification, because it recognizes no limits to its gaze or its formative effects.<sup>8</sup> Whenever it goes unqualified—qua “theology”—a certain kind of positionality is inevitably disclosed. It is important to take stock of the documentary, historical evidence—the genealogy—for how practical theology came to be. Hence, to qualify *theology* is to identify the matrix—or, for us *practical* theologians, the multiple matrices, midwives, and migratory patterns—out of which we voice our experiences and give articulation to our insight.

Taking our esteemed editor at her word, with Miller-McLemore we regard this *Reader* as but one among many canonizations possible (cf., 11). As such, practical theology—the endeavor serving multiple communities *to know and love the divine*—already awaits the next attempt to lay out the “field’s” contours and elevations. For us who come across the treasure hidden in that field, we give joyfully—which is not to say easily—in order to gain a share ourselves.

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### Notes

**1** Among these important works were edited collections *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2012) and *Conundrums in Practical Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), co-edited with Joyce Ann Mercer, a monograph entitled *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), and a quarter-century appraisal of the benefits and limits of her own “living human web”-metaphor for (re)framing pastoral theology, in the article “The Living Human Web: A Twenty-Five Year Retrospective,” in *Pastoral Psychology* 67, no. 3 (2018): 305–21.

**2** Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015) and *Theory of the Border* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

**3** Following is the fuller context where she invokes the familiar phrase: “[T]hose who engage in practical theology investigate lived theology, extending interest in rituals and practices to questions about how theology or knowing and loving the divine takes shape in everyday life and how everyday life influences theology” (italics revised), in Miller-McLemore, “Practical Theology,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, eds. Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams, vol. 3, 1739–43 (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2010).

**4** James Woodward and Stephen Pattison, eds., *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000). On the intent of superseding, see Miller-McLemore 2019, x.

**5** Of 23 chapters collected, editors Woodward and Pattison acknowledge only eight reprint permissions (2000, xi-xii). Compare the genre and setting of Miller-McLemore’s 2012 *Wiley-Blackwell Companion*.

**6** If one can suffer yet another Western musical pun, at least another regarding “canon” might be available here—although the patterns of earlier voices are not exactly restated mere measures apart. Perhaps “inventions” and “sinfonias,” due particularly to their modulatory sensibilities, are wordplays more apt for metaphorically describing how the literature (and its performativities) gets extended and revoiced.

**7** The editor marks this as a “flagship” entry (141), pointing to three poignant images in the original

publication not reprinted here. In fact, this is the sole chapter in common between this Reader and 2016's *Conundrums in Practical Theology*.

**8** For a compelling analysis on the formative “idolatry” regnant in formal theological studies—and academic practical theology, in particular—see Courtney T. Goto, *Taking on Practical Theology: The Idolization of Context and the Hope of Community* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), which postdates the material contents for this Reader.