[Book review of:] Letters to a Young Theologian, by Henco van der Westhuizen, ed. Bouman, Michiel

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This book, edited by Henco van der Westhuizen, is a valuable collection of wisdom and inspiration for young theologians like myself. Its contributors take the ancient approach of epistolography as a means of advising, encouraging, warning, and challenging the reader in a personal style. The diversity of voices that is the natural consequence of the genre is one of the strengths of the book. The letters range in length from three to fourteen pages, contain anywhere from no to forty-two footnotes, and are written in a myriad of styles, from very personal to merely informative. Besides general advice and encouragement for young theologians, a few common themes run throughout the letters: what theology is; when one qualifies as a true theologian; the intellectual versus the practical or activist side of theology; the importance of making theological ‘friends’; theodicy and theology; the emphasis on theology that is rooted in the Bible; the importance of interreligious dialogue in pluralistic societies; and the connection or gulf between the academy and the church. It is also illuminating to read about the theological ‘friends’ of the authors themselves, which gives the reader a feeling of being part of a tradition of theological tutoring. Reflecting the book’s Protestant lens, there are numerous references to Luther, Barth, and Bonhoeffer, but others, including Francis of Assisi, Dostoevsky, Desmond Tutu, and Gustavo Gutiérrez, are also mentioned.

The forty-one letters are divided into seven sections, which are unfortunately somewhat arbitrary and do not really help to categorize the letters. The book therefore does not lend itself for guidance on a specific matter, which is unfortunate, as the letters cover a vast number of topics and concerns. There is one more missed opportunity. Although the back cover prizes the “outstanding and diverse array of theologians” and many contributors recognize the importance of a variety of voices (see, for example, pp. 33, 82, 107, 145–204), one cannot help but notice that most of the contributors are Protestant professors of systematic theology from the U.S., Northwest Europe, and the editor’s country of residence, South Africa. Without wanting to make this a matter of counting, in a volume that can so easily incorporate a real diversity of voices (as every theologian qualifies as author), it is a shame that, for example, only about a fourth of the contributors are women, especially because this book aims to provide role models and theological guides for “a theologian in all their particularity and diversity,” as van der Westhuizen notes (5). There remains, however, enough diversity to inspire, encourage, and appeal to any young theologian. It is, for one, reassuring to be congratulated for having chosen theology by so many established theologians (as Gijsbert van den Brink illustrates is not at all
common [269]). At the same time, many contributions do not shy away from straightforwardly addressing the difficulties surrounding becoming a theologian and consequently offering pastoral advice on how to deal with them. Such contributions appealed to me the most, as they address concerns that many young theologians will recognize: anxiety about one’s career path, the question of relevance, and the perceived intellectual impossibility of theology. I found this to be particularly true of the letters of Jürgen Moltmann, Miroslav Volf (all three of his contributions), Karen Kilby, Stanley Hauerwas, Katherine Sonderegger, Kevin Vanhoozer, Adam Neder, Rachel Muers, and Cynthia L. Rigby. Examples of more thought-provoking letters are those of Emmanuel Katongole, Bram van de Beek, Mitzi Smith, and Traci West. Given the richness of the book, I strongly advise the reader to take time between reading the letters, as the diversity of input can dazzle and can even be discouraging. To mention just a few: biblical knowledge is crucial; patristics is indispensable; knowledge of languages is important; make sure to have good philosophical and historical training; tend to the needs of your time; do theology that is connected to the church; broaden your horizon to other religions; confront the white self-sufficient man; read the newspaper; have fun; pray; and so on. Of course, most would agree with any of these suggestions, but in the often hypercompetitive and fiercely demanding context of academic theology, eager young theologians might be more in need of the soothing words of Karen Kilby: “nothing is easier than to be convinced one is not a proper theologian and to live in dread of the moment when one’s ignorance of something every serious scholar obviously ought to know will be revealed. [...] None but the arrogant, I’m inclined to think, ever feel fully competent in theology (62).” If I may thus add one piece of advice: if you plan to use this book as inspirational dopamine—for which it serves very well—make sure not to overdose.

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