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How to Make a Theologian: Theological Education and the Life of Discipleship

Andrew C. Stout

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Bibliographic Essay



Henco van der Westhuizen *Letters to a Young Theologian*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022.

Parr, Patrick. *The Seminarian: Martin Luther King Jr. Comes of Age*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2018.

Rogers, Eugene F. Jr. *Elements of Christian Thought: A Basic Course in Christianese*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021.

Professionally speaking, I am not a theologian; I am a librarian. I earn my living through the collection, organization, instruction, and sharing of information. When it comes to theology, I am what Nicholas Wolterstorff, in an essay from one of the books reviewed here, calls a “genial dabbler” (39-40). Wolterstorff does not intend the title as a compliment, but it is actually not a bad description for most librarians. While we have our various specialties, librarians are generalists at heart. We know (or quickly learn) a bit about many different subjects, our working knowledge expanding relative to the scope of our collections and the needs of our patrons. Even theological librarians, despite the specificity of their title, have to be acquainted with the whole variety of subdisciplines represented by the various specialties in a seminary, divinity school, or theology department. This “dabbling” may leave us feeling inadequate at times, but I think it also gives us a unique perspective on the task of theology and the role of the theologian.

Who can legitimately lay claim to the title “theologian”? There are (at least) three ways to think about who counts. First, there is an important sense in which every human being is a theologian. Francis Schaeffer insisted that the discipline of philosophy, at its core, is an exploration of how we view the world. In this sense, “all people are philosophers, for all people have a worldview. This is as true of the man digging a ditch as it is of the philosopher in the university.”¹ Similarly, if theology deals with our understanding of the divine, about who we think God is, then it is not simply the business of those with graduate degrees in theology or religious studies. In this sense, anyone who asks meaningful questions about God is a theologian. Second, those trained in seminaries and divinity schools to minister in the church are

¹ Francis Schaeffer, *The Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy: The Three Essential Books in One Volume* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990) 279. Crossway Books, 1990) 279. As R. C. Sproul, the great popularizer of Reformed theology, put it in the title of one of his books, *Everyone’s a Theologian: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2014).

(at their best) theologians in a pastoral mode. The pastor-theologian imparts their understanding and experience of God to a local community of believers through preaching, teaching, counseling, and administration of the sacraments. Finally, there is perhaps the most common picture of a theologian, the doctor of theology. The professor in a seminary or university theology department, with letters behind their name and publications to their credit – this is the image that most easily comes to mind when the title of theologian is evoked.

The books reviewed here explore the nature of theology, chronicle the development of theologians, discuss the role of the theologian in the church, and are generally concerned with what it takes to make a theologian. They very loosely correlate to the three senses identified here in which a person can lay claim to the title of theologian. The first book is an introduction to Christian theology intended for an undergraduate audience. It is the kind of book that could speak to anyone asking serious questions about God and how the Christian tradition has understood God to engage with humanity. The second is a concentrated biography that chronicles the seminary years of one of the most important figures in the history of the twentieth century. The third is a series of letters from accomplished academic theologians to young scholars just starting out in the field. Together, they depict the development of a theologian, from the general to the ministerial to the scholarly.

Elements of Christian Thought: A Basic Course in Christianese

Eugene Rogers's introduction to Christian theology – his course in “Christianese” – is a product of the COVID-19 pandemic. Faced with social distancing and online classes in the spring of 2020, Rogers endeavored to transcribe the lectures he had been delivering for nearly thirty years to his undergraduate students in an introductory theology course at two different public universities (first the University of Virginia and then the University of North Carolina at Greensboro). The context is important because it directly shapes the tone and the approach of the book. This act of service to his students resulted in more than simply a series of lecture notes: “My husband observed (as he has before) that I was writing a book,” referring to the final product as his “baby systematics” and his “minimum opus” (xvii). Intended as supplemental reading to the primary texts of the theologians the book discusses, it is designed for a one-semester class that introduces students to the major topics and important thinkers in the Christian tradition.

Not going in for false modesty, Rogers insists that some students in his course “ranked it as the best class they took in college” (xi) – and I am inclined to believe him. The chapters are filled with witty asides and genuinely funny interjections and speculations. It is easy to imagine him delivering these chapters as lectures to a classroom of engaged undergraduates. Before even getting to the preface, readers encounter numbered lists entitled “Why You Should Read This Book” and “Why

You Should Not Read This Book.” The former includes reasons like, “It’s designed for students of Christian thought both inside and outside Christianity, since both insiders and outsiders want to study how Christian language works,” and, “The interlocutors are great! We engage with the greatest hits in Christian thought” (xi). The later includes reasons like, “You think of it as Sunday school,” and, “You’re not interested in sex, death, or evil” (xiii). Throughout, he interjects snarky, tongue-in-cheek comments like this one in his discussion of Augustine’s view of free will: “You may not buy this theory. You don’t have to buy this theory. *I just want you to practice it until the end of the book...* You can go back to being Pelagian heretics or righteous atheists as soon as you finish the book” (131; emphasis original). Like the best teachers, Rogers knows he has something important to impart to his students – and he does so with memorable hooks.

As an introduction to Christian theology offered at a state university, Rogers is concerned with making the material accessible and valuable not only to professing Christians, but to students of other faiths and those of no particular faith at all. He does so by arguing that learning about a religion can be like learning a language. You do not need to be a native speaker to be able to learn a language. You do not need to become a Spanish citizen to begin to learn and use the Spanish language. However, to a certain degree, you do have to give yourself over to the rules and assumptions that make up Spanish grammar. Similarly, Christianese is a language that you can learn to speak with or without regular church attendance. Native speakers have been learning their language since childhood, but non-native speakers can bring fresh perspectives and critical questions that keep a language living and vital. The “grammar” of the Christian faith is the main trope of the book. Rogers cites George Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic approach to religion and the development of Christian doctrine as highly influential.² Rogers is careful to acknowledge that this grammatical approach is only one way of approaching the Christian faith, even if it is one that lends itself well to a diverse academic context. This focus on Christianity as a language also helps account for the wordy chapter and section titles.

The book is divided into sections that cover the topics of election, incarnation, atonement, the Trinity, creation/freedom, the nature of evil, resurrection/Eucharist, ethics (focusing on the issues of sex and slavery), and salvation. He explores the relationship between Judaism and Christianity as he brings the Orthodox Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod into conversation with John Calvin and Karl Barth on the doctrine of election, drawing out the corporate elements of the doctrine in all

2 See Lindbeck’s seminal *The Nature of Christian Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 25th Anniversary ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009). While Lindbeck and the Yale school brought the “grammar” of the faith to the forefront of twentieth century theological discourse, John Henry Newman was arguing in the nineteenth century that assent to the Christian faith included far more than the purely propositional. See Newman’s *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, ed. I. T. Ker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

three thinkers. Rogers's appreciation of Barth is deep, and even while he is critical of Calvin (or at least Calvinism) at points, his account of the development of the Reformed tradition is knowledgeable, sympathetic, and creative. Discussions of Athanasius's and Kathryn Tanner's formulations of the doctrine of the Incarnation are explored to show that "orthodox" Christianity is something like an outline of the most appropriate language to describe the way the Bible depicts Jesus.

In the longest section of the book, Rogers compares the atonement theologies of Athanasius, Anselm, and Abelard, creating a helpful chart to elucidate the views of each. While acknowledging differences among their positions, Rogers is primarily concerned to show how the particular cultural contexts each thinker inhabited influenced the ways they formulated the problem of sin and redemption. This results in atonement theories that differ in emphasis, but which Rogers ultimately sees as helpful counterbalances provided by thinkers with varying concerns. He defends aspects of Anselm's satisfaction theory and Abelard's moral theory, insisting that the contemporary debates "hardly touch Anselm and flatten Abelard" (73). His close reading of their work, along with careful attention to their cultural and personal contexts, results in a humanizing reading of both thinkers that avoids reductionistic psychologizing.

Rogers's treatment of the atonement also demonstrates his attempt to account for the diversity of the Christian tradition. He includes a brief chapter on Stephen Ray's reinterpretation of Origen's ransom theory in light of the concerns of the Black Lives Matter movement. He also consults Julian of Norwich for her lesser known, "wound or servant theory of sin" before ending an examination of the implied universalism of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theory. Rogers's goal of including African American and women's voices in a scholarly conversation that has traditionally been dominated by European males is laudable, and he continues to include the perspectives of women as well as racial and sexual minorities throughout the book. The parameters of that conversation are still dominated by more traditional perspectives, but Rogers does an admirable job of bringing others to the table. Ultimately, what readers get is an approach that values diverse perspectives and refuses to turn the formulation of an atonement theory into a zero-sum game.

While Rogers's treatment of the Trinity, creation/freedom, the nature of evil, and resurrection/Eucharist are fascinating, engaging, and worthy of comment (the pairing of some of these topics alone is of interest), I must comment on his treatment of Christian ethics. Rogers has engaged scripture throughout, but it is here, in his discussion of Christian views on sexuality and slavery that scripture, rather than the Christian tradition (to the degree that these can be separated) becomes the primary interlocutor. In the chapter on sexuality, he engages Rowan Williams's essay "The Body's Grace," along with several key passages of scripture to make the point that, "Both the coupled life and the Christian life depend on allowing the loving,

delighted perceptions of another, slowly or quickly, to transform you” (170). There is a parallel here between the vulnerability inherent in sexual intimacy between two people and the vulnerability of being fully exposed to God. Both are occasions for us to be changed, and learning this vulnerability through the bodily expression of sexuality can train us to be vulnerable to God as well. As a gay man in a committed relationship, Rogers is convinced that same-sex and nonbinary relationships carry this grace in the same way that cross-sex couples experience it.³ Williams’s essay has become something of a classic, but, like much of Williams’s writing, it is often opaque. Rogers summarizes and interprets Williams lucidly, a virtue that he exhibits with his interlocutors throughout the book.

As he moves to discuss Christian views of race, Rogers does so through an examination of Thornton Stringfellow’s proslavery interpretation of scripture. Rogers uses this discussion to lay out his view of the place of the Bible in theology. He notes that placing this discussion of hermeneutical method near the end of the book is unusual. He gives multiple reasons for this decision, all of which indicate that Rogers’s approach is in line with the theological interpretation of scripture.⁴ For Rogers, theological assumptions, embodied in the doctrinal teachings of the church, shape and inform our reading of scripture. He uses this theological instinct to argue against the abuse of the Bible to justify slavery. While Stringfellow (and tragically many others) have put forward plausible sounding interpretations to justify appalling practices, Rogers appeals to Augustine’s moral criteria for interpretation: “Any interpretation of the Bible that did not teach love could *not* be a meaning of that verse” (176; emphasis original). Interpreting the Bible to justify slavery would violate Jesus’s command to “Love your neighbor as yourself.” For Rogers, the difficult passages of the Bible – in fact *all* passages of the Bible – must be interpreted Christologically. The moral teaching of Jesus rules out any interpretation of a passage that would seek to justify the total subjugation of neighbor. In this way, Rogers applies the theological interpretation of scripture in a way that reveals the Bible’s relevance for issues of racial justice and the controversial social issues of our day.

Not only an introduction to the loci of Christian theology, the book also serves as a guide to classic and contemporary Christian literature. For those simply

3 For his fuller views on sexuality, including his theological rationale for the celebration of same-sex relationships, see Eugene F. Rogers Jr., *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999). While he argues for a nontraditional opinion within the church, it is important to recognize that Rogers argues from a position that takes orthodox teachings on sexuality seriously. He is not interested in dispensing with the church’s vision for marriage. Rather, he wants to expand that vision to include same-sex couples.

4 For introductions to the theological interpretation of scripture, see Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). Also, for a commentary series that explicitly takes this approach, see the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible.

looking to gain a sense of Rogers's treatment of theological figures, he provides helpful summaries of their major works. For those using the book in a classroom setting, he provides a syllabus in the back of the book that lists readings (and offers brief summaries of those readings) to pair with each chapter. In this sense, like a good teacher, Rogers does not simply tell you what he thinks on a given topic. He directs you to Anselm, to Barth, to Sarah Coakley, to James Cone, asks what you think of them, and then offers his own reading for consideration.

The overall approach of the book is one that combines a confessional or theological approach to Christianity with a religious studies approach. Rogers neither assumes fealty to a particular religious tradition, nor does he pretend that he is approaching religious ideas with objective neutrality. Instead, he lays his cards on the table, teaching from the position of one who holds to the faith that he seeks to explain. However, as a member of a university faculty committed to intellectual diversity, he invites those of any or no religious faith to explore the language of Christianity. He explains this position at some length (and in fairly technical terms) in an appendix entitled "Objections to the Cultural-Linguistic Approach." He suggests that theologians can learn from religious studies to be open to the insights of other religious traditions. Likewise, religious anthropologists can better learn about religious traditions from the insider perspective of the confessional theologian. Humility should be the order of the day, and the sometimes messy plurality of higher education calls not for more methodological formulations, but "for more formation and tact, for scholarly virtues" (200). We will encounter this issue of the relationship between theology and religious studies again when we look at *Letters to a Young Theologian*.

There are moments in the book where the transition from classroom lectures to introductory text has not been made entirely successfully. Occasionally, Rogers rushes too quickly through an explanation of a complex theological idea. I can imagine these dense explanations being interrupted by raised hands that push the lecturer to slow down and elucidate. At other points, Rogers's text relies heavily on knowledge of the required primary source reading. This is perfectly reasonable for students expected to do the assigned reading. However, the less ambitious reader might be left feeling a bit out of their depth if they lack familiarity with the texts that Rogers discusses. And yet, Covid-haunted as this book is, these imperfections are simply marks of the extraordinary circumstances in which this book was born.

Rogers does make one qualification that is important to note before moving on: "I am aware that when the chapter titles speak of 'Christians,' they might as well speak of 'theologians.' My comparison of theologians to highly practiced native informants is seriously meant, but it's a bit of a conceit, like Aquinas's use of Aristotle. Sometimes you catch a twinkle in his eye." While he spends the book *talking* about theologians and turning over their ideas, Rogers acknowledges that "[t]he practices

of Christianity do of course go far beyond talk” (xviii). The “theologians” that Rogers presents and contemplates are like icons of the Christian life. The truths about God that they articulate lack dimension if they are not embodied in human lives. One such life is the subject of the next book reviewed.

The Seminarian: Martin Luther King, Jr. Comes of Age

Seminary should be a time of formation as well as education. At Crozer Theological Seminary from the fall of 1948 to the spring of 1951, Martin Luther King, Jr. not only acquired ideas, but he began to be formed into the spiritual leader who would challenge the racist violence of Jim Crow through a non-violent revolution based on a Christian understanding of sacrificial love. James Cone reflected on King’s too often neglected significance as a theologian, insisting that “When Americans celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday as a national holiday, seminary students and faculty, church leaders and Christians throughout the world should not forget his importance *as theologian*, perhaps the most important in American history.”⁵ In Patrick Parr’s book *The Seminarian: Martin Luther King Jr. Comes of Age*, we are given an up close and detailed view of the three years that formed America’s greatest public theologian.

Parr’s book is a remarkable project. There are, of course, many biographies of King, the most recent of which is Jonathan Eig’s exhaustive *King: A Life*.⁶ In his six-hundred-plus page biography, Eig acknowledges the significance of *The Seminarian*, and he relies on Parr’s account for his own fourteen-page treatment of King’s seminary years. David Garrow, himself a celebrated King biographer, notes in the Foreword that the “depth and thoroughness of Parr’s research is nothing short of astounding” (ix).⁷ While other biographers nod to the significant role that King’s seminary training played in the formation of the civil rights icon, Parr documents the day-to-day minutia of King’s seminary experience – giving us a unique portrait of “ML,” an intelligent, quiet young man, growing in confidence and maturity. He reconstructs King’s daily schedule for each of his nine school terms (three terms per school year) by collating the seminarian’s transcript, digitized by the King Center in Atlanta, GA, with the course titles and schedules found in Crozer Seminary’s *Annual Catalogues*. From the grades on the transcripts, Parr even charts King’s GPA for each term. Each chapter is built around this reconstructed schedule, with course catalogs providing basic descriptions of each class. Further context comes through quotes from King’s

5 James Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 72; emphasis original. For more on Cone’s assessment of King as a theologian, see Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & American: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992).

6 *King: A Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023). Eig’s book draws on thousands of King-related documents that were recently declassified by the FBI, as well as thousands more primary documents and materials related to King that have been collected in recent decades.

7 Garrow won the Pulitzer Prize for his biography *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

letters, the papers that he wrote for courses, the published work of his professors, and remembrances from classmates, among other sources. The overall effect is a picture of seminary that will be recognizable to one degree or another to almost anyone who has received seminary training.

Crozer had a reputation for high academic standards, and its professors prided themselves on disavowing their students of rigid biblical literalism and inculcating them in a historical-critical approach to scripture. Describing the demythologizing project of New Testament professor Morton Scott Enslin, Pratt notes that “Enslin’s intent was not to torture his students; his end goal was to build them back up so that they could better serve Christian society” (55). This breaking down and building back up of a student’s views on scripture is not unique to seminaries in the liberal tradition. Many students in conservative and evangelical seminaries have the experience of having their naïve ideas about the Bible challenged by serious engagement with the text and a study of the subtleties of hermeneutics. For many people, seminary is an experience that seriously challenges their faith, and King was no exception.

However, for King, it was not so much the challenges to biblical literalism that shook his faith. In fact, he was primed to critique the fundamentalism of his father, “Daddy King,” and explore a more sophisticated and nuanced approach to scripture and the Christian intellectual tradition. However, this northern sophistication came at a price. As a socially progressive, northern Baptist school, Crozer was an ostensibly welcoming place to Black students. In fact, King’s class was the first to be majority African American. However, Crozer was still an overwhelmingly white institution with white professors and white cultural standards. Parr suspects that it was King’s informal apprenticeship to Rev. J. Pius Barbour – pastor of a local Black Baptist Church, the first Black graduate of Crozer, and a friend of King’s father – that led to King receiving low grades in his first homiletics courses. It is possible that Robert Keighton, the theatrically trained, Shakespeare loving homiletics professor, “responded unfavorably to signs of Barbour’s influence, and ML’s grades suffered as a result” (72). By preaching at Barbour’s church, King was being trained in a style of preaching that would connect with a Black congregation. In Parr’s view, the Cs he received from Keighton was quite possibly a result of white standards being applied to Black rhetoric.

More deeply than this though, Crozer’s curriculum bore no trace of Black Christianity. In the course “Great Theologians,” taken in the second term of his first year with George Washington Davis, King listened to lectures on “men such as Karl Barth, Walter Rauschenbusch, Thomas of Aquinas, and his namesake Martin Luther” (59). The rest of the curriculum was predictably Eurocentric, embodying precisely the kind of education shaped by a heritage of colonialism, imperialism, and the master/slave relationship described by Willie James Jennings in *After Whiteness*, his recent

book on theological education.⁸ These issues of race and education come up again when Parr describes King's process of applying to graduate schools. He submitted applications to Yale, Boston University, and Edinburgh University. Yale was his preference, but it was the only school that required applicants to receive a high score on the new GRE, "a daunting prospect for someone who'd grown up outside the northeast liberal environment in which the exam was designed" (167). Contemporary theological education in North America has not escaped this heritage of whiteness that fails to fully incorporate students of color.⁹ Even in the failures, deficiencies, and injustices of this formation, King was gaining skills that would equip him for the civil rights work that lay ahead of him. His preaching, even as a student, exemplified his ability to embody the passion of the Black church tradition while communicating his message of racial justice and the beloved community in a way that engaged the white majority.

An aside here about Parr's qualifications as a biographer of King's theological context – he is not a trained theologian, and Parr is not always exact in his use of theological jargon. He is not inaccurate in his summaries or descriptions of theological ideas. He just does not always seem to have the broadest theological vocabulary. For example, Parr writes a lot about Crozer professors dispelling the Bible's "myths," but I do not recall him ever using the term "historical criticism" to describe the biblical scholarship that King encountered at Crozer. That said, whatever Parr lacks in theological expertise, he more than makes up for with his depth of research, the clarity of his prose, and the evocative pictures he composes of King's life at Crozer.

Parr's charting of King's intellectual maturation at Crozer is alternatively a common account of a student testing the limits of his intellect against a range of new ideas and perspectives or an uncommon account of a three-year period that saw America's most important prophet/theologian develop many of the convictions that would fuel the civil rights revolution. Parr describes King grappling with the question of the inherent goodness of human beings as he thinks through the competing perspectives of liberalism and neo-orthodoxy. In his second year, King took something of a radical turn, reading and learning from Marx, denouncing the excesses of capitalism, and learning about Gandhi's life and methods of non-violent resistance. King would later repudiate Marxism in his published writings. However, Parr observes that he did so at a time of public prominence, "when he needed to

⁸ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020).

⁹ James Cone described his own struggles to learn how to write academically acceptable papers in seminary, noting that, "In the Negro community we talked and preached, even in college. I hardly know how the English language functioned when words were put on paper." He challenged his colleagues at Union Seminary to make room for minority students by "being open to more than the study of European theology," and allowing them to "ask new questions as defined by the black experience." *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 28, 117.

publicly and unequivocally reject Communism to avoid inviting suspicion from the government.” As a seminarian in 1949, however, “ML may have been more open to some of Marx’s ideas than he would later be willing to admit” (99). King’s image has been much sanitized in the decades following his death, but the social upheaval of the Black Lives Matter movement and the ever-widening gap between the richest and the poorest of the world have brought renewed attention to the radical character of his social and political stances.¹⁰

One unfortunate aspect of King’s academic career cannot be avoided. On the issue of King’s plagiarism – well documented by Stanford University’s King Papers Project – Parr pulls no punches. The discussion of King’s plagiarism has centered on his Boston University doctoral dissertation. Parr demonstrates that the habit started earlier, citing numerous examples from King’s seminary papers where he passes off the words of other authors as his own. Noting examples of both intentional and unintentional plagiarism, Parr considers all the factors that could have contributed to this behavior. Sloppiness, the indifference of certain professors, and lack of instruction in proper citation methods probably all contributed.¹¹ Parr never apologizes for King’s cribbing, but he is also sensitive to differences in context that contemporary readers could fail to grasp. Laying out the evidence and possible interpretations, he ultimately allows readers to come to their own conclusions.¹²

Parr also highlights non-academic aspects of King’s seminary experience. He hung out in the campus recreation room with friends till three in the morning, playing pool and smoking cigarettes. He played on the Crozer basketball team, scoring 3 points in a game against their evangelical rivals from Eastern Baptist Seminary (Crozer got trounced, losing by a score of 104-41). He engaged in his earliest civil rights work when he pursued charges against a New Jersey tavern owner who illegally denied him and his friends service in the summer of 1950. He also fell in love. Undoubtedly, Parr’s most significant contribution to King studies is his chronicling of the relationship between King and Betty Moitz, the white daughter of a Crozer staff member. Other biographers have noted the relationship, but none recognized its significance. Astoundingly, Parr was the first King biographer – sixty-five years after her relationship with King ended – to interview Moitz at length. Between his interviews with Moitz and accounts from King’s close friends, Parr is convinced that

10 For an exploration of King’s democratic socialism, see Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Radical King*, ed. Cornel West (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015).

11 This librarian likes to think that King’s legacy could have been spared this blackspot if he had received adequate information literacy instruction as a student.

12 Lewis V. Baldwin is as able a theological interpreter of King as we have. In exploring what he calls the “divided self” in King, Baldwin notes that, “It is also difficult to conclude, based on what we know about King’s character, that his plagiarism resulted from an intentional desire to deceive or to be dishonest, and he reportedly confessed his infidelity to his wife, Coretta, during the last year of his life.” Lewis V. Baldwin, *The Arc of Truth: The Thinking of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022), 111.

the two were deeply in love and that they would have married were it not for King's fears over his mother's objections and the improbability of a southern Black church accepting a pastor with a white wife. Parr documents the relationship thoroughly, combining the personal tragedy of lost love with the social tragedy of the rejection of interracial relationships.

Seminary can be a time of questioning, both practical and theoretical. Why am I here? Am I called to ministry? What ministry am I called to? Will I be able to find a call, to simply make a living? Do the biblical languages, the theology, the theory that I am learning have any relevance for the real world? It is fascinating to think that a figure as renowned as King carried similar doubts and questions. Most seminarians can hope to see their years of study bear fruit in more quiet and mundane roles than the world-changing leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. However, the demonstrable gains of the civil rights movement, King's legacy of nonviolent resistance, and his vision of the beloved community owed much to his seminary education. Despite his own flaws as a student and the flaws of the system that educated him, this should give all seminary students hope that God will use their study to help bring about the realization of God's Kingdom. King's willingness to die for that vision also indicates the potential cost of faithfulness to the calling.

Letters to a Young Theologian

As with most things, the writer of Ecclesiastes is ambivalent about the value of youth. On the one hand, the Teacher offers this exhortation: "Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth." On the other hand, he instructs his student to "Banish anxiety from your mind, and put away pain from your body; for youth and the dawn of life are vanity."¹³ Youth and vigor are goods that should be valued and put to good use. They are also fleeting, vaporous, a vanity. James K. A. Smith, commenting on the book of Ecclesiastes, reflects on what is being conveyed in this passage:

In a way, the Teacher is inviting his student to a kind of time travel: heed my words, listen to what I've learned in this long life, and you will know in advance what I only discovered after the fact. Learn from the arc of my life and you'll be able to 'remember' what you haven't experienced. I suspect the Teacher is old enough to know that, sadly, youth is rarely primed to receive such a gift.¹⁴

¹³ Ecclesiastes 11:9-10 (NRSV).

¹⁴ James K. A. Smith, *How to Inhabit Time: Understanding the Past, Facing the Future, Living Faithfully Now* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022), 114. Smith has also tried his hand at the "letters to a young" genre with *Letters to a Young Calvinist: An Invitation to the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010). For my money, this remains the best accessible introduction to Reformed theology in print.

You cannot receive what age has to give ahead of time. Some things only come with experience. But maybe you can be prepared to receive it, to recognize the gifts of age when they are offered.

In *Letters to a Young Theologian*, a group of senior theological scholars do their best to impart the experience they have gained to young scholars starting out in the field. If *Elements of Christian Thought* is concerned with the kind of broad theological education available to anyone with an inquiring mind, and *The Seminarian* is concerned with the formation of a Christian minister, *Letters* addresses those considering or entering the field of theological scholarship. While the letters constantly consider the theologian's responsibilities to both church and academy, the primary focus is on the theologian as a member of the academy. While all the authors are careful not to elevate the importance of the professional theologian over the lay Christian, theology is presented as a vocation with its own unique norms, trials, and joys. With varying degrees of confidence and a range of perspectives, this diverse cohort of senior scholars casts a vision of the possibilities and pitfalls of the vocation for their younger counterparts.

Much like *Elements of Christian Thought*, the COVID-19 pandemic is the persistent backdrop to these letters. Published in 2022, many of the writers were in the midst of lockdowns and online classes as they wrote their letters. Some merely note the oddity of the situation. Justice oriented theologians like Allan Boesak point out the ways that the pandemic compounds the oppression of the poor and the marginalized. Heinrich Bedford-Strohm deals with the pandemic at greater length than anyone, using covid as a case study to help sketch the tenets of public theology. The book is marked by the upheaval, loss, and anxiety of the pandemic.

There is another anxiety though that is even more in evidence throughout. Karen Kilby states it most clearly when she acknowledges the “worry over whether one ought to be doing something more practical,” naming this the “anxiety of relevance” (61). Do we really have the luxury of sustained theological reflection when there is so much practical work to be done in the world? Daniel Migliore and Mitzi Smith home in on the anxiety of relevance when they acknowledge that theology as a discipline can feel insignificant in light of systemic racial inequalities, extreme wealth inequality, and the climate crisis. Given the crisis of higher education and the bleak job prospects for recent humanities PhDs, Michael Mawson raises the question of “whether anyone should be devoting time and resources to theological study” (236). Despite these very practical concerns, the consensus among these contributors is that theological reflection has an important role to play in responding to each of these crises.

As might be expected, another major theme of the book has to do with defining the task of theology. Any number of definitions are offered. Hanna Reichel

says that “doing theology, as we are doing here, *means wrestling with God and the world* (11; emphasis original). Ellen T. Charry defines theology as “sustained intellectual work that helps people know, love, and enjoy God and the things of God better for their own flourishing and for the common good” (157).¹⁵ While a variety of approaches are articulated – differing based on each theologian’s subdiscipline, cultural context, confessional identity, and any number of other factors – two definitions of theology recur frequently. First is a definition originating with Thomas Aquinas, consistently paraphrased this way: “Theology is about God and everything in relation to God.”¹⁶ This definition is employed by Christopher Schwoebel (92), Kevin Vanhoozer (109), Miroslav Volf (145), Douglas F. Ottati (246), and Gijsbert van den Brink (272) – and I cannot guarantee I did not miss a reference along the way. Despite this definition being derived from the premier theologian of the Roman Catholic Church, there is a certain resonance with Abraham Kuyper’s declaration, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”¹⁷ This resonance reveals the generally ecumenical tone of the essays, even if they are not ecumenical in the representational sense. All but two of the contributors are Protestants of various stripes. Karen Kilby and Emmanuel Katongole are the only two Roman Catholics; there are no Eastern Orthodox theologians, nor theologians from Pentecostal denominations.

The second definition is Anselmian. The phrases “I believe in order to understand” and “faith seeking understanding,” recur throughout as Vanhoozer (114), Denise Ackermann (218), and Cynthia L. Rigby (307) discern what is at the core of the theologian’s task. While so many of the letters deal with theology as it is conducted in a university theology department, this repeated emphasis keeps the theologian’s task from being subsumed into the role of a dispassionate researcher. Even theology of the highest scholarship is carried out in the humble attempt to better understand and apply the gift of God’s revelation in the person of Jesus. And yet, even while most contributors acknowledge that the theologian has ecclesial commitments, the overriding context assumed by these letter writers is that of academia. To say that theology is the process of faith seeking understanding, and that theology should be done for the community of the church, does not mean that the theologian merely does the bidding of church authorities or communities. Yes, there is risk of the theologian becoming beholden to the respectability of the academy; but there is an equal risk of the theologian’s prophetic edge being blunted by demands to fall in line

15 The echo of the Westminster Shorter Catechism’s insistence that “man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever,” is discernable in this robust definition. Charry’s elaboration on Westminster’s concise statement beautifully incorporates the notion of *shalom* or human flourishing.

16 This paraphrase represents the view expressed in *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a.3: “Sacred doctrine does not treat of God and creatures equally, but of God primarily, and of creatures only so far as they are referable to God as their beginning or end.” St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, 1-49, *Summa Theologiae* (Lander, WY: Emmaus Academic, 2017), 6.

17 Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

from ecclesial institutions who have lost sight of the church's commitment to the marginalized. Douglas F. Ottati's letter embodies this deeply Protestant impulse, and the warning is in evidence throughout the collection. In this sense, the academy can serve as a prophetic outpost that speaks a purifying word to the church.¹⁸

This brings us to another issue related to the role of the theologian in the academy, the distinction between theology and religious studies. Some contributors take a "queen of the sciences" view toward theology, but most articulate a soft version of this stance. For example, Gijsbert van den Brink understands theology to integrate history, philosophy, and other disciplines in such a way as to make it "queen of the humanities" (270). This does not, however, grant theology a status that allows it to dictate the terms of knowledge to other disciplines. He bemoans the split between normative and descriptive approaches to religion, insisting that an approach is needed "that connects (normative) theology and (descriptive) religious studies rather than playing them off against each other" (275). Similarly, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen calls for a practice of comparative theology that integrates confessional or doctrinal theology with a religious studies approach. We saw earlier that Rogers calls for "formation and tact" in navigating the pluralistic values of the contemporary university. Here we see evidence of a very similar sensibility in this collection, with Kärkkäinen's letter contributing the most descriptive and constructive approach as he describes his efforts at incorporating "interfaith sensitivity and knowledge" into seminary training (290).

At the risk of being a joyless pedant, I will note a problem of attribution.¹⁹ In the book's front matter, the publisher notes that Stanley Hauerwas's and Kevin Vanhoozer's chapters were previously published elsewhere and are included with permission. There is no mention of a previous publication history for any of the other thirty-nine letters. However, Nicholas Wolterstorff's letter seemed extremely familiar. I pulled off the shelf my copy of Wolterstorff's collection of essays *Hearing the Call* to confirm that I had encountered it before. Sure enough, that collection includes the essay "Letter to a Young Theologian," which was originally published in *The Reformed Journal* in 1976 (as helpfully detailed in the acknowledgements section of that book).²⁰ In Wolterstorff's excellent essay, he offers his correspondent insightful advice about the current state of Reformed churches and the particular qualities required of a theologian in those circles today. But Wolterstorff is talking about the "today" of

18 For more on the role of religion in the university setting, see Nichoals Wolterstorff, *Religion in the University* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

19 This might be dismissed as simply the complaint of a grumpy librarian. I will accept the charge and concede that proper attribution and citation are professional values for which I am willing to appear pedantic.

20 Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Letters to a Young Theologian," in *Hearing the Call: Liturgy, Justice, Church, and World*, ed. Mark R Gornik and Gregory Thompson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 218-227; originally published as "Letters to a Young Theologian," *The Reformed Journal* 26, no. 7 (September 1976): 13-18.

1976, not 2022. His insight remains immensely helpful – particularly his insistence that systematic theologians need to work with the resources of their tradition to speak imaginatively and creatively to the concerns of lay Christians in every cultural context. But the specifics of the cultural context of both the Reformed and the broader American theological scenes are different after forty-six years. I strongly suspect that there are other chapters that were originally published elsewhere, though I am not so pedantic as to undertake an exhaustive investigation. However, even if the publisher was not legally required to receive and acknowledge permission to reproduce certain chapters, I do think that readers were denied context to which they have a reasonable expectation.

As focused on the academy as most of these letters are, we find one surprisingly consistent note among them. Early in the book, Jürgen Moltmann quotes Martin Luther as saying, “By living – no, much more still by dying and by being damned to hell – doth one become a theologian, not by knowing, reading or speculation” (19). This characteristically brash statement from the hero of the Reformation signals an emphasis on lived theology among the contributors to this volume, despite their predominantly scholarly context. Lived theology does not eschew the academic or the scholarly. What it does is to bring a theological lens to the everyday lives, stories, and sociocultural identities of the faithful.²¹ Many contributors write in an autobiographical vein, exploring how their own lives and spiritual journeys led them to professional reflection on the life of God in Christ. This is most evident in the section entitled “On Flourishing, Blossoming, Liberating.” This section features theologians, mainly in the liberationist tradition, who get specific and contextual. Mitzi Smith talks about her mother as her earliest spiritual mentor. Allan Boesak talks about South Africa and the struggle for human dignity in the face of an apartheid regime. For these theologians, the task of reflecting on God cannot be discussed apart from discussing their own lives, contexts, and loves.

At the beginning of this essay, I sketched three senses in which one could be considered a theologian. And yet, I think this is too restrictive. John Macquarrie suggests that “there are different styles of theology, just as there are different styles of art, and perhaps each one can claim its right and justification.”²² Surely these different “styles” of theology would also call for more diverse modes of being a theologian. The novels of Marilynne Robinson are as theologically profound as any treatise; the visual art of Makoto Fujimura reflects spiritual realities in a way that words cannot;

²¹ For more on the practice of lived theology, see Charles Marsh, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azaransky, eds., *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). This emphasis on lived theology has shaped recent attempts at systematic theology, as evidenced by Kevin W. Hector, *Christianity as a Way of Life: A Systematic Theology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023).

²² John Macquarrie, *Studies in Christian Existentialism: Lectures & Essays* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 20.

the music of Sufjan Stevens intertwines biblical stories and imagery with personal reflections on faith, doubt, and relationships. In this sense – and with just a touch of irony – profoundly human endeavors like storytelling, the visual arts, and music making, bear a deep theological capacity. Those who create have a unique ability to help us understand the one who created all things. What could be more theological than that?

Well, there is something else. The *imitatio Christi*, a life intentionally modelled after the sacrificial life of Jesus, should be the end or goal of theological reflection. It is precisely this that is captured in these books. While Rogers presents a semester-long course on “Christianese,” he acknowledges that “[t]he practices of Christianity do of course go far beyond talk” (xviii). While Martin Luther King, Jr. reveled in the intellectual opportunities of a seminary education, the end of that formation was a life devoted to racial justice in the name of Christian love. While the various epistolary writers are full of advice for navigating life in the academy, they are most concerned with living the kind of life that honors God and promotes human flourishing. Perhaps all this is to say that whatever else the vocation of the theologian involves, it is never less than a call to discipleship. Those who would lay claim to the title “theologian” do so legitimately when they understand that it is a variation on the title “disciple.”

Reviewer

Andrew C. Stout