

# Forks in the Road when Tracing the Sacred

## Practical Theology as Hermeneutics of Lived Religion

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### Abstract

The diversity within the discipline of practical theology is so large that it can accommodate many different contexts and challenges. The risk is, however, that it loses its coherence. Drawing on a range of recent introductions to practical theology and on ongoing discussions in the International Academy of Practical Theology, this paper tries to describe both the common ground and the major decision points (or forks in the road) where practical theologians diverge. The common ground is described as 'hermeneutics of lived religion', which marks the distinction from social sciences of religion on the one hand and other theological disciplines on the other. The forks in the road regard how broad the object is defined, how praxis and theological theory are related, how the researcher is positioned vis a vis the object, and how the primary audience is understood. This framework helps to clarify the complexities of the field and to position oneself in that field.

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The choice to engage in what is called practical theology has been much easier for me and much more self-evident than understanding what that thing 'practical theology' actually was. I remember quite vividly the confusion when I started to encounter the myriads of definitions, approaches, themes, motives, and objects of study that all went under the big umbrella of practical theology. What I had expected to be primarily practical turned out to be a highly complex network of networks of meanings and theories, actions and practices, relationships and conversations. That memory helps me sympathize with students working through their bewilderment when they move into the broad field of practical theology. If they do, of course. A sizeable group of students, practitioners and even scholars is hardly bothered by this hotchpotch I have come to enjoy. They have found their path through the forest, often initiated by their own teachers. They follow the tracks they know so well, and consider that to be the only legitimate way of doing practical theology. They are not so much inspired by the multitude of possibilities as they are bemused or irritated that others in practical theology use the same name for a whole different game. Sometimes, I confess, I am one of those. I have my own preferences and at times I find it rather annoying that not everybody agrees. Not just for my sake, but for the sake of the discipline that seems to lack a common object, method, and aim, and therefore risks not being a discipline at all. Wouldn't it be better if we could find common concepts, methodological consensus, and standard theories to work with? And of course, wouldn't it be better if you all were to adopt the road I prefer? On my better days, however, I not only understand the muddled reality of our field, but I appreciate its inevitability and even value its richness. I intend this to be one of my better days, so I will not try to make a case for any particular approach to practical theology. I rather want to suggest that there are shared features that mark the identity of the field, but also parameters on which we all make different choices. Together these parameters define the many shapes practical theology takes and it may be useful to identify some of these

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parameters. I will do so drawing on the many contributions during this and other conferences as well as on two dozen recent introductions or textbooks in practical theology.<sup>2</sup> The issues that I address in this presentation were developed inductively from the engagement with all this material.

## Shifting contexts

I have been doing this exercise not only in our International Academy, but also in my own university. Using that as a case study may help you appreciate what I am aiming at. Notwithstanding a strong reformed heritage, my university has become perhaps a culturally and religiously more diverse university. Until a couple of years ago, we were one of the centers of formation for ministers in the mainline reformed church. When that ended – primarily because the church had to reduce its number of centers to keep in pace with a declining need of ministers and a reduction of available students – our faculty started to evolve to become inter-, post-, or nondenominational. We now train in theology and religious studies and embedded in our faculty are seminaries for one of the most orthodox protestant churches, for the very liberal Dutch Mennonites, for the evangelical Baptists and Pentecostals, for Muslim hospital chaplains, and there are more to come, including Hindus. In that new situation, we practical theologians had to reinvent ourselves and explain to others our place in the faculty. In earlier days, the primary task of practical theologians was to offer ministry formation. As a result, there was a strong orientation on the church: courses and research were organized along the lines of the various classical tasks of the minister, and there was a preference for publications written for the audience of practitioners. Needless to say that all lecturers were themselves a member of our most important customer, the mainline protestant church and most were ordained ministers. Now that this close connection had been severed, some said or thought, there was less need for practical theologians. Even when new groups and seminaries joined our faculty, they usually brought their own staff especially for the aspect of formation, and thus primarily practical theologians. And when it came to the Muslim programs, there would be parallel or even integrated courses, but it was not clear that those should be called practical theology. By consequence, the faculty was tempted to focus more on general courses, less ecclesial, less normative, less spiritual. But precisely those dimensions were traditionally the hallmark of theology in general and of practical theology in particular. What then could practical theology be in that new context?

This question is not reserved for a faculty like where I am. It is, I would say, one of the key questions for practical theology in a changing world. The face and structure of religion are changing, and theology, even more practical theology, has to respond to those changes. How can we account for the dramatically increased contacts beyond our own religious group that we usually describe with words like globalization (Reader 2008), ecumenism (Hastings 2007), and multiculturalism? What are the effects of secularization and deinstitutionalization for a discipline that tended to be focused on the in some contexts declining institutionalized community of believers (Ward 2008)? And what does it mean for a discipline that for a long time fostered the professionalization of ministers and other church leaders to encounter a culture that is increasingly critical towards any kind of authority in religious matters? And perhaps the questions are still phrased too much in a European or at least Western way. One might also ask how a discipline that was deeply enmeshed in colonial structure and culture can be redeemed and reclaimed to account for the experiences and issues of the marginalized and subaltern voices (Andrews 2002, Moessner 2008). Or better: how the work of many practitioners and

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<sup>2</sup> The introductions or textbooks include Anderson 2001, Andrews 2002, Ballard & Pritchard 2006, Bass & Dykstra 2008, Beaudoin 2008, Dinter, et al. 2007, Floristán 2002, Forrester 2000, 2005, Graham 2009, Hastings 2007, Immink 2005, Mette 2005, Moessner 2008, Möller 2004, Osmer, R.R. 2008, Parmentier 2008, Pattison 2007, Reader 2008, de Ruijter 2005, Smith 2007, Swinton & Mowat 2007, Veling 2005, Ward 2008, Woodward & Pattison 2000.

scholars in such contexts can be acknowledged as being practical theology in actu? The questions abound and we have to engage with them time and again because we cannot escape the tensions that are intrinsic to the discipline. We may choose different roads, but it is the same dilemmas that made us choose in the first place.

## Common ground

I want to start exploring these forks in the road by searching for some common ground. There is after all some kind of family resemblance that makes us recognize all these approaches as varieties of one group of activities called practical theology. We might even recognize it when it runs by different names, like pastoral theology, public theology, contextual theology, spiritual theology, empirical theology, liberation theology, psychology of religion, and so on. To be precise: I am not claiming that all those are in fact practical theology, but there is at least a certain overlap which means that some endeavor given one of those names might just as well be called practical theology in another context. When it is indeed a family resemblance structure, then there is not one single aspect that defines any activity as practical theology. It is instead a collection of features of which a few or more may be present. Some would say that practical theology can be recognized by its strategic outlook, others by its critical normativity, still others by its conversation with practitioners or with social sciences, by its bridging of biblical themes with contemporary issues, or by the fact that it is performed by people who are themselves believers. And yet for each of these I can find examples of practical theologians whose work does not qualify on all these criteria. I want to suggest that the common ground be found in a description of practical theology as the hermeneutics of lived religion. In one way or other, this description seems to fit what we are doing and the three constitutive terms together form the heart of practical theology.

## RELIGION

The first term that anchors our discipline is religion. However else we define it, practical theology has to do with religion. I am aware that some find this term too general, objectifying, or anthropological and they tend to replace it by for example faith. Others define religion as institutional by nature and prefer a term like spirituality. Still others want to limit the playing field to Christianity. All these preferences belong to the forks in the road in my view and despite the debates they can be subsumed under the notion of religion. In this context, I would define religion as the transcending patterns of action and meaning embedded in and contributing to the relation with the sacred. This is primarily a functional definition, aiming at maximum pliability so that we can account for new and different forms of religion. The core of the definition, however, is the relation with the sacred, which is not an endlessly open concept. Without going too deep into those waters, for me the notion of the sacred at least implies that it is a center around which one's life gravitates and a presence that evokes awe and passion. Often this is determined by the cultural context in which one lives and modeled by a religious tradition. In individual cases it may be something idiosyncratic that most people would not consider religious. The reason I champion this type of definition is that I want to avoid two errors in the study of religion. One is the false negatives on the side of newer forms of religion that are easily excluded if we base our definition on traditional forms. The other is the false positives in which traditional forms of adherence count as religious even when there is in fact little transcending or relation with the sacred. So I take religion as the transcending patterns of action and meaning embedded in and contributing to the relation with the sacred. That is in my view the core subject matter of practical theology. It is not all practical theology engages with. We may study organizational and psychological structures, social issues, and much more, but in the end each project in practical theology focuses on religion, either on the level of the phenomena we study or on the level of theological reflection about these phenomena. If there is no religious component at all, it would be hard to call it practical theology.

## LIVED

The second term qualifies this further by speaking of lived religion (Failing & Heimbrock 1998). As I see it, the study of religion, theology included, works with three different types of material, with three corollary approaches and disciplines. The first material is 'text', by which I do not mean just anything written, but the textual sources of a religious tradition. This material is central to the 'religions of the book', but it is also pertinent to the major eastern religions. Whether these texts are taken as direct revelation or as the reflection of centuries of wisdom regarding the sacred, the main question here is what the text is trying to say and how we can understand that in relation with other texts, with our beliefs about the divine, and with human experience. The methods used originate mainly from linguistic and literary scholarship and the discipline is usually called biblical theology, Qu'ranic theology or something similar. The second material is 'idea', the conceptual and/or doctrinal structures that seek to express what we can and cannot think and say about the relation with the divine. The main question is whether certain views of the professed religious tradition are tenable in relation with each other, with human experience, and with textual backgrounds from the sources of the religious tradition. The methods are primarily philosophical and the discipline is called for example systematic theology. The third material is 'praxis' or lived religion, the actions and meanings operant in the ways humans live, interact and relate to the divine. The main question is what happens and how we can live life more adequately in relation to the sources of religious tradition and to the ideas about the divine. The methods here stem primarily from social sciences and pedagogy, and the discipline is called practical theology.

These three, biblical, systematic, and practical theology have formed the structure of theology through the ages. The adjectives in their names thus do not refer to a quality of the discipline that misses out in the others – unbiblical, unsystematic, and impractical theology – but to the nature of the subject matter central to the discipline. There has been discussion about other disciplines, notably history, but I would say that historical theology is not formally a different discipline but the chronological dimension of the other three.<sup>3</sup> It usually focuses again on text, idea, or praxis. It should be further noted that each of these three immediately relates to the other two. There is no text without ideas or praxis behind it, in it and evoked by it; no idea without sources and repercussions in praxis; no praxis without sources and inherent ideas. That is what holds theology (or the study of religion) together, even when the materials and methods necessarily diverge. The study of religion works with religious sources, professed religious tradition, and lived religion. The contribution of practical theology starts with the exploration and understanding of lived religion, and religious sources like the bible and religious ideas like doctrines come into play insofar as they relate directly with praxis, often even emerging from the study of praxis. What counts as relevant praxis, and how the connection between theology and lived religion is thought, may differ and these differences result in major methodological diversity, but the focal point remains praxis or lived religion. When this is not the focus, it would be hard to call it practical theology.

## HERMENEUTICS

The third term is hermeneutics. Like the other terms this one may evoke major discussions about definition and confusion, but it nevertheless seems to be a powerful descriptor of the nature of a theological study of religion as compared to a primarily social-scientific, linguistic, or philosophical approach. The hermeneutical nature thus holds for the whole of theology, not only for practical theology. If I am correct, there are two approaches in the history of thinking about hermeneutics that until today define the field at least within practical theology. By stressing one or the other, different understandings emerge. The first is the classical focus on the relation between text and reader, leading to the identification of rules of interpretation or to a study of

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<sup>3</sup> See Farley (2001) for a description and critique of the development of the fourfold pattern in which history emerged as a fourth discipline 'without clear agreement about the nature of its subject matter or the basis of its importance' (79).

the interaction of tradition and experience. The second is the broader approach that stresses the process of human interpretation, thereby placing existential themes at the center of investigation. In the first, practical theology moves closer to the religious tradition, church, and biblical or systematic theology. In the second it may align more with social sciences and the broad realm of worldviews and religions. In practical theology, we study the field of lived religion in a hermeneutical mode, that is, attending to the most fundamental processes of interpreting life through endless conversations in which we construct meaning. These conversations not only include exchanges with our fellow humans, but also with the traditions that model our life. This exchange with tradition, with all its interpretive power and normative claims, eventually aims at a more profound and more adequate spiritual life.

Put differently, we study religion – and for us lived religion – as theologians. Our approach is eventually always a theological one. That should not be equated with confessional, Christian, or anything like that, which is why I prefer the more general term ‘hermeneutical’. For me that word indicates that we want to understand lived religion from its own characteristics and in light of its own understandings and intrinsic normativity. We do not study religion as merely a psychological, sociological, or cultural phenomenon – even though those may be the entrance points for many investigations – but as a religious phenomenon. When I work together with psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists, I constantly find that there is subtle but defining difference between us. In the end, they are interested in for example the psychological processes, the social backgrounds and consequences, or the cultural make-up in and behind a religious experience. I am ultimately interested in the relation with the divine itself. It is the encounter with or experience of the sacred that I am trying to understand. For me theology is the discipline that discerns, describes, interprets, explains, evaluates, and helps to construct the ways people speak about God – theo-logia – to God, and experience being spoken to by God. For me theology is tracing the sacred.

## Tracing the sacred

When I use the word ‘tracing’, that is not only because it sounds so well in combination with sacred. It is especially because of the more than adequate meanings it carries. The first is the archaic meaning of traversing or travelling over a certain area. The second involves meanings like following or tracking the footprints of someone or something, like when on a hunt. Metaphorically, it can be transposed to study something in detail, like the history of an idea, the whereabouts of money moving around the world, or one’s ancestry. It may also refer to the search for traces, signs, evidence, or remains of something that indicate a certain activity or presence. Tracing then has to do with reconstructing and developing knowledge. The last type of meanings has to do with drawing or sketching. It may be the careful forming of letters or figures or even certain kinds of decoration, but usually it is a form of copying by hand through a transparent sheet. Here tracing has to do with constructing, modeled after an external reality.

### TRAVELLING

I want to suggest that all these meanings are relevant to describe practical theology as tracing the sacred. I especially like the first, archaic meaning of travelling. It suggests that practical theology is itinerant scholarship, which resembles more the roaming through a forest of explorers who enjoy the scenery than the planned building on solid ground based on the work of others before us. This is no plea for unsystematic fuzziness and lack of method. It is an acknowledgment that practical theology belongs to humanities. Unlike natural and to a degree social sciences, the acquisition of knowledge is not simply cumulative, but more often circular. We revisit places we have seen before and repeat old questions to consider old and new answers. We hardly ever establish absolute facts nor develop many robust theories with long term impact. Probably that is a weakness of our discipline that we have to address, but it also has to do with the fact that our scholarly work is itself interpretive by definition as much as the phenomena we study. Neither the human interaction with the sacred nor our analysis of that

interaction can be tied securely to previous knowledge but it remains self-critical and open to what is new and unexpected. Even our definitions are more itineraries to travel in a constantly shifting world than fixed maps of unchanging areas (Tweed 2006). When we do theology, we travel the realm of the sacred, trying to understand what is happening there, and letting ourselves be affected by what and whom we encounter. This is why Josuttis (1996) describes ministry as 'guidance in the hidden and forbidden zone of the sacred'. The guide is not an omniscient narrator, but a fellow traveler. In that sense, theology itself can even become a spiritual practice in its own right (Beaudoin 2008).

## FOLLOWING

Tracing as following first takes up this spiritual dimension by referring to the ways in which practical theologians may want to follow faithfully in the footsteps of God (Veling 2005). Discipleship would be a proper description of this approach in which the theologian tries to grasp what God had intended in light of the promises of the Kingdom – to use biblical language for a moment. In words of St. Paul: "Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect; but I press on, if it is so that I may take hold of that for which also I was taken hold of by Christ Jesus. Brothers, I don't regard myself as yet having taken hold, but one thing I do. Forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12-14). This sense of following the way of God is the second meaning of tracing the sacred.

## STUDYING

Tracing as studying in detail suggests that we try to discern and analyze evidence or remains of the sacred. We are reminded of course of the Augustinian notion of the *vestigia Dei* (or more precisely: *vestigia Trinitatis*), the traces of God that could be perceived in this natural order and in the human interior life. They are understood as fingerprints, or – better still – footprints of God, marks left where God appeared or acted. Augustine felt that the presence and recognition of the traces of God are possible only because of the previous revelatory-salvific action of God, but that is too speculative for me. Theologically, we need to be careful not to imply God's presence in the traces we perceive and still appreciate the traces for what they are. Transcendence after all means that God may have left traces, but that we never know whether traces we find are traces of God. All we have is signals or cues that religious people take to be a trace of divine presence and activity. When we are tracing the sacred, we do so as a second order activity: we follow and scrutinize the details of how people perceive traces of the sacred. That is, we try to trace down the sacred indirectly in a reconstructive and empirical mode.

## SKETCHING

Tracing as sketching finally suggests that we try not only to copy the religious reality and experience, but also model or even decorate it. Put metaphorically, we try to transpose the original image of the sacred on the hopefully transparent world we live in. Tracing the sacred is envisioning and developing a world in which we can live faithfully. In doing so, practical theology aims at changing the world. Tracing the sacred then is a constructive mode of doing theology, even when done only in sketchy, essayistic way, in what Duncan Forrester (2005) called 'theological fragments'.

Traveling, following, studying, or sketching; practical theology is tracing the sacred in spiritual, empirical-reconstructive, and critical-constructive modes. I am not suggesting that these four meanings of the word 'tracing' should be connected one to one to different styles in practical theology. I would rather say that all practical theology is in some way or at some point traveling, following, studying, and sketching. Practical theology is tracing the sacred in the sense that we study the hermeneutics of lived religion by wandering its uncharted and changing territory, by being faithful to what is sacred to us, by analyzing how people relate to the divine, and by trying to change the world.

## Forks in the road

I have suggested thus far that there is common ground in practical theology as the hermeneutics of lived religion or as tracing the sacred. In describing that common ground however, I have been quite open to a wide variety of interpretations of the most central terms I have chosen. This may be a shortcoming of my description, or an indication of its capacity to integrate such diverse samples of practical theology. At least it offers a starting point to describe the forks in the road while we are tracing the sacred, that is, the choices we make in how we understand our task. If we find ourselves choosing different roads, it is helpful to identify the dilemmas where our choices are demanded.

For my contribution today, I want to address four – interlocking – forks in the road that seem rather pertinent and that appeared in the various presentations of our conference and in the different recent introductions to practical theology that I had a chance of collecting. The first regards the demarcation of the object of our studies and involves the question whether we should limit ourselves to clearly Christian phenomena and interpretations or take a principled broader view of religions and world views. The second regards the methodology, more specifically the question how praxis and theology are connected. The third regards the researcher and the question whether the researcher is expected to be believer, a practitioner and/or a distanced observer. The fourth regards the audience and deals with the question whether we develop our discourse for church, society, or academia. These are not the only questions we wrestle with. There is the issue of balance between or combination of descriptive, normative, and strategic approaches in practical theology.<sup>4</sup> There is the choice between various subdisciplines like pastoral care, homiletics, religious education, congregational studies, etcetera. There is a choice between different forms of theological reflection (Graham, et al. 2005, Stone & Duke 2006, Whitehead & Whitehead 1980). But somehow these are often seen as complementing each other and seem less likely to lead to debate. In terms of my metaphor, these are not necessarily forks in the road, but rather a series of parallel and often intersecting pathways. For my reflections today I will focus on the real forks, the choices and dilemmas that easily divide the discipline. Together they define the manifold shapes of the discipline: object, method, researcher, and audience.

### Fork no. 1: the object

The first divisive issue regards the object, more specifically how broad we should take the field we study. Here we find quite some divergence. It is clear that the praxis or lived religion is at the center, but it is not clear which shapes of praxis are to be included. Here we can distinguish six concentric circles: office, church, faith, religion, culture, and society.<sup>5</sup>

#### ORDAINED MINISTRY

The smallest circle is a focus on church office and ordained ministry (Bass & Dykstra 2008). Firmly rooted in the history of theological education, and anchored in for example Schleiermacher's view of the theological curriculum (Moessner 2008), this clerical paradigm has been and still is the heart of many projects and courses in practical theology. Where most of the students are preparing for ministry, it is no coincidence that most of the courses focus on that as

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<sup>4</sup> Heitink (1999) distinguishes between the empirical, hermeneutical, and strategic circle in practical theological reasoning, in which the first resembles the descriptive, the second the normative and the interaction with tradition (and the most explicitly theological), and the third the strategic. Browning (1991) speaks of a descriptive, systematic and ethical, and strategic phase.

<sup>5</sup> De Ruijter (2005) describes the first four of these (office, church, faith, religion) and remarks that even those working with a very broad concept of religion usually do not cover other religions because of the theological complexity. In my discussion, I will however point to some examples of interreligious practical theology in the making.

well.<sup>6</sup> The whole structure of the subdisciplines in practical theology is in fact often based on the various tasks of the minister (hence the usual downplaying of diacony, politics, media, and finances). The clerical paradigm has received strong criticism (Farley 2001), but should not be abandoned completely given the needs of students (Miller-McLemore 2007).

## CHURCH

The second concentric circle is the focus on the church. Here the praxis is not limited to pastoral practice, but includes the ways in which the church as a whole functions in society. I think for many practical theologians this is the most important focus. Ray Anderson (2001, 32) speaks of '... the church, in its reflection on its existence as a missionary community'. Ballard & Pritchard (2006,18) describe the subject matter as 'The practice of the Christian community in the world'. Swinton & Mowat (2007,6) identify the core object as 'the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world'. The emergence of this circle beyond the clerical has led to newer subdisciplines like congregational studies, and a lot of important work is being done on this level, although the discussions about deinstitutionalization challenge its centrality (Streib 2007, Ward 2008). The question is how our practical ecclesiologies can adequately address new, temporary, partial, and virtual forms of community.

## FAITH

The third concentric circle is the focus on faith, as the subjectivized and individualized shape of religion (Failing & Heimbrock 1998). This is not only an interest in the individual, it is also an acknowledgement of the gap between individual faith and organized communities with their tradition. To understand how people live their lives and shape their relation with God, it is not enough to study the messages and forms of the church. In religious education and pastoral care, this awareness has a long history which resulted in many investigations in the particulars of individual lives and life issues. Practical theology then needs to concentrate on the relation between the human subject and God: faith (Immink 2005, see also many contributions to the study of faith development following the groundbreaking work of James Fowler 1981). In this vein Heitink (1999,6-7) identified the subject matter of practical theology as 'the mediation of Christian faith in the praxis of modern society'.

## RELIGION

The fourth concentric circle is the focus on religion. In our increasingly globalizing world, one can argue that we need to develop a practical theology that is not confined to one specific religion but seeks to understand the relation with the sacred in all its shapes and traditions. Examples of that broadening are already ventured in the fields of pastoral care (Schipani & Bueckert 2009), religious education (Sterkens 2001) and comparative studies in practical theology (Van der Ven, et al. 2005). Further insights may be drawn from cultural anthropology, religious studies, psychology of religion, and so on. The fundamental issue here is not just demarcation of the field, it is in the end the question whether Christian faith is unique or simply one religion among others. Related to that are the question to what degree and in what ways practical theology should accommodate this religious plurality (Knitter 1991) and how the practical theologian engages with traditions that are not his or her own.

## CULTURE

The fifth concentric circle is the focus on culture. Here the boundaries between religious and non-religious shapes are blurred in the acknowledgment that the distinction is highly contingent. The ways in which we structure our lives and societies, give meaning to what happens to us, symbolize what is important, and act accordingly may be framed in religious terms in one context and in non-religious terms in another, without necessarily different content or significance. When people say or doubt that Jesus is their savior, Obama their messiah, or soccer player Del Piero their God, these statements of faith may be completely different, or they

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<sup>6</sup> Examples can be found in Cahalan, et al. 2008, Heitink 1999, Möller 2004, Parmentier 2008

may have a similar character. The risk is of course to overinterpret cultural meanings as religious ones or to read traditional theological structures and contents into them. The praxis at stake is the cultural process of creating meaning and the challenge is to come to understand cultural shapes of religion and quasi-religion in their own right before confronting them with particular religious traditions (Cobb 2005, Ganzevoort in press, Lynch 2005, Vanhoozer, et al. 2007).

## SOCIETY

The sixth and final concentric circle is society at large. Here all the public, political, social, and psychological issues can be addressed, whether they are framed in religious terms or not. Woodward & Pattison (2000,8) conclude: 'Any issue that is of practical contemporary human and religious concern may become the focus for practical theological consideration.' Even when they accept that usually the focus is much more limited to church or ministry, they see no a priori reason why practical theology could not be this broad.

Obviously, if the phenomena we study are less explicitly religious – say: violence, poverty, gender inequality, economic crisis, ecology, pop music, marriage, childhood, disability – the reflection needs to be more explicitly religious in order to count as practical theology. The point remains however that the religious or religiously relevant praxis that is at stake in practical theological reflection can be as narrowly defined as ordained ministry or as broadly as culture and society. We may choose pragmatically, depending on the specific project we are working on. The real choice beneath that, however, defines how we understand practical theology.

## Fork no. 2: the method

The second fork in the road regards the methodology. I do not simply mean that the discipline of practical theology boasts a great variety of approaches and research methods (van der Ven & Ziebertz 1993, Osmer 2008). The more fundamental methodological question pertains to the role of praxis in practical theology and thus to its epistemic status. I see five different roles in practical theological literature, each resulting in specific demarcations of the field and specific aims to achieve: praxis may function as the object, source, telos, field, or forum.

## OBJECT

When praxis is the object of practical theology, we speak of empirical theology (van der Ven 1998, Dinter, et al. 2007). Here the religious praxis contains the material that needs to be investigated, but the theological categories, models and theories come from the religious and theological tradition. In that sense, tradition is the theological source from which we deduct the concepts that we bring to the phenomena. Usually this is done in a mutual critical correlation as described by Tracy (1981) and Browning (1991), which means that praxis also functions as a critical test of theological theories of the religious tradition.

## SOURCE

A related but different shape is found when praxis is the source of inductive practical theology. Here the theological and religious tradition may be useful for the interpretation of this praxis, but the true source or locus theologicus is praxis itself (Schmid 1998). Examples of this approach can be found in phenomenological research (Dinter, et al. 2007), liberationist approaches like feminist, womanist, black, queer, and other contributions from the marginalized (Graham 2009, Moessner 2008, Smith 2007), and cultural hermeneutics as in the study of popular culture (Gräb 2002). The praxis provides the material and categories that we need to construct theology. As a result, the theological tradition is critically examined to see how these subjective experiences are being highlighted or – more often – denied.

## TELOS

The third shape of practical theology takes praxis as its telos or the aim toward which everything is done. This is the case in what we can call critical theology. The praxis in church and society is studied with transformation of that praxis in mind. Tradition here serves as the source and norm for this critical reflection, which makes it the mirror of the source-approach. Both aim at critical reappraisal and transformation, but the telos-approach intends to transform practice, while the source-approach wants to transform the theological and religious tradition. Examples are found in forms of public theology (Forrester 2005, Storrar & Morton 2004), classic shapes of liberation theology (Andrews 2002), and several pastoral and pedagogical contributions (Swinton & Mowat 2007).

## FIELD

The fourth shape takes praxis as the field of practitioners who are already doing practical theology on the go and are in need of profound theological reflection. Tradition here again functions as source and norm, but the principal aim is to support the praxis of practitioners rather than transform a broader praxis. This is the kind of strategic practical theology that was outlined by Browning (1991) and that we find in many practical theological contributions (Ballard & Pritchard 2006, Bass & Dykstra 2008, Floristán 2002, Miller-McLemore 2007, Parmentier 2008). It may also function in the classical applicational style of practical theology. Practical theology devoted to this shape acknowledges that practitioners in congregations, mission, schools, chaplaincy and so on are to articulate and represent the message of faith in this world and need support that is deeply theological and very practical. To bridge the gap between academic theology and local practice is the task of practical theology.

## FORUM

The fifth shape takes praxis as the forum of practical theology. Here the praxis is primarily the ecclesial community, both on the local level and wider. This praxis is the conversational partner of practical theology and in this dialogue the questions are raised and possible responses evaluated. In this form of ecclesial theology, the religious tradition functions as source and in many ways also as the normative framework to govern practical theology. This not only binds the practical theologian to the tradition, usually there is also a strong tendency to sustain the status quo. Those most influential in the audience may have the strongest interest in maintaining power balances. At any rate, practical theologians have to justify their reflections and show how their proposals meet ecclesial criteria.

All these approaches to praxis have their merits and their downsides. Praxis as object allows for scholarly discourse that holds water in conversation with other sciences, but it easily objectifies the religious praxis and becomes irrelevant for participants and practitioners in that praxis. Praxis as source helps us see the intrinsic theological meanings in praxis, but easily overinterprets those meanings or loses the connection with the religious and theological tradition. Praxis as telos evokes critical analysis and constructive proposals, but easily becomes ivory tower arrogance. Praxis as field leads to high relevance in projects and publications, but easily supports status quo and ends up in offering tips and tricks. Praxis as forum binds practical theology to the religious community and an authoritative religious tradition, but easily denies the theologians task of critically examining that praxis. It is the critical combination of the five that keeps practical theology on track.

## Fork no. 3: the researcher

The third fork in the road regards the role of the theologian as researcher. The main question here is to what degree the theologian is expected to be a participant in the field she or he is investigating. Based on Ricoeurian hermeneutics, Jaco Dreyer (1998) has shown how the participant and observer perspective are dialectically connected in the work of practical theological research. In their actual projects, however, practical theologians tend to stress one or

the other. Taking an analogy from the realm of sports, I want to suggest that there are four roles in which we engage in research: the player, the coach, the referee, and the commentator.<sup>7</sup>

## PLAYER

The first role is the sports player. This is the person who actually engages in the game as a firsthand participant. In religion, this is the believer (and the non-believer), the participant in first order religious discourse (Ganzevoort 2004). This includes not only the trained theologian, but every believer (Stone & Duke 2006), which is why some speak of 'ordinary theology' (Astley 2002). There is a lot to be said for the preference of this perspective, because this is as close as we can get at the actual relationship with the sacred. To speak of God (theo-logy) in praxis is best found in the lives of those that actually play the game. Many practical theologians therefore claim that personal spiritual engagement is a prerequisite for their work (Ballard & Pritchard 2006, Veling 2005). The praxis here is the praxis of faith and there is no aim beyond a more profound and salutary praxis of faith itself. Practical theology then is a spiritual discipline.

## COACH

The second role is the sports coach. This is the person who is dedicated to enabling others to engage in the game. The coach is committed to a particular team, but need not be a great player him- or herself. In religion, this is the practitioner who works in a particular practice, like a congregation, school, or hospital. Swinton & Mowat (2007, 4) for example describe the aim of practical theology as 'enabling the faithful performance of the gospel and (...) exploring and taking seriously the complex dynamics of the human encounter with God.' In this role, the practical theologian is called to contribute to the praxis of faith through the praxis of the practitioner. Practical theology here is a transformative discipline.

## REFEREE

The third role is the referee. This is the person that follows the game intently, only to interfere when the rules are being broken or participants hurt one another. Here the engagement of the practical theologian is a critical one. The praxis of faith is accepted as the playing field, but that doesn't mean that anything goes. Ethical, doctrinal, psychological, and other criteria are brought to the task of protecting the game from unfair tricks, power play, and perversions. Practical theology here is a critical discipline, based on a constant interaction between the complex and pluralistic praxis of faith, the religious traditions, and academic reflection.

## COMMENTATOR

The final role is the commentator. This is the journalist who usually enjoys the game a great deal, has clear preferences for one team or the other, but accepts the task of clarifying what happens in the playing field. The commentator tries to analyze the movements and interpret the strategies. Regularly, he or she will offer advice to the teams, although chances are that only the audience will hear that advice. In religion, this is often the position of academic theology. The practical theologian as commentator seeks to recognize religious forms, describe them properly, interpret them in their relation to old and new religious traditions, and suggest adequate strategies for their development, but without interfering too much with the game itself. Practical theology here is a descriptive discipline.

Underlying these different roles are different understandings of the discipline as such and of the distinction or overlap between theology and religious studies. I do not believe in a strict demarcation of the two as if for example, theology is normative and religious studies is descriptive or theology has an inside or emic perspective and religious studies an outside, comparative, or etic perspective. I'd rather see the two as a continuum. On one extreme we find

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<sup>7</sup> Analogies can be drawn with Osmer's (2008) description of the descriptive, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic tasks of practical theology, Ballard & Pritchard's (2006) mention of its descriptive, normative, critical, and apologetic nature

classical confessional theology as *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* in which the theologian is a participant by definition. On the other extreme we find religious studies approaches which we can define as the study of God-talk or theo-logy. While we can move on this continuum from one side to the other, it is a choice with consequences for the work we are doing.

## Fork no 4. The audience

The fourth fork in the road regards the primary audience of practical theology. Following Tracy (1981) we can distinguish between theology for the audience of the church, theology for the audience of society, and theology for the audience of academia. While he described that threefold audience in order to clarify the confusion in the broad field of theology, and suggests that practical theology functions primarily for the audience of society, I think the distinction works better within every theological discipline.<sup>8</sup> In the International Academy we have worked with this distinction in organizing our seminars, and I want to reflect on the three styles that follow from the distinction a bit more.

### ACADEMY

'Practical theology and (empirical) research' is located before the audience of the academy. It seeks to strengthen the scientific (usually but not exclusively empirical) quality of the discipline. It may focus on empirical methods, discussions on the philosophy of our discipline, epistemology, and results from empirical research. The aim of this approach is to enhance the academic nature of practical theology, notably in relation to other disciplines like the social sciences. The type of rationality here is argumentative, valuing formalized patterns of reasoning and criteria of proof.<sup>9</sup>

The history of this style of practical theology is closely connected with the emergence of modern sciences and the discussion about the place of theology in that development. One should of course think of Schleiermacher here, but he is certainly not the only one. Tracy (1981) refers to a host of efforts to reconcile theology with the academic criteria of modern science. He acknowledges the enduring debate on the scientific nature of theology and rests with its status as (what Toulmin called) a diffuse or 'would-be' discipline, even when that implies that we suffer from a preoccupation with methodological debate and a tendency to splinter the field into competing sects. Moving that discussion to the level of one style of doing practical theology, we can indeed witness these risks, but the development of empirical theology is also more than that. It is a conscientious effort to keep practical theology rooted in Academia and not forfeit its potential to contribute to wider scholarly knowledge (an effort both secularists and some confessionalists deem futile and ill-advised). In this effort, new directions involve the debate on the paradigms of social sciences and humanities and their meaning for practical theology (Baronov 2005, van der Ven & Ziebertz 1993). Perhaps the most promising avenues in this regard are found in social constructionism and Peircian pragmatism (Cartledge 2003, Ganzevoort 2005, Hermans, et al. 2002).

### CHURCH

'Practical theology and ministry formation' focuses on the audience of the church. Many practical theologians have a clear commitment to training for ministry and indeed specific tasks in this training. The discipline of practical theology has the duty (among other things) to support this formation with research, reflection, and the development of new approaches. The type of rationality here is primarily conversational. This hermeneutic approach stresses the relation

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<sup>8</sup> Tracy describes fundamental theology as primarily oriented toward the audience of the academy, systematic theology toward the church and practical theology toward society. He seems to be describing styles rather than disciplines however and acknowledges that every theologian and every theological discipline is in one way or another responding to all three audiences (28-31).

<sup>9</sup> The rationalities I describe for all three styles are based on Osmer (1997).

between tradition and present, taking into account that the other (e.g., the student or the congregation) is a subject rather than an object of knowledge.

In the history of this style we find the age-old understanding of theology as church theology or reflection on its being and self-understanding. It also links up with the spiritual dimension of theology as a 'praxis pietatis', in which believers are initiated and educated. More recent contributions reflect influences from social sciences and especially modern pedagogy and supervision and coaching theories. All this shows a strong focus on the person of the theologian and the development of his or her theological habitus and skills (Farley 2001).

## SOCIETY

'Practical theology and liberating practice' is directed toward society. In describing that audience, Tracy discusses the three realms of the technoeconomic, polity issues of justice and power, and the symbolic realm of culture and religion. It often takes the form of public theology, clearly committed to the resistance toward oppression and evil and inspired by the liberating practice of an orientation on the Kingdom of God. Many practical theological debates on for example globalization, economic and sexual abuse, violence, and HIV/AIDS are directed toward liberation for the whole of society. The rationality here is rhetoric, stressing interests, critique, and concrete, specific, and episodic strategies.

The history of this style is primarily found in the many forms of liberation theology and critical social analysis (like postcolonial studies). These theologies from the margins endeavor to give a voice to those rendered speechless by the powers that be. Marginalization may be based on race (Andrews 2002), gender (Moessner 1996), social class (Couture 1991), language, sexual orientation (Moon 2004), physical or mental ability (Swinton & Brock 2007), or age. To develop theology from below is to acknowledge the perspective of those who are marginalized and to develop theological discourse and resources that supports their emancipation. This style of practical theology takes into account that theology is in fact a constructive process of generating meaning and projecting possible worlds, which makes it essential to decide whether the proposals we make will benefit the marginalized or those benefiting from the status quo.

These three styles of doing practical theology thus have their profound histories, clear objectives and distinct loyalties, and specific approaches and contribution. Most of us have a natural inclination to one of these, but not many would want to be limited to just one. It is in fact, I believe the configuration of the three that makes practical theology so inspiring and intriguing. Our responsibility toward the three audiences and the unavoidable conflicts between them gives the discipline its hybrid character, but also its sense of urgency. There is after all a debate about the scientific study of religion and the need for normative approaches. There are many issues in church and ministry that request serious and engaged scholarship. There are societal issues of life and death, justice and exclusion, in which theological expertise should be made relevant. We cannot walk away from these responsibilities, nor reduce one to the other. Our major challenge then in further developing the discipline is to foster all three and relate them to each other.

## Conclusion

I have not tried to present a map of practical theology, because both the field we study – lived religion – and the ways in which we move through that field are far too dynamic to be captured in a map. Instead I have tried to identify some of the forks in the road that define our movements. As a hermeneutics of lived religion, I believe practical theology can play a major role in supporting connections: between religious praxis and its tradition and sources, between different and conflicting forms of religious praxis, between theological and social-scientific accounts of religious praxis, between church and society, and so on. In our International Academy of Practical Theology we try to keep all those movements together and understand the inevitability and richness of its diversity. In doing so, we are tracing the sacred: traveling,

following, studying, and sketching. It won't come simpler than that or it stops being practical theology.

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