

Van der Ven's empirical / practical theology and the theological encyclopaedia

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INTRODUCTION

Hans van der Ven undoubtedly ranks among the most influential practical theologians of our times. An important reason for this is his relentless dedication to empirical research. This dedication has contributed to the emancipation of practical theology as a discipline in its own right. A second reason, equally important for the acceptance of this discipline, is Van der Ven's profound use of systematic theology. This has brought Gerben Heitink (1991) to an ambivalent evaluation. He applauds the methodology and the academic status that can be derived from it, but he questions the identification of empirical theology with practical theology. Heitink comments on the connection of an empirical approach with theological statements. In such an approach, the research focus is whether these statements indeed represent experiences of human beings and how theological concepts might need to be readjusted as a consequence. In terms of the theological encyclopaedia, according to him, this should be regarded as systematic-theological research employing an empirical methodology rather than as practical theology.

Valuable as such an 'empirical dogmatics' may be, for the development of practical theology and its place in the theological encyclopaedia it raises crucial questions. If the whole of theology is practical and/or empirical, then what is specific about practical / empirical theology? (Van der Ven, 1998, pp.29-32) How can the particular approach of practical theology be described in the whole of the theological encyclopaedia? Should we – and can we – move one step further, beyond Van der Ven's empirical emancipation, to strengthen the identity of practical theology? This is all the more needed because Van der Ven's empirical approach is grounded in a clear hermeneutical intention that involves dialogue with other theological disciplines and presupposes a firm practical theological profile. These questions are at the heart of my contribution. I take my starting point in a deceptively simple definition of theology: 'speaking of God'. Acknowledging the various discourses in which this occurs (Tracy, 1981), I will distinguish three main *loci theologici*, sites for 'speaking of God'. From there I

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will discuss styles in practical theology and discuss Van der Ven's contributions in the light of these styles. Finally I will suggest a possible direction, based on an encyclopaedic discussion.

THEOLOGY AS SPEAKING OF GOD

The answer to the question of the identity of practical theology depends on the answer to the question of the nature of theology. As practical theologians we are regularly challenged to clarify the theological nature of our discipline. If we rely upon systematic theology, we are questioned about our particular contribution beyond application. If we do not use a systematic theological framework we are asked in what sense what we do might be called theology. These questions, it seems to me, not only reflect quite accurately the underdeveloped identity of the discipline. More than that they result from the rich and sometimes troublesome diversity of theology as a whole. Theology is under the constant threat of disintegration (Farley, 1983), because it is more like an amalgam of sciences, each focusing on speaking of God in dialogue with a series of other sciences: social sciences, literary sciences, philosophy, cultural anthropology, historical sciences and many more.

Theology as a whole, then, lacks a central focus, methodology or even a scientific vocabulary that might integrate the various disciplines and define what exactly should be understood as being theological. Of course, many answers to this question have been proposed. One of the better known is the understanding of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*. In this Anselmian or even Augustinian formula, the integrating principle is found in the religious pre-understanding of the theologian. Theology is not regarded as a science investigating faith, but as faith in search of scientific understanding. The foundations and normative limits are dictated by religious presuppositions.

In my view, theology is a forum where various scientific discourses meet. The rationale for this forum lies in the understanding of theology as 'speaking of God'. The integrating principle is here found in the connection of speaking and God. In more abstract terms, the shared identity of the various theological disciplines is found in the investigation of language and other symbol systems in their relation to religious experiences, beliefs, and actions and thereby focusing on a transcending reference.

If the integrating principle of theology is found in speaking of God, the differential principle for the theological disciplines is found in the varying *loci theologici*, the sources where we may find the raw material for the construction of theology. Following Aquinas and Cano, the *loci* may be taken as a methodological foundation for argumentative theology. In this understanding, the *loci* denote the sources for theological knowledge in terms of discovery and justification. Among these *loci* are canonical scriptures, patres, theologians, natural reason, philosophers, and human history. Schmid (1998) argues that practical theology

takes the locus of human history as its main source: 'In a kairological perspective, the present actual historical praxis, the contemporary realization of life from faith, is in this strict sense a locus theologicus, site for the reflection on faith, source for theological learning. In it the *sensus fidelium* reveals itself in that it becomes visible in action. Thus the *con-sensus* of many individuals becomes theologically meaningful, because the result of the sense of faith – the actual content of the consciousness of faith – is not a critically compiled or systematically presented product, but living testimony of faith'.¹ Praxis then serves as a locus theologicus in that it offers the material from which theological discourse is built.

The difference between the various loci theologici lies in the predominant type of material and in the methods appropriate to that type of material. For me, the loci are equally meaningful, equally loaded with normative aspects. The material found in each locus is 'speaking of God', first order constructions with a transcendent reference (Ganzevoort, 2003). Together they provide the material necessary for hermeneutical dialogue. The theological disciplines find their identity in the methods employed to investigate the specific type of material in a particular locus. This combination of two principles (method and locus) serves to describe the unity and differentiation of the theological encyclopaedia.

In his proposal for pastoral education, Van der Ven (2000, p.135) treats the theological curriculum only in passing, abiding with this traditional quadrivium. In contrast, I will from here on focus on three main disciplines within theology: biblical, systematic, and practical theology. As Farley (1983) points out, the reasons for the standard 'fourfold pattern' (biblical, historical, systematic, and practical) are in part accidental or based on the historical circumstances. The subdiscipline of practical theology was established as a discipline of (church) practice, contrasted with three theoretical disciplines (biblical, systematic, and historical theology). Of these, the place of biblical and systematic theology was self-evident. Church history on the other hand had a more accidental origin: 'the legacy from patristic historians, the Renaissance turn "to the sources," the use of church history in the polemical warfare between Catholics and Protestants, and the rise of historical-critical methods and consciousness in the Enlightenment. Most sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theologians agreed that the study of secular and sacred history was important, though there was little consensus as to why.' (p.79) My choice to focus on only three main disciplines in theology is by no means a disparagement of other branches (ethics, history of religion, comparative religion, crosscultural theology, and so on). It is instead based on the conceptual and methodological home those branches may find in the three main

¹ Orig: 'In kairologischer Perspektive ist die jeweilige aktuelle geschichtliche Praxis, die zeitgeschichtliche Verwirklichung des Lebens aus dem Glauben, in diesem strikten Sinn ein Locus theologicus, Ort der Reflexion des Glaubens, Lernort für Theologie. In ihr offenbart sich der *Sensus fidelium*, indem er im Handeln sichtbar wird. So wird der *Con-sensus* der vielen einzelnen theologisch bedeutsam. Denn das Resultat des Glaubenssinns – der je aktuelle Inhalt des Glaubensbewusstseins – ist kein kritisch erarbeitetes oder systematisch dargestelltes Elaborat, sondern lebendiges Glaubenszeugnis.'

disciplines, distinguished by their primary loci and the concurrent lines of reasoning.

THREE LOCI FOR SPEAKING OF GOD

The three loci central to the main disciplines are the bible, the religious belief system, and the praxis of lived faith, both contemporary and historical. These loci theologici are in many ways interrelated. In each of them we encounter references to the other two. Within the praxis of lived religion, there are numbers of implicit or explicit traces of confessional or scriptural speaking of God. Confession and tradition refer to scripture, but are also embedded in actual praxis, both of the time of its origination and of the present. In its turn, scripture itself is saturated with lived praxis and confessions. Each locus then is regarded as an adequate starting point for (second order) theology. Each can contribute to interdisciplinary theological investigation.

The material found in the three loci of first order theological discourses (“speaking of God”) can be identified as text, idea, and act. The differences may be observed on the level of phenomena but only to a degree. More than that, the distinction lies in the methodological approach toward these phenomena. Because of the interrelations, it is possible to study for example texts as representing acts or ideas. This is where the different disciplines may meet in the investigation of a particular phenomenon. In that case, biblical theology will focus on the textual dimension, systematic theology on the ideas expressed, and practical theology on the acts involved.

The material of each locus can be understood in terms of discourse (or semiotics). Ricoeur (1981) for example has treated at length the understanding of meaningful action as a text. Semiotic theories usually distinguish three dimensions of language: the syntactic, the semantic, and the pragmatic. The syntactic refers to the signs of language themselves and their interactions, abstracting from both use and meaning. The semantic involves the relations between signs and meanings, abstracting from use. The pragmatic focuses on the use of signs in communication. Roscam Abbing (1982) has suggested applying metaphorically the three dimensions of semiotics to these three loci. The locus of Scripture consists of ‘classics’, canonical texts that prompt the central question what is said. Roscam Abbing connects this to the syntactic dimension. He sees the semantic dimension dominating the locus of confession, focussing on the articulation of meaning in material like creeds and doctrines. Inquiring the locus of praxis, the core challenge is to find out how it works. This relates predominantly to the pragmatic dimension. Intriguing as his suggestion is, the connection of the syntactic with biblical texts seems problematic. Biblical theology focuses more on semantics, and systematic theology involves some kind of meta-syntactics in identifying the ‘grammar’ of faith and developing rules for well-formulated religious language. Moreover, these three dimensions are present in each locus of first order discourse as well as in each second order discipline. In practical

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theology they are operationalized in respectively the empirical, the evaluative (often called hermeneutical), and the strategic research phases or approaches (Heitink, 1993).

There is however a point to Roscam Abbing's suggestion if we focus on the prevailing questions posed by these types of material or to be answered through studying them. Farley (1988, pp.148-155) identifies three 'primary hermeneutic modes' to be developed in the theological study following foundational studies.² These modes are the interpretation of tradition, the interpretation of truth, and the interpretation of action. Though Farley resists the temptation of identifying these modes of interpretation with specific theological disciplines, he does show the need to develop and integrate all three modes. The difference between these modes, it seems, is primarily a difference in theological method. More precisely, it is a difference in the line of argumentation along which conclusions are reached. As a consequence, the three modes operate predominantly with different material and are involved in different dialogues with other disciplines.

The three types of first order constructions demand different theological approaches. Scripture, referring to the classics of our religious tradition, prompts the question what is said. The final point of reference and the method to decide upon the questions lies in the understanding of the text. This is not limited to the original understanding. It may also be directed to the uncovering of the interpretive potential for today. But even then it is the investigation of and discussion with the text that defines the conclusions. Belief systems, including creeds and doctrines (tradition), invoke questions of the meaning of propositions and content. It need not be limited to official confessions but may include present day expressions of religions and worldviews. The material is not primarily taken as text or as praxis, but as the expression of ideas. The method to decide upon the questions lies in the analysis of ideas and their consistency, consequences, and justification. Praxis, referring to lived religion, both inside and outside the church, prompts the question what is done. It seeks to decide upon the questions through empirical methods (which does include normativity, Ganzevoort, 2003). Not denying substantial overlap, these methodological differences are related to the material central to each locus, to the partners in dialogue, and to the history of each discipline.

Biblical theology finds its primary locus in the classics of the Christian religion. Tracy (1981, p.108) speaks of classics when 'certain expressions of the human spirit so disclose a compelling truth about our lives, that we cannot deny them some kind of normative status.' For Christianity, the event and person of Jesus Christ are the first classic. The witnessing text of the Bible is a primary source.

² Among these foundational studies, Farley mentions the articulation of 'the comprehensive concrete cultural context and situation of religion and the church' (p.145; comparable to Browning's [1991] 'thick description' in 'descriptive theology'), anthropological study of 'the paradigms of human being' (p.146-147; related to Schleiermacher's 'Philosophical theology'), and 'knowledge of Christianity as a historical reality' (p.147).

Still, this limitation is not that clear. The borders of the Bible are not that easily demarcated, because there is a fluid transition between canonical and non-canonical texts. More fundamental is the question whether the classics of the Christian religion are the sole locus. This could only be maintained if we chose to define theology as Christian theology. The reasons for such a choice are sometimes pragmatic, sometimes resulting from a *fides quaerens intellectum* approach. No matter how one decides on this issue, the basic material is textual. The classic texts are considered to be the first order constructions under inquiry. That determines the types of possible questions and answers and the choice of methods and theories from adjacent sciences. For biblical theology, linguistic and literary sciences would be the primary non-theological counterparts. Sometimes other disciplines are invoked as well, like archeology and history of religion. These disciplines may yield insights of crucial importance in understanding the texts, focusing on the syntactic and semantic dimension.

Systematic theology finds its primary locus in the creeds and wider belief systems construed in the Christian tradition. Again this may be broadened to religions and worldviews. Although for scientific theology these are still considered to be first order constructions, they naturally comprise a higher level of reflection and systematization. The scientific discipline most congenial to systematic theology is philosophy, offering methods, content, and critique, especially with regard to the (meta-) syntactic and semantic dimension. Systematic theology usually functions in circular interaction with the praxis of the Christian church. It offers second order constructions concerning the first order constructions of the church, but these second order constructions easily gain the function of more encompassing first order constructions, so that they are understood as foundations of first order constructions rather than reflections upon them. Most notable examples are found in the creeds of the church, heavily influenced by scholars of the time. The temptation for systematic theology – as it is one for practical theology – is to obscure the difference between first and second order discourse. Doctrines, creeds, and other content of the ‘world of ideas’ should be distinguished from reflections upon this material. In its ongoing dialogue, however, dogmatics may move from being theories concerning these ideas, to new expressions or indeed new first order constructions. Although this may be applauded as a seminal way of furthering the church’s way of speaking of God, the status of the discipline could gain clarity if the theologian’s confessional (first order) and analytical (second order) enterprise were consistently distinguished.

Practical theology finds its primary locus of first order constructions in the praxis. The interdisciplinary study of praxis involves academic dialogue with other sciences studying human praxis. The intersection of theological and social scientific approaches forms the primary locus of dialogue for practical theology. Practical theology may investigate ideas and texts as well (even canonical ideas and texts), but they are studied as elements of human praxis. This does not preclude the understanding of praxis (meaningful action) through the model of the text, as Ricoeur has shown. ‘Text’ in this Ricoeurian sense does not refer to

the material, but to the theory used. Practical theology gives predominant attention to the pragmatic and semantic dimension of discourse.

STYLES IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

The description above implies that practical theology is involved in three different dialogues resulting in three discourses, each with its own rationality, aims, methods, and normative criteria (Ganzevoort, 2003). First, there is the dialogue with the praxis, focused on but not limited to the praxis of the church. Practical theology is usually an engaged discipline, aiming at cooperation with first order participants in understanding and improving the praxis. (Dreyer, 1998). Second, we find the dialogue with other theological disciplines, most notably (especially in Van der Ven's work) with systematic theology. Third, we have the dialogue with the social sciences, usually psychology and sociology. This insight seems to be present in Fowler's (1983, p.152) depiction of the relationships of practical theology. He develops a model in which practical theology forms a first dialogical triangle with other theological disciplines and with scripture and tradition. A second dialogical triangle consists of practical theology with social and human sciences and with present experiences and situations. Although Fowler does not mention such a distinction, his model can even be read as taking into account the difference between first order and second order discourses. Scripture and tradition, as well as present experiences and situations can be regarded as first order discourses, while theological, social, and human sciences belong to the second order.

This multi-dialogical nature of the discipline is reflected in the various styles in practical theology. Each style represents a specific configuration of these dialogues. The first style regards practical theologians that find their natural habitat in the dialogue with the praxis of the church. Fowler makes this point when he takes up the Schleiermacherian linkage between the scientific spirit and the ecclesial interest. Obviously, this need not be limited to the institutional church in a strict sense (Van der Ven 1998, pp.34-40). My point here is not that actual practices are being studied (Christian, ecclesial, or secular). That will be a major feature of all practical theology. The point is that this study is defined first and foremost by the dialogue with the praxis. It is not hard to find practical theologians whose main contribution is the development of liturgical or catechetical material to be used in churches. This may be done in a conservative or critical way, but the primary orientation of these practical theologians lies in the dialogue with the praxis. In this practical theological style social scientific and academic theological contributions are of a secondary nature. Usually it takes the form of applied theology or applied social sciences, but it may also come in the shape of a functional pragmatic approach (Schuringa, 2000).

The second style of practical theology is found with those theologians that align primarily with other theological disciplines. Their concepts, arguments, and criteria are primarily of a systematic theological or biblical theological nature. In a

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sense, many practical theologians advocating a hermeneutical approach employ this style. Heitink's (1993) grand scheme, for example, integrating empirical, hermeneutical, and strategic approaches presents the hermeneutical as the most theological. According to him, the hermeneutical dimension provides the motivation and content for the other two dimensions. Without denying the complementarity of these dimensions, the hermeneutical is prioritized: 'The understanding of the Word demands that the Word is thought through and made comprehensible in the present time, by means of interpretation, directed to the coming to understanding by the human in and from his own world of experience. This is not a one-way-street, because understanding in turn rests upon the experience and presupposition of the subject that tries to understand, interpret, and convey the Word from his experience' (Heitink, 1993, p.115). The result is that for Heitink the strategic dimension has a theological foundation, but only a very limited theological content. The empirical dimension is limited to the measurement of theological content that does not arise from the praxis, but from the tradition. In the part of his book where he describes the hermeneutical dimension more fully, he is deeply involved with systematic theologians, rather than with practical theologians.

The third style of practical theology is represented by those theologians whose primary partners in dialogue are found among social scientists. Examples are James Fowler and Leslie Francis. Many of them are found in the border regions between practical theology and psychology of religion, sociology of religion, ritual studies, anthropology, and the like. Their prime methods and theories are derived from these non-theological disciplines. The emerging concept of religious studies as a new umbrella for the theological disciplines can be understood in this light. Not only is the scope of academic theology broadened to include other religions and world views, but the role of other disciplines is strengthened as well (Van der Ven, 2001).

If this distinction between three styles and the main dialogues they are derived from makes any sense, how is the contribution of Hans van der Ven to be interpreted in this framework? It seems that his work does not fall easily under the headings of one of these styles. Instead, I would suggest that it has been so rich and influential precisely because he has developed a complex combination of styles. Given the broad scope of his work and the abundance of publications, I do not claim to give a final analysis. I merely seek to explore his primary position in the framework I have suggested.

At first sight, the dialogue with the praxis is not at the forefront of Van der Ven's work. Admittedly, many of his studies contain empirical work, and under his supervision there has been a range of research projects that aim at dialogue with the praxis (notably in Van der Ven & Vossen, 1995 and in his beautiful reflection on Psalm 139; Van der Ven, 1998, pp.109-122). Most of these studies, however, investigate the praxis but do not find their primary dialogue in the praxis. The praxis serves as a source, not as a forum. This might even run the risk of

somewhat using or objectifying the praxis, but Van der Ven's hermeneutical intention to give due attention to the critical role of contemporary experiences and practices counters this risk at least to a degree. I will return to this shortly.

The dialogue with social sciences is present in Van der Ven's work on two levels. He has become known for his use of empirical methods, derived from the social sciences. For Van der Ven this is the consequence of his so called intradisciplinarity (Van der Ven 1998, pp.40-50). In his treatment of the various options of integrating theology and social sciences, he first rejects monodisciplinarity (mainly in the form of applied theology or in extreme forms of what I described as the second style). This option prevents practical theology from fulfilling its purpose: the investigation of the here and now of the practice of Christianity. Multidisciplinarity – according to Van der Ven – results in a two-phase approach in which theologians interpret empirical research material. Here the main problem is that the social scientific analysis and theological reflection are governed by entirely different paradigms, theology being defined by 'critical-religious consideration from the perspective of the normative nature of the Gospel'. Interdisciplinarity assumes proper interaction between social scientists and theologians (or sometimes within one person with double expertise and recognition). True interdisciplinarity is hardly ever achieved. Intradisciplinarity for Van der Ven requires that theology itself becomes empirical. He shows that in other theological branches it is customary that theologians familiarize themselves with the methods of their non-theological counterparts.

The obvious yet stunning effect of this approach is that dialogue with social scientists becomes almost as absent as in monodisciplinarity. Van der Ven seems right in noting that intradisciplinary use of non-theological methods is present in all theological disciplines. Practical theology's problem was that it did not employ the methods fit for researching its primary locus, praxis, but methods from other theological disciplines – and thus from the non-theological counterparts of those disciplines. His achievement has been that he has identified the proper non-theological methods. But if the other theological disciplines have been intradisciplinary in this way, there is no real difference left with monodisciplinarity. A telling example is found in the extensive research project on suffering and theodicy (Van der Ven & Vossen, 1995). The presentation contains a few references to social scientific literature on a very general level (Habermas, Mead, James), and some to books on bereavement. What is missing for example is the body of literature on religious coping. The theoretical framework of the study consists of systematic theological concepts of theodicy. There is thus no real dialogue with social scientists but merely the adoption of their methods; ancilla theologiae all over again.

Before this sounds like too harsh a judgment, I must attend to a shift of meaning in the term monodisciplinarity. Van der Ven uses this term to refer to the predominance of systematic theology and the understanding of practical theology as applied theology. In that sense, all theology was systematic theology. In my

view, systematic theology is intradisciplinary as well in that it incorporates the methods appropriate for its material. On the level of theology as a whole, monodisciplinarity means that the other theological disciplines are subordinated to systematic theology. On the level of a particular discipline, monodisciplinarity and intradisciplinarity are alike. It seems to me that Van der Ven's rejection of monodisciplinarity could gain strength when these two issues are distinguished: 1) practical theological discourse does not depend on systematic theological discourse, and 2) the appropriate methods for practical theology are empirical.

There is a second level where Van der Ven deals with social sciences. This is the level of metatheory. Here Van der Ven enters into fundamental discussions in which he is deeply influenced by Habermas (and in some of his later works by Ricoeur). His fundamental frame of reference, determining his hermeneutical approach, is of a non-theological nature. (One could argue that the non-theological partners introduced here relate more naturally to the discourse of systematic theology, because the methodological procedures are idea-based rather than acts-based. Probably on the level of metatheory the distinction cannot be followed with the same rigor. However, the fact that Van der Ven works with non-theological theories does not mean that it becomes practical-theological.) Before normativity is described theologically, it is defined in Habermasian terms (Van der Ven, 1990, p.69 vv). The same may hold for the grand theories of modernity, secularization, and the like. These theories play an important role in Van der Ven's work (e.g., Van der Ven, 1998, p. 4 vv). Again, before he gives a theological interpretation, he describes – and discusses – these theories from a mainly social-scientific point of view.

The dialogue with other theological disciplines is the most apparent in Van der Ven's work. Especially when it comes to the 'theological deduction' that leads to empirical research, Van der Ven operationalizes fundamental (systematic) theological concepts of theodicy, ecclesiology, God images, and so on. He finds that not all of these concepts have equal ground in the empirical reality of believers and non-believers. Some theological constructs reflect quite adequately the understandings in the praxis, while others seem less relevant. Here we find the critical role of contemporary experience toward the tradition and the systematic theological reflection.

It seems then that Van der Ven employs a somewhat hidden four-level approach. On the level of metatheory, he follows social-scientific and philosophical theories. On the level of content, he is clearly involved in systematic theology. On the level of research, he employs empirical methods but makes less use of social scientific concepts or of the critical contribution social scientific theories might offer. On the level of the praxis, Van der Ven merges social-scientific and theological categories. A fine example of that is his book on ecclesiology (Van der Ven, 1993). His dialogue with the praxis, however, remains limited as his primary discourse is of an academic nature.

At this point I have to return for a moment to the question whether Van der Ven's approach is consistent with his clear hermeneutical intention. To say the least, he does allow contemporary experiences and practices to complement, critique, or maybe even rectify aspects of the religious tradition. His method seems to be best summarized as testing these aspects empirically for their meaning and relevance. We must, however, not overlook the more inductive research in his oeuvre, in which the concepts are derived from the material. Fine examples are found in his work on human rights (Van der Ven, 1998). It is in these contributions that Van der Ven's attention for the independent hermeneutical role of religious experiences and practices of people in the process of theological theory-building becomes most explicit. These studies are, in my view, the most unambiguously practical theological because they create theological discourse from the raw material of the praxis. They do, in fact, agree so closely with my own preferred style of practical theology that I am at the risk of misjudging his other work. I must therefore make a further refinement. Much of his research of a statistical nature, as outlined and exemplified in his *Entwurf einer empirischen Theologie* could be called practical theology insofar as the argumentative line of reasoning, the route along which one decides upon matters of truth, lies in the praxis itself. In discussing theological normativity in this outline, (Habermasian) paradigms and procedures govern the theological symbols he introduces. But the theological theory is not derived from the praxis. The succinct description of the five phases of empirical research shows that the theological research question arises from the praxis, but the theory to be tested is built on (systematic) theological literature (Van der Ven, 1998, p.53 vv). It is therefore, I would suggest, intradisciplinarity, not because it includes empirical methods – that should be self-evident given the object of the discipline –, but because it includes systematic theological theories.

The challenge I see for the further development of practical theology is to strengthen the identity of the discipline. In this process, the emancipation fostered by Van der Ven's approach is an important prerequisite, but the price has been a continuing centrality of systematic theological theories. This becomes apparent in a humorous encyclopaedic aside, where Van der Ven (2001, p.21, n.33) questions the theological quadrivium and asks whether systematic theology is truly a discipline of its own or rather a dimension of the three main forms of research: literary, historical, and empirical. This question indicates that theology almost coincides with systematic theology. My hopes lie in a different encyclopaedic approach for which I have presented the building blocks earlier. This may result in the recognition of practical theological theories built on material of the praxis as truly theological, so that they may be brought into dialogue with other theological theories. A basic sketch may suggest the future I envision. This sketch will combine the differentiation of loci and styles or dialogues. It consists of two (circular) phases: disciplinary theological theory and interdisciplinary theological theory. The reader is warned that I use these terms in a way that differs from Van der Ven.

DISCIPLINARY THEOLOGICAL THEORY

The three theological disciplines differ from one another in terms of locus and dialogue, and therefore in terms of methods and imminent neighbors within the academic world. That is, they partake in specific dialogues with fellow scholars and these dialogues impose specific demands on theory building. Because of these differing dialogues, practical theologians have to render arguments plausible to for example social scientists, systematic theologians have to justify their theories before philosophers, and biblical theologians are confronted with an audience of historians and linguists. Depending on the particularities of a research project, the list of partners in dialogue can be extended endlessly. The point I want to make here is that all of them also have to account for their theological theories in front of other theologians. This is where interdisciplinary theological theory is built, but it will start on the disciplinary level.

Each discipline interacts with its specific material and with other sciences dealing with the same type of material. The practical theologian will observe and interpret a phenomenon in the praxis. (S)he will converse with psychology and sociology of religion to understand for example the process through which people obtain an experience and communicate it to others. This may involve psychological theories of religious experience, cultural anthropological theories of ritual, sociological theories of charisma and religious groups, historical theories of worship, and so on. All these theories may shed light on the observations made. They may result in more specific empirical research, using in-depth interviews, surveys, participant observation, rhetoric analysis, and other methods, depending on the precise research question. All these social scientific theories and methods aid the practical theologian in investigating the central question how people 'speak of God' or are 'spoken to'. That is why practical theology cannot be replaced by these sciences. The psychologist of religion may study the same phenomenon, but his/her central research question will focus on the relation between such experiences and other psychological phenomena such as personality structure, attachment styles, social learning processes, perception or projection. The sociologist will link these experiences to other sociological concepts like social influence, (sub-)cultural relevance of emotional experiences or collective plausibility of accounts of experience. The practical theologian seeks to understand the phenomenon in connection with the communication between humans and God. This involves the question how the relationship with God evokes or prevents certain experiences, behaviors, or convictions, and how the relationship with God is affected by them.

The theories developed here can be distinguished in various levels related to the order of discourse. Ziebertz (2002) speaks of 'first degree' or everyday theories, which serve a function of orientation in routine everyday conduct. These theories belong to first order discourse. 'Second degree' or reflected theories guide professional conduct and require a higher level of complexity and reflection. These theories are based on the interaction between first and second order discourse. 'Third degree' or object theories are scientific by nature, dedicated to

analysis and description, truth and rationality. Theories can also be distinguished by their scope, the range of phenomena to be explained. Ground-level-theories are restricted to the exact phenomenon investigated. They may also be integrated in broader, middle-range theories that are usually the aim of practical theological research. We could also strive to develop encompassing theories, but both the complexity of the field and the present-day aversion to grand theories make this development less likely. One could argue, however, that in first order discourse these grand theories are still in vogue. Individuals – at least some – may live with a certain worldview that claims to be applicable to everything. Likewise, some religious communities claim that their belief system covers the whole field of religion, life, and truth. This may be a challenge for practical theologians to reconsider their reluctance, especially if they want to be in dialogue with the praxis.

Just like the practical theologian, the systematic theologian will try to understand the ideas and experiences in a methodological double discourse. Philosophy may be helpful to understand the logical, epistemological, and metaphysical implications of the constructs. Historical study may inform the understanding of the idea and the way such experiences have influenced the development of confessional ideas. Again, the singularity of the systematic theologian in studying this idea may be the understanding of the ideas in relation to the communication between humans and God.

For the biblical theologian, the main focus will be on the texts that function in a specific case and on the texts that speak of comparable experiences. Here the dialogue will be with scholars of language, hermeneutical theories of reading texts, historical theories on extrabiblical accounts of experiences of the vicinity of divinities, historical research on the Wirkungsgeschichte of particular texts, and literary studies on the experiential background of biblical texts. As a theological enterprise, the core question will be how to understand these texts in relation to the communication between humans and God.

These three branches with their respective counterparts not only work with different material or use different methods for studying them. They also work in different paradigms or along different lines of reasoning. To answer any specific research questions is to enter a specific discourse with rules of its own. How are we to decide what is true? In other terms: what will count as knowledge? When are our observations and interpretations justified? Here we are confronted with complementary discourses. The paradigm of social sciences enforces a line of reasoning in which empirical data provide the essential criterion. The paradigm of literary sciences asks for interpretative reasoning based on the interaction of author, text, and reader. Various approaches may stress one of these components. The ‘best reading’ of the text will be determined with referential and performative arguments. The line of argumentation may resemble that of social sciences, as Ricoeur (1981) demonstrates in applying textual hermeneutics to meaningful action. The paradigm of philosophical sciences presents somewhat different

criteria, like non-contradiction, propositional content, and logical linkage between propositions.

In this stage of disciplinary theological theory-building, the primary dialogue is with the non-theological counterparts. To put it bluntly, a practical theological theory of suffering need not follow the structures or contents of systematic theology or biblical theology. It seeks to answer the theological question (how do people ‘speak of God’ and how are they ‘spoken to’) in their suffering. If biblical texts and/or traditional ideas come to the fore, it is only because the participants in the praxis present them. Obviously, such a disciplinary practical theological theory has limited possibilities, just as a systematic theological exploration of the ideas or the biblical theological exegesis of texts are limited. Disciplinary theological theories are nothing more than the threads needed to weave the tapestry of interdisciplinary theological theory.

INTERDISCIPLINARY THEOLOGICAL THEORY

The next step therefore is the interaction between these three theological approaches. The aim of this stage of interdisciplinary theological research is the construction and corroboration of theory. Here the demands may seem overwhelming, as the theory to be developed has to comply with academic standards from more than one scientific paradigm. This may be the reason why interdisciplinary work in theology not always yields integrated theory. Quite often a multi-disciplinary approach is offered instead (Van der Ven, 1998, p.48). Multi-volume series like the German *Theologische Realenzyklopaedie* and *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* and the *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* do just that. For each main entry there is a biblical-theological, a systematic-theological, and a practical-theological section, sometimes completed with anthropology, comparative religion, or art history.³

The daunting task of creating interdisciplinary theological theory may come within our reach if we limit ourselves to a specific research topic and to specific aims. In the example of investigating suffering, each of the disciplines may have constructed a particular theological discourse and offers the fruits of theological labor. The biblical theologian brings a description of experiences and responses as available in the texts of the classics, focusing for example on the Psalter. The systematic theologian comes up with a typology of suffering and theodicy. The practical theologian has investigated how people cope with suffering in their relation to God and may have discovered that the main factors in these experiences are the psychological predisposition of the individual and the social support available (Ganzevoort, 1994).

If these were the outcomes of the disciplinary investigations, how do they contribute to interdisciplinary theological theory? The first step is the combination

³ In the *Theologische Realenzyklopaedie* practical theology is often not a separate section.

of insights. There may be parallels between the types of experiences in the Psalter, the typology in systematic theology, and the factors operating in the praxis. This can lead to an integrative typology that does justice to all three realms. The second step is the interpretation of findings from each discipline in terms of the theories of the others. If indeed the three ways of speaking of God in first order discourse are interrelated, then this cross-sectional interpretation contributes to understanding the observations. This brings us to the third step of mutual critique, challenging the assumptions made in the other disciplines. This step involves a metatheoretical discussion (see an example in Browning, 1987). The fourth step is critical correlation (Tracy), for which Browning (1991, p.71) develops five levels of validity claims:

- (1) the visional level (which inevitably raises metaphysical validity claims);
- (2) the obligational level (which raises normative ethical claims or claims of rightness in Habermas's sense of this word);
- (3) the tendency-need or anthropological dimension (which raises claims about human nature, its basic human needs, and the kinds of premoral goods required to meet these needs – a discussion that Habermas believes is impossible to conduct);
- (4) an environmental-social dimension (which raises claims that deal primarily with social-systemic and ecological constraints on our tendencies and needs); and
- (5) the rule-role dimension (which raises claims about the concrete patterns we should enact in our actual praxis in the everyday world).

These validity claims will be brought to the theological theories from each of the disciplines. This critical correlation then can pave the ground for the fifth step, determining goals both for praxis and for future research in each of the disciplines.

My description here has focused on second order discourse, but the same process can be found in first order discourse. A community of faith offers and validates specific ways of responding to suffering based on its experiences and expectancies, its understanding of the bible and its confessional tradition. The community comes up with a new shape of praxis of which the participants believe it complies with the demands as Browning describes.

This encyclopaedic proposal finds its foreshadowing precisely in the work of Van der Ven. In an intradisciplinary way he has combined the disciplines of practical and systematic theology. The most balanced example, it seems to me, is his ecclesiology, precisely because the theological and the social scientific provide parallel input for his theory. As a master of at least two trades, he has developed both a practical theological theory and a systematical theological one and

combined the two into an ecclesiological framework. This balance is not always maintained in his empirical work as I have discussed above. The backlash of this is a lack of clarity concerning the theological identity of practical theology.

The dialogues envisioned in this paper are a manifestation of the hermeneutical nature of theology and congenial with Van der Ven's hermeneutical intention. The shared hermeneutical task of all theological disciplines is to analyze and construct adequate and viable 'speaking of God'. The particular contribution of practical theology is a hermeneutics of praxis. Perhaps here may lie a task for practical theologians less bilingual in terms of theological disciplines, among whom I count myself. If we strive to develop plain practical theological theories with the capacity to function in an interdisciplinary theological theory building as proposed here, the identity of practical theology in its dialogues with social sciences and with other theological disciplines may become all the sharper.

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