

INTRODUCING THEOLOGICAL METHOD: A SURVEY OF CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGIANS AND APPROACHES. BY MARY M. VEENEMAN. GRAND RAPIDS, MI: BAKER ACADEMIC, 2017. VI + 202 PP.; ISBN: 9780801049491 (PBK.); 24.99 USD.*

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The literature about the contents and trends of the modern theologies is rather vast, but the number of books dealing with contemporary theological methods is much more limited. Therefore an accessible and informative publication by Mary Veeneman, associate professor of biblical and theological studies at North Park University in Chicago, Illinois, is a valuable contribution. Her *Introducing Theological Method* (hereafter ITM) is precisely this – a simple in style, well-documented, and well-structured introduction to “a conversation about method” as it has been held in the twentieth and early-twenty-first-century theology (4). The book is intended for students of theology and must be regarded as a guide to how theology has been done recently.

Veeneman does not give a clear definition of method but indicates that “[t]heological method is a work of prolegomena” which “sets the ground rules for how theology is tied to the world around it, what texts are read, and what questions are asked” (2). Specifically, it has to do with one’s basic assumptions and understanding of what are (i) the primary sources, (ii) the key questions, and (iii) the starting points for theological reflection (3-4). These are integral elements of one’s theological method, and therefore Veeneman attempts to detect and present the methods of a selection of contemporary theologians using this set of aspects. After the *Introduction* that sets the scene under the heading “The Context of Modern Theology” (1-5) and the orientating chapter on *The Work of Theology* wherein the definition of theology and the notion of its sources and its “work” are offered (7-14), she surveys the ways in which theology has been done recently.

Veeneman successively introduces and discusses the methodology of Neo-Orthodox, Ressourcement, “Correlation,” Postliberal, Evangelical, Political, and Feminist Theologies, finishing her study by a treatment of the so-called “Theologies of Religious Pluralism and Comparative Theology.” Each movement or strand is presented according to its expression in works of its key proponents: for example, postliberal thought is identified with George Lindbeck and Hans Frei and explained through their positions, whereas Evangelical theologies are exemplified in the work of Millard Erickson, Stanley Grenz, Kevin Vanhoozer, and Clark Pinnock. Veeneman presents her heroes and their respective stances in a coherent and systematic manner: she starts off by sketching their biographies and noting the background, then proceeds to their assumptions and “driving questions,” and arrives at their methods (and sometimes the fruits) of theologizing. Such an approach allows for a contextualized understanding of theologians’ thought and

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gives a vivid portrait of their theological profiles. Hence, the book is to be praised for such a sensitive historical approach that is enhanced by the author's accessible style of writing and consistent treatment of the theological method through the lens presented in the beginning (sources—questions—starting points).

Especially informative and thorough are the sections that deal with such individuals as Dulles, Tillich, Rahner, Lindbeck, Grenz, and Johnson and such movements as correlational, political, postliberal, and feminist theologies. Here the reader will find both the social context coupled with an element of personal stories and the presentation of a specific method. Veeneman is obviously well-read in the Catholic tradition but her acquaintance with the Protestant thought is impressive, as well. It makes ITM a pretty balanced survey of disparate theological approaches. The author shows clear Catholic leanings but cannot be accused of a too biased tactic.

However, the book is not without shortcomings. I will name just a few.

The main weakness, in my view, is the choice of exemplary thinkers but it has to do not with who has been selected but with those who have been omitted. Not a single Eastern Orthodox theologian can be found in the book, and, as a result, the whole tradition has been ignored, although it has recently had a number of great thinkers whose methodologies deserve some attention: for example, G. Florovsky, V. Lossky, D. Stăniloae, J. Zizioulas, D.B. Hart, and others. In the same vein, a number of original protestant thinkers did not make it to ITM in spite of their valuable methodological musings: for instance, S. Hauerwas, J. Moltmann, J. McClendon, A. Plantinga. Finally, some important movements or trends have not even been mentioned. Unfortunately, one will not find consideration of the rise of postmodern, postcolonial, philosophical, and analytic theologies in ITM. Hence, some important contributions to the discussion about contemporary theological approaches have definitely been skipped over or regarded unimportant (without explanation), although Veeneman claims that her work covers “many of the most important theologians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (187). In fact, just as many of the most important theologians are not there, and this is probably the major issue with ITM.

The second (rather expected) shortcoming is that the introductory format of the book turns some sections to shallow and truncated presentations. For instance, Barth and Lonergan's five-pages-long treatments give an extremely abridged picture of their complex and multi-faceted methods. Additionally, half of the sections found in ITM does not show how this or that method works in practice. Veeneman is consistent in offering a clear presentation of what *is* the method that the thinker in question proposes and employs but she frequently saves the space and does not tell the reader *how* this method works in relation to a certain Christian doctrine. For example, her treatment of correlational and feminist theologies includes both a theoretical introduction to their methodology and an explication of its application to the doctrines of God, Christ, and salvation (35-54, 148-167), but the sections on Dulles, Barth, Frei, Erickson, and Pinnock are largely

limited to methodological musings (15ff, 25ff, 74ff, 81ff, 106ff). Hence, there is a certain structural imbalance and accidental superficiality in ITM.

Nevertheless, the book clearly meets the set goal: it surveys (a number of) significant theological figures and in this manner provides the beginners with access to a spectrum of methods used in contemporary theology. The book can—and probably should—be (one of) the first reference points when one wants to get acquainted with the key approaches of modern and postmodern theology of Western Europe and the Americas.

Rostislav Tkachenko
Evangelische Theologische Faculteit
Leuven, Belgium
ORCID: 0000-0002-5355-2090