



Expressing Theology: A Guide to Writing Theology that Readers Want to Read

Roach, Jonathan; and Dominguez, Grisel
Cascade Books, 2015

Book Review

Tags: assessing writing | student writing | teaching theology | teaching writing

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Jonathan Roach and Grisel Dominguez helpfully remind us that theological writing should be beautiful, compelling, and engaging, but I am not quite sure that I am ready to join their writing revolution. *Expressing Theology* addresses a broad audience. Epistles to undergraduate students in theology, graduate students, dissertation writers, and “authors in training” dot the text. And the book certainly offers sound advice to writers of theology at any stage in their careers.

Chapters five through seven fill the writers toolbox. Here the reader finds the usual contents of a writing primer. Roach and Dominguez introduce the writing process and discuss each step along the way: from drafting to writing techniques, to grammar, and the all-important revision and editing stages. I like that advice from Strunk and White is mixed with wisdom from Gustavo Gutiérrez and examples come from Martin Luther King Jr. and Qoheleth. Perhaps the best things about these chapters are the pacing and style. The authors move through these technical pieces without becoming nearly as dry as many writing guides.

The more expressly theological material comes in chapters one through four. I think the authors are really smart to begin talking about engaged theology with a chapter on the writer’s identity and location. Writers are encouraged to own their unique perspectives and to write out of their own experiences. The section on sources somewhat predictably uses an only slightly modified version of Wesley’s quadrilateral, but it is not unhelpful. The chapter on audience prescribes writing theology as a conversation rather than a preachment and I could not agree with this sentiment more.

I am convinced! Theological writing should be beautiful and compelling. But I remain a little wary of the revolution that Roach and Dominguez have asked me to join. Throughout the text, the authors attack abstract and “boring” theology as they often repeat the mantra, “keep your feet on the ground.” The theologians among those most often cited are Anne Lamott, Kathleen Norris, and Thomas Merton, all of whom are beautiful writers to be sure and certainly theologians of a sort, but not really shapers of the history of thinking about God. Of course, I do not want to advocate that theology be ungrounded, but I repeatedly wondered if the sort of exacting, often dense, and sometimes technical theology that I read and write would be excised in this revolution. As I read *Expressing Theology*, I remembered myself reading Tillich and Whitehead for the first time and pondering the world anew as I read sentence by sentence at a painfully slow pace. I thought of Rosemary Radford Ruether so meticulously uprooting essentialisms and utopias, page after page. I relived the moment that tears came to my eyes, when after two hundred pages of groundwork, Jürgen Moltmann declared “*Ecce Deus!* Behold God on the cross!” (Moltmann, *The Crucified God* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993] 205) as God became the godforsaken. I hope that Roach and Dominguez would agree that these too are beautiful and compelling theologies. Perhaps their advice will lead some authors to engaging, elegant, yet complex and careful writing like these.

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