

WYSIWYG. Social Construction in Practical Theological Epistemology

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ABSTRACT

Working in a social constructionist framework, the author describes practical theology as a multi-conversational discipline. In each conversation (with systematic and biblical theology, with other academic disciplines, and with the church and society) specific demands are placed on discourse, governed by specific criteria for truth claims. In these conversations, two levels of discourse are distinguished. First order discourse consists of ordinary religious language (and action), second order discourse is the academic discussion of this language. In both discourses social constructions can be found, analyzed and critiqued, but the referential and performative criteria differ. Finally it is claimed that the theological and normative dimension of practical theology is not something added to empirical investigations, but present in the material researched.

INTRODUCTION

WYSIWYG: What You See is What You Get. That was the message in the early days of graphic interfaces for word processors. For those unfamiliar with the term, it is what you are working with if your computer displays the text as it will appear on paper, complete with fonts, images, and so on. In one sense, it was just a technique for enabling the author to imagine what the text would look like once printed. In another sense, it changed the process of writing. Layout and presentation became part of the writing itself, instead of an add-on feature created by others than the original author.

One might say that in the field of practical theology a similar shift occurred. In the history of our discipline, there has been a strong current of understanding practical theology as applied theology. That is, practical theology was understood as the discipline where theology was applied to practice, especially to the professional practice of ministers and priests. Practical theology added the layout and presentation so to speak to the texts that other theologians had written.

The emancipation of practical theology into a discipline of its own rights is a fairly recent development. As Edward Farley (1990, 934) remarks in the *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, practical theology could be defined as a field in

clergy education focussing on ministerial activities or church life, or – and this is the newer understanding – as a discipline of theology covering Christian practice and contemporary situations and thus as a form of contextual theology. Practical theology's process of emancipation has benefited greatly from the empirical turn, which provided a method and form unparalleled in other theological disciplines.

This development of the discipline involved more than the introduction of new research methods. As in the case of WYSIWYG, it changed the process of doing theology. Or – to be a bit more careful – it may change the process in the years to come. I would like to share some initial ideas on where we may be heading and invite you to join me in a critical dialogue. I will first describe practical theology as a multi-conversational discipline. In each conversation specific demands are placed on discourse, governed by specific criteria for truth claims. Then I will distinguish two levels of discourse, where discourse is understood as including constructions and communication, experiences and action. In these discourses social constructions can be found, analyzed and critiqued. Finally I will claim that the theological and normative dimension of practical theology is not something added to empirical investigations, but present in the material we research.

A CONVERSATIONAL DISCIPLINE

True perhaps for every discipline, practical theology's possibilities and challenges lie in the specific conversations it engages in. It is one of the core suppositions of social constructionism that discourse determines our understanding of the world, so that content and communication cannot be separated. As leading spokesperson Ken Gergen (2002, 6-10) summarizes:

- The terms by which we account for the world and ourselves are not dictated by the stipulated objects of such accounts;
- The terms and forms by which we achieve understanding of the world and ourselves are socially derived products of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people;
- The degree to which a given account of world or self is sustained across time is not principally dependent on the objective validity of the account, but relies on the vicissitudes of social process;
- Language derives its major significance from the way in which it is embedded within patterns of relationship;
- None of the propositions making up the social constructionist web are candidates for truth.

We could of course apply this approach to the fields we study. In fact, certain strands in practical theology have done just that as a recent volume by Hermans and others (2002) demonstrates. Critical practical theology, feminist and otherwise liberationist practical theology, narrative studies and the like are methodologically close to social constructionist approaches. In that sense, social constructionism is

not a new paradigm but the reflection of age-long debates (cf Van der Ven 2002, Ganzevoort 1998).

We could also – and that is what I am attempting here – take a social constructionist look at practical theology itself. I will not focus on the methodical or methodological dimension of social constructionism, but address the issues of normativity in empirical practical theology. To do so invokes an analysis of the conversations practical theology partakes in, and the discursive demands and constraints of those conversations. Here we enter the domain of practical theological epistemology.

WYSIWYG: Discourse determines how observations or experiences are understood, what counts as knowledge, and what we want to achieve. But practical theology is not involved in just one conversation, but in several, each with its own demands and conventions. What practical theology is and how the empirical and normative dimensions are framed will sound differently in each conversation. Let me mention just a few of these central conversations, following David Tracy's (1981, 5) analysis of the threefold audience of theology: society, academy, and church. He states: 'The more general question "What is theology?" first demands (...) a response to a prior question: What is the self-understanding of the theologian? To ask that question as a personal and in that sense an irrevocably existential one is entirely appropriate.' But '... one risks ignoring the actual complexity of different selves related to the distinct plausibility structures present in each theologian. Behind the pluralism of theological conclusions lies a pluralism of public roles and publics as reference groups for theological discourse.'

Tracy aptly describes each of these publics as heterogeneous. The academic public will function differently in a seminary as compared to a department of religious studies in a secular university. Or to give one Dutch example: In Kampen the department of practical theology includes social scientists, which brings about intensive cooperation. In Utrecht on the other hand, social sciences are not part of the church-related department of practical theology, which brings about sharper distinctions between the two.

Beyond academe, practical theology finds a natural audience in the community of faith, but there is always communication with the wider society as well. Before these two audiences, practical theologians will need to develop both explicit or Christian and implicit or secular language (Cf Bailey 1997). The interaction between these two languages may become one of the most intriguing tasks of practical theology in the years to come. But it is not simply a matter of different discourses about something – in these discourses practical theology itself takes on different meanings. The locus of conversation defines in part the shape and tasks of the discipline. In each locus of conversation, correspondence to and difference from the other party define the identity of practical theology. In relation to the church, practical theology may stress its academic nature in its efforts to serve the community of faith. In relation to the academic realm it may focus on empirical

and strategic efforts, communicating with social sciences on the one hand and other theological disciplines on the other. Obviously then, each practical theologian will develop his or her own definition of practical theology within the specific configuration of relations of the person.

FIRST AND SECOND ORDER DISCOURSES

To me it seems helpful to distinguish between two orders of theological discourse. Academic discourse belongs to the second order. Discourse of religious or non-religious individuals and communities belongs to the first (Ganzevoort 2001). George A. Lindbeck (1984, 69) works with the same distinction.¹ Speaking of theological propositions in a cultural-linguistic approach, he states: "Technical theology and official doctrine [...] are second-order discourse about the first-intentional uses of religious language. Here, in contrast to the common supposition, one rarely if ever succeeds in making affirmations with ontological import, but rather engages in explaining, defending, analyzing, and regulating the liturgical, kerygmatic, and ethical modes of speech and action within which such affirmations from time to time occur. Just as grammar by itself affirms nothing either true or false regarding the world in which language is used, but only about language, so theology and doctrine, to the extent that they are second-order activities, assert nothing either true or false about God and his relation to creatures, but only speak about such assertions. These assertions, in turn, cannot be made except when speaking religiously, i.e., when seeking to align oneself and others performatively with what one takes to be most important in the universe by worshipping, promising, obeying, exhorting, preaching."

I follow Lindbeck in this basic distinction, but stress two points that may be slightly different from his position. First, I would suggest that the difference between the orders is not the presence or absence of truth claims but the different criteria for truth claims and the different lines of reasoning governing the discourses. Second, I am not sure that official doctrine should be regarded as second-order discourse. The criteria for truth claims and the lines of reasoning seem to be more akin to first-order discourses of religion. There are in both first and second order discourse varying degrees of reflection as well as more individual or more collective utterances that are more or less validated. Official church doctrines are more reflected, collective, and validated, but they still abide with the rules of first order discourse.

The formula of first and second order discourse may overcome negative connotations of Henning Luther's terms 'Laienperspektive' and 'Laientheologie' (lay perspective and lay theology) and confusion arising from the terms faith and theology. Heitink (1993, 114-115), for example, seeks to address these levels when he states: "The direct object of research is faith. The indirect object, God, cannot be the object of research. God is only the direct object of faith." Convenient as

1. ¹ With thanks to Mark Cartledge for the reference.

Heitink's solution may seem, the perspective of scientific practical theology as a second order construction and of religion and world-view as first order constructions questions its validity. If God is the object of first order constructions, and cannot be the object of second order constructions, then what is the nature of the relation between the object and the constructions? In what way is 'speaking of God' – theology – different when it is done by believers as compared to scientists? Even worse, the dichotomy quoted suggests that the acts of speaking are categorically different, because the believer's speaking can include an object that is inaccessible to the scientist's speaking.

For practical theology, the notion of first and second order discourse implies that in both cases knowledge of self, world and God is socially constructed and dependent on specific criteria that govern the discourse at hand. Constructed experiences and truth claims regarding the constructions are evaluated according to these criteria. Following Marcel Viau (1999), we can identify criteria on the levels of object and discourse, closely related through experience. This results in two types of criteria: referential and performative. The referential dimension of language denotes the way words refer to phenomena, either in the material world, or in the speaker's mind (the experienced object). The performative dimension of language refers to the way words try to accomplish something in the social world (conversation or discourse).

Truth claims in first order constructions are both experiential (referential) and determined by the performative aims one has in relating to others. These performative aims are influenced by the frame of reference of for example the religious community one belongs to. When a person confesses his or her faith in the midst of this community, the truth of this confession will be judged by tradition-specific criteria, like glossolalia in Pentecostalism or the awareness of sin in orthodox Protestantism. The frame of reference of the community and its tradition provides the performative criteria. Referential criteria on the other hand are determined by the experience of reality. Fundamental with respect to experience are criteria of authenticity and functional significance.

Second order construction's truth claims are equally located in experience and perspective, determined by referential and performative criteria. For practical theology experience is systematized in empirical data; performative criteria are found in rhetorical persuasiveness and compliance with conventions of a ruling paradigm. In conversations with social scientists, this will be a different paradigm than in conversations with systematic theologians.

First and second order constructions are central not only to the work of practical theologians. Both theology in general and the social sciences have to reckon with these two levels, even when first order constructions come in different shapes. For biblical theology, for example, first order constructions are found in the classics of the Christian tradition. Unfortunately, in many cases either the distinction between the two orders is blurred or their interaction is not articulated.

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AS EMPIRICAL THEOLOGY

In practical theology, the material of our second order discourse is the first order of human praxis of faith. It is the experiences and constructions of individuals and communities, responding to what they perceive, construct as coming from God, and their discourse about God and towards God. I use the term 'God' here in a broad sense, as I am working with formal, not material categories. Whatever practical theologians may investigate, it is always connected in some way to human discourse in relation to God. For participants in first order discourse – either believers or non-believers – there is a reference to this discourse: God – and experiences of God function as referential criteria in this first order discourse. More importantly, there is a performative dimension to this discourse, not only within human conversations, but also in the relation to God. That is, humans construe their discourse with the purpose of making, shaping or breaking the relationship with God. (Day 1993)

In social constructionist terms, then, there is no reason why this discourse and its connection to God could not be investigated scientifically. We can describe the first order discourse, analyze the constructions and the way these constructions function in the relation to God and in relation to other individual and social phenomena. This is where we will meet social scientists of religion. Beyond description, we enter into discussions of a normative nature, including truth claims and ethical standards. That is in itself not a unique feature of practical theology. Psychologists and sociologists do the same.

We have to be aware though that in second order discourse the criteria for knowledge or truth are not the same as in first order discourse. Although the basic types – referential and performative – return, their content is different because we partake in a different conversation. Performative criteria rest in the ruling scientific paradigms with their procedures, theories, and so on. Referential criteria lie in the observations, in those experiences that we count as facts. Whether or not God is accepted as a reference depends on the specific conversation with for example social scientists or systematic theologians. The benefit of this constructionist approach is that we can develop theological discourse, even God talk, and still avoid the pitfall of ontological statements that would jeopardize our conversations with social scientists (Cf Roukema-Koning 2002).

Let me give one brief example of what this may contribute to practical theology. In some reflections on the relationship with God in prayer, I have distinguished several roles attributed to God and the complementary roles attributed to humans. In line with Sundén, I focussed on the traditionally offered roles for God, but beyond that I devoted attention to the human roles that are available for an individual with a specific life story and audience. As a practical theologian I cannot answer the question how God really 'is'. But I can work with the question how specific human-God role-relations function in religious conversation and how they contribute to or maybe harm the person's relation with God (Ganzevoort 1999).

Obviously, many scholars would agree that objective knowledge is beyond our grasp because culturally different meanings and frames of reference always determine us. The advantage of a social constructionist approach is that this is not regarded as a hindrance to be overcome, but as the starting point for constructive dialogue. Instead of asking ‘what is?’ we start asking ‘what if?’

ON DEVELOPING EMPIRICAL THEOLOGY

Given the situation that the type of first order discourse we are dealing with is human praxis, practical theology is empirical by nature. That is to say, the material consists of human actions and discourse. This is the main difference between practical theology and other theological disciplines. The correspondence between theological disciplines lies in the fact that they all investigate first order discourses in relation to God – be it in the Bible, confessions, or church history.

If this line of thinking is accepted as valid, then it is not just the term ‘practical’ that points to the empirical. The term ‘theology’ is likewise an indicator of the empirical nature of the discipline. It seems to me that the theological nature of practical theology is often discredited, or filled with categories of a systematic theological kind. All too often practical theological studies are counted as theological if and only if they include a systematic theological discussion. To me that is one of the weaknesses of our discipline at present. The challenge ahead is the development of theological categories from the material of our own discourse, and that is praxis. Practical theology might truly become theology of praxis: building theological theory from the material of human praxis.

This development of truly practical theological categories is mandatory, I think, if we take seriously the social constructionist insight that the meaning of concepts depends on their place in specific discourses. Each discourse has material of its own and purposes of its own. If we take systematic-theological categories as our theological framework, we may not only discover a fundamental misfit with our empirical data, we may even work with a categorical mistake in that the concepts take on different meanings when transposed to a different conversation.

The theological categories we are to develop will function at the intersection of the various conversations in what Tracy called critical correlation. Our normative discussions therefore are framed within the combined discourses. The answer to the question what is true or good has to comply with the demands of social scientific discourse, of broader theological discourse, and of first order discourses inside and outside the church. That of course is a daunting task.

Let me conclude with the example of worship. Between empirical analyses and strategic proposals, we have to address the normative question as to what defines proper or good or true worship. Here we will encounter normative statements of other theological disciplines. But my point is that even a normative discussion in practical theology will be thoroughly empirical. The starting and ending point for practical theological normative discussion is the existing human praxis of faith with the values, ideals, and norms inherent to this praxis. Worship is good in a

practical theological sense if it is psychologically healthy, sociologically sound, systematic theologically correct, and adequate within the first order discourse of the religious community.

I started my reflections with the emancipation of practical theology. The development and use of empirical methods has been crucial in creating new discourses both with other theologians and with social scientists. The next step may be a practical theological approach that is conversational throughout. In each part of the process – description, normative interpretation, and strategy – we communicate with several audiences. If we don't, we simply become irrelevant to their discourses.

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