

Joyce Ann Mercer and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, eds. *Conundrums in Practical Theology*. Boston: Brill, 2016. 320 pages. \$76.

A conundrum is a puzzle or riddle without an apparent solution, an enigma that baffles, frustrates, and evades resolution. *Conundrums in Practical Theology* examines the confusing and difficult problems and questions currently catching at the “raw spots” within practical theology. From the tensions around race and bodies; to questions about whether studies of practice count as respectable scholarship; to the complexity that local, contextualized knowledge brings to the task of academic study, this book offers eleven chapters that raise awareness about important issues often ignored or avoided within the academy and religious communities.

Paging through the table of contents of this fine volume of essays, the homiletician will notice that there are no chapters about preaching. While this is a disappointing oversight and/or omission, the essays in this book do have important insights for teachers of preaching and worship. For example, Kathryn Turpin’s essay on “The Complexity of Local Knowledge” includes a case study about teaching students the importance of liturgical language and its ramifications surrounding the congregational practice of communion. She first shares the speech she uses in class to illustrate the formative power of liturgical language. But for the reader she reveals several layers of unredacted detail about how things like race and country of origin, gender and sexual orientation, ecclesiology and hospitality, hierarchy, and good old church politics complexify the story. Later in the chapter she homes in on the very real but often ignored dimensions of smells, sounds, and interpersonal interactions that happen during the preaching of a sermon, details which are rarely discussed when we teach seminary students. This chapter offers many excellent questions and issues which are especially applicable to field education supervisors guiding students in their congregations. Turpin’s essay also references Dale Andrews, whose book, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, buttresses her section on “situated knowledge.”

Part of the authors’ aim for this book is to help “seminary faculties at large think afresh about how curriculum evolves, how colleagues relate, how courses are structured, how problems in ministry and faith are addressed, and so forth” (5). Thus, I would recommend this book as ideal fodder for faculty discussions. Take, for instance, Faustino M. Cruz’s chapter, “The Tension between Scholarship and Service.” He highlights the double bind set up within the academy of requiring countless hours for professional activities and institutional service, while simultaneously penalizing a lack of published scholarship. Especially for women and scholars of color, this situation is a Catch-22. When scholars of color are invited to leadership or administrative positions (often with the unspoken expectation that they will “represent” their historically marginalized group), Cruz notes that saying “no” is not an option, because of the need to represent the minority and have a voice at the table. The unfortunate result is that “women and faculty of color contribute a disproportionate level of service to the academy,” but then struggle with earning promotion because of not having an “acceptable” publishing record (73-75). Thus, he calls for faculty perception of service to shift toward “scholarship of service” in order to create new ways of evaluating scholarship. This may, in turn, help rectify deep institutional bias favoring research and publishing over service.

Cruz’s colleagues in this volume all demonstrate a similar fearlessness in shining a light on injustices and deep-seated patterns of power and privilege within the academy. The chapters on racism, for instance, are a must-read because they lay bare the conundrums of race and racialization in a fine-grained, yet systematic way. Courtney T. Goto analyzes her experience of

“Writing in Compliance with the Racialized ‘Zoo’ of Practical Theology,” and the metaphor is a powerful indictment of the way in which the “white gaze” both represents and activates power over minoritized scholars. In tandem with Goto’s essay, Phillis Isabella Sheppard’s chapter, “Raced Bodies: Portraying Bodies, Reifying Racism,” uncovers the irony that even committing to “a robust analysis of raced bodies” can unintentionally serve to reinforce and reproduce widespread stereotypes. Her hope is that “we will bear witness to the lived experiences of dismissed raced bodies and the discipline’s history of complicity,” with the goal of transforming “the scholarship, membership, and practices of the discipline” (247).

While this is not a book for undergraduate study, it is essential reading for practical theology graduate students and their advisors. There are chapters on the devaluation of using single case studies in one’s research; the tension between knowledge, subjectivity, colonialism and reflexivity; normativity within empirical practical theological research; interdisciplinarity; and the politics of the theory-practice binary. Each essay raises imperative questions that defy easy answers, and yet demands a reckoning if we are to engage in research, teaching, and leadership with authenticity and accountability.

*Conundrums in Practical Theology* is intentionally destabilizing, as it should be. The honesty with which these writers enter the unsolvable riddles is refreshing and permission-giving, and may lead to still more questions from scholars freed to delve into taboo topics. What holds the project together is the obvious collegiality and solidarity among the writers as they shared their questions and chapters with each other throughout the writing process for this book.

With Mike Grave’s edited volume *What’s the Matter with Preaching Today* (Westminster John Knox, 2004) over a decade old, now might be the ideal time to revisit the conundrums facing our own guild. Perhaps it is time for the rising generation of preaching scholars to identify our own particular conundrums to puzzle over and explore together. As *Conundrums in Practical Theology* demonstrates, the results may yield discernments that have important ramifications for homiletics and the art of preaching for this present time.

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