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Beyond Misunderstandings?—The Reality of Practical Theology

A Response to Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore from a European Perspective

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I greatly appreciate Miller-McLemore's attempt at opening up a new round of conversations on the situation and on the understanding of practical theology.¹ While some observers may be critical of such attempts because they cannot see why this discipline keeps trying to reinvent itself again and again, and because they consider such tendencies a clear sign of deep crisis, I am convinced that self-critical reflection of its disciplinary status and outlooks is a real – and possibly even distinguishing – strength of practical theology, not a weakness to be deplored but something that other (theological) disciplines could even learn from.

Before developing my own views which, to some degree, are different from Miller-McLemore's, I want to clearly state that there is much agreement between her understanding of the discipline and my own. Just like her, I have been very interested not only in material achievements or individual contributions to practical theological questions but also in the scope of the discipline itself.² My comments in the following should therefore be read as coming from an academic

1 Cf. her article "Five Misunderstandings about Practical Theology" in this issue of the present journal. The page numbers in the following refer to this article.

2 Since this is a brief response I will limit my references to the publications quoted in the text. For the background of what follows as well as for further references cf. Karl Ernst Nipkow/Dietrich Rössler/Friedrich Schweitzer (eds.), *Praktische Theologie und Kultur der Gegenwart. Ein internationaler Dialog*, Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus) 1991, Friedrich Schweitzer/Johannes A. van der Ven (eds.), *Practical Theology – International Perspectives*, Frankfurt a. M. (P. Lang) 1999, Friedrich Schweitzer, *The Postmodern Life Cycle: Challenges for Church and Theology*, St. Louis (Chalice Press) 2004, Friedrich Schweitzer, *Religionspädagogik*, Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus) 2006.

friend or from a close neighbor who, exactly because of his closeness to the original writer, inevitably also perceives whatever differences there are and maybe even tends to magnify them.

I perfectly agree with Miller-McLemore that it is helpful to make the reality of practical theology the starting point for further analysis, with a “descriptive rather than prescriptive intent” (20). In this way, it will be possible to include the work of others in the field. Miller-McLemore has done so in cooperation with colleagues in the United States (19). I want to suggest that this kind of cooperation should be broadened and be extended to international colleagues as well. In other words, it seems to me that Miller-McLemore’s conclusions might be more reflective of the disciplinary situation in the United States than of the reality of practical theology in other parts of the world. This is why I want to present an explicitly European perspective or, to be more accurate and also more modest, a Protestant perspective from Germany.

In order for readers to be able to understand the special nature of my perspective, I will first address what I consider major challenges for practical theology today. In a second step, I will have a look at the situation of practical theology itself. Against this background, I will then offer some comments and questions referring to Miller-McLemore’s article and suggest some consequences for future work.

1 Contextual Challenges for Practical Theology in Germany Today

In Germany, the discussion on practical theology has evolved in a number of different and more or less distinct phases. The last round of foundational discussions in Germany (which paralleled the American discussion of the 1980s to which Miller-McLemore refers—a parallel that also was a presupposition for founding the *International Academy of Practical Theology*) was closely related to the work of Dietrich Rössler and Gert Otto, at least on the Protestant side.³ Most of all, these authors set forth comprehensive foundational understandings of practical theology that would give this discipline a new status within theology. In hindsight, one could probably say that these new understandings had become possible because the general climate within theology had started to change, for

³ Cf. Dietrich Rössler, *Grundriss der Praktischen Theologie*, Berlin/New York (de Gruyter) 1986, Gert Otto, *Grundlegung der Praktischen Theologie*, München (Chr. Kaiser) 1986.

example, in terms of a waning influence of Barthian (neo-orthodox) theology. For practical theology in Germany, Barthian theology had meant a narrow focus on proclamation, often reduced to preaching, which seemed to imply that practical theology could be best understood – and often reduced to – a derivative of systematic theology. Similarly, biblical exegesis in the hermeneutical tradition of Bultmann and his contemporaries had been so influential that practical theology could only be viewed as a vessel transporting exegetical insights to their recipients in the congregations.

As long as such tendencies prevailed, it was indeed hard if not impossible to have a practical theology on eye level with other theological disciplines. The merits of the 1980s discussion must be appreciated as a first step beyond this long-standing predicament. The complaints about the lesser status of practical theology within theology or the academy that Miller-McLemore quotes (7), refers to this pre-1980s situation, and it was quite justified, at least in Germany.

In the meantime, however, in the three decades since the 1980s, the situation has changed again, maybe even dramatically, at least in certain respects. Just like Miller-McLemore observes for the United States, one could say for Germany that practical theology has become much more established and that its status as a theological discipline of its own right is not contested anymore. The reasons for this new appreciation of practical theology, however, are not due – like in Miller-McLemore's analysis for the United States – to a new openness in the academy for the practical vis-à-vis the theoretical. Instead, at least in the first place, there are a number of social and religious changes that have made it more and more obvious that a discipline like practical theology with its focus on contemporary culture and on lived religion is indispensable, for theology as well as for the church.

In Germany (as well as in a number of other European countries), the church has come under much pressure during the last few decades. There are, of course, many reasons for this. Only a few of these reasons can be mentioned here. First, there is a demographic factor that seems to hold an immediate threat to the future of the church. Since birth rates have gone down dramatically especially with those parts of the population that belong to the church, a dramatic dwindling of church-membership is expected for the coming years. Second, a growing part of the population has no formal religious affiliation – either because they never had one or because they have dropped their former church-membership. In East Germany, 70–80% of the population have no formal religious affiliation, and in West Germany the percentage of non-affiliates has also been growing. Since German unification twenty years ago, church membership in Germany (taking Protestants and Catholics together) has gone down from approx. 80% in former West Germany to a little more than 60% in

the unified country. Third, non-Christian religions have assumed a very visible presence, with more than 4 million Muslims living in Germany, amounting to almost 5% of the total population. For younger age groups and considering the demographic factor, this implies that 10 or 15% of children and youth in this country are Muslim. In addition to this, there are urban areas where most students in certain schools have a Muslim background. It is no surprise in this situation that several German universities are now trying to establish faculties of Muslim theology (including the practical disciplines but without the explicit designation of practical theology).

In my own sub-discipline, i.e., in religious education, additional pressures have come through international large-scale student assessments of student achievements (PISA etc.). This pressure applies directly to religious education taught in state schools, and indirectly it applies to all educational programs offered by the church. Such programs must now compete with other programs closer to the educational achievements privileged by a social climate of educational standardization and achievement orientation.

Moreover, universities have also been affected by this climate of competition and forced aspiration for the publicly acknowledged status of “excellency”. Due to this climate, economic perspectives and criteria have gained much more influence within universities. This implies that theological faculties have come under pressure altogether. They do not seem to contribute in any major way to the economic future of society which, in turn, means that they should not expect to be supported to the same degree as other disciplines that are more promising in this respect.

Given this general situation, what Miller-McLemore describes as the new appreciation of the practical, certainly is not at the forefront of many practical theological discussions in Germany. This also refers to the methodologies to be used in practical theology. Rather than relying on case-studies as Miller-McLemore seems to suggest, practical theology has to grapple with large-scale assessments, with representative quantitative studies, economic and managerial models and analyses as well as with long-term demographic statistics. At least in part, the new plausibility of practical theology in Germany seems to be premised on this discipline’s ability of taking part in debates based on such empirical results and, where possible, also to produce comparable results and insights of its own that can play a role in such discussions.

2 The Reality of Practical Theology: Four Tendencies

I do not want to claim here that I am in a position to describe *the* reality of practical theology. Luckily, we are talking about a broad and lively field of teaching and research in practical theology, even in one particular country like Germany. Instead of trying to do the impossible by attempting to cover this field, I will limit myself to pointing out four tendencies that, in my observation, have been quite influential during the last three decades and that are of major interest in the present context as well. In other words, I am interested in what distinguishes practical theology today from the version of this discipline in the 1980s when the last round of foundational discussions mentioned above took place.

In my understanding, four such general tendencies appear to be quite obvious. I will present them in an open sequence, without elaborating on their possible interrelations and also without trying to identify one of them to be of more influence than the others.

First, there is a strong interest of today's practical theology in the individual person. It is no coincidence that the individual often is referred to as "subject" in order to make clear that the individual should not be treated as an object, for example, of instruction or of proclamation, and that the aim for practical theology must always be to support the individual in becoming a true subject in the sense of personal autonomy. Putting so much emphasis on the individual also means that his or her needs and outlooks are now considered as something that practical theology has to respect, not only in a pragmatic manner but as a matter of principle. This is why it appears justified to speak of a *subject-oriented turn* in practical theology.

In relationship to religion, this subject-oriented turn implies that the religious needs, orientations and outlooks of the individual must be analyzed with utmost care. Sometimes it is said that practical theology must extend as much care and expertise to interpreting lived religion as it is used to extending to the texts of the Christian tradition. Such an attitude is now considered the presupposition of any successful communication between theology and the inhabitants of the modern or postmodern world. Moreover, in following this path, practical theology must become sensitive to all kinds of differences—related to gender, age-groups, social backgrounds, cultural presuppositions, migration, etc. which, in turn, requires this discipline to develop new methodological approaches.

Second, today's practical theology considers the cultural embodiments of religion a major topic and challenge for research. After the breakdown of traditional theories of secularization that often were fueled by theological motives as

well, and after the replacement of such theories by alternative views that stress religious pluralization and individualization, many practical theologians consider it a vital task to identify and to understand the cultural transformations of Christianity within contemporary culture. Again, this identification is considered a decisive presupposition for successful religious communication.

In many ways, religious pluralization implies far-reaching difficulties for church and theology alike, especially in respect to their task of communicating the Christian faith. The traditional problem of finding a language that people will understand, is now intensified by the realization that there is not only a linguistic problem but also a cultural problem. This is why practical theology had to take a *cultural turn* and in order to become what some practical theologians call a religious hermeneutics of contemporary culture.

Third, as has become clear already in the first section above, religious pluralization goes much further than Christianity. The strong presence of Muslims in Germany and in many other European countries is only the most visible expression of this tendency towards general multireligious situations or landscapes. Especially through international media, many non-Christian religions have gained considerable influence, at least in terms of people's awareness of them and often in terms of some kind of multi-religious consciousness as well. It is quite telling, for example, that Germany's most popular tabloid—the *Bild-Zeitung*—gave the Dalai Lama his own rubric for spiritual advice, not only once but on a continuous basis at least for several months. Since the target readership of this tabloid is the famous 'man in the street' I consider this rubric a clear sign of our times. Many people feel that it pays to be open for new religious impulses, even if this does not always mean that you have to actually change your church-membership.

While practical theology has clearly taken the subject-oriented turn as well as the cultural turn described above, the same is not true for what would then be an *interreligious turn*. In pastoral care and religious education, however, the respective tendencies are clearly visible, and it is easy to predict that other sub-disciplines will follow, given the challenges related to intermarriage and to interreligious ceremonies that are in increasing demand with a changing population, among others, on the context of funerals or other family-related occasions. In this respect, practical theology in Germany has not really reached the point where it could be said to be in touch with the current social and religious situation. There is, for example, basically no practical theological literature on preaching in a multireligious society available so far.

Fourth, given the pressures that the church is experiencing in today's Germany (cf. section 1 above), it is most natural that questions of church development are at the forefront of the practical theological discussion as well. In fact,

practical theological ecclesiology has become a very lively field of its own. It is important to note, however, that much of the analytic work offered by practical theology in this context, is not directed at individual parishes or pastors (there are many non-academic publications for this audience, often written from the perspective of evangelism). Practical theology aims for more far-reaching theological insights into the problems and difficulties encountered by the church today. Following the interdisciplinary approach characteristic of practical theology, such insights can only be gained by combining theological analysis with the perspectives of neighboring disciplines, like the sociology of religion in general and systems theory or theories of social organizations and management in particular.

It must be underscored again that the four tendencies described in this section in a short-hand manner are not meant as a complete picture of the current reality of practical theology in Germany. Moreover, much more could and should be said about each of them. Yet for my present purposes, i.e., for providing some background for my comments on Miller-McLemore's statement, it may be enough to have these tendencies identified as such. In any case, these tendencies can be considered decisive parameters on which the plausibility of practical theology will depend, to say it again, at least in Germany.

3 Comments on Miller-McLemore's Understanding of Practical Theology

In her article on the "five misunderstandings about practical theology" that Miller-McLemore wants to correct, she does not set forth a comprehensive understanding of the discipline. Yet it is easy to see that her presidential address on the central occasion of the International Academy's 2011 conference aims at the identification and promotion of "our understanding of the discipline" (6), by *underscoring* "that practical theology as a discipline has made significant progress and continues to have contributions to make to the academy and religious life more generally" (7). While I fully agree with her intention and with her general evaluation, I also consider it important to discuss her corrections of the misunderstandings identified by her because some of the corrections suggested in her statement might otherwise lead to more misunderstandings. Moreover, in the spirit of international cooperation, I consider it vital to broaden our views of the reality of practical theology.

In discussing the first misunderstanding, Miller-McLemore makes a case for the practical and for "*understanding knowledge as it arises in practice*" (12). In

this vein, she challenges the priority of theory in relationship to practice (4). For this reason, she draws on Bent Flyvbjerg's defense of the case-study approach that offers interesting and far-reaching insights into the nature of knowledge gained by this practice-oriented procedure.

I see no reason to doubt the value of the case-studies approach, be it in practical theology or in other fields. Its value is especially obvious in the field of pastoral care but also in respect to education as well as to teaching in general. Yet it would be a clear mistake to identify practical theology or practical theological research as a whole with a case-study approach. Case-studies can and should play indeed an important role in practical theology but they cannot even address—and even less answer—many of the questions mentioned above, for example, concerning future developments in the church, the meaning of large-scale assessments or of long-term demographic prognosis, etc. Instead, practical theology needs a plurality of methodological approaches, including case-studies as well as approaches based on systems theory and organizational theories or on representative quantitative data, to just mention a few examples. In this respect, “*understanding knowledge as it arises in practice*” (12), clearly will not do. It is but one part of practical theology. Practical theology and practical theological research must be based on methodologies which are as plural as the plurality of tasks in practical theology requires.

This implies that the ‘practical’ which gives practical theology its designation, should not be confused with meanings of this term that presuppose an opposition between the theoretical and the practical. As an academic discipline, practical theology must be theoretical, quite independently of the practical perspectives of this discipline. At least in some respects, this discipline can even be criticized for not being theoretical enough, for example, because practical theology has not produced theories that can serve as a general backdrop for guiding empirical research in this field. From the perspective of psychology, for example, this lack of theoretical orientation is a clear weakness of practical theology (and the consequences of this weakness can be seen, among others, in the high rate of abortive applications for funding with major sponsors of research like the *German Research Foundation/Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* [DFG]) or the exclusion of this discipline as an applicant for such funds in other European countries.

In a similar vein, I am not clear what exactly Miller-McLemore refers to as the “*cognitive captivity of theology*” (14) and what exactly she wants to criticize. The same is true for what she calls—and deplores as—the “intellectualism” of (practical) theology and theological education (15). On first sight, this sounds like an ever popular criticism directed at the academy that will resonate well especially with many non-theologians. There still are quite a few parishioners

who doubt that all this 'academic stuff' is really needed in order to become an effective pastor. In the German tradition, criticizing practical theology for not being "practical enough" (Heinrich Bassermann) has been a well-known recurrent topic for more than one hundred years. But so also is the response quoted quite as often—that there is nothing more practical than good theory. In other words, as an academic discipline, practical theology must work with theories or produce theories that are of practical relevance. I do not think that including emotional aspects or practical experiences (which, of course, are quite important for theological education!) could or should *replace* theoretical understanding or fulfill its tasks as the term "intellectualism" could imply. In fact, Miller-McLemore's article is quite "intellectual"—and this is one of the reasons why I consider it a very valuable contribution to practical theology. Consequently, it might be more helpful to demand theories that are open for the emotional dimension and that are clearly related to practical experience, as was the claim of American Pragmatism which, with all of its claims to practice and practical problem solving, always remained a high-rate academic *philosophy*.

I also fully agree with Miller-McLemore's plea for being clear about the distinction between practical and pastoral theology. If there is a defining need for practical theology as a discipline which is "*integrative, concerned about broader issues of ministry, discipleship, and formation*" (17f.), this discipline cannot limit itself to the pastoral or ministerial dimension. More than Miller-McLemore herself I consider this point to be of continuing relevance in relationship to what has been criticized as practical theology limited to the "clerical paradigm"—a critique that Miller-McLemore, however, wants to challenge (13). If practical theology has to take a whole-hearted cultural turn and if an inter-religious turn is at least imminent as described above, a pastoral or clerical focus will not do, even if practical theology should indeed remain mindful of the task of informing ministers in their work. For this reason, I see a clear need for maintaining the critical evaluation of the "clerical paradigm" which, in my understanding, is another way of maintaining the necessary distinction between practical and pastoral theology. In other words, Miller-McLemore's argument seems to presuppose the rejection of the "clerical paradigm", and it is not clear to me why she wants to leave the critical perspective on this paradigm behind.

In this article, I have tried to be clear in my appreciation of Miller-McLemore's suggestion to arrive at an understanding of practical theology with a "descriptive rather than prescriptive intent" (20). At this point, however, I want to add the critical comment that of the four uses of the term she describes—for an "*activity of believers*", a "*method*", a "*curricular area*", and an "*academic discipline*" (20)—only the last two are in general use in my context, at least generally speaking. It is at this point where international discussions easily can

go astray. It might be helpful for the future to trace the different uses of the term practical theology in different contexts historically and empirically in order to achieve further insights into their backgrounds. Even in the absence of such insights, it can be helpful to be clear about the different references that, in my understanding, have indeed caused much unnecessary confusion in international discussions. Given the different uses of the term practical theology in different contexts and countries it hardly makes sense to try convincing others that only one's own use is correct or well-founded. In this respect, the decision about the meaning of practical theology is a matter of nominalism, not of realism.

Finally, that practical theology must be mindful of its normative dimension should indeed be stated quite clearly. In this respect I again fully agree with Miller-McLemore. Yet it is less clear that it is the normative dimension that makes practical theology theological. Would it not be more exact to say that practical theology needs the interplay between normative and empirical approaches and methodologies in order to do justice to its theological character? In my understanding, no methodology is theological in itself, neither a normative nor an empirical methodology. What makes them theological is their specific use for theological purposes. At the same time, all of theology—exegesis and church history as well as systematic theology—includes normative as well as descriptive or empirical dimensions. Theological anthropology, for example, is not only theological because of its normative implications. And even theological ethics which undoubtedly is the most normative discipline in theology, clearly depends on descriptive and empirical work that is theologically grounded and perspectivated.

Since Miller-McLemore considers the emphasis on being more normative a necessary correction (25) I want to add that there also is the need for practical theology to become more empirical. While practical theology has indeed produced a considerable body of empirical research over the last three decades, these achievements clearly have not made practical theology a discipline that is acknowledged or even appreciated within the academy for its contribution to general empirical research on culture and society. Practical theology should not withdraw from the task of doing empirical work in order to become more normative again. Instead, it should continue its efforts of combining normative and empirical perspectives.

4 Conclusion

In writing these comments I have once more become aware of the far-reaching limitations of my own work and perspective. As I said in the beginning of this article, I am writing from the perspective of German protestant theology. Moreover, just like Miller-McLemore admits that she will “remain a pastoral theologian at heart” (17), I could say that I remain a religious educator at heart. This is why cooperation is so important—interdisciplinary and international. The new round on foundational understandings of practical theology as a discipline should not be limited to national contexts anymore. In my view, this is another crucial difference that distinguishes today’s opportunities from the approaches of 30 years ago that tended to limit themselves to a national audience from the beginning. Among others, the *International Academy of Practical Theology* founded more than 20 years ago will bear its fruits when such discussions can be based on international cooperation. I am glad that Miller-McLemore has given us the opportunity to get started with this discussion.