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Bowman, Donna, *Prayer Shawl Ministries and Women's Theological Imagination* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2016), 390pp., £75.00 hbk. ISBN: 978-0-7391-7971-0

This book concerns the phenomenon of North American prayer shawl ministries: the practice of knitting or crocheting a shawl to give to a recipient as an act of prayer. For the originators of this form of ministry, '[t]o tangibly wrap someone in your prayers and best wishes for them [...] to drape a shawl made by the work of your hands and the prayers of your heart' (p. 3). Donna Bowman's study is the result of qualitative research with eighty-three participants, in one-to-one interviews and small group sessions. Yet this book is not simply a sociological or ethnographic study of a religious practice performed only by a small number, however interesting and valuable. *Prayer Shawl Ministries and Women's Theological Imagination* has wider significance as an example of the scholarship of 'ordinary theology', identifying and communicating the daily theologies that lay religious people did not realise that they had.

The substantial Introduction to *Prayer Shawl Ministries* opens with an excellent and succinct section on the sources of theology, and the relation between 'top-down' and 'ordinary theologies'. This section would stand alone as a helpful introductory resource on any number of undergraduate courses in theology and religious studies. Bowman then discusses the shifts in various scholarly disciplines towards interest in the material and the everyday, also related to feminist recovery of women's neglected histories and ways of knowing. Bowman's specific project is to present 'the theological meanings women make out of their work in prayer shawl ministry groups [...] arranged to highlight the discoveries that came to light from my perspective as a professional theologian' (p. xxix). She makes a strong case for prayer shawl ministries providing 'a unique vantage point for observing bottom-up theologizing in process' (p. xxix) and sets out key underlying questions which other scholars may apply in different contexts.

The first chapter provides the historical background to prayer shawl ministries, relating the surprisingly fascinating story of the ministries' origin in a very specific, feminist theological context. This chapter, and each subsequent chapter, begins with the story of a particular shawl. Janet Bristow and Victoria Cole-Galo's origin shawl story takes place at a class at the Women's Leadership Institute at Hartford Seminary. One member of the class asks the group to pray for her seriously ill husband: '[a]s she wrapped herself in the brightly colored shawl she was wearing, we laid our hands to her and joined our prayers to hers'. The shawl became 'a mantle, newly blessed by our prayers' (p.1). Bowman's reading of this origin story identifies a number of the key principles of prayer shawl ministry that Bristow and Cole-Galo would go on to found and disseminate through groups and publications. This includes the implicitly feminist concept of the divine feminine that Bristow and Cole-Galo propound, particularly influenced by the work of Miriam Therese Winter, concerned with cycles, processes and empathy. This first chapter of Bowman's study, worthwhile in itself as an analysis of Bristow and Cole-Galo's work, ends with a discussion of how the diverse prayer shawl ministry groups across the US both

cohered with and departed from Bristow and Cole-Galo's original vision as published in their books. For Bowman this forms a case study for how 'bottom-up' theology works with its source 'top-down' theologies.

The second chapter explores the theme of 'connection' in prayer shawl ministries. This applies not only to the connection between makers, givers and recipients of the shawls, but also of joining a prayer shawl ministry group as a way of becoming more a part of one's local community or congregation. Chapter Three concerns the issues of 'inclusion', stemming from the original prayer shawl ministry's principle of unconditional love. Bowman discusses her participants' grappling with the issues of ecumenism, evangelism, gender, sexuality and race in their ministry. These questions, of (mostly implicit) feminism, male knitters and recipients, and inclusivity in the context of conservative religious groups, could perhaps have been explored in more depth; nevertheless Bowman raises valuable points and shows the complex considerations of her participants that will defy many stereotypical expectations of what knitting and crochet ministries entail. The following chapter on 'reciprocity'—what the makers get from their giving—also features how the participants struggle with issues of perfectionism in their craft, recognition of the value of their work and importance of their ministry, in relation to their theologies. Chapter Five uses the image of 'kindling' as a way of combining the principles of 'passing on' and 'paying forward' blessings that motivate prayer shawl ministries. The sixth chapter, 'Compassion' considers the affect of prayer shawl ministries; for me the most interesting discussion here was the relation between expressing empathy and compassion and the material characteristic of the shawls, such as the choice of fibre or the texture of the stitches. Bowman returns to more explicitly political themes in the following chapter on 'Solidarity', in some ways an extension of the earlier topics of connection and inclusion in its discussion of mutual support and friendship in women's groups, gendered divisions of labour and leisure, and participants' theological understandings of these issues. The eighth chapter, on 'generativity', discusses the teaching and learning of skills as acts of love, whether from mother to daughter or in a peer group context. Theological themes of sanctity and divine providence emerged from Bowman's questions to her participants about the status and fate of their shawls, presented in Chapter Nine, 'Trust'. The final chapter brings all the preceding themes together under the umbrella of 'Empowerment', finishing with summarised answers to the key questions of her study, emphasising women's gendered experience, materiality, and process.

In the introduction Bowman briefly relates her own religious background and theological journey; throughout the book she provides glimpses of her own interaction with her participants and their practice. In the final chapter she devotes a few pages to her interaction with her participants and her own learning to knit and crochet. Nevertheless, here I would have appreciated more detailed in-depth analysis and reflection on Bowman herself as the researcher affecting the research. Despite the focus on materiality in the prayer shawl ministry ethos and the experience of participants, the book contains no illustrations, and for me it would have been improved by photographs of the shawls. Nevertheless Bowman's text is beautifully written and her vivid descriptions enable the reader to imagine them.

Bowman's research involves a number of interesting boundary crossings, not least of which is her status as a systematic theologian doing ethnographic research. As a specific case study, this book could come in useful to students and scholars of practical theology, a valuable addition to more general existing handbooks and readers on qualitative research methods and religion. Bowman closes the book with an affirmation of her participants and their ministries: 'I have tried to treat the experience of prayer shawl makers with the seriousness that any theologian owes to the sources she gathers and synthesizes. They did not set out to do theology. But in their words and actions, their memories and plans, theology happens' (p.335).

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