
practical matters

Five Issues In: Reflections on the Promise and Progress of Practical Matters

By Jessica M. Smith and Jermaine M. McDonald

It has been five years since the idea of *Practical Matters* began, not on the website screen, but rather in the imaginations of graduate students who observed an important convergence of interests between scholars of religious practices and practical theologians. Those pioneering graduate students envisioned the journal as a place where practical theologians, scholars of religious practices, teachers, and students could engage one another across disciplinary and vocational boundaries around a common theme relating to the lived religion and everyday practices of religious communities. Three institutions have played pivotal roles in bringing all five issues of *Practical Matters* to fruition. The Emory University Library has hosted and maintained the journal's system architecture, the Candler School of Theology and the Graduate Division of Religion at Emory University have sponsored the initiative, and the Lilly Foundation, Inc. has generously funded a grant to support the development of the journal. These institutions supported our founders' vision of creating a unique online space to nurture conversations about religious practices between a myriad of diverse individuals from different fields and perspectives. Though the number of online, open access journals has proliferated since 2007, *Practical Matters* continues to fill this important niche.

Inspired by innovations in the digital humanities and visual scholarship, *Practical Matters* places text-based scholarship and scholarship in other modes—film, digital video, images, audio, new media, data sets, and so on—side by side. We do not seek to *replace* traditional textual schol-

arship but to *displace* it as the only kind of intellectual work valued as scholarship in the academy. To help facilitate this displacement, we have developed peer-review standards for non-textual scholarship and provided a venue for the publication of these new forms. In this way, we hope to contribute to an expanded understanding of “what counts” as scholarly work. Furthermore, we publish teaching resources from scholars seeking to push the boundaries of classroom scholarship in a way that incorporates digital scholarship and breaks the mold of traditional ways of teaching familiar and niche subjects.

Notwithstanding all the ways we intend to be innovative, we have held on to some of the best conventions of scholarly journals. *Practical Matters* has established an Editorial Board of scholars and scholar-practitioners from many institutions, traditions, and methodological approaches who share our vision for innovative scholarship and new models of scholarly publishing. At Emory, a Faculty Advisory Board guides our work. Moreover, each issue is shaped by Emory faculty and doctoral students with particular expertise in the issue theme.

Five issues in, *Practical Matters* continues to fulfill its early mission while also moving into new initiatives and practices of journal life. We continue to publish thematic issues focused on provocative intersections between religious practices, practical theology, and a topic of public concern or interest. We have tackled [Imagination](#) (Spring 2009), [Youth](#) (Fall 2009), [Ethnography & Theology](#) (Spring 2010), [Religion, Health & Healing](#) (Spring 2011), and [Violence & Peace](#) (Spring 2012). We have sought to push beyond traditional boundaries in illuminating each of these areas and the connections between them.

Moving forward, we anticipate illuminating more distinctive topics that intersect with religious practices and practical theology, hoping to cover areas not widely addressed in existing academic journals. To that end our sixth issue, scheduled for a Spring 2013 publication, will be “Ethics, Ethnography, & Visual Culture,” featuring several extended reflections on the 2011 publication, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (Continuum, 2011). Additionally, in Spring 2012 we launched an exciting new blog, *Religion Matters* (www.religionmattersblog.org), which seeks to extend conversations started at *Practical Matters*, reflect on trends in practical theology and the study of religious practices, and preview anticipated content for future issues of *Practical Matters*.

The landscape of journal work has changed since those earlier years of the journal. For one, the original staff members have moved on, while a whole new set of enterprising graduate students continue the work of the journal. Over the last five years, thirty graduate students have spent at least one year working on the journal staff, with many more serving in auxiliary roles that did not require full-time status. Of the eleven (11) students who have graduated after serving on the staff as of May 2012, nine (9) have obtained faculty positions at schools across the country. Secondly, *Practical Matters* has accumulated an impressive mix of senior scholars, up-and-coming scholars, graduate students, and religious practitioners who have published content with us, provided guidance to us, and served as thorough peer-reviewers for us. Additionally, we have forged relationships with other journals and blogs, provided guidance to others seeking to develop their own

multimedia journals, and developed a reputation for publishing thoughtful, provocative pieces.

Though we have been on the cutting-edge of academic scholarship, more and more print journals are either adding e-journal publishing to the standard print versions of their journals or moving the publication of their journals online. Many of these journals remain tethered to the text-based paradigm of academic scholarship. Others are forsaking the rigorous, peer-review process to allow scholars to develop content accessible to a broader audience. *Practical Matters* does not treat these audiences as mutually exclusive and we welcome content catered to credentialed specialists, a general audience, and anyone in between. This philosophy, exemplified by the content we have already produced, allows us to develop a network with other online journal and blogging venues including [Southern Spaces](#) and [State of Formation](#). These two venues have enabled us to learn from and with our colleagues in this academic digital space. Our commitment to digital scholarship has not been without its challenges, however. The abstract and indexing services that provide research tools for university library systems are neither equipped to deal with non-textual scholarship as easily as it handles textual scholarship, nor easily able to index a journal that does not originate in print materials. This means that our journal has had trouble integrating into library system search engines and indexing services. Further, because we are primarily an academic journal, the standards of publishing images and video differ than with online news sources. On several occasions we have had to turn down provocative photo essays because the photographer did not have releases from the individuals photographed, a standard not in place for news media.

Finally, the fields of practical theology and the study of religious practices continue to fluctuate and evolve from their earlier conceptions. A significant new work, the *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), attempts to stake a clearer definition for the field of practical theology (expect a comprehensive review of this volume in Issue 6 of *Practical Matters* in Spring 2013). Two additional works, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* and *Ecclesiology and Ethnography Vol. 1: Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012), exemplify a growing trend in the study of religious practices employing ethnography as a means to understand and articulate the *theology* informing the practices of religious communities. In this sense, the journal is continually negotiating its role between the fields of practical theology and the study of religious practices and is always trying to find a balance between them. As our founding managing editors, Donna Mote and Letitia Campbell noted in our first editorial, these two fields present “many generative tensions—between descriptive and constructive modes, fact and value, explanation and interpretation, theory and practice” in different ways that can pose fruitful discussions in both. We hope that the journal can continue to be a place that fosters such discussions; conversations that promote a transdisciplinary effect of respecting the boundaries of each discipline precisely by attending to the practices that matter to both. We do not seek to co-opt or transcend any particular discipline. Rather, we have always tried to offer a many-layered and multi-disciplined conversation that allows specialists of any discipline to cross back and forth between one article and another to bring richer scholarship to the practices of reli-

gion and practical theology. Five years from now, we hope that *Practical Matters* has continued to grow, expand the limits of academic scholarship, extend conversations on practical theology and religious practices, and provide thoughtful analysis, introspection, and resources about dynamic intersections between religious practitioners and themes impacting our world. We also hope that you continue to follow us in this exploration.

To keep aware of what's going on at *Practical Matters*, follow us on twitter ([@pm_journal](#)), like us on [Facebook](#), and visit our new blog, [Religion Matters](#). We'd love for you to help us extend these conversations on religious practices!