

## BOOK REVIEWS

Guy, Fritz. *Thinking Theologically: Adventist Christianity and the Interpretation of Faith*. Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1999. xi + 271 pp. Paper, \$24.99.

Everyone who has listened to Fritz Guy or read his work over the years will appreciate having his essays on theology in permanent form. His book addresses issues of fundamental importance clearly, logically, and carefully. An evidence of Gut's tidy way of thinking is his table of contents. Note the careful parallelism of section and chapter headings.<sup>1</sup>

### *Expounding the Argument*

Guy's study is far too rich to summarize in a short space. It moves through a long parade of theological issues, from logical fallacies to be avoided, through presuppositional issues to be addressed, to various structures of biblical and historical theology, and different ways of pursuing theological topics—synchronic, diachronic, and focused (214). But the last chapter of the book is clearly the best, and readers would benefit from reading it first. As Guy describes it, theological thinking must be tripolar: it must include careful reflection on “the Christian gospel, our spiritual center; our cultural context, where we live, worship, witness, and serve; and our Adventist heritage, the foundation of our theological identity” (225).

It is important to realize that a tripolar conception of theological thinking is not the same as a tripartite division of the theological task, or a mapping of the theological territory. When we think theologically about any topic, Guy argues, attention to the gospel, to culture, and to our denominational heritage will all play a role. They cannot be separated because they are all dimensions or aspects of our religious identity.<sup>2</sup> We cannot extract ourselves from our culture or our

<sup>1</sup>Table of contents:

#### **Explaining the activity**

1. What theological thinking actually is

#### **Exploring the task**

2. Why everyone should think theologically
3. How theological thinking should begin
4. Why theological thinking is open-ended
5. how to think with intellectual integrity

#### **Explaining the ingredients**

6. How Scripture should function
7. What else is involved
8. How culture makes a difference

#### **Envisioning the work**

9. What logical presuppositions need to be identified
10. What forms theological thinking can take
11. Why tripolar thinking is essential.

<sup>2</sup>Guy, 250-251, states: “The three ‘poles’ of Adventist theological thinking . . . are not separate from each other and do not represent separate tasks. Rather, Adventist theology is a single task—one comprehensive, integrated activity of interpreting faith, albeit with three

denominational background when we think nor should we try. The important thing is to be aware of their influence and their proper roles, so we can maximize their appropriate contribution.

As Guy describes the gospel, its central element is the notion that God is universal love, and that this deserves a preeminent role in religious reflection. His remarks on cultural context express one of the pervasive concerns of the book, namely, that we cannot think about anything, including our faith, apart from the situation in which we find ourselves. And his suggestive account of the Adventist heritage serves as a programmatic theological essay of its own. The comments on sabbath, advent hope, the ministry of Christ, human wholeness, and especially on truth, not only engender a deep appreciation for the Adventist perspective, they provide exciting glimpses of what a full-fledged Adventist theology might look like.

Another important feature of Guy's proposal is the way he relates the Adventist heritage to the Christian gospel. While he affirms the importance of authentic Adventism, being Adventist is a way of being Christian, not something other than or more than being Christian. And the features which we share with Christianity in general are more fundamental, more important, than the distinctives that set us apart (229, 251).

### *Theology as Craft*

One of the most helpful aspects of the discussion is Guy's description of theological thinking as something that all serious Christians not only should but can do. It is not the province of the specialist alone. Like every human endeavor, it has its superstars, figures whose ideas are widely discussed, sometimes for centuries. But these are rare exceptions. Theology, to use Guy's distinction, may be a profession, but theological thinking is not.<sup>3</sup> It is accessible to every dedicated church member. In this respect, theology is more like a craft than an art. You don't have to be a genius to do theology. The required skills are accessible to all. You just have to be willing to put in the time to acquire them.<sup>4</sup>

### *Expanding the Discussion*

Although Guy's book makes a number of helpful points, it also raises a number of important questions.

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fundamental concerns. . . . For the whole point of the metaphor of polarity is to insist that the concerns associated with each of the three poles should be continually recognized and addressed in our collective interpretation of faith."

<sup>3</sup> Schubert M. Ogden, in "Toward Doing Theology," states: "A profession is distinguished from a trade or a craft only insofar as the practice of it is informed by a proper theory" (*Journal of Religion* 75 [1995]: 13).

<sup>4</sup> It could be argued that theological thinking is like a craft in other ways, too. It is best learned not through theory, but through practice, specifically, by repeated contact with those who know the craft well and communicate their skills effectively. And like a craft, theological thinking of the sort Guy describes is typically done in a somewhat "ad hoc" way, by addressing concrete problems as they arise rather than constructing a theoretical edifice.

### *The Audience*

I am not sure this project quite achieves Guy's objectives. His intended audience is the "serious general reader." But I am not convinced that's who will profit most from it. When people say, "I'm not writing a book for experts," the subtext is usually, "but they *will* be by the time they finish reading this." In spite of Guy's declared intentions, this is not a how-to book for the general church member. It is a manual for professionals. It is a helpful discussion for people who already have a pretty good idea of what theology involves. In fact, I think it provides an excellent description of what a good ministerial education should do—acquaint students with all the facets of theological inquiry in ways that uplift the life of the community.

I am particularly interested in the way this book might serve the needs of Adventist pastors. And I am curious that there is very little said here about the pastor's role in thinking theologically. After all, who is the person most likely to assist the church members in this area of their lives? Guy's book shows that theology plays a pastoral role in the life of the community. But the pastor also plays a theological role, and I would like to see that aspect of ministerial service developed here.

Guy's proposal also raises important questions about Adventist education. If thinking theologically is something everyone in the church should do, then training people to think theologically should be a high priority in the church. In this connection, we need to hear more about the distinctive role of Adventist schools, specifically colleges and seminaries, as places where this work should be carried out. The fundamental task of Adventist education is arguably to do precisely what Guy describes as theological thinking. That is, to encourage and equip young church members to think carefully through their beliefs, with professional assistance in light of the challenges these beliefs face in the contemporary world. Educators need to hear Guy's call for thinking theologically.

### *The Church as Theological Community*

While emphasizing that every member of the church should think theologically, Guy also describes theology as a function of the church as a whole. He speaks of "the community's theological vocation" and calls for a "community-wide discussion" (180, 43). And at the end of chapter 7, he remarks: "Everything I have said here about individual religious experience as an ingredient in theology has parallel in the life of the community of faith: the shared experience of the community is a significant ingredient in its collective understanding of faith" (156). Well and good, but how does this work? Just how does the community *as a community* do its thinking? What are the organs of theological communication? What are the goals of theological interaction?

In this connection, Guy speaks of theological thinking as a professionally assisted activity, and says some helpful things about the contributions that those whose "vocation is the ministry of theology" can make (40-41). One of them is "to identify major theological issues" that should be "addressed by the community as a whole." But just how does the community as a whole address these issues? And how does the community as a whole make its decisions? We need to hear more about the way in which "the community as a whole, as distinct from its organizational and institutional structures" carries on theological conversation (9).

*Experience as a Theological Resource*

Guy's discussion overall focuses predominantly on Adventist beliefs. Theological thinking is surely an intellectual enterprise and this methodological proposal consists of thinking about how we ought to think. In this connection we have chapters on how to analyze beliefs, determine their meaning, assess their truth. But Guy also tells us that our theology should arise from what the community of faith "experiences" and "practices," not simply what it believes (38), and he identifies "personal-experiential ingredients" in theology (156-157). We need to hear more about this connection between experience and theology. How do we cull or extract theological convictions from the rich matrix of personal and communal religious experience? This is a more pressing theological task than analyzing explicit beliefs. It is also more difficult. A community's beliefs are only a part of its religious dynamic. They are intimately connected with other factors, and these factors deserve attention, too.

Although Guy portrays theology as a fundamentally intellectual activity, it has other dimensions too, and these need exploration, particularly if the intended audience is general church members. This would be a good place to explore the interaction between theology and worship. There are theological proposals that devote significant attention to the church's liturgical life as the place where theology is enacted.<sup>5</sup> But Guy says little about the corporate worship of church as a theological activity. He says more about ethical issues as a theological concern (232, 248), but it would be helpful to hear more from him in this regard as well.<sup>6</sup>

*Theology as Interpretation*

The key word on the cover of Guy's book is *interpretation*. It points to a particular configuration of the theological task, and in our current context this raises questions that cry out for discussion.

Behind this configuration lies a consistent emphasis in *Thinking Theologically*. We are willy-nilly citizens of our time, inhabitants of our cultural world, and we can no more depart this setting than we could change our address to another planet. All thought and experience take place within a framework of inherited and largely unrecognized assumptions. And our cultural perspective is with us whenever we approach the gospel, and whenever we attempt to communicate it to others. We cannot speak effectively about the gospel to anyone without taking into account his or her cultural setting as well as our own. As Guy says: "Our culture is, whether we like it or not and whether we admit it or not, a significant ingredient in our interpretation of faith" (160). "No one can live in the contemporary world without breathing its intellectual atmosphere anymore than one can live in a place without inhaling its air" (236-237).

Accordingly when we describe the task of theology (or of theological thinking) as interpretation, it implies a work of mediation. The interpreter

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Don E. Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, the systematic theology of James W. McClendon, which devotes vol. 1 to ethics and vol. 2 to doctrine (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

undertakes to mediate between the faith of the ages and men and women who live in the twenty-first century. As Guy put it: "The constructive way of being theologically relevant is to take seriously the need both to understand the contemporary world of knowledge, beliefs and values, and to understand (and be true to) the gospel within this world" (236).

With this view of things, Guy stands in the tradition of theologians who see their goal as mediating between the gospel and the contemporary world. Whether we describe the poles of theological thinking as message and situation (Paul Tillich),<sup>7</sup> message and existence (Langdon Gilkey),<sup>8</sup> or religion and culture (Bernard Lonergan),<sup>9</sup> the essential strategy is the same. The theological thinker moves between the gospel and the modern mind. His or her task is to render the contents of faith intelligible within our cultural context. This gives theology a bipolar configuration. As Schubert M. Ogden put it, theological proposals must satisfy two criteria, "appropriateness and credibility." They must represent the same understanding of faith as expressed in "normative Christian witness." They must also meet "the relevant conditions of truth universally established with human existence."<sup>10</sup>

The problem for theological thinking is the relative unintelligibility of the original and originating expressions of the Christian faith to secular persons of the twenty-first century. One solution is to rephrase the biblical and historical material in terms and categories that make the relatively unfamiliar more accessible.

Those undertaking this task face certain hazards. There is always the danger that the message may be lost in the translation. Paul Tillich acknowledged that exchanging the traditional language for philosophical and psychological concepts in his method of correlation runs the risk of losing the substance of the Christian message.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Guy acknowledges that "contextualization is not risk-free." It carries with it the possibility of "letting the context control the content of our theology" (236).

In recent decades, a number of Christian thinkers have mounted a vigorous protest to this way of looking at things. They want to "reverse the trend in modern Christianity of accommodation to culture." In their view, the attempt at interpretation has cost Christianity its unique voice and reduced it to an echo of the world around it. Their critique goes roughly like this. Modern theology is "shaped by the Enlightenment's demand for a ground common to all rational

<sup>7</sup>Paul Tillich states: "A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation. Theology moves back and forth between two poles, the eternal truth of its foundation and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received" (*Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-1963), 1:3).

<sup>8</sup>Langdon Gilkey, *Message and Existence: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1979).

<sup>9</sup>Bernard Lonergan states: "A theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix" (*Method in Theology* [New York: Herder and Herder, 1972], xi).

<sup>10</sup>Schubert M. Ogden, *On Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 4-5.

<sup>11</sup>Tillich, 3:4.

beings."<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, God becomes a way to thematize our essential human religiosity. Christ becomes a symbol of the authentic humanity available to all of us. And the Bible loses its authoritative voice. When Guy says that "the answers to some religious questions are logically prior to the interpretation of faith and even to the experience of faith itself," and speaks of "a theologically neutral standpoint, outside of faith," and "basic religious belief," he reflects the Enlightenment mentality to which these critics object (183, 195).

As they see it, the goal of theology is not to find ways to render the claims of the gospel intelligible to the modern mind, but to bring our minds into conformity to the gospel. In other words, the theological task is to adapt the framework of our thinking to the contents of Scripture, not the other way around. Postliberals embrace "Christianity's unique and historical particularity," and they propose a hermeneutic in which "the scriptural world structures the church's cosmos and identity." "Rather than translating Scripture into an external and alien frame of reference, which devalues and undermines its normative exposition and eventually produces an accommodation to culture, the postliberals call for an intratextual theology that finds the meaning of the Christian language within the text."<sup>13</sup>

To etch the contours of his position more clearly, it would be helpful if Guy answered such questions. We must avoid a narrow biblicism, but we need to be attentive to the biblical modes of thought, to the narrative patterns of biblical expression, and to the desire to make every thought captive to Christ.

I agree with a friend of mine who once said: "Nothing is more practical than a good theory." But we need praxis as well as theory. I urge Guy to continue his theological work by fulfilling the practical promise that *Thinking Theologically* provides, and by extending the constructive theological work outlined in his programmatic final chapter. Guy has shown us around his shop, defended the importance of theology, described its objectives, praised its values, appraised its challenges, summarized its history, and demonstrated the impressive array of tools at his disposal. Now, let's hope, he will turn on the equipment and build us something more.

### *Extending the Effort*

Books on theological method are often symptoms of theological malaise. Whenever Christian thinkers run out of interesting things to say, they seem to spend their time spinning theories about what it means to say something interesting. They offer people the sort of thing Jeffery Stout disparages as "seemingly endless methodological foreplay." Instead of robust expressions of religious faith, they merely give the cultured despisers of religion less and less to disbelieve.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, books on theological method may point to something altogether different. They may show that a church feels a fresh burst of energy.

<sup>12</sup>Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 11, 10.

<sup>13</sup>Phillips and Okholm, 13.

<sup>14</sup>Jeffery Stout, *The Flight From Authority: Religion, Morality and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 147.

They may also indicate that the community has acquired a new level of maturity, that its members have come to realize that reflecting carefully on their faith and life can enrich their experience and enhance their witness.

I hope that Guy's book is an indication that Adventism has reached a point where it can confidently survey the resources at its disposal, think methodically about its task, and develop an expression of its faith and life that will do justice to the vitality of the movement—to the breadth of its vision and the depth of its convictions. But only time will tell.

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Dederen, Raoul. *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*. Commentary Reference Series, vol. 12. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000. xxiv+1027 pp. Hardcover, \$37.95.

Under the skillful editorship of Raoul Dederen, Emeritus Professor of Theology at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* consists of twenty-eight chapters articulately addressing all the major doctrines of Christianity and the distinctive doctrines of Adventism. The subjects of these chapters closely parallel those of the SDA Statement of Fundamental Beliefs. The chapters were written by twenty-seven contributors, with the editor authoring the two chapters on Christology and ecclesiology. This *Handbook*, representing a wide diversity of scholarly disciplines, was ten years in the making. It was produced in cooperation with the Biblical Research Institute Committee, which reviewed each chapter. "The aim of the editorial staff and contributors has been to produce a work of reference written in a spirit of unqualified loyalty to the Scriptures as the written Word of God, in the hope that these pages will be fruitful for personal reflection in faith and practice" (xi).

Each chapter includes four sections. The first section, and by far the most prominent, presents a given subject from a scriptural perspective. A second section highlights the historical and theological developments of the doctrine. The last two sections offer a selection of quotations from Ellen G. White and a short selected bibliography. Given the high caliber of detailed biblical and theological studies found in the first two sections, the third section on Ellen White's thought is a disappointment. Only a few chapters offer commentary on her perspectives, while the rest provide only quotations. This gives an unfortunate semblance of proof-text methodology when it comes to Ellen White, a methodology that many are consciously trying to get away from.

One of the great assets of this work is its theological strength. To the editor's credit, the different authors' theological contributions are well linked together so that many chapters build on each other. This volume is focused on its intended theological purpose. Thus the chapters on "Revelation and Inspiration" and "Biblical Interpretation" convey a clear and consistent theological approach. The same can be said of the chapters on the "Doctrine of Man," "Sin," and "Salvation."

Throughout the *Handbook* one finds evidences that common beliefs are shared by Adventists and many other Christians on such doctrines as the infallibility of Scripture, an Arminian/Wesleyan understanding of the doctrines