

# Acting out

by [John P. Burgess](#) in the [May 22, 2002](#) issue

Americans remain deeply attached to religion. The days of the “secular city” (Harvey Cox) have been left behind for “the spiritual marketplace” (Wade Clark Roof). Though Christianity may play a less prominent role in the public arena and may have more competition from other religions and spiritualities, high percentages of Americans continue to claim belief in God and affiliation with a community of faith (especially the Christian God and the Christian church).

Yet, as every American mainline pastor knows, people are far more attached to the idea of religion than to its practice. In the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches 1998* George Gallup speaks of three gaps that afflict contemporary American Christianity. Although religion is highly popular, “survey evidence suggests that it does not change people’s lives to the degree one would expect from the professed level of belief.” People call themselves believers, yet biblical and theological illiteracy is rampant. Americans join churches, yet they are ambivalent about religious institutions and easily float in and out of religious communities.

Church leaders worry about how to close these gaps in ethics, knowledge and affiliation. Increasingly, their attention has fallen on the “practices” side of the equation. How can belief be translated into practice? How can personal religious experience be more fully integrated into patterns of communal life and practice? What is needed, according to much of the mainline decline/renewal literature, is not a set of abstract intellectual arguments, as though the problem were a theoretical atheism. Rather, American Christians need to learn to resist a *practical* atheism. They need to live out their faith.

At the forefront of this thinking about the role of Christian practices has been Craig Dykstra, Presbyterian minister, theologian and head of the religion division of the Lilly Endowment. Working with Dorothy Bass, formerly a seminary professor and now director of a Lilly-funded project on the education and formation of people in faith, Dykstra has argued that the Christian life is best understood as a process of moral formation. One grows in faith as one participates in disciplined, communal practices

of living the faith.

Among the recent fruits of Dykstra and Bass's labors has been *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, a book of essays edited by Bass and published in 1997. In it 12 theologians explore particular practices of Christian faith, ranging from honoring the body to keeping Sabbath, from dying well to singing the faith. The book has won numerous accolades and has been widely used by church study groups and in seminary classrooms.

*Practicing Theology* continues in this trajectory. Like the earlier volume, it is a group effort. Dykstra and Bass contribute an opening essay; Miroslav Volf, professor of theology at Yale Divinity School, brings the volume to its conclusion. Among the other contributors are various prominent professors of systematic theology in divinity schools and seminaries. The book is a series of reflections on how beliefs and practices intersect and condition each other, and it is directed more to an academic than a lay audience. Do beliefs explain and justify practices or do practices shape and justify beliefs? Do beliefs serve as a kind of ideological overlay, or do they help guide and correct practices? How can one believe the right things but fail to put them into practice? How can reflecting on practices deepen our capacity to engage in them?

This concern reflects larger movements not only in the church but also in recent theology and ethics. Feminist and liberation theologies, with their emphasis on the priority of praxis, offer one approach. It is in the worldly struggle for equality and justice that Christians discover the liberating power of the gospel and Christian belief. Practice shapes belief. Postliberal theologies, influenced by the work of philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre, have approached the question from a different angle. For postliberals, foundational narratives play a key role in shaping communities and their distinctive ways of living. The gospel and Christian belief, focused on the story of Jesus, shape a community that practices nonviolence and hospitality.

From yet another angle, the interest in practices has grown out of renewed attention to worship, sacraments and spirituality. New liturgical theologies have reemphasized the ancient Christian slogan *lex orandi, lex credendi*. The way we worship shapes the way we believe. From this point of view, more faithful and regular celebration of the sacraments and observance of the spiritual disciplines, especially daily prayer, would help renew Christian faith and life.

While the authors of *Practicing Theology* explore all these angles, a particular doctrinal concern emerges as key to their particular interest in practices: the Reformation understandings of sanctification. As contributor Serene Jones notes, “To know Christ is to live a certain way, to be disciplined into certain patterns of living, to become a person disposed toward certain kinds of actions and thought. Although Calvin never uses the explicit language of practices to capture the character of this new material reality, his description comes close to an understanding of practices as put forth in this volume. . . . Practices are the things that Christians do as their lives are conformed to . . . patterns of holiness—sanctus.”

Sanctification requires the cultivation of key practices: a receptivity to God’s grace, a commitment to telling the truth about God and the human condition, skills of discernment (how do I know God’s will?) and the courage to forgive. *Practicing Theology* puts particular emphasis on hospitality (which is treated in nearly every essay). To grow in Christian faith is to grow in one’s capacity to welcome the stranger and the outcast. We most fully respond to a radically gracious God by demonstrating a self-giving, gracious love toward other human beings.

This focus on sanctification and hospitality suggests the complexity of Dykstra and Bass’s enterprise. Both argue that one of the values of focusing on practices is that they are neither too large nor too small—they provide a helpful level of analysis, somewhere between a general concern for the Christian life and specific questions about how we act in such-and-such a situation. But hospitality is itself a broad practice that tells us little without further analysis. Christians from the beginning have had to discern when hospitality was being abused and when the claims of the stranger had to be resisted.

Similarly, the doctrine of sanctification leads quickly to larger systematic theological concerns. Who is the Christ into whose image we are called to grow? What are the dynamics of sin that continue to infect and vitiate our best efforts to live a transformed, justified life? What in scripture rightly reveals God’s will?

*Practicing Theology* is more suggestive than complete, more a summons to a way of doing theology than an extended, systematic theological effort. But the volume successfully whets our appetites for detailed studies of specific practices, which several contributors have explored in other places (for example, Christine Pohl on hospitality, Dorothy Bass on Sabbath-keeping, L. Gregory Jones on forgiveness, and Miroslav Volf on reconciliation).

The book also acknowledges that deeper issues remain. Beliefs and practices are part of a much larger problem: the reshaping of the whole self in the image of God and in relationship to other humans. As contributor Amy Plantinga Pauw notes, vital worship and celebration of the sacraments are central to the shaping of both belief and practice, and to healing the gaps between them. Here the volume would benefit by more fully exploring the nature and purpose of pastoral ministry.

Ministers at their best are pastor-theologians who assist congregations in making connections between beliefs and practices. But ministers know that they have an even more fundamental task—to proclaim through word and sacrament the good news of Jesus Christ in a culture that too easily accommodates the gospel to consumerist, therapeutic values or ignores it altogether. Every time they preach, every time they offer counsel, pastors face the most profound questions: How if at all is it possible to orient human beings toward the living God? What if anything can the church do to align humans' deepest desires and longings with God's purposes? If we are to make further progress in thinking about beliefs and practices, we will need the help not only of our best academic theologians, but also of our best pastors and preachers.