



Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters

Bass, Dorothy C.; Cahalan, Kathleen A.; Miller-McLemore, Bonnie J.; Nieman, James R.; and Scharen, Christian B.
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Book Review

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As a womanist biblical scholar working in the context of a theological institution, *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters* helps me understand my role as a theological educator. Authored by Dorothy Bass, Kathleen A. Cahalan, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, James Nieman, and Christian B. Scharen, this volume takes seriously the concept of Christian practical wisdom (the ability to “render a proper assessment of a situation and to act rightly as a result”) (4). Theological educators are called to instill this virtue within students.

Divided into three parts, the largest sections (Part One and Part Two) loosely interrogate embodied knowing with interdisciplinary conversations. Part Three serves as an invitation to collaboration and experimentation and expresses gratitude for the gift of collaboration that the authors experienced while working on this project. Indeed, collaborative work is rare within the academy of religious scholarship and makes me wonder what theological schools would look like if faculty from across disciplines gathered together to collaborate in their own contextual spaces.

Here are brief highlights of a few essays. In “How Bodies Shape Knowledge,” Miller-McLemore engages the modern biases that separate bodily practices from our modern practices of worship. Thinking across denominational differences, Miller-McLemore ponders a theology of sensory movement that, while seemingly easy for children, becomes more difficult as we age. Realizing that we have a long history of “damning the body and its temptations” (29), Miller-McLemore uses the apt metaphor of “spooning” within the marital context to illustrate “everyday body wisdom” (30). Spooning serves as part of a discussion around how a body

knows, enacts, and evokes love even in a state of unconscious sleep. As bodies lead, oftentimes thoughts follow. Miller-McLemore argues that the wisdom of God is bodily wisdom gained through everyday reminders of death and love together. Since sleep is like death as it mirrors the body's vulnerability, the act of spooning while sleeping serves as a reminder of the love within the context of death. Miller-McLemore argues that there is disconnect between the spooning that we experience in relationship with God and how we traditionally teach within a theological context.

I found two essays particularly edifying as a woman and a scholar of color. First, Scharen's essay entitled "The Loss and Recovery of Practical Wisdom in the Modern West" evidences the need for a kind of knowing that is both concrete and universal, timely and timeless, practical and abstract (174). To highlight his point, Scharen engages the feminist history of the Bohemian Princess Elisabeth of the Palatinate and her letters to French philosopher Rene Descartes. Even though the mind-body dualistic legacy of Descartes ruled for a time in Western philosophy, Elisabeth's recovered feminine voice rightly pushed Descartes to discuss his maxims for public life instead of relating his pontifications only to himself (160). For Elisabeth, practical wisdom had to relate to the practical ethics of public life and duty. Attention to the feminist revisionist history and philosophical debates behind these letters allows Scharen to converse with contemporary theologians such as Fergus Kerr and Sarah Coakley and the "taken-for-granted notions we live by" (166).

In the essay "Biblical Imagination as a Dimension of Christian Practical Wisdom," Bass rightly argues for the concept of biblical imagination as "a knowledge of, which cannot be had without life-shaping embodied participation" (236). As a womanist biblical scholar within a theological context, I am constantly advising students to embrace the "both/and" nature of academic biblical scholarship in combination with their embodied participation with the biblical text. Indeed, we need both.

While I thoroughly enjoyed reading and pondering deeply the issue of Christian practical wisdom, please allow one critique. I wonder how the conversation and collaboration would have changed if there were a visibly identified religious scholar of color working on the volume. While each of the scholars involved are esteemed in their own right, I am left wondering how Christian practical wisdom looks different from other perspective such as, but not limited to, global South, African American, Latino/a, or Asian Christian perspectives. Nonetheless, I enjoyed reviewing such an important volume.

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