

Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski, eds. *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014. 332 pages. \$34.

As a newly minted pastor, I received a call from a growing mainline congregation. While on the surface this was happy news, in our day-to-day life, many saw growth as a problem: “I don’t know this church anymore!” “We’re growing too fast!” And so on. The senior minister had a stock reply for these complaints: “Yeah,” he would say, “these are problems, but they’re the *good* kind.” You might say the same thing about the field of practical theology: with its porous lines, its many conversation partners, its sometimes dizzying array of hermeneutical locations, suspicions, and commitments. It can sometimes seem like an adolescent, all legs and arms, betraying a beautiful sort of awkwardness. If we can rest with the sometimes doesn’t-quite-fit-here feeling of the field, what we may find is a good sort of problem, namely a heuristically rich form of growth.

Editors Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski wisely chose “openings” for the title of this edited volume of fifteen essays rather than “models” or “types” because they wanted to avoid “conceptual entities” abstracted from the “messiness and complexity of actual practice” (7). In this spirit, Richard Osmer suggests the metaphor of multiple, distinct, and intersecting trajectories within practical theology (69–71). Rather than the slow, slumbering crisis of unmitigable stagnation, the “openings” of this volume provide insight into vital as well as varied embodiments within the field of practical theology.

What sorts of openings? Some are vocational, fitting into the “clerical paradigm” of practical theology. Mikoski explains that while his years in seminary provided perspective and tools, it was the lived experience of pastoral ministry that retooled his theological imagination (169). Hosffman Ospino insists that ecclesial contexts cannot account for the whole work of practical theology; it remains a form of public theology insofar that it exists in the “lived experiences” of Latino/a peoples in the United States (240–1).

Some of the contributors share how the field of practical theology was, in a sense, blown wide open for them when they realized that all theology, including white theology, is contextual. Stephen Bevans recalls his bewildered reaction to a friend’s report that he had just “discovered” black theology through James Cone: “‘Black theology?’ I said, ‘There’s no such thing as Black theology! There’s only theology’—meaning, of course, the kind of theology I was learning as a seminary student in Rome” (45).

A generation later and Bevans’ sparkling incredulity has turned into the careful analysis of Courtney T. Goto. She underlines her identity as a third-generation Japanese American with deep roots in the United Methodist Church. Her study of a Japanese American Church in Sacramento, California, revealed a process of identity formation through play with visual art (32). According to Goto, Asian American practical theologians live in the “gaps” and amid the “ambiguities” of identity and experience (41). The work of practical theology is not so much a fixture but, according to Goto, a trajectory of the Spirit’s movement: “The creative work of Asian American practical theologies is never accomplished alone. Human creativity for justice and liberation participates in the transformative work of the Holy Spirit, which is both creative and redemptive. There is no project more sacred” (44).

While admittedly diverse, the editors see common values and elements shared among practical theologians. These qualities contribute to the template used by each author (historical context, orientation and key features, norms and authority, views of theory-practice relationship, among others). Cahalan and Mikoski invite readers to consider the most apt way of exploring its

contents. They recommend against reading the book from beginning to end (the contributions are organized alphabetically by title) but, instead, suggest alternative “Tables of Contents,” each following a different trajectory within the field, namely, methodological approaches, ecclesial tradition, ethnic or gender identity, and one that cuts across the gender/ethnicity category (8–10).

What are some ways you might use this book? Selected essays in a seminary level course could help students value, articulate, and deepen the integrative impulse resident in pastoral theology. As a whole, it would be highly useful in doctor of ministry as well as Ph.D. level courses. One question we might ask, in keeping with the way this work “opens” the field to its own richness: what would it look like for a volume to include practical theologians alongside and in conversation with sympathetic representatives of non-theological disciplines? Perhaps that is one more opening in a vital and growing field.

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