

For published version: Journal of Pastoral Theology 20 (2): 195-199.

WORDS MADE FLESH: WRITINGS IN PASTORAL AND PRACTICAL THEOLOGY.

Elaine Graham

London: SCM Press. Soft cover. 366 pp. £30.00

Reviewed by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

Vanderbilt University Divinity School and Graduate Department of Religion

Stephen Pattison, a much-admired scholar in practical theology in his own right, begins his forward to *Words Made Flesh* by dubbing Elaine Graham “dean of British practical theologians” (v). He lauds her “firsts”—founding chair of the British and Irish Association for Practical Theology in 1994, first British woman and layperson to receive a faculty chair in practical theology in 1998, and first British president of the International Academy of Practical Theology between 2005 and 2007. To the list, I would add first or among the first British feminist practical theologians concerned about women’s invisibility in the discipline. A book collecting 20 previously published essays and one unpublished lecture from 20 years of scholarship since her initial appointment at Manchester University in 1988 seems appropriate.

Graham arranges the essays into five parts with about four chapters each, plus an Epilogue with some theology as practiced outside the academy—remarks from a worship service commissioning a colleague and friend as the Church of England’s Bishop for Urban Life and Faith. Although she chooses a thematic schema, the order roughly follows her own chronological trajectory from (1) early interest in feminist theory and (2) constructive work on gender and theological anthropology to (3) articulation of a theology embedded in practice and (4) investment in practical theology’s public relevance to more recent interest in (5) technology and the “post/human.” The book actually falls as naturally into three rather than five parts—the first two sections on feminism, sexism, and gender, the next two sections on practical theology as an academic and public discipline, and the final section on the post/human.

Much material in the first two sections will strike readers as quite familiar (e.g., problems with Christian views of self-sacrifice, the need to attend to the systemic causes of individual suffering, the limitations of simply “adding” women to pastoral theory, etc.). She names sexism and clericalism major impediments to full recognition of women’s needs and capacities for ministry and theological construction. And she insists on a shift from a disciplinary obsession with the pastoral agent—mostly male clergy—to “greater focus on the cared-for” (p. 12). Her accomplishments in these sections closely parallel developments in the United States, where her ideas might have seemed less unique than in Britain. Her co-edited collection on women and pastoral care, *Life-Cycles* (Graham and Halsey, 1993), appeared two years after the first such US book, *Women in Travail and Transition* (Glaz and Stevenson Moessner, 1991). And by the 1990s, many prominent US scholars had begun to consider sexism, gender, and pastoral ministry (e.g., Doehring, 1992; Justes, 1993; Neuger, 1992; Ramsay, 1992). Her essay (Graham, 1999) tracing the impact of feminist theory on pastoral theology appeared the same year as my own (Miller-McLemore, 1999). None of this overlap, of course, diminishes Graham’s

notable leadership at the forefront of the call for social analysis and prophetic proactive ministry as essential aspects of pastoral care.

The next two sections of the book turn to the discipline of practical theology proper, focusing first on its long-standing engagement with practice and then turning to its public relevance. These chapters reiterate in different ways practical theology's interest in everyday religious praxis and vernacular theology or theology of the people. She concludes a chapter summarizing *Transforming Practice* (Graham, 1996) with a succinct definition: "Pastoral theology is an interpretative discipline enabling faith-communities to give a public and crucial account of their performative truth-claims," attempting thereby to "capture glimpses of Divine activity amid human practice" (p. 161). Doctrinal or institutional forms of theology hold interest for practical theologians primarily in terms of what happens in practice. Doctrine is perhaps best known through practice. Or, in her words, "values and truth-claims" are "meaningful only as they are embodied in practices . . . expressive of the nature and activity of God" (p. 150).

Good public theology itself challenges theology as "a deductive and intellectual" endeavor (p. 198) and shows the importance of putting beliefs into action in the political sphere. Two chapters in the fourth section in particular give readers an inside portrait of what public theology looks like in the British context and Graham's own involvement. She analyzes themes, limitations, and embedded theologies of two major efforts of the Church of England to address urban poverty and neglect—the ground-breaking 1985 report of the Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the City*, and *Faithful Cities*, the 2006 report of the Commission on Urban Life and Faith on which Graham herself served. Despite the national or Established Church's dwindling attendance among the population at large, the reports challenge a conservative government reluctant to devote further resources to social welfare. They also demonstrate the value of religious communities as a kind of social or "faith capital" or resource for enhancing the common good. The organized church was the only institution to maintain its building and services in many otherwise abandoned urban settings.

These first four sections demonstrate Graham's breadth and originality. But it is the final section where she takes up concerns few other practical theologians have addressed that offers her most distinctive contribution in my view. She considers tough questions about the nature of the person in a world in which boundaries between the human and non-human have become increasingly blurred, abetted by digital, genetic, cybernetic, and biomedical technologies. Study of the post/human is for her essentially an "*interrogation* into the terms by which Western culture has defined what it means to be human" (p. 269, her emphasis). Current technologies present unique challenges but humans have always struggled with the complicated shifting definitions of *human* and *non-human*. Rather than uncritically adopt technology as simply a useful tool or immediately reject it as an offense to human virtue, Graham advocates a "reflexive" middle ground that respects technology's creative gifts while watching over its potential to shape and distort. Theology is especially well suited, maybe even better than other disciplines as she notes in the introduction, to analyze and grasp the "language of the sacred and transcendent" as it appears in supposedly secular or non-religious contexts (p. xiv).

So what is missing? That *little is missing* may itself be a problem. That is, I wondered about Graham's principle of essay selection. There is considerable repetition of

ideas, analysis, and figures. In two cases, chapters simply summarize her books. The volume might be stronger if she had put forward what she considers the best essays, choosing quality over quantity. Given the anthological nature of this collection, I would also have appreciated original publication dates at the beginning of each chapter and brief commentary on the context that sparked the research. Readers can hunt down dates from a partial list in the acknowledgments. But for theologians who believe context shapes theology, the lack of attention to factors shaping Graham's own ideas and assumptions seems like a significant oversight. Finally, there is a blurring of terminology for the discipline (*pastoral* and *practical* theology) that is confusing and unhelpful, especially for readers in contexts where the two disciplines have evolved in divergent directions. Her parenthetical acknowledgment that for Brits the two are "interchangeable" fails to account for the connected but distinctive histories and developments (see Miller-McLemore, 2010). The book is on what most US scholars understand as *practical* rather than *pastoral* theology.

None of these complaints distracts from the volume's overall contribution. Graham is well read, well spoken, and has a creative synthetic mind. Her work covers a wide range of issues in practical theology and displays the discipline at its best. She hones its definition, demonstrates its theological dexterity, integrates feminist and critical theory, and grapples with one of the discipline's central questions of what it means to be human. In her introduction she says her title, *Words Made Flesh*, "says it all" (p. x). And it does. It captures the essence of Graham's work and the work of practical theology. Practical theologians are notoriously interested in how practice embodies theology and God's grace. Graham is no exception. Indeed, she carries this project further by exploring in rich detail theology's relevance to society, its sacramental and performative character, and its bodily, non-cognitive, aesthetic, and cultural representations.

References

- Doehring, C. (1992). Developing models of feminist pastoral counseling. *Journal of Pastoral Care* 46, no. 1 (Spring): 23-31.
- Glaz, M., and Stevenson Moessner, J. (Eds.) (1991). *Women in travail and transition: a new pastoral care* / edited by Maxine. Publication info: Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Graham, E. L. (1996). *Transforming practice: Pastoral theology in an age of uncertainty*. London: Mowbray.
- Graham, E.L. (1999). From "terrible silence" to "transforming hope": The impact of feminist theory on practical theology. *International Journal of Practical Theology* 2, 185-212.
- Graham, E.L. and Halsey, M. (Eds). (1993). *Life-Cycles: Women and pastoral care*. London: SPCK.
- Justes, E. J. (1993). Women. In R. J. Wicks, R. D. Parsons, and D. Capps (Eds.), *Clinical handbook of pastoral counseling*, Vol. 1, expanded ed. New York: Paulist.

- Miller-McLemore, B.J. (1999). Feminist theory in pastoral theology. In B. Miller-McLemore, B., and B.L. Gill-Austern, (Eds). *Feminist and womanist pastoral theology* (pp. 77-94). Nashville: Abingdon.
- Miller-McLemore, B.J. (2010). Also a pastoral theologian: In pursuit of dynamic theology (or: meditations from a recalcitrant heart). *Pastoral Psychology*, <http://www.springerlink.com/content/r048377514204q6l/>
- Neuger, C. C. (1992). Feminist pastoral theology and pastoral counseling: A work in progress." *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 2 (Summer): 35-57.
- Ramsay, N.J. (1992). Feminist perspectives on pastoral care: Implications for practice and theory. *Pastoral psychology* 40.4: 245-258.