**H. Walton, Writing Methods in Theological Reflection. London: SCM Press, 2014. Pp. xxxiv, 199. Pb. £25. ISBN 978-0-334-05185-5.**

Most readers of this journal will be collectors of books. They are necessary

tools of our trade as teachers, seekers after wisdom, researchers and

writers. Having recently moved house, I found the task of downsizing a

library certainly a demanding judgment. For example, it was relatively easy

to let go of some cookery books. With very few exceptions, most of them

were simply not useful. Some of the recipes looked attractive but were much

more complicated to prepare and deliver in ever-increasingly busy lives.

Apply this analogy to our theology libraries: which of these books have

abiding value? How many of the books organised on our shelves are of

any practical use? There are some indications in the developing culture

of the Church that theology is not a tool to be drawn on for the enlarging

of our minds and the nurture of human flourishing.

Heather Walton is one of the most innovative of practical theologians

and this volume of collected pieces of writing comes out of her teaching

in the University of Glasgow and especially her influential (I think)

co-directorship of the Centre for Literature, Theology and the Arts.

The book begins by acknowledging a wide range of influences (including

particularly the development of a multi-centred doctorate in practical

theology) and offers an excellent introduction to reflective theological

writing. Four parts follow, dealing with auto-ethnography; journalling; life

writing; and poetics, theology and practice. There are seventeen chapters,

which are completed with a bibliography, and name and subject indices.

Walton’s abilities to craft words and organise theory give this text a

particular quality. The writing is engaged, earthed and seriously reflective

as it grounds itself in the vulnerabilities and strengths of Walton’s own

life (infertility, motherhood, politics, teaching and writing). In ecclesial

communities whose focus seems to be ever self-preoccupied and inward-

looking, Walton demands that we consider the validity of religious

discourse within an understanding of the complexities and ambiguities

of faith. Above all, she shows her readers how to integrate some of these

uncertainties through creative writing. She both models and embodies a

truthfulness which has energy and a life-affirming vibrancy. If the Church

has a future, it may be that a poetic which is incarnational, public and

subversive, can be part of reshaping an integrity and validity that might

be prophetic and transformative.

This is a good book and deserves its place on a carefully selected

bookshelf of key volumes in practical theology. In all texts relating to

theological reflection, there is a significant ‘so what?’ factor. Despite the

development of the discipline over the past ten years, there remains some

disconnection with putting theology into practice through an integrated

approach to the interrelationships between life experience, reflection

and theology. Without skilled presence and facilitation, we may run into

the danger of sending the discipline into an enforced early retirement. To

return to my analogy, theology runs the risk of remaining a tempting set of

recipes which seem incapable of being ‘cook-able’ into nourishing meals.

Unrealistically, therefore, what might be needed is the empowering

and releasing educational skill of Walton in the room to bring the book

alive. Accompaniment and facilitation become key parts of enabling the

practice of theological reflection. Walton offers us a guide, but there is a

great deal of further work to be done to empower a wiser, creative and

integrated practical theology.

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