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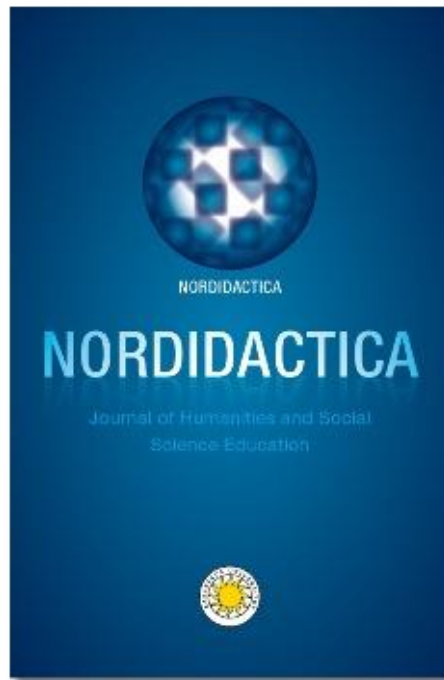
Book review: Practical Theology – Relevant for Multicultural Religion and World View Education? A review of John M. Hull. 2014. *Towards the Prophetic Church. A Study of Christian Mission.*

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Book review

Practical Theology – Relevant for Multicultural Religion and World View Education?

A review of John M. Hull. 2014. *Towards the Prophetic Church. A Study of Christian Mission*. SCM Press.

During the last quarter of the 20th century and well into the 21st, John M. Hull was among the most distinguished international authorities in the academic field of religious education. He was, for example, a contributor to the production of the 1975 Birmingham Agreed Syllabus, one of the first and most debated multicultural religious education syllabuses in England and Wales. In 2004 Hull retired from his position as Professor at the Faculty of Education, University of Birmingham, and began teaching practical theology at the nearby Queen's Foundation, an independent ecumenical theological institution for the education of ministers and lay people.

Towards the Prophetic Church was launched in October 2014, half a year before the author turned 80. It can be seen as a summary of the first ten years of Hull's academic achievements whilst teaching ordination candidates at Queen's Foundation. The book is divided into four parts offering a concentrated account and integrated vision of the Christian message for a global audience, i.e. a theology of justice and peace. The book's thesis or agenda may be read from the titles of its four parts: *The Origins of the Prophetic Church*; *The Betrayal of the Prophetic Church*; *The Recovery of the Prophetic Church*; *Towards the Prophetic Church*.

In a short introduction Hull positions himself theologically, distinguishing between different understandings of prophets and prophecy in contemporary Christian churches. He proclaims a universal prophetic message of justice and inclusive universal love, with intertwined elements of the human and the divine.

The first part of the book deals with hermeneutics and biblical exegeses. Of particular interest here is Hull's discussion of certain parts of Old Testament prophecy; chapters in the books of Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. All of these texts are demeaning to women through their use of highly ambiguous sexual imagery to portray the relationship between God and Israel. Hull draws on the work of different biblical scholars, often representing feminist theology, whilst writing his own exegeses of the disturbing texts.

Proclaiming a message from the Old Testament prophets for today, Hull highlights the concept of ambiguity – both regarding the understanding of history and time, the understanding of society and nation-building, power and place, and when discussing the image of the divine. He refers to Paul Tillich's idea of broken symbols intertwining human and divine creativity. With particular references to the second

Isaiah, Joel and Jeremiah, Hull puts forth an image of divine justice and deep, renewable love. However, he states, with Tillich, that even Christ may become an idol if absolutized. Hull breaks the taboo implied in the concept of Holy Scripture. He views the Bible as an open, dialogical text.

In the second part, Hull discusses prophetic theology and imperialism, claiming that the Christian church through its history, from Constantine, to a large extent has betrayed its prophetic message. From the history of Christianity in Britain, he offers insight into particular and fascinating sources, for example by analysing the language in Isaac Watt's many popular hymns as carriers of imperialism.

The third part of the book gives an exposition of the prophetic church. Here Hull underlines the importance of social sciences for a renewal of Christian theology. Among selected theological agents, he clarifies how Paul Tillich has interpreted and integrated biblical prophecy into his systematic theology. Of special importance is Tillich's early work from 1933, its English title being *The Socialist Decision*. Hull provides a detailed introduction to this book and the context in which it was written. Further concepts and ideas drawn from Tillich writings are the relationship between place, space and time as well as covenant and sacrament. While covenant is linked to the constant awakening work of the prophets, sacrament refers to the regular cultic work of the priests, and both are necessary, according to Tillich.

In the final part, Hull summarizes his message in a brief systematic theology, explaining how the central ideas of sin, God, Jesus Christ, salvation, the Church, the Christian life, the Bible, Christian education, and other religions are interpreted very differently by 'imperial faith' and by a renewed prophetic theology. A good example here is the understanding of Jesus Christ. In imperial faith '[t]he Christian mission has been turned into a personality cult of Jesus' (p. 200). A worship focussing on Jesus alone easily becomes unhealthy. In a prophetic theology '[t]he death of Jesus Christ will be understood as indicating and exemplifying the presence of God amidst human sufferings [...]', and 'Jesus is the crucified people' (p. 204). The last quotations show the influence of liberation theology on Hull's message. Interestingly, he acknowledges an affinity to feminist theology due to his adult experiences of becoming a blind person. Exposing the characteristic features of a prophetic theology, Hull offers both biblical exegeses and discussions of central Protestant ideas like 'justification by faith'. He proclaims an action-oriented practical theology, outlines how this may be done in a program of theological education, and in an appendix offers criteria for 'prophetic action'.

What are my reasons for reviewing *Towards a Prophetic Church* in *Norddidactica*, a journal dealing with research on history, geography, civics and religions and world views as school subjects in today's multicultural schools? Primarily I believe that the two fields of (practical) theology and (relevant) subject didactics may learn from each other. In Norway, during the 1990s, when confessional religious education was turned into an 'ordinary subject' with contents from the main world religions and the humanistic tradition, members of the theological field and the comparative religion field approached each other. They discussed the relevance of various positions and

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perspectives (e.g. the voices of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’) in both fields’ methodologies. Hull participated in a research conference at Gran in Norway in those days, contributing to the dialogue. This ‘getting closer’ has in more recent times again been challenged. I would claim that it is in the interest of researchers of religion and world view education to be familiar with the scriptural and the systematic theology (including the normative language and position of a theologian/an ‘insider’) of at least one of the relevant main traditions. I also think there is a tendency within the academic field of religion and world view education to leave out the challenging parts of a tradition, the parts which spur criticism from a humanitarian and human rights position. Books like Hull’s *Towards a Prophetic Church* disagree with such a tendency.

I learnt a lot through Hull’s clear and simple presentations of feminist theologians’ interpretations of the prophets of Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. I also found his various historical discussions of the Christian mission in the centuries of early modernity interesting and relevant, especially his references to social sciences and use of interdisciplinary approaches. His use of collective memory theory is inspiring.

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