

Book Reviews

David P. Gushee and Paul Silas Peterson (eds), *Christianity and Democracy Today: International Perspectives* (Routledge, 2025), 152 pages. ISBN: 9781032965765.

Reviewed by Daniel Hutton

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The editors, David P. Gushee and Paul Silas Peterson, bring substantial expertise to this volume, and their long-standing work in Christian ethics, public theology, and the study of religion and politics positions the book as a significant contribution to the current debate on the evolving relationship between democracy and religion around the globe. The editors curate a collection of scholarship that engages both the historical nuance and contemporary urgency of democracy, framing the conversation in ways that are accessible to scholars, practitioners, and students of Christianity. In an era marked by democratic fragility, resurgent nationalism, and contested visions of religious freedom, the combined experience of both editors and authors contained in this text lends the volume a depth that makes it a valuable resource for those seeking to think carefully about Christianity's public role.

One of the notable strengths of the book is the way it illuminates the complex and mixed record of Christianity's entanglement with democratic projects across different regions and periods. Rather than offering a simplistic story of Christianity as either the guardian or the enemy of democracy, the essays draw attention to the ambivalence, tensions, and mixed motivations and results that have characterised this relationship. The volume foregrounds how theological commitments, ecclesial structures, and socio-political contexts have variously created lasting foundations and unstable bases for democratic norms. Attesting to the diverse lived experiences of faith communities' participation in

democratic processes, the book resists universal solutions to localised situations regarding the possibility of faith strengthening democratic traditions. Instead, it invites readers into a more focused and historically informed engagement with the theme.

A further contribution of the book lies in its sensitivity to the varied historical trajectories through which ideas of Christianity and democracy have developed, particularly in both colonial and emerging contexts. The chapters show how these concepts are not abstract ideals floating above history, but, instead, they are realities that have existed within concrete situations of power, resistance, and cultural negotiation. Attention to colonial legacies, postcolonial aspirations, and the dynamics of emerging democracies allows the volume to present multiple perspectives on how Christian faith intersects with struggles for representation, participation, and human dignity. This multiplicity of voices asserts the important claim that there is no single model, struggle, or solution for 'Christian democracy'. It is, rather, a range of contextual experiments that arise from a myriad of different social and historical experiences.

Taken as whole, the varied angles in this volume offer rich insight into how democratic life might grow, endure, and bring genuine benefit within very different global communities. Precisely for this reason, however, it is regrettable that voices from the Arabic-speaking world, whether from the Middle East or North Africa, are largely absent from the conversation. Given the diversity of governance and experiences of democratic traditions in these regions, and the long historical presence of Christian communities there, this omission leaves a notable gap at a point where questions of democracy and faith are especially acute. A more sustained engagement with these contexts would have further strengthened the volume's claim to present a truly global account of Christianity and democracy. However, even with this critique, the book presents readers a great opportunity to explore the current state of Christianity and democracy from a global perspective, strengthening opportunity for understanding, dialogue, and action.

Nicholas Norman-Krause, *Political Theology and the Conflicts of Democracy*. New Cambridge Studies in Religion and Critical Thought (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 361 pages. ISBN: 9781009603843.

Reviewed by Christopher Schelin

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In this book, Nicholas Norman-Krause offers an intervention into both radical democratic theory and Christian political theology to resolve a central issue: namely, the relationship between political community and pluralistic difference. These dimensions of social existence are commonly understood as opposed to one another, catalysing either illiberal and postliberal projects of homogenisation or liberal efforts to manage diversity through individualistic tolerance and a public discourse reduced to an alleged ‘neutral’ rationality.

The author endorses the convictions of radical democracy, also known as agonistic political theory, that difference and its resulting conflicts are not just ineliminable but are productive aspects of democratic practice and human flourishing. But Christian theology tends toward interpreting contestation as a consequence of sin and has, like political liberalism, sought to restrict or contain it. Norman-Krause thus sets out to develop a ‘theory of conflict’ for democratic political theology (p. 13). He joins a growing body of work on the interface of theology and radical democracy, although his text demonstrates little awareness of the existing literature apart from radical political theology, which rejects notions of divine sovereignty and transcendence.

The argument begins with two mostly descriptive chapters that introduce prominent political theologies and their accounts of difference, followed by an outline of agonistic theory. The former details two strands of the Augustinian tradition: a postliberal trajectory as exemplified primarily by John Milbank and the civic liberalism of Eric

Gregory and Charles Mathewes. The latter chapter focuses on the ontological grounding for constructive agonism in the writings of William Connolly and Chantal Mouffe.

Theorising democratic conflict begins quite rightly with a political-theological anthropology that recognises disagreement is borne of our creatureliness as defined by finitude, contingency, and embodiment. ‘Ordinary’ conflict occurs in the day-to-day negotiation of competing goods, calling forth practical reason. Norman-Krause then argues for a dynamic understanding of community as constituted by practices of making and contesting shared judgements. Finally, he returns to the Augustinian tradition to centre agonistic political theology in love, elaborating Augustine’s concepts of friendship and admonition and then Gustavo Gutiérrez and Martin Luther King Jr’s understanding of enemy-love as an invitation to moral and political conversion.

Norman-Krause provides a robust argument for embracing the central claim of agonistic theory that conflict is not only basic to human nature but that it can and must be wielded as a positive good for attaining and revisioning political agreements. Moreover, he has demonstrated that the Christian tradition contributes intrinsic intellectual resources to this effort. My quibble with the resulting theory of conflict is whether it is sufficiently theological. Norman-Krause effectively refutes trinitarian and other analogical arguments for normative political relationships, but I am not convinced that political theology should refuse any theoretical grounding ‘in claims about the nature of God’ (p. 143). He makes incidental references to kenotic Christology and divine judgement that transcends political judgement, but, ultimately, his agonistic political theology is so oriented to creatureliness that I expect it can be readily adapted to naturalistic theorising. Nevertheless, this is an essential read.

Russell P. Johnson, *Beyond Civility in Social Conflict: Dialogue, Critique and Religious Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 324 pages. ISBN: 9781009427173.

Reviewed by Nividi Kevichusa

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Russell P. Johnson presents a timely analysis of communication ethics amid pronounced political polarisation. In the face of the extremes of both antagonistic confrontation and superficial civility, he advocates a model of ‘constructive conflict’, in which critical communication facilitates the search for truth, accountability, and transformation.

Drawing on this foundation, Johnson criticises actions that avoid sincere communication or merely seek results, arguing that such approaches mainly benefit those in power. He responds by proposing a communication ethic focused on accountability and moral responsibility, encouraging people to reflect on their words and their impact on relationships and public communication.

Continuing this exploration, the first chapter describes three main ‘voices’ in communication: victory, civility, and open-mindedness. The ‘victory’ approach, as shown by Saul Alinsky, prioritises results over ethics and sometimes supports manipulation and the demonisation of others. ‘Civility’ focuses on politeness and democratic values, while ‘open-mindedness’, developed by Sally Miller Gearhart, sees persuasion as a form of pressure. Johnson says none of these approaches works well on their own, pointing out the struggle between staying ethical and being effective.

Johnson discusses non-violence, drawing on Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr, and states, ‘It is not possible to achieve a non-violent society using violent means’ (p. 129). Non-violence is not simply a strategy, but also a way of communicating that shows respect, empathy, and moral consistency in standing up to injustice.

Building on communication practices, Johnson's discussion of Kierkegaard on 'illusion' and indirect communication stands out. He criticises abstract, impersonal speech, saying it does not bring real change. Instead, he supports 'concerned speech', which pays attention to context and how listeners receive the message. This idea is especially important for Christian communication, where at times, faith can become merely a cultural label rather than a way of life.

The last chapter concludes the book with a theological view of communication based on the 'Good News'. Johnson argues that the choice between compassion and confrontation is a false one, and instead suggests 'compassionate confrontation', which blends honest critique with love and reconciliation. Relying on Desmond Tutu's ideas, he expands this concept to include restoration for both victims and perpetrators. Johnson's core message is consistent with the kingdom paradox found in the teachings of Christ, where Christians are commended to love even our enemies. The message of communication is thereby not only about redemption, but about restorative justice for all, including our opponents.

While Johnson's emphasis on non-violence and love for one's adversaries may at first seem idealistic in contexts of deep injustice, his monograph offers a rigorous and provocative framework for critical 'Christian' communication. This book is timely and a much-needed message for Christians today who are divided globally along many lines, the political and theological chief among them. As such, the book's relevance extends to all who seek to participate in critical and ethical dialogue within today's highly polarised world.

Ruth Gouldbourne and Anthony R. Cross, *The Story of the Bristol Baptist College: Three Hundred Years of Ministerial Formation* (Pickwick Publications, 2022), 215 pages, ISBN: 9781532662515.

Reviewed by Gabriel Venturini de Souza

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Drawing on Anthony R. Cross's extensive research, this book narrates the three-hundred-year history of the Baptist College in Bristol, from 1720 until 2020 (although it covers essentially until 2006, with brief notes after that). It is said that the original material was quite detailed and academic, but, in this publication, there was an intention of making reading more easily accessible. This was successfully accomplished through Ruth Gouldbourne's work of condensing and transforming the original research into a more 'popular' style. The reader senses the emotional weight of this work, not only because of the content, but also because of the passing of Dr Cross in 2021. The book was dedicated to him, in honour of his work and research.

The book's structure follows the sequence of the story of the college, with three main chapters dedicated to each century of its existence. Rather than simply presenting a chronological list of events, the authors weave together multiple threads within each period. They begin by presenting the broader social and political landscape, showing how these situations influenced both the city of Bristol and the college's daily life. At the centre of each chapter lie the principals, particularly those with prolonged tenures, whose theological convictions, educational philosophies, and personal temperaments left lasting imprints on the institution. Yet the narrative extends beyond these leaders, offering glimpses into the lives of students, the contributions of tutors and professors, and the college's evolving relationships with the wider Baptist family and other academic institutions (especially Bristol University). Theological debates and social issues (such as slavery or the

impact of the two world wars) are covered with seriousness, although necessarily broadly. Spread between these chronological chapters are shorter thematic ones that trace themes transcending any single phase: the debates over ministerial education, the college's various physical homes, and the development of its library (which is the shortest one). This structure allows readers to appreciate both the sweep of history and the threads of continuity running through it.

The authors present the essence of the 'Bristol Tradition', with its continuous focus in forming 'able, evangelical, lively, zealous Ministers of the gospel', as well as a notion of 'catholicity' and a refusal of a narrow denominational position. While born from the life of one institution, this story transcends its immediate 'family'. For any reader engaged in Baptist life, the themes, debates, and enduring challenges mirrored in Bristol's journey will feel profoundly familiar. As an outsider to the college, this history fostered not just respect but a deep admiration for its enduring mission. This volume is more than a college history; it is a valuable case study in the very history of Baptist theological education itself, making this a vital and instructive read for the entire Baptist family.

Sergii Sannikov, *Signs of the Presence: Toward and Eastern European Baptist Sacramentalism* (Langham Global Library, 2025), 260 pages. ISBN: 9781786411655.

Reviewed by Toivo Pilli

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Sergii Sannikov is a prolific Ukrainian author, theologian, and pastor. He earned his doctorate from the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University and is the founder of Odessa Theological Seminary where he served as rector 1989–1997, after which he contributed significantly to the development of the Euro-Asian Accrediting Association. He has written in the field of Slavic Baptist history and theology and published several volumes in wider church history. He was the chief editor of the Slavic Bible Commentary, which appeared in 2016. While he is well-

acquainted with the Slavic Baptist story as a researcher and pastor, he combines both Western and Eastern European Baptist perspectives in the present book, entitled *Signs of the Presence: Toward and Eastern European Baptist Sacramentalism*.

It is rather unusual for an author from Eastern Europe to make an effort to use sacramental interpretation not only in analysing the theology of baptism and the Lord's Supper, but also when discussing the laying on of hands, preaching, music, and other elements of Christian practice and worship. One of the benefits of this volume is that it puts 'on the table' both Eastern and Western baptistic views and demonstrates the broad scope of the author's analytical interests. The book emphasises not only rational elements of faith but argues for engagement with the mystery of divine presence.

Sannikov finds sacramental thinking in an Eastern European setting that is often considered more symbol-oriented, or Zwinglian, if you like. Slavic Baptists have historically been shaped by their opposition to the churches that represent a sacramental understanding of God's presence, such as the Orthodox Church. Sannikov shows that, while in some sense true, this is not the full story. He states, 'In the broadest sense of the word, a sacrament is an event of encounter, in particular, an encounter between man and God through Jesus Christ' (p. 8). If a sacrament is seen in terms of communication and meeting with God, then a door opens for Baptists to engage with this approach. Sannikov outlines a more prominent place for material aspects that God uses for mediating his grace. A sacrament, according to Sannikov, 'stands as the inscrutable mediating presence of the sacred in the profane in a particular place and under specific conditions' (p. 9).

Sannikov's line of thought is well-argued, and he makes a credible and valuable contribution by exploring the possibilities of placing sacramental theology into an Eastern European context. It would be interesting to know to what extent Sannikov's theological views are reflected in the parishioners' convictions on the local church level. Of course, this will be another research project and book to be written in the future.

Leonid Mikhovich, *Traditional Worship in Russian-speaking Churches: Formation, Features, and Internal Conflicts with a Focus on Belarus* (Langham Academic, 2025), 363 pages. ISBN: 9781839736612.

Reviewed by Brian Talbot

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Leonid Mikhovich is an acute participant observer who is extremely well-placed to write this study of traditional worship services in Russian-speaking Baptist churches in Belarus. He was brought up within a committed Christian family attending regular services in this union of churches, and he subsequently has served in Christian ministry since 2002. He is currently the president of the Baptist Union of Belarus and rector of the Minsk Theological Seminary, Belarus.

The opening section of this lengthy detailed account of public worship explains the nature of the study and the methodology used to obtain the information utilised so effectively in this text, followed by an account of the important role played by public worship services in the Belarussian Baptist context. It was viewed by church attenders in times of persecution as a place of refuge and as a unique place for fellowship with other believers experiencing the same difficult times. The third chapter covers the history of Evangelical Churches in Belarus and the particular influences that shaped the distinctive patterns of worship services found in that country. The author, who leads worship services and preaches on a regular basis, is concerned that acts of public worship should be personally fulfilling and meaningful. However, it appears that in the twenty-first century an increasing number of churches, in the larger cities in Belarus in particular, are adopting newer patterns of worship under the influence of Western churches, without giving adequate reflection on the theological significance of these changes (pp. 4–5). Therefore, it is timely that this study of traditional forms of worship in Russian-speaking churches in Belarus has been written.

One chapter covers the religious influences, particularly from the Orthodox tradition, and the impact of persecution and suffering over decades in the last century. Examples of the context and

components of Baptist worship services are provided from selected churches. In order to give a clearer picture for the readers of what was taking place, the author provides rich detail not only of the act of worship but also in the use of space of the houses of prayer. Another chapter highlights theological emphases in these traditional worship services, prior to two final chapters that identify tensions in public worship and guidance for overcoming them.

This study is thoroughly researched with great attention to detail, allowing the reader to gain a clear picture of the patterns of worship found in these churches. It is written in a style that is easy to follow. It is not only groundbreaking original research, but it also fills a significant gap in scholarship on this subject. Hopefully, this book will encourage similar research projects in other countries. It is also reasonably priced and warmly commended.

Christopher B. Barnett, Clark J. Elliston, and Trevor B. Williams (eds), *Theological Discourses on Social Media* (Routledge, 2026), 246 pages. ISBN: 9781032436135.

Reviewed by R. Benjamin Potter

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In the acknowledgements section of this timely volume, the editors likened the process of assembling an anthology to ‘buying a puppy: it usually starts with casual conversation, initially seems like a great idea, and eventually leads to numerous sleepless nights’ (p. xiii). In this reviewer’s estimation, the sleepless nights have proven worthwhile. *Theological Discourses on Social Media* offers a series of reflections and analyses that seek to diagnose, analyse, and (in some cases) triage our vexing predicament of discussing theology through various social media outlets. The book’s contributors seek to interrogate various modes of theological discourse on the web and promote a way of thinking that attends to real challenges in a myriad of social media contexts. The result is a versatile and thought-provoking series of meditations that

encourage the reader to attune her or his senses to the challenges confronting serious theological engagement in our present moment.

Though it is a slender volume, *Theological Discourses on Social Media* is ambitious in its scope. The contributors discuss numerous social media platforms, connecting each with a theological concept, media theorist, philosopher, or other relevant point of contact. The book's structure lends itself to this task and is divided into three parts: Social Networks (Part I), Media Sharing (Part II), and Collaborative Knowledge and Virtual Reality (Part III). One of the book's shining moments occurs in Michael Burdett's opening essay, entitled, 'Attention Online: Christian Practice and Facebook Living'. Burdett intriguingly argues that incorporating contemplative spiritual practices such as 'fasting, lectio divina, and silence and solitude', to name a few, can offer Christians a path forward in theological discourse on Facebook. In a manner that is emblematic of the book's primary strengths, Burdett draws upon experts in the fields of technological ethics and media theory to demonstrate the manner in which Facebook has ceased to be fun and has, instead, become addictive (p. 9). He then persuasively challenges the reader to engage in an intentional spiritual 'counter-praxis' of spiritual disciplines (p. 15). The Internet, argues Burdett, 'is not essentially reprobate', and such counter praxis may grant Christians the privilege of 'transfiguring it for God's kingdom' (p. 16).

Not a page is wasted in the work, as each essay offers something different than the one preceding it. And, as is often the case in wide-ranging anthologies, its versatility is also a weakness. While the book's structure helpfully groups the essays into a sensible framework, some readers may wish for a more unified argument, or, at least, a common approach to discussing the relationship between theology and social media. However, in this reviewer's estimation, the trade-off is more than worth it, as the joy of making connections between the essays for oneself is its own gift. This book would be a welcome addition to the collection of academic theologians and theologically attuned laypersons alike. I highly recommend it.

Katherine Turpin, *Questioning Our Faith in Practice: Unlearning White Supremacy in Practical Theology* (Brill, 2025), 235 pages. ISBN: 9789004714243.

Reviewed by Marcus Tayloe

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There is an urgency that accompanies Katherine Turpin's writing throughout *Questioning Our Faith in Practice*. It is an urgency brought about by the proliferation of whiteness in Christianity. A proliferation so daunting that it even drives Turpin to wonder if the decreasing number of white Christians is not itself good news. Fortunately, Turpin is not consigned to despair despite the overwhelming problem, and she attempts to give us a picture of a redemptive practice of practical theology that fights against the constrictions of whiteness.

Turpin helpfully categorises whiteness as 'extractive, individualist, systematic/orderly/timely, hierarchical, patriarchal and heteronormative, supremacist, nationalist, and Christian' (p. 8). This definition frames the discussion throughout the book as she applies it to various areas of focus within practical theology. She subdivides the discipline into the categories of practice, education, intervention, leadership, congregations, apologetics, christocentrism, and anthropocentrism, which I found to be helpful as one not embedded within the field. Turpin's sharp criticism and deconstruction of these different areas, however, not only reveals the damage whiteness has done but equally illuminates our own participation within these systems.

The ethos of this book can be summarised through the practice of humility and repentance. Throughout, Turpin remains vulnerable not only to the power of whiteness but also to her own participation within it. She does not accuse others but insists upon her own guilt in proliferating the power of whiteness in practical theology. In doing so, she allows this book to be not merely an analysis of harmful trends but a repentant reflection that humbly admits to the violence perpetrated. It is due to this repentant and humble nature that this book is able to speak effectively to the problems that exist.

This book is of great value to white people engaging within the field of practical theology, because we need to constantly be engaged in reflection of our own participation in systems of whiteness. Katherine Turpin helps to open our eyes to these factors, yet appropriately recognises that her work is limited by her own status as a white individual. Therefore, if you pick up this book, understand that it is simply a launching point, and, as Turpin pleads, it should be ‘an invitation to read and re-read the work of our contemporaries of color in the field and to be inspired and transformed by their courage and insight’ (p. 214). This book is, nevertheless, a great place to begin, and, through critical engagement with its message, white practical theologians can develop the humble and repentant demeanour needed to work effectively within the field.