

**A Transdisciplinary Multimedia Journal of Religious Practices and
Practical Theology: Introducing *Practical Matters***

Letitia M. Campbell and Donna S. Mote

Welcome to *Practical Matters*. In this journal you will find digital scholarship that utilizes the capacities of the internet to ask and provoke new questions about religious practices and practical theology. You will also find here a variety of content: peer-reviewed scholarship in several media and genres, reflections and essays by practitioners and teachers, video and audio interviews with scholars, reviews of current work in religious practices and practical theology, musical performances, photographic essays, and more.

Since we first began imagining this journal in the spring of 2007, we have spent many hours talking about our hopes and aims for *Practical Matters* and the questions and commitments that shape our enterprise. In this editorial, we sketch the broad contours of those conversations as a way of introducing *Practical Matters* and inviting you to join us in the debates, reflections, and exchanges unfolding in these pages.

A Practical Convergence

The emergence of “practice” as a theoretical paradigm in a number of fields in the humanities and social sciences has deeply affected religious studies. In research and teaching, scholars increasingly focus on lived and popular religion, material culture, and religious life and lives “on the ground” in particular social and cultural contexts. This interest has been matched by the resurgence since the 1970s and 1980s of conversations about “praxis” and “practical” theology—that

is, a theology that responds to lived conditions and situations, and in turn shapes the way that communities, institutions, and people live.¹

A new dialogue between theologians and religious studies scholars is emerging around this convergence of “practical” interests. This generative and exciting conversation is bubbling up particularly from doctoral programs training new generations of scholars in religion and theology for whose work practices are foundational. One of these doctoral programs is the Graduate Division of Religion at Emory University, with its Initiative in Religious Practices and Practical Theology, a project undertaken with the collaboration and support of Lilly Endowment, Inc.

These doctoral programs mark new interest in (1) religious traditions as “ways of life” in which convictions are embodied in religious practices; (2) methods, including ethnography and other critical tools of anthropology and cultural studies, and their application to research questions in scholarship that emerges in and for religious communities; (3) theories, particularly theories of practice; and (4) structures, especially structures of scholarship that allow for more robust interactions between academic institutions and religious communities and practitioners.

The Practice and Matter of Scholarship

Currently, there is no other journal that seeks to nurture this conversation about religious practices among scholars of religious studies and practical theologians. Religious studies scholars generally publish in journals that address religious studies broadly or in journals of their various scholarly sub-fields. Practical theologians tend to publish in the journals of their scholarly sub-disciplines or in publications within their religious communities. Almost never do practical theologians and religious studies scholars publish in the same venues. Despite a convergence of interest in practice, the boundary between religious and theological studies remains heavily guarded.

This situation often obscures the fact that many generative tensions—between descriptive and constructive modes, fact and value, explanation and interpretation, theory and practice—are present in work across both fields, albeit in different ways. The work of practical theologians is constructive, but it grows from adequate description. Work in religious studies, on the other hand, foregrounds description, but is nonetheless shaped by values and commitments that animate the field as a whole. Moreover, many of these same tensions are echoed in conversations across the human and social sciences, where there is a renewed interest in questions about the place of commitment in scholarly life, the role of scholars in wider publics, and the ethical impulses that shape research questions and methods.²

It is with these questions and concerns in mind that we have launched *Practical Matters*. We publish work by and for scholars, practitioners, and teachers across religious, scholarly, and methodological traditions. In addition, we welcome work by artists, documentarians, and journalists. Some pieces are more analytic in nature. Others point more directly toward the enrichment and reform of religious communities. Still others feature the thoughtful reflections of teachers and

practitioners. In these pages, we hope to cultivate transdisciplinary conversations that engage both religious practices and practical theology in expansive as well as rigorous ways.

We also understand *Practical Matters* as a contribution to emerging models of scholarly communication shaped by new technologies, new ideas, and new financial and institutional pressures. We publish only online. This makes good financial sense, of course, but it also makes *PM* more rapidly accessible to more people globally, helping to break down some of the barriers to truly transnational scholarly exchange. We are committed to the principles of open access because they respond creatively to concerns about systemic problems in the world of academic publishing and the changing economy of information. The platform that supports *PM*'s model of multimedia scholarly publishing will be made available as open source software when it is fully functional. We hope that this journal will inspire others to experiment with new models of scholarly publishing and that the availability of this software will make it easier for them to do so.³

Inspired by innovations in the digital humanities and visual scholarship, we also decided early on to develop a journal in which text-based scholarship and scholarship in other modes—film, digital video, images, audio, new media, data sets, and so on—could be published and engaged side by side. The goal is not to replace traditional textual scholarship but to displace it as the only kind of intellectual work valued as scholarship. By developing peer-review standards for non-textual scholarship and providing a venue for publication of these new forms, we hope to contribute to an expanded understanding of “what counts” as scholarly work.⁴

Practical Matters

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 theme.

The day-to-day operations of the journal are handled by a staff of doctoral students in Emory's Graduate Division of Religion. Our work on *Practical Matters* is helping to establish new forms of scholarly communication that honor innovative models of research and teaching. As a collaborative enterprise involving both faculty and graduate students, the journal is also shaping the next generation of scholars. Such collaborative opportunities are rare in graduate education, and this critical involvement of students highlights another aspect of our aim to generate new conversations with fresh language and perspectives.

At least initially, our issues will be thematic and rooted in face-to-face consultations hosted by the Initiative in Religious Practices and Practical Theology at Emory. Some themes will lean toward the traditional concerns of practical theology, others to concerns more closely associated

with religious studies. In all cases, we hope to push beyond traditional boundaries, illuminating each of these areas and the connections between them. The inaugural issue explores the theme of Imagination, the topic of our initial consultation in October 2007. The second issue on Youth (Summer 2009) grows out of a consultation held at Emory in October 2008, and a March 2009 consultation on Ethnography and Theology will lead to our third issue (Spring 2010).

Dedication

As this first issue of *Practical Matters* and our permanent web site entered the final stages of preparation, one of the professors most supportive of our digital publishing endeavor began the last chapter of her life. In gratitude for her keen intellect, her mentoring spirit, her innovative approaches to qualitative methods, and the many varied ways she participated in the scholarly formation of many members of the journal staff and numerous other doctoral students in Emory's Graduate Division of Religion, we dedicate this inaugural issue of *Practical Matters* to the memory of Nancy Lynn Eiesland (1964-2009).

Notes

1 For overviews of these trends, see Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Theology and the Lure of the Practical: An Overview," *Religion Compass* 1/2 (2007): 294-304; Heather Levi, "Practices," *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. Maryanne Cline Horowitz (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2005); and Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri, eds. *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2006).

2 See Linell E. Cady and Delwin Brown, eds. *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002). For a discussion of similar issues across the academic disciplines, see Richard Wightman Fox and Robert B. Westbrook, eds. *In Face of the Facts: Moral Inquiry in American Scholarship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), including Robert Orsi's essay, "Snakes Alive: Resituating the Moral in the Study of Religion," 201-226.

3 See Laura Brown, et al, *University Publishing in a Digital Age* (Ithaca Strategic Services, 2007), <http://www.ithaka.org/strategic-services/Ithaka%20University%20Publishing%20Report.pdf>; and Nancy L. Maron and K. Kirby Smith, *Current Models of Digital Scholarly Communication: Results of an Investigation Conducted by Ithaka for the Association of Research Libraries* (San Francisco: Association of Research Libraries, 2008), <http://www.arl.org/bm~doc/current-models-report.pdf>. In April, 2007, the Emory University Libraries hosted a symposium on "The Library and the Production of Knowledge in the Digital Age" that helped to shape our thinking, as well; vodcasts and podcasts of that event are available online: <http://web.library.emory.edu/symposiums>.

4 For a taste of work in the digital humanities and scholarly publishing, see the Center for History and New Media

at George Mason University (<http://www.chnm.gmu.edu>) and the online journal *Southern Spaces* (<http://www.southernspaces.org>), an Emory University Digital Library Research Initiative. For an introduction to this emerging field, see Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth, eds. *A Companion to the Digital Humanities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/companion/>. For treatments of visual approaches, films particularly, as constitutive of a different kind of scholarship, see David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).