1 Introduction

In the second half of the twentieth century a deliberate shift of perspective occurred in practical theology. The discipline started to give special attention to reality, not only of the church and ministry, but also of culture, society, and religion in general as an empirical realm to be considered. The way in which the individual experiences their religiosity and spirituality inside and outside the institutional and traditional sphere of the church or other religious tradition began to acquire greater relevance, whether their experience related to a religious system or not. The concept of lived religion emerged from this empirical turn as a way of observing and reading the context of life and of religion outside the strictly institutional, normative, traditional, and dogmatic realm of the church. Thus, lived religion has become for practical theology at the same time a kind of hermeneutics, a key to read the context, but also a phenomenon of expression of religiosity and religion in a broader sense. This article intends to contribute to the reflection on the hermeneutics and the phenomenon of lived religion in its relation with practical theology with particular attention to the Brazilian and Latin American context, where religion, religiosity and also lived religion exist in an exuberant manner, and where, however, there has been little reflection on the basis of the concept of lived religion.

I learned about the possibility of an interest in the investigation of religious expressions and experiences outside of the ecclesiastical and theological institutional realm when I was doing my doctorate in Germany, at the University of Hamburg, at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s. Professor Hans-Martin Gutmann (1998, 2009, 2013) had recently come to that university and it was from him that I heard for the first time about the potential relation between theology and popular culture, particularly cinema, but also music and literature. This combination was something uncommon and strange for me, but fascinating at the same time, because it enabled me to combine two things in which I was deeply interested, which are theology and contemporary culture. The first texts in which I came across the concept of lived religion as such were the works of Failing and Heimbrock (1998) and Gräb (1995, 2000, 2002, 2006). At that time, I still wasn’t aware of the fact that in the Brazilian and Latin American context, where religion and religiosity are very much present, one could also feel the pulsing of something like a lived religion outside of religious institutions, and that several studies, although they did not explicitly use this concept, analyzed, in different ways, religion and religiosity in a manner that was similar to the investigations of lived religion.

After finishing my studies in Germany, my church sent me to my first field of ministry. Contrary to all my expectations and personal projects, my first field of
work was a pastoral ministry at a Lutheran school in southern Brazil. I was standing, on a daily basis, in front of children and youths who experienced life and religion in a de-institutionalized, de-traditionalized, pragmatic and individualized manner, with little involvement or interest in the church or formal religious issues, who were resistant to classical traditions of theology, indifferent to orthodox biblical and theological questions. At the same time, they showed openness to messages about the meaning of life, broader forms of spirituality and mystical experience, and overcoming crises and fears.

In this article, then, I intend, as mentioned above, to define lived religion in its relation with practical theology taking into account the changes – or at least the change of perception – in religion, culture and society in recent decades, in particular taking into consideration the Brazilian and Latin American context. I try to point out possibilities of a practical theology in dialogue with lived religion that may contribute towards rethinking the role of the church in a context in need of meaning and social transformation. The article is organized as follows: First I discuss aspects of the change in research on religion and culture as the backdrop of what later came to be defined as lived religion. Next, I attempt to delineate a concept of lived religion in its relation to practical theology. In the third section I reflect on the possibilities of a lived religion in the Brazilian and Latin American context. Finally, I discuss some consequences of this study for practical theology.¹

2 Religion, Culture and Context in Change – the Backdrop of Lived Religion

The backdrop of the concept of lived religion emerged from a change in culture and society and, at the same time, from a change in theory and research, especially in sociology of religion, in the twentieth century. This was a cultural turn in which empirical, cultural, and hermeneutical perspectives began to play a preponderant role (Herrmann 2007, 45; McGuire, 2008; Ammerman 2007). These changes have been articulated on the basis of new assumptions in sociological research and assimilated by theology, to a great extent, through a change of the role of the church and the relation of people with religion and the church, especially in the post-industrial European context (Herrmann 2007, 45). In a general way, facing the profound changes in the view of the world and of reality: pluralization, diversity, globalization and, at the same time, the individualization of the conceptions of life, traditional and institutional models of religion were all no longer able to respond effectively to the permanent human longing for meaning in life (Gräb 2000, 23–35).

¹ Some of the authors I’m citing in this article, have written their texts in German and other languages. As I quote them, I translated the excerpts into English, so that the text can be understood in its entirety. Those quotes are marked with “o.t.” for “own translation”.
In 1967, Thomas Luckmann published a small book in the form of an essay called *The Invisible Religion* in which he tried, starting from sociology, to broaden the concept of religion beyond a sociology of religion, by including other forms of religiosity in modern society in that concept. According to this author, secularization did not mean an overcoming of religiosity and religion in society and in people’s mindset, but rather a change and broadening of religious experience in the form of a syncretic, secular, and private religion – something that empirical research on religion should take into account. The displacement of religion towards the outside of what sociology used to define as religion took place, basically, because of the freedom that modern individuals have to organize their understanding and experience of religion independently of sociostructural determinations (Luckmann 2014, 1996).

The essay on invisible religion led Luckmann to a functionalist and anthropological definition of religion according to which human beings transcend biological beings to become human. In other words, the religious phenomenon is part of the human process of socialization, in the objectivation of subjective experiences and in each one’s individuation. In his Postscript, added nearly 25 years later, Luckmann states:

> I continue to hold the view that the basic function of ‘religion’ consists in transforming members of a natural species into protagonists inside a historically grown social order. Religion is found everywhere where the behavior of members of the species becomes actions that can be morally evaluated, where a Self is in a world inhabited by other beings for whom and against whom he acts in a way that can be morally evaluated. (Luckmann 2014, 138; o.t.)

The idea of invisible religion would be given many other names in sociology, such as modern religion, diffuse religion, individual, civil, popular, mediatic (Herrmann 2000; Gräb 2002), everyday religion (Ammerman 2007) or even lived religion (McGuire 2008) and would enable sociological research of religion to not only look at what is outside traditional and institutional religious expressions, but also to rethink its own closed and objective conceptions of religion (Asad 1993; Port 2011). The way people live, experience and express religious convictions and views acquires value, be it in the realm of religion itself, in daily life, in the world of labor and business, in consumption, leisure and entertainment, in the search for life quality and health, or in the new views on spirituality (Streib 2008).

McGuire raises the following question:

> Scholars of religion, especially sociologists, must reexamine their assumptions about individuals’ religious lives. What might we discover if, instead of looking at affiliation or organization participation, we focused first on individuals, the experiences they consider most important, and the concrete practices that make up their personal religious experience and expression? What if we think of religion, at the individual level, as an ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy – even contradictory – amalgam of beliefs and practices that are not necessarily those religious institutions consider important? (McGuire 2008, 4)
In this article I do not operate with a concept of religion as a set of values, beliefs, rites and symbols around the transcendent or numinous. In my view, that does not equate to the concept of lived religion. Lived religion is instead a way of perceiving religion in its practical, every day, cultural experience, in a dynamic and contextual manner, providing people with a meaning for life (Gräb 2000, 13–22). Therefore, I consider those investigations that open up the individual experiences and practices that are equivalent or come close to what I understand by religion in a broad sense, to be particularly important. Along with the works of Luckmann (2014, 1996), Asad (1993) and Van de Port (2011), I value specific studies on lived religion that do not adopt a concept of religion as a trans-historical, isolated, and timeless essence. Religion is, rather, something that lies in people’s views and experiences and therefore changes along with time, culture, and society.

3 Lived Religion and Practical Theology

These changes in sociology of religion have also had an impact on practical theology, mainly as far as the relation between theology, culture and the individual are concerned. It is important to note that in theology there was already at least one articulation of the correlation between theology and culture, which is Paul Tillich’s theology of culture. These changes led not only to the question about a correlation between culture and religion, but also to the great question about whether religion exists and lives outside of and beyond institutions such as the church. Can one identify religious phenomena in spaces that do not see themselves as being religious, but can be understood as such from a theological-religious perspective?

The concept of lived religion in practical theology appears as a way of corroborating the insight that there are actually forms of lived religion in everyday life, in culture, individuality and in people’s life stories, which sometimes are conscious and related to a particular traditional religion and other times are unconscious and experienced without a religious connotation by a person or human group. Practical theology, now understood as the theory of religious practice (Steck 2000, 100), has an interest in these expressions as a way of rethinking itself and the church’s role in the present. Thus, lived religion is understood as a way of seeing and perceiving religion and theology not primarily based not on its theoretical, dogmatic traditions, and on the tradition of the church, but of what culture and people do and call religion and religious, as pointed out by Ganzevoort and Roeland:

The concepts of praxis and lived religion focus on what people do rather than on ‘official’ religion, its sacred sources, its institutes, and its doctrines. As such, practical theology has much in common with what in disciplines like anthropology, sociology, and media studies, is known as ‘the practical turn’; the turn away from institutes and (cultural) texts to the everyday social and cultural practices of ordinary people. (Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014, 93; o.t.)
Lived religion is a way of perceiving religious elements, contents and forms in the sphere of life, be it in everyday and personal experiences, or special moments of celebrations or crises, in various relationships, in leisure and entertainment. In sum, it is experienced outside of the domain of the religious institution: the worship service, the sacred sphere itself – although sometimes related to it. “This empirical orientation means that the attitude taken is more descriptive and analytical than normative. Another common ground seems to me that the textual side of religion can be understood in the sense of a cultural system of codes of meaning, with the help of which people interpret their lives.” (Herrmann 2007, 46; o.t.) The possibilities of perceiving this expression of lived religiosity can take place in the realm of a religious tradition, such as the church, by evaluating how people interpret and experience religion independently of the institution and its precepts, but also without relation to a particular religion.

This second possibility has to do with expressions in culture, in the media and in daily life, in elements, contents and forms where one perceives relations with religious elements. As pointed out by Gräb (2000, 39; o.t.) “lived religion, also Christian lived religion, is not simply found in the church.” These relations may be of a more explicit nature, such as references to religious contents and practices: lyrics of the U2 Band based on biblical references (40, for example), or the movie *Noah* by Darren Aronofsky (2014), based on the biblical narrative of the flood. Or they may contain more implicit expressions of religiosity that can be interpreted as a religious equivalent such as the devotion to the singer Madonna or touristic visits to places of memory such as the house of Anne Frank in Amsterdam.

In Gräb’s view, this lived religion can be seen in communication as an expression of the search for meaning for human existence.

According to this author, the human search for meaning in life, mainly through relationships and belonging – “Meaning is relationship, is connection, is connectedness.” (Gräb 2000, 13; o.t.) – takes place in a context of loss of value-related references, on the one hand, and on the other hand the pressure to guarantee a life in fullness vis-à-vis a diversity of roles on offer. In this sense, the reference of the Christian faith, which for generations has provided meaning for people, has become weaker in its role as a master key vis-à-vis the diversity of offers and possibilities of meaning (Gräb 2000, 14, 42–43; 2006, 17–23). Failing and Heimbrook (2001), although more focused on Christian practice in daily life, corroborate this proposal by reinforcing perception (*Wahrnehmung*) as a basic principle for present practical theology. According to these authors, the reason leading to this proposal has to do with the loss
of relevance of theology as a whole in the present, on the one hand, and the relevance of everyday life, on the other, mainly on the basis of Henning Luther’s work (1992), as a space of the subject’s experience of religiosity in the search for meaning and transcendence within the immanence of life.

It is important to note that lived religion is related not only with implicit forms of religion and religiosity, but also with explicit ones. In both cases religious traditions and matrices are important because it is on their foundations that lived religion can be understood and put into dialogue with practical theology itself. Sometimes one may have the impression that the phenomenon of lived religion is something new. McGuire (2008, 25–26) refutes this idea by showing that in the Late Middle Ages both Catholicism and Protestantism were not unified and homogeneous entities and that there were projects of consolidation of theological and practical patterns about people’s religious beliefs and experiences of an authoritarian nature. In other words, it seems that there have always been, even in biblical tradition, forms of religion that were lived at the margins of the official religion.

In the discussion on practical theology as hermeneutics of lived religion, Ganzevoort and Roeland define religion itself in an open and broad manner, i.e., “religion as the transcending patterns of action and meaning, emerging from and contributing to the relation with the sacred” (2014, 96). For these authors, this is a primarily functional definition that aims at a maximum of malleability so that we may be open to new and different forms of religion (Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014). For them, patterns of the transcendent should not be confused with a transcendent being but are processes of a transcending of borders in the relationship with something that involves us completely. In Luckmann’s view, transcendence is precisely that which surpasses the immediate evidence of the experience of the world of life (Luckmann 2014, 138). The core of Ganzevoort’s and Roeland’s definition, however, is the relation with the holy, which is not an infinitely open concept. For them, the notion of the holy implies at least a center around which our lives gravitate as well as a presence that evokes reverence and passion. This is often determined by the cultural context in which we live and follows the model of a religious tradition (Ganzevoort 2014, 322).

It must be added that from the very beginning the concept of lived religion has been treated as a complex and controversial concept, or, as Rössler puts it: “lived religion remains indeterminate, vague, unclear and difficult to demarcate.” (Rössler 1976, 67; o.t.) The uncertainty and unease brought by lived religion as a hermeneutics of practical theology are due to reasons that can be imagined, such as the opening of theology to the concept of religion, the complexification of the concept of religion itself and, last but not least, the decision to interpret it based on the transitoriness of concrete practices, individual practical, daily and cultural wisdom. Consequently, lived religion implies a change of perspective in theology: from theory to concrete practice, which is something that, as noted by Miller-McLemore, causes resistance and insecurity of various kinds (2016, 37–38). Using the hermeneutics of lived religion and recognizing the phenomenon of lived religion always involves the risk of
thinking about religion and theology beyond what has been standardized as a system or a truth.

Besides that, for theology and practical theology lived religion is just a contextual hermeneutics of change of religion and culture, a reading of people’s individual expressions and experiences, of the search for meaning expressed through aesthetics and communication. At a second moment, they dialogue with the basis of meaning, with the communication and tradition of theology and the church, as pointed out by Gräb (2000, 45; o.t.): “Practical-theological hermeneutics of religion is meant to orientate the life of the Church and of the Christians building it. It must therefore always connect lived religion in its plural meanings to the traditional stock of meaning of the Christian faith.”

4 Lived Religion and Religion in Brazil and Latin America

In contrast with the European context, in which the concept of lived religion emerged and which is marked by a certain secularism and individualization of religion, Brazilian reality is marked not only by religion and the church, but mainly by the manifestation of religion in the traditional and popular forms in all spheres of life. The first action undertaken by the Portuguese when they invaded the territory of what is now Brazil was to hold a mass, which was an emblematic event for religion and its later development. In spite of this Catholic liturgical inscription, it was not only the official form of the Catholic Christian faith that prevailed in the country, but also, from the very beginning, forms of religious syncretism with indigenous religions and later with religions of African origin, which have marked the Brazilian religious context in a permanent, unique and effervescent cultural and religious hybridity. The Protestant (beginning in the nineteenth century) and later Pentecostal (beginning in the twentieth century) contribution became a part of this religious hybridity and syncretism even when opposing them.

At present one can experience in Brazil – and, with due regard for the differences, in several other Latin American countries – the effects of this religious diversity and effervescence on a daily basis. One could almost say that what is experienced here is an excess of religion that goes beyond the religious field itself. Religion is part of culture, of society, of intimacy, of the body, of sexuality, of politics and the economy, of pop culture, of daily life. Besides the surprising emergence of new churches and religious movements in recent decades, syncretism, religious mobility, bricolage, and hybridity are part of trends that can be observed in the religious field. In the case of the growth of evangelicals, which Peter Berger (1999) calls “evangelical explosion” in his text on the desecularization of the world. It is significant that “already at the beginning of the 1990s one new church was founded on each workday only in the Greater Rio area” (Bartz, Bobsin and von Sinner 2012, 232).
On the other hand, there are studies indicating a significant decline of the historical denominations, such as Lutheranism and Catholicism, besides a growing lack of interest in the more traditional forms of religion, particularly Christianity, as I showed in the introduction when talking about my experience in the school pastoral ministry. In line with this trend, there is a considerable growth of the group of those without religion, for instance, according to data of the population census (Ribeiro 2013). Either with or without connection to this trend of a certain secularization and religious decline, the adhesion to practices and experiences of pop culture such as soccer, cinema, television, internet, and music, mainly among young people, has become widespread in Brazil. To what extent people look also for something religious or equivalent to religion in these environments is a question worth considering.

Is it possible to speak of a lived religion in this context? Certainly yes, considering its peculiarities. I think we can speak of a lived religion in the Brazilian context considering both popular religiosities and religious syncretism and hybridity as well as the explicit and implicit expressions of religiosity in everyday life, in the media and in pop culture. Regarding the first case, Adilson Schultz proposes a way of thinking about theological structure in Brazil based on the religious imaginary, which he defines as a nebula. He uses the term “nebula” because he believes that there is no base on which the religions or the Brazilian religious matrix is constructed, but rather something, meanings that move between the religions and their matrices (Schultz 2008, 31). According to the author, at least three references feed this nebula.

The main references of the Brazilian religious matrix are the religious meanings that come from Catholicism, from African-Brazilian religions and from Spiritualism – besides the indigenous meanings in the aspects in which they influence Umbanda, Spiritualism and Candomblé (Schultz 2008, 28).

According to him, this nebula, forged in a slow historical process, hovers over the country and is constantly repeated in a continuous process of resignification of values and principles, which is something that makes a lot of sense for the reflection on the various forms and contents of lived religion. The author complements his idea by taking the rhizomatic theory from Gilles Deleuze. As it is different from roots, that are connected to a same point, “the logic of the rhizome operates at the same time by ruptures and interconnections” (Schultz 2008, 33; o.t.).

Thus, lived religion has a lot of space in the perception of these popular phenomena, of syncretism and hybridity. The second space where lived religion can be observed is related to culture, daily life, life in its spontaneity, dynamism and needs. Beginning in the 1960s, with the articulation of a more contextual theology, which is liberation theology, a perception of and interest in the reality and expression of religion beyond the institutional realm arose in Latin America. The seeing-judging-acting method, as an analytical, hermeneutical, and practical process, shifted the doing of theology towards concrete life, towards practice, mainly where there was suffering under oppression, economic misery and discrimination of the poor, women, blacks and indigenous people. Doing theology meant considering and transforming this reality: “The presence of the church in society occurs not only through
religious (devotional, cultic, liturgical) practice; the religious practice has to be connected to ethical, social practices and to the promotion of human being as a whole and all human beings.” (Boff 1979, 13; o.t.) Theology starts from practice and returns to the practice of life.

In the following decades liberation theologies broadened and at the same time specified their perspective, going beyond economic, social, and political concerns. Gender theologies, for instance, pay great attention to everyday life. In recent years the feminist theologian Ivone Gebara, for example, has contrasted an epistemology of ordinary life with reflective, philosophical, and scientific epistemology, proposing everyday knowledge, mainly of people in a situation of vulnerability and invisibility, as the starting point for an authentic theology of life: “The originary place of theology is not logos about God, but human experience in its complexity and in its irreducibility to a single explanatory reason.” (Gebara 2015, 37; o.t.)

Rubem Alves articulated in a very explicit way a form of lived religion in the relation with everyday life, art and culture, a theology that unfolds in simple and concrete life. According to Alves, religion arises from the human need to imagine possibilities that overcome the harshness of life’s reality. In his words, “religion is the proclamation of the axiological priority of the heart over the raw facts of reality […] in the name of a vision, of a passion, of a love.” (Alves 1988, 19; o.t.) For him, theology permeates daily life and is intertwined in ordinary life, in the subject’s spirituality and religiosity in the different spaces of life, as a way of giving life meaning and beauty.

“For those who love, theology is a natural function just like dreaming, listening to music, drinking a good wine, weeping, suffering, protesting, hoping […]. Perhaps theology is nothing but a way of talking about these things by giving them a name and is only distinguished from poetry because theology is always made with a prayer. No, it doesn’t result from the ‘cogito’ in the same way as poems and prayers. It just sprouts and unfolds, as a manifestation of a way of being: ‘sigh of the oppressed creature’ – would a better definition be possible?” (Alves 1985, 21; o.t.)

Also, in the 1980s, the Dutch anthropologist André Droogers, then living in Brazil, wrote a small text proposing the existence in Brazil of what he called Minimal Brazilian Religiosity (MBR). “It is a religiosity that manifests itself publicly in secular contexts, that is conveyed by the mass media, but also by everyday language. It is part of Brazilian culture.” (Droogers 1987, 65; o.t.) This MBR is very similar to what I understand as lived religion in the sense that Droogers considers it as a set of religious and spiritual expressions present in the everyday life of Brazilian culture and free, general forms with which people express their beliefs and belonging, in a way that is independent of religious institutions. The author analyzes this MBR in politics, sports, television, radio, advertisements, sayings on bumpers, in everyday language and popular sayings.

Much more recently, in the last decade, a new concept has entered the scene, which is postcoloniality or decoloniality. Rather than a concept, postcoloniality or decoloniality is a new way of perceiving local (and global) reality on the basis of
its differences, subtleties, fragmentariness, alterities, ruptures and social, cultural, sexual, political and religious alternatives, rather than just on the basis of what is already established and standardized.

[...] speaking of postcoloniality means to challenge and deconstruct the dynamics of identification pursued by the colonial forces by exposing their own weaknesses through the heterogeneities inscribed in that Subject, with the purpose of making visible the intrinsic bifurcations that characterize the global context, which enable its constant malleability, transformation and openness to new forms of sociocultural construction. (Panotto 2016, 34–35; o.t.)

Here we have a great potential to think about lived religion in the Latin American context, since postcoloniality intensifies the gaze at culture, daily life, the body, highlighting particularly the difference, those aspects that do not fit into the homogeneous standards of the systems and absolute truths and are, for this reason, seen as weak, fragile, and vulnerable.

### 5 Consequences of a Hermeneutics of Lived Religion for Practical Theology

Practical theology is a critical reflection about praxis, about theories and perceptions of practice aiming at communicating the Gospel to the world. In this sense, the hermeneutics of religion is an indispensable way of understanding society, culture and human beings and their manners of experiencing and understanding life on the basis of religion. Lived religion is a way of initially observing a person’s religious reality to – based on this observation – take the way back into the communication of the Gospel (Ernst Lange), taking into account the theological, biblical, historical heritage and the church tradition. The hermeneutics of lived religion is not closed upon itself but serves as an instrument of reflection on the practical religion of individuals, cultures, and societies.

In this sense, one can see in the hermeneutics of lived religion at least three major consequences for practical theology. (1) Institutional religion, the church, no longer offers the whole meaning for the lives of people and societies today. As Gräb puts it: “Christian faith can no longer claim to give the definite answers to what is happening in the world as a whole and the history of mankind on the tiny earth on the edge of the immeasurable universe.” (Gräb 2000, 17; o.t.) The human search for meaning, however, remains. (2) It is necessary to understand other offers of meaning present in individualized, plural, and experiential society. Lived religion in its varied forms expresses and shapes the human search for meaning in life (Adam, 2017). Thus, lived religion makes it possible to rethink ways in which practical theology can help human beings to find the meaning offered by the Christian faith. Finally, (3) observing lived religion in its implicit and explicit forms is a way
of expanding practical theology itself as a discipline and of reinventing new forms of evangelism, mission, and experience of the Christian faith in today’s world.

Bibliography


