

Testing the Boundaries: Self, Faith, Interpretation and Changing Trends in Religious Studies, Edited by Patricia 'Iolana and Samuel Tongue, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, 2011

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This book is a collection of essays that arose out of the 2009 annual conference of the Graduate School for Arts and Humanities at the University of Glasgow, Scotland. Its diverse contributions reflect a strong and exciting trend emerging in Scottish Theology and Religious Studies: to break out of a “ghetto mentality” and engage, as theologians, by listening attentively to new spiritual movements in the wider society. There is something very bold in the convictions held by each contributor, and cohesive in the collection’s overall direction. Each contributor tests theological boundaries as assumptions are tested. Patriarchy, interfaith boundaries, the delineation of disciplines and approaches are all critiqued. These diverse concerns and methodologies from the contributors share the determination to rethink limitations and explore new possibilities. It is this commitment that yields the boldness and the coherence of the collection. Editors Patricia 'Iolana and Samuel Tongue are also clear about resisting any trend of the academy to address the public without listening. Rather, they emphasize awareness of “new trend(s) in religious discourse that (are) being overlooked by the academy and most religious scholars” (p.42). Each essay in its own way does indeed “test the boundaries” of theology, with a rigor going beyond emotive idealistic rhetoric.

Consequently, there is also a commitment to use appropriate academic methods to think through the complexities of these realities. For Patricia 'Iolana and Rasa Lutyze, the challenge of the new comes in the shape of feminist spirituality which not only rejects patriarchal religious structures but liberates itself from the authority of religions of the book.

'Iolana has undoubtedly tapped into a rich vein of discourse which enables women to create subjective spiritual myth with personal integrity and strength. Drawing on the work of theologians such as Carol Christ, Sallie McFague and Merlin Stone, 'Iolana takes two memoirs of women's spiritual quest as case studies of the emerging (diverse and loosely woven) religious movement of Theology. Dreams and subjective interpretation are important, but a cohesive force also operates in the shared heritage of female archetypes as Goddess, in religious myth across cultures and throughout history. 'Iolana asks if traditional theology can find a balance and coexistence with theology. Because this work is so new, and much work needs to be done in processing its own discourse, inevitably there are questions 'Iolana does not address about the relationship between theology and theology. Her aim is to challenge existing theological paradigms, and as she says, "this is precisely what makes the experiences contained in these spiritual memoirs so dangerous to traditional theology," (p.28). To explore historical debts (and specific points of conflict) from the Judeo-Christian culture, whose theology 'Iolana challenges, would be beyond the scope of this essay. The challenge, however, is already staked out as a bold and considerable one. Its terms are well defined; subjective mythology-

creation, which draws on Jungian methods and archetypes, is clearly demonstrated to be a new religious movement that subverts patriarchal theology.

Rasa Lutyze concentrates on folk mythology surrounding the Virgin Mary. Drawing on a similar narrative of spiritual quest, Lutyze is clear in framing her work as a reading through feminist and Jungian principles that deconstruct patriarchal religious authority. She insists on the right to a subjectivity that subverts religious authority by constructing personal myth. The aim and the process are both experiential - "to find herself" - as opposed to an abstract philosophical discourse.

Lutyze engages with the psychological/mythical approach of Pinkola Estes' feminist spiritual classic 'Women who run with the Wolves.'¹ Where her narrative comes alive is in her use of the frightening poetic force of Žemait's setting of a novella recounting domestic abuse alongside a litany of Mary.² This powerful way of theologizing through poetic myth shines through again in Lutyze's juxtaposition of "The Sorrow Bird or The Bird of Grief," with the painting of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa in Poland. Lutyze's vision (like 'Iolana's) of a holistic personal spiritual journey for women as individual subjects includes the redemption of a Jungian "shadow side." This would involve creating a personalized version of the myth of Mary to supplant the "stiffened myth of Mary in Christianity." As with 'Iolana's work, it would require another paper at least, to confront orthodox Christian theologies more fully. This corollary would be a painful, but necessary, continuation of this important work. Her re-appropriation of Mary is a powerful start, articulated with

¹ Estés, Clarissa Pinkola. 1992. *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. London, Sydney, Auckland, Johannesburg: Rider, 42

² Estés, Clarissa Pinkola. 1992. *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. London, Sydney, Auckland, Johannesburg: Rider, 41

poetic force as witnessed by her use of the fictional resources mentioned. Since, like 'Iolana, Lutyze is celebrating the subjective and the creative, her argument is enhanced greatly by drawing on sources which diverge from the authority of theologically canonical texts.

In contrast, Jacob Wirén and Samuel Tongue engage more directly with Christian theology to challenge and interrogate both the Bible and systematic theology. Jakob Wirén critiques the inadequacies and unanswered questions of eschatology and the Other in Moltmann, Ratzinger and Hick. Wirén's logic is sound and creative by bringing Paul Ricoeur and David Tracy to address the serious challenge of framing an eschatology that preserves full respect for the other as other. What is most exciting in this article is the highly creative paradigm-shifting conclusion, where Wirén challenges the reader to consider the eschaton itself as other. A fuller exploration of this concept would have been welcome. One wonders if it might have relied on mysticism not dissimilar to Hick's meta-narrative.

Samuel Tongue's essay on the development of evolving Biblical hermeneutics defines its stance by stating at the outset that "apart from certain theological and ideological maneuvers, a concept of "The Bible" (with a definite article and a capital "B") is problematic" (p.127). He adopts the term "Bible" (minus definite article) "as an archetypal term for the nexus of relations that are exerted on bibles" (p.127). Tongue draws on the work of Philip R. Davies to highlight the distinction between theology and biblical studies. In this framework, the Bible of theology is, in contrast to the historical object of biblical studies, some kind of Platonic ideal. Into the gap between the two, Tongue brings in literary theory as a mediator. There is a

Tillichian existentialist flavor to Tongue's argument that the "mobile (i.e., indeterminate) Bible" (Tongue's metaphor is of a 'mobile' Bible, and a 'dancing between disciplines') is "a project of meaning-making rather than an object...often reflecting the needs and interpretational tools that are turned upon it" (p.128). His sympathetic and careful research on the ironies of the self-defeating Enlightenment/ rationalist strategies, and the development of paradigms of the Bible, leads to a plea for self-examination within conflicting disciplines, to examine underlying presuppositions. Tongue's article demands a careful reading, and provokes questions worth pondering. Since he has argued that 'Bible' is a fluid and ever-evolving concept, can systematic theology and historical criticism fruitfully stabilize and co-operate, or is a stasis even possible or desirable? Furthermore, one wonders what the implications of this fluidity would be for the demands of theological education and ministry. In a usefully balanced way, this collection moves from speculative models of theology to challenges emerging from specific situational human demands. The resultant practical theology emerges by moving from the situational to the theological, and gives a sense of grounding to the concept of changing theological boundaries.

In Erol Firtin's essay, the European Muslim experience of postcolonial citizenship leads Firtin to contrast political and social concepts of belonging and participation. Drawing on the reactions to the tragic hijab-related murder case of Marwa el-Sherbini in Germany (Dresden 2009), Firtin reviews anthropologies of religion to argue that Islamic culture is viewed as specifically bound to written religious tradition. This leads to the importance of understanding how concepts of

selfhood in Islam bear upon social cohesion and participation. Reading the twentieth century Kurdish scholar Said Nursi, against Habermas' concept of responsible agency, yields a useful distinction. Firtin alerts the reader to a tension between Islamic subjection to divine authority and the demands of state authority. The need for consensus between liberal democracy and the "jurisprudence of Muslim minorities" leads to a consideration of the model of "a democratic state of multiple minorities" (p.84). Seeing the tensions inherent in this model, Firtin concludes by seeing hope of a more cohesive social trend in "an emerging Euro-Islamic public sphere" which "against the possible exclusionary practices of the modern secular state, might be approached as a harbinger of a new Europe whose boundaries are not constrained by territoriality, ethnicity, and religion (p.85). Firtin's work powerfully demonstrates how theological issues cannot be viewed in isolation from political concerns or vice versa, and how interdependence between disciplines yields a more powerful critique.

Similarly, Maureen Seir's contribution documents the trend for state sponsored interfaith dialogue. Seir's writing is grounded in specific examples of interfaith dialogue, from her own experience within the Scottish Inter Faith Council, and from documented governmental sources. Many of the instances she cites are deeply moving. Perhaps the most powerful advocacy of interfaith dialogue comes from King Abdullah II of Jordan, speaking in the UN General Assembly Meeting of 2008 – "...dialogue is essential, to reveal the commonalities that unite humanity...it teaches people to respect their differences. It opens eyes and hearts to the beauty of

diversity. It helps disentangle fact from fiction. And it exposes the fraudulence of extremist teachings” (p.197).

Seir writes “the past five years have demonstrated to (her) on a deeply personal level the power of inter-religious cooperation and activity to have a positive impact on resolving serious conflict” (pp. 200-201). She speaks from an informed position to demonstrate not only dialogue’s efficacy but also its importance in principle, in safeguarding both human rights and social cohesion. She argues for universal values that can commend a consensus among faith traditions, and does not shy away from a value judgment that faces the possibility that ideologies may at times fail to pass the litmus test of being both life enhancing and compassionate. It would be hard to read Seir’s experiential account without respecting her convictions, and the research that confirms her hope for progress in a difficult field.

Briefly, mention must be made of the anthropological approach of Wynter Miller’s essay on linguistic issues around ecological concern. The specific case study is about the use of religious and scientific language for the concept of pollution in the river Ganges. Miller’s attention to the worldview underlying language aims to facilitate communication between contrasting (and overlapping) religious and secular discourse, and demonstrates the practical value of religious studies as a social science. Similarly, Daniel Sungho Ahn’s contribution charts the development of the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci’s “accommodation theology” in interesting ways that centre on problems of trans-cultural issues emerging in the specifics of Nineteenth Century Bible translation. Sungho Ahn’s historical study raises

important questions for theology's assumptions about clarity in language, not only in the example he gives of translation, but in terms fundamental to theological understanding itself.

A bold move to incorporate spiritual issues into nursing care is argued for in Beth Seymour's essay on spiritual education for nurses. Seymour, as a nurse trainer, is able to develop and test models of how spiritual care could be made part of care practice. Her discourse is underpinned by an implicit commitment to the kind of pluralist values Seir has argued for in her essay on Interfaith Dialogue. The person-centered examples Seymour gives are a testimony to the potential for a very considerable efficacy in her approach.

Lastly, Chloe Erdman's "Nomadic Theology" reads as a clarion call for the building of academic attentiveness to the popularly labeled 'New Age' belief systems that define spiritual commitment as a subjective experiential pilgrimage between (and perhaps beyond) traditions. Her article is refreshing, written with great integrity, and responds to the values with which 'Iolana's editorial comment began – to address "new trend(s) in religious discourse that (are) being overlooked by the academy" (p.42).

A minor fault in the overall reading of this book lies in the editorial failure to work on what occasionally reads as un-idiomatic English from some contributors, although this does work to preserve the individual voice of each contributor. Overall, however, it is clear that the research presented in this volume is new, emergent and begging for further exploration, and for deeper ongoing engagement with challenges to its logic. It bodes well that these new paths are setting an agenda

for exciting and valuable future work, and to neglect the challenges they present might be to fail to hear a prophecy of some importance.