

Richard R. Osmer. *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008. 256 pages. \$24.00.

John Reader. *Reconstructing Practical Theology: The Impact of Globalization*. Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2008. 144 pages. \$29.95.

The field of practical theology has seen a resurgence in the USA during the past decade, but one that has included surprisingly few homiletics. That absence is puzzling. Perhaps this is because homiletics already has an extensive scholarly literature that enables it to function as something of a standalone discipline. There is every reason for those interested in preaching to be invested in new developments in practical theology, however, since the field represents a wider home for the very ministry and discipleship concerns that are central in proclamation, let alone a space for integrated partnerships with those in adjacent fields of pastoral care, liturgics, education, leadership, and so forth. The two books under review here can each offer a helpful orientation to practical theology for those looking to become better informed about recent developments in the field, though from very different angles of vision. Osmer deals more with *method*: how practical theological work happens in relation to several ministerial tasks. Reader attends more to *focus*: what should really be of concern to practical theology today, especially beyond conventional categories in the field. I will treat each book separately, returning at the end to note a few implications for homiletics.

Richard Osmer is a senior scholar at Princeton Theological Seminary, a long-time leader in religious education and practical theology. For purposes of this book, he situates practical theology in relation to leaders in congregations, whose work he sees unfolding in four main tasks that correspond to commonsense questions. These practical theological tasks are the descriptive-empirical (What is going on?), the interpretive (Why is this going on?), the normative (What ought to be going on?), and the pragmatic (How might we respond?). These tasks, sketched in the Introduction and discussed in turn in Chapters 1 through 4, can be understood as what church leaders must take into account in a fully developed approach to any ministry challenge. Those familiar with the larger literature in the field may note some similarity to the four theological types outlined in Don Browning's *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (1996), but Osmer's approach is more focused on ministerial action and examples than congregational settings under analysis, as with Browning. Moreover, Osmer's theoretical underpinnings differ considerably from his predecessor's, to whom he is still openly and gratefully indebted.

The result is a book that, upon first reading, students and pastors have found quite accessible and attuned to the actual challenges they face. I have used the book extensively with practicing ministers, who hear in it both the ring of truth and the sage guidance of an author who can name what ministry looks like at its best. In relation to such readers, however, there are two possible distortions to be avoided. The first is to treat Osmer's four practical theological tasks as a series of ministry steps, a recipe toward assured outcomes. Instead, they are actually iterative moments, all of which must be engaged in a back-and-forth rhythm, like large stones amidst a stream on which we nimbly shift our weight, from one foot to another and back again, in order to cross the water safely. The second distortion is to imagine that all of the "real" theological work happens in the third task (the normative), with perhaps also a bit in the second (the interpretive). Practical theology has helped us realize again that how we look at reality (the first, empirical-descriptive task) and what we do about it (the fourth, pragmatic task) are suffused with fully

theological claims and assumptions. The disservice of much contemporary theological education has been to perpetuate the myth that theology only occurs in its reflective and regulative guises.

Osmer's breadth and depth as a scholar are reflected in the substance and sources of this book, sometimes to an extreme. There is the occasional obligation to include just one more insight or theory when restraint might have been the better course. Although ministers I know have valued his three approaches to normativity in Chapter 3, for example, they find the very brief introduction to a smattering of positions referenced there to make the argument unduly complex and overloaded. By contrast, the attention to servant leadership in Chapter 4 at times sounds stale, obvious, and stretched, more focused on those ordained for public ministry than all the varied leaders one finds in churches today. The book's Epilogue, which traces how we got to where we are in theological education with special attention to practical theology, may also be of less value to some readers, though I found it very interesting. It would surely stimulate a lively discussion among theological faculty members, including homileticsians.

John Reader is a scholar of a very different sort, for three decades serving as an Anglican priest while conducting research and instruction. His book is aimed less at ministers than fellow scholars in practical theology, a field he criticizes for a narrowness that is out of touch with our globalized reality. In particular, Reader castigates pastoral care, worship, religious education, and other areas for being dominated by conventional concepts, which he calls "zombie categories," persistent but lifeless. He proposes that practical theology should instead recognize and address three changes that globalization brings to the fore: blurred boundaries (the loss of either/or separations between nations, peoples, religions, and disciplines), tension between enclosures and thresholds (the emerging constraints and opportunities that affect human liberation in new ways), and reflexivity (the undermining of previous structures of social and family life that are changing how humans construct identity).

Chapters 2 to 7 then apply these three changes to a series of ministry issues, such as pastoral care, spirituality, families and children, and work. The aim is to show how these areas look different when globalization is taken into account, and Reader is convincing at this. His typical method in each chapter is to engage a key theorist in an extended literature review, as well as specific examples drawn often from his own research interests. Since most sources and examples are understandably drawn from the UK, readers from elsewhere will have to spend some effort to test the book's claims against their own settings. Moreover, since the several topics (whose logic is finally disclosed in Chapter 8) are tied to Reader's interests, nothing is said about some areas in practical theology, significantly (for readers of this review) homiletics.

While it is helpful for practical theology to be challenged by the realities of globalization, the book often remains quite theoretical. Even then, some decisions raise doubts. For example, despite the many references to "globalization," it only is clear near the end of the book that the author actually sees it as a synonym for global capitalism, overlooking the broader way that term is being discussed today. In addition, Reader's argument would actually have been enhanced by noting that the narrowness of practical theology he asserts of his own setting has, in fact, been well addressed in the field elsewhere, such as the USA, South Africa, and continental Europe. Then, there is the tiresome repetition of the charge of "zombie categories," which is unhelpful in two ways: first, by substituting name-calling for careful analysis, and second, by dismissing the historical continuities that ought to influence any field, including practical theology. Ultimately, the book is better at posing questions than offering proposals, which are limited to scattered places as well as the final few pages of the last chapter.

With their various strengths and limitations, these two books can be particularly useful for those in homiletics. From Osmer, we might ask how the practice of preaching engages the four practical theological tasks he names. Could we say that preaching falls short to the extent that it overlooks one or more of these? Even then, how can preaching more effectively interact with other forms of practical theology as these four tasks are faced during the course of ministry? From Reader, we might ask how the challenges of globalization sketched in his six central chapters impinge upon preaching and the teaching of it. If a new chapter on homiletics were to be inserted into his book, what might our globalized circumstances suggest about a new shape for preaching? Surely changes in communications, belonging, pluralism, and relativism would become much more prominent. In any case, these two volumes invite homiletics to enter into a dialogue with practical theology, one that would both strengthen our scholarship and be a place where a homiletical voice would be a welcome partner in the wider conversation.

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