# What you see is what you get.

# Social construction and normativity in practical theology[1]

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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. Following Browning's levels of practical moral reasoning, some parameters for normativity are displayed. 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.

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[1]  An earlier and shorter version of this chapter appeared as Ganzevoort, R.R. (2002) WYSIWYG. Social construction in Practical Theological Epistemology. *Journal of Empirical Theology 15/2, 34-42.*

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. This will be illustrated in the normative criteria that can be categorized through Browning's levels of practical moral reasoning. 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.[2] 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 form his position. First, I would suggest that the difference between the orders is not the presence or absence of truth claims but the different

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[2]        With thanks to Mark Cartledge for the reference.

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 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 of 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?'

## PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AS NORMATIVE THEOLOGY

Empirical theology (or descriptive theology in Browning's terms) should not be mistaken in a positivistic sense as providing objective data to be interpreted afterwards. Praxis – including the praxis of church and ministry – is theory laden, and our perception of that praxis is already determined by our Vorverständnis. In the same way, our theological interpretations and the theological tradition in which we stand have grown out of the previous praxis of church and ministry. In the hermeneutical circle of theory and praxis, we need to ask ourselves where we find the normative criteria to create new strategies or to evaluate existing ones.

One classic way of doing this is taking the paradigms of biblical and systematic theology as providing the normative criteria, or even the very concepts that lie at the heart of normative theology. In a sense, this approach is present in most practical theological contributions. In some currents of the Christian tradition (e.g., in orthodox protestantism), biblical theology plays the central normative role. Mainstream western practical theology locates normativity in systematic theology. Heitink's (1993) grand scheme for example, integrating empirical, hermeneutical, and strategic approaches presents the hermeneutical as the most theological. He states that empirical approaches are insufficient because we need to acknowledge the normative claims of the Christian tradition. Strategic and empirical approaches are important, but their theological normativity is derived from the hermeneutical interaction with tradition. It is in that part of his book that Heitink is deeply involved with systematic theologians, rather than practical theologians. The same can be observed in Browning's (1991) proposal. He solidifies the position of practical theology by reclaiming the praxis-orientation for

the whole theological enterprise and by stressing the descriptive and strategic phase. However, the interpretive 'movement' is defined by systematic theology, more specifically theological ethics. In this phase practical theology has no particular contribution.

Insightful and balanced, Heitink and Browning succeed in avoiding the pitfalls of theologia applicata and in gaining some ground for a truly practical theology. Both however have difficulties in describing the theological nature of practical theology in its own right and not as a derivative of systematic theology. Perhaps the most radical approach locating normativity in the praxis is found in those shapes of practical theology that are influenced by liberation theologies.

At the heart of all this is the hermeneutical discussion on the nature of our knowing and doing things. As stated, praxis and interpretation are always intertwined. We have learned from hermeneutical philosophers like Gadamer and Ricoeur that there is no direct access to the original meaning of texts nor to the intrinsic meaning of present practices. All too easily we will read our interpretations into the texts and into the praxis, misunderstanding them both. It seems to me that even a critical reading does not safeguard us against these risks, because it still seeks some original - in a way objective - meaning.

For practical theology, the question of normativity cannot be delegated to systematic or practical theology, nor to our understanding of the needs of our situations. Neither of these can function as a direct source of normative criteria for the observations we do, the interpretations we are to make, or the strategies we have to develop. This conclusion is reached when one truly acknowledges the various discourses in which practical theology partakes. Privileging one discourse over the others invariably obstructs the other discourses. Beyond this communicative reason, there may also be a theological reluctance toward normative criteria. Speaking in faith language, we might have to say that the true source of normative criteria is God Himself. This should caution us against the hubris that is inherent to our every effort to define absolute criteria.

Paradoxically, precisely this humility may bring us to the point where we can establish some criteria. Not the ultimate ones, but penultimate criteria that will do for our present situations. If God, truth, and absolute criteria are not accessible to us, maybe we can value the many pathways where we find traces of God. In more methodological terms, we may come to appreciate the use of triangulation: the combination of more than one source and method. We may read the Bible as witness of living with God, and in the same way we may read our present situations as ways of living with God. If we take this approach, our task as theologians is to foster the dialogue. This is precisely what all hermeneutically oriented practical theologians have argued.

There is, however, one more question. And if one answers this question negatively - as I do - our task becomes even more humble. The question is this: Do you believe that theologians should make normative statements and provide the right strategies for the church (and/or society)? It seems to me that answering

'yes' to this question grants the theologian an authority that he or she does not merit. The empirical description of the praxis, the interpretations and criteria we may come up with, the models and strategies we may develop, they are in no way better, more normative, or more true than what the participants of first order discourse (the church, the believers, and others) can offer.

This is a daring statement and one to be disputed. But it is not just a particular theological opinion. It is also a methodological critique that is right at the heart of the theme of normativity and empirical research. I would like to challenge the habit of theologians like ourselves to blur the distinction between our professional and/or academic task on the one hand, and our role of believer or minister on the other. As believers or maybe even ministers and priests, we are part of the church, and together with others we evaluate the situation, search for the will of God, and develop new ways of being and acting. In fact, it may be our ministry to guide this process, and show the 'right' direction. But as professionals, and especially as academics, we have to be aware of the limits of our insights and engage in scrupulous self-critique. We partake in the entirely different second order discourse of academe. It is a major challenge for practical theology to clarify the distinction and the connection between our professional academic discourse and the church's communication - internally between members, externally with other groups and naturally with the texts and traditions that are the sources of her understanding of God.

A social constructionist approach to practical theology focuses on the discourses in which meanings develop and function. We do not expect to find normative criteria outside of these discourses. Instead the discourses themselves are investigated and critiqued in order to elucidate the often implicit and possibly conflicting normativities that are used in these discourses. For practical theology, the main discourse to be investigated is the first order discourse of (religious) praxis. This is the realm where normative criteria are found and challenged, especially through dialogues with other relevant discourses found in tradition, theology, and social sciences.

## PARAMETERS

Now, modest as our task may be, we are to work on theological description, interpretation, and strategy. To do so systematically, I will propose some parameters we may consider in this task of clarification and critique of normative criteria. These parameters guide us in each stage of practical theological research: empirical description, interpretive theory, and strategic innovation. My main example will lie in the development of models of practical ministry.[3] The function of these parameters is to provide the formal logic for these models. As parameters, their value - that is, their content - may be altered, and each variation

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[3]     This example arises from the collaboration between the Theological University of Kampen and Debreceni Reformátys Hittudományi Egyetem (Debrecen Reformed University of Theology – Hungary).

will result in a changed model. I take my parameters from Don Browning's (1991) encyclopedic proposal for what he calls a *fundamental practical theology*. Browning distinguishes five levels or dimensions of practical moral reasoning: The visional level, the obligational level, the social-environmental level, the rule-role level, and the tendency-need level.

As for the visional level, Browning claims that our theological thinking is embedded in a tradition determined by stories and metaphors that shape our self-understanding. Each model for practical ministry will involve a vision of the identity of the minister. Theological discussions on ministry often seem to focus on this level, but for empirical research and developing strategies this is only one part of the picture. Three basic notions seem important here. The first is ministry as an ordained position. The second is ministry as a profession. The third, often appearing in and through the other two, is ministry as personal charisma. These three concepts of ministry all have a long history.[4] In different currents of Christianity, the balance between these concepts may differ, resulting in different models of practical ministry. It is useful to note that these concepts originate in different discourses as well, as I will illustrate for ordination and professionalism.

Ministry as an ordained profession stems from the religious tradition and was fortified through biblical images like the priest, systematic theological interpretations of vocation, and historical developments of church hierarchy. The ecumenical discussion portrays variations in the vision of the relation between the ordained minister and the congregation. For the discourse of social scientific research of religion this religiously articulated view of ordination is not useful. Instead the concept of ordination is understood as social and religious legitimization in which power dynamics become an important topic. In first order discourse of the congregation ordination may serve as the crystallization point for expectancies and projections of transcendence. Practical theological discourse has to foster the dialogue between these discourses, overcome the barriers in this dialogue that arise from normative claims and interests of these discourses, and develop a common language for discussing normativity.

Ministry as professional action stems from the organizational domain. Professionalism is understood as a twofold concept. On the one hand it denotes the development of a specific occupation with well-defined standards and aims. In this sense professional ministry can be identified and measured. On the other hand professionalism is the process whereby workers in a specific occupation employ strategies (like stressing a specific expertise) to strengthen and defend their position. (Brouwer 1995) The discourse of professionalism in ministry therefore is defined by interests and issues of power and by the understanding of

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[4]     Weber (1980) identified charismatic, traditional, and legal-rational leadership. Building on his distinctions, others added functional-rational leadership. Given indications that legal-rational leadership correlates highly with traditional leadership (Van der Ven 1993, 258), I focus on the three notions mentioned. Ministry as ordained profession depicts the traditional and legal-rational type; ministry as profession the functional-rational type; ministry as personal charisma the charismatic type.

profession as a definable set of tasks and performances. For systematic theological discourse, this understanding poses questions regarding the action of God through and behind the professional activities of the ministers. At times reference to a spiritual dimension in ministry seems obsolete in the discourse of professionalism. In first order discourse of the congregation, professionalism in ministry evokes ambivalence. It may enhance the quality of work done by ministers, but it also resists congregational expectations of unlimited availability.

Practical theological studies of ministry encounter a void when it comes to the dialogue of the discourse of professionalism and the discourse of theology of ministry. (Schilderman 1998) The two discourses use different perspectives and different normative claims. The analysis of these discourses, their conflicting normativity, and the purposes and interests for which these are employed is a major task for the practical theologian.

The second level is the obligational. This has to do with the ethical demands or general moral principles. These obligations are relatively independent, yet embedded in the visions. As an ethicist, Browning underlines this ethical dimension. For the purpose of my argument here, I would distinguish these two levels slightly differently. My proposal is to take the visional level to indicate the identity of the minister according to the various discourses. The obligational level then may be used to describe the mission. What is our task, our direction, our mission? The obligational level then applies to the core business of the minister. Is it to represent God, to bring God's Word? Is it to represent authentic humanity before God? Is it to serve the people? Is it management, education, counseling? Is it the explanation of ancient texts?

The three basic notions of ministry - ordained position, professional functioning, and personal charisma - may all lead to a different description of the task and mission of the minister. Again the discourse chosen will determine the discussion on normative criteria for this obligational level. The actual performance of ministers and the experiences and expectancies of parishioners reflect the outcome of often implicit negotiations regarding these obligations. Empirical practical theological research on ministry thus deals with normativity long before the practical theologian begins to evaluate the practices. The praxis of ministry is truly theory-laden and therefore normativity-laden. This praxis is part of the first order discourse that practical theology investigates and brings into dialogue with second order discourses of theological and social-scientific disciplines.

The third level is called the tendency-need level. In moral reasoning this has to do with the needs and the pre-moral good. In our discussion it may provide parameters for the practical and personal needs of ministers and congregations. No matter how elevated our ideals, how spiritual our vision, we live with specific tendencies and needs. The relation between minister and church is defined largely by concrete issues. Browning (1991, 106) states that 'the mere existence of these needs, whether basic or culturally induced, never in itself justifies their

actualization … [but] … [the] higher order moral principles always function to organize, mediate, and coordinate these needs and tendencies…'

The tendency-need level of practical reasoning investigates the hierarchy of pre-moral needs and tendencies, and therefore is normatively defined. This is apparent in discussions on the vocation and remuneration of the minister, but also in discussions about homosexuality or euthanasia. They all circle around the question of the relative weight of conflicting needs and tendencies. The important issue for practical theological investigations here is the awareness that first order discourse on these topics is informed by second order discourses of e.g., psychology and theology. Many debates about homosexuality are framed in the conflict between 'people are what they are' and 'the bible says so'. These first order understandings portray different normative criteria grounded in naive anthropologies or readings of Scripture. For the practical theologian the task is to clarify and perhaps challenge these understandings. Obviously, the practical theologian's personal opinion will influence this task. Empirical investigation of the normative criteria will include these first order understandings, the opinion of the practical theologian himself or herself, and the second order discourses of (in this case) biblical theology and sexology. This dialogue will display conflicting hierarchies of moral principles.

The fourth and fifth are the environmental-social and the rule-role level. The environmental-social refers to the social-structural and ecological constraints of a particular congregation and ministry. The rule-role level refers to the most concrete level of actual guidelines for practices and behaviors, together with the institutional structures of - for example - a denomination. It is here that the sociological and psychological analysis is more than needed to understand the possibilities and limits of the theological models we are to develop. That is not to say that the social sciences are only present at this level. As my description may have illustrated, they too are concerned with vision and obligation, just as much as theology has to engage in tendency-need, environmental-social, and rule-role levels. As theologians usually are not very well equipped for this, the contribution of social scientists is much wanted. Inter- or intradisciplinary integration of social scientific insights has rightly been an important feature of empirical practical theology.

Just like the tendency-need level, these two levels contain a normative dimension. In Browning's model, they are aspects of the practical moral reasoning that is present in the first order discourse of the congregational praxis. Therefore, they will be attended to in descriptive or empirical theology. My effort has been to show that the normativity as categorized in these levels is elemental to the objects investigated in empirical practical theology. The analysis of the normative dimension in first (and second) order discourses is essential to overcome the seeming gap between quasi-objective empirical research and normative theological interpretation.

## 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 op 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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