*Conundrums in Practical Theology*. By Joyce Ann Mercer and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Boston: Brill, 2016. 320 pages. $76. (PBK). ISBN 978-90-04-32423-7.

**Reviewed by**: James Woodward, Principal of Sarum College, Salisbury and Visiting Professor of Theology, the University Winchester UK

jww@sarum.ac.uk

All those engaged in learning and teaching will have a system for organising books and resources of information. They may be, inevitably, a number of systems that may range from ad-hoc freedom through to absolute order. I have never had the courage to organise my books according to the colour their spines but was assured that the academic who followed this colour-guided rule never had any difficulty in finding a book!

Consider what kind of system might enable the section of the library to ‘organise’ those volumes that might fall broadly within the area of Pastoral and Practical theology. To give a sense of the complexity of this area of theological study consider the broad headings of volumes that might fall within this section of a library: history and development of pastoral care; textbooks or readers in this area; sociology; psychology; cultural studies; theological reflection; political and public theology; leadership; reflective practice; chaplaincy; ministry and mission; ecclesiology; ethics; self-care and volumes dealing with specific issues (disability, the nature of pain, end-of-life care etc.).

This review article begins with an acknowledgement of the scope of the field of practical theology. This discipline embraces a number of interconnecting fields.How do they connect? How should practical theology be taught?

It is against this image and these questions that this significant contribution to the literature is reviewed. This book is demanding, informative and fundamentally challenging in its framing of a range of conundrums. The editors and authors are to be commended for consistency and quality across the eleven chapters. Practical theology, as we have acknowledged, has a complex identity and a variety of aims and locations. This book seeks to explore how we navigate academic structures that shape and distort intellectual life in this field. It engages our imagination with some arresting images and metaphors. The reader is asked to be a boarder crosser, a boundary walker and even a scavenger that should look for truth in many places.

At heart is this question – what does it mean to be a practical theologian? Mercer and Miller- McLemore gather eleven contributions from American pastoral theologians alongside a Scandinavian pastoral theologian. The areas covered include the theological nature of practice; the use of case studies in practical theological research; the public benefit of scholarship; the nature of reflexivity, normativity and interdisciplinarity in practical theology; racism; the politics and complexity of practical knowledge and the nature of the Roman Catholic contribution to the reframing of practical theology.

The introduction opens up the field by exploring definitions and acknowledging the complicated position and history of the discipline of practical theology. It articulates an ambitious aspiration that hopes practical theologians might be facilitators of change by contributing to the transformation of individual and communal life through putting to work the practices of religious traditions. This narrative holds together a realistic dynamic and tension between academy and context. Pastoral theology involves engagement with the conceptual, the emotional and the political (page 3). Good pastoral theology begins in conversation and community. In relation to our sources of information in the work of practical theology there is a question of naming and even locating the audiences of practical theology. We are asked to consider how far this body of knowledge contributes to the common good in our social and political arenas.

Chapter One establishes the importance of experience and practice is a source of theological engagement and knowledge. Theologians in this field must explore how they develop capacity to show how practice constitutes theological knowledge. A clear sense of distance is maintained between the activity of theological reflection and the work of Christian churches. A broader more outward facing focus should challenge some of the internal contradictions and conflicts of religious institutions. What becomes clear in this context is the significant distance of thought, culture and experience between American and European contexts. There are some key questions for us to consider: What is our experience of theology and where and how might we find it boring, irrelevant or just wrong? How does theology help us or enable us to come to terms with living? How independent should theology be from the church? In what ways theology the servant of the church? (p17) This is picked up in more detail in Chapter 3 (The tension between scholarship and service) as Cruz explores the nature of service as empathetic knowing. There is an insightful exploration of the vocation of reflective practitioner (pp64-5) with key discussions about ways of knowing and the importance of developing enough intelligence to discern what can be solved and what simply needs to be lived with (p79). In this context the Pastoral theologian needs always to evaluate scholarship and develop the skill of making space for adaptive change in patterns of teaching, learning and scholarship especially in times of institutional transition. (p81).

Chapters 2 ,6 and 10 by Campbell Reed and Turpin highlight the limitations, problems and difficulties around interpretation. We are reminded by a number of writers in this volume that whenever story is narrated there are always issues around power. Our view is limited and interpretation partial.We always only see part of the story. We are asked to consider how far theology runs the risk of self-justification and the extent to which we see the dangers of summarisation – and therefore by implication oversimplification? Reed argues that there is a continuing uncritical use of the word theory, which runs the risk of practical theology either overpromising or mispromising what can be delivered. This results in an ongoing maintenance of the split between theory and practice. (p47).

Turpin offers some useful and practical tools to enable students to reflect on their experience particularly if they are being trained for public ministry. She asks how far meanings are so contextualised to the history of a particular community in time and place that it is difficult to imagine whether it might be translated or related to similar practices elsewhere. Turpin articulates the layers of complexity in shaping an account of local knowledge and describes why this complexity matters both in the context of professional practice and in the ‘production’ of the Christian tradition. It follows that irreducible complexity is a hallmark of the practical wisdom necessary for the discipline. It follows that we need to be observers that are more creative and attenders to the multidimensional realities of lived religion.

In this context, we should attend carefully to the social, cultural and political challenges posed by the power of racism and the ways in which we devalue and underestimate the diversity and necessity of looking beyond a particular ‘white’ perspective on life. Shepherd in Chapter 6 explores this (Raced bodies: portraying bodies, Reifying Racism) and has particular relevance in the light of Trump’s election and the decision of the British people to exit the European Union. Here is the core challenge, ‘the vocation of the Christian theologian is to hold tightly the spirit filled, prophetic, critical and creative edge… Our theology must stand with societies most abject, despised and oppressed. In the twilight of American culture, telling the truth about white racist supremacy is a theological obligation, no matter how cauterizing those truths may be. To speak about theology as truth telling is to accentuate its core responsibility…’ (p245).

In terms of listening to different and too often minority voices Wolfteich in chapter 11 offers us a plea to listen more carefully to Roman Catholic contributions and conundrums as she asks how far does practical theology have a home in catholic structures? The reader is reminded about the critical nature of attending to the content of theology as we are asked to explore the development of a theology that moves from life to Christian faith to renewed faith for life. The Roman Catholic tradition has much to offer in this generative task of articulating the content of faith.

The theme of conundrum (as a puzzle or riddle without an apparent solution, an enigma the baffles, frustrates and evades resolution) continues throughout the volume but particularly in chapters 4, 5 and 6. Dreyer (p91) reminds the researcher that all knowledge is mediated knowledge, and that there is a constant conflict of interpretation. Bias, researcher subjectivity and positionality play a role in these interpretations. This is described as a basic epistemological dilemma, ‘the point of this chapter is that reflexivity cannot heal the epistemological wound of researcher subjectivity, bias and personality… Our reflexive efforts will therefore always be trapped between apodictic certainty and perpetual suspicion. This is the conundrum of reflexivity’ (p92). Gotto picks up some of these themes as we are asked to appreciate diversity especially in the areas of race and gender. In other words – ‘through whose eyes do we view theology and theological task?’ (p116). Researchers should explore the significance of power and privilege within their discipline. Kaufmann (chapter 6) asks about the nature of normativity. What we mean when we critique a text as being insufficiently theological or insufficiently normative? He discusses (p137) the correlational approach – what should be given priority in a mutual, critical conversation between human experience – and theological tradition or normative systematic theology? Where does authority lie? Who decides? Some important connections are made with systematic theology as this chapter asks us to consider the shape and content of our theological anthropology (p154)

Finally chapters 7 and 8, written by the editors (Mercer and Miller McLemore) explore interdisciplinarity as a practical theological conundrum and the politics of the theory-practice binary. Mercer asks how are we to define interdisciplinarity and in doing so reminds us that ‘practical theology, with its focus on the lived practice as a person and communities within their social contexts, is inherently interdisciplinary, since this kind of work necessitates not only knowledge of theology but also of human personhood alongside social and contextual knowledge’ (p163)

This takes us into fundamental questions about understanding the nature of personhood and the limits of divine revelation. In dialogue we are bidden to consider that we do not add theology to social science, nor do we add social science to theology. Both are present and interacting in a practical theological analysis of a person or community. Mercer is constantly aware of the complexity of the teachers’ task in enabling students to grasp a complex range of subjects. The skill and contribution of the teacher a practical theology is affirmed, ‘Practical theologians become quite adept, even expert, scanning and selecting the usable element from a much larger canon of literature. We become skilled in the art of collaborating with others who can assist us toward a more appropriate and adequate level of knowledge in a new field we need to employ’ (p145).

Miller McLemore reminds us of the modern divorce of academic theology and life (p193) adding to the authority of this discipline as one that aspires to empower and transform living and understanding.

This volume of essays is to be commended for its range and scope. The authors are consistently committed to opening up confusing and conflicting problems and questions. Together the volume highlights the state of a discipline in process, on a journey of discovery and development. Part of the establishing our authority within the field the theology will depend upon our ability and preparedness to tackle some of the difficult questions posed here.

I return to those bookshelves and the acknowledgement of the sheer scope of the field and discipline of Pastoral and practical theology. This book perhaps encourages us to sit lightly to over defined boundaries and make deeper and more imaginative connections between the disciplines that shape practical theology. While this is not a book for undergraduate study, it is essential reading for researchers and supervisors. It will demands close attention and careful reflection. It is the task of practical theology to continue to articulate its conundrums and to attract a range of voices into its life and work.