

Summary of *The Study of Theology*

ed. **Kenneth E. Kirk, D.D.**

Harper and Brothers, London: 1939

This volume contains essays regarding various topics in the education of a theology student. The authors are academics from early 20th century English church life.

Since the book was published before World War II, it does not contain more recent theological thought. Given the quality and tendencies of that thought, this may not be a bad thing.

The theological reading list for our denomination's priestly development program makes much use of parts of this book. The section on apologetics refers to essays on the philosophy of religion and the psychology of religion.

Most of the essays present interesting and useful thoughts to the student. However, the essays do not always cover their subjects with enough thoroughness to allow the volume to serve as a solid introduction to the field. The chapter on liturgy spends much of its time talking about the history of liturgy. It would have been more useful if it had spent more time discussing current liturgical practice, or how to conduct a worship service.

The article on "The Psychology of Religion" seems to be more about a general introduction to psychology than religion. It spends about half of its space on the introduction without any mention of religion at all. It eventually devotes a couple of pages each to topics like the psychological aspects of sin, conversion, group worship, and mysticism. However, the reader probably needs a degree in psychology to understand the concepts under discussion. The article's usefulness to the modern priestly candidate is limited by its academic orientation.

Another article cited in the apologetics section concerns "The Philosophy of Religion." The author assumes that religion as separate from philosophy would not have occurred to most thinkers until after the Renaissance. Before that, the two fields would have been seen as one by most.

The author is a Jesuit, and he criticizes rationalism as an attempt to take over God's place. This suggests that the author holds some form of Christian faith. However, the essay meanders around trying to justify religion's place in the realm of philosophy but never quite accomplishing the task.

Dr. Kirk contributes the essay on "Moral Theology," which presents various tests of motives and intention to determine whether an action is morally right. Even though this kind of argument can quickly turn into lawyer-like pleading, it is still worth a look just to see the weird situations that Kirk can come up with. When is it immoral to give to charity? How about killing a viciously evil man?

The section on the Old and New Testaments cannot do justice to such large subjects in a small number of pages. This does not mean they are worthless.

The Old Testament article starts out as an apology for the Christian study of the Old Testament, which was under much criticism at the time of the article. It defends Old Testament study as the account of Jewish history which was markedly different from the histories of other Middle Eastern peoples of that era. No other culture defined a monotheistic system like the Jews. Recent archaeological research, while sometimes seeming to attack the Old Testament narratives, has mostly supported them.

The writer of the New Testament article wants his readers to be scholars. He demands they know New Testament Greek well enough to read the gospels and epistles in the original, and throws around words like *αγαπη* (agape). He looks at the subject under the eyes of newer analytical tools like form-criticism. He wants his readers to study the Greek world of New Testament times to know why the New Testament writers used the concepts they did and how they were or were not understood by the Greek mind. In a real sense, this essay is not much about the New Testament but more about how to study the New Testament.

So much of the entire book is like this. It does not attempt to cover the full subject of the articles, but focuses on one or more subtopics within the overall topic. It almost teases the reader.

This volume is worth reading for the serious student, but it cannot be recommended by itself since it only covers selected parts of theological study. A student would need to find a good and reasonably complete introduction to the field to accompany this useful but frustrating volume.