

## Book Reviews

*Novel Preaching: Tips from Top Writers on Crafting Creative Sermons.* By Alyce M. McKenzie. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010. Pp. 180. \$17.00.

In *Novel Preaching*, Alyce M. McKenzie offers a prescription for congregations bored with preaching but who yet crave deeper knowledge about the Christian faith: “sermons that teach with imagination” (5). The prescription is divided into two parts.

In the first part, entitled “Cultivating the Imagination,” McKenzie invites readers/preachers to an imaginary writer’s conference where, in the course of three chapters, she shows what preachers can learn from the discipline of creative writing—how and what to notice in the details of life that can fill our sermons with imagery that invites hearers into the gospel. This is about much more than finding the right illustration for a particular sermon, although that is part of it. It is about transforming the preaching event by training one’s attentiveness in the course of daily life to see both the human condition and God’s providential and salvific care in the midst of that condition in new ways. Specifically, McKenzie shows how preachers can learn from fiction writers’ ways to attend to and incorporate in sermons dilemma, incongruity, connections between the unrelated, memory, common emotion, archetypal characters, flexible images or concepts, imaginative situations, and intriguing fictional situations (22). Moreover, she conveys practical advice from these writers concerning fostering imaginative attention and developing habits for collecting those things to which we attend for use in future sermons—e.g., keeping a journal, free writing, reading, walking, and festive play (39-44).

In the second section of the book, entitled “Sermon Shapes,” McKenzie turns her focus to creative structures and movement that preachers can use for shaping the sermonic material in a way that it teaches with imagination. The first chapter of the section (Chapter 4) again brings tools from fiction writing to bear on the sermon development. Here McKenzie advises how to create sermon structures that, analogous to fiction, have depth and coherence, are engaging, offer true teaching, and moves from making an entrance to making an exit. In Chapter 5, McKenzie turns from fiction writers to contemporary homiletical approaches that offer potential for living up to these standards. Imagining all homileticians as contestants at different cooking stations on *Iron Chef*, McKenzie walks readers through the room sampling various chefs’ recipes for sermons—

Charles Rice, Fred Craddock, Patricia Wilson-Kastner, Eunjoo Mary Kim, David Buttrick, Richard Eslinger, Henry Mitchell, Frank Thomas, Paul Scott Wilson, Nora Tubbs Tisdale, Eugene Lowry, Linda Clader, Post Vatican II Sacramental preachers, Mike Graves, Thomas Long, Joseph Webb, and Emerging Church preachers.

The second section of the book concludes with eight of McKenzie's sermons. Throughout the book, she has pointed ahead to these sermons, naming which pieces of advice are exemplified in which particular sermon. Thus, by the time readers get to the end of the book, they are primed to see what the creative processes look like in the final product of a sermon.

If there is a criticism of the book to be offered, it is that the connection between the two main parts is not as strong as it might be. The section on sermon shapes feels almost like a different book than the section on cultivating the imagination. That said, both books are worth buying. Indeed, chapter 5 alone is worth the price of the book. It is the best and most engaging brief review of contemporary homiletics I have read. Readers will find themselves logging into online bookstores before they have finished reading this chapter to find more from the chefs surveyed. But the strongest contribution of the book is the first three chapters. Not only does the author derive practical advice about preaching from the discipline of creative writing, she models the best of creative writing in the way she presents the advice. Preachers who struggle week after week to offer proclamation that engages and moves hearers will be encouraged and better equipped to bring the gospel to life if they follow the advice McKenzie offers here.

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*God As Love: The Concept and Spiritual Aspects of Agapé in Modern Russian Religious Thought.* By Johannes Miroslav Oravec. Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2014. Pp. xviii + 518. \$40.00

Butler University professor Paul Valliere, quoted often from his book *Modern Russian Theology*, writes in the foreword: "...an ever-growing number of Western Christians readily acknowledge the inspiration they have derived from their encounters with the Orthodox tradition." *God As Love* is a rich contribution to the perception and appreciation Protestants and Roman Catholics can have of Christian life historically parallel to their own.

This encyclopedic book, on 25 Russian theologians and their relative focus on the biblical theme of love, traces the author's thesis of *God As Love* through three centuries of Russian Orthodox ecclesiastical history. Personally, he shows a preoccupation with dialogue between East and West and ecumenical possibilities, but the primary focus is the religious thought of outstanding theologians of successive generations. In each study, he shows the personal encounter with the living and loving God. His aim is to identify and underscore the centrality of love, *agapé*, in the developing of modern Russian religious thought. He is especially concerned with love in metaphysics and philosophy, "but even more so in theology." The 25 priests, monks, and philosophers represent a chronological pattern of diverse schools of thought, whose exposition on love – 1 John 4:8,16 – has not been defined until now. Many of these theologians are unknown in the West, and their writings remain without translation. The purpose is to "fill the vacuum" by portraying *agapé* as the unifying, divinizing, and humanizing, as well as kenotic, aspect of modern Russian thought. *God As Love* is truly an original work and an exceptional resource.

Beginning with the determination of Tsar Peter I to Westernize Russian society and to control the clergy, Oravec traces the changes of doctrinal and hierarchical dynamics to the present time. In the preliminary historical background, the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophical theology of Soloviev, the opposing tendencies of Slavophiles and liberal Intelligentsias, and social reformers lead to world consciousness and social dynamics that result in the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. From the repression of the Church and the oppression or exile of the clergy, emerges the theological renewal of late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Nicolas Berdyaev, Serge Bulgakov, Paul Evdokimov, Jean Meyendorff and others become prominent after the founding of *l'Institut Saint Serge* in Paris in 1925, today on *Rue de Crimée*.

A notable controversy grew between Serge Bulgakov's liberalizing emphasis on Sophiology and Georges Florovsky's neopatristic concentration on the early church fathers. Both sought a guide of faith to contemporary theological relevance, surrounded by a Western and secularized world. Bulgakov was accused of heresy in 1935 in an inconclusive dispute and died in 1944. Florovsky came to New York in 1949 to become dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary founded by Russian clergy in exile in 1938. St. Vladimir's was located in Reed House, on 122<sup>nd</sup> Street, across Broadway from Union Theological Seminary, where the Orthodox were adjunct professors. In 1961, it was moved to Crestwood, in Yonkers, N.Y., as Saint Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary. Florovsky was later lecturer at Harvard and Princeton. Roman Catholic and Protestant communities in

the USA became aware and appreciative of Orthodox Christianity through these precursors.

The methodology of *God As Love* is of interest. Each of the 25 theologians from Filaret of Moscow (1782-1867) to Alexander Schmemmann (1921-1983) is introduced with a brief biography, followed by extensive commentary on his writings and characteristic themes. Each is followed by a brief summary conclusion and the author's observations or criticism of the theologian's attention to the theme of love.

It must be noted that the footnotes are profuse. In many places they consume half the page, and very often, they exceed the text itself. Curiously, in the contextualizing of spiritual and human development, no mention is made of Napoleon Bonaparte or the Crimean war.

Each of the 25 studies is revelatory of theological insights and religious inspiration largely unknown even to academics and totally unfamiliar in their essence to most readers. Therefore, there is a lot to gain from this erudite introduction. Not least are the eight pages of Conclusion of this extensive work. He draws together in a meaningful whole the main lines of personal and mystical theological emphasis for a "new hermeneutics: God is Love as the ontological foundation of our faith." By imitating the Trinity, the Church Universal becomes a communion of love – a *sobornost* – representing Christ's self-sacrificing love which includes *all* humankind. He calls it "an epistemology of love," which grows and makes progress in the human heart, more than a sentiment, an illumination of true faith. This is the ecumenical liaison between a diversity of traditions for followers of Christ.

Each of the 25 subjects of this study are listed in a Selected Bibliography of ten pages, which is surely definitive. For example, Serge Bulgakov has 24 titles, including five in English published by Eerdmans and others. Paul Evdokimov has 17, many in French and English. Georges Florovsky has 6, including his Collected Works of 14 volumes and the two-volume *Ways of Russian Theology*. Alexander Schmemmann has 24, most in English. Eleven pages of Secondary Literature follow with an estimated 300 entries, plus 16 pages of useful Index. *God As Love* is a factual review of Russian theological history, but also a primer on Christian faith from a Russian Orthodox culture and point of view.

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*An Introduction to Catholicism.* By Lawrence S. Cunningham.  
New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. xi + 284. \$31.99.

*An Introduction to Catholicism* is one volume in a series of books that Cambridge University Press invited scholars to write on the religious traditions of Christianity. The author, Lawrence Cunningham, the John A. O'Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame, was certainly up to the task of educating his audience about Catholicism.

Cunningham provides the reader with a clear statement of purpose in his *Preface*: "This work...is neither a book of technical theology nor of pure history. It is a work that attempts to blend the two along with an account of worship, popular devotions, and, of course, how Catholics understand both personal and social morality" (viii). Cunningham also identifies his audience: "My target audience is not my academic peers but... reasonably literate inquirers" (ix). Cunningham wants his readers to understand that while he writes about Catholic belief and practice, he also writes as a Catholic. The book is "an 'insider view' in that the presentation is made by someone who is a member of the Catholic Church" (2).

While writing as a Catholic, Cunningham exhibits ecumenical awareness and sensitivity. In his chapter, *The many meanings of Catholicism*, Cunningham traces the meaning of the word *catholic* through history, starting with the whole Church, moving on to the orthodox Church, and then on to the Catholic Church at Rome (Roman Catholic Church). He explains the desire of some Anglicans to maintain the title *Catholic* and to understand the Catholic Church as having three branches: Anglican, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic. However, for the purpose of his book, Cunningham explains that we are to understand "*Catholic* in the generic way (i.e. as opposed to the Orthodox or Protestant or Anglican Churches) as is commonly used unless stipulated otherwise" (8).

While not writing a history book, Cunningham traces the history of each topic that he addresses: the historical development of worship, the creed, Catholic spirituality, the role of the Bishop of Rome (the Pope) etc. In doing this, Cunningham prepares his readers to understand concepts such as the pilgrim Church and the development of doctrine.

The book is not laden with theological vocabulary that an inquirer into Catholicism would not be able to understand. When words such as *homoousios*, *Theotokos*, *hypostatic union*, *transubstantiation*, and *infallibility* are used, they are carefully defined so as to be

understandable to those who are not yet familiar with these words and the concepts that they attempt to convey.

*An Introduction to Catholicism* is a valuable resource for many settings: an adult ecumenical study group, a Parish RCIA catechetical process, a congregational adult education class, or a college introductory course on Catholicism. The reader will learn what Catholics believe, how Catholics pray, and how Catholics live out their beliefs in everyday life, especially in service to the marginalized.

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*What Not to Say: Avoiding the Common Mistakes That Can Sink Your Sermon.* By John C. Holbert and Alyce M. McKenzie. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011. Pp. ix + 124. \$20.00.

Every time I teach *Introduction to Preaching*, I warn students to question everything they are going to say by asking, “What does this language/image do that I do not intend it to do?” John Holbert and Alyce McKenzie have written a book and created accompanying videos (found at <http://holbertmckenzie.wjkbooks.com>—available without having purchased the book) that expand that warning into a discussion of all kinds of ways we preachers deconstruct and distract from our message in unintentional ways. They focus on our bad habits in preaching but do not poke fun at us. Instead they help us laugh at ourselves so that we can better offer the Good News to our congregations.

Each chapter is divided into two main sections: warnings and suggestions. There are eight chapters involving what not to say and what to say about God, the Bible, beginnings, the congregation, middles, the preacher herself or himself, stories and endings. But the headings are somewhat misleading because mixed in under these topics are all kinds of practical warnings/suggestions (e.g., when discussing whether preachers should speak about themselves, preachers are warned that speaking about previous parishes—even positively—announces to the present congregation that they are sermon fodder for the next congregation; p. 80).

I should offer a caveat: if you read this book at some time or another the authors will step on your homiletical toes. Enter its pages humbly with the word “I repent...” ready to spill from your lips. On the other hand, readers will also find some discussions in the book disappointing, because the authors do not spend enough time trouncing this or that problem you hear occurring in sermons. When you read this book, you will find yourself wanting to create a bulleted list of all the

bad habits we preachers have that Holbert and McKenzie have missed.  
And this is exactly what they would want you to do.

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