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DOROTHY C. BASS, KATHLEEN A. CAHALAN, BONNIE J. MILLER-MCLEMORE, JAMES R. NIEMAN, AND CHRISTIAN B. SCHAREN. *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016). 325 pp. ISBN 9780802868732. £19.99.

JOYCE ANN MERCER AND BONNIE J. MILLER-MCLEMORE, EDS. *Conundrums in Practical Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2016). 320 pp. ISBN 9789004324237. £45.

Divinity students may well value both ‘academic modules’ and ‘more practical topics’, but consider the latter ‘less challenging’. Educators soon get fed up of wisecracks from their peers that either go, ‘Practical theology. Isn’t that a contradiction in terms?’ or, conversely, ‘Isn’t all theology supposed to be practical?’ These two books go to the heart of this debate - and not simply to the relationship between theory and practice, but to questioning such taken-for-granted categories. Bonnie Miller-McLemore, being a common denominator, anchors these texts in a stream of scholarship in the USA that has recently included, but is not limited to, *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (2012) which she edited. In many senses the volumes under

review not only go deeper than the *Companion*, they address significant deficiencies in its coverage.

Christian Practical Wisdom is a book about knowledge, but of a particular kind. Objective, abstract knowledge (the way of viewing the world that is traditionally privileged in universities) lies at one end of a theory/practice spectrum. The book's claim is that the sort of knowing that energizes Christian life is located closer to the opposite end of that spectrum, where we find embodied, situated, knowing-in-action. This would likely come as no surprise to already-sympathetic readers, but with the aim of rebalancing the relationship between theory and practice (not overthrowing the former), the authors offer particular insight into the *interplay* between various ways of knowing. What emerges is imaginative description and conceptual defence of wisdom that is 'morally attuned, rooted in a tradition that affirms the good, and driven toward aims that seek the good' (*Christian Practical Wisdom*, p.5).

The authors are five leading practical theologians in the USA who gathered in a retreat centre and continued conversations that developed relationships among them that were integral to the crafting of the chapters that bear their respective names. Theirs, as they insist it be termed, is a collective rather than a collected volume. In Part One each author articulates an aspect of Christian practical wisdom in largely autobiographical or autoethnographic mode. In exploring how bodies shape knowledge, Miller-McLemore relates, for example, her experience of discovering the body habits and posture of an Episcopal tradition, contrasting with those of her Disciples of Christ heritage. Through a reflection on the relief brought by swimming whilst recovering from back surgery, Cahalan reflects on the value of the *Lectio Divina*. A camping trip lies at the centre of Bass's story of encountering the wonder of God's creation, interwoven with family relationships developed through pain and reconciliation; for her, wisdom in everyday life. Nieman unpacks the local wisdom that he found lay behind a Lutheran congregation intentionally building the upper floor of their church hall to be sloping. By way of his appreciation of, amongst others, Alabama Shakes and Jack White, Scharen reflects on the wisdom found in rock music that helped him engage with brokenness at individual and societal levels.

Each of these chapters is valuable in its own right as an exemplar of how to write 'theological reflection' (the expectation sometimes presented to Divinity students with little in the way of examples to get them going). However, Part Two offers conceptual discussions and ought to be read *after* Part One - a sequence especially important for readers who feel an urge to cut to the chase and skip what s/he considers to be 'fluffy' personal stories.

This second part traces the eclipsing of practical wisdom in the modern West and a critical discussion of attempts at its recovery in North American practical theology, such as the seminal work of Don Browning. Continuing the constructive

contribution, a further chapter proposes a creative interplay between imagination and modern, critical, biblical scholarship. With similar purpose, the final substantive chapter explores the relationship between spirituality and practical wisdom, largely through the frame of unknowing, apophatic mysticism.

In the second text the *conundrums* explored by this largely US-based list of scholars (there is one each from South Africa and Norway) demonstrate the maturity of the discipline by not being simply intellectually puzzling, but having material implications for social inequalities and political injustices experienced by people on a variety of margins. Tom Beaudoin tackles three interwoven 'disorientations': the theological significance of practice, the white-racialised character of his own practical theology, and a 'Christian-Centrism' that neglects the possibilities of knowing itself through understanding a second religious (or nonreligious) tradition. He deploys a term from religious studies, 'christianicity' to draw attention to how the practice of Christianity is actively making and sustaining an identity: rather than being an abstract, solid state 'thing'.

Eileen Campbell-Reed's conundrum is that faced by any researcher who values the richness of a single case study for demonstrating the complexity of a situation, but who wonders, or is warned, about the danger of over-simplification and misleading application to other contexts. She concludes that these are worth the risk, not least because of an emphasis on the relational character of practical wisdom that bears its own import of local accountability. Katherine Turpin (placed strangely, it seems, out of sequence) poses a variation on this conundrum: adequately accounting for the complexity of local knowledge located in specific contexts. Reducing complexity may well be necessary if action is not to be overwhelmed. Not all local knowledges are considered to hold equal status. And micro-, meso- and macrosystems interlock in often intricate, multilayered ways. Choosing which layer or perspective to relate and analyse is not an innocent step in a research project, but one, concludes Turpin, requiring wisdom and more gentle forbearance by reviewers and colleagues who might wish yet more complexity (that includes, unrealistically, their preferred research interests). At the same time, researchers ought to be cognisant of what is at stake for the community about whose local knowledge they have published.

The principal readership of *Conundrums* is those teaching and researching in practical theology in higher education institutions so Faustino Cruz digs into the tension, even dichotomy, created between scholarship and wider administrative/support service in career progression. He brings the vocation of being a reflective practitioner into the domain of university administration, re-framing 'service' as empathic knowing. Reflexivity, understood as itself a conundrum, prompts Jaco Dryer to explore his situatedness as a male, Afrikaans-speaking,

member of the Dutch Reformed Church, and white researcher, navigating, and accounting for, the biases in his worldview that has been shaped by colonialism. Despite one's best efforts, reflexivity is always partial, but, he argues, with ethical imagination a genuine concern for the wellbeing of those one is researching may be developed and so a practical theologian need not be paralyzed. The theme of race is also significant for Courtney Goto who recounts her experience of being invited to write a chapter on it for an introductory text in practical theology. She found herself required to expound dynamics of power and privilege that were not deemed necessary for her white fellow-authors to articulate regarding their research. The notion of 'coercive mimeticism' provides Goto with an interpretive lens for the experience of people of colour being expected to frame themselves in the terms delivered by members of more dominant cultures. The conundrum here lies around playing the part expected (and thereby failing her own minority community) or refusing this patterning (and thus being further distanced as exotic and risky). Acknowledging such coercion has to be, she concludes, a communal task within the practical theological community, involving alliances across any number of differences.

Phillis Sheppard's chapter (strangely, not immediately following that of Goto's in the collection) also engages with race. She contends that even when practical theologians critique discourses on race this occurs through a lens where cultural misrepresentations abound. Given that people of colour are relatively scarce within the discipline, Sheppard proposes that those who are the subject of theorising raced bodies often remain absent. The challenge she poses is to take up raced bodies in practical theological research but in such a way as to represent 'fully lived raced bodies' (*Conundrums*, p. 243), a method that would demand confronting ideologies of whiteness.

Tone Kaufman recognises the invidious position of practical theologians who engage in empirical research that is criticized by social scientists for sneaking in normative evaluations and by scholars of Divinity as being not normative enough. Drawing on the work of Hans Harbers and Geir Afdal, Kaufmann breaks from any dichotomy between description and prescription. Instead, we are introduced to different forms of normativity (from-within and from-the-outside). In research engagement with, for example a congregation, the researcher's findings can help people revise their practice (from-within) without telling them how to run their church (from-the-outside). Such research might well be interdisciplinary, but, as Joyce Ann Mercer argues, this leaves practical theology with a two-fold conundrum: the vortex of evermore complex analysis from so many disciplines and identity issues for researchers who are not deemed to hold full membership in *any* field. Mercer's way forward lies in drawing parallels with jazz musicianship in which experts in

improvisation require solid knowledge of musical structure and advanced dexterity in a number of styles. In addition, as she observes, practical theologians require to be adept at the institutional politics that circulate in interdisciplinary endeavours. Miller-McLemore picks up the politics of practical theology in the academy in her conundrum: practical theologians claim that knowledge resides in practice but have struggled to work this out in their employing institutions. The valuing of theory over practice as sources of knowledge has proved to be a stubborn stumbling block about which, argues Miller-McLemore, more academics' consciousness requires to be raised. Claire Wolfteich unpacks her dislocation of being a Roman Catholic practical theologian when the discipline does not have a home in those denominational structures and is largely dominated by Protestant discourse. Whilst one resolution seems to lie down the road of Catholic contextual theologies, Wolfteich is concerned lest this be a Protestant 'colonisation'. Her proposal is more towards partnership with systematic and moral theologians, and fostering conversations with Catholic contextual theologians.

These volumes have their respective strengths. *Conundrums* advances sophisticated discussion of significant problems and challenges within the discipline – precisely those everyday remarks that open this review. *Christian Practical Wisdom* makes its contribution by offering conceptual clarity on *wisdom* as a critical mode of engaging with a number of modes of knowing. Taken together, the two books help to recover *wisdom* from its 'non-academic' label within the taken-for-granted assumptions theological educators encounter (and sometimes clash with) all too regularly.

Together, these volumes could help hold practical theology on course lest it diverge into privileging Bible and tradition *or* experience, especially in the context of the often non-transparent, un-named politics of studies in Divinity. Furthermore, recent seeming normalization of white supremacy in the USA and Europe demands urgent and sustained critical reflection. In Scotland, we have not grappled much with the whiteness of most of our theology (including practical theology). In the UK as a whole, debate has intensified around the relative value of university subject-areas. These two books will stimulate readers in considering the important social question of the role of higher education in cultivating *wisdom* when the two main foci of institutions are often employability and knowledge acquisition. Even when the foci are employability and critical thinking the latter may not be synonymous with being a *wise* thinker.

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