

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski, eds., *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 342 pp.**

The dedication page of this books honors “all those who formed us as practical theologians.” Although practical theology is the backbone of both seminary education and ministry, does anyone actually study intentionally in this field? Are there any degree programs across our continent that offer a major in practical theology? Don’t most of us who identify ourselves as part of this field come to it through a host of other avenues? Indeed, our “formation” usually comes from those identified in the authors’ dedication: “teachers, mentors, colleagues, students, and friends,” but not as often from a traditional path through the academy,

Cahalan and Mikoski begin Chapter 1, the introduction, by proposing “a number of core commitments” that practical theologians share while acknowledging that these tend to “overlap and interlock.” Eleven elements and values are given, with each one briefly described. The authors summarize this information by sharing that they use the terms “opening” and “approaches” in the title of their book to signify both plurality and multiplicity in the field of practical theology.

The main table of contents shows the book unfolding in fifteen chapters with different authors (the editors each provided a chapter). The titles of the chapters, with one exception, are all followed by the words “Practical Theology” (shown

here only once): African American Practical Theology, Asian American, Contextual Theology, Empirical, Evangelical, Feminist and Womanist, Hermeneutics in Protestant, Hermeneutics in Roman Catholic, Liberationist, Neo-Protestant, Postmodern, Religious Practices, Roman Catholic Pastoral Theology (full title), U.S. Latino/a, White. On pages 8–10 of the introduction, there is a helpful “Alternative Tables of Contents” section that reorganizes the fifteen chapters by Method, Ecclesial Tradition of the Author, and Ethnic or Gender Identity. The reader is invited to consider creating yet another grouping according to his or her own study and practice of this overall discipline.

At this point, even before delving into the chapters that follow, Cahalan and Mikoski have clearly undertaken work that is ambitious and impressive, creating a new and expanded set of borders around the term “practical theology,” borders that are—to use one of their own terms—highly permeable.

The organizing method for the remainder of the book makes it possible to compare and contrast among the multitude of practical theologies represented. These sections are included in each chapter: Historical Context, Key Features and Representative Figures, Norms and Sources of Authority, Views of the Theory-Practice Relationship, Roles of and Approach to Contexts, Interdisciplinary Conversation Partners, Areas of Current and Future Research, and Suggested Readings. By giving this outline to fifteen contributors, in essays that average seventeen pages each, a wealth of information has been included.

I wish there had been a chapter devoted to LGBTQI practical theology. In an otherwise comprehensive book on practical theology, I found this an unfortunate omission. The subject index lists thirty-two references for the terms “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersexuality, and sexual orientation.” They are all simply passing references to these communities. I could find only one book on gay theology among the two hundred “suggested readings.”

In the brief conclusion, Cahalan and Mikoski note that “practical theology is a conversation” and offer observations on points of “commonality and divergence.” These focus us to the future, to the ever-expanding study, practice, and contemplation of the discipline. *Opening the Field of Practical Theology* is an invitation toward further dialogue about the contributions we all are making. For me, its main benefit has been to add depth and breadth to my understanding of my field.

Nancy E. Hall  
 American Baptist Seminary of the West  
 Berkeley, California