

**THE PRACTICE OF THEOLOGY: A READER** edited by Colin Gunton, Stephen R Holmes & Murray Rae, *SCM Press*, London, 2001. Pp. 495, £15.95 pbk.

It may be age—maturity even—or simply the heightened consciousness of weight and health questions that come with years, but I am aware now of a range of mixed emotions on receiving large boxes of chocolates as gifts. Along with a sure delight, and pleasurable anticipation, at least a part of which is to do with the sheer choice laid out before me, there are background niggles: is this bad for me? What about the ones I don't like? What will the chewy ones do to my teeth? What is the calorific value of each? Something like these mixed emotions are reflected in my sense of this book—this reader in what the editors call “the practice of theology.”

The first year students whom I teach some of their first theology would, I think, benefit from this book in all sorts of ways. For many teachers and their students—particularly those starting out in theology—this book will be a good gift. The task of introducing to the fundamental questions of the theological enterprise which are the subjects for this reader, is often a difficult and complex one, due not least of all the general lack of shared reference points. As a tool, a textbook, *The Practice of Theology* is truly valuable in this: it not only identifies the methodological questions central to theology, in terms of sources and epistemology, but also attempts to give an account of the major trends in contemporary theological activity. Throughout, these questions are set out, accessibly and pretty much uncontroversially, in short essays from the editors, and illustrated from a wide range of theological writings from across different traditions, and from the full range of Christian history. Well, almost.

We are blessed in the Cambridge Theological Federation, where I teach, with the privilege of teaching theology in the context of committed Christian faith; we are also committed to the difficult and complex task of teaching that theology “ecumenically”, in a way that honours the different traditions within which students and staff work and worship. This context gives a particular perspective on this reader.

For in many ways *The Practice of Theology* reflects the dominant concerns of this teaching experience, and the characteristic features of how these concerns are dealt with. There is a proper sense of needing to represent a range of materials—from early Church writings, through the thinking of the Reformation, to modern, and some contemporary, texts; there are here characteristic readings from Aquinas, from Trent, from Calvin and Luther, as well as patristic texts, and views from East and West up to recent times. What are generally seen as the key thinkers in modern theology are well represented—Schleiermacher, Barth, Rahner, Pannenberg, von Balthasar, Zizioulas, Florovsky...there are few surprises in terms of the texts chosen. And nor, I suppose, should there be, in a work whose primary concern is to act as a source book for those starting out in fundamental theological thinking.

It would, I think, be unfair to criticise such a helpful book on grounds which are, in fact, different from those its compilers are working from; the editors are, themselves, quite clear about the limitations of their text, with its inevitably superficial account of any of the thinkers or traditions represented, and its uneasy work of “cruelly ripping” excerpts from their contexts (*General Introduction* p7). However, I am aware that the very appropriateness of *The Practice of Theology* to my own teaching has raised sharp questions for me about how we are equipping people for the doing of theology.

Some of these questions concern what it might mean to teach theology “ecumenically”. Whilst fully committed to this, I am also aware that hard thinking has to be done to sustain the practice of this conviction with any integrity. The tendency is often to replace theology with what is more a history of doctrine: that’s what those people believed then, and these people thought differently, and this is reflected in the way we do things differently now. In the quite proper desire to honour and learn from all shades of Christian theology much teaching falls into a pattern of patristic, reformation, and contemporary texts, which disintegrate any sense of “a tradition” in which we might stand in our own doing of theology. This generous, essentially liberal spirit, is what seems to be operative in this reader. And yet—as the texts chosen here themselves reflect—much of the theological tradition, from whatever time and place, has been born out of passionate dialogue and conviction, and rigorous argument about *the* true way to speak of these things. One wonders what Hubmaier and Calvin would have made of having their words alongside those of the Council of Trent in this way.

On finishing this book I was also struck by a sense of disjunction between the first two parts and the third part. Parts I & II, looking respectively at “Sources for Theology” and “The Nature of Theological Claims”, are followed by a section on contemporary theology, which identifies, in particular questions of modernity and postmodernity, “local theologies” (contextual theologies), and multi-faith questions. Again, none of this is, in itself, controversial: it is rather that, what is highlighted in a through-reading of the texts, is a certain disappearance of the fundamental questions posed in the first half of the book. I am left wondering if those questions of epistemology and theological authority are to be posed in relation to, for example, feminist theologies; or whether, in fact, contemporary theological thinking has somehow left those questions behind.

The teaching of theology at a tertiary (or any) level today is not a straightforward business. As Colin Gunton’s thoughtful essay at the end of the book makes clear, there are, in the university setting, particular challenges for the theological discipline. In many ways, what Gunton writes here makes clearer to me that it is precisely into the areas of “reason” and faith, epistemology and authority, truth and transcendence, that these challenges lead us; and in exploring these areas for our own time we do well to look back at history of Christian thinking. Indeed, more

and more these fundamental questions are being asked by theologians, and philosophers—the thinkers behind what has been termed “Radical Orthodoxy” and the work being done in Catholic theology in response to *Fides et Ratio*, spring immediately to mind, (although not mentioned in *The Practice of Theology*.) For many teachers of theology this reader will be welcomed as an accessible starting place, and shared basis upon which to build contemporary theology on the basis of fundamental, methodological understanding.

But a starting place is all it can, really, be—as I think the editors themselves realise. Perhaps, in the end, it is not so much a box of chocolates, but more a plate of varied *hors d'oeuvres*; if the appetite is thereby stimulated for sturdier nourishment a good job will have been done. But there is always the risk of spoiling our appetites.

CLARE WATKINS

**SEVEN WORDS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY** by Edmund Newell and others, *Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 2002, Pp.xviii + 116 + CD, £16.95,pbk.,*

The Passiontide devotion of the “Seven Last Words on the Cross” originated, somewhat surprisingly, in the New World and by the end of the eighteenth century it had reached the South of Spain. The famous performance in the cathedral at Cadiz in 1783 set the seal upon this format because the music was written by Joseph Haydn and is amongst his most famous compositions – there being an orchestral and a chamber edition, as well as the original choral. Bishop Richard Harris, in the Introduction, gives an excellent account of its genesis, history and spiritual significance. The format was simple: the text was read, a sermon preached, a movement of the musical work was performed, and a period was devoted to silence and meditation. After all of the seven words Haydn’s score went on to provide a shattering representation of the earthquake that occurred at Christ’s death.

The piety of the time was devotional and inward looking. Both sermon and music were designed to foster this spirit. In this particular case it favoured the highest quality in music, but one would suspect that the spirituality was by contrast escapist and private – perhaps more along the lines of the *Imitatio Christi* than the slant given to Christian spirituality by, say, Liberation Theology.

This book, as the title makes clear, offers us a version of this format for the 21st Century. The sermons are ‘preached’ by a number of notable Anglican divines, of whom the most famous is Rowan Williams. They are specifically outward-looking, seeking the words of the Gospel in our neighbours, seeking to find out who those neighbours may be. For the most part they are, I think, essentially successful. I will not, however, offer awards and prizes.

The music by Adrian Snell, as one might expect, is less of an easy matter to judge. Apart from anything else the format itself sets it up in