

Practical Theology and Religious Pluralism

Possibilities and challenges for teaching.

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The fact that we are discussing religious pluralism as an issue for practical theology is in itself an interesting phenomenon. When I was studying theology, only twenty years ago, religious pluralism was a topic for missiology, and practical theology was closely knit to the practices of and in the church. Fortunately I had a chance to take a minor in missiology next to my major in pastoral psychology, because religious pluralism and dialogue had always been part of my experience. I had lived in different areas of the Netherlands as well as in Surinam, South America, where my friends would be Muslim, Hindu, Catholic, Protestant, or just nothing. And in each group, there might be radical fanatics as well as relativists. As an adolescent, I became involved in evangelism with a local Youth for Christ-group, but I also attended Hare Krishna meetings, and loved it. But when it came to studying theology, everything seemed to be reduced to an 'us' and 'them', with 'us' being Christian, church, and practical theology, and 'them' being people of other or no faiths. And of course, the challenge would be to make them join us.

When I look at my present situation, a lot has changed. Religious pluralism has become an inevitable part of our situation, and theological education cannot avoid that or limit it to a course on world religions, missiology, or something like that. Put simply: religious pluralism is the most prominent characteristic of the world we – and our students – live in. That is not only the case for people in religious studies. Even in isolated seminaries students will have to deal with a religious world that is fragmented, contested, and pluralist. My own institution, VU university, is a case in point. Traditionally a self-consciously reformed institution, it is by now the most multicultural and multireligious university in the Netherlands. The faculty of theology is no exception. We still have a significant number of students from mainline reformed churches, but they are now studying together with large groups of Baptists and Pentecostals, liberal Mennonites and ultra-conservative protestants, Muslims, non-religious persons, solo-religious individuals with interests in traditions like Buddhism or Wicca and sometimes a background in Roman Catholicism, and we hope to start programs for Hindu spiritual caregivers and others. The faculty has indeed

changed quite dramatically, and we are trying hard to develop a theological and pedagogical concept that fits our situation.

Not all my colleagues agree, but I think that we cannot continue with the classical approach in which theology is fundamentally reflection from a specific religious point of view. This approach does not account enough for the pluralist situation we are in, even if you would allow for a variety of theologies in peaceful coexistence. We could do that of course, offer protestant theology, Muslim theology, Baptist theology and so on, and we have indeed courses to that respect. The problem is, however, that it is increasingly difficult to make that kind of general distinctions. More and more students have broader interests or even affiliations than to be placed in one program. Some are Pentecostal Protestants, others are Catholic Buddhists, Secular Muslims, or Reformed Wiccans. As far as practical theology includes preparation for a particular ministry, it is by no means clear what that would mean for our so different students. And in each form of ministry, inside and outside a religious community, they would be working with people of any or no faith.

Alternatively, we could turn the whole curriculum into a more neutral form of religious studies. This would solve the problem of affiliations, and we have – again – courses in religious studies. We did not opt, however, for neutrality, nor did we limit our studies to the official views and rituals of the recognized world religions. What we try to develop is an approach to the study of religion that is both theology and religious studies or neither. That is, we don't accept a watershed distinction between the two. It seems to me that the polarization is declining and that it is better now to speak of a continuum than of two different perspectives or disciplines.

We take as our starting point the view that every student – every individual and group for that matter – has a position on religion, a way of relating to the sacred, ultimate meaning or whatever. We expect students to explore their personal perspective, experiences, views, behaviors, and relations in a continuous awareness that they live all this in a pluralist situation. One reason for doing so is the fact that in many parts of the world, but certainly in my context, religion is deinstitutionalized and mediated. Traditional religious institutions have been in decline for a long time and renewed interest in spirituality does little to change that. By consequence, religion can no longer be equated with recognized traditions, if ever it could. Instead we find religious forms of all kinds, heavily influenced by media, commercial and political organizations, and so on. Individuals are forced to pick and choose and follow the heretical imperative (Berger).

This asks for a form of dialogical theology, but not in the sense that we first teach students a particular theological content and then invite them to bring that into dialogue with people of other or no faith. Instead we expect them to start with the dialogue and then invite them to deepen that by means of theological reflection. Or even more: we expect them to take seriously the

dialogues they are already part of. Obviously this is a major challenge for us teachers, and we disagree often about how to deal with this. We have a full specter of traditions on board; some colleagues work in a classical theological style, others in the mode of neutral religious studies, and still others in the kind of dialogical theology I am advocating. In that sense, as colleagues we also have to learn to develop the theological dialogue we want our students to learn, and this paper serves not only to share with you how I am trying to find my way, but also to enter into discussion with my colleagues at home.

Example: a course on rituals

But let me move to a very concrete example of the kind of teaching I have in mind. It is the opening session of the introductory course on practical theology. This is a course for first-year undergraduates, most of whom come from different protestant backgrounds (I would like to see the whole variety of students involved in this course, and I have had some experience, but unfortunately that is not yet the normal case). The course focuses on rituals, because that allows us to explore many different aspects of religious praxis, like tradition, religious leaders or ministers, congregations, and the individual believer. I work with many different examples, including formal rituals like the Eucharist and idiosyncratic rituals in pastoral care.

For the opening session however, we turn to an internet site, www.petloss.com. It is a wonderful place packed with poems, stories, pictures of loving pet-owners. You would find a memorial text like "Fatty, 04/2009. i miss my baby fatty. she was the best fattest hamster ive ever had and i miss her so! :] i would love to see her again, but sadly cant... i live her! RIP fatty (other hamsters too!) Allison Dennise Castillo". There are prayer requests, like "Paris Dog 10 years Confused over changes in his life also suffering from hip dysplasia and hot spots Carrie". Or: "Abby Min. Poodle 06/05/93 My baby girl is blind, deaf, and tired. her and i both need prayers-this is too hard... Lindsay". There are testimonies and mythic stories that tell us our pets, or fur-babies, are waiting at the rainbow bridge, just this side of heaven, for their special person to comfort them and cross the bridge together. There are even 9/11 actualizations of the stories, tapping into the contemporary reality.

And then there is the Monday evening candle ceremony. A healing ritual, it says, across the globe, performed offline or in the website's chatroom at 9PM central time. The ritual comes with an FAQ that advises: "The Ceremony typically involves the lighting of three candles. A three-wick candle is also fine. And if you only have one candle, that is fine as well. If you are allergic to candles or have none, simply turning on an extra lamp is also fine. The idea is to send out light to our furbabies who have gone to the Bridge, and whatever is available to you is perfectly fine. If you do have candles, you will want to gather those, as well as something to light them with. The Ceremony can be very emotional for many, so having tissues close at hand is also advisable." The ceremony itself contains something like a sermon and a song, but the central part is a ritual, in which

three candles are lit, one for your personal furbaby, one for furbabies or bridgekids of friends and family, and one "In honor of all the homeless, forgotten, abandoned, abused animals. For the nameless furchildren who gave their lives for others, for research and as a result of humankind's inhumanity. May the Higher Powers that be forgive the cruelty." The ceremony is closed with blessings based in part on the beatitudes, and with a prayer to the "Gentle spirit" and concluded with "Amen, Shalom".

Typically, exploring the website evokes strong responses from students. There may be laughter or disbelief at the vast number of contributions that seem to be all too serious. Some students become irritated that significant words from their religious tradition are used in what they see as vulgar ways. Immediately others jump in to explain how serious the death of a pet can be and to defend the right of people mourning such a loss to make use of religious forms. Sometimes I have to explain that this site is an example of religious praxis and as such pertinent to practical theology. Even those students preferring practical theology to be limited to preparation for church ministry are usually quick to admit that among their future parishioners some will probably be engaged in this kind of praxis. My role as a teacher is first to help them express these responses and understand responses by others. In a second step, we set out to clarify the different responses and categorize the issues involved.

We may for example embark on a debate about how churches offer inadequate pastoral care when it comes to the death of pets, or about ethical questions to the proportionality of attention for this grief compared to the nameless children dying in Darfur or elsewhere. There may be critiques of the 'theology' of the site and of the whole idea of a rainbow bridge and animals going to heaven or acting as guardian angels. We may even end up with the issue of whether or not evil is really acknowledged, given the fact that the animals represent the unambiguous good. Would there be a place on this website for a pitbull dog that has to be put down because it has killed a child? And if not, what kind of 'religion' is that when it cannot account for such ambivalences? Is it even religion at all?

Theology through dialogue

Ethics, dogmatics, psychology and sociology of religion, liturgics, pastoral care, theory of religion, biblical studies, anthropology of religion, philosophy, and other disciplines all prove to be relevant for our theological understanding of this religious praxis. It is not difficult then to explain students how the whole curriculum of theology or religious studies coheres and relates to practices like these. But my point is, that this learning experience takes off at the experience of dialogue in the classroom. The gut reaction of students is taken seriously as material pertinent to theological reflection. Whether or not they approve of or criticize what they encounter, there is a dialogue going on among the students and between the students and the internet ritual. It is not only a dialogue in which they express their theologies, but rather a dialogue that invites them to

become aware of the different theological issues and positions, including their own. It is a dialogue that assumes the praxis they encounter and their own reactions to be saturated with theological material that is often not articulated and not reflected upon. It is the dialogue itself that helps them explore all that.

In conclusion, let me try to lay out the theological and pedagogical underpinnings of this teaching approach. It is not just about the example, because I also use traditional lecturing as transferring information, assignments, readings and all. But the overall approach and perspective remains the same. Pedagogically, my approach focuses on the student as subject of the learning process. It is not the educator's intentions or views, nor the specific content that steers and structures the program, but the student's learning process. That does not make me neutral or mute, but my work is defined by what students can learn, not by what I can teach. In terms of religious pluralism specifically, this implies that I am not focused on teaching them a theology that they can use when they enter a religiously plural situation, but on fostering their growth when they are experiencing that pluralism. And for that reason, a religiously and otherwise plural student body is a wonderful pedagogical asset.

When I talk about this with people, they usually understand the pedagogical benefits. They see problems, however, with the theological implications. If dialogue is everything, what about truth claims, revelation, etcetera? My response of course is that these are not and cannot be settled outside of the dialogue but are instead precisely what is at stake in the dialogue. The dialogues in our classroom, as well as in the real world, are precisely about that: what is true – and how do we know? What are the right and just things to do – and what justification do we have for that? And what moves us in terms of beauty and experience – and how do we value that? In other words, dialogues are precisely about the most normative of issues, the verum, bonum, pulchrum.

Does that make me a neutral teacher in the face of religious pluralism? Not at all. Not only am I myself positioned in a specific way, rooted in one tradition, exposed to some, but never familiar with all, I also have strong sentiments about all these normative issues myself. That is, in all sorts of ways, I am also a partner in the dialogue I want my students to learn. Moreover, I am a fierce believer in the rights of everyone, which includes my students, to develop their own theological voice and build their own narrative. I will do whatever it takes to foster their narrative freedom and competence, to help them grow towards religious authenticity and to do so in a communicative and dialogical way. To me, that is close to the heart of what theology can offer. Dialogue and religious pluralism, I would say are pedagogically speaking an asset, and theologically speaking a blessing.