

**THEOLOGIANS IN THEIR OWN
WORDS**, edited by Derek R. Nelson,
Joshua M. Moritz, and Ted Peters. Minneap-
olis: Fortress, 2013. Pp. 288. \$29.00 (paper).

It has been said by some that a work of art should be regarded on its own terms without needing to know anything about the character of the artist who created it. According to this view the work stands on its own; and viewers are on their own to enjoy and interpret. Yet we all know that there is an unquenchable desire to know things about the lives of artists and celebrities. *People* magazine and supermarket tabloids bear witness to this "need to know." These media intimate that our perception of a work is enhanced if we know something about the one who created it. We are inclined to go in search of information about artists like Rembrandt and Andy Warhol, and we seek out gossip about such stars as Marilyn Monroe and Brad Pitt, believing that the more we know

about who they are, the more we will appreciate what they do.

The editors of *Theologians in Their Own Words* have slaked this thirst by compiling twenty-three relatively brief autobiographical essays by theological thinkers of the last several decades. We all have stories about the experiences and persons that have shaped our lives and thinking. The editors of this book confirm and commend the value of theological autobiography by referring to such historical persons as Augustine and Margaret Kempe. They are convinced that theological autobiographies “are not just statements about a theologian, but are also genuine vehicles of theological reflection” (9).

The essays are relatively brief and informative, some of them even moving (though none possesses the spiritual gravitas of Augustine or Julian of Norwich). The longest essay is an affective piece (twenty pages) by Marilyn McCord Adams in which she affirms that philosophy is and ought to be the backbone of theology, while citing Julian of Norwich’s conviction that “sin is at bottom not rebellion but incompetence” (22). The shortest piece is by Harvey Cox (a tidy five pages), in which he confesses and recounts his abiding fascination with the interaction of religion and politics.

Most of the remaining essays are about ten pages, and while obviously diverse, they share some common features: influence of friends and family, schools attended, books published, and summaries of the author’s thought. Readers of these think-pieces may know some of these theologians personally. Other readers may be familiar with them through readings, classes, or public lectures. Still others may find a writer or two to be somewhat unfamiliar. No matter, by chewing on these pocket-sized autobiographies readers should find their own thinking sharpened, enlightened, even stimulated. It doesn’t hurt to become acquainted or reacquainted with what was once learned and, perhaps, forgotten.

One could wonder what the principle of se-

lection was in choosing these writers. They are doubtless all first rank. Ten of the twenty-three are Lutherans, and the rest are Anglicans, Roman Catholics, main- and side-stream Protestants, variously connected thinkers, and a hard-core Evangelical. Five of the authors are women, all but three or four are from North America, and five (as of this writing) are deceased. While the line-up is impressive, one wonders about other heavy hitters (like John Cobb, Larry Rasmussen, Douglas John Hall) who did not make the cut. Perhaps they were asked but were unable to respond, or, more likely, the number had to be limited for purposes of space.

The academic credentials of the theologians are very impressive, though only a few admit to having had parish experience. Each writer pays homage to scores of theologians past and present who have influenced them, such as Martin Luther, Paul Tillich, Jaroslav Pelican, Karl Barth, George Lindbeck, Joseph Sittler, to name just a few. Since the book does not have an index, it is difficult to recall who influenced whom and in what way. Oddly, there seems to be no mention of the towering influence of Reinhold Niebuhr on society and on theological thinking (though an index might prove otherwise).

Many themes for theological reflection recur in these essays: the challenge of atheism, social justice, nature and ecology, science, ontology, postmodernism, and many others. One of the rewards in reading this compendium of theological thought is to compare, contrast, and reflect upon the variety of recent Christian thought. Some of the essays are “confessional,” that is, some writers tell of personal incidents from their past. Other pieces are “mini-lectures,” short courses in theological thought and writing. Each is insightful and informative in its own way.

Another feature of interest is the various ways theologians think of theology. For example, Alister McGrath regards theology within the churches as part of the “discipleship of the

mind" (133). Nancy Murphy presents the view of theology as the discipline that answers "boundary questions" that arise in both cosmology and ethics (147). Gerhard Forde strongly asserts that theology is for proclamation (50), while contrarily, Roger Haight, S.J., flatly asserts "Theology and proclamation are not the same thing" (73).

Because nearly half of the contributors are Lutheran, Lutheran readers might find the "in-house" conversation interesting. H. Paul Santmire stresses "Ecology, Justice, Liturgy" (chapter 18), while Ronald F. Thiemann examines "Faith Seeking Understanding" (chapter 23). In discussing various educational institutions, Robert Jenson shares his disdain of Luther Seminary (91), while Paul Sponheim extols the institution (261). Whatever else the-

ology might be, it is not merely an academic subject.

One comes away from these brief encounters with these "defenders of the faith" touched not only with the erudite subject of theology but also by the very human practitioners of the discipline. To quote from Douglas John Hall (who incidentally didn't make the cut for this volume), people are bewildered by theologians (*Waiting for Gospel* [Cascade Books, 2012] 18). That is, they generally know what it means to be a doctor or a violinist, but they are uncertain what a theologian does. To rectify this vocational imbalance one might find it helpful to become acquainted with these nearly two dozen theologians in their own words.

Robert Brusic
Luther Seminary
Saint Paul, Minnesota