

# Teaching that Matters

## A Course on Trauma and Theology

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Looking back on my work in practical theology so far, I have always searched for teaching and research that matters to real people. My student years were not always too fulfilling in that respect. I learned a lot of course, and some of the material we studied was intellectually rather challenging, but I found it difficult to understand the connection between the conceptual systems and ritual traditions that we studied and the real life questions I encountered on the outside. Theological disputes often seemed mere mind games, fascinating but unreal. Even when I read a practical theological study that explicitly linked the intra-trinitarian communication to the communal structure of the congregation, thereby grounding practical ecclesiology in the core notions of theology, I felt completely in the blind as to what this meant. The author clearly intended more than using trinity as a model, but I could not understand what this 'more' would be, let alone explain to non-theological peers what on earth we were doing. Now maybe I wasn't the best of students, but I was left with an unfulfilled desire for a theology that mattered, for a theology that communicated beyond the theological department and beyond the church. That is why I chose to specialize in pastoral psychology and missiology. Since then I have become heavily involved in the discipline of psychology of religion, where at least I understood why something would count as knowledge or truth. But more and more, I also felt the need to reconnect theology and praxis.

Maybe this biographical note is helpful in understanding the motives that inspire me in working on a somewhat different kind of theology. Fortunately, I come across many colleagues internationally with similar desires, and it is in this sense of solidarity that I will try to tell you something about the backgrounds and intentions of the modest courses on trauma and theology that – until recently – I coordinated at the Protestant Theological University in Kampen. I will not focus completely on these courses, because it is really a rather small-scale operation, but on the principles behind it that may be more relevant to your own efforts in

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teaching practical theology. I will first focus on the theological choices and the practical theological profile, then identify some of the pivotal theological issues that come to the fore, and finally describe the course and its educational principles.

## 1. PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

I would not be the first if I tried to describe the developments in practical theology, so I will limit myself to three different ways in which praxis and theology are connected. In the field of pastoral work, Rodney Hunter (2005) makes this point in his *Dictionary* when he provides a threefold definition of protestant pastoral theology. The first (traditional) definition of theology *for* the praxis reads: 'the branch of theology which formulates the practical principles, theories, and procedures for ordained ministry in all its functions'. The second is: 'The practical theological discipline concerned with the theory and practice of pastoral care and counseling'. This is in my view a theology *about* praxis. The third one, more recently elaborated, is what I would call a theology *of* praxis: 'A form of theological reflection in which pastoral experience serves as a context for the critical development of basic theological understanding.' This reflective approach has for example been highlighted in the book *Theological Reflection* by Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Francis Ward (2005). The difference between these three definitions lies not only in the particles used, but also in the kind of praxis that is at stake, so let me say a little bit more about that.

Practical theology as theology *for* the praxis is one of the older institutional understandings of the discipline. It was not always seen as a truly theological discipline with rights of its own. At times it counted merely as the final course in which candidates for ministry learned how to apply theology to the praxis they were to work in. We can distinguish between a functional approach and an 'applied theology' approach, the first being technological rather than hermeneutical and therefore rightly criticized for not being theology at all (Schuringa, 2000). The second, applied theology, can be found in most of our history, including heroes like Schleiermacher and Thurneysen. Regardless of their differences, and although they move beyond the purely functional, they both see practical theology as mainly the translation of core insights from 'true' theology to praxis. Unreflective and shallow as that may seem today, the emergence of an applicational practical theology was an important step forward and launched the development of the discipline. Before the institutionalisation of practical theology as a discipline, the application onto the praxis had been an integral part of biblical and systematic theology. Until today this strand merits appreciation and attention of practical theologians in their responsibility of providing tools and training for ministry, even when the intrinsically deductive approach and its accompanying lack of profound knowledge of the complicated reality of the praxis of faith are abandoned (Van der Ven, 1998). In this first current practical theology is placed between systematic, biblical, or historical theology on the one hand and practice, notably the practice of ministers, on the other.

A second current in the development of practical theology could be understood as theology *about* the praxis. In this case, practical theology took a more reflective stance. It is often acknowledged that all theology is oriented to the praxis of faith. Practical theology's task was the integration of these praxis-oriented theological disciplines with social sciences in a combined effort to improve the praxis of the church. Precisely at this point, a collision occurred between practical theology's relations with social sciences on the one hand, and with systematic theology on the other. The discipline knew itself to be tributary to both sides and had to justify its profile for these diverse audiences. Whereas in theology *for* the praxis social sciences could be seen as auxiliaries to the task of translating biblical and systematic theology's proceedings into pastoral practice, the construction of theological discourse *about* the praxis forced the discipline into juxtaposition with both systematic theology and social sciences. It had to prove that it functioned according to the standards of other praxis-related sciences yet simultaneously continued to be truly theological.<sup>2</sup> The integration of social sciences and theology has been a matter of longstanding debate, in which various options are available from mono- to multi- to inter- to intradisciplinarity (Van der Ven, 1998).<sup>3</sup> In this approach to practical theology, we also find a different view of praxis. It is not limited to the praxis of clergy, but now incorporates the praxis of the religious community. All this is related to the waves of democratisation that swept the western world in the second half of the last century, bringing about a reevaluation of the role of the congregation and of the wider world.

A third current seems to be evolving in our times, one we may call theology *of* the praxis. The *locus theologicus* of our discipline is the praxis, just like the canonical texts are the locus for the Biblical scholar. Whereas all theology is related to the praxis, practical theology takes the praxis as its source and starting point.<sup>4</sup> The material we need to 'talk about God' – theo-logy is found in the God-talk of the

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<sup>2</sup> One way of combining these strands of justification can be found in the use of the Chalcedonian structure to describe the relationship between theology and social sciences (Hunsinger, 1995, Loder, 1999).. Another example may be found in Heitink's (1999) important concept of bipolarity.

<sup>3</sup> Van der Ven rejects monodisciplinarity or applied theology as he had labelled it before. This option prevents practical theology from fulfilling its purpose: the investigation of the here and now of the practice of Christianity. It does not aim at developing theological theory, but offers practical advice based on what other theological disciplines would have brought forward. For that purpose, practical theology would resort to the methods of the corresponding theological disciplines. This option could be subsumed under the heading of 'theology *for* the praxis. Multidisciplinarity (cooperation of social sciences and theologians) – 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. The aim here is critical correlation, often based on some understanding of an anthropological agreement. True interdisciplinarity however 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 and that for practical theology empirical methods are the most adequate.

<sup>4</sup> Schuringa (2000) returns to an unnecessary reduction in focusing on church and ministry and in a classical Reformed view of the priority of 'theological theory and principle over praxis'. See also Schmid (1998) for praxis as locus of theological reflection.

praxis. Here the perspective is dictated by the tenet that the praxis itself is a provider of theology. Implicit as it may be, individuals and groups attribute meanings, construe systems of religion and Weltanschauung, and therefore are to be acknowledged as ‘first order theologians’. I think this is close to what Jeff Astley (2002) and others had in mind when writing about ordinary theology, but it also matches the basic perspective of liberation theology. The deceased German practical theologian Henning Luther (1992) gives apt priority to the perspective of the so-called laity, which he describes as not the mere receptor of theology created elsewhere, but as humankind reflecting on meaning and faith, and therefore the producer or constructor of theology. He adequately distinguishes between this first order theology of the laity and scientific theology, or second order theology. This scientific theology, Luther notes in resonance of Schleiermacher, is not necessary for the faith of the individual. It is needed, however, ‘to be able to make communicatively fruitful the pluralization caused by the individualization of religion, i.e. to prevent that understanding between the manifold subjective entrances to religion becomes impossible. Practical theology [...] clarifies – in a hermeneutical and empirical way – the conditions under which understanding between the religious subjects may occur. The subjects themselves will decide what and how to believe.’<sup>5</sup> The final sentence of this quote may easily be interpreted in a too individualistic manner and needs to be understood in a more communal way. Troublesome is also the dichotomy of laity and clergy, which does not coincide with the dichotomy of first and second order constructions. Luther’s fundamental insight, however, offers an important principle for the development of practical theological discourse, differentiating between first and second order theology and engaging into dialogue with other theological disciplines and with social sciences.

The praxis addressed in this third current of practical theology is widened again. Next to the clerical paradigm of the first perspective and the ecclesial of the second, here we focus on the religious praxis of individuals and groups or even cultural expressions. This need not be confined to the Christian tradition, but may extend to other traditions or even to idiosyncratic religious constructions. In fact, it has to in a plural religious context where even common believers develop hybrid religious identities, combining their traditional faith with religious material from the media, other religions, and so on. If I were to define practical theology from this third perspective, I would say something like the study of contemporary religious praxis, geared to understanding, evaluating, and improving the relation between people and what is holy to them. Of course I will not hide my own Christian background, but as a practical theologian, I work as a professional rather than confessional (Ganzevoort, 2005). Teaching that matters, for me, is in the first place directed to the development of a kind of practical theology that takes the

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<sup>5</sup> Orig: ‘um die durch die Individualisierung der Religion bedingte Pluralisierung kommunikativ fruchtbar machen zu können, d.h., zu verhindern, daß zwischen den vielfältig subjektiven Zugängen zur Religion keine Verständigung mehr möglich ist. Praktische Theologie [...] klärt - auf hermeneutische und empirische Weise - die Bedingungen, unter denen sich die Verständigung zwischen den religiösen Subjekten vollziehen kann. Was und wie zu glauben ist, klären die einzelnen Subjekte selber.’ (Luther, 1992)

human praxis of faith as a legitimate source of theological reflection. Individuals, groups, and cultural producers all offer such a praxis, sometimes in the form of God-talk, in which they deal with transcendence and relate to the holy. I want to take such praxes seriously.

## 2. TRAUMA AND THEOLOGY

In this perspective to practical theology, we have chosen trauma as a key notion for several reasons. The first is that the programme has the specific intention to cater for the needs of students who come from parts of the world where trauma is usually part of everyday life. Our international students come from Africa with its high rates of crime and HIV/AIDS and histories of recent warfare, from Indonesia with its natural disasters and religious conflicts, and from countries like Birma/Myanmar, Vietnam, and so on. Dutch students involved in the programme focus on issues like domestic and sexual violence as well as international themes. When one looks at issues like these, we must conclude that our western societies are to no less degree defined by violence and trauma, even if everyday life is in many ways much more comfortable. A representative study in The Netherlands found that some 45 % of participants had suffered domestic violence for a significant time, and some 30 % of participants mentioned significant consequences in relationships and self-esteem. The focus on trauma for our programme places these massive experiences at the root of our theological reflection. In doing so, we take trauma and violence not as the strange exceptions to an otherwise 'nice' world. This is perhaps what we usually would want to do to preserve the illusion that the world we inhabit is a safe and nurturing environment. That illusion of course is important for our sense of comfort and security, but it comes at the price of marginalizing and eventually stigmatising the victims. After all, if we hold on to the idea that a peaceful and trauma-free world is the natural state of affairs, then victims and perpetrators automatically become the anomalies of our world view. We place trauma at the centre of attention in this programme, and acknowledge the experience of suffering. In a way, we thereby affirm the wisdom of the story of the Fall and of the most orthodox of doctrines: we don't live in the garden of Eden but in a dangerous and sometimes evil world.

This centrality of the experience of trauma (in the broad sense of crisis, violence, suffering) is reflected in the fact that it connects directly to a series of fundamental issues in theology. Also in that sense, a programme on trauma and theology is teaching that matters. A first theological issue is the question of suffering and theodicy. How can we make sense of painful experiences and still believe in a loving, caring and powerful God? Should we see our suffering as a punishment from God, a learning opportunity created for our spiritual growth, a chance for mystical union with the suffering Lord, or is it a meaningless event in which God is either absent or present only to comfort us? Such questions cut to the heart of our understanding of God. We have to discuss the doctrines of the nature and person of God, not in the form of abstract metaphysical speculations, but as the

metaphorical crystallization points of our life experiences (Doka, 2002), the complements of our existence of suffering and happiness. All we say about God is in one way or another also an interpretation of human life, and the focus on trauma and theology brings these connections to the fore.

A second theological issue immediately related to the theme is that of guilt and innocence, tragedy and malice. Traumatic experiences range from the painful but morally neutral contingencies of life to the evil wrongdoings committed by one person against another. The experiences of people suffering from natural disasters like a tsunami or volcano eruption or from small disasters like perinatal death are theologically – and perhaps also psychologically – quite different from victims of crime or warfare or sexual abuse. In the first case, our major questions lie in the realm of theodicy and comfort, but in the second case, we have to discuss evil and guilt. More specifically, in the first case, which I would label as tragic, we encounter victims, but no perpetrators. In the second case, which I call malicious, we have to deal with both positions. Obviously, in many cases the distinction is not that easily made. Even in the case of natural disasters one can ask whether human actions may be directly or indirectly causing the tragedy, as Al Gore's *inconvenient truth* seeks to demonstrate. And on the other hand, even clear acts of malice may be traced back to the tragic circumstances of a perpetrator's youth. Reality is never that simple. Still, the conceptual difference between the two is important (Ganzevoort, in press). Whether or not someone can be identified as being guilty has great impact on how victims deal with their situation. A theological reflection on this point immediately brings to mind that the Christian tradition has a strong inclination to the topic of guilt, but almost exclusively in the sense that we humans are guilty and depend on God for receiving forgiveness. The victims of this guilt of ours usually find themselves in a theological cul-de-sac. There is a theology for sinners to be sure, but the theology for victims is less developed, except for the more recent, militant, and contested theologies of liberation based on race, class, gender, or sexual orientation. But usually these theologies are better at expressing their own voice and affirming their autonomy and dignity, than at articulating their being a victim.

This observation leads us directly to questioning the meaning of the central stories of the Christian tradition: cross and resurrection. It is fascinating to consider that at the root of Christianity is a story of traumatization, directly connected to the question of oppression and/or guilt. The theological question at stake is how the suffering of Jesus relates to our suffering, how his victimization relates to our victimization, and how his resurrection may relate to a possible new life for us as well. If we learn to look at matters not only from the perspective of the sinner, but also of the victim, then many stories appear in a completely different light. The suffering of Jesus then may be read as an affirmation of solidarity with victims, and the Eucharist may be interpreted as not only salvation for the guilty, but also for the wounded that share in the brokenness of the body. Attention for trauma instead of sin creates space for these interpretations.

A third theological issue regards the centrality of forgiveness and reconciliation. Closely related to the traditional interpretation of the cross, there has been a strong conviction that we should forgive those who trespass against us, just as God would forgive us our trespasses. We can even interpret the biblical material as stating that the forgiveness we offer is conditional for the forgiveness we want to receive. This traditional message can be heard from many pulpits, but is as difficult for victims of traumatization as it is convenient for perpetrators. In cases of severe trauma, the victim is psychologically damaged and often simply not capable of forgiving unless some healing has occurred. For forgiveness it is essential that one is able to give without fear, to realistically assess self and others, and to empathize with the other person. These capacities may be damaged in the case of traumatization (Gartner, 1992). That means that our common theology of forgiveness asks victims to do something they cannot do. There are many examples of inappropriate calls for forgiveness and reconciliation, based on a lack of understanding of trauma, and on a lack of critical reflection on biblical stories.

These three themes are just examples. We could add other linkages to for example theological anthropology, to the theology of the body and sexualities, to the interaction of religion and violence and the question whether God has a violent side as well, and especially to ecclesiology, where it boils down to the questions of inclusion versus exclusion and acceptance versus judgement or grace versus holiness. The contemporary Anglican controversy over homosexuality is a wonderful yet bitter example. We find that in focusing on the issue of trauma and victimization, all these theological issues are brought to the table. A programme on trauma and theology is far removed from the comfort zone and its challenges its participants and lecturers to critique what they took for granted and to contest what they were happy to believe. We find that especially students from other parts of the world and from orthodox protestant or evangelical backgrounds sometimes find it rather difficult to take this critical stance toward what counts for them as absolute and revelational truth. That is why we dedicate a lot of attention to hermeneutical questions. Teaching that matters is also teaching that challenges.

### 3. CONSEQUENCES FOR TEACHING

What does all this mean for teaching courses on trauma and theology. I will highlight some of the educational choices of our teaching. I was involved in a small-scale international master programme – that we like to see growing, so please take some leaflets – and in post academic courses for chaplains in health care and in the armed forces. Let me describe them a little bit, so that you can see what we are doing. The post academic courses with a course load of 150 hours offer a combination of literature study, lectures on psychological and theological themes, and assignments for reflection on personal and work experiences. We start with a general introduction in trauma theory and ask participants to reflect on the emotional impact of watching stories of traumatized people. This way, they are forced to make a connection between their own life story and the experiences of the people they are to counsel. What we try to avoid is an approach based on

curiosity and purely academic distance. At the same time, we focus on academic reflection and formal theory, because we also want to avoid simple intuitive or emotional responses. In sum, we challenge the participants to move between their inner emotional responses, their cognitive grasp of theory, and the development of a professional attitude toward the people they work with. The psychological themes addressed in this course are trauma theory, the dynamics of intimate partner violence, transcultural aspects of traumatization and of counselling, and the effects that working with traumatized people has on the counsellor. Theological themes are the meaning of trauma as identity threat and identity marker, developing the metaphor of stigmata as sacraments, forgiveness and reconciliation, and the intrinsic relation between religion and violence. The aim of these theological contributions is to challenge these chaplains to use their theological knowledge in a more profound and creative way. The further aim is to strengthen the professional theological identity of chaplains, helping them move away from the dilemma between a confessional identity that is meaningless to many people they work with and a wannabe therapeutic role in which they will always be amateurs and finally lose their *raison d'être*. Many pastors experience a wide gap between their practical work and their theological knowledge and they lack the skills and the procedures to make the connection. If they attempt to make a theological interpretation, they feel that it is either irrelevant to the situation, or overpowering the people they work with. We try to develop ways in which the theological material in the stories of counselees can be the basis for new and more adequate theological interpretations. Often we hear that this is indeed a novel experience.

In the masters programme, a one-year 60 ECTS curriculum, we have the same intentions although we follow a different route. As we are in our third year and adapting it to some organizational changes, this presentation offers a preliminary curriculum structure that serves to highlight the principles. The students are partly Dutch and range from young students who have just finished their bachelors and not yet had any work experience to older students with a professional bachelors and years of experience in pastoral care that they want to reflect on in their masters. The foreign students have at least a bachelors and sometimes a local masters degree and usually several years of pastoral experience. The programme starts with a 7 ECTS module on hermeneutics, in which the differences in background are articulated and a foundation is laid for critical theological inquiry. This module brings together students in all theological disciplines, and it contains both general elements and particular aspects of practical theological hermeneutics. The second module is also a joint one, focused on the theme of sacred texts and human dignity. In this module, there are some specific readings for the students of this trauma-programme. The third module is on empirical research methodology. Although the main emphasis is on the research process, supporting the students to develop their own research proposal for their masters thesis, we also discuss empirical studies on trauma. This module also includes an exposure in which the students reflect on real life confrontation with issues of traumatization. In the fourth module, we focus on the interaction of religion, trauma, and coping.



The content of this module is comparable to the post academic course I described earlier. It serves as the conceptual core of the programme. The fifth module then relates this core to different domains of practice, in which the student can choose between counselling, education, ritual/preaching, health care, army chaplaincy, and so on. We aim at tailoring this module to the needs and interests of the individual student. The remaining time is devoted to studying literature on the topic of the thesis, doing research, and writing the thesis.

The educational principles underlying the programme can be described as praxis oriented, student-centred, and experience near. By calling the programme *praxis oriented*, we claim that the whole theological curriculum should be governed by a clear focus on the praxis of faith. That does not mean that there is only room for practical theology, or that we are constantly focused on professional training, but that every discipline has to articulate its relevance for the praxis of faith. Of course we take pride in research projects of a more or purely academic nature, but even then the question of relevance must be answered. Our whole curriculum asks for this kind of relevance, from the first module on bachelors level, which is called 'exploring the religious praxis' to the masters level. In this programme on trauma, the orientation on praxis is present in every module. We want students to acquire and develop a strong theoretical basis, but also a strong practical orientation. The notion of *student-centred* implies that the learning process of the student is the decisive factor in the programme, not the teaching content offered by the lecturer. We focus on process in our teaching approach, and develop our modules with the learning styles and steps of the students in mind. That is one of the reasons we combine exposures, assignments, literature, discussions, and lectures in such a way that the students are challenged to grow, mature, and integrate the different learning elements. The idea of *experience-near*, finally, has to do with our conviction that religion and trauma need both academic distance and personal involvement. We invite students to reflect on their personal experiences by writing an autobiographical essay and reflecting on how their role as a pastor or educator is shaped by their personal experiences. Furthermore, we confront them with stories and images and challenge them to develop more existential learning modes.

#### 4. AND BACK TO PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

By means of conclusion, I want to return to the questions regarding the profile of practical theology. In the International Academy of Practical Theology, we are developing structures to accommodate three rather different discourses that are going on. These three represent different questions asked, different purposes served and different audiences addressed. The first is practical theology and ministry formation. The prime reference group here is the church, and the theological research and curriculum are devoted to this, for example in focusing on skills and the role of the minister. The second is practical theology and empirical research. Here the reference is to the forum of the university and there is a strong emphasis on methodology. The third is practical theology and

liberating practice. In this discourse the target is society and the central notions are issues of liberty, justice, ecology, and the like. The method is more critical and political, intertwined with action, and the intention is to change the world. In the distinctions between the three, you may recognize – be it with a twist – David Tracy’s (1981) three audiences of society, church, and academe. You may also recognize Rick Osmer’s (1997) description of different rationalities at work in our practical theologies.

I believe that we need all three in the further development of our discipline. More specifically, I believe that in teaching practical theology, we need to bring these three together, because practical theology operates precisely on the interface of the three. Scholars may find their natural habitat in one of them, but they have to teach students to make the connection. In our programme we have the clear intention to do that. We take a critical perspective of liberating practice, we focus strongly on empirical research and state of the art psychology, and we train students to become more effective ministers, educators, and counsellors. In other words, we try to teach our students the kind of theology that we desired ourselves. A theology that matters.

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