

Friedrich Schweitzer

# Professional Praxis in Practical Theology: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

**Abstract:** This article discusses the understanding of praxis in practical theology as well as the implications of this understanding for empirical research. It advocates a nominalist understanding of praxis and suggests that definitions of praxis must, in the present context, depend on the theological encyclopedia in use. If practical theology and ethics are organized in separate disciplines, human praxis in general will be the object of ethics while practical theology should concern itself with professional ecclesial praxis. The author understands this praxis in a very broad sense (beyond the church; beyond traditional forms of preaching, teaching, counselling; beyond the focus on professional pastors), not only in terms of the theoretical scope of the discipline but also in respect to the material object to be studied by practical theology. In line with this understanding, the author defines the formal object of practical theology as critically facilitating ecclesial praxis. The methodology of practical theology must be in agreement with this formal object but beyond this, practical theology should not make claims to any special research methods that would be particular only to this discipline. In conclusion, the author offers some answers to the question what practical theology may benefit from theoretical analyses of the present kind.

**Zusammenfassung:** Dieser Beitrag erörtert das Verständnis von Praxis in der Praktischen Theologie sowie die Implikationen dieses Verständnisses für empirische Forschung. Vertreten wird eine nominalistische Sicht von Praxis mit dem Vorschlag, dass alle Definitionen von Praxis im vorliegenden Zusammenhang notwendig von der vorausgesetzten theologisch-encyklopädischen Vorstellung abhängig sind. Wenn Praktischen Theologie und Ethik als jeweils eigene Disziplin organisiert sind, ist menschliche Praxis im Allgemeinen Gegenstand der Ethik, während sich die Praktische Theologie auf professionelle kirchliche Praxis beziehen sollte. Der Verfasser versteht diese Praxis in einem sehr weiten Sinne (über die Kirche hinaus; über die herkömmlichen Formen von Predigt, Unterricht und Seelsorge hinaus; über den Schwerpunkt bei der Professionalität von Pfarrerin-

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nen und Pfarrern hinaus), nicht nur im Blick auf die theoretische Reichweite der Disziplin sondern auch hinsichtlich des Materialobjekts, das Gegenstand der Praktischen Theologie sein soll. Diesem Verständnis entsprechend definiert der Verfasser das Formalobjekt der Praktischen Theologie als kritische Beförderung kirchlicher Praxis. Auch die Methodologie der Praktischen Theologie müsse diesem Formalobjekt gerecht werden; darüber hinaus sollte die Praktische Theologie aber keine Ansprüche im Blick auf besondere Forschungsmethoden erheben, die nur für diese Disziplin gelten. Abschließend formuliert der Verfasser eine Reihe von Antworten auf die Frage, was theoretische Analysen der vorliegenden Art der Praktischen Theologie nützen können.

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In the following, I want to address two related questions. First, I want to discuss the understanding of praxis in practical theology, and second, I will consider the implications of this understanding for empirical research and for the methodology that practical theology should use in this kind of research. In my conclusions, I will offer some thoughts on how practical theology may benefit from such clarifications.

Both questions mentioned above are of a foundational nature. Practical theology as a discipline obviously depends on the understanding of praxis that it presupposes. This can most easily be seen from two common misunderstandings. Until today, there is the common misunderstanding that practical theology means applied theology. In the past, this often implied that there is no such thing as research in practical theology because application was understood as transporting, transferring, or implementing research results produced by other theological disciplines. Another misunderstanding views practical theology as opposed to the theoretical or abstract nature of other parts of theology. While some practical theologians might happily agree to being considered concrete, the implication would still be that practical theology ceases to be a truly academic endeavor. The development of theories that can be critically evaluated or tested is at the heart of all academic work.

Yet even after leaving behind these common misunderstandings, many unresolved problems remain. What kind of praxis is practical theology about? Whose praxis should it be? And what are the implications of the answers to these questions for research?

The answer to the second question mentioned in the beginning of this introduction – what are the implications of the respective understanding of praxis for empirical research and for the methodology of practical theology – certainly is

determined by the answer to the first question about the understanding of praxis. Yet the second question is no less foundational since the actual work of practical theology depends on its understanding of research as well. In the present context, this will only be discussed in respect to empirical research. This special focus should not be understood to mean, however, that research in practical theology should be limited to empirical methods altogether. Practical theology does not equal empirical theology. From my point of view<sup>1</sup>, practical theological research must include at least three different approaches – historical, systematic or analytical, and empirical research – and each of them requires a different methodology. Moreover, these three approaches are not mutually exclusive. In many cases it is mandatory to combine historical background information with analytical perspectives as well as with insights gained from empirical work. The focus of the present article on empirical research should not blind us in respect to the limitations of only one type of research.

I am writing from the perspective of Protestant religious education which I combine with a strong interest in foundational questions of practical theology.<sup>2</sup> The empirical research I have been involved with for more than two decades, refers especially to questions of teaching religion, to confirmation work, and to youth and religion. I will draw on this research by using it as an example but I will not go into the details of this research here. Yet it may be of interest to readers to be aware of the kind of work that has informed my understanding of the discipline.<sup>3</sup>

## What does “Praxis” mean in Practical Theology?

From my experience it is important to first be clear about the nature of this question before trying to answer it. Is it a nominalist or a realist question? In other

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1 Cf., for example, Friedrich Schweitzer, *Research in Religious Education. Perspectives for the Future*, in: *Religious Education* 101, 2006, 167–169; also cf. Friedrich Schweitzer, *Religionspädagogik*, Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus) 2006, 263–286.

2 Cf., for example, Johannes van der Ven / Friedrich Schweitzer (eds.), *Practical Theology – International Perspectives*, Frankfurt am Main et al. (Peter Lang) 1999; Richard R. Osmer / Friedrich Schweitzer (eds.), *Developing a Public Faith. New Directions in Practical Theology. Essays in Honour of James W. Fowler*, St. Louis (Chalice Press) 2003.

3 Cf., for example, Friedrich Schweitzer / Wolfgang Ilg / Henrik Simojoki (eds.), *Confirmation Work in Europe. Empirical Results, Experiences and Challenges. A Comparative Study in Seven Countries*, Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus) 2010; Katja Dubiski / Ibtissame Maull / Friedrich Schweitzer, *How Many Gods in Heaven? Young Children and Religious Plurality – Results of a Qualitative Study*, in: *Journal of Empirical Theology* 25, 2012, 99–122.

words, does it make sense in this case to say, following a realist understanding, that praxis is “*in fact*” or “*really*” *x*, *y*, or *z*?

While we often encounter statements that presuppose such a realist understanding, I do not think that such statements are helpful in this case. Pointing out that “praxis” in practical theology “really” is such and such, actually refers to a reality that does not exist apart from academic discourse, social constructions and collegial validations. Academic disciplines are always based on theoretical constructs, not only in reference to reality as such (the Kantian “*an sich*”) that humans can never know, but also in respect to their self-understanding as disciplines. Practical theology is a social invention, based on socially validated concepts of praxis. This is why it does not make sense to base one’s argument of “what practical theology really is”.

This does not mean, however, that the meaning of praxis in practical theology is completely arbitrary. It depends on social validation from a group of colleagues comprising all those who are considered practical theologians. Moreover, this kind of validation is not immune to new or critical impulses, especially in the academic context. Consequently, it makes indeed sense to discuss the meaning of praxis in practical theology and to enter controversial debates about this meaning. Yet the question is not what a discipline “really” is but what it *should be* – from our point of view or, maybe, just from my point of view (although given the communal structure of academic disciplines, answers should not be based on an exclusively individual perspective).

From my point of view, the question of the nature of praxis in practical theology then clearly is a nominalist question. As such, it should first be treated as an issue of theological encyclopedia.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the understanding of an academic discipline must define praxis in relationship to its closest neighbors, i. e., by defining its tasks in comparison to neighboring disciplines that must have other tasks. A first answer to the question about the nature of praxis in practical

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<sup>4</sup> In this respect, I follow the model of many other authors who develop their understanding of practical theology within the horizons of theological encyclopedia. The classic statement is, of course, Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Kurze Darstellung des theologischen Studiums zum Behuf einleitender Vorlesungen*, Darmstadt (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft) 1973. In recent years, Don Browning, *A fundamental practical theology. Descriptive and strategic proposals*, Minneapolis (Fortress Press) 1991, has received a lot of interest in this field. For my own views, see Friedrich Schweitzer, *Wider die Suche nach der theologischen Leitdisziplin. Theologie als Prozess interdisziplinärer Kooperation*, in: Martin Rothgangel / Edgar Thaidigsmann (eds.), *Religionspädagogik als Mitte der Theologie? Theologische Disziplinen im Diskurs*, Stuttgart (Kohlhammer) 2005, 68–82; also cf. the discussions in Michael Welker / Friedrich Schweitzer (eds.), *Reconsidering the Boundaries Between Theological Disciplines / Zur Neubestimmung der Grenzen zwischen den theologischen Disziplinen*, Münster (LIT Verlag) 2005.

theology then must come from the place of this discipline within theology. Depending on the respective breakdown of theological disciplines, the kind of praxis to be addressed by practical theology will be different. The main question here is about theological ethics as a discipline that is about praxis as well, analyzing and guiding human action or praxis from a Christian perspective. Wherever there is such a discipline, we have to answer the question: Does practical theology differ from ethics? And if yes, practical theology cannot be about human action in general, at least not in the way of ethics. Yet if both disciplines, ethics and practical theology, are not institutionalized as two separate disciplines but only as one (as it is the case in a number of countries or universities), then there will be no need for clear distinctions of this kind. Practical theology and ethics can then be treated as one and the same discipline. From the perspective of theology in general, it is mandatory that both, human action – the material object of ethics – and the material object of practical theology (as explained below) are treated theologically but it is not mandatory to have two separate disciplines, ethics and practical theology, in order to fulfill this task.

Historically, the praxis of practical theology has been identified with a special type of action: professional action.<sup>5</sup> This understanding makes practical theology a part of ethics and a neighbor of ethics at the same time. If ethics relates to human action in general, it must also include professional action. Otherwise it would obviously be incomplete. Yet as a general theory, ethics cannot comprise all of the professional specializations of praxis that have come to exist in society. Ethics can at best offer a general framework for all action but it must depend on other disciplines for the question of how this framework can be used in different fields. Moreover, while ethical principles play an important role for professions, norms and values alone do not constitute a profession. Medical doctors or teachers must act in accordance with certain norms and values but these norms and values cannot make a good doctor or teacher by themselves. The body of professional knowledge studied and produced by practical theology is what makes this discipline a neighbor of ethics, rather than only a part of it.<sup>6</sup>

Another insight from the history of practical theology refers to the difference from pastoral theology.<sup>7</sup> Pastoral theology makes the pastor its organizing focus and offers advice for how he or she should act. We can also say that pastoral theology refers to pastoral action. The fact that pastoral theology has survived the

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5 Again, Schleiermacher, *Kurze Darstellung* (n. 5), can be quoted as the main example.

6 See the discussion between Don Browning and Friedrich Schweitzer in Welker / Schweitzer, *Reconsidering the Boundaries* (n. 5).

7 Cf., for example, Dietrich Rössler, *Praktische Theologie*, Berlin / New York (De Gruyter) 1986.

invention of practical theology for at least two hundred years (or possibly even for much longer, depending on when practical theology is supposed to have come into existence) clearly shows that there is a continuing need for this kind of theology. Yet it is also clear that practical theology, claiming equal status within the theological encyclopedia, has always been expected to go beyond pastoral theology, not only by offering more than advice to junior pastors but also in theoretical scope. In order to do justice to this scope and to the distinction between pastoral and practical theology, I suggest that “praxis” in practical theology refers not only to pastoral praxis but to *professional ecclesial praxis*. It is easy to see that the defining reference to ecclesial praxis makes sure that practical theology will not be limited to the perspective of pastors. Yet at the same time it may appear too narrow vis-à-vis the challenges of contemporary religion.

Many discussions of the last two hundred years have made it clear that the understanding of practical theology relating it to professional praxis as suggested by Schleiermacher must be refined and extended. This is why I want to add *several further extensions*. Three such extensions are of special importance:

*Beyond the church:* Practical theology must include the presuppositions of ecclesial praxis in culture and society<sup>8</sup>; it cannot be limited to the church itself but needs to develop, among others, a religious hermeneutics of culture as well as a type of system-related analysis; presuppositions of ecclesial praxis refer to the individual as well as to the societal or even global level. Therefore neither a hermeneutics of culture can be sufficient nor a systemic focus on institutions and social structures. Moreover, this consideration makes it clear that my understanding of “praxis” in practical theology is quite in line with what has been called the societal paradigm of practical theology.<sup>9</sup> I am not arguing for the pastoral or the ecclesial paradigm.

*Beyond the traditional forms of preaching, teaching, counselling:* The traditional topics treated in practical theology are still focused on the pastor who was considered a preacher in the first place but also a teacher and a counselor. While these traditional forms of praxis have not lost their importance and influence, other forms must also be considered part of professional ecclesial praxis, for example, social work or political activities, to just mention two examples.

*Beyond the pastoral focus:* With this extension I do not want to refer to the difference between pastoral and practical theology again. Instead, the issue here is the question of voluntary workers and their relationship to practical theology.

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<sup>8</sup> This understanding is commonly seen to have originated with Carl Immanuel Nitzsch, *Praktische Theologie*, Bonn (Marcus) 1847.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the discussions in Don Browning (ed.), *Practical Theology*, San Francisco (Harper & Row) 1983.

Clearly, voluntary workers are not professionals, at least not according to the traditional understanding. Their professional identity is related to fields of work most often outside the church, or they may not be professionals at all. This is why traditional practical theology did not include them in its research. Moreover, from a historical point of view, the importance of voluntary workers is clearly changing. Never before has the number of volunteers been anywhere near to what they are today (in Germany alone, for example, there are approximately 60,000 volunteers in confirmation work per year<sup>10</sup>). The more important their work in the church and for the church, however, the more practical theology must include voluntary workers within its scope. This does not mean to turn volunteers into professionals. Instead, it is more adequate to distinguish between the noun *professionals* in the sense of people following a profession within the church or in other contexts, and the adjective *professional*, referring to the degree to which some kind of work can be carried out in a professional manner by people who are not professionals. This allows us to say that practical theology also refers to the work of volunteers – not as professionals but as doing “professional” work.

In defining the meaning of praxis in practical theology, it should not be overlooked that this understanding must also be defined in relationship to an audience. While many practical theologians would of course like to reach an audience beyond their colleagues and beyond those pastors who are interested in reading theological publications, the real audience seems to be more defined and more limited, at least in most cases. Publications produced in practical theology seem to reach an academic audience – in the first place, readers will be other practical theologians. Volunteers, for example, in the field of confirmation work are often quite young (around the age of 18 years) and are not interested in this kind of reading. Most of them would find it more than difficult to even understand what it is about.

Such considerations concerning the possible audience of practical theology is one of the main reasons for me to relate this discipline not to praxis in general but to professional praxis. Another reason can be seen in the need for evaluative research on the quality of professional praxis. If practical theology would be limited to human action in general or to research on religion as a hermeneutics of culture, it could not address this important task in respect to professional praxis.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Ilg / Friedrich Schweitzer / Volker Elsenbast, Konfirmandenarbeit in Deutschland. Empirische Einblicke, Herausforderungen, Perspektiven. Mit Beiträgen aus den Landeskirchen, Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus) 2009, 89.

## Implications for Empirical Research in Practical Theology

In order to answer the question what the understanding of “praxis” in practical theology implies for empirical research, we have to distinguish between the material and the formal object of research.

From my point of view, the understanding of praxis explained in the preceding section already implies what we should consider the *material object* of practical theology. For research in practical theology this object must be ecclesial praxis in a professional sense. Moreover, it is also clear that the three extensions suggested above – beyond the church; beyond traditional forms of preaching, teaching, counselling; beyond the focus on professional pastors – refer to the understanding of the material object as well. Consequently, my understanding of praxis as the material object of empirical research in practical theology is rather broad. The focus is on ecclesial praxis in a professional sense which actually may sound quite narrow, but I view this praxis as embedded in an intentionally very broad social, cultural, and religious context that also has to be studied empirically. Ecclesial praxis cannot be studied or evaluated apart from a research-based understanding of contemporary culture and religion. The extensions suggested above have not always been in view in the field. It is probably fair to say that, for the most part, research in practical theology has been focused too much on the professional work of the pastor or on the situation or life of congregations. In this respect, the understanding of the material object of research in practical theology could play a critical role, challenging the discipline to take more seriously the need to further extend its definitions of the objects to be studied.

It is less clear so far, however, how we should define the *formal object*. Again, my suggestion is rather broad. The formal object should be: *critically facilitating ecclesial praxis*.

With this definition, I emphasize the *critical* nature of research because otherwise research or theory would just duplicate praxis. Research must be done with some kind of distance from its object in order to arrive at new insights. Consequently, the designation as “critical” should be understood in a broad sense, not, for example, in relationship to a particular approach like the so-called critical theory of the Frankfurt School of Sociology that has played an important role in certain understandings of practical theology<sup>11</sup>.

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11 Cf. Gert Otto, *Praktische Theologie*. 2 vols., München (Kaiser) 1986, 1988.

The emphasis on *facilitating* praxis is in line with the theological nature of research. In my understanding, theological research cannot be limited to descriptive and analytical procedures like in sociology or psychology. While practical theology has a clear need for descriptive and analytical work, it places this work in a specific context, i.e., helping ecclesial praxis to become more effective and more appropriate.

It is obvious that both – more *effectiveness* and more *appropriateness* – are criteria in need of further elaboration. To make praxis more effective can be a very narrow aim. It can be criticized for leaning towards a technological understanding of practical theology that contradicts the theological dignity of the discipline. The focus on what is appropriate should also be understood in a theological sense, not only in terms of what might fit a given situation, for example, in a certain congregation. Practical theology has to make sure that its research will include such wider horizons of making ecclesial praxis more effective and more appropriate. Otherwise it will fall short of the self-understanding of practical theology.

## Implications for Methodology

What does the understanding of “praxis” in practical theology and of the material and of the formal object of research in practical theology described above imply for methodology? Questions of this kind have often been discussed at length. In my eyes, however, the answer must be quite simple.

We should make use of whatever methods are suitable in terms of the material and formal object of research in practical theology. There can be no a priori limitations to a certain kind of methodology, especially if we keep in mind the further extensions of practical theological research on ecclesial praxis. Consequently, at a general level and without addressing specific studies, the only thing that can be stated is that research methodologies in practical theology must do justice to both, the formal and the material object in its full extension.

The basis upon which questions of methodology have to be judged, be it in practical theology or in other academic fields, first of all must be the relationship between research questions on the one hand and the design of a research project on the other. The quality of research depends on the adequacy of this relationship. According to the reports from institutions sponsoring academic research (for example, the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* / German Research Foundation), many applications for funding in the field of practical theology fall short of this requirement. They may state interesting questions for research but the methods and research procedures planned do not fit with these questions, at least not to a satisfactory degree.

Sometimes, however, there is the assumption that practical theology should have its own special methodology altogether – in other words, the methodology of practical theology should be different from that in empirical research in other fields.<sup>12</sup> Yet this position is difficult to maintain. In reality, concerning empirical research carried out in practical theology, it is hard to find methods used in such projects that are not in use in non-theological fields (this can be seen, for example, from textbooks on research methods for practical theology<sup>13</sup>).

For a long time, practical theologians tended to exclude quantitative methods altogether because they were considered unethical from a theological point of view. Qualitative methodologies would then have been the only choice for practical theology. In the meantime, this view has almost disappeared from the discussion in practical theology.<sup>14</sup> Obviously it does not make sense to condemn certain approaches from the beginning. Methods and the results gained with their help can always be abused, independently of their qualitative or quantitative direction.

It is easy to see, however, that the understanding of research in practical theology developed above does have implications for methodology. These implications mandate the inclusion of different methodological approaches rather than excluding them. If practical-theological research must be able to address general questions of religion and society or culture, it is hard to conceive of this research without including quantitative methods that are working, for example, with very large samples of maybe even several thousands of interviewees (as we actually do in our international-comparative research on confirmation work in Europe, with more than 20.000 confirmands completing questionnaires<sup>15</sup>). And if research in practical theology must have an interest in individual appropriations and transformations of the Christian faith, then this research will not be possible without qualitative methods looking into the microspheres of personal faith of possibly very few people in specialized projects. It is no coincidence that the combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies – sometimes called triangulation – has become a normalcy.<sup>16</sup> Some of the most advanced studies on youth and

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**12** Cf. Stephanie Klein, *Erkenntnis und Methode in der praktischen Theologie*, Stuttgart (Kohlhammer) 2005.

**13** As an example, see Astrid Dinter / Hans-Günter Heimbrock / Kerstin Söderblom (eds.), *Einführung in die Empirische Theologie. Gelebte Religion erforschen*, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 2007.

**14** For a recent discussion cf. John Swinton / Harriet Mowat, *Practical theology and qualitative research*, London (SCM) 2006.

**15** Cf. Schweitzer / Ilg / Simojoki, *Confirmation Work in Europe* (n. 4).

**16** For a recent discussion see Christoph Morgenthaler, *Methodenintegrative empirische Religionsforschung*, in: Birgit Weyel / Wilhelm Gräß / Hans-Günter Heimbrock (eds.), *Praktische*

religion, for example, are based on such combinations. Practical theology should not hesitate to follow this path.

## Conclusions

What may we benefit from such clarifications? Are they more than abstract questions that not even academics are willing to deal with in their everyday work? In concluding this article, I want to offer three reasons why such endeavors may be helpful and even necessary, in practical theology or in other disciplines.

Asking about the nature of the discipline and about its research and methodology is a helpful interruption of everyday work within the discipline. It forces us to think about the meaning and scope of this work by making us aware of its direction as well as of its limitations. I call this the effect of *self-critical awareness*.

If we explain our understanding of the discipline and of its functioning, our work as practical theologians can become more transparent and understandable for others. This effect of *transparency* is especially important in teaching because it tells others not only how things are done but why they are done in a certain manner. Through this, students of practical theology will have a chance to become more independent because they are made aware of the choices behind the way we work. This can enable them to make other – considered – choices, independently from their teachers. This is especially true for a collection of parallel attempts of answering the same question like in this issue of the present journal.

Finally, exposing our understanding of the foundations of practical theology makes us vulnerable to criticism. It forces us to be explicit about our positions that others may not share. Since critical scrutiny is a main characteristic of academic work, this effect of *exposure* should be most welcome, even if at times it may seem that ensuing discussions only take up the time much needed for everyday research.

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**Note:** This article was written as an introduction to the panel discussion at the meeting of the International Academy of Practical Theology in Toronto, April 2013. It may be helpful for readers to keep in mind the corresponding intention of describing the field and opening up the discussion.