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Practical Theology as a hermeneutical science of lived religion

Abstract: It is the aim of this paper to explain why and how practical theology is a hermeneutical science of lived religion, concluding with the challenges a practical theology that is constituted as such currently faces, and how they can be encountered. Asking the seemingly old question of what practical theology is – what is theological about it and what practical – anew in the context of deinstitutionalization and pluralization, the paper will approach an answer by drawing upon the concept of “lived religion” including historical sources such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Paul Drews and with reference to empirical cultural studies. Practical theology is thus seen as a theory of religious practice in society which attends to the relationship between constituted church and lived religion.

Zusammenfassung: Ziel dieses Beitrags ist es darzulegen, warum und auf welche Weise Praktische Theologie eine hermeneutische Wissenschaft der gelebten Religion ist, welche Herausforderungen sich für eine Praktische Theologie solcher Art ergeben und wie diesen begegnet werden kann. Die scheinbar alten Fragen, was an der Praktischen Theologie theologisch sei und was praktisch, werden im Kontext von Deinstitutionalisierung und Pluralisierung erneut gestellt und vor dem Hintergrund des Konzepts der „gelebten Religion“, historischer Ansätze von beispielsweise Friedrich Schleiermacher oder Paul Drews und unter Einbeziehung empirischer Kulturwissenschaften zu beantworten versucht. Praktische Theologie wird folglich als Theorie religiöser Praxis in der Gesellschaft verstanden, welche das Verhältnis zwischen verfasster Kirche und gelebter Religion kritisch und konstruktiv begleitet.

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1 Asking for the Question which is Answered by Practical Theology¹

The question asking for the scientific self-conception of practical theology, the way it relates to practice and its theory construction, is not just one issue amongst others; rather, the question for the scientific conception of practical theology constantly runs in the background even when it goes unnoticed. Usually, when the question what exactly practical theology is comes up, it has a critical intention. In my perception, two critical inquiries stand out: For one, there is the question of theology: What is theological about practical theology? Is practical theology not just – whatever ‘just’ may mean in this case – sociology of religion, psychology of religion, cultural studies or something entirely different? Students of theology, for instance, ask this question since they are largely on their own when it comes to integrating all the different subjects of theology within the context of their studies. However, this question is also of importance where questions of normativity and action orientation erupt. The inquiry into the theology of practical theology signals discontent with the theoretical models and explanatory approaches of religious life; these are obtained from diverse scientific perspectives, and they adopt a distanced attitude towards church and religious practice. Theology is often equated with religion. The scientifically devised difference between the practice of religion and the theory construction which refers to that practice is not always seen by theology and church as a gain of distance but often as an inappropriate creation of distance and commented on accordingly. In the 19th century, the German territorial churches engaged in a controversy concerning the education of pastors to be timely and appropriate to the situation of modern society. In this controversy, we encounter the liberal plea for a liberal-minded and critical scientific theology merely as orthodox educational concepts, which foremost aim at the piety of future pastors and favor the habitual practice in a church practice of faith over a scientific education.² Thus, the question of theology can resonate with more or less skeptical voices asking whether the rationality of science threatens belief itself at its core. This question is answered controversially in theological faculties as well as in churches. Usually, these

¹ Consistent with the wording of Odo Marquardt, *Frage nach der Frage, auf die die Hermeneutik die Antwort ist*, in: Id., *Abschied vom Prinzipiellen*. Philosophische Studien, Stuttgart (Reclam) 1981, 117–146.

² Cf. Birgit Weyel, *Praktische Bildung zum Pfarrberuf. Das Predigerseminar Wittenberg und die Entstehung einer zweiten Ausbildungsphase evangelischer Pfarrer in Preußen (BTh 134)*, Tübingen (Mohr Siebeck) 2006.

reservations are specified in expectations of immediate application which arise when content gained elsewhere is only to be mediated by practical theology without giving practical theology credit for independent subjects, topics and expertise.

Another critical inquiry which to my knowledge has always played a role in the history of practical theology concerns its practical relevance. At least in the German context, you increasingly hear of “impractical theology”³ in the context of an initial empirical turn of practical theology around 1900, which is related to a general empiricisation of the sciences.⁴ You can find it also in the surroundings of a second empirical turn in practical theology, repeated in the 1960s, for example, by the systematic theologian Gerhard Ebeling, which resulted in practical theology significantly opening up to the social sciences. Yet, Ebeling does not speak of empirical deficiency but of a “lack of experience” of theology, he distinguishes “immediate life-experience” from an “experience that is scientifically disciplined” which is abstracted from the conduct of life and deliberately constructed.⁵ In terms of a more scientific reference to experience, practical theology has considerably advanced its practical relevance within the past 50 years. Whereas in the beginning complex social scientific theories, which were adapted by practical theology, were dominating, practical theologians today also do empirical research themselves. Practical theologians initiate, methodologically implement, conduct and evaluate qualitative as well as quantitative studies. Since Bornemann, practical theology has put a strong emphasis on empiricism and refined its methodologies. Hence, the awareness has shifted from the professional actors in the church, which practical theology through university and practical training has always had in view, towards the religious subjects themselves as “sources” whose religious productivity and independent meaning making attracted more and more attention. As a result, they are now integrated in practical theology as independent actors and not only as addressees of church-based actions.

This being the case, the questions we are discussing today are not new, but their constellations have changed. Against this background, the question to which practical theology is the answer is being asked anew again.

³ Wilfried Bornemann, *Die Unzulänglichkeit des theologischen Studiums der Gegenwart. Ein Wort an Dozenten, Pfarrer und Studenten*, Leipzig (Lehmann) 1886, 85.

⁴ Cf. Volkardt Krech, *Wissenschaft und Religion. Studien zur Geschichte der Religionsforschung in Deutschland 1871 bis 1933*, Tübingen (Mohr Siebeck) 2002, 5.

⁵ Gerhard Ebeling, *Die Klage über das Erfahrungsdefizit in der Theologie als Frage nach ihrer Sache*, in: Id., *Wort und Glaube. Bd. 3: Beiträge zur Fundamentaltheologie, Soteriologie und Ekklesiologie*, Tübingen (Mohr Siebeck) 1975, 3–28.

2 Lived Religion as a Subject of Practical Theology

The subject of practical theology, that is religious praxis, is not just to be found, but practical theology needs to actively find it. Because religion is lived individualized and in various ways, it is first to be identified and designated as religion. When the question of religion – what religion is and how to collect its data – comes up time and again in specific research projects, what religion is and how to collect its data, this is not to be misunderstood as having approached the subject in an overly naïve manner. The need for developing a new understanding of religion with the conduct of every specific research project and in working on its subject is an essential part of practical theology. Working on the concept of religion is a never ending process since the understanding of religion cannot be separated from the specific manifestations of the religious.

Paul Drews, who combined “lived religion” with a plea for the “awareness of contemporary religious life”⁶, uses the concept of “lived religion” critically. Drews’ criticism is directed against an intuitive understanding of religious practice and scientifically unverified, dilettante opinions on people’s religious notions and needs as distinguished from the factual complexity and plurality of religion. The concept of “lived religion” as a subject of practical theology, thus, always reflects the interdependencies of the modern lifeworld and the manifestations of the religious. Lifeworld concepts, social group formations and regional imprints are not merely external conditions which are secondary, but they are constitutive of religious practice itself. Paul Drews invented the term “Religiöse Volkskunde” (sometimes referred to as studies of “folk religion”⁷) for his in this sense empirically oriented practical theology. It is from this redefining of a scientific discipline that impulses have originated for the self-conception of practical theology as well as for empirical cultural studies, which are of importance to this day.

Although the studies of folk religion provide a basic discipline for cultural studies, Drews closely combines them with reform proposals for the theological training. It is important to reflect upon this since basic research on the one hand, and practical training relevant to the future occupation on the other hand, are frequently pitted against each other. Drews functionally relates the fundamental principles of academic studies of folk religion to the theological training of pastors;

⁶ Paul Drews, ‘Religiöse Volkskunde’, eine Aufgabe der Praktischen Theologie, in: *Monatsschrift für die kirchliche Praxis* 1, 1901, 1.

⁷ Following Marion Bowman, “Religiöse Volkskunde” will be referred to in the following as studies of folk religion: Marion Bowman, *Phenomenology, Fieldwork and Folk Religion*, in: Steven Sutcliffe (ed.), *Religion. Empirical Studies*, Aldershot (Ashgate) 2004, 3–18.

he calls it “education towards the contemporary”⁸ since it introduces future pastors to religion as it is actually lived. Studies of folk religion are situated in the academic studies at the universities, complemented by the training in the seminaries which is more action-oriented and aimed at the specific professional life of a pastor. The institutional differentiation of practical theology into empirical cultural hermeneutics and an action-oriented science, which is focused on the profession, has the advantage of the two being able to relieve and complement each other.

In my view, these reflections are still timely. I consider it to be an important aspect that the basic science constitutes an essential part of the education of a future pastor. Furthermore, it seems important to me that the church is the point of reference of practical theology because it is closely related to the theological training of pastors. However, practical theology is neither confined to church life nor is church life the sole purpose of practical theology. Lived religion as subject of practical theology aims simultaneously at religious practices within and outside of the church by analyzing the manifold relations between church life and cultural life. Schleiermacher’s concept of church leadership as the purpose of practical religion integrates the awareness of lived religion outside of the institutionally constituted religious community. Moreover, it highlights the critical function that practical theology maintains for the benefit of the religious autonomy of the subjects from church organization.⁹

As a further aspect of Drew’s reflections, the concept of “lived religion” also carries normative implications. By identifying “lived religion” as its subject since its empirical turn, practical theology has connected with this definition the claim of fundamentally contributing to a theory of Christendom by presupposing that “an objective phenotypology of *the* religious, which, thus, existed independently of the construction of a normative, scientific concept of religion, does not exist.”¹⁰ The theory constructions of lived religion are simultaneously “strategies for making religion visible”¹¹, which behave critically towards such theories of secularization that identify the decline of institutionalized forms of religion with the disappearance of religion itself.¹² A great number of the empirical qualitative

8 Paul Drews, *Das Problem der Praktischen Theologie. Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Reform des theologischen Studiums*, Tübingen (Mohr) 1910, 8.

9 Cf. Wilhelm Gräb’s contribution in this journal.

10 Georg Pfleiderer, ‘Gelebte Religion’ – Notizen zu einem Theoriephänomen, in: Albrecht Grözinger / Georg Pfleiderer (eds.), ‘Gelebte Religion’ als Programmbegriff Systematischer und Praktischer Theologie, Zürich (TVZ) 2002, 23–41, hier 33.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Concerning this tendency, cf. Detlef Pollack, *Säkularisierung – ein moderner Mythos? Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Deutschland*, Tübingen (Mohr Siebeck) 2003; and *id.*, *Rückkehr des*

papers in practical theology which emerged over the past 20 years help to make visible Thomas Luckmann's "invisible religion"¹³ by surveying religious construction processes¹⁴, lifeworld structures¹⁵, biographical meaning making and more.¹⁶

Simultaneously, religion needs to be operationalized, so it can be surveyed in its various practical contexts. The research process of conceptualizing and empirical surveys leads into a hermeneutical circle of interdependent explanations.

In my view, not only historical roots but ineluctable aspects for approaching practical theology can be found in studies of folk religion which try to find and denote religion and religious practice as they occur in their complex lifeworld constellations. Practical theology and empirical cultural studies are closely knit sciences. Especially since religion is not naturally shared anymore within the scientific community, conceptualizing and emblemizing religion is needed. Following Clifford Geertz, religion is to be understood as a cultural system in which experiences of transcendence are socially constructed. These construction processes are culturally mediated objectifications and externalizations. Martin Scharfe cautioned against an emphasizing of subjects, and Angela Treiber states: "Not the realm of the internalized, subjective believing, feeling, thinking, what happens in their inside, can be the origin of our research, but processes of *externalizing* and *objectivizing* as objectification of human agency, of 'lived religion', and of 'religious culture'."¹⁷ Interpreting religious experiences is dependent on signs, images and texts which have been mediated by society and culture.

Religiösen? Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Deutschland und in Europa II, Tübingen (Mohr Siebeck) 2009.

13 Thomas Luckmann, *Die unsichtbare Religion*, Frankfurt am Main (Suhrkamp) 1991.

14 Exemplarily are to be mentioned the guideline-based interviews within the context of the third survey on church membership of the Evangelical Church in Germany, which have been a source for methodical impulses for many practical-theological papers. *Die evangelische Kirche in Deutschland. Studien- und Planungsgruppe* (ed.), *Quellen religiöser Selbst- und Weltdeutung. Die themenorientierten Erzählinterviews der dritten EKD-Erhebung über Kirchenmitgliedschaft*, Hannover 1998.

15 Cf. Kristin Merle, *Alltagsrelevanz. Zur Frage nach dem Sinn in der Seelsorge*, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 2011.

16 Cf. Wolf-Eckart Failing / Hans-Günter Heimbrock, *Gelebte Religion wahrnehmen. Lebenswelt – Alltagskultur – Religionspraxis*, Stuttgart (Kohlhammer) 1998.

17 Angela Treiber, "Gelebte Religion", "Religiöse Kultur" als volkscundlich-kulturwissenschaftliches Forschungsfeld. Von historischen Deutungsmustern, Sinnzuschreibungen und gegenwärtigen Konzepten, in: Birgit Weyel / Wilhelm Gräß / Hans-Günter Heimbrock (eds.), *Praktische Theologie und empirische Religionsforschung* (VWGTh 39), Leipzig 2013, 41–64: 52f. Cf. Martin Scharfe, *Menschenwerk. Erkundungen über Kultur*, Wien u. a. (Böhlau) 2002, 16–27. Scharfe talks about externalized experiences, imaginations which have merged into cultural materiality.

There is no other scientific access to religion but via a thorough analysis of these interpretations.

Therefore, communicative action as a way for appropriating and applying knowledge of belief is central to an empirical practical theology. Hence, the constitution of a theory of religious practice is preferably but not exclusively done based on a repertoire of empirical and qualitative methods as it exists in the various ways of accessing the field and in techniques of interviewing and observing.¹⁸

3 Challenges for Practical Theology

Practical theology essentially defends the relevance of theology with regard to church and practice. As a theological discipline, practical theology is the answer to the question of religion in view of the processes of differentiation of modern society. As an academic discipline, however, practical theology does not just provide answers. In a positive sense, it also needs to fail such expectations. Finally, I will mention a few problem areas which, in my view and for my context, I consider as particularly challenging.

3.1 Practical Theology as a Magnifying Glass for Reality

By pursuing its hermeneutical task of emblemizing religion as religion in culture, practical theology exercises a constructive-critical function for the action orientation within the church. I have been observing, at least in my church, occasionally, a loss of reality. The church feels challenged by religious pluralization in society and declining membership. One side of this loss of reality is the church trying to react with control programs, which are programmatic in character. While churches are shrinking, and one should address issues such as how to

18 Cf. exemplarily for practical theology: Christoph Morgenthaler, *Methodenintegrative empirische Religionsforschung*, in: Birgit Weyel / Wilhelm Gräß / Hans-Günter Heimbrock (eds.), *Praktische Theologie und empirische Religionsforschung* (VWGTh 39), Leipzig (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt) 2013, 209–219 and for the relation of theoretical concepts and empirical surveys Birgit Weyel, *Netzwerkanalyse – ein empirisches Paradigma zur Konzeptualisierung von religiöser Sozialität? Überlegungen zur wechselseitigen Erhellung von empirischen Methoden und praktisch-theologischen Konzepten*, in: Birgit Weyel / Wilhelm Gräß / Hans-Günter Heimbrock (eds.), *Praktische Theologie und empirische Religionsforschung* (VWGTh 38), Leipzig (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt) 2013, 157–169.

deal with less members and less resources, how to rationalize by merging congregations and to rededicate church buildings, the church is committed to handing out promotional programs advertising that the church can and must grow. Congregational models of free churches are copied by congregations within the “Volkskirche”, although they do not share their structures of participation. This raises expectations within the church that are unrealistic in any respect and will demand too much of the people to take them seriously. Pastors with a strong intrinsic motivation and high standards run the risk of overstraining themselves which eventually may even result in burnout. The other side of this loss of reality is that what actually does exist in religious practices in society, and what the “Volkskirche” does accomplish when it comes to providing orientation for making meaning, both of the world and biographically, gets buried under a bewailing of the crisis: invisible forms of lived religion, even though they and their differentiated processes of transformation have been analyzed by sociology of religion and practical theology.

It is the task of practical theology not to accede to short-circuited programs but to point out the limits of options in guiding the church long-term. Practical Theology at university has free rein to distance itself from the logic of the system of the institutionalized church and to be of benefit for the church exactly because of this distance. An ineluctable function of practical theology is in sharpening the sense of reality and to oppose the inward-looking objectives of an organization with the scientific perception of religious practice in church and society.

3.2 Empirical Methods in Teaching and Research

The structure of theological studies mirrors the encyclopedia of theological disciplines. Practical theology in Germany has indeed been successful in moving towards the center of the course of studies instead of being noticed only at the very end. In my experience, it has grown in awareness and popularity among students. However, it is still an issue that practical theology as an academic discipline has been concentrating on professional fields of actions which is why it has not adequately been able to assume its role as religious basic science. Interpreting statistics, developing surveys, having insights in the nexus of research questions and their operationalizations for going into the field, ethnological procedures and much else have long been part of the scientific qualification of practical theology. During the course of the study, however, they occur only marginally. Practical theology needs a methodological introductory class which introduces to the theory of lived religion and provides exemplary exercises that

teach students not only historical and systematic ways of accessing religion but also empirical methodology.

3.3 Practical Theology and Interreligiosity

Taking into account the many different forms of lived religion entails the need for practical theology to integrate the variety of religions. There has always been a certain division of labor as the practical theology of the catholic theological departments surveys religious practices within its own confession, for instance, while the practical theology at protestant theological departments investigates protestant forms. However, in the context of a society characterized by deinstitutionalization, the subject areas cannot be distinctly separated from each other. Furthermore, the pluralization of the religious demands consideration of the variety of the religious beyond respective confessional confines. Religious education has been concerned with interreligiosity for quite some time now. This is also a subject in the context of intercultural pastoral care.¹⁹ However, the areas in which practical theology faces the challenge of reflecting religious practices in cooperation and coexistence are still comparatively small and contingent on professional places in which the plurality of religions is most obvious (school, hospital). The issue of the pluralization of the religious and the relationship of practical theology and religions, however, is part of the essential inquiries in practical theology. When the perspective on the religiously plural society is narrowed, then practical theology itself will be narrowed; it will lose its public dimension and its theoretical range. Other religions will be exoticized or improperly subsumed by a protestant concept of religion. A lot of specific research remains to be done here. Potentially, this involves a change of mentality for denominational theologies and churches. Critical inquiries concerning the self-concept of practical theology are important inquiries which can carry the discipline forward if they can be discussed in the context of cooperative self-understanding without any apologetic constraints. By pursuing them within a transnational discourse, the context in question and cultural commonalities just as differences are brought to awareness. They contribute to the concept of practical theology.

¹⁹ Cf. Christoph Schneider-Harpprecht, *Interkulturelle Seelsorge*, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 2001.

Summary

I understand practical theology as the theory of religious practice in society which, within the frameworks of protestant theology, aims especially at protestant forms of personal religious practices. Practical theology does not limit its scope to institutional forms, i.e. religious practice within the church, but it attends to the relationship between constituted church and lived religion in a constructive and critical way. In this sense, according to Friedrich Schleiermacher, it is church leadership. This implicates action orientations for agents within the church without amounting to nothing more than instructions. First and foremost, though, it is a perceptual science which integrates the becoming of contemporary phenomena with a historical perspective; it focuses on contemporary religious practice, but it also aims for the future by trying to reconstruct tendencies, trends and developmental perspectives, and by trying to influence the shaping of church practice in training and in the transfer of knowledge between university, society and church.