



Reading Theologically

Barreto, Eric D., ed.
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Book Review

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Reviewed by: Benjamin D. Sommer, *Jewish Theological Seminary of America*

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This collection of essays is intended for Christian (more particularly, liberal Protestant) seminarians, especially those beginning their studies at a seminary. It provides guidance on how to read as a seminary student and, thereafter, as a person in service to the church.

Essays by eight theological scholars address several types of reading that are important for the seminarian: reading basically, meaningfully, biblically, generously, critically, differently, digitally, and spiritually. The scope of the book might seem narrow, and in various places a lack of awareness about potential readers does come to the fore (especially in the chapter on reading biblically, which seems oddly unaware that much of Christian scripture is shared with another faith community). But most of the chapters take up problems and possibilities of reading useful in any academic context, whether in a seminary or a college. Thus the chapters “Reading Basically” (Melissa Browning) and “Reading Meaningfully” (Miriam Perkins) are outstanding introductions to what it means to read actively in any academic field in the humanities. While the examples Browning and Perkins marshal happen to come from Christian religious literatures, the concerns these chapters raise and the techniques they inculcate are relevant to any student, whether of religion or anything else. The chapter “Reading Digitally” (Sarah Morice Brubaker) examines critically some of the habits of reading and debate encouraged by the Internet. Brubaker shows with wit and genuine insight that what can be called “analog reading” involves slow, continuous engagement, as opposed to the quick, discontinuous “digital reading” too often encouraged by the internet. Yet she by no means endorses Luddism, conveying instead realistic advice on how to overcome the confirmation biases that the internet intensifies. The chapter “Reading Generously” (Gerald Liu) takes up a major theme in the study of literature and relates it convincingly to a Christian ethic. Other

chapters focus on issues specific to the experience of seminarians (and not only liberal Protestant ones), such as the unhappy tendency of academic analysis of scripture to extinguish, for many students, an enthusiastic approach to the Bible. In the chapter "Reading Spiritually," Shanell Smith acknowledges this problem but does not indict academic analysis, showing instead how to confront the challenges seminarians face while studying scripture in a context radically different from what they knew earlier in church or youth group so that a deeper engagement with scripture can emerge.

A theme that recurs through several chapters is the importance of cultivating a practice of reading as dialogue or conversation. This practice can be useful for any engaged reading but is especially crucial for the study of scripture. *Reading Theologically* is readable and frankly prescriptive; it is full of imperative verbs that tell the reader what to do in order to utilize one's reading to grow in wisdom and faith.

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