# Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Vanderbilt's Tumbleweed

Bonnie Miller-McLemore's *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* of 2012 differs both in perspective and method from Rahner's work. This becomes apparent in the foreword to the *Companion* as well as in a separate article by the handbook's editor, which attempts a self-definition of the discipline. Both will be the object of study in this chapter.

First of all, the foreword takes into account the developments of theology *and* the study of religion in English-speaking academia. Miller-McLemore attributes the shift away from a mere application of dogma to developments that happened outside the religion-related disciplines. Educators in professions such as law or nursing became aware that

> the expert practitioner in the professions possesses a kind of wisdom that escapes the quantifiable, technical, rule-bound restrictions of theory alone (Miller-McLemore 2012a, p. 2).

At the same time, theology itself increasingly turned towards the practical wisdom of communities under the influence of Latin American liberation theology of Gustavo Gutierrez (cf. ibid., p. 2).[1] This led to a worldwide rise of new approaches and study programs that testified to the discipline's pluralism. Yet,

1 As with all positions that focus on the community, e.g. community organising – as described in the chapter on (142) –, there is the danger of losing both the greater systemic perspective as well as that of the individual. The latter has been a focus point in the controversy between the Catholic magisterium and liberation theology.

> few publications in practical theology have marked this progress. Many previous overview books have had a homogeneous authorship and a largely intradisciplinary audience (Miller-McLemore 2012a, p. 4).

The multi-faceted nature of the discipline makes it difficult, Miller-McLemore argues, to write a concise handbook. Her attempt is influenced by the fundamental question that she rediscovered for herself during the establishment of a new Ph.D. program *Teaching for Ministry* at Vanderbilt University: "What is practical theology anyway?" Miller-McLemore's answer defines the shape of the *Companion*:

> Practical theology refers to an *activity* of believers seeking to sustain a life of reflective faith in the everyday, a *method* or way of understanding or analyzing theology in practice used by religious leaders and by teachers and students across the theological curriculum, a *curricular area* in theological education focused on ministerial practice and subspecialties, and, finally, an *academic discipline* pursued by a smaller subset of scholars to support and sustain these first three enterprises. Each understanding points to different spatial locations, from *daily life* to *library* and *fieldwork* to *classroom*, *congregation*, and *community*, and, finally, to *academic guild* and *global context* (ibid., p. 5).

Three aspects are noteworthy for our understanding of the structure of the handbook project. Firstly, from an epistemological perspective, there is a strong focus on believers and (reflective) pastoral practitioners, making the case for a strong link between the pastoral profession and the university subject. This is in line with Rahner's focus on the church community and its pastoral leader. Secondly, from the aspect of method, the order in which the discipline is introduced seems reversed compared to Rahner's handbook. The *Companion* starts with activities in the daily life of believers, then moves on to a methodological analysis, and at the end of the book seeks to integrate that into the history of the academic discipline. Taking the analysis of lifeworlds as a starting point shows a prominent sociological influence which other scholars of the discipline have shown as well. Thirdly, from the perspective of space, Miller-McLemore assigns specific locations to each area of the handbook – from the congregation hall to the academic library. Rahner turns to the specific location of the congregation as well, assigning academia as one location among many is a shift in perspective that underlines the insight that theology must become self-reflexive, as

e.g. Regina Polak put it, when she demanded that before the classical three step analysis – see, judge, act – comes another step: orientation.

> Therein we clarify in which situation (where and when), with which interests, from which perspective, with which previous experiences, and for whom ("option") the practice of the present is being reflected* (Polak 2015a, p. 72).

This allows us also to see the restricted viewpoint of theology in academia in terms of gender, race, nationality, educational background, and many more aspects we must be aware of[2] – especially if we remind ourselves of theology's option for the poor and the marginalised (cf. Polak 2015b, p. 84).

After the foreword, part one begins with the examination of "activities of daily life" (Miller-McLemore 2012a, p. 7). It encompasses mundane situations, such as eating, drinking, etc. These are analysed from a specific perspective, namely as "sites where faith breaks down and people struggle" (ibid., p. 9), not just in the private, but also in the public sphere (cf. ibid., p. 8). Even the naming of these activities in the gerund-form (-ing) is theologically motivated, as God himself is portrayed in Exodus 3:14 as the "becoming" God (ibid., p. 8). The chapter on eating for instance begins with the gathering at the author's family table (cf. Bass 2012, p. 51) and then moves on to discuss the chasm between God's wish that all be fed and the broken and exclusionary food system in the United States today, asking in the end how Christian wisdom can contribute to changing the situation (cf. ibid., p. 58). It is a refreshing perspective, but it runs the risk of subsuming the worldly experience all too soon under a Christian narrative, even if it is not the narrative of self-assurance for a theological discipline, as we discussed earlier, but that of individual faith stories. Miller-McLemore's definition of the nature of practical theology is telling in this regard:

> [P]ractical theology is a general way of doing theology concerned with the embodiment of religious belief in the day-to-day lives of individuals and communities. […] It focuses on the tangible, the local, the concrete, and the embodied (Miller-McLemore 2012a, p. 14).

2 Miller-McLemore names several "isms", that mar theological analysis: e.g. sexism, classism, "Christocentrism" (Miller-McLemore 2012a, p. 9). She is also aware that every book project in its selection of authors repeats marginalisations of different communities who are excluded from the project (cf. ibid., p. 15).

However, we need to add that "belief" can also mean relying on non-religious narratives which help us make sense of the world and our daily lives. Miller-McLemore's definition could profit from a sideview on the sociology of everyday life (cf. Schütz and Luckmann 1972) and a critique of everyday belief systems (cf. Lefebvre 1987; Henkel 2021a).

## A Point of Culmination

The focus on the embodied harks back to a discussion that already surrounded the establishment of Vanderbilt University, the place where Bonnie Miller-McLemore holds the chair of *Religion, Psychology, and Culture* at the university's Divinity School. But instead of retelling the story of the Vanderbilt's foundation as a Methodist university in the South of the United States in the years after the Civil War, I want to localise and materialise the discussion, linking the aspects as they pertain to practical theology's role between theory and praxis. I will do this by highlighting a recent addition to the university's sculpture collection.

*Tumbleweed* (1987) by the American artist Mark di Suvero is a 9-meter-high steel structure. First set up in the Marcy Sculpture Garden adjacent to the *San Diego Museum of Art*, where it was set against Spanish Revival architecture in the background, the artwork was acquired by Vanderbilt university in 2015 and now sits on the green lawn of the university campus in front to the arts building, a modern, nondescript, red-brown brick structure.

*Figure 3: Bryan Costales (2011): Installation views of Tumbleweed at Marcy Sculpture Garden / Clark Williams (2013): Installation view of Tumbleweed at Vanderbilt University*

Photographer Bryan Costales documented the installation of "Tumbleweed" at its original site for *bcx.news*. Note the joints and cuts in the material. Clark Williams has photographed the current site at *Vanderbild University* for the university's news page when the sculpture was installed on campus.

## Tumbleweed

The name of the sculpture guides the viewing experience, as the structure indeed resembles a tumbleweed bush, albeit reduced in form to just seven branches with a knot at the centre and greatly magnified.[3] The name evokes images of the lonesome prairie, which is absent on the green campus. As an artist who has overseen most of his installations, di Suvero was particularly interested in the constellations of his sculptures with their surrounding land- or waterscapes (cf. Collens 2015, pp. 8–9). Moreover, the environment presents a challenge for sculptures of such enormous size:

> Du to their weight and size, di Suvero's large-scale sculptures have relied heavily on the realities of space and gravity for their very composition. (Lawrence 2015, p. 22)

The contrast between university campus and prairie landscape points to the fundamental controversy that surrounded the establishment of the university. The initial plan was conceived by a group of progressive Methodist leaders who saw the Southern churches lacking an intellectual epicentre to educate its ministers,[4] especially if the churches wanted to cater to the growing educated middle class in the cities.

> For these clerics, the church should be the region's social and religious flagship – a dignified and glorious symbol of a morally upright and regenerated South. The supposition of the progressives was that in order to expand their mission beyond their traditional (but not monolithic) rural and plain folk constituency and evangelise to the rich and the middle class, as required by the Gospel, southern Methodism must have a more educated ministry. (Bishop 2011, p. 149)

3 Several other of di Suvero's sculptures have similar resemblances, e.g. *New Star* (1986-87) and *Will* (1994) (Collens, Lawrence, and Choi 2015, pp. 126–127, 142–143).

4 A noteworthy parallel to the establishment of pastoral theology in Austria one century earlier in 1774, as mentioned above on page 28.

On the other side of the debate stood those who believed in the tradition of Methodism as a religion of the spiritual revival movement,[5] where preachers were called forward by God's spirit and, when found suitable by the elders, started preaching regardless of a college education. Rather, the education of the new cleric took place on horseback, riding through the prairie to remote rural settlements under the auspices of an experienced preacher.

> Traditionalist southern Methodists believed that a preacher, regardless of his educational background, should undertake a self-directed course of study while riding a rural circuit under the direction of an elder preacher who served as a kind of mentor. According to Methodist tradition, preachers were to "proclaim their own experience of conversion […] in language understandable to their fellows." (Bishop 2011, p. 149)

The proponents of both positions, Bishop George Pierce for the traditionalists and Bishop Holland McTyerie for the progressives, fought out a heated battle over the importance of theological education as opposed to the praxis of preaching in the spirit. It was only when McTyerie met Cornelius Vanderbilt in New York and was able to secure a large endowment from one of the richest entrepreneurs in the United States that the progressive side got the upper hand and was eventually able to open the university in 1875. Despite the troubled history with the Southern Episcopal Methodist Church that eventually ended in a split between university and church, the initial plans to complement the praxis of preachers with a profound education were successful and led to Methodism increasingly embracing the middle class. But with that the church also left behind some of its traditional membership, especially poor sharecroppers and African Americans (ibid., p. 161).

One has to be aware of this complex history of intellectual progressivism, wealthy donors, and a growing middle class in the cities if one wants to understand the long way Miller-McLemore's *Companion* project has come. The author herself is aware of that when she rebukes practical theology's self-portrayal as a marginalised discipline, outside of the circles of power. Not only has practical theology gained an increased importance over the years but it is also itself a part of the "modern university's pecking order, where mathematicians look down

5 Which traces its history back to theology of John Wesley, who led the reform movement that broke with the Church of England.

on physicists, who look down on engineers, who look down on contractors and janitors" (Miller-McLemore 2012b, p. 9).[6] As such, one must be aware not to reverse the "clerical paradigm" that marred the discipline in its beginnings and turn it into an "academic paradigm" that makes us "devalue all things *clerical* or *practical* as lesser than all things *academic*, despite everyone's best intentions" (ibid., p. 13).

Much could be said about the role of praxis in practical theological research, but with *Tumbleweed* I want to direct our attention to the equally important role of praxis in the educational context. In her chapter on *Contextual Education* in Miller-McLemore's handbook, Emily Click tells the story of a young pastoral professional witnessing a child abuse case and grappling with an adequate response when she learns that the reaction patters taught to her in university might have adverse consequences in the field. Even more insightful than the (fictional) situation is the response of the student's class which refuses to tell her

> what she should have done differently. Instead, she discovers that the real work of reflection involves paying attention to complex layers of meaning that are embedded in these situations. […][That] process teaches her how to weave a thread of theological interpretation through those many layers. (Click 2012, p. 351)

I want to focus on the *layered* nature of the relation between doing praxis and theoretical reflection that goes beyond a simple one-way application of theoretical insights to practice. For that I want to use *Tumbleweed* with its reminiscence of the bushes in the desert here as a powerful placeholder for "riding the circuit," i.e. repeatedly going through a multi-layered praxis, which escapes a complete analysis, as part of a theological education, even though students spend the majority of their time in an academic environment.

But the sculpture is more than a reminiscence of the wilderness. In its construction the artist himself reflects on the role of practice, or more precisely, the relation between doing art as both conceptualising and crafting. Di Suvero has always worked directly with his material, cold-bending the massive steel bars

6 The author here quotes John Burkhart who argues that in the Protestant tradition Schleiermacher faced the same doubts when he tried "to carve out space for theological study as knowledge oriented toward practice" (Miller-McLemore 2012b, p. 9; cf. Burkhart 1993)

without the aid of models or drawings (Lawrence 2015, p. 19). The artist begins a dialogue with the material, or, as he puts it:

> When you're working your pieces you chew them. They are worn and that makes all the difference in the world. (Rydingsvard and Suvero 2015, p. 61)

Thus, *Tumbleweed* reminds practical theology of this fundamental link to praxis, not as a naïve showcasing of voices from the field, but as the beginning of an intimate dialogue with practice and its many shapes. This dialogue happens not only in theology and ministry but also in other disciplines which are in between conceptualising and crafting – architecture for instance.

## Constructive Fragments

The features that unify many of Mark di Suvero's sculptures, besides the material (2.5-centimetres thick steel) and the colour – RAL 3000 fire-red, a bright colour reminiscent of Henri Martisse's use of bright colours as well as Jean-Baptist Camille Corot's use of the colour red (Lawrence 2015, p. 30) – are the gaps and missing bolts in the joints, the strange and contorted angles of the heavy steel beams, and the rough edges where the torch has cut through the steel. At first, the material seems heavy, reminding the viewer not only of industry but also of industrialised warfare, just as the steel bars at the Herder building.

> Many of his materials […] were developed to aid in the advancement of our cities, our commerce, our military and our architecture. But di Suvero's interest in these materials runs counter to their intended uses, and is indicative of his humanism (ibid., p. 14).

These sculptures are not utilitarian supports for the needs of industrialists or militarists, rather, di Suvero has turned industrial production on its head, using its logical methods and materials to create works that invite play and contemplation (ibid., p. 14). In fact, most of the sculptures seem playful and almost levitating, despite that their construction is statically sound. Not even all of the

steel feet touch the concrete foundations, as if the sculpture is about to roll off in the wind.[7]

Adding to that perception of playfulness is the fact that in *Tumbleweed*, as in many other sculptures, di Suvero exhibits loose joints and material imperfections. In a conversation with di Suvero, the sculptor Ursula von Rydingsvard sees a certain "rawness in the kind of nuts and bolts that you use, and in the way in which you put things together" (Rydingsvard and Suvero 2015, p. 61).

With this observation I want to look at the *Companion*. While we can find many shortcomings in terms of a clear disclosure of its theoretical foundations – despite its repeated insistence on the concrete and tangible as well as the work of Don Browning (cf. e.g. Browning 1991) – and in terms of its maybe all too strong tie to the praxis of pastoral workers and students of Christian theologies, one of the great strengths of Miller-McLemore's book is that we get a glimpse at the process of theological reflection. We read how the authors bolt their theology together in their daily lives, as many chapters begin with personal stories where the authors experienced a situation that spurned their reflection on the topic. As Miller-McLemore points out, this is deliberate, as the authors were specifically asked "to ground their chapters in case study, concrete illustration, or thick detail" (Miller-McLemore 2012a, p. 14).

On a meta-level we can argue that the *Companion* follows a different epistemological construction principle than the other handbooks. It brings observations from the lived praxis to the table and then lets the reader follow along as the authors try to make sense of them – as they, like the steel artist,[8] work with and sometimes against the physical forces of real world experience. It is an open and ongoing process, within which the joining together of different fragments becomes visible. Like with di Suvero's *Tumbleweed*, these seemingly loose joints make the work almost playful to read, even if it does not shun away from "heavy" topics, such as racism, sexism, colonialism, or classism.

7 Several of di Suvero's sculptures are actually designed to move in the wind, despite their weight.

8 Mark di Suvero openly talks about the hard work involved in constructing, moving, and assembling his pieces. He was even almost fatally crushed in the process of assembling one of his sculptures (cf. Knoll 1990).

On another level we could argue that this forming through assembling process[9] is a contrast programme to the planning and executing way of doing pastoral work that Rahner displayed.

The one thing that we might miss in this endeavour of constructively playing with fragments is the "knot", made of a red steel plate at the centre of most of Mark di Suvero's sculptures. It prevents the diverging steel arrows from from falling or flying apart. Finding such a point of convergence is difficult from the perspective of the sculptor. Many of di Suvero's sculptures are "open structures," lacking a "central core," and instead "invite viewers to pass under, through, around […][them], viewing them from many angles" (Lawrence 2015, p. 30) and thus inviting "engagement and play" (ibid.). The artist nonetheless manages to join the different pieces of steel together without creating a massive fixed core – which, in my perspective, is one of the most remarkable achievements of his sculptures.

Likewise, finding such a point is also challenging for the theologian. Especially as one works with constellations of material artefacts, architecture, philosophy, sociology, the arts, and also theology. In our quest of trying to find a theoretical point of culmination that holds our observations together and is yet open so that our readers might "pass under, through, around" it we might fail. Our positions might not stand the structural forces that arise between our fragments, but we must not miss out on that opportunity; even a breaking down of our constellations would be a learning after all.

9 I will come back to form-finding processes later in the book.