

Rituals and public theology

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The introduction of the new Bachelor-Master structure in the theological curriculum of our university has had major effects on the process and content of teaching practical theology. More than other disciplines, practical theology was affected by the change *and* was given the opportunity for a significant innovation. This was not just an external impetus. Many discussions in the field result in the desire to make such a change (although of course not all practical theologians would welcome the present developments. In this contribution I will first describe these changes as the background for the course on rituals that will be presented.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF A NEW CURRICULUM

Two points of departure of the new curriculum are essential for the place practical theology has received. The first is the principle that the various theological disciplines function as equals juxtaposed to one another. This seemingly self-evident point must be evaluated as a significant development. Although there has always been the understanding that theology had a fundamental practical intention, the place of practical theology in the actual curricula has usually been the closing entry. After studying the Bible, the Creeds and confessions, and the history of the church (and perhaps a little bit of other religions), finally the student would receive training in preaching, pastoral care, and religious education. This Schleiermacherian sequence has functioned in our curriculum until recently. In previous curriculum changes the share of practical theology and of the social sciences was increased strongly, but all this was intended to fortify the practical training and preparation for ministry. Practical theology still was primarily practical, and only to a degree theological.

The second point of departure is defined by the international European consensus that bachelor studies are not intended to provide the necessary skills for practice. Instead the bachelor study should be devoted to academic training. If the university study would include preparation for professional work, this should be located in the master's studies.

These two points of departure coincide in the present curriculum. The result is that the professional preparation in the master studies is the joint responsibility of all the theological disciplines. Although practical theology may have a somewhat larger task (given the practical training involved in this study phase and the fact that usually practical theologians are most skilled in providing this training),

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essentially preparation for ministry is not the sole task of practical theology. On the other hand, in the bachelor phase, practical theology has a net study weight of 15 weeks, equal to other disciplines (beyond this, there are integration courses and languages). These practical theological courses are not burdened with the task of practical training. Instead they are available for academic introduction in practical theology and social sciences.

For the innovation of the discipline this is an important gain. Not only does it create time in the curriculum for academic introduction and discussion, more than that it allows a more pure academic growth because practical training is not intended. One logical result of that is that the topics in the bachelor courses on practical theology are not restricted to the church. The course presented here explicitly includes public rituals and discusses public theology.

As said earlier, not all practical theologians would welcome such a development. They might argue that practical theology finds its identity in a close connection to the praxis of the church and/or to the practice of the minister. Such conceptions of practical theology have their legitimate place. The problem, however, is that these close connections hinder the dialogue with other academic disciplines. The bachelor-master distinction has helped us to create space for both: more academic in the bachelor's and more practice-focused in the master's.¹

The three bachelor courses on practical theology together offer a strong introduction in the discipline. The first course offers the general introduction and has a thematic focus on rituals. The second course offers an introduction in descriptive approaches to practical theology and a general introduction in the social sciences. Its thematic focus is on family, care, and power. The third course is on normative practical theology and offers an introduction into gender studies in theology. Its thematic focus is on learning. This way the three main areas of the field practical theology is involved in (worship, pastoral care, religious education) are presented to the students, but not in terms of how the minister should function. Instead they are offered as fields where we find phenomena worthy of theological investigation. More important still is the introduction to fundamental approaches in practical theology: description and normativity, and the adjacent disciplines of social sciences, gender studies, and pedagogics.²

¹ Of course, those students choosing practical theology as their specialization, their master's study does include further academic work in practical theology.

² In this structure, the third step – strategy – is missing. This is the main accent of the preparation for ministry during the master studies. Combining the two – as most students do – we offer a complete route through the discipline. These three steps (description, normative interpretation, strategy) are not the propriety of practical theology. They also formed the structure of the 2001 conference of DRHE and THUK. See Ganzevoort, R.R. & Fazakas, S. (eds.) *Amt und Professionalität. Ministeriality and Professionalism*. Debrecen ny (2002).

A COURSE ON RITUALS

The choice to focus this introductory course on rituals has been rather deliberate. It seems that we live in a time where the classic shapes of religion, exemplified in the Word, have become more or less marginalized.³ For many people today, both inside and outside the churches, religion is not so much defined by words, but by experiences and gestures. Rituals have taken the place of content and convictions. Obviously, we may wonder whether this truly is a new situation. Perhaps theologians and church leaders have stressed the dimension of convictions and content, but for many believers experience, consolation, stories, and rituals have been more central to what religion means to their lives. Now that in our times religion becomes more and more deinstitutionalized, this laical preference comes to the fore and the ecclesial focus on content seems to become obsolete.

For students of practical theology, the challenge is to engage in this changing religious world, a world in which they are usually more at home than their parents, ministers or university teachers. In our usual curricula, we encouraged students to disengage from their first-hand knowledge of the world outside, and taught them theological blinkers, so that they were more or less unworldly when we were through with them. What we try to do now is activate their so far implicit and unarticulated theological pre-understandings and engage in critical conversation with the diverse religious landscape.

The course on rituals (like all the courses in the curriculum) consists of five chapters. Each chapter contains a section on the introduction in the discipline (general introduction, practical theology and ministry, practical theology and the church, practical theology and the individual believers, practical theology as an academic discipline). Furthermore, each section contains a case study of a particular ritual, ranging from a Sunday morning Eucharist to a 'Pink Sunday' worship, affirming gay and lesbian persons in the church, and from a pastoral care ritual to collective rituals following major events and disasters. Traditional and new institutional rituals thus are studied side by side with therapeutic and cultural rituals. The students are challenged to observe, analyze, and evaluate critically these rituals. They may bring their personal preferences and experiences to this evaluation, but only because that raises the question how and why we make certain judgments. What we want to teach in this course is not the proper stance toward certain rituals, but the critical academic attitude to understand and evaluate them. To illustrate this, I will present one of these rituals and discuss some of the theological questions involved. This ritual is treated in the chapter on everyday rituals and public theology.

³ R.R. Ganzevoort, *Rituals and the Decay of the Word*. In: P.N. Holtrop, F. de Lange & R. Roukema (eds.) *The passion of protestants*. Kampen 2004, 149-164.

THEOLOGY OF THE RAINBOW BRIDGE...

The section starts with a brief introduction to identity, rituals, and the virtual world of the internet. The internet world offers new possibilities of interacting with other persons and groups, with new shapes and new limitations. On the Internet, we find many shapes of rituals, like lighting a virtual candle of commemoration. One advantage of the internet is that one can more easily find people in similar circumstances.

Following this introduction, the students are invited to visit www.petloss.com. This site is dedicated to those mourning the death of their pet. On it, we find guidelines for the *Monday Pet Loss Candle Ceremony*: 'On Monday evenings all across the globe we light candles in memory of our pets. It is a very healing ritual with no adherence to any religion or creed, just a simple lighting of candles to bring us all together.'

While there is an on-line Ceremony in the Chat Room every Monday, the Candle Ceremony does not have to be done on-line. Each of us can light our candles in our own way, and privately, but since we share a common love and since most of us do light them at the same time, we are joined in love and in spirit.' Ideally, this ceremony is performed at 10 PM GMT.

The website also provides the liturgy for the ceremony in many languages (including Dutch, excluding Hungarian, but new translations are welcome). It reads as follows:

Tonight, Monday, we join hands, hearts and souls across the land as one large extended family to pray for our sick and dying pets and to pay tribute to our furbabies who have gone ahead to Rainbow Bridge.

Someday, we will meet them again, with hugs, tears and kisses, as we walk together, in eternity, to our new home.

Until that blessed day, we honor these precious souls and remember them with the warm glow of flickering candles, sending a message of love, light and healing, and the faith to believe in miracles.

PRAYER: God, Creator of all living things, we ask that as we light our candles, the healing warmth of love will flow into the brokenhearted who are tending their ailing pets.

Give to them Your strength and comfort.

We also pray that the soft glow of light will part the clouds of grief and sorrow to surround our furbabies at the Bridge.

May excitement REIGN SUPREME as wagging tails, ecstatic purrs and flapping feathers feel our gentle touch once again.

May they know the gratitude we hold in our hearts for their faithfulness and gift of unconditional love as they are forever remembered.

We are temporarily separated for only a short while.

The silver cord that connects us through time and space can never be broken.

AMEN.

CANDLE 1: PERSONAL FURBABY. Anything you wish to say.

I will not look back for there is sorrow.

I will not look for today for there is longing.

I will look forward for there is OUR tomorrow.

CANDLE 2: FURBABIES OF FRIENDS AND FAMILY

Read the names of those who are ill or have gone on before us as a tribute to them and their loving parents.

As we all meet here, our Bridgekids will be meeting all newcomers, easing their way.

CANDLE 3: FOR ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND PEACE

In honor of all the homeless, forgotten, abandoned, abused animals.

For the nameless furchildren who gave their lives for others, for research and as a result of humankind's inhumanity.

May the Higher Powers that be forgive the cruelty.

We light this candle for them.

As our lights shine brightly through the galaxy, may the angels smile upon us, and know that for a brief moment, we have put aside worldly differences to bond as ONE.

CLOSING:

I have sent you on a journey to a land free from pain, not because I did not love you, but because I loved you too much to force you to stay.

MOMENT OF SILENCE.

"Blessed are they that mourn, for they will be comforted."

Love, light and healing to all. Amen.

The candles being lit tonight;
Cast a soft and welcome flame.
And draw our loved ones to the light,
As we call to them by name.
Imagine spirits taking flight,
For a moment our souls entwine.
Say not Good Night, but in some
Brighter Time
Bid them all-
Good Morning.

When students have read this ceremony, they are asked to reflect on it. Usually quite diverse reactions are brought to the discussion, each meriting further practical theological analysis and evaluation.

First, there is the experience of alienation. This ritual has a common form, but an uncommon content. Many students feel that this is from a completely different way of life. Probing this alienation a bit further, they become aware that their theological evaluations are often determined by the degree of familiarity to the students' own faith and tradition. The important issues arising from this are the relative importance of content versus form, and the impact of personal preferences on our theological investigations.

Students are also impressed by the love and energy dedicated to the memory of these loved animals. This raises a lot of discussion about the role pets play in people's lives and what can be inferred from that about the level of social coherence in our societies. Is our connection to animals a sign that human interconnections fail to supply what is needed? These discussions prompt further research into societal loneliness and social networks. Psychological and sociological knowledge is brought to that task.

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Some students are irritated by this attention for animals on ethical grounds. They object to the seemingly excessive attention for animals when compared to the attention for millions of humans dying from (for example) AIDS or disasters. Pet love may be a western morbid luxury. In response to this, it is observed that the primary aim of the ceremony is connection and consolation. The suffering people go through is legitimate and cannot be dismissed because others might suffer even more. Through this ceremony, they not only connect (albeit imaginary?) with their lost pet, they also console one another.

Usually students oppose the dogmatic content of the ceremony. The presuppositions for the ceremony reflect a popular form of a (disputable) eschatology that is extended towards animals. The idea that our pets remember us at heaven's gate and will welcome us after our death may be comforting, but it is not necessarily true or compatible with Christian expectations. In this respect, the use of Christian language offends some students.

Finally, some students observe that the ceremony is built on a one-sided image of animals (or pets in particular). It uses specific 'soft' language (rainbow, fur) and portrays pets as warm, innocent, tender creatures. There is no room for animals that may be fierce or dangerous. If a dog would have to be put to death because it had killed a child, this animal would not fit in the categories of the ceremony. In theological terms, the animal world depicted in the ceremony is one in which evil does not exist. It is paradise. The evil that is addressed in the ceremony is human evil. This portrayal should be evaluated as a simplification and as an escape from reality.

PUBLIC THEOLOGY

This task is an exercise in public theology. What we try to teach students is that their theological expertise is useful in analyzing public phenomena. Usually we use our theological knowledge only or primarily for understanding phenomena in the church and for acting in church ministry. That is a classic and legitimate use of theology for the audience of the church.

Sometimes a second step is set, in which theology is used to make the Christian self-understanding a more visible and viable function in society.⁴ In this approach, theology is primarily content, and more specifically Christian content. It is a form of theology that has an open eye for the needs of this world. At its worst, this type of theology seeks to demonstrate the superior value of the Christian worldview for this debate. Examples of this are found in the way the Vatican addresses fundamental questions of sexuality and HIV/AIDS and gender issues. At its best, this type of public theology is willing to engage in the troublesome issues of public debate. It wants to show how Christian visions can be useful in societal questions. Wonderful examples of this type of theology have been found in anti-Apartheid theology in South-Africa.

⁴ See Forrester, D.B., *Truthful Action. Explorations in Practical Theology*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark 2000.

The ideal of public theology governing this course is, however still one step further. I see public theology as the challenge to share our methodical expertise and our knowledge of spirituality, meaning, transcendence, etcetera with the world we live in. Though based on a clear Christian background and identity, this public theology needs not be explicitly Christian in all its statements. Instead, it is brought to the task of hermeneutical analysis of public phenomena such as popular culture⁵ or individual biographies of traumatized men.⁶ Theologians working on public theology of this kind bring their methodical expertise to the understanding of the world we live in.

⁵ Gräb, W., *Sinn fürs Unendliche, Religion in der Mediengesellschaft*. Gütersloh: Kaiser 2002. Graham, E., *Representations of the post/human. Monsters, aliens and others in popular culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2002. Herrmann, J. *Sinnmaschine Kino. Sinndeutung und Religion in Populären Film*. Gütersloh: Kaiser 2002.

⁶ Ganzevoort, R.R., *Reconstructies. Praktisch-theologisch onderzoek naar de verhalen van mannen over seksueel misbruik en geloof*. [Reconstructions. Practical Theological Inquiry into the Stories of Men about Sexual Abuse and Faith]. Kampen: Kok 2001.