

Strange bedfellows or Siamese twins?

The search for the sacred in practical theology and psychology of religion

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There is at least one thing that psychology of religion and practical theology have in common: both suffer regularly from a lack of appreciation by their direct neighbors. Within theological faculties, practical theology was often regarded as maybe the most practical, but certainly the least theological discipline. If it had to be taught, then probably that should be done in seminaries, but not necessarily in an academic setting. In similar manner, psychology of religion still has a hard time to find acclaim in psychological departments. More often than not – as far as I can see – it is located in theological departments, which does not really contribute to its standing among psychologists.

This is no attempt at academic masochism. I can also tell proud stories about our fields, but I think it is meaningful to reflect a little bit on the marginality of the disciplines before considering the interactions. It is, I believe, no coincidence that both psychology of religion and practical theology are at least somewhat in the margins of psychology and theology respectively.

Over the past century, psychology was developed as a rather atheistic discipline. Not only methodologically – the notion of methodological agnosticism has been and still is an essential contribution to the scientific study of religion – but also in content. Psychologists count among the most secularized groups of professionals and have often tended to prefer materialist and reductionist approaches to human life and experience. In the world of psychotherapy – say: the application of psychological insights to the help of individuals in distress – key notions of wellbeing and ideals to achieve include autonomy and individuality. But these notions are not necessarily compatible to religious attitudes which may stress dependence and communality. Religion then has been suspicious in the eyes of many psychologists. Moreover, within psychology experimental, hard quantitative studies and neurosciences are often valued more than interpretive approaches, but in psychology of religion we find many examples of the latter. To study religion then, and especially to be open to positive aspects of religion, is not the best boost for your academic reputation as a psychologist.

For practical theology, the situation is different, but the consequences are similar. Theology of course has a long history of reflection on religion from a participant point of view. Usually this reflection would take a deductive approach in which the authoritative religious texts and the dogmatic tradition are the key sources. Theologians then were by definition religious believers and often religious leaders, aiming at articulating the truths of the tradition for their contemporary church and world. In that deductive approach, practical theology was not central to the discipline of theology, but its application. The task of practical theology, at least since Schleiermacher, was to describe the guidelines to build the church based on the insights derived from biblical and systematic theology. Until recently, it was very common to appoint someone to a chair of practical theology who was trained in systematic theology, but I don't know one reverse example. Apparently practical theology requires less specific knowledge and it certainly yields less theological status.

Psychology of religion and practical theology then both lack a traditional high standing in their respective disciplines, partly because they go against central currents of the disciplines they are part of, partly they cross boundaries. That results in a somewhat marginal, but also critical position. I would contend, and maybe this is something we can discuss today, that practical theology has been more successful in developing that critical position and in turning its marginal position into an opportunity of renewing the whole field of theology, whereas psychology of religion is still very much at the margins of psychology proper.

A PERSONAL JOURNEY

Maybe at this point I can bring to the table my own experiences in the two fields. When I was studying theology, I often found myself at loss when we were engaging in the high fields of systematic theological discourse. I think I understood the concepts (although you can never be certain), but I really didn't grasp two central issues. The first was how you could decide that one statement was true and the other was false. That is: what criteria would govern that discussion and why. Surely, some claimed that conceptual consistency or conformity with biblical revelation would be such fundamental criteria, but for me that was rather hard to swallow. If it was only about conceptual logic, wasn't it mere mind games? And if the Bible was the final criterion, how could we avoid sectarianism in which only believers would become convinced? My search, in retrospect, was for an existentially engaged yet academically convincing perspective to religious experience.

Having a hard time with that search in systematic theology, I chose to major in what was called pastoral psychology, but actually was closer to psychology of religion. Suddenly I found myself in a field of scholars who were far more specific (and convincing to me) about what would count as true or false, hypothesis or proof, theory or phenomenon. I enjoyed the empirical approach in which the search for knowledge was satisfied by a methodologically sound analysis of the world out there. Instead of the inspiring but elusive concepts of systematic

theology, we could just describe, measure, analyze. True was what could be proven empirically. The people I have met in the field of psychology of religion were usually either theologians with the same kind of frustration I had, or psychologists with a similar interest in religion but more background in psychological theories and methods. And the latter – I must say – often reminded me that I was not a real psychologist of religion, just like my fellow theologians would challenge my position as a true theologian.

I have tried to remain an active participant in both the field of psychology of religion and the field of practical theology. The latter offered me a space that was more contested in psychology of religion. Questions of good and evil, for example, or of the sacred, were asked much more openly and early in practical theology. I have enjoyed many enthusing conversations in both domains, and often there was a lot of overlap between the two. So maybe I can offer something in reflecting on the interaction between the two. I will not tell you right away with which label I identify most, and I must warn you that my formal position as professor of practical theology is not the dead giveaway it may seem.

DESCRIBING THE FIELDS

If I would have to describe the two fields of psychology of religion and practical theology, I think the first task would be easier than the second. That does not necessarily mean that psychology of religion is more coherent than practical theology, but it does mean that there is more conceptual structure. Psychology of religion is indeed the psychological study of religious phenomena. That is, the term ‘religion’ points to the level of phenomena and the term ‘psychology’ to the scholarly perspective taken to analyze and interpret those phenomena. But even if we would agree on this simple description, we run into many questions. Obviously we have to deal with different definitions and theories about what exactly constitutes a religious phenomena. Do we focus on existing traditions or also on implicit religion? Do we delimit the concept in substantive or functional terms. Does a soccer tournament qualify as religious context? Why? Or: why not? And what are the psychological perspectives we bring to the task of understanding religion? How do we choose from among all the psychological theories and approaches? And of course the crucial question: to what degree do psychological theories help us to understand the intricacies of religion? How are they able to grasp the heart of what religion is? Isn’t there an intrinsic and unavoidable reductionism in a psychological approach? And for those psychological approaches that include the transcendent or transpersonal, are they not becoming pseudo-theologies?

To describe practical theology is more difficult because there is less consensus in the field. 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 (empirical) 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.

In speaking about theology, I may work with a broader concept than Fraser Watts. He describes theology as reflection on Christian doctrine and practical theology as the application of that reflection on church practice. I would see practical theology primarily as the theological reflection on religious praxis, which necessarily involves empirical research, and which is sometimes closely related to tradition, sometimes rather distanced. I want to understand the implicit theologies of contemporary practices rather than apply the explicit theologies of tradition.

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. 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.

Practical theology, I would say, is a hermeneutical discipline. 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 take the position of a practical theologian and work together with psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists, I constantly find that there are subtle but defining differences. In the end, the psychologist of religion is interested in the psychological processes in and behind a religious experience, just like a sociologist is interested in the social backgrounds and consequences, and the anthropologist is interested in the cultural make-up. The practical theologian is ultimately interested in the relation with the divine itself. It is the encounter with or experience of the sacred that she or he is trying to understand. I would say then that 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.

In and of itself, the term ‘sacred’ is not the sole property of theology. Psychologists of religion like Kenneth Pargament, anthropological scholars in the tradition of Otto and Eliade have all worked with the concept of ‘the sacred’. Some approach it more essentialist notions, others with a more constructionist view. Some use the insights of religious traditions, others the analytical scrutiny of social sciences, notably of psychology of religion. But somehow the notion of the sacred can function in this broad field of overlapping disciplines. It helps us to move beyond the local definitions that we find so often in denominationally organized practical theology, but also beyond the often more functional definitions we often encounter in psychology of religion. The sacred then is broader than the divine, but is not everything. To call something sacred implies that it is a center point around which we organize our lives and that it is experienced as coming toward us from the outside, even when we acknowledge that is in itself a cultural construction.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS OR SIAMESE TWINS

So are these two strange bedfellows or Siamese twins? There is something to say for the first term. Obviously both engage with the study of religion, or of the sacred as it functions in the empirical reality. They are different disciplines in that they bring very different concepts and theories to that analysis. They often presuppose a different perspective of the researcher, committed to the religious tradition in practical theology, more independent in psychology of religion – at least not letting that tradition interfere with the analysis. And where psychology of religion usually focuses more on description and explanation of phenomena, practical theology engages more with normative evaluation and strategic development of new practices.

And yet, I would prefer the image of Siamese twins. These are two individual disciplines in their own right, but they share parts of their bodies, which makes it sometimes difficult to discern where one starts and the ends. Some body parts seems to belong to only one of the two, but other parts are clearly shared in common. Perhaps for our discussion it can be useful to try to identify some of these body parts.

On the level of the **phenomena** we study, we share the focus on individual religious practices and experiences. Prayer, conversion, religious coping; on such topics it is sometimes hard to say whether research projects should be called one or the other. But practical theology can also study social and cultural religious practices, bringing it closer to sociology or anthropology of religion. It may study societal issues, bringing it closer to ethics and political sciences. And it may study histories and texts, bringing it closer to humanities and the arts. Likewise, psychology of religion may engage with for example neurosciences, that is, focus on phenomena inside the human brain, and I would not expect practical theologians to offer much to that line of research.

On the level of **theories**, we share much, although I think it is fair to say that psychology of religion has contributed more in terms of academically articulated

theories from which we can derive hypotheses to be tested in empirical research. Practical theology usually builds fewer theories and is less focused on testing them. But that may be misleading. The point is that practical theological theories are partly drawn from the religious traditions, which means that they are articulated in a different discourse and sound more like spiritual interpretations than like academic theories. But there is a lot of potential here. Traditions usually offer theories on theodicy, forgiveness, conversion, and so on. And if we see religious traditions – like I do – as the sediment of ages of wisdom, then we should continue to unearth those theories and make them fruitful for our work.

On the level of **aims**, there are indeed often differences between the disciplines: describing, explaining, evaluating, developing. I would see these as complementary and not conflicting. Moreover, I cannot say that these aims are neatly divided over the two disciplines. In both you can find examples of all four aims, even when the focus may be slightly different.

As Siamese twins, we are probably destined to live together. That certainly is the case in my life. In the end, I would not know how to distinguish them completely and I use my dual belonging to enjoy the broad range of opportunities the combination offers. I can tell – at least sometimes – that a particular project is more one or the other. But quite often the label I use simply depends on the conversations I am part of. As Siamese twins, I am we. I can speak two languages and have a dispute even within one body.