



Reviews



Eric Stoddart, *Advancing Practical Theology: Critical Discipleship for Disturbing Times* (London: SCM, 2014), pp. xv + 159, ISBN 9780334051916. £19.99

This is an exhilarating book that should disturb the hearts and perceptions of Practical Theologians across the UK, bestirring them to examine their practice critically and engage afresh with new constituencies in the task of public theology. It speaks in a particularly beguiling way to members of that ‘imagined community’ here in Scotland, standing as we are in a climate of renewed engagement with – perhaps even trust in? – the processes of deliberative and participatory democracy. Can our discipline catch this wave?

It is a work of great integrity. Not only is it ruthlessly honest and at times fiercely direct, but it models the espoused methodology; this is indeed a work of ‘truthful action’. Practical Theologians pay attention to the particular, the contingent and the embodied; they subject the self-understanding of the researcher to critical scrutiny; their processes involve mutual encounter of persons before positions. Accordingly Dr Stoddart begins this work of theological epistemology by reflecting critically on his own journey of engagement with Practical Theology, a self-reflexive account of one man’s pilgrimage through a changing hermeneutical landscape, ultimately arriving within the portals of Scottish Anglo-Catholicism and to the particularity of that ‘hyphenated identity’.

Having isolated one model of the hermeneutical cycle, that of Thomas Groome, Stoddart then inserts a worked example of such shared praxis into the narrative: the facilitation of group discussion on the topic of Scottish independence. This first case study demonstrates the value – and the importance – of making the tools of Practical Theology much more widely accessible to Christian disciples, to whom they rightly belong by virtue of their calling, helping them to think critically and theologically about real world challenges and lived experience.

Such a process of theological empowerment, while laudable, needs to be extended even more widely – Stoddart’s exercise was conducted with a homogeneous group, all educated to degree level and from a single socio-economic context – so that previously excluded groups bring both their testimonies and their interpretation to the theological discourse. Then indeed would we have a ‘fresh expression’ of what it means to be the church within and for the world.

But the author’s radicalism extends further than simply desiring to bring hitherto sequestered – ‘grassroots’ – theological voices into the public domain or extend the scope of such enquiry far beyond the confines of church-related activities and into the whole of everyday life; his concept of ‘critical discipleship’ is more heavily freighted than that. Stoddart maintains that if Practical Theology is to be truly liberative then it needs to embrace a far less bourgeois form of reflective practice, one which at every stage of the model critiques the all-pervasive neo-liberal and imperialist economic system which shapes Western lives and subjectivity; the ‘disturbing world’ in which we live and move and have our being. It needs to adopt a questioning awareness of the ways in which a privileged minority is being (de)formed by these cultural, political and social forces, and to use that new awareness to go on to challenge and dismantle the structures of oppression so created. Such a process, he maintains, would be for the good not just of the oppressed but also for the oppressors, hitherto blind to the power they wield and the systemic injustice they perpetuate.

In the closing polemical chapters, Cuban ethicist Miguel De La Torre’s system of liberative ethics is offered as ‘a way of envisaging what a radicalized Practical Theology, that takes post-colonial critiques of Empire seriously, might look like’ (p. 137); one which weaves in to every stage of the hermeneutical process ‘the voice, needs and contribution of those who are marginalized, disenfranchised or in other ways oppressed by Empire’ (p. 144). A second case study scrutinises the recently published *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* for the articulation of such a challenge to the dehumanizing impact of cultural globalisation, and finds that all too few contributions adopt such a perspective, let alone acknowledge the military and nationalist fist behind the hidden hand. The monograph ends as it began, with a brave piece of self-reflexive writing, the tone

of which is in keeping with the accessible, laicised and prophetic methodology the book espouses.

In reprising Edward Farley's call to promote 'the hermeneutics of vocation' (albeit for a changed social, ecclesial and global landscape), Stoddart sets before Practical Theologians the task of helping Christian disciples grow in theological wisdom and fluency, equipping them with the tools to exercise a properly critical calling in the world as contributors to the common good. Those engaged in forming Scottish congregational leaders – in seminaries and the academy alike – should heed his passionately argued plea and seek creative ways of putting Stoddart's thesis into action before the wave of current opportunity crashes and fades on the shore. For it is only by fostering such an imaginative civic/global apologetics that Practical Theology will achieve its full, radical, potential and make a difference in God's world. Only then can the discipline be said to have 'advanced'.

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Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation* (trans. Martin J. Lohrmann; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014), pp. xix + 286, ISBN 9780802869241. £23.99

Well written, well researched, and well argued, Berndt Hamm's latest installment in the Lutheran Quarterly Books series is a worthy addition. Professor Hamm has a long history of research in late medieval and Reformation theology, and it is all on display here in the English translation of his 2010 book, *Der frühe Luther*. Cutting against the grain of conventional wisdom, he argues that scholarship is wrong in trying to discern a moment where Luther makes the reformational turn. Instead, Luther's journey should be described as a slow albeit steady progress through a series of insights and transformations, gradually reassessing and reworking the tradition he had inherited. Described thusly, the entire debate about whether Luther is rightly considered