

The Routledge Companion to the Practice of Christian Theology

Mike Higton and Jim Fodor, eds. *The Routledge Companion to the Practice of Christian Theology*. New York: Routledge, 2015. 450 pp. \$240.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780415617369.

In the *Routledge Companion to the Practice of Christian Theology* (subsequently referred to as *Companion*), Mike Higton and Jim Fodor provide an excellent overview of how Christian theology can be pursued holistically. The objective of the *Companion* is to provide an overview of “ongoing habits, the persistent pattern of activity involved in the pursuit of Christian theology” (1). It is not so much about what “budding theologians do when they are first starting off” (4). Instead, it aims to look at various means through which individuals or groups draw nearer to God.

The challenges of a work like this lie in the title. Theology’s breadth is enormous, and there are multitudes of means through which it can be practiced. Because of this, content of this nature can differ dramatically based on age, ethnicity, denominational heritage, and a number of other factors. With their wisdom, the editors address this issue upfront. They state that neither will all of the contributors agree in this work, nor is the *Companion* comprehensive (6). The intention of the *Companion* is to provide a sample of the variety of ways that Christian theology can be interpreted and the variety of ways in which that interpretation can be practiced.

Higton and Fodor provide some diversity in this collection. This is most clearly displayed in the contributors chosen to provide works for the *Companion*. They range from contributors from a more conservative background, such as Kevin J. Vanhoozer from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, to scholars from more progressive institutions, such as Garrett Green from Connecticut College. The diversity of scholarship is also recognized with the representation of numerous Catholic institutions as well as several institutions from various Protestant denominations. This diversity is an excellent way Higton and Fodor ensure their work reflects a holistic sample of ways in which Christian theology can be practiced.

However, their diversity is not as rich as it could be. While their selection of contributors is notable, all of their contributors are from Anglo-American institutions of higher education. With the exception of Thia Cooper, a director of Latin American studies at Gustavus Adolphus College, none of them appear to have any background that might provide them with an ability to provide what the practice of Christian theology might look like from a non-Anglo-American perspective. While this is a weakness in their work, the strengths of the *Companion* compensate for these weaknesses.

The second challenge that the title brings about is that many individuals strive to practice Christian theology, layperson and scholar alike. While the *Companion* intends to be directly applicable to a lay audience, the academic tone and depth of the essays suggests that it is aimed at scholars interested in practical theology. While a layperson could sit down and read an essay or two, if they are not familiar with the scholarship embedded in practical theology, they will often find themselves lost or intimidated by the depth of these essays.

The book is broken up into four sections. These sections follow the four-fold concept developed in the Wesleyan traditions: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Each section contains between five and eight essays touching upon a particular aspect of each of these elements. In spite of its monocultural tone, when the purpose and range of this book are considered, Routledge’s *Companion* provides an outstanding collection of essays. This excellence shines through numerous essays, but it is particularly brought to the forefront in two of them.

The first is an essay by Brad J. Kallenberg entitled “Some practices of theological reasoning, or How to work well with words,” under the section of “Reason.” Kallenberg, a professor at the University of Dayton, a Catholic institution, discusses five practices of theological reasoning: theology-as-witness, theology-as-politics, theology-as-conversation, theology as working on oneself, and theology as discourse modeling. He convincingly argues that each of these is a method through which theology can be justified.

Kallenberg's concept of theology-as-politics may, at first glance, seem a bit odd. However, he clarifies this concept by stating that he is not making reference to politics in a traditional manner. He is referring instead to politics in the sense of community and the art of community formation. Kallenberg eloquently shows how theology plays a role in the development of community, and how, when done intentionally and tactfully, it can reap benefits.

In his discussion of theology-as-conversation, Kallenberg eloquently maintains the critical nature of conversation to much of theology. He makes an intriguing critique of how modern technology tends to devalue this particular aspect of theology. Kallenberg articulately argues that social media such as Twitter or new technological means such as texting have affected the development of theology by limiting conversation to short phrases and ideas that often lack the depth needed in true theological discourse. Kallenberg uses the example of how conversation played a critical role in the development of the doctrine of the trinity and suggests that social media may have detrimentally impacted the depth that conversations are able to bear, making it more challenging for theological development.

Kallenberg writes and argues eloquently, giving his work theological depth and a cause for reflection, but it is also a very enjoyable read. These characteristics permeate this collection of essays.

In the book's tenth essay, Vanhoozer follows Kallenberg's powerful style in an essay entitled, "Scripture and theology: on 'proving' doctrine biblically." This essay is under the section entitled, "Scripture." Vanhoozer's inclusion in this work is a great example of the editors' desire to provide a diverse sample of how Christian theology can be practiced.

In this essay, Vanhoozer argues that there is a distinction between thinking biblically and simply utilizing a passage of the Bible to prove a point of doctrine. He states:

To think biblically is less about mining Scripture for isolated propositional truths than it is indwelling Scriptures as a unified narrative with rich patterns (e.g. judgment and mercy) and interwoven images (e.g. sacrificial lambs) that come into greater focus as they are seen to center on Jesus Christ. We think biblically when we take our bearings from and participate in the great drama of redemption, in which we are summoned to be actors (156).

Vanhoozer moves on to provide several cases of various ways to interpret scripture, including excellent examples where means of Biblicism, Christocentrism, and proof-texting have been used and have been corrected throughout history. One particular example of proof-texting — using an isolated verse in the Bible to justify a theological conclusion — is when the Arians argue against the deity of the Son of God by utilizing Colossians 1:15, which refers to the Son of God as "the firstborn of all creation." This is often the only reference utilized by the Arians to make this conclusion. To do so is stripping this passage from its context, which is what proof-texting is known for doing.

When arguing against proof-texting, anyone familiar with the narratives of the Gospel or Paul's writings is well aware that the authors of these seem to utilize proof-texting as well. Were they incorrect in so doing? Vanhoozer acknowledges this and firmly argues that their use of "proof-texting" has a rich theological background, whereas most proof-texting in modern times does not.

The *Companion* continues with a number of other essays that follow the pattern of excellence and theological diversity displayed in Kallenberg's and Vanhoozer's work. Each essay ends with a notes section, enabling those wanting to pursue further research on a particular element discussed to do so. The extensive index in this book also enables an individual looking for a particular discussion to find it without combing through the over 400 pages of the *Companion*.

In spite of its ethnically monotone voice, the *Companion* surpasses its objectives of providing a theologically diverse and rich discussion of the practice of Christian theology. It does so in an eloquent manner, providing its readers with content for meditation, deep theological discourse, and yet practical means through which that discourse can be manifested.

The *Companion* would be a welcome addition to any seminary or graduate theological school library. While it could be utilized in an upper-level undergraduate course as well, the contributors assume that the readers have attained a certain amount of theological education. The vocabulary and inferences, while straightforward for someone with basic theological training, may make it difficult for one without that training to follow.

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