

Rethinking Faith: A Constructive Practical Theology

by James N. Poling

Fortress Press, Minneapolis. 192 pages

REVIEWED BY AARON FULP-EICKSTAEDT

In this book, the process theologian James Newton Poling invites the reader on his journey toward developing a practical theology, a theology which arises out of concern for and experience with victims and perpetrators of violence and abuse. As he says in his introduction, “Our lives and faith are embedded in long histories and complex social situations. It is not simple to state our faith — God is complex and multifaceted; the world is complicated and confusing; we ourselves are inevitably ambiguous and contradictory. To find our way as human beings, we need ways of thinking and practices of faith that can help us keep our balance in the midst of uncertainty and violence.”

Poling starts his book with his personal creed, which centers on three ideas about God. God is *radically relational*: God is real, and an active agent in the center of every human life, and the decision of every moment of experience is received into the life of God. God is *ambiguous*: God’s morality transcends human understanding and God has placed us in a world of complexity and contradiction; accepting this ambiguity is a sign of maturity. And God is *resilient*: though human evil can at times seem to eclipse God for a season, God has the power to absorb tragedy, never giving up until God’s aims are ultimately realized.

Poling then addresses the reality of sin (“the denial of loving sensitivity and turning away from communion with self, others and God”) and evil (“the abuse of power destructive to bodies and spirits”). He illustrates these definitions with examples of the impact of violence and abuse on human beings. He moves to Christology, pointing out the difficulties with looking at the cross and suffering as redemptive before he describes how what God has done in Jesus Christ is salvific.

Poling says that looking at Jesus we see clearly the nature of God’s love and power. Finally he outlines the five marks of churches that live out what it means to be the body of Christ: they manifest inclusive relationality, empowering justice, nonviolent resistance to evil, and both multiplicity and an underlying unity. These congregations take seriously the terrible ambiguity of life without becoming resigned to evil.

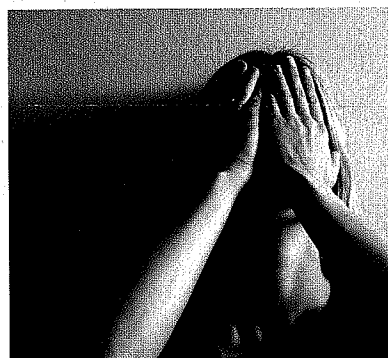
The conclusion focuses on eschatology, in which Poling lays out strategies of hope to employ as we await the eschaton, which for him is the beloved community God intends. He wraps up the body of his book by giving examples of how particular congregations practice hope.

Throughout, Poling stays grounded in the pain and possibility of survivors and perpetrators of violence, honoring their experiences and weaving his view of God, Christ, church and humanity out of what he sees and hears in them.

His book would be beneficial to anyone willing to take on the discipline of constructing a practical theology. It would also be helpful for anyone who has ever struggled with the question of how to reconcile the love and power of God with the reality of violence and pain in the world.

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BOOK IN REVIEW



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A book offering help to those who struggle to reconcile the love and power of God with the violence and pain in the world.