

CONSTRUCTING CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY: AN INTRODUCTORY SKETCH.
JASON A. WYMAN. MINNEAPOLIS: FORTRESS PRESS, 2017. XXXIV +
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Jason Wyman, a visiting professor of religious studies at Manhattan College and a member of the Workgroup on Constructive Theology, has recently published in book form his PhD thesis which he defended in 2016 under the supervision of Gary Dorrien, professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary. In this book Wyman focuses on constructive theology – a movement and a method in contemporary theology.

Constructive theology is characterised by (a) an ongoing process of formulation and re-formulation of theology; (b) multivocal conversation instead of a solo voice; (c) authentic dialogue with other academic disciplines, and (d) social activism. Perhaps this is the first theological movement that occurred in academia *par excellence* and is done by lay theologians who work in the university setting (86).

Since the subject is new and has never before been explored, the author claims his work is itself “an exercise in constructive theology” (vii). In fact, he attempts to present constructive theology not only as a method distinct from dogmatic and systematic theology (xv-xxvi) but also as a peculiar school of thought or, to put it in Wyman’s terms, “a tradition”. Wyman approaches the task “chronologically and by issue” (p. xii), using the texts and interviews of the key participants of the movement.

The first two chapters of the book describe the historical roots and forerunners of the movement (ch. 1), and its further maturation in the work of the Workgroup on Constructive Theology associated with Vanderbilt University from 1975 on (ch. 2). The next two chapters dwell on the key features of the method of constructive theology – interdisciplinarity (ch. 3) and activism (ch. 4). Wyman finishes by reflecting on whether constructive theology could be called a method and a tradition (ch. 5).

As a movement, constructive theology originated in the liberal strand of Christianity and sought to rethink theology in the light of modern knowledge. As early as the 1900s, some thinkers began raising the issue of the constructed nature of theology and the need for the ongoing formulation of theological statements. Wyman points to the persistent elements among which are the unfinished and fallible nature of theology, the propensity towards non-confessional theology, and the conviction that reason and experience cannot be the exclusive sources of theology (26). Some of these are extracted from the proto-constructive theologians among whom are a Canadian, James Ten Broeke, and an American, Bernard Eugene Meland. However, constructive theology differs from liberal theology in that it aims at “reengagement and rewriting of the doctrines of Christianity” instead of the accommodation typical of the latter (12). Moreover, Wyman states that constructive theology “recognizes liberal theology as a spiritual and cultural dead end for Christianity, especially in light of crisis and tragedy” (27).

Chapters three through five consider constructive theology as interdisciplinary, activist, and as a theological method and tradition. The former two features are very significant for understanding constructive theology, especially if theology is considered against the backdrop of modern academia and the public sphere.

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Through interdisciplinarity, constructive theology first seeks to establish external criteria for its accountability and find ways for the cross-fertilization of theology with its dialogue partners (87). Constructive theology engages such fields as hermeneutics, literary studies, language theory, and social and cultural studies. However, at this stage of its development, constructive theology draws from other disciplines rather than offers something in return. It will perhaps take some time to establish credibility and convince colleagues from other fields of the importance of theology for academia as a whole. Another question that begs an answer is this: Could it be that the attempt to gain the credibility of other disciplines will be earned at the high price of losing theology's core convictions and practices?

In speaking about activism, Wyman admits that this concern has developed within constructive theology gradually, responding to the emergence of liberation theology and its characteristic themes (119). Being activist, constructive theology reacts to ecological (121-26), race (126-35), gender (135-38) and class (138-46) crises and challenges. Activism springs from the core conviction about the constructed nature of all theology, which requires the deconstruction and change of oppressive structures for further work towards greater justice. It should be mentioned that the dominance of white male theologians was a typical trait of the Workgroup on Constructive Theology and began gradually changing within the last decade of the twentieth century. This fact shaped the way constructive theology was formed in the 1970s.

Wyman demonstrates that, as a method, constructive theology is both in continuity with and differs from dogmatic and systematic theology. Dogmatic theology is built around an accepted dogmatic core and the message of the church, the content of which should be proclaimed afresh in new circumstances. Constructive theology assumes that doctrines are "contingent, constructed and open to change" (xvi). It resists systematization. Constructive theology abandoned the genre of *summa*, written by a solo author, in preference for theologizing in dialogue with many participants and resists finalizing the process in the form of a coherent and closed system. In Wyman's words, constructive theology "rejects systematic theology in order to prioritise induction, centralize the reiterative nature of theological work, and maximize creativity and relevance" (xxii). Systematic theology deals with doctrines comprehensively and attempts to "test the internal coherence and consistency of Christianity" (xix). In short, constructive theology sees not only the form of theology but also its content as historically and culturally constructed.

Wyman's notion of constructive theology as a tradition is less convincing. It is not clear to what extent interdisciplinarity makes constructive theology different from other theological movements, such as radical orthodoxy, which are committed to dialogue with other disciplines but, nevertheless, remain within the contours of dogma.

Apart from being somewhat superfluous and repetitive, Wyman's work is a genuinely good introductory text that traces the roots, points to the key figures, detects major concerns, and hints at the persistent issues of constructive theology.

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