

# Book Reviews

Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Motherhood as Metaphor: Engendering Interreligious Dialogue*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2013. 260 pp. \$26.00. ISBN: 9780823251186.

In a diverse church and world, navigating difference is a valuable skill. Jeannine Hill Fletcher's book *Motherhood as Metaphor: Engendering Interreligious Dialogue* provides readers with concepts and models for developing and implementing this skill. By grounding her work in specific historical and contemporary examples, she moves beyond academic discourse and demonstrates ways in which people negotiate difference with respect, grace, and openness.

Hill Fletcher defines theological anthropology as "a faith perspective on what it means to be human" (2). She challenges individualistic, male-centered theology that has dominated Christian history and remains central in some settings today. In doing so she decenters white, European, male theological lenses and shows that people who have been marginalized from mainstream theological discourse have enriching insights to offer about God, faith, and relationships.

Hill Fletcher's core assertion is that theology begins with people's experiences rather than with an external truth that can be applied to all situations. That is, theological reflection "emerges out of distinctive human experiences, interwoven with the faith tradition, and it offers an invitation to view one's own experience through them" (6). She emphasizes the contrast between a deductive and an inductive approach to doing theology. A deductive approach begins with an external authority such as Scripture or doctrine and proceeds to draw conclusions about human nature and about God. This approach has been prominent throughout Christian history and continues to hold strong sway today. The inductive approach by contrast begins with the unique experiences of people living in their particular contexts. These experiences then inform the development of spiritual practices, theological traditions, and personal and corporate beliefs.

Hill Fletcher illustrates the importance of experience by engaging the lives and relationships of particular women in particular time periods. She describes and analyzes three different examples of women doing mission work, and in each example she makes connections with mothering, nurturing, and caretaking metaphors. First she describes the Maryknoll religious order, Catholic sisters who lived alongside Chinese women and interacted with them in their everyday lives. "Prior to engaging in any theological conversation," Hill Fletcher writes, "the Sisters first offered friendship and friendliness. They had to open themselves to relationship and the many complex dimensions of the women's lives in order to be in a place

to engage theologically” (21). The mission work fostered a sense of mutuality that impacted the sisters themselves as well as the people they encountered. In her second example, Hill Fletcher describes ways that women in the first-, second-, and third-wave feminist movements worked in religious and secular contexts to build relationships and improve the world around them. In her third example, she describes experiences of contemporary women in a Philadelphia women’s interfaith dialogue group. These women get to know each other in personal ways by sharing their spiritual autobiographies. In doing so they show that, as Hill Fletcher writes, “‘religion’ cannot be reduced to doctrines and scriptures, to ‘what I believe’ or ‘what I do.’ ‘Religion’ is always ‘found’ embedded in and intertwined with other aspects of our lived condition” (157).

Themes of relationality, multiplicity, and particularity are woven throughout Hill Fletcher’s book. Though there are places where the writing becomes more technical because the author references concepts less accessible to those who are not scholars of religion, the book’s overall relevance for twenty-first-century mission work is undeniable. For people working to be missional inside and outside of the church, and in formal and informal ways, the author offers both a starting place and a grounding place. In suggesting that human story, subjectivity, and relatedness (rather than an objective truth) become central, she highlights ways in which an orientation toward nonjudgmental listening, personal storytelling, and cultivation of mutual respect creates a culture of openness, grace, and love. Even better, Hill Fletcher’s use of the inductive method means that these claims are not made in the abstract.

Significant challenges related to differences in belief and practice face many Anabaptists today. Hill Fletcher’s approach offers one method for approaching contentious conversations and strained relationships. She questions the prominence of theology done from dominant cultural positions by creating and even demanding space for people who come from marginalized communities. Her focus is on gender, but her method is easily applied across many contexts to people who are LGBTQ, people of color, people whose status is not recognized by the country where they live, and more.

For those seeking a universal theological authority, the emphasis on an inductive approach that begins with experience may present some difficulties or require a shift in perspective. For those seeking to do contextual theological reflection in their own spaces, it may serve to affirm and encourage their efforts. This method means that we work not to fit our stories into a larger narrative that outlines absolute truths, but that we recognize ways in which our spiritual truths rise out of personal and relational narratives.

In her introduction, Hill Fletcher writes, “the story of Christian theological anthropology has been told as if the Christian moved through the world oblivious to

the many and diverse stories that orient humanity to the world” (8). The challenge, then, is to begin moving through the world with awareness of those diverse stories that orient humans in many life situations to divine goodness and hope between and among one another. Her conclusion reminds us that humans are “fundamentally relational” and that we “have the capacity to...know ourselves into interbeing in community with others” (209). When we start with experiences, mine and yours, we can get to different places than when we start with a Bible passage, a confession of faith, or a membership policy. Perhaps we begin and end with fundamental disagreements, but perhaps we also understand one another better and are better able to agree and disagree in love.

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Harold J. Recinos, ed., *Wading through Many Voices: Toward a Theology of Public Conversation*, Rowman & Littlefield, Plymouth, UK, 2011. 392 pp. \$64.95. ISBN: 9781442205833.

I added a new phrase to my lexicon in the process of reading and reflecting upon *Wading through Many Voices*: subaltern theologizing. Put simply, *subaltern theologizing* is theology “from below” and reflects the central conviction that animates this fine collection of essays edited by Harold Recinos. Winston Churchill is reported to have remarked, “History is written by the victors.” The same could be said about theology. Theology has, like many other types of study and discourse, been dominated by white males writing out of contexts of privilege and exclusivity. *Wading through Many Voices* represents an attempt to correct this deficiency by paying attention to themes and perspectives that have often been excluded from dominant modes of theological discourse.

Included in this work are voices from a wide variety of communities. Whether it is Tink Tinker’s critique of modern American conceptions of the “public good” from a Native American perspective, or Nancy Bedford’s analysis of the politics of food production through the lens of its impact on US Latina workers, or Korean American Andrew Sung Park’s plea for a public theology of “enhancement” as a way both honoring *and* challenging the particularity of individual cultures in the American context, each chapter (and its response) reflects the intention of the project as a whole. A theology of public conversation *must* include a diversity of voices. It *must* include the experiences and reflections of those who have historically found themselves on the margins. And it *must* not only accept, but also *prioritize* the themes of justice and liberation that so often emerge “from below.”

This book reflects almost exclusively on the American political and theological