

RETHINKING FAITH: A CONSTRUCTIVE PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

James Newton Poling

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011. Soft cover. vi+ 187pp. \$29.00

*Reviewed by Elaine Graham
University of Chester, UK*

This book is an exploration of what it means to talk about God from the perspective of practical theology. James Newton Poling seeks to bring three perspectives into conversation: the discipline of practical theology; traditions of Christian practice as embodied in the Church's historic witness; struggle for justice, especially in solidarity with those who have experienced violence. It is not unusual for practical theologians to stress the multi-vocal and dialogical nature of their discipline as one of listening to different voices from tradition, experience, and culture. Poling's intention is to demonstrate how practical theology works and what it looks and sounds like when it listens to the voice of God speaking through the practices of communities of faith. It therefore exemplifies the inductive and contextual nature of practical theology by proceeding from embodied, social practices as sacraments of the continuing activity of God in the world. Doctrine, for Poling, proceeds from there and is to be understood as the unfolding of God's self-revelation in history. "Every day is a new challenge for believers to understand God, and God is actively trying to reach us with new understandings that fit our changed situations" (p. 3).

This is also an intensely personal, autobiographical book and serves as a testimony to Poling's long-standing ministry, not only as teacher of practical theology, but as a professing Christian who has committed himself over a number of years to working alongside those affected by violence and abuse. This stance is an outworking of his personal journey as a follower of Christ, but as his story shows, is also one of the occasions of the world's woundedness where the most pressing questions are asked about the nature of God.

Poling's intellectual influences are felt also, although lightly worn: process theology, now a little unfashionable, but developed here as a foundation for understandings of the essentially relational, immanent nature of God. Whilst God is the creator of all things, God may also appear ambiguous or uncaring, especially to survivors of violence and abuse. Yet God's deep identification with suffering in Jesus redeems such suffering and offers solidarity and healing. Process theology also leads Poling to affirm the eschatological

nature of Christian hope, which is embodied and affirmed in ecclesial practices of worship, pastoral care, and social action.

Those living outside the United States are often given the impression that all Christians in the U.S. are conservative evangelicals or fundamentalists and Republicans. The voice of a more theologically liberal, politically progressive Christian perspective is rarely heard. It is particularly important, then, that Poling articulates a deeply-rooted theological understanding that integrates the personal and the political. Nor is he discouraged by the apparent waning of many radical social movements that since the 1960s promoted civil rights, environmental sustainability and an equitable global economic system. However, Poling regards God's love as absolutely resilient in the face of suffering, and the church's practices of hope as the embodiment of their faith in the indestructible goodness of God.

Earlier in this review, I noted how Poling's dialogical approach of blending Scriptural witness, doctrinal theology and contemporary Christian practice formed the basis of his practical theology. Very often, however, theologians who take this approach are at pains to move beyond the strictly ecclesial or confessional in order to listen to voices of other faiths or to wider culture. Whilst Poling makes passing reference to his exposure to alternative cultures beyond the church, and especially to those that resist the homogenising tendencies of globalisation (pp. 109-111), it would have been good to have heard more. Very often, wider society is in advance of the church in terms of its commitment to social justice – but we hear very little of the tensions inherent in this or how congregational practices might learn from other communities and traditions of activism. The churches have colluded with the powerful, and although we have a detailed picture of how everyday practices of responsible citizenship keep alive the transformative power of God, this often occurs against the grain of much of Church life. This reaction may be conditioned, again, by living in northern Europe, where the gulf between people of faith and the “cultured despisers” is growing, and where institutionalised religion is seen as a problem rather than a solution to social ills.

The book closes with two end-pieces which reflect Poling's lifetime of involvement in teaching practical theology. These are helpful codas to the rest of the book in reinforcing the practice-based, problem-centred nature of theological discourse and how affirmations about the nature of God inform the practice of Christian witness – and vice versa. To teachers and students of practical theology, they cover familiar ground, but they are nevertheless an accessible distillation of practical theological method.

This book serves as a fitting tribute to a life of engagement and struggle

that has often flown in the face of theological fashion but has always refused to dodge the difficult questions about human suffering. Yet the message of this book is that the realities of human ambiguity and brokenness are the places of God's identification with the world and must therefore be the starting-point for all our talk about God.

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