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Cultural Hermeneutics of Religion

1 Introduction

If religion is understood as a cultural and culturally embedded phenomenon and if practical theology is understood as a culturally sensitive and contextual reflection, then a hermeneutical approach is at the heart of the practical theological endeavour. This chapter explores this hermeneutical character and places it in a transcultural and transreligious context. The chapter focuses on lived religion in culture and sees the formalised and institutionalised traditions from the vantage point of people's practices and experiences. Firstly, I position myself within the field of practical theology and discuss various layers of culture and lived religion. Then I attend to the specifics of a hermeneutical approach. Lastly, I ask what this implies for practical theology as cultural hermeneutics, offering the concrete example of the European public discourse on refugees.

2 Practical Theology

As it quickly becomes clear from the contributions in this volume, there is a wide variety of what counts as practical theology. In previous research in which I undertake a survey of the discipline at that moment in time (Ganzevoort 2009), I suggest that beneath the different and competing approaches to practical theology and the distinct parameters on which they rest, a clear, common ground can be discerned. The common ground is in my view the understanding of practical theology as the *Hermeneutics of Lived Religion*.

I define *religion* as the transcending patterns of action and meaning embedded in and contributing to the relation with the sacred (Sremac and Ganzevoort 2019). Transcending here means not limited to the specific situation but reaching 'beyond' or responding to what is experienced as coming from 'beyond' (Ganzevoort 2006). This primarily functional definition seeks to avoid both false negatives – excluding new and idiosyncratic forms of religiosity due to a bias toward established traditions – and false positives – including traditional forms of religion even when there is in fact little transcending momentum or relation with the sacred. The relation with the sacred, however understood or culturally construed, is at the heart of practical theology. The focus on *lived* religion distinguishes practical theology methodologically

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from other theological disciplines. Whereas other disciplines take ‘text’ or ‘idea’ to be the primary object of analysis, practical theology focuses on praxis (Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014). Obviously, these materials overlap and intersect – praxis includes and refers to texts and ideas, and vice versa – but the primary focus determines the methodologies and the perspective (and vice versa). The hermeneutical dimension, crucial to any theological approach in my view, will be discussed in more detail below.

On this common ground of practical theology, many different versions of practical theology have been developed, based on the different choices on four parameters (Ganzevoort 2009): 1) the *object*, running the gamut from religious clergy through the faith community and the religious traditions to culture and society; 2) the *method*, approaching praxis empirically, phenomenologically, critically, constructively, or dialogically; 3) the role of the *researcher* as participant, consultant, referee, or observer; and 4) the *audience*, being primarily the academy, the church, or society (Tracy 1981). Although the usage of term ‘practical theology’ is commonly restricted to (Western) Christianity, scholars from other religious backgrounds have explored how it can also function to describe parallel approaches in their context (Carter 2018; Isgandarova 2014; Trinlae 2014).

My own approach to practical theology is of course influenced by my own social location. I was raised in a protestant, middle-class, Dutch, intellectual environment. I have lived in different locations in both the Netherlands and Surinam. I have worked as a church minister, academic, academic administrator, hotel owner, and politician (and usually simultaneously). I have worked and lived with colleagues, students, friends, and partners from different cultural and religious backgrounds – and am myself inspired by several of those. I am a father of six and a grandfather of five and I identify as gay (and increasingly as middle-aged). I have experienced great joys as well as intense grief. In other words: I cannot be categorised by simple labels, as probably nobody can. I am privileged in some respects and disadvantaged in others. I can only acknowledge the fact that my perspective is multi-layered, inconsistent, and not universal and that my particular vantage point can and should always be critiqued.

This awareness has contributed significantly to my social-constructionist perspective in practical theology (Ganzevoort 2004, 2006). Meaning and truth are ingrained in social interactions and dependent on culturally determined understandings and power relations. I will develop this topic further in the sections below.

3 Culture, Lived Religion, and the Sacred

It is not the intention of this chapter to provide an in-depth discussion on the concept of culture. My broad and plural understanding of culture incorporates two particular types of differences. On the one hand my conceptualisation includes what we usually call ‘intercultural’ encounters, for example between people from Europe, Af-

rica, and Asia (Lartey 2006). As mobility and migration increase, more and more contexts are becoming internally diverse, challenging notions of multiculturalism and interculturalism (Elias and Mansouri 2020) and moving into a situation of religious and cultural superdiversity, especially in post-secular cities. Although all these concepts are contested (Sealy 2018), they commonly point to the cultural differences rooted in different societies.

The second notion of difference refers to the differences between so-called high culture, popular culture, and folk culture. Although these categories can and should be critiqued, they offer a helpful theoretical model to reflect on cultural expressions. These three connected but distinguishable cultural repertoires co-exist in many cultural contexts and interact across those contexts (Lynch 2005). High culture circles around original cultural creations with identifiable authors (like Bach's cantatas or Garcia Marquez's novels). Folk culture refers to traditional, often local, expressions, handed down the generations (including local crafts and decoration styles). Popular culture is characterised by mediation and usually has strong appeal in very diverse contexts. These distinctions should not be taken as absolute but as a lens to understand cultural dynamics. When the souvenir shop at the Louvre museum sells Mona Lisa coffee mugs, high culture moves into popular culture. When artists make innovative creations using traditional Aboriginal techniques, folk culture moves into high culture. And so on. Religion can be expressed in all three of these dimensions and in their interactions.

Both types of cultural differences and their intersections are relevant for a trans-cultural approach to practical theology. It is a simplification to assume that the intercultural differences are more fundamental than the differences between high, folk, and popular culture, especially in a globalised world. The cultural elites in many contexts share a preference for globalised high culture, especially when it represents the historical Western repertoire, as found in museums, opera houses, and universities. Popular culture is perhaps even more proliferated across cultural contexts and in many contexts the appropriation of popular culture from elsewhere is a sign of being modern. This is equally true for the commercial success of McDonald's and Starbucks in emerging economies as it is for western youth cultures embracing Eastern meditation and Caribbean or Africanised music styles. In the field of religion, clear examples of this globalised influence are the popular culture-based worship style of Hillsong, originating in Australia and now popular in many non-western countries (Klaver 2021), or the more classical shapes of Orthodox liturgy attended by post-secular westerners (Herbel 2014).

Religion is in my view a specific part of culture and of these cultural differences and repertoires. My definition used the phrase "patterns of action and meaning" which refer to this broader definition of culture. The specifying element is the relation with the sacred. This relatively open term can be defined by a particular tradition or take an idiosyncratic shape, but it at least represents a centre around which one's life gravitates and a presence that evokes awe and passion. This is not a matter of value judgement: the sacred – and one's relation with it – can be life-giving and cre-

ative, or it can be toxic and destructive. The question whether for example soccer fandom can count as religion, can now be answered in a nuanced way: for a particular fan it can certainly take on these religious qualities of a relationship with what is sacred, although for many it will just be pleasure. Similarly, however, traditional practices like attending prayers in the mosque or temple can be religious but are not necessarily so.

Lived religion refers to what people – alone or together – experience, do, and construe in their relationship with the sacred. The repertoires of the cultural and religious traditions facilitate them by providing narratives and rituals, prescribed behaviours, and material forms and places. The concrete practices that can be studied in practical theology are therefore by definition the outcome of complex and multi-layered negotiations of the actors with the available repertoires, the normative audiences they encounter, their understandings of the sacred, and so on. An example may serve to demonstrate this.

In a qualitative study among young Dutch and bicultural women who got pregnant before their 20th birthday, we explored how young women navigate the moral arena when they are confronted with a teenage pregnancy and which role the embodiment of pregnancy plays in the construction of social meanings (Cense and Ganzevoort 2019). Normative discourses influence the stories these young women tell about their pregnancies. Social, cultural, and religious norms play an important role in the construction of the meaning of their teenage pregnancies, but so do their embodied experiences. One woman explained: “I went through a very difficult period. So, although my boyfriend did not agree, I had an abortion. My parents still do not know. They would find it horrible if they ever found out. My boyfriend and I had a lot of conflicts over it, but well, in the end it was me who had to choose as it was in my body. It was a hard decision to make, as I am a Christian myself. To tell you the truth I felt I did not have the right [...]. And I was afraid I would regret it later. But when I look back now, I feel sorry, but I also feel it was the right thing to do for me then.”

To understand this woman’s story, it doesn’t suffice to ask for ‘the’ Christian view of abortion or the liberal Western perspective on self-determination. The concrete outcome and the meaning this has in her story has to do with the complexities of her biography, the normative framework of her parents and her boyfriend, the moral repertoire of her Christian tradition, and so on. We described this as the storyscape in which she finds herself, the multi-layered narrative world provided by her polyvalent social context. This storyscape consists of narrative repertoires and cultural normativity present in the story as well as in the audience. The narrator is constantly navigating this storyscape, that is: negotiating possible meanings that can account for her experienced reality vis-à-vis her audience (Ganzevoort 2017b). What is at stake in this woman’s story is her sense of purpose and identity, her commitment to her tradition, her view that she did not have the right to have an abortion, and so on. All these elements can be indications of what is sacred to her. All of them are strongly related to the cultural and religious context in which she navigates her

story. To understand her story then, is to understand what precisely is sacred to her – and to those around her – and how she engages with that.

This is not only the case for the extraordinary instances of intense suffering or moral dilemmas. It also holds for much more common everyday practices and experiences. We can assume to know what it means to have one's new-born baptised or circumcised by asking for the normative theological views of one's tradition, or the formal views of academic theologians. However, these may be different from the espoused (what people say they believe and do) and operant (what they actually believe and do) theologies (Ward 2017). Religious post-birth rituals may have multiple possible meanings, for example, of divine grace, gratitude, obedience, joining the covenant, testifying to one's faith, strengthening the community, fear of social disapproval, magical protection, family customs, or something else entirely. Whether the significance of the praxis is related to the sacred or not, cannot be decided beforehand.

Lived religion is culturally embedded, just as the sacred texts and places in religious traditions are embedded in their cultural context. It is usually easier to see to what degree specific religious practices are culturally determined when that culture is further removed from one's own in time or space. Many European or American protestants may feel that an African ecstatic worship service with drums, dancing, and spiritual trance for example, is more culturally defined than their own quiet sitting in the pews listening to a sermon. Both, however, are cultural patterns determining body postures and movements that directly affect our limbic system and foster particular experiences that are construed as religious. For this reason, Tweed (2006, 54) refers in his definition of religions to "organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering." His definition further speaks of human and supra-human forces and describes the aim of religions as "[making] homes and [crossing] boundaries".

This 'crossing and dwelling', as Tweed calls it, is an important final dimension of cultural dynamics and especially of the religious dimension of culture. Religion, in a Durkheimian sense, is one of the fundamental social institutions, providing structure and a sense of collective consciousness. It allows for humans to build a socially inhabitable world, which means: a place where they can dwell. Religion also offers the elements to symbolise this dwelling, including ritual times and spaces that differentiate the sacred from the profane. But religion does not only support the dwelling-character of culture; it also challenges its structures and status quo by crossing boundaries and inviting individuals to break out of prescribed norms and behaviours. Examples here are religious trance, carnivals, and pilgrimages. Often these two roles of religion are connected. Pilgrimages, for instance, are movements (crossings) towards a specific place (dwellings). Sometimes their connection remains ambivalent. Monasteries are places of dwelling for the monks but crossings for the visitors. Religion, in sum, validates cultural structures and values but also challenges them, and it takes a nuanced and critical reading of religious and other cultural practices to understand them.

4 Hermeneutics of Force and Meaning

Precisely this search for understanding is the essence of the hermeneutical approach. Its starting point is the hermeneutical awareness that a full and direct understanding of the other – be it a text or another person – is not possible because we have no complete access to the intentions and the inherent layers of meaning. This awareness is denied in some romanticising or fundamentalist naïve circles but is commonly accepted in the field of practical theology (Brown 2012).

As a theory of interpretation, hermeneutics was originally applied primarily to ancient texts so that it could also be understood as the theory of exegesis. With Schleiermacher, Dilthey and others, the focus broadened to include the intentions of the author as well as the historical context of the text. Gadamer's interest in the role of the reader in construing meaning so that the text-reader interaction became a central point of attention, added another perspective. More importantly for practical theology, however, has been the contribution of Paul Ricoeur, who articulated how meaningful action can be interpreted as a text (Ricoeur 1981). He shows that – similar to texts – actions, once performed, take on a meaning that is partially independent from the actor and their intentions. The significance of the action stretches beyond the original situation, making it a kind of 'open work' of which the meaning remains undecided because each observer can add their own, new interpretations.

This focus on text has been criticised because it can easily downplay embodied dimensions. A textual reductionism can become too cognitivist and distort our view of the essential dynamics of religions as if they are primarily about texts and ideas. Moyaert (2017) acknowledges the risk of this 'textualisation' of the world when the metaphor of action as text becomes too dominant but argues that the model is still helpful to understand symbolic mediation in ritual action. She claims that Ricoeur's fundamental combination of distanciation and appropriation is present not only in the cognitive mode of reading a text but also in the embodied, physical mode of participating in ritual. This broadening of the model is necessary to make it useful for an analysis of the material/physical dimensions of lived religion.

To understand the practices of lived religion, we need a hermeneutical approach that accounts for cultural embeddedness and intercultural differences. A helpful distinction in that regard is found in the threefold *mimesis* as Ricoeur (1984–1988) calls it, building on Aristotle. The first *mimesis* is the *prefiguration* or the 'world behind the text'. This includes the pre-understandings, intentions, and competences of the author and the reader (or the actor and the audience) and their cultural backgrounds. The second *mimesis* is the *configuration* or the 'world in the text'. This includes the content, structure, symbolism, and everything that is part of the text or the praxis itself. The third *mimesis* is the *refiguration* or the 'world in front of the text'. This includes the possibilities that are presented to the reader and that (s)he can envision, contemplate, and respond to.

With this threefold mimesis, the possible meanings of every practice can be gauged in these three worlds. When asking about the meaning of a movie, for example, we can read interviews with the director or the actors to establish their intentions or compare the movie to the book or the events it may be based on. We can also focus on the movie itself by analysing the structure, narrative, use of camera, light, and music, internal references, and recurring symbols and metaphors. Or we can interview the audience to find out how the movie affects people. There is no necessary priority for one of these meanings as if the ‘true’ meaning of the practice is found in either the intentions, or the action itself, or its effects. Obviously, one may prefer one of those, just like one may prefer an ethical approach that highlights the intentions, the factual action, or the consequences. For a culturally sensitive hermeneutics of lived religion, it is necessary in my view to pay attention to all three and ask specifically about the concordances and discordances between them. If the audience reads something very different in the text, movie, or performance than the author, director, or performer intended, this is where fruitful conversations can commence. This juxtaposition will therefore serve to develop intercultural understanding because it allows the voices and interpretations of multiple sides to be heard.

It also challenges us to add a critical dimension to the encounter, or a hermeneutics of suspicion, following Ricoeur’s depiction of the work of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. At this point, it is interesting to note Ricoeur’s (1970) interpretation of Freud’s semantics of desire, consisting of the two different languages of force and of meaning. This interpretation is an important element in the application of hermeneutics to practical theology, as Gerkin (1984) already pointed out, because it precludes an overly cognitivist or idealist approach to hermeneutics (or narrative for that matter). A critical hermeneutics should not only attend to meanings attributed to practices and experiences, but also to the interpersonal and structural power dynamics and the subconscious psychological forces and neurological processes, notably in the limbic functions of the human brain. Critical contributions based on this hermeneutics can be recognised in for example feminist, postcolonial, queer, and empire studies.

The importance of the critical hermeneutics of force and meaning becomes clear when we look at the concrete example of traumatic experiences incurred from structural violence like racism, a matter of much debate in decolonial discussions and the protests known as *Black Lives Matter* (Mitchell and Williams 2017). Notwithstanding contextual particularities which make the debate about race and power different in for example the United States, South Africa, or the Netherlands, the dynamics of force and meaning operate in each of these contexts. Given the historical background of slavery and injustice and the remaining social inequalities, it would be misleading to limit our interest only to the level of meanings and neglect the level of force. That would suggest that we can have a simple exchange of different views without acknowledging the differences in power and privilege that are the resultant of this historical background. Not acknowledging those differences in fact benefits the status quo and those privileged by it. Similarly, ignoring the traumatic effects and the forces

of traumatisation affecting one's possibilities to think, speak, and act, constitutes new violence and injustice. The meanings attached to black and white bodies play out in the forces of structural power and violence available to each. The meanings attributed to that power, depend on the power positions of each actor, as can be seen in the contested terms like brutality, rioting, protest, and so on.

This critical hermeneutics of force and meaning is essential for the understanding of lived religion in its cultural context. It acknowledges the multiplicity of meanings which remain fundamentally open to reinterpretation. It allows for the various voices brought to the conversation to be heard. It also considers the contestation of these interpretations that are themselves subject to power, authority, and cultural dominance.

5 Practical Theological Hermeneutics of Culture

How do these insights contribute to a practical theological hermeneutics of culture? In other words, how do practical theologians deploy their perspective with regard to cultural and intercultural practices? In the remainder of this chapter, I will demonstrate this practical theological hermeneutics of culture by focusing on the specific case of the recent refugee crisis and especially the public discourse around it in Western Europe (Ganzevoort 2017a). This case provides interesting material because it concerns the encounter of cultures and religious traditions as well as cultural expressions on different levels. For this purpose, I consider media outlets and social media platforms as cultural practices that are produced, mediated, and consumed.

At the heart of the European refugee crisis is the Syrian civil war, which started in 2011. As a result, more than half of the 22 million population had to leave their homes. One quarter was internally displaced, and one quarter crossed into other countries where they applied for asylum or were forced to stay in refugee camps, especially in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. In search of better chances, a substantial number tried to flee to Europe through the sea passage to Greece where the overcrowded camps on islands such as Lesbos became a symbol of the humanitarian disaster taking place. An icon of this narrative was the dramatic 2015 picture of three-year-old Alan Shenu (or 'Kurdi') whose body was found on the Turkish coast of Bodrum after he and most of his family drowned when the small inflatable and overcrowded boat they had been travelling in, capsized.

The public discourse responding to this crisis can be found in newspapers, television talk shows, and social media. Central actors are of course politicians and public influencers, but also spokespersons for humanitarian and religious organisations. The stories of the asylum seekers themselves are seldom heard (for an exception see Derks and Sremac 2020).

The storyscapes emerging in this situation are highly contested and mutually excluding. On the one hand, the right-wing populist frame posits refugees as a threat to European society. They are generally assumed to be Muslim, overlooking the reli-

gious diversity among them or treating the Christian refugees as the only acceptable exceptions. The situation in their home country is downplayed, whether this is Syria or elsewhere. The conflicts and fires in reception camps are taken as evidence that they are uncivilised and dangerous. The risks they take by fleeing or boarding small boats with their children are seen as proof of their irresponsibility. The frame is exacerbated by politicians claiming that Islam is not a religion but a political ideology and that the “asylum-tsunami” is threatening our values, our welfare state, and our peaceful and tolerant society. Young male asylum refugees are portrayed as potential jihadi terrorists or at least a sexual danger for women and children, dubbed ‘rapefugee’ by anti-Islam-organisation PEGIDA. Al Jazeera (2016) reported:

Dutch anti-immigrant politician Geert Wilders has handed out self-defence sprays to women fearful of what he described as “Islamic testosterone bombs”. [...] The Freedom Party leader said that, if elected, he would “close the borders immediately and have no more asylum seekers. We just cannot afford to have more”. “The Dutch people in a big majority don’t want it. [...] It makes our people and women more unsafe,” Wilders added.

Wilders and the likes play out a rhetorical trope well known from historical forms of racial and religious ostracization, especially targeting Black and Jewish men (Bonjour and Bracke 2020). This trope sees the refugee as the male, dominant, hypersexualised, animalistic, and violent intruder, and Europe as the pure, innocent, vulnerable woman. The female body, ostensibly protected by the politician with self-defence sprays, is a symbol for the body of the nation that should be protected from desecration and defamation.

The storyscape on the other side is no less explicit about the European values that need to be protected, but they identify an entirely different threat. For them, Europe is all about hospitality and inclusion and the influx of refugees as the victims of violence constitutes primarily a moral responsibility to offer care and protection. Here the storyscape is filled with historical tropes like the immigration of the Sephardic Jews in the 16th century and the Huguenots in the 17th and 18th. These groups were welcomed in Amsterdam and other cities proud of their religious freedom and equally eager to attract commercial and intellectual high-potentials, and bolster Dutch identity against the Spanish Catholic oppressor. In this idealised storyscape, cultural diversity is embraced, and the iconic refugee is a child. Centuries later, this storyscape results in the political decision to grant a general ‘Children’s Pardon’ to young asylum seekers who matched certain criteria.

Based on my theoretical explorations in this chapter, we can now further probe into these two storyscapes from the perspective of practical theology as cultural hermeneutics of lived religion. This leads to the following observations, each warranting further research.

First, the competing storyscapes focus on cultural conflicts and values. One storyscape depicts this in the style of the clash of civilisations, the idea that conflicts after the cold war will be mostly cultural and religious by nature (Huntington 1996).

The other approaches it as an intercultural encounter in which the refugee is a migrant who makes the intercultural encounter possible. In both cases, there is a narrative of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders. The narrators differ on who is the real victim, but both narrators portray themselves as the saviour and protector of those victims (Ganzevoort 2017a). This application of the drama triangle turns the concrete issues into a value conflict that takes on cosmic proportions. It is no exaggeration to suggest that it has become a conflict about the question of what is sacred in Europe's identity.

Second, religion plays a significant role in these storyscapes. Not only are the refugees categorised as Muslims, but the European culture is in return portrayed as Judeo-Christian, sometimes adding the humanist and Enlightenment tradition (Nathan and Topolski 2016). Downplaying Europe's grim history of persecution of Jews and religious dissenters and the cruelties of colonialism, this self-identification based on religious heritage serves to build and uphold an image of tolerance and human rights as the quintessential nature of Europe (Kluvelde 2016). Usually, this self-identification is more secular than religious and often it excludes Islam as 'the other'. It serves primarily to mark the boundaries of European cultural values and implies less of a return to or revaluation of the religious traditions themselves. The lived religion in which this narrative functions, is therefore also primarily a civil religion, as Bellah ([1967] 2005) described with reference to Rousseau. It aims to protect for example Christmas and Easter as European Christian feasts without much interest in the religious meanings that underpin them. It is important that shops and companies use the word Christmas rather than 'winter' in their advertisements, much more than any reference to Jesus.

Religion also plays a role in the competing storyscape of the pro-refugee movement. Although this movement consists of convinced atheists and agnostics as well as religious people, there are some remarkable cases of explicitly religiously inspired interventions. One of these cases is the "church asylum" that was offered from October 26th, 2018, until January 30th, 2019, in the Protestant Church of the Hague. Building on old traditions and the constitutional protection of religious worship against state interventions, the church held a continuous service with alternating preachers and worshippers that lasted 2,307 hours. During this time the Christian Armenian family Tamrazyan lived in the church building, protected by this ongoing worship. The family had come to the Netherlands as refugees and permission to stay had been granted to them, but the state kept appealing the decision to grant asylum. When their application to the Children's Pardon was denied and they were at the point of being evicted, the church stepped in and used its religious right (successfully) to protect this family and (unsuccessfully) to press the government to develop more welcoming policies. Although this church action was criticised by some as being too political, it was at least also a clear example of lived religion, using the traditional ecclesial institution and structures. Their daughter, Hayarpi, wrote a collection of mostly Christian poems that was published afterwards.

A kindred campaign was the initiative “We gaan ze halen” (“Let’s bring them here”). In 2018 this crowd-funded grassroots movement, led by young post-evangelical theologians, bought a bus, and drove from the Netherlands to Greece to pick up asylum seekers and bring them to the Netherlands. In 2020 they rented an airplane and flew to Athens to collect 189 refugees from the burnt down refugee camp Moria on Lesbos. In both cases they had to return without a single refugee, but the campaigns attracted much media coverage and challenged the public opinion. The message of “We gaan ze halen” is never explicitly religious but instead foregrounds the language of human rights and European values, but the inspiration of the founders and many supporters is a typical post-secular lived religion.

Third, although the whole case of Europe’s response to refugees is about power and justice, the critical hermeneutics advocated above invites us to reflect on the fact that the voice of the asylum seekers themselves is hardly heard, Hayarpi Tamrazyan being one of the exceptions. The right-wing anti-immigration groups as well as the ‘refugee protectors’ are articulate and well able to access (social) media platforms, but the refugees are more the object of their rhetoric than narrators with their own voice. How they experience these conflicts and how their lived religion plays a role in coping with the situation and with the hostilities they encounter, therefore remains mostly absent from our understanding.

6 Conclusion

This chapter has described practical theology as a hermeneutical discipline with culturally embedded lived religion as its object. A critical hermeneutical approach toward culture and the implicit or explicit religious practices in it allows us to understand the multi-layered meanings and the often-competing narratives (storyscapes) as well as the power dynamics operant in these intercultural encounters.

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