April 2014

Prof's Picks

The Rev. Ruthanna B. Hooke, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Homiletics at Virginia Theological Seminary, recommends the following books as part of the Bishop Payne Library's monthly series highlighting a faculty member's "picks":


This is the first volume of Sarah Coakley's long-awaited systematic theology. Coakley, one of the foremost contemporary Anglican theologians, places contemplative prayer at the heart of her systematic undertaking, arguing that it is through such prayer practices that one can best understand the nature of God as triune, as well as the connection between sexual desire and desire for God. Coakley’s work is erudite and rigorous, and promises new approaches to vexed contemporary questions about sexuality and gender, as well as providing an illuminating consideration of the doctrine of the Trinity. Significantly, Coakley engages not only academic writings on the Trinity and on gender, but also the lived experience of Christian believers.


In this volume Williams brings his theological brilliance to bear on the realm of theological aesthetics, and specifically the connection between art-making and the religious life. Recovering the work in this area of Jacques Maritain, and artists who drew from him in understanding their own art-making (such as Flannery O'Connor and David Jones), Williams argues that there is a real, though dialectical, relationship between art-making and the sacred. In order for art not to be propaganda or kitsch, artists must pursue their work with strict attention only to the good of the things being made. However, if they do this, the art they create reveals a depth dimension in the world that opens into the transcendent. In this way, art-making is intrinsically related to God's creative action, and is a form of love for the world. This book rewards re-reading, and has implications for the practices of liturgy, preaching, and other aspects of the church’s life that are both artistic and religious.


This lovely book has influenced me as a teacher more than any other reflections on the teaching vocation. Palmer’s premise is that good teaching cannot be reduced to technique. Rather, good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. We teach who we are, which means that in order to teach well we need to be fully present in the classroom, able to connect to our passion for what we are teaching, as well as to connect to students and their perspectives and selfhood. Palmer accurately names the vulnerability of teaching, and also its great rewards, when teachers and students meet in a common quest for meaning that is the discovery of self as well as of the topic being taught.