Exploring Practical Theologies of Desire.

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Desire is one of those concepts that runs through many theories and perspectives, yet is seldom addressed by its own name (Delattre, 1987). There are numerous studies about religious experience, magic, prayer, and so on, but very few on the desires in and behind them. There are many discussions on sexual tendencies and moral boundaries, but not really on the desires at stake. There are some critical descriptions and evaluations of consumerism and the temptations of material fulfillment in for example prosperity gospel movements, but even fewer that approach these issues from the perspective of desire. And there seems to be no systematic treatment of the category of desire in and across these domains, at least not in practical theology. It is for that reason that the International Academy of Practical Theology devoted its 2011 conference and this volume to the theme of desire. Its location was the city of Amsterdam, iconic for its apparent facilitation of every desire and a great opportunity to explore the practical theological meanings of desire.

The concept of desire or the description of phenomena understood as desire usually involves descriptions in volitional terms like want, wish, inspiration, and intention. Complementary to that are affectional descriptions like passion, eroticism, yearning, and lust. The volitional points to the direction that is inherent to desire. As a dynamic volitional force, desire is always desire for something or someone. It implies movement in a certain direction. The affectional points to the involvement of the person or group to this movement. Thus, the affectional implies the strength of the movement for the people involved. Taken together, desire can be seen as the power of self-transcendence, moving us beyond the boundaries of our existence towards something or someone else. As self-transcendence, it almost immediately takes on spiritual meanings.

Delattre (1987) addresses three fields of questions around desire. The first regards the kinds of phenomena named as desire, the second the circumstances under which desire becomes an issue for the religious or spiritual life, and the third the negative and positive strategies religious and spiritual individuals, communities, and traditions employ to deal with desire. Following this line of thought, we can start our explorations with the understanding of desire as the conscious impulse towards something that

promises enjoyment or satisfaction in its attainment. Desire emerges from the connection between a presently experienced lack or deficiency and a possible or postulated fulfillment. This connection gives desire its meaning and force in human life. At the same time that the desired object is lacking, it is represented in our experience, which makes desiring a performative act: in desiring, the desired object becomes present in our lives.

Relating to the second field of questions mentioned by Delattre, we can observe that our deepest desires are too fundamental to be fulfilled by concrete experiences, so that we normally encounter only partial or temporary fulfillment. Often we replace the most fundamental desires for more accessible ones, but the ensuing satisfaction can only reveal that our deeper yearning is insatiable. Beneath our everyday desires is an ultimate and transcending desire, maybe even a desire for the Divine. This may help us understand how a city of desires can be interpreted as a place for God. The third field of questions regards among other things the ethical questions arising from the fact that fulfillment of the desire of one person can be harmful to another. Some of these topics are reflected in our cover image. On the wall of a building in Amsterdam, Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza's words come to life: "Men under the guidance of reason ... desire nothing for themselves which they do not also desire for the rest of mankind." Apart from the traditional masculine wording, this suggests a critical stance toward desire and a preference for rationalism, which Spinoza also applied to religion, transcendence, and revelation. All these fields of questions will emerge in the contributions in this volume.

Desire in practical theology

Although the word desire can be found in many publications in the discipline, only a few practical theological works place the concept in the center of attention. Ploeger and Ploeger-Grotegoed (2001) us it as the leitmotiv in their parishioner-oriented practical theology, aptly titled "The congregation and her desire" (orig.: De Gemeente en haar verlangen). They define desire as an anthropological category: "the mental capacity of desire is strength of mind that resists suffering. It is the ineffable and dynamic positively oriented desire for 'insight into the origin of life', stemming from deficiency and suffering. Desire for 'insight, into myself, into humankind, and into the world around me', and into 'present-day security, justice, love, beauty, and delight' and to 'fulfillment' in the future". [1] Although conceptually a rather loose definition, it helps to identify some key features. Desire in practical theology is related to suffering, insight, and fulfillment, encompassing past, present, and future. This anthropological approach facilitates an inclusive treatment, overcoming narrowly defined confessional descriptions. It is only in a second step that

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[1] Translated from Dutch by the present author.

Ploeger & Ploeger-Grotegoed speak of substantively filled – Christian – desire that emerges from the encounter of our human desire and a spiritual offer from the Christian tradition.

It seems useful to reflect on three fundamental dimensions in which desire often materializes: time, relations, and meaning. The function of desire in the temporal dimension can be found in Gerkin's study on crisis experience in modern life. Gerkin (1979, 20) pictures contemporary consciousness in Western society as "the image of life as caught between infinite aspirations, on the one hand, and the boundaries of finitude, on the other. It is the image of humankind coming of age, captured by the vision of human potential for mastery of one after another of the contingencies that impinge on the length and quality of human life, yet having to come to terms with our finitude and the vulnerability that finitude entails." This description not only focuses on human possibilities or limitations, it also involves a time dimension in that the present self is connected retrospectively to the past and anticipatory to the future: "… the self-transcendence of the present self is not only continuously re-imaging its past, but is also continuously presented with the necessity of pre-imaging and pre-structuring its future self and experience. Our biographies of the future are also being continuously rewritten." (56) This self-transcendence in time is an important aspect of desire.

These dimensions of temporality can be interpreted in a Kierkegaardian sense by describing the authentic self as an entity with three fundamental components: necessity, freedom, and possibility. This is how Lester (1995) elaborates the concept of hope for pastoral care. Necessity, or actuality, consists of the utter dependence on God for our existence, the givenness of the specifics of our personhood, and the results from choices exercised in the past. Possibility has to do with the potential for change and development, thus construing a future that is different from the past. Though limited by the actualities, the future is open-ended. Freedom is the dynamic center that keeps necessity and actuality in equilibrium. "Being authentic includes being realistic about the past, expectant about the future, actively engaged in the present, and as a result – hopeful." (14) In this vein, Luther (1992, 170) argues that identity should be interpreted in a fragmentary way, because development always includes loss, which makes us "ruins of our past". At the same time, we are always "ruins of the future", construction sites of which we never know that the construction will be pursued. "All we know is that the construction is not completed. Against the freezing is the desire, the movement of self-transcendence."[2]

The second dimension in desire is relational. For Luther (1992) this is another reason to describe identity in fragmentary terms. Our identity is summoned in encounters with others. The ideal of non-fragmentary identity implies the renunciation of mourning, hope, and love. Desire for another person is thus also a form of transcending the self. Friendship, love, romance, eroticism, and

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[2] Orig: „Gegen die Erstarrung steht die Sehnsucht, die Bewegung der Selbsttranszendenz."

sexual lust are some of the terms we use to understand and categorize these desires. Even a brief glance at these issues reveals the complicated nature of desire. Desire is constructed from the combination of inner urges and impulses, on the one hand, and socially transmitted patterns of meaning on the other. Sexual lust, for example, is not merely an animal-like instinct, explainable in for example endocrinological terms. It is also a category of interpretation in which certain longings are classified and loaded with meaning. Some of these longings are defined as sexual, whereas other longings count as romantic or amicable. Physiological impulses and social meanings interact in such a way that one can evoke the other. In that sense, sexual lust is already the outcome of an encounter between the person and his or her context.

When sexual lust is directed towards a specific person, it can be understood as the desire to gain access to the life of the other. More than that, it is the wish to cross the boundaries that mark the difference between self and other. Lust is the self-transcending effort to encapsulate the other within the self and to surrender the self to the other. This aggressive dimension of lust needs to be balanced by respect for the alterity of the other, understanding that the mystery of the other can never be conquered, but only received. In other words, the self-transcendent dynamics of lust are dialectically connected to respect for the evasive other.

The third dimension in desire is meaning. Dutch sociologist of religion Ter Borg (1991) distinguishes three levels of self-transcendence in the dimension of meaning. Primary transcendence is the surpassing of the person's individuality and his or her biological existence into the social-cultural reality. Secondary transcendence is the exchange of one system of meaning for another. Tertiary transcendence is the surpassing of the systematization of meaning, resulting in chaos and despair, derangement and creativity, and possibly in a new system of meaning. It is this third level that is addressed in mystical traditions.

The desire to attribute meaning to life and the experiences thereof has often been acknowledged as characteristic for humankind. Forrester (2000) rightly puts passion (in the double sense of intense emotion and suffering, congenial thus to Ploeger's understanding of desire) at the heart of practical theology, whilst stressing the connection with knowing and truth. Knowing God, he states, is personal knowledge or love: "Lovers, and only lovers, can know God." He points to the Hebrew verb *yada* that applies to both knowing and sexual intercourse. The same can be said of meaning. As in other languages the Dutch word for meaning *zin* has a number of connotations. It can point to the physical *senses* or sensations. It can denote the *strivings* or likings including lust. It can also refer to the more rational sense or *meaning*, or even be framed utilistically. And finally, it can mean the *sentence*, the coherent expression through an ordered group of words. These multiple understandings of the word *zin* may aid us in maintaining the connection of meaning and desire. Understanding life, giving or finding meaning, is not just a cognitive effort, let

alone a system of truth detached from people's emotional and physical whereabouts. It is instead the encompassing longing to find integrity and integration, to be at home in oneself and in the world, to experience, explore, and employ, to see the connections, and to express oneself properly.

Desire thus denotes the force of movement that resists acquiescence or satisfaction with the actual situation or experience. Instead of just asking "what is?", desire deals with "what if?" This makes desire the dynamic impetus for potentiality next to actuality, hope next to resignation, passion next to passivity, connection next to isolation, and meaning next to meaninglessness. Desire transcends the boundaries of our lives.

About this volume

For the understanding of desire as self-transcendence and the practical-theological reflection on its dimensions and ramifications, this volume offers a variety of perspectives. The volume is divided in four sections. The first section locates desire in various contexts and offers first perspectives to the description of phenomena of desire, hermeneutical interpretation, and ethical reflection. The second section focuses on embodying desire, exploring the relation between desire and the brain, sexuality, pregnancy, and so on. The third section, culturing desire, looks at consumerism, popular culture, and politics. In the final section we offer perspectives on the spiritual transformation of desire from various traditions.

Locating desire

Anthropologist Mattijs van de Port presents in the opening chapter a compelling description of shapes of desire. Taking the location of the city of Amsterdam as his starting point, he looks at shopping, flirting, and praying and asks whether, seen through the prism of desire, these phenomena might be mere variations of the same force. Religious devotion can be presented in the erotic language of sexual desire, shopping malls can function as temples of consumption. Van de Port connects his detailed observations of a major department store's advertisements, Amsterdam's gay club scene, and evangelical religion with Lacanian theory and suggests that what is at stake in all three is not the dissolution, but the production of desire.

Maaike de Haardt explores the notion of the "city" as a powerful location for images of desire and its perversions. As a systematic theologian she calls to memory the ambivalent and often gendered symbolism of the city in the Bible and the tendencies to interpret the "city of Man" (sic!) and its desires as sinful and opposed to the "city of God". Given this antithetic perspective, De Haardt sets out to search sacred spaces in the city, or Thirdspaces, appropriating and transcending the Firstspace of given reality and the Secondspace of symbolic meanings. With these notions she reflects on three examples of women transforming city space into places of resistance, hope, and communication.

This contributes to her interpretation of desire as a religious, creative, and dangerous life-force.

Constanze Thierfelder takes up this positive perspective to desire as a life-force and connects it to Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. His linguistic turn in psychoanalysis focused on radical alterity and the desire that remains and (unlike needs) will never be satisfied. It is desire that leads to language and intersubjectivity. Thierfelder takes from Lacan also some clues for an ethical interpretation of desire, especially with regard to the narcissistic self that does not accept the alterity of the other. Following Irigaray's deconstruction of Lacan's male and monolithic imagery, Thierfelder gives attention to an Italian movement of women philosophers, DIOTIMA. They describe desire primarily in terms of connectedness and meaning, the longing of the soul to participate in the world. In the remainder of her chapter, Thierfelder connects these thoughts to the mystic Marguerite Porete and her view of passion as connectedness to the totally different Beloved.

Embodying desire
In the second section, six authors present studies about the embodied character of desire. David Hogue provides important insights from contemporary neurosciences, suggesting that physical, relational, and spiritual shapes of desire share significant biological processes. Interestingly, different modes of love and attachment activate different neural systems and involve different hormones. The sex drive, the attraction system and the adult attachment system have distinctive neurochemical structures and evolutionary purposes. This understanding may have implications for the theologically sanctioned cultural union of sex, love, and marriage. Although much more research is needed before we actually understand human behavior, neuroscientific insights will help us to connect the different desires and to understand that we are hardwired for relationships.

Riet Bons-Storm follows up on Hogue's insights and focuses on the importance of touch for young children in becoming sensual beings. The sense of self, evoked by touch, is the basis for a sense of agency and connection. This brain-behavior system is processed into feelings and experiences, which then produce conscious desires and practices. This process is saturated by relational and cultural influences, including power and gender messages. Bons-Storm connects this understanding of the complex origins of our desires with Althaus-Reid's explorations of sexual desire, power, and practical theology. This raises the question how to speak of God in terms of body, gender, and desire: How can the relationship between embodied, desiring human beings and the hardly sensual God or Jesus be imaged? This would imply a critique of traditional models of God and a preference for more earthly and relational models of incarnation.

This borderline between the physical and the virtual appears in a different form in the chapter by Joyce Ann Mercer. Her study of cybersex or disembodied desire starts with reflections on neurosciences and theology, but

then moves on to ask what happens when the boundaries between the real and the virtual are erased. What are the implications when virtual affairs become actual infidelity? A multi-billion dollar industry, cybersex has not received a lot of practical-theological interest. The desire at stake here is not only a vital force, but also the suffering of lack that may seek egocentric gratification and result in compulsions and/or betrayal. Its virtual nature allows cybersex to erase the unwanted aspects of real-life bodies and situations and engage in an illusion of sexual perfection, but it does not erase the real engagement and the effect it may have on offline relationships. This asks for a critical and compassionate hermeneutics of desire.

Annemie Dillen and Judith Cockx focus on another connection of desire and the body by looking at pregnancy and childbirth. Although "being expectant" and "desire" seem closely related, this connection is seldom reflected upon. Dillen and Cockx present material from their interviews with expecting couples. Their child wish seems to imply heteronomy and transcendence of the couple's existence. The time of pregnancy is filled with desire, but also ambiguity: heteronomy-autonomy, pleasure-pain, hope-anxiety. In the secularized context of the authors, these ambiguities are not usually discussed in religious terms, but meaning making and spirituality seem to surface easily. Dillen and Cockx challenge pastoral theologians to take pregnancy more seriously as the celebration of new life and as a time of ambiguity that may require care. They call for new rituals that do justice to especially women's experiences and they plea for the spiritual dimension of midwifery.

That desire can be perverted and transformed, is paramount in the chapter by Julian Müller and Anton Binneman. Based on original research with a group of adolescent girls from Johannesburg. They identified as homosexual, but their stories were much more about physical and sexual abuse and exclusion. Their stories show a transformation of desire on the social, physical, and sexual level. They found ways of fulfilling their desire for belonging and self-esteem, albeit in ways unaccepted by the larger community. Although this transformation at first may be no more than a means for survival, it can turn into a hopeful road towards a satisfying life.

Culturing desire
In the third section, the focus is more on the dynamic ways in which the social and cultural context shapes our desires. Mary Elizabeth Moore looks at the desires of youth culture in interviews with young people and popular literature. Their powerful and fragile stories highlight the painful experiences and underlying desires. Central, generative themes from the narratives include yearnings for home, accomplishment, belonging, and authenticity. These desires should be shaped, Moore claims, in a nurturing environment.

Wilhelm Gräb looks for desire in popular culture, ranging from a bestselling comedian's book about his pilgrimage to the quest for meaning in popular films to the interference of traditional sacred and secular pop music. He sees popular spirituality as a desire for the reality of the spiritual realm in the

middle of a one-dimensional yet complex world. Not bound by specific traditions or institutions, postmodern spirituality is found everywhere and Biblical narratives are simply part of the narrative material of the prevailing entertainment culture. They can become meaningful again when they are connected to the desires found in popular culture.

The culture of consumerism is central to Johan Bouwer's contribution. He takes a critical hermeneutical approach towards consumption as a symbolic activity of gathering meaningful sensations, which at the same time can transform consumers into commodities. Over time, the drive of *homo consumens* has developed from need to desire to wish. Consumption then becomes a means of self-actualization, meaning, and identity. Briefly discussing opposing evaluations of consumerism, Bouwer advocates post-consumerist rather than anti-consumerist lifestyles, accounting for sustainability and a new understanding of hedonism and (economic) value.

Heather Walton explores the meanings of matter: the ambivalent relation to material objects, full of ambiguous meanings. She describes a journey from a naïve love of things, through Marxist and eco-spiritual critique to a revised appreciation of the power of things in human life. Building on anthropological and philosophical reflections on materialism, this chapter challenges the reader to connect fundamental values with ephemeral matter. This is not without problems, Walton admits, when she discusses the tension between this confident, material cosmology and Christian tradition.

Transforming desire
The fourth section offers contributions on the spiritual (trans)formation of desire. Ilonka Terlouw's research deals with the spiritual desire of having a "personal relationship with Jesus." Interviewing evangelical members of traditional protestant churches she found that this desire to experience "more" operates in the performance of communicative faith practices and experienced in events that are interpreted as stemming from God and revealing God's will. The effective performance of these practices arouses a desire to do more for God. This God-centered desire is driven however by self-centered religious and existential needs.

Exploring the praxis of iconography, Daniel Louw discusses how spiritual desires are shaped and mediated through images. In visual aesthetics, the human body and desires can become an icon of incarnation in both joy and frailty. Louw contrasts the power oriented iconography of the Byzantine era with the compassionate imagery of Biblical narratives, the enfleshment of grace. In religion, our spiritual desires are externalized and transformed. Existential needs are connected to the quest for meaning through images and symbols.

Michael Bakker approaches praxis and desire from the perspective of Eastern Orthodox theology. He focuses on the ascetic processes that aim at managing and transforming human desires. Exploring connections with psychoanalysis and ancient philosophy, Bakker describes views of personal and communal

mystagogy. The ascetic praxis is not a battle against the body, but a struggle to free the body from wrong use and tainted desire and direct it to the divine.

In the chapter by Francis-Vincent Anthony, we return to topic of consumerism, but now from an intercultural point of view, focusing on Western Christianity and the Indic religio-cultural context. The drives of material need and post-material desire are framed differently in these two perspectives, which is highly informative for the understanding of the cultural shapes of Christian faith. While consumerism has become central to Western culture, "cosmotheandric interdependence" is central to the Indic traditions. The latter leads to a non-dual and affirming view of desires, leaving space for both satisfaction and liberation of these desires. Desire can be an egocentric force to overcome or an ecstatic force to nurture.

Ministering desire
In the final section contributions focus on the role of desire in the life and work of theologians. Neil Pembroke addresses the meaning of charm in pastoral work, the capacity to stimulate, refresh, and renew the persons one encounters. Building on the philosophical work of Marcel, Pembroke argues that the moral ground of charm is the union of *agape* and *eros*. The self-giving love of *agape* and the energy of *eros* together create the physical and spiritual presence of charm and the space for the other. It is this desire for connection that makes charm such an important element for faithful and effective pastoral ministry.

Robert Mager questions the Christian discomfort with (sexual) desire. He reflects on essential links in Paul Tillich's life and work, notably his theology of *eros* in human life and his own erotic life. The divine-demonic ambiguity is central to erotic desire and there can be no contradiction between vitality and the spirit. Several interpreters of Tillich's work have looked at how his alleged sexual relations with women were ways of reuniting with the infinite Being, thus connecting it with finite human desire. According to Mager, the challenge for theologians is to become more conscious of how their own gender and eroticism impact their theology. While feminist theologians have taken up this challenge, especially male theologians still have to learn how their finite desires of *eros* can be transfigured by *agape*.

Thomas Hastings brings a Japanese cultural perspective to the discussion of the role of the theologian. He discusses different views of the desire to know God and the ways in which this desire is shaped by the theological guilds to which theologians may belong. What counts as theological knowledge is deeply influenced by culturally specific and gendered understandings of desire. Hastings describes debates about the warrior-desire of Japanese *kokorozashi* ethos as a counterpoint to platonic *eros*, so dominant in the West. This discussion thus challenges the standards for theological knowledge.

Conclusion

Although this volume is not a systematic treatment of the concept of desire and its related phenomena, it offers a series of perspectives, *topoi*, and dimensions that can be used as building blocks for a practical theology of desire. Desire is at the same embedded, embodied, enfleshed in our corporeal existence and in our socio-cultural context. It is shaped by the traditions from which we seek wisdom to mediate, transform, and manage our desires. It is vitalizing and sometimes dangerous. Desire is, if one wants to see it, at the heart of our theology, our ministry, yes: our human existence.

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