

## **PRACTICAL THEOLOGY TODAY: INTEGRATION AND IDENTIFICATION**

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Practical theology in the German speaking countries finds itself at this point in a process of reviewing and reorganizing its topics and fields of study. The discussion of its identity as a field of study and a science has intensified. Practical theology today has again turned to the question about its own identity as an independent and separate discipline within theology as a unified science. This newly raised question concerning the unity of practical theology has a systematic (theological) as well as a historical dimension. The systematic dimension has to do with the critical limitation of the specialization, which has occurred in the different subdisciplines of practical theology. Here, unity of practical theology is a question of the limits which characterize the discipline in its specific quality. In its historical dimension, this question of unity has to do with the development of the theory of practical theology and the way it has been understood. Here the unity of practical theology has to be seen in the light of its beginnings in modern history as an independent discipline within the academic field of theology, and in the light of the problems it has been concerned with.

Beginning with the late 1960's, the development of theory in the practical theology of the German-speaking sphere has been characterized by an increasing specialization in different fields of praxis. In each case, a strong connection has been established to a corresponding subdiscipline in the social sciences, which are not part of theology. In truth, this specialization consisted of the adaptation of insights and methods which had been developed in the fields of sociology, psychology and education. The first area where this happened was Christian education, where links were established with the lively discussion going on in the field of education and didactics. Next to move into the centre of interest was pastoral care. Through its adaptation of the methods from psychotherapy and the concept of "clinical pastoral counselling" as developed in the United States, it opened up new perspectives for competence in the ministry. And finally, communicative aspects of the task of preaching were stressed in homiletics, although this was less pronounced due to an emphasis on questions of rhetoric. The main intention in each instance, however, was to enhance the different areas of church activity through the experience and the competence of such sciences, where the reality of human life and its psychological conditions are studied in an empirical-critical way. In the area of Christian education and of training in pastoral care, this specialization was furthermore accompanied by a development in the direction of institutional independence. Therefore, it could not be long before the systematic question arose

again, as to how these independent branches of practical theology could be brought together to form the unity of one discipline.

From a systematic perspective, the question of the unity of practical theology within the scientific field of theology as a whole, arises from the experience of the loss of this unity. At the same time, this loss of unity mirrors a historical development, which must now be integrated in its new self-understanding as a discipline. This loss of unity, which becomes apparent from the systematic point of view, is historically mainly the result of the separation from its dogmatic premises. These were formerly supplied by the influence of Dialectical Theology and the “Wort-Gottes-Theologie” (“Word of God Theology”). Although no new concept of practical theology as a discipline was developed by the school of Dialectical Theology, there nevertheless existed a shared basic concept as to what practical-theological work should be. Dialectical Theology understood practical theology as being focused on preaching as the central task of the church; moreover, practical theology was seen as, in all its branches, serving the practical task of proclaiming the gospel. Practical theology was just one particular variation of this one task. Its task was to reflect upon the word of God as it is to be proclaimed today through human words. Thus practical theology had to deal with the word of God in a constitutive form — as part of theology as a whole, which is the teaching of the word of God in all its forms.

Seen from a historical perspective, the development of the German speaking Protestant practical theology of the last twenty years, consists of the gradual separation from this paradigm, which had been supplied by the “Wort-Gottes-Theologie”. As it was turning away from this paradigm, practical theology was turning to psycho-social reality. It is this reality which influences both production and reception (speaking and listening) of the speech of the church — even where this speech remains altogether orientated towards its one task — as it understands itself — which has its foundation in the Bible. The turning away from this *kerugmatik* concept of practical theology thus meant a turning to the present condition of the church's existence as the place of religious communication in society. But this new *development* in practical theology as a discipline had to lead, sooner or later, to the question of a new *self-understanding* of this discipline. This then led to the rediscovery of historical connections to 19th and early 20th century traditions which had been severed by Dialectical Theology.

### **1. Practical Theology as “Handlungswissenschaft” (Theory of Action)**

A first attempt to reformulate the theoretical foundation of practical theology in the post-dialectical era was already undertaken in the late 1960's and early 70's.

Growing awareness of the world of every-day-life, in which the Christian religion is rooted both in and outside of the church, led to a discussion about the theoretical foundation of practical theology in the context of the social sciences. A number of authors such as H.-D. Bastian, G. Krause, H. Schröer, R. Zerfaß and K.F. Daiber began to explain the “new” practical theology as a “*Handlungswissenschaft*” or (“theory of action”).<sup>1</sup> The notion of the “*Handlungswissenschaft*” which goes back to H. Schelsky and his definition of the purpose of modern social sciences<sup>2</sup> was meant to refer to the consequences of the sciences on the context of social life as a whole. Some of the modern social sciences strive for better controls and more precision in social action. Correspondingly, practical theology was now to be seen as a “*Handlungswissenschaft*”, since by adopting methods of the social sciences it, too, was searching for better models for the activity of church practice. The unity of practical theology was thus to be defined by the designation of practical purpose. Its task was to be the development of such models for action in the different areas of its activities that would in each case improve the social and communicative skills of the acting person.

It is obvious that the concept of the “*Handlungswissenschaft*” belongs to the socio-technological context. It must be noted, however, that in regard to its adoption by practical theology, no critical reflection of this relationship occurred. Either the question as to the kind of action specific for church and religion was not raised, or if it was, one was content with accepting the traditional dogmatic answers, based on the concept of the proclamation of the Gospel. Practical theology as “*Handlungswissenschaft*” could be seen as a more direct and especially a more success-orientated theory, stimulating the church in the practical fulfilment of its tasks of preaching, education and pastoral care. Under the traditional dogmatic superstructure it was easy to integrate empirically tested models of action and the training in work methods which promised to be effective. In fact, the self-understanding of practical theology as “*Handlungswissenschaft*” remained associated with the paradigm of practical theology as a discipline committed to the proclamation of the gospel, that is, to the ministerial tasks.

The theoretically analysed foundation and integration of practical theology in the context of the social action sciences (“*Handlungswissenschaften*”) remained for some time at a stage which must be described as theologically naive. The first theologian to voice a fundamental and decisive criticism of this concept was W. Pannenberg in his comments on the role of practical theology as a science within the field of theology. Pannenberg points out that it is necessary to show “the dependence of a *Handlungswissenschaft*, which in its theoretical identification sees itself as an independent science, on the experience of meaning which is prior to each action and makes the action possible in the first place.”<sup>3</sup> In regard to practical theology, this more general observation contains the quite specific appeal that its

concept of action must include *theological responsibility*. Practical theology must deal with the question of the *church's* actions, or in the framework of a Christian ethic and therefore, finally, in the even wider context of the “Lebenswelt des Christentums”<sup>4</sup> — the world in which Christians live. The specific subject matter of practical theology is no doubt the church praxis. With this Pannenberg agrees.<sup>5</sup> It also follows, he argues, that church praxis must have its own context of meaning. *Church praxis* has to be understood as the social form of *Christian praxis*. But Christian praxis rests on the *relatedness of Christian faith to practical life*. Christian *praxis* is to be understood from the Gospel as its foundation. Christian *praxis* means the realization of that freedom which is the gift of the Gospel, also in the world.

This is the context of meaning in which the church's action, which is the subject matter of practical theology, is placed. Practical theology can deal with this question of action only if it does not limit itself to the immediate consequences in the daily life of the people. Of course, the resulting consequences are important, and because of this, theories and methods developed by the social sciences to control or produce such results, are also important for practical theology. Yet the activity of the church must not be restricted by the results which will occur in the individual and social relationships between human beings and in which they live in the world (according to the standards of “Handlungswissenschaft”). For the church in its activity is committed to the specific foundational principles out of which these actions grow as consequences. It is the meaningful context of the Christian faith which is the basis for the church's action as the social form of Christian action, and it is precisely in this context of meaning that it is rooted. It is the realization of this context of meaning, that is the realization of the Christian faith as the foundation of all action, which paves the way for new action.

Practical theology can only answer its purpose as a theory of the church's activity, if it does not content itself with the empirical-critical examination of this activity, or the improvement of the social effectiveness of such actions. With the help of historical-hermeneutical methods it must represent the church's activity as a specific form of Christian action in the context of the meanings, which it is to embody and for which it stands in the *open-ended* history of Christianity.

## 2. Practical Theology or a Critical Theory of Action?

The notion of the “Handlungswissenschaft” suggests a socio-technological understanding of this discipline.<sup>6</sup> It has therefore been attempted to redefine this notion in regard to Christian praxis being bound up with the realization of meaning, while keeping it as a guiding concept for the self-understanding of

practical theology as a theoretical science. To this context belong the attempts to define practical theology in reference to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School<sup>7</sup> or — especially in Roman Catholic practical theology — to the “liberation theology” of Latin America.<sup>8</sup> Here also the studies by Norbert Greinacher, Norbert Mette und G. Lämmermann in the late 1970’s must be mentioned, where they attempt to redefine practical theology as a critical theory of action as opposed to a merely technological, empirical-functional theory of action.<sup>9</sup>

These different attempts at reformulating this formerly empirical-practical concept of action in a historical-hermeneutical, and a speculative or materialistic-dialectical direction, are in fact the signs of the beginning of a new discussion. This emphasis on historical-hermeneutical and dialectical-speculative or dialectical-materialistic aspects helped practical theology to turn away from the theoretical argumentation of the more technological social sciences. At this point, as the study by G. Lämmermann plainly shows, the focus shifted towards such issues as the implications of meaning and motivational strength of the practical action, which is the subject matter of practical theology, while not being identical with it. Or, to put it differently, what became important was the specific understanding of Christian practical action as a liberating action determined by the Gospel; and furthermore the question, in what way could it, as critical theory, contribute to a realization of just such a practical action.

Nevertheless, in the traditional subdisciplines of practical theology, especially in the pedagogy of Christian education and in the theory of pastoral care and beyond that in the empirically-practically oriented field of homiletics, the tendencies towards “*Handlungswissenschaft*” and social techniques were still dominating. These disciplines are still, above all, committed to improve the didactic, therapeutic or rhetorical skills of teachers, pastors and preachers. Specific actions were being studied in the context of how they functioned empirically, and their social effectiveness was to be improved through the development of new models of action. Because practical theology is, more than the other theological disciplines, concerned with the training of ministers, this pastoral-theological emphasis corresponds to the church’s expectations. Yet, if practical theology is orientated towards the criterion of social effectiveness, which always implies an influence on others, the question must be asked, whether this kind of practical theology does in fact correspond to the basic meaning of Christian praxis.

### **3. The New Question about the Unity of Practical Theology**

While the practice-orientated sectors of practical-theology were becoming more specialized, the theoretical discussion in the 1980’s turned towards a new

definition of the concept of practical theology as a whole, both historically, in regard to the history of the discipline, and systematically, in regard to its theoretical concept. On the historical side, let me mention the name V. Drexsen with his extensive studies about the constituent conditions of practical theology.<sup>10</sup> According to V. Drexsen, these conditions are set by the separation between theology and religion. The history of practical theology as a discipline, separate from other theological disciplines, is explained from its first beginnings with Schleiermacher up to our own time. It is described as the return to the socio-cultural life-world of the Christian religion, and the acceptance of this world in its own context of understanding and action; this life-world of the Christian religion had fallen into disregard within theology which had increasingly become an academic field, teaching professional knowledge to the clergy.

Of the systematic studies concerned with a redefinition of the concept of practical theology, let me mention those by E. Hübner<sup>11</sup> and most recently by A. Grözinger.<sup>12</sup> All these studies have in common that they endeavour to relate the specialized "Handlungswissen" ("action knowledge") of the different sub-disciplines of practical theology to a basic *theological* concept. The connection existing between theology and *praxis* becomes apparent, where the latter does in fact, in church and religious practice, precede the former. The function of furnishing the orientation necessary for practical action is therefore restored to theology, to the Protestant principle of justification or to the central Christian dogma of the trinity.

This question of unity has, however, been newly raised and treated from both an historical and a systematic perspective in the comprehensive works by G. Otto<sup>13</sup> and by D. Rössler.<sup>14</sup> Two things are to be accomplished here: the differentiated sub-disciplines of practical theology are to be integrated into one unified concept, and they are to be defined critically within the limits set by the unity of practical theology. It is obvious that all the more recent studies attempting to redefine the concept of practical theology are discussions of the most recent developments. It is generally agreed that neither dogmatic premises as a starting point, nor a normative-deductive method will be adequate. In this sense, it should be pointed out that the two new comprehensive works just mentioned are perfect examples of "post-dialectical era" writing. Although quite different in their argumentation, they both no longer start from normative premises of a dogmatic ecclesiology. Rather, the church itself is observed in its form as a social body. As a specific form of Christian religious "praxis", it is the object with which practical theology is concerned. But it is not because of its identity as expressed in the creed, that it is the normative guiding principle for the theory of practical theology. Not the church as confessed in the Christian creeds, but the church as it *is*, the de facto product of

the process of its history, and mainly that of modern times, is the church which sets the stage for practical theology.

To proceed from dogmatic premises might possibly lead to theoretical conclusions in the abstract, in contradiction to the church in its social reality. In the course of the 1970's practical theology widely showed great openness towards experience, and this led away from an understanding of the church based on dogmatic premises. At the same time, these new studies in practical theology have demonstrated the needs of modern-day Christianity and its demands.

In the theoretical discussion in the 1970's, about the relationship between theory and praxis and about "Handlungswissenschaft" as a basis for practical theology, this relationship between practical theology and modern Christianity has often not been clearly shown. Only recently, since questions have been asked concerning the understanding of practical theology as a whole, both from a historical and a systematic perspective, has it become clear that the turn away from a normative-dogmatic foundation for practical theology was accompanied by a fundamental insight into both social sciences and the history of Christianity. A practical theology based on nothing more than the dogmatic teaching of the church will not only prevent itself from observing reality as it is, moreover, it will not be able to correspond to the church in its social form today — which has not only grown out of the historical creeds, but is also part of this, our modern world, with its pluralism of beliefs.

This insight is being documented in comprehensive new works on practical theology. A practical theology starting from dogmatic premises would not only limit its own openness to experience, but would neglect to take into account the socio-cultural situation of the church in our modern world. Practical theology must acknowledge that the church is dependent on social history, and that therefore any attempt at a dogmatic understanding of "church" will result in a foreshortening of the picture. It would be unwise for practical theology to choose a dogmatic or biblical starting point, for, as a consequence of modern history, the church no longer stands for that entirety which Christianity represents in our social reality. What is meant by "church" in the *modern world of Christianity* is a functionally differentiated religious system. This religious system no longer functions as an integrating entity for the culture as a whole, but it is through the church, that religious communication takes place in our society. This, in particular, is the religious function of the church. Only as such may it become important for individuals and for society, possibly even in such cases where members of society do not view themselves as being religious or, much less, religious in the Christian sense.

This altered position of the church as a social form in our modern time has been taken into account by recent comprehensive work in practical theology. Such studies point out reasons why a biblical-dogmatic foundation alone will offer no great help for practical theology. With this background, they show why the unity of practical theology can only be maintained if a theoretical integration of the socio-cultural plurality in Christianity of our day can be accomplished in the tension between church, religion, individual and society.

Yet these comprehensive studies also show the difficulties connected with such an undertaking. The study by G. Otto shows the interrelatedness which exists between the loss of unity in practical theology as a theory of the church's action and the socio-cultural situation of Christianity in the present-day society of Western Europe. G. Otto does not focus on the church and its traditional areas of practical theology, simply because he assumes that Christianity is only of marginal importance there and not very attractive at that. Rather, Christianity plays a more important role for the general religious needs of the people and for fundamental social issues. Instead of seeking the tasks of practical theology in the traditional practice of the church and the ministry, G. Otto claims that practical theology is competent for all kinds of practical actions, "which carry any kind of fundamental anthropological meaning and simultaneously play a role in the context of society — religion — church."<sup>15</sup>

People in general tend to hold rather negative views of the "church" as an institution. And yet for many people the religious question is an important one, at least at times, therefore they are interested in the services the church provides if those services correspond in a meaningful way to the lives of the people. From this assessment of the socio-cultural situation G. Otto draws his conclusions for a new comprehensive outline of practical theology. It is the task of practical theology to respond to all questions of any kind of relevance to the lives of the people in present-day society, whenever those questions have any kind of relation to religion and church. Viewed from this perspective, the unity of practical theology can only — if at all — rest on the obligation to serve, in any instance and upon any topic which is addressed by practical theology, the interest of the realization of humanity. It serves this interest by turning its attention, trained in learning and theoretical thought, to particular fields of activity; these are of fundamental importance anthropologically, socially relevant, and are related to religion and church — but not necessarily just to them. This common concern connects all the different fields of activity, such as adult education and youth groups, pastoral counselling and care, benevolence and aid to underdeveloped areas, the relationship between the generations and the world-wide church (ecumenics), the clerical tasks of and the worship performed in the church. But the traditional basic tasks of church praxis or pastoral duties such as homiletics, catechism, care of the souls



and liturgics can doubtless no longer play their leading role within the structure of practical theology. Practical theology is no longer primarily the theory of church praxis and of the practical duties of the ministry. And as for the agents, for whose benefit "thought perspectives" ("Reflexionsperspektiven") have been developed by practical theology, they are neither the institutionalized church, nor its ministry, nor the congregations. What G. Otto has in mind is "the actually existing plurality of people with their different relationships to religion and church."<sup>16</sup>

This last issue, which emphasizes the new, non-church subject of practical theology, has been raised especially by H. Luther in his discussion of the identity of practical theology.<sup>17</sup>

This concept of practical theology, referring to religious and real human interests in general, takes into account the socio-cultural situation of a Christianity, which can be identified neither with an unequivocally fixed social form, namely the church, nor with a clearly delineated social group of supporters, namely the members of the ministry or the "congregation". By stressing the human interest in general, this practical theology is committed to the realization of a universal humanity. This is also the concern of a practical theology which, above all, aims at a comprehensive theory of faith development with regard to religious education. As K.E. Nipkow and F. Schweitzer show, practical theology's main concern is the communication of the Christian interpretation of the life-cycle within the conditions inherent in a secular society.

It must be admitted that, with G. Otto there is above all a considerable danger of getting lost in a haze of the undefined and accidental here. Therefore it will be useful to look at another proposal, as outlined by D. Rössler. There is no disagreement about the issues to be discussed. The main question is how the unity of practical theology can be maintained once the traditional basic tasks of church praxis and its biblical-dogmatic foundation no longer constitute such a unity. This is the conceptual problem of a practical theology which is confronted with the social differentiation into many forms of what used to be ecclesial Christianity. Besides this church Christianity, there are other forms of practical religion. Out of this awareness may, however, grow the other awareness that these pluralistic forms of practised religion outside of the church, those religious intentions growing out of individual reflection and spreading in society, are, in fact, dependent upon the existence of an ecclesial Christianity, and that ecclesial Christianity does know this. Religion, as universal, individually thought out religion, or as spread through all of society and soaked up by it, is in itself the specific result of the very history of the religion of Christianity. It is exactly this undefined religion (religiosity) outside of the church to which the church corresponds in its form of the *Volkskirche* ("peoples church"). In Rössler's practical theology, the three main areas of

church praxis and the ministry are as follows: The individual religiosity in its many forms is the concern of pastoral care. Preaching and church worship are at the centre of ecclesial Christianity. Education, especially in its institutionalized form of state schools, is in charge of societal meditation.

#### **4. Practical Theology and the Problem of the Understanding of the Church**

Recent discussion shows that the unity of practical theology rests on the understanding of the church. One should be careful, however, not to mistake this for a revival of normative deductionism based upon biblical-dogmatic premises. On the contrary, the historical reality of Christianity and church is *not* to be assessed in the light of fixed definitions of the essence of the church, which were thought to precede the historical church and to be normative for it; rather these definitions are themselves seen as belonging to the historical world of Christianity. In the context of the realm of modern Christianity the question arises as to why Christianity is not identical with the social form of the church, and this demands an answer. The observance of the religious rites of Christianity is supposed to take place in the daily life of this world; this, however, cannot be done without the existence of church Christianity in its fixed form. For in the end, it is only thanks to ecclesial Christianity and Christianity in self-reflection, namely theology, that both individual and social religion are still seen as belonging to Christianity, even where there is no longer a personal awareness of the relationship to Christian assertions.

It appears that in the question concerning the unity of practical theology, the understanding of the church will play a crucial role in the future, and no less so in those situations where no close relationship presently exists between Christianity and an institutionalized church. For it is only through an understanding of the church that the ethical and religious plurality of our daily experience can be related to the essence of Christianity, and to what Christianity has stood for from its very beginnings. For the message for which Christianity as a whole stands, is found in ecclesial Christianity and in the self-understanding of the Christian congregations as reflected by the church's theologians. The church keeps alive the memory of that particular relationship with God, which we know to be the foundation of all human freedom and which is to be lived out in the daily life of this world.

It is necessary that, time and again, this relationship with God becomes visible in the actual church worship of the congregation. From there it will then be able to affect all other reaches of life. It could be argued — *ad bonam partem* — that this centre is the moving force activating all those initiatives in practical theology which forego the theoretical debates of their discipline (and there are quite a few

of them), but which prefer to concern themselves with programs for the renewal of congregational life, such as R. Bohren,<sup>18</sup> Ch Möller,<sup>19</sup> or M. Seitz,<sup>20</sup> or even those initiatives which discuss the conflicts confronting the minister, viewing this situation as the paradigm of Christian theological existence today, as e.g. especially M. Josuttis<sup>21</sup> for example. These contributions to practical theology are possibly rooted in the — not altogether unjustified — doubt, of whether, maybe, the subject matter of practical theology will not be found other than in a specific model or in a manifest demonstration of its contingent emergence out of the word and spirit of God. With the decrease in the confidence in religious communication in the context of the history of Christianity, this view is quite appealing. It would mean — although this remains inexplicit — that the subject matter in hand, the church, would be visible only to those who actively take part in it or, in other words, to those who *are* the church. Yet, this claim of unmediated relationship to its subject matter carries with it the danger of a loss of general communicability for practical theology. If its foundation and its meaning cannot be explained, it would only be intelligible to insiders. Through its immediacy, which seemingly keeps in close touch with praxis, it will lose its meaning as practical orientation, which is (exactly) what it is supposed to be for the life of the church in its function as a critically reflective theory of the praxis. This is the central point for future theoretical debates of practical theology. The most urgent question to be discussed will probably have to be: What contributions can practical theology make, through its efforts at theoretical understanding of the theological identification of human life, to support the persuasive power of the church speaking to individuals, and to strengthen the church's social integrative and innovative ability?

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