

Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner. *Overture for Practical Theology: The Music of Religious Inquiry*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2016. 126 pages. \$37.

Overture for Practical Theology: The Music of Religious Inquiry is an introduction to practical theology and its interrelatedness with other disciplines. Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner argues for the image of the “living human document” used in pastoral theology to expand to “the living human instrument,” positing that “theology is the music of religious inquiry” (27). The metaphor of an orchestra using its living human instruments underscores the entire book, and is interwoven throughout the text from the headings of the chapters (stanzas) to the content within the chapters. The author uses extensive anecdotal evidence to support her argument for the lived humanness of practical theology and to offer many an entry point, through the living human instrument, for different disciplines to engage.

Stanza 1 unpacks Schleiermacher’s theological model of the tree that illustrated his understanding of how philosophical theology (roots), historical theology (trunk), and practical theology (leaves/fruit) are related to each other. Stevenson-Moessner uses this image as a foundational image in understanding practical theology in relationship to other disciplines. The author then supplements this image with her use of the orchestra as metaphor.

Stanza 2 builds upon the metaphor introduced in stanza 1 and discusses the purpose of the church and the ministry of the church. The author posits “the purpose of the church and its ministry, as well as the goal of theological education, is to increase among humankind the love of God, the love of neighbor, and the love of self” (23). This goal is not limited to practical theology but can be easily found in conversation with practical theology because of its focus on lived experience and practices as the documents being studied. In this chapter, she names the difficulties that are posed by diverse perspectives and offers a challenge to practical theology to consider a methodology that can be foundational to many perspectives, yet still invite the diversity of thought that comes from them.

Stanza 3 highlights practical theology’s emphasis on movement and direction. The chapter focuses on movement seen in the dynamics of power; however, the reader could translate this to other dynamics as well. Stevenson-Moessner specifically looks at how the practical theologian looks at the dynamics and is able to use the movements between to name aspects of the lived experience of humanity.

Stanza 4 and Stanza 5 both focus on the unavoidable presence of cacophony and failure in both the study of practical theology and the execution of pastoral leadership. In the orchestra, harmony is created with different instruments but there are also moments when the harmony is off and failure requires one go back and try again. Drawing on Victor Hunte’s seven principles of orchestration for practical theological leadership, the author offers tools to help navigate the moments of cacophony to find beautiful harmony once again.

The final stanza explicitly states the two themes of the book. The first theme is that theology is the music of religious inquiry and the second is that all of God’s creations are living instruments. Although the author names it as secondary, the latter theme dominates the book.

Overture for Practical Theology is focused on persuading the reader that practical theology can be a place for all disciplines to engage and consider the human experience within their theoretical frameworks. Overall, the text can be helpful to scholars from a myriad of disciplines in framing how they might begin to work with practical theology. She disrupts the seemingly stagnant image of Schleiermacher’s tree and argues for a more fluid framework where disciplines equally add to the harmony of the orchestra. The metaphor of the orchestra that was

used throughout might cause confusion because some of the terms were not explained. However, if the reader looks up the terms they can see how the author is using the metaphor of the orchestra to argue that different human experiences create harmony in our work that creates a more robust sound than a sole instrument. Stevenson-Moessner accomplishes her goal of providing space for different disciplines to consider how they might use the methodologies of practical theology in their work, however the exact places that she sees interdisciplinary engagement are not explicitly stated and have to be determined by the reader.

This book is beneficial to all persons looking to engage with practical theology and those that hesitate to believe that their discipline would benefit from this type of interdisciplinary engagement. I recommend this text, not simply as a look into practical theology, but as a tool to begin engaging in interdisciplinary work and a useful metaphor to consider how different disciplines create harmony together in scholarship.

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