

***Nell, Ian 2020. Together in God's Theatre: Practical theology in an African context. Wellington, CLF Publishers. ISBN: 978-1-86804-493-1.***

*Together in God's Theatre* is Ian Nell's monograph concerning a theo-dramatic approach to explain practical theology within an African context. He locates his approach as aesthetic and considers theo-drama useful in theology as "drama is 'story' by nature with a plot that unfolds and emphasizes the unity of action over a period" (xi). His aim is to use both the read and performed aspects of drama to "help shape the field of practical theology" (xiii) and he does so by means of drama-related categories such as setting the stage (establishing what theology is), the stage (micro, meso, and macro perspectives), the script (texts, both biblical and cultural), the plot (performed activities), and the characters (faith communities and individuals).

Chapter 1 considers the *setting of the stage* by mentioning various texts that dialogue with one another, namely, the Bible, communities, and individuals, and these do so within specific contexts of time, location, and circumstances. Theology as faith seeking understanding is relational and can be studied scientifically using available sources that are theologically critically reflected upon. Chapter 2 considers the stage from three vantage points: micro, meso, and macro. The micro stage discusses a local community (Stellenbosch) by critically reflecting on various challenges it faces, namely ecological, ethnical, economic, educational, endemic, electronic, and ethical. The meso *stage* discusses national challenges facing South Africa, namely, governance (economy and money), policy (politics and power), integration (influence and socialization), and identity (culture and religion). The macro *stage* discusses the effects of globalization, postmodernisation, and postcolonialism as dramatic influences. Chapter 3 considers texts, both biblical and cultural, highlighting the role of tradition and doctrine in interpreting these texts. Three ways of reading texts is offered: informative (focusing on the mind), formative (focusing on the heart and character), and performative (focusing on actions).

Chapter 4 considers the *plot of activities* by discussing the practices of worship, proclamation, teaching, care, service, and leading (leadership). Each of these sections include a biblical theological perspective, elements found within mainline church, the African Independent or Initiated Churches (AIC), and improvisation that offers recommendations for future practice. Chapter 5 considers the *characters* by discussing discipleship and calling with a specific focus on the unique gifts each person in the faith community receives. Again, a delving into the biblical historical roots is followed by discussing the expression of *charismata* found within mainline churches, and thereafter the same within the AIC's. Chapter 6 concludes by considering *the curtain closing* and offers a synopsis of the preceding five chapters.

The book is aimed at two audiences with interests in the field of practical theology, namely those who teach it (academics such as lecturers and researchers) and those who may want to broaden their understanding of the sub-discipline (the general reader) and is presented in a format that accommodates both by means of easy reading and substantive endnotes. It can by no means fully satisfy either audience as the former may decry its sufficient depth while the latter may find it slightly overwhelming. But that should not be a concern as it is not an exhaustive presentation of either practical theology or theo-drama and aims to help shape and not revolutionize the sub-discipline of practical theology.

The book's positive aspects include an easy-to-read and pleasant presentation that is logically coherent, an unforced approach that is straightforwardly identifiable (theo-drama), a selective synoptic overview of the field of practical theology, helpful examples of theological critical reflection, helpful summaries at the end of each chapter, and a fair number of endnotes that don't detract from reading as footnotes or in-text citations would for the general reader. Conversely, the unexpected short and repetitive conclusion does not convey a sense of the curtain closing only to reopen for the next act, but rather the end of the show – which it isn't. Although practical application and future reimagining was presented as "improvisation" throughout the book, adding and or expanding upon it in the final chapter would have been most helpful. In conclusion, *Together in God's Theatre* is recommended as a valuable resource, both as introduction

to the casual enquirer and critically reflective overview for the more ardent practitioner in practical theology.

*Reviewed by Shaun Joynt, South African Theological Seminary.*