**1 Preliminary Considerations**

Calling a collection of chapters an International Handbook of Practical Theology requires careful consideration. Practical Theology indicates a consistent academic discourse although the term refers to a variety of concepts, contexts, and approaches. The designation as handbook suggests comprehensiveness and a well-considered selection of key topics. However, if one really takes diversity seriously, it quickly becomes clear that with each topic considered in the book, the number of blind spots and blanks becomes even more obvious. Editing a book always means limiting the number and variety of all kinds of topics, approaches, and authors. As editors, we cannot escape this imperative, since this kind of decision making also involves excluding topics, approaches, scholars, and contexts from being part of such a project. Every handbook is merely a snapshot and is rounded up by other books.

In a way, this description can be claimed for almost all academic discourses. However, Practical Theology does not always assume the guise of academic discourse with corresponding institutional frameworks: rather, in some contexts, it is seen to be wisdom, practical knowledge. We, the four editors who met each other and maintained conversations in the International Academy of Practical Theology, cannot cover the complexity and messiness of all approaches in Practical Theology, but we appreciate the openness for conversations (Cahalan and Mikosi 2014, 7) and are aware of our self-limitation to academic discourses in this Handbook. Our concept of Practical Theology therefore always means Practical Theologies in the plural. We owe this insight to conversations with colleagues in the International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT). Examples are those with whom we had the opportunity to discuss the concept of this book in two paper sessions in Sao Leopoldo, Brazil in 2019.

Last but not least, the term ‘international’ needs some explanation. At one point, we were thinking of eliminating it altogether. The concept of nations is, like Benedict Anderson (1963) shows, an invented tradition in terms of the nationalism and imperialism of North America and Europe in the nineteenth century. Over the last decade the self-reflection of Practical Theology has focused on plurality and diversity, but that is still very much only beginning. In this light we made three editorial decisions:

First, Practical Theology does not only refer to the Christian Tradition. Even though we as editors and most of our authors are Christian theologians and Christianity itself is split into many different ecclesial traditions, we have also collected chapters from scholars who belong to or refer to non-Christian religious traditions and communities. These chapters do not only enrich Practical Theology and make
it more diverse, but they also help our epistemology. The respective communities of practice and theological concepts (values, norms, traditions, communities) cannot be tacitly assumed, references must be made explicit and accessible to description and reflection.

Secondly, there are many overlaps and common approaches between Practical Theology and Religious Studies including empirical research on religion. There is a whole range of disciplines that form important interlocutors for Practical Theology. A question that is asked again and again is: What is theological about theology? The discussion of disciplinary belongings seems to be an open field to us and containing many ambiguities in which strict boundaries are not helpful. Following these considerations, we invited contributions from colleagues who do not necessarily self-define as theologians and who are not linked to any institutional theological background.

Finally, from our point of view, the issue of limitation, which we considered from many different viewpoints, can lead to making explicit one’s own perspective and scope of representation. This includes not obscuring or objectifying one’s own self-image, but rather disclosing it. Limiting becomes a problem if it is made as if it were ever possible to cover all possibilities or to ignore concrete contexts. As noted above, the term ‘internationality’ is associated with hegemonic claims which have their roots in Europe and North America. With this in mind, we encouraged authors to make their affiliation, subject relation, and context-boundness transparent, even though in some academic traditions doing so is considered a non-academic writing style. However, the question of what Practical Theology means and for what purpose it is practiced finds different answers depending on local, institutional, cultural, and religious environments. Therefore, from our point of view, it is a proof of epistemological honesty to make one’s own knowledge recognizable as situational knowledge. In the following therefore we would like to further discuss our context and the issue of Practical Theology.

2 Practical Theology – The Subject Matter

It is not surprising that Practical Theology, as an academic discipline, is involved in ongoing discourse about its self-understanding, its tasks, its methods, and subjects. The discourse on the epistemology of Practical Theology reflects the fact that the interests and questions pursued by this discipline are closely related to contextually specific challenges posed by religious communities, and practices. As to the subject matter of Practical Theology an important question is one of relevance: Does what academic practical theologians do have any relevance for people in their religious and social communities? The concept of collaborative empirical research is one example of handling the question of relevance regarding research (de Roest 2020). Does academic Practical Theology contribute to the training of professions, while the focus on professions may be broader than the pastoral paradigm? In which
ways is research in Practical Theology also of interest to other religion-related disciplines, such as empirical religious research, sociology, or psychology?

A Practical Theology that faces the complexity, plurality and diversity of situations and contexts of religious practices in a global horizon has to make visible the discourses which identify and shape these religious practices in a specific sense. In this volume the term religion is taken to refer to a field of cultures, ritual practices, and symbolic orders whose boundaries are not well defined and whose contents are shifting. To describe a practice, an experience, an event, an institution, or a community as being ‘religious’ depends on the respective religio-cultural context and the related framework of interpretation.

3 Encyclopaedia

We assume that the assignment of religious practices to certain religio-cultural traditions, communities, and organisations already presupposes their discursive construction. As such, we did not choose classifications and categorisations which are related to fixed traditions, regions, or religions. From our point of view this leads again to generalization and essentialization. We are not interested in an overview of knowledge, which disregards the situatedness of knowledge and the positionality of representation. In our conversations about the concept, we agreed that we did not wish to allocate the chapters of this Handbook to denominational or religious traditions and organisations, nor did we want to divide the volume according to the chapters’ affiliation to countries or continents. Such allocations resemble tidying up a messy subject. We recognise that denominational and religious, regional, and national affiliations have a marked influence on the conceptions and formations of religious communities and religious practices. We assume that these interrelations are fundamental. The chapters of this Handbook portray the discussions which shape institutions, religious communities, and religious practice as such. They show the embeddedness of religion.

In the light of these considerations, we chose a lean encyclopaedic system and divided the Handbook into three sections. In the first section, titled ‘concepts of religion’, we present seventeen examples of fields in which religion is conceptualized. Family or biography are not religious in any way, but the contours of the religious become visible in these contexts with reference to certain discourses. In the second section, the chapters explore strategies of religious practices with respect to their actors in a variety of twenty-eight case studies. These include e.g., rites of passages, sacred space, and praying. These case studies not only refer to human beings when talking about actors: They also include material objects. The third section presents a selection of fourteen key discourses Practical Theology refers to, such as Gender Studies, Hermeneutics, and Philosophy. Of course, the series of topics and and contributions could easily be extended. However, the fact that the middle section
is the most extensive is no coincidence. The heart of Practical Theology lies in the religious practices themselves.

To bring out the situatedness and contextuality of discourses conceptualizing religious practices, imaginations, and strategies of individuals and religious communities, we tried hard to invite authors from all over the world. The Handbook aims to contribute to the international network of Practical Theology. We are very grateful to the authors for embarking on this adventure with us. Especially those who did not know us as editors at all. In this sense, it builds on the activities of the International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT). We experienced the biennial meetings as an inspiring hub of conversations and encounters. We also owe much to the International Journal of Practical Theology (IJPT), which has been published by De Gruyter since 1997. In almost every issue of the IJPT there is an “International Report” which describes practical-theological discourses in relation to a particular region of the world and the ecclesial and religious situation there. Much can be learned from these International Reports about how different perceptions of the ecclesial and religious situation also give rise to different practical-theological problems and theoretical procedures. Nevertheless, for this Handbook we made the decision not to report on the practical-theological discourses in their international affiliations, but to let the authors each take their situationally conditioned perspective on their topic, moving in the conceptualization of a particular ecclesial, religious, and cultural context.

Due to the different regional, ecclesiastical, religious, and cultural affiliations of the authors, it was our hope that the global approach of this Handbook would emerge. It was particularly important to us to include perspectives from authors living and working in the Global South and to represent as broad a spectrum as possible in their religious belongings and cultural orientations. To have achieved this more fully, our circle of editors, all Christian theologians, should have probably been composed differently. In this respect, this Handbook represents a first step to a global approach to Practical Theology in international discourse. Perhaps it already makes visible how cultural and religious boundaries are becoming more and more fluid and permeable within this discourse. We have therefore refrained from a detailed labelling of the ecclesiastical and religious affiliations and situational contexts of the authors. A few traces can be read beyond the articles in the (short) author biographies. Instead, chapter authors were asked to make explicit their personal experiences and views in their articles.

We have relied on the fact that denominational, religious, and cultural affiliations become apparent from the author’s discourse, but that this kind of cross-over discourse is also open to readers with other denominational, religious, and cultural affiliations. In the best case, we gain new insights into what we initially perceived as different: on denominational, religious, and cultural levels.
4 Concepts of Religion in the Perspective of Practical Theology (Part 1)

The International Handbook of Practical Theology enters the arena of the disciplines of Practical Theology assuming that Practical Theology is an empirically grounded and hermeneutically elaborated theory of religious practice. The primary interest as practical theologians is the focus on ‘doing religion’. What people call ‘religion’ or ‘spirituality’ is not only vague and fluid but is related to culture and the ways in which individuals make use of the term. The question of religion is also open and controversial in academic discourse. When things go well, it becomes clear that the question is indeed answered differently by the discourse partners. When things go poorly, religion is talked about as if it were a fixed object. Is religion an experience, an event, an institution, a community, a practice, a collection of sacred literature, or a historical movement? Is Buddhism a religion? What is meant by African Heritage Religion? Are there many Christianities, African religions or just one “Christianity” or African Traditional Religion? Can practitioners of one shaping of Islam recognize and legitimize practices of Islam in all other parts of the world? It is the stated task of the first part of the Handbook to ‘clarify its notion of religion’.

These chapters include considerations of ‘anthropology and religion’, ‘community and religion’, ‘family and religion’, ‘institution and religion’, ‘law and religion’, ‘media and religion’, ‘politics and religion’ and so on – all aimed at clarifying the conceptualizing of religion in a variety of fields.

The chapters, moreover, are written by authors from different parts of the globe. The contributors engage their topics from within their own context and culture, which is made abundantly clear, recognizing that no one speaks for all but instead our situatedness gives us grounding from which to explore any subject. Aware of the historical danger of universalizing from one’s particularity – the peril of colonialist discourse – from these vantage points they each explore possible meanings of religion in a wider, transcultural, globalizing, and decolonializing world.

What we have then in this first part is a collection of essays which illuminate the problem of ‘religion’ in our world in its current fragmented and fluid state, and then offers ways in which practical theologians may frame and explore their interest in religious practices and in doing religion.

5 Religious Practices in the Perspective of Agency (Part 2)

Whatever definition of religion is used, religion is also something people do. People living their religion implies practitioners involved in embodied practices. This conception of the Handbook becomes abundantly clear in Part 2 where twenty-eight
sets of keywords closely connected to practices are discussed. They are ordered alphabetically, beginning with Artifacts and Confirmation, including Praying and Rituals, and ending with Symbolizing and Weddings. A reader will encounter a description of animal sacrifices in South Africa within a spiritual worldview, music performed in traditional mainline churches in a more secularized Europe, and pilgrimages undertaken by Muslims from all over the world.

Part 2 widens the scope of practical-theological reflection, transcending traditional teaching, preaching, and pastoral care. It includes practices of traditional communities, such as the Lutheran or Roman Catholic Churches as well as for example practices of African Independent Churches. In the past, practices of the latter would only have been the discussed in contexts of Religious Studies, Anthropology, and Missiology, reflecting a clear bias on the side of Practical Theology in respect to which churches’ practices were deemed important for scholarly reflection. In addition, Part 2 also includes a range of practices with no relation to any specific church or religion. This is because the choice of what to include was not about what constitutes religious, Christian, or theological practice, and what does not. Instead, the choice about what to include in Part 2, was an indication of what counts in the Handbook as knowledge and, in addition, whose knowledge should be included amid the fluidity of church and religion today.

In Part 2, as in Parts 1 and 3, the authors represent scholars from many parts of the world, and a variety of disciplines and backgrounds. Apart from the religious practices readers encounter in the chapters in Part 2, they will also, importantly, encounter the authors of each chapter who very deliberately situated themselves in their socio-cultural contexts and disciplinary fields whilst exploring these practices. This situatedness of the practices and the positionality of those reflecting on the practices, makes for a transcultural approach as it uncovers the struggles of each author and the resources at their disposal. The practices open up windows to the life-world of the authors, their challenges, and privileges in a very particular time in history in specific contexts. It also allows for the individual author’s idiosyncratic understandings or definitions of religion to surface in their chapters, which is critical for a transcultural Practical Theology. In this regard, methodologically, it is important that the chapters deliberately take an emic perspective and provide idiographic rather than nomothetic accounts of the practices.

This methodological approach implies that the practices reflected upon are executed by humans with agency. In Ted. A. Smith’s discussion of theories of practice in The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology (Smith 2014), he refers to Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the topic and his distinction between “subjective” (focus on freedom of human action) and “objective” (social structures determining actions) which is critical for the notion of human agency in relation to practices. The chapters in Part 2 provide a variety of perspectives on human agency as human beings doing religion by means of their involvement in practices. And the actors in these practices include a wide variety of people in religious communities, aca-
demia, and society, often reflecting on practices as they relate to problems, struggling to enhance the life of individuals and communities.

The largest portion of the Handbook is devoted to Part 2 and thus to practices. This is due to the conviction that Practical Theology is reflection on the relation of practice and theory. With this emphasis on practices, the Handbook wants to move beyond a practice-theory dichotomy and a privileged position of theory in academic reflection. Instead, it positions practice at the core of practical-theological endeavours, thus not as a secondary task, but as primary and integral. In Conundrums in Practical Theology Bonnie Miller-McLemore (2016) shows how deeply entrenched the theory-practice binary is, also in our academic institutions.

With practices at the core of Practical Theology, and religion as doing, important sources of knowledge can be included into the picture, such as embodied knowledge. Regarding practices it includes, importantly, human bodies. In his classic article “On ritual knowledge” Theodore Jennings Jr. (Jennings 1996) discusses a (religious) practice, namely ritual, as well as the importance of a bodily based epistemology and the human body as a site of knowledge production. This knowledge is knowledge gained through practice such as rituals. The knowledge gained through ritual action is “knowledge gained in action of action”; aimed at finding out how to act. In recent years, the material turn has contributed to a focus on materiality, spatial arrangements, and the collaboration of things in practices. Theology in many parts of the world has a strong focus on the subject. The focus on religious practices and on agency distributed among different actors, including non-human actors is worth pursuing further.

6 Discourses in Practical Theology (Part 3)

In the third part of the Handbook, theoretical approaches and scientific-methodological procedures are presented. They are already referenced in the critical and constructive analysis, reflection, and presentation of religious discourses and practices in Part 1 and 2 of the Handbook. In Part 3 they are explicitly named and developed in context: Sociology of Religion, Hermeneutics of Culture, Gender Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Phenomenology of Religion, Psychology of Religion. This list is unfinished, because it is our view that all approaches which help in the understanding of and reflection upon religious practices, are relevant to Practical Theology. The reader may notice that Practical Theology is not part of the theoretical approaches as such. Practical Theology as one chapter in addition to the list of academic discourses presented in a handbook of Practical Theology looks like a meta-discourse. Therefore, we put Practical Theology as a matter of subject in Part 1.

Practical Theology, as an academic reflection on the practices of religion is part of this practice. So, ultimately, we understand Practical Theology as both, the subject, and the object of its self-reflection. This reflection cannot stay in an inner space of one cultural and religious tradition only. The principle aim of this Hand-
book, therefore, is to bring religious and denominational traditions and cultures into a conversation.

A central question which has concerned us in the conception of this Handbook, is what Practical Theology can contribute to the perception of lived religion in different cultural contexts and religious traditions. Is not the distinction between religion and culture rather blurred and therefore inappropriate? How can Practical Theology refer to other religions and relationships without othering? In our academic context, very often Religious Studies relate to the claim of a supposedly ‘objective perspective’ on religious phenomena. As editors, we are convinced that it is helpful to disclose one’s own self-relation to the object of research. This is also part of a process of learning in ethnographic research.

The answers we give in this Handbook attempt to culturally situate every description of practice and discourse of religion. The position of the author, his or her cultural context, and his or her religious affiliation and individual religious conviction must be made explicit in the processing of the topic. However, this can be at the expense of the general scope of the representation again and lead to the fact that Practical Theology merely makes positional statements. Therefore, we presuppose, those who belong to other traditions or religious communities or who move in different cultural and social contexts must also be able to understand the practical-theological analysis and reflection of religious practices and communities. We hope that the global perspective transcends boundaries between cultures and religions by making visible connecting themes beyond distinction. Therefore we talk about a global approach instead of intercultural or interreligious theology. Talking of inter-culturalism and inter-religiosity starts from the assumption of religions and cultures as more or less fixed social bodies, and space of intersection in-between. Instead, we assume that there are no fixed boundaries between religions and cultures. Rather, in the globalized world we are involved in dynamic processes of cultural and religious transformation creating a complex entanglement between different religious traditions, cultures, discourses, communities, and practices. This entanglement is what we seek to highlight in this anthology.

Bibliography


