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BOOK REVIEW

“TOGETHER IN GOD’S THEATRE”. PRACTICAL THEOLOGY IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT

Nell, I., (Wellington: CLF Publishers, 2020), 170 pp. ISBN: 9781868044962 (R220)

The book *Together in God’s theatre* aims to use the theodramatic approach to explain and discuss practical theology as a subdiscipline of theology within an African context. The book is in conversation with two audiences. First, academic scholars who teach practical theology and, secondly, a more general reader may include students in practical theology and pastors with an interest in practical theology.

The theodramatic approach uses a “drama” concept as a framework and identifies the following four aspects: stage, text, plot, and characters to guide the analysis. It is the core argument of the book to explain and discuss practical theology from this perspective.

The film *Son of Man* (2006), using the gospels, is used as an inter-text to analyse the four aspects of the theodramatic approach. This is used to explain each aspect and creates a Southern African-township context for the argument in the book. This is a creative way of integrating and discussing the argument of the book.

The first chapter provides a comprehensive introduction to the positioning of the theodramatic approach within theology, practical theology and the context of a paradigm to understand the approach used in the book. Theology is about ...

- the **scientific study** through interpretation and discernment
- of the **Holy Trinity's actions** as author, main character and director
- from the **source texts** of Scripture and faith traditions
- on **different stages** within specific times and circumstances
- embodied in a **plot of practices** by individuals and faith communities
- with a view to the **credible performance** of the Gospel drama
- by a variety of **actors** who form part of **faith and other communities**
- as part of a process of **transformation** towards the realisation of God's kingdom as a hopeful future. (p. 7)

and practical theology ...

is the critical and theological reflection on the practices of individuals and faith communities in their interaction with the public practices of the world, with the view to prophetic (transforming) participation in God's salvation practices in, to and for the world, through the faithful performance of the gospel drama. (p. 17)

is well explained and sets the stage for the further development of the theodramatic approach.

Chapter 2 deals with the *stage*, on which the drama takes place. The micro (Stellenbosch), meso (Africa) and macro (globalisation, individualisation and secularisation) levels help describe the context as the stage, on which the drama is taking place. Parsons' action theory is used as a basis for the meso description (pp. 40-45). Van der Ven (*Ecclesiology in context*, 1993) further developed Parsons' AGIL functions from a practical theological perspective into an ecclesiology and his contribution should also be referred to. The action theory cannot explain change adequately, and it is thus a pity that the conflict theory (for example, Marx) is not also referred to. It plays a vital role within the South African context (for example, the Kairos document and Liberation Theology). This would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the context.

The Bible is used as the primary *text* for the drama (see Chapter 3). The texts of the different theological and denominational traditions also play a role, but the main focus is on interpreting the biblical text as the dialogue for the

drama. The main moments of the biblical text are discussed in a historical, chronological order as five scenes. The main moments, as a critical comment, can also be read in other ways. For example, the creation story can be read as a post-exilic text, as a single example. The other ways of reading both the Old and the New Testament texts could be explained in at least a few endnotes. The central role of discipleship is linked to the text as a script and states the critical point that discipleship should be an essential task of practical theology.

The *plot* of the play is discussed in Chapter 4, and six activities (worship, proclamation, teaching, care, service, and leadership) are identified by referring to Acts 2. The six activities are then briefly discussed in terms of their biblical theological roots. The differences between the Mainline Churches and Africa Initiated Churches in their understanding of the six activities are discussed in depth. This is an excellent contribution to help understand, from a practical theological perspective, the differences between these two denominational streams. This is an innovative approach, but it runs the risk of limiting the spectrum to two poles. The denominational landscape is much more diverse than simply these two extremes on the ends of the spectrum. Or, to phrase it even better, the denominational distinctions are much more complex (and often entangled) than is suggested in this book, and thus greater care and more nuance is perhaps required. For example, the growing importance of Pentecostalism in the African context can also be considered. I miss a clear framework, in which the plot is seen through, or framed by, for example, a missional lens. If Nell neither agrees, nor is interested in such a suggestion or approach, then at least an explanation of why not, in my opinion, is needed. Moreover, what would be the alternative? The ever-growing prominence of missional theology as part of the plot cannot be denied within the South African context. In short, this plot is framed, and we need to deal with this.

The *characters* on the stage (Chapter 5) are discussed in terms of their calling to be disciples of Jesus. Attention is also paid to the unique gifts (charismata) of the individuals. This chapter follows the same structure as the previous one by referring to the biblical roots and the differences in understanding by the two denominational streams.

The curtain closes with the last chapter, giving an appropriate summary and conclusion of the theodramatic approach. Some remarks could have been made about the way forward. For example: What is the importance of the approach to a multidisciplinary discussion within theology and other fields of study?

The course of the argument in the book and the coherence between the different chapters are excellent and logical. The structure of the theodramatic approach also makes it easy to follow and read. The book is well researched

and is presented clearly and distinctly. The author is well acquainted with the approach and presents a convincing argument.

Nell proposes a new approach to the academic discipline of practical theology in South Africa. This is placed within the historical context of the development of the discipline within South Africa (see Chapter 1). The book, therefore, offers an introductory and exploratory overview of the theodramatic approach and its implications for practical theology in South Africa. In my opinion, the author builds a valid argument about the value and usefulness of the theodramatic approach to the South African context.

I can boldly recommend *Together in God's theatre. Practical theology in an African context*. It makes a substantial and fresh contribution to the reflection on practical theology in the South African context. The theodramatic approach deserves a place in reflecting on the ministry of congregations and discipleship in the current context. It also contributes to bringing practical theology home on the African stage.