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Practical Theology as a Religious and Cultural Hermeneutics of Christian Practice

An enthusiastic support of Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore's corrections of the Five Misunderstandings of Practical Theology based on Schleiermacher's Concept of Theology

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Miller-McLemore is completely correct to disagree with each of the five misunderstandings of Practical Theology that she identifies: Namely, 1. Practical theology is no longer a “marginalized discipline”; 2. It is no longer primarily orientated toward a “clerical paradigm”; 3. Every serious practical theologian knows that practical and pastoral theology are different things; 4. It is not more difficult to define the field of practical theology than it is to define the fields of the other theological disciplines; 5. Practical theology describes and interprets Christian religious practices and at the same time develops their normative implications. In contrast to the views suggested by these five misunderstandings, one can say that practical theology of today mostly follows Friedrich Schleiermacher's understanding of theology. On Schleiermacher's understanding, reflection on and interpretation of Christian practice aimed at a normative orientation is what makes a discipline distinctively theological. I want to formulate my response to Miller-McLemore's paper by developing the self-understanding of practical theology in Schleiermacher's tradition. But I also want to integrate that self-understanding with a contemporary discussion of practical theology as a religious and cultural hermeneutics of lived religion. This self-understanding of practical theology understands practical theology not only as being far from marginalized, but establishes practical theology as the leading theological discipline. More than the other theological disciplines, practical theology addresses the contemporary challenges of and to the church. To profile this understanding of practical theology as a religious and cultural hermeneutics of lived religion, I

formulate ten theses and explain them in the context of an important stream in German theological discourse.

1. In a modern context, Theology as a whole and Practical Theology in particular is becoming a study of Christianity that operates empirically and hermeneutically. “The modern change of Practical Theology has turned it to the religious-cultural reality of the Christian religion.” (Volker Drehsen)

Schleiermacher’s encyclopedic outline of theology, his Brief Outline on the Study of Theology, defined practical theology as one of the constitutive disciplines of theology. Schleiermacher oriented the whole science of theology toward practice, and he set practical theology in close cooperation with the other theological disciplines and their referent disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences. Practical theology is not just instruction in the duties of church professions. Nor is it completely absorbed in being an action-oriented theory of church professions. Rather, Schleiermacher assigned to the whole field of theology, including practical theology, the whole field of empirically given and observed practice of lived Christianity.

Part of the lived practice of Christianity is the church as an institution, but the church does not exhaust what Schleiermacher understood by Christian practice. In keeping with Schleiermacher’s understanding of theology, then, the subject of theology in all its disciplines is the Christian-determined religious consciousness or, stretched even further, the empirical-historical practice of Christian religion. Theology becomes an empirical discipline,¹ and “empirical theology” becomes a complex religious studies of Christianity. The tension between empirically-founded religious hermeneutics and the practical interests in Christian church praxis is the difference between philosophy of religion, religious studies and religious cultural history. If theology as a whole can begin to appreciate this tension, it can become in all its disciplines a practical science, and theology will become practical theology all the way through. Practical theology as a sub-discipline of theology, in the older, narrower sense, limited itself to a methodology of training and serving church leadership. But this division of the subjects of the theological disciplines and of their modes of interaction will no longer be sufficient. Now the theological disciplines must cooperate intradisciplinarily with one another and interdisciplinarily with the human and empirical sciences. Practical theology today cannot be limited to church theory, pastoral theology or even methodologically-oriented empirical science (*theologia applicata*).

1 Cf. Eilert Herms, *Theologie – eine Erfahrungswissenschaft*, München (Chr. Kaiser) 1986.

2. The main interest of Practical Theology as an empirical-hermeneutical science of Christian practice focused on church practice lies in lived religion in the context of the cultural presence and resonance of Christianity.

Practical theology needs a definition of the term religion, in particular, a definition adequate to the modern situation of Christianity. It has to clarify the term “religion” by working out the socio-cultural reference problems of lived religion in modern culture.

Practical theology cannot elude answering the question, “What is religion?” Today it has become a primary question for all areas of theology. Answers to the questions, “What is religion?” and “How does religion occur in culture and society today?” are not immediately accessible by means of traditional theological approaches or church doctrines. To continue to use such traditional approaches alone in examining questions of religion and culture to some extent already assumes the answers, namely, what has always been taken as religion in society: church and theology. If we want to overcome this church-theologian self-reference, we ought to reflect on the term “religion” in a more discursive-open and formal-functional manner. Certain phenomena in culture and society are not as such religious, or at least not in a traditional church-theology model of religion. But they may well be seen as religious, if understood as phenomena that fulfill socio-cultural functions similar to more traditional phenomena of religious expression.

Practical theology needs a critical, formal-functional understanding of religion to proceed with a hermeneutics of culture and religion. Empirically saturated, this broader understanding of religion would enable practical theology to define which phenomena in culture and society can be (1) understood as religious and (2) interpreted in their Christian religious content in a narrower sense. Neither can any longer be adjudicated by a normative, dogmatic pronouncement in the Christianity of the modern world, for the normative implications themselves become a part of the formal-functional determination of the term religion. We as theologians are already included in the circle of the hermeneutics of religion when we determine the term religion; we are already directed by a previous understanding of religion. Practical theology should attempt to define phenomena as religious through the employment of a cultural-hermeneutic.

A cultural-hermeneutic practical theology should avoid, however, finally normative determinations of certain phenomena as being religious, either in an ontological or metaphysical sense. It is better to understand the term “religion,” again, formally and functionally as a discursive operator that enables theology to interpret certain phenomena, experiences and life-expressions as religious. Of chief importance is the presence of the hermeneutic “as,” used to interpret something as religious. The hermeneutic “as” always presupposes in the term

“religion” a theory of religion. Moreover, each “as” – each theory of religion – is itself situated in the cultural-hermeneutic circle, implying the particularity of every theory. For this reason, the general, formal-functional term religion will always be based on a certain religion. Schleiermacher understood both the “as”-structure and the particularity of interpretation. In his manner of proceeding, the operation of a general, formal-functional term of religion does not endanger but, rather, requires the particular reference of theology to a “positive” form and appearance of religion, such as Christianity.

Use of the term “religion,” therefore, also enables theology to determine the Christian religion in its specific religious motifs and to determine its specifically Christian issues. The practical theology as I am describing will continue to face the counter-charge that theology has to defend its exclusive origin and issue, in the Christian faith and in the church. Such an objection sees the Christian faith as different from the Christian religion and denies the formal-functional usefulness of the term of religion in theology. This counter-charge is often based in an axiomatic “word-of-God-theology,” which maintains theology should be based on God speaking in Jesus Christ. However, in more detailed examination, we can see how elegantly Karl Barth broke through this axiom of the positivism of revelation – i.e., God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ – in a religious-hermeneutic way. We only have access to Jesus Christ as God’s human word in the biblical texts and in the sermon that brings to mind the biblical texts. Without the church-Christian history of interpreting the bible and ever renewed human efforts to understand reports of the experiences of God’s revelation passed on by the biblical witnesses, God’s revelation in Jesus Christ would not be able to base a word-of-God-theology. Thus Karl Barth, too, presents God-communicated through a theory of Christianity. The doctrine of the triple shape of God’s word in the prolegomena to his *Church Dogmatics* can be read as a conceptualization of general religious communication outlined in a particular model, namely, communication of God’s word: God is only conveyed, realized and communicated by symbolic media (bible) and their infinite ongoing interpretation (sermon).²

3. A practical theology operating with a hermeneutics of lived religion must enter the hermeneutic circle, and a general term of religion can only be based on positive religions. Moreover, the determination of practical theology’s content does not need to coincide with the church and dogmatic self-interpretation of the Christian faith.

Only with a discursively open and formal-functional understanding of religion will practical theology be able to remain open and alert in, both (1) its

2 Cf. Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, I, 1, Zürich (TVZ) 1964, 89–127.

broad, empirical interpretation of religion and culture, and (2) its more focused interpretation of religious communications in theology and church.

In a recent volume on a “hermeneutics of religion” Philipp Stoellger, one of the publishers of the volume, wrote an article titled „Abgründe und Anfangsgründe einer Hermeneutik der Religion“³ (Abysses and Elements of a Hermeneutics of Religion). Stoellger argues that religion is only given in positive religions; to this extent we agree. But he then argues this means one must engage or reflect on religion in its concrete shape in phenomenological respects and not on a preconceived general term.⁴ Stoellger’s phenomenological attunement is well-taken, but his hesitation or resistance to work on a general concept of religion ignores the hermeneutical circle. In the whole article not a word may be found questioning or defining which understanding of religion Stoellger takes particular religions to be instantiating. And yet, he does use “religions” in the plural and takes them to differ from one another, implying some common traits by which they may all be classified as instances of religion.

Stoellger neglects to discuss how the shape and content of religions are given as religious and can be developed by empirical research. It remains entirely unclear what qualifies a positive religion as a religion at all and how its boundaries in the cultures of the modern world can or should be determined. One can only conclude the criteria for being a religion and the boundaries of religions must be obvious. It ultimately remains unclear what it means that religion can be found in positive religions, as Stoellger says.

In the end, Stoellger claims that positive religions have the right to define by themselves what religion is. But even this self-report does not attempt to define a general, formal-functional understanding of religion from the particular perspective of Christianity. Not only should positive religions not be interpreted with the assistance of a general understanding of religion, they also should not produce general understandings of religion. The positive religion of Christianity does not say, according to Stoellger, what religion is in a general sense of the term. It says only what the Christian religion is with respect to what Christian faith believes. But a self-report of Christian religion about what its faith is can only imply the church-dogmatic interpretation of Christian faith. For Stoellger, this means the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. There are no new aspects to the understanding of a lived religion produced through the self-reporting of positive religions, including Christianity, because these self-reports have no

³ Cf. Philipp Stoellger, *Vom Nichtverstehen aus. Abgründe und Anfangsgründe einer Hermeneutik der Religion*, in: Ingolf U. Dalferth/Philipp Stoellger (Hg.), *Hermeneutik der Religion*, Tübingen (Mohr Siebeck) 2007, 59–90.

⁴ *Ibid.* 63.

means of expression or communication beyond the in-house religious language of faith. The strange result of this model is that even different instances of the same positive religion separate from one another and are unable to determine whether they can communicate.

If practical theology wants to work out an empirical cultural-hermeneutical theory of lived religion, it needs to develop a formal-functional concept of religion based in positive religions. A practical theology's concept of religion – although based in the particular positive religion of Christianity – needs to be able to define and then identify instances of religion across cultural practices and discourses, not merely in the dogmatic and normative set of interpretations of the contents of Christianity. Only in this way will practical theology be able to recognize and analyze religious motifs and forms of expressions beyond the expressly theological and churchly. Then, the border between an internal perspective and an outside perspective will become permeable, a movement that has not seemed feasible for a long time. Finally, a formal-functional concept of religion, and the movement between inside and outside which it enables, will give practical theology the chance to show – even in church activities – how people beyond the church can relate in and to a Christian-religious view of world and life.

4. A practical theology that operates empirically and hermeneutically will recognize socio-cultural references to religion in the experience of contingency, in confrontation with unavailability and the observation of something unobservable.

People often deal with the social references to religion just named in a non-religious way. Numerous people follow a non-religious way of life. One culturally dominant way of dealing with these social references to religion is the practice of neglect, misjudgment and denial. These behaviors in response to experiences of contingency, unavailability or unobservability are called religious if there is a recognition in them of an encounter with unconditionality, for a core element of religious behavior is the ability to differ between conditionality and unconditionality. On a formal-functional understanding of religion, then, religion is not private and self-referential but necessarily entails a communicative act.

In the introduction to the volume „Hermeneutik der Religion“ (Hermeneutics of religion), co-authored with Ingolf U. Dalferth, Stoellger deviates from his rejection of a general term of religion, and does search for a general term of religion together with Dalferth.⁵ He asks about the difference between a religiously orientated life and a non-religiously orientated life. Both refer to Niklas Luhmann and his definition of religion that religion is the symbolic treatment of

⁵ Ingolf U. Dalferth/Philipp Stoellger, Einleitung: Religion zwischen Selbstverständlichkeit, Unselbstverständlichkeit und Unverständlichkeit, in: Dalferth/Stoellger (Anm. 3), 1–20.

experiences of unavailability. All societies form a communicational code that is able to differ between availability and unavailability, between the familiar and unfamiliar. Religious communication, then, is always present in society. If an experience of difference occurs between availability and unavailability, between familiarity and unfamiliarity, it will always have been introduced and will have to be processed to society in a communicative way. By coding, symbolizing and ritualizing such religious experiences, society builds up a culture of behavior for relating to the unfamiliar and unavailable.

Thus, Stoellger and Dalferth ultimately do need a formal-functional understanding and concept of religion, though both had refused having one at first. They needed it to identify and interpret socio-cultural references to transcendence and expressions of a sense of indeterminableness as religious. By means of a concept of religion, these expressions become capable of connecting to theology. A formal-functional concept of religion opens a discursive space in which human living expressions may be interpreted as religious, even if they do take themselves to be religious per se. Numerous hybrid formations of religious symbols and rituals then begin to appear in culture: in secular-religious equivalents to churchly rituals, in media networks, and in various forms of patchwork-religion. Every interpretation of life based on a transcendent sense of the whole opens itself to interpretation for a formal-functional understanding of religion.⁶

5. A formal-functional understanding of religion therefore understands religion as a communicative practice of interpretation that situates the limited human life into an unlimited, holistic and necessary web of meaning. Religious communication, as a practice of interpreting the meanings of life on horizons of unconditionality, may be found wherever people ask the question, “What gives meaning to my life?”

Religion is the symbolic communication of a “last-resort” interpretation of the meaning of life. Sociologist Armin Nassehi,⁷ following Luhmann’s theory of religion, analyzes the religious situation in a postmodern, “post-bourgeoise” society through qualitative interviews carried out within the “Bertelsmann Religionsmonitor.” He concludes that this religiously shaped sense of the whole still seems not only necessary, but remains omnipresent in social communications. Religion has not simply made a come-back. It never disappeared. It has not been able to disappear because social communication can’t do without recourse to

⁶ Cf. Birgit Weyel/Wilhelm Gräb (Hg.), *Religion in der modernen Lebenswelt*.

Erscheinungsformen und Reflexionsperspektiven, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 2006.

⁷ Cf. Armin Nassehi, *Religiöse Kommunikation: Religionssoziologische Konsequenzen einer qualitativen Untersuchung*, in: Bertelsmann Stiftung (Hg.), *Woran glaubt die Welt? Analysen und Kommentare zum Religionsmonitor 2008*, Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus) 2009, 169–204.

entirety, totality, wholeness. Single issues only make sense with reference to some whole that connects them to one another. Individually, we are unable to comprehend the totality of something as vast as “the universe” in our limited, individual experiences; we can’t even process the totality of our own lives. But nevertheless we are unable to not talk about these things. Why are the truth claims of Christian dogmatics and the interpretations of the meaning of life contained therein so tightly linked to their personal appropriation and constitution in an individual’s own belief?

Nassehi answers: Because there are many different Christian interpretations of life, because not only religious communities and churches but also mass media now store religious meanings and language, and because the society has become so enormously complex and confusing overall, especially in themes and promises of meaning concerning the wholeness of life. These three factors contribute to the pluralization, individualization and culturalization of religious issues by bringing about considerable transformations in the coding and symbolization of the unobservable and, thereby, in the construction of holistic sense contexts. People are still ready and able to answer religiously, whether in the form of questions about God, meaning, luck, life or death. But the “post-bourgeois” issue for Nassehi is that, while people still operate in the same religious modes, they do so in different manners: People do not engage religious issues with reference to general and objective, normatively valid dogmatics. Rather, individual people corporately interrelate individual experiences with individual religious (or non-religious) understandings and go about developing their religious understandings through agreement and criticism. Church and what is preached and taught in church plays a comparatively small role in the production of religion in everyday life. The contents of faith represented by church constitute just a collection of symbols, which are freely combined if they are known at all. They provide language and ideas. By adopting these, people conduct themselves sovereignly in questions of meaning that come up in life. This behavior is called religious to the extent that people link their configurations of these words and symbols to observations of the unobservable, to the extent that they produce individual interpretations of meaning and subjective ideas of God, afterlife and so on. Whether or not such individual formulations accord with the teaching of a formal, church-constituted religious community is very much a secondary matter of interest to the people.

The church speaks to people and serves an important role in people’s lives when its dogmatic presentations of Christian faith connect to and facilitate people’s self-interpretations of their own lives and as part of all of life. We need to understand that people self-confidently absorb and combine a variety of ideas and fragments from different religious cultures and symbols. They are able to link their religious worldview – i.e., their constructions of meaning concerning a

transcendent whole – with elements of secular and even atheistic worldviews. The “post-bourgeois” society does not feel compelled to uphold the consistency requirement that traditional theological dogmatics has for so long held dear. According to Nassehi’s qualitative empirical research, the thing “post-bourgeois” religious communication values most is authenticity: “So I believe this.” “I see it this way.” “That is my belief.” Hence the sentiment of people whom the “Bertelsmann-Monitor” identified as highly-religious: “That is my experience.” According to this, religious expressions don’t have to work anymore with general truth claims or with the paradoxes of theological figures of thought, as was the case in the period of classical modernity. They don’t even measure up to the authority of the church and its proclamation. Instead, the important issue is the authentic self-representation of individuality, of one’s own religious experience or opinion. Being the person one is, i.e., individuality and its authentic manifestation, is the index of the truth of religious expression. According to Nassehi, it is the same for the highly-religious people. This group of people in particular often criticizes the church, its teachings and its theology. They object that they do not understand the doctrine of trinity, that the sermon fails to speak to them etc. In place of these things, they put their individual experience of God and the change it has wrought in their lives. It is of course possible that such individuals might trace their conversion back to reading the Bible. But it is the individual authenticity in religious experience itself that is decisive for people. Thus, more than anything a person reads in the Bible, it is the precise way in which that reading connects to the individual that brings to life the religious sense for the individual. For this reason, Nassehi’s highly-religious people are capable of absorbing seemingly incommensurable religious ideas and interconnecting them. Nassehi calls this phenomenon the culturalization of religion, which he adds to its subjectification.

6. Practical Theology, working with hermeneutics of religion, enables a religious interpretation even of so-called “secular” culture. This does not mean that it takes leave of the church. Rather, it shows the church how it has to adapt its practice to the changed culture of religion in society.

The task of the church is no longer simply to communicate interpretations of life strictly lived in Christian faith. The traditional communicative practices of the church – proclamation, education, pastoral care – extend from a narrowly Christian to a broadly cultural theology. A practical theology of culture, therefore, has the job of transposing biblical and dogmatic doctrines into the key of modern culturalization of religion. Only when we take this work seriously will it make sense to talk of agreement or rejection between contemporary cultural modes of expression and Christian faith.

We are only able to understand single issues light of a general issue; general issues come about only through the arrangement of single issues. We call this

well-known interpretive reality the hermeneutic circle. Rudolf Bultmann, to name one thinker who discussed the hermeneutic circle in reference to a religious question, described how, in the interpretation of religious texts, we understand a text and what it says about a certain issue only with a pre-understanding of the issue of the text. In his essay “Problem der Hermeneutik” (“The Problem of Hermeneutics”) Bultmann argues it is only when one has a pre-understanding of God, at least in the shape of a question about God, and only when one brings this understanding to the interpretation of biblical texts, that one is able to understand text about God and his actions.⁸

How is this pre-understanding of God constituted today, or at least in the shape of a question about him? If the question of God exists as a question of meaning and happiness, as Bultmann said, how can the word “God” be understood today? Practical theology is ultimately oriented around the church practice of communication of the gospel; in service of this aim, practical theology tries to bring to light the religious pre-understandings and self-understandings that people have through empirical, religious-hermeneutical procedures. Therefore, it is critically important that practical theology develops empirical and hermeneutical methods that can identify and track socio-cultural religious transformations. Only then will it be able to follow new, hybrid formations of religion and the (often not explicitly) religious dimension in questions of the meaning of life. It should explore the religious communication of meaning in popular Hollywood-movies, in pop music and fan culture, and last but not least in online social networks. With its qualitative-empirical research, practical theology gains insight into the production of religion that brings about and is brought about through people’s activities of self-interpretation. No less, however, through this research practical theology gives the word to people in their everyday world.

In view of the blurring of the boundaries between traditional religion and culturally fluid religion, the most important challenge of an empirically founded practical-theological hermeneutics of religion is to interpret religious meaning in ordinary forms of communication. It needs to be able to read cultural phenomena and practices in a religious manner. Making religious demands on cultural phenomena and practices is not a main concern. Rather, practical theology aims to figure out whether communication in the course of people’s everyday lives, even when not self-consciously understood as religious, fulfills for these persons the function of constituting a religious entirety of meaning. Through empirical research, practical theology considers whether symbols in media or in ordinary, everyday com-

⁸ Vgl. Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Problem der Hermeneutik* (1950), in: dersb., *Glauben und Verstehen. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 2. Bd. 4. Aufl. Tübingen (Mohr Siebeck) 1965, 211–235.

munication should be interpreted as religious: sometimes exactly this interpretation makes the most sense of the communications, decoding more of their meanings than other interpretations. As long as people continue to communicate in religious modes of interpretation, the religious sense in interpretation obviously remains understandable for them – even if its claims are ultimately rejected. Either way, the work of interpretation is operating in a religious capacity.

The key question of religious communication in church today is the extent to which it too may take on the character of religious hermeneutics. It is a question of whether people can participate in the interpretation of the church's proclamation with and by means of their own acts of religious self-interpretation and communication. If both the church and its individual members understand this interpretation as an interpretation of meaning that integrates particularity into wholeness (of experience, life, the world), and thereby recognize the proclamation of the church as a life-generating power, then the church may be willing to more thoroughly turn its attention to individual participation, and the members of the church may continue to value the church as an institution that facilitates their faith. Therefore practical theology must attend to this church interest and allow and enable the people to participate in a Christian faith, the interpretation of which creates meaning in life and connects to people where they are. This task calls practical theology to foster an atmosphere that encourages individual interpretation of the Christian faith and translation of the faith into localized cultural and linguistic discourses.

7. Once we have recognized that the borders of church-constituted religious communities today are quite open and that religion in general and Christianity in particular have individualized and integrated into culture, practical theology extends to a cultural theology.

The same empirical, hermeneutical analysis of religion that calls practical theology to become a cultural theology also gives it a corresponding task. That is, its ability to identify and understand religious practices and communication throughout society depends on it being itself able to practice the same kinds of fluid, hermeneutical communication, integrating religion and culture. Practical theology's empirical research into the hermeneutics of religion in culture enables it to perform an interpretation of the interpretation of experiences concerning media and everyday life, granting it insight into absolute qualities present in meaning-making. As a theological hermeneutics of religion it aims to calibrate church communication with forms of communication of meaning in everyday life – both to hybrid forms of new, religious-cultural formations and to the fluidity of cultural-religious issues in general.

Practical theology, which with churchly interest, attempts to empirically and hermeneutically analyze religion and its transformation in cultural practices,

cannot claim to have an exclusive relationship to its object, viz. religion in contemporary culture. Today practical theology is one voice among others in the concert of interpretations of religions. Practical theology should combine its empirically established religious-cultural hermeneutics with its historical strength and hermeneutical sophistication in engaging the exegetical, systematic, and historical theological disciplines. But it should bring these traditional strengths to bear upon its specific task, that is, reflection on religious needs for meaning and understanding in society and on the potential value of Christian dogmatics for their development. The blurring of the boundaries between “positive” Christianity (i.e., the historical-traditional, “what Christianity has been”) and fluid-religion, in addition to the social marginalization of church (in Eastern Germany very advanced), strengthens demand on practical theology to develop an empirically constructed hermeneutics of religion. It has to extend its practice beyond the confines of the church into a practical interaction with culture and society. And in order to do so, hermeneutics of religion must become a hermeneutic not only of religion in, but religion and culture, thereby transforming not only the cultural space outside the church into a field of religious interpretation but also transforming the space inside the church into a field of cultural communication.

8. Practical theology has to convert its biblical hermeneutics into a hermeneutics of religion. It ought to read the biblical texts as expressions, codings and symbolizations of religious experiences and to interpret them as religious-hermeneutical acts of creating meaning.

Biblical hermeneutics has to operate with a hermeneutics of religion if the Biblical text is going to be theologically useable in practical modes. Church practices of communication in the form of the sermon, teaching and pastoral care are especially suited to the hermeneutics of religion and culture. Successful religious communication – making a real connection to people’s lives – through interpretation of biblical texts requires that the interpretation bear witness to events and experiences that have been self-interpreted as religious experiences, as experiences of self-transcendence, as a God experience.

Furthermore the direction of the question now changes. The question is not simply how to apply a formal-functional understanding or concept of religion as the guideline for the understanding of the biblical texts as exemplary documents of religious experience. The Christian idea of God emphasizes that in a Christian understanding the appropriate human response to God is faith alone, understood as unconditional trust in God. Our religious-cultural situation accepts as plausible the idea of God being present in everyday life and the implications of this for the people’s interpretation of the meaning of life follow accordingly. But first we must consider the question of why humans would think to interpret

certain experiences as experiences of God, before we can turn to the specifically Christological, Christian idea of God in our interpretation of biblical texts.

9. Practical theology relies on all the theological disciplines for its articulation of a hermeneutics of religion, including history of Christianity, history of church and history of theology, as well as dogmatics and ethics.

Still, it is only by unpacking the religious production of meaning in the handed-down contents of Christian faith that subjective reception of the faith takes place and makes the transfer of tradition successful in a modern culture. The practical purpose of church history and of history of Christianity lies in the ability of these fields to vitalize religious communication within and outside the church through the richness of Christian cultural symbols and rituals. Hermeneutics of biblical and church traditions has always promoted a kind of navigational competence that helps people to plot and interpret their own lives on a horizon of Christian life and thought. But today there are other important religious practices of interpretation than these that function independent of Christian traditions. And the religious educational processes that correspond to new forms of religious interpretation do not merely transfer given stocks of traditions, but seek the willing input of individuals to integrate themselves and their religious understandings with received tradition. This participatory “religious self-education” forms novel processes of religious formation according to contemporary perception and need. The possibility of such a process of religious formation-through-integration taking place is conditional upon the kind of analysis of culture and of Christianity that a hermeneutics of religion can provide.

10. Practical theology fulfills its purpose for the practice of religion and for the church, first, by making the religious needs, attitudes and expectations of contemporary society clear. Second, practical theology then needs to develop and facilitate forms of religious communication in the church that work in concert with forms of religious formation extant in the broader culture.

In summary and conclusion, an empirically-based hermeneutics of religion and culture becomes the key task of practical theology as a specific theological sub-discipline, though the entire field of theology remains “practical theology” in the sense I described at the beginning of the paper. Practical theology in the narrower sense explores the existence of religious motifs, symbols and rituals in everyday life and the different fields of contemporary culture: in the media, in arts and politics, in pop music and cinema, in law and education. Toward this end, practical theology employs a general, formal-functional understanding of religion and the methods of empirical social research. Its practical aim focuses on the fluid development of compatible communications between, on the one hand, contemporary forms of religious expression, in all their hybridity and ambiguity, and, on the other hand, received forms of Christian expression and

symbols. As an analysis of the former, it is a theology of religion in culture; as a revitalization of the latter, it is a theology of culture in religion.

Empirically established hermeneutics of religion and culture shows itself to be a rigorous practical theology by its consistent interest in the life of the Christian church. Only if practical theology is able to work out a better understanding people's absolute concerns in various aspects of their lives will it be able to powerfully, that is, meaningfully connect with people through its preaching, teaching and pastoral care.