Book Review


At first glance, *Illuminating Faith* could be assumed to focus on faith as a concept, or how faith itself acts as a light. As the title of their text suggests, Francesca Aran Murphy, Balázs M. Mezei, and Kenneth Oakes address each of these options by profiling a number of thinkers and issues, in how they define and use faith and the respective theology that emerges. Light itself is an apt metaphor for faith, as faith can be identified both as an individual and discrete experience, or an overarching theme throughout the history of Christianity, akin to the particle and wave duality of light. The authors state that faith has been ‘the defining notion of Christian theology’ (p. 1), but by focusing upon diverse thinkers and their expressions of faith, break any assumption that faith is static. *Illuminating Faith* shows that there is no universal definition, expression, or understanding of faith, but a complex and nuanced tapestry which has produced heterogeneous, and at times conflicting, theologies.

While theology is a prominent part of *Illuminating Faith*, faith itself is the primary focus. It is a textbook primarily on faith, showing theology as its by-product. Working under the definition ‘reasoning faith’ (p. 130), theology is shown to be the product of an individual’s belief system as distilled through their sense of logic. Using faith as a starting point and primary focus helpfully narrows the scope of the work, resulting in concise and accessible profiles well-suited for novice students of Christianity or theology. Such a student may wish for a supplementary theological text to best understand a theologian’s full spectrum of work, as the brief nature of each chapter prevents a comprehensive discussion of each subject’s theology. No single work can properly and fully present the entire story of faith within Christian thought; however, as a text meant to present the spectrum of faith and spotlight faith as the foundation of Christian thought, *Illuminating Faith* is ultimately successful.

No small amount of dexterity is required to suitably and succinctly cover a concept which has transformed from being seen as ‘elemental firmness’ to an ‘existential stance’ in the course of its history (p. 150). Each chapter responds to, critiques, or continues upon the preceding concept of faith, helping readers to see the fluidity of understandings of faith in Christian history. Murphy, Mezei, and Oakes do well to represent fairly both Catholic and Protestant voices instrumental in shaping Christian thought, such as: St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Kant, Pope Pius X, and Barth. I found the most valuable chapters in the text to be those near the end of the book not focusing on a specific thinker, but on topics such as faith and science, and reformed epistemology, as well as the papal encyclical *Fides et ratio*. These chapters allow the authors to bring their voices forward and provoke more reflection than the profile chapters reporting on a theologian’s use of faith.
Illuminating Faith is an important addition to the shelf of any student of theology or religion. As a compilation of individuals central to Christian history, the profiles contained assert faith’s central standing in Christian thought. Of equal importance, it reminds the reader that theology is not a detached or purely academic pursuit, but founded upon a personal faith, whatever that faith might look like. Without requiring extensive prior knowledge, Illuminating Faith is useful either as an accessible study of faith or as a reference source for how faith has driven the theology of a specific thinker. By putting faith first in their book, Murphy, Mezei, and Oakes show both its continuity throughout Christian history, and the number of ways it has been understood and applied. Illustrating Faith illustrates that when focused upon, faith takes its proper, vital position in Christianity and also carries theology to the fore.

Jamie Thrams
University of Iowa