Birgit Weyel  
**Practical Theology and Religion**

1 **Introduction**

What is practical theology? What religious practice does it refer to? These definitions are highly relevant to me. As a chaired professor in Practical Theology at an old university in southern Germany, my work depends heavily on the answers to these questions. What subjects for research should I select and where do I find them? From what perspectives and with which methods should I proceed? For whom do I write? For what audience and with what goal? What is the relationship between the topics of my teaching/speaking engagements and the shifting interests of my research? At this point in my academic career, I have answered these questions with considerable diversity (Weyel 2006a, 2013, 2014, 2016). In addressing these matters, I also have to account for the shifting contexts and expectations which are brought to me and in which I conduct myself. Practical theology cannot be separated from religious practice – they must be sought and found together because together they form a common context. My understanding of religious practice informs my practical theology and vice versa. The proceeding discussion will unfold as follows: First, I will go deeper with these encyclopedic questions and bring them into contact with my particular framework. (2) In doing so, the topic at hand will fan out in various directions, unfolding intrinsic tensions in the field (3). Then, I will treat explicitly the topic of practical theology, lived religion (4.1), the concept of religious practice (4.2) and from there I will inquire about the theory-formation of practical theology.

2 **The Encyclopedic Question**

What from case to case we ought to understand by “practical theology” depends on several factors and their dynamic relationships: institutional setting, different methodological approaches, and corresponding theory-development, the overlapping of various contexts into which practical theology is speaking, the various expectations brought to practical theology, and last but not least the subjects who pursue practical theology as practical theology. The same may be said of other academic fields, but the complexity of the issue is often understated when speaking about practical theology. Hence Brett C. Hoover describes practical theology as a “hub of intersecting activities” (Hoover 2019, 7). The following sketch will be one that both serves the current understanding of the field and allows room for new models. This contribution operates against the background assumption that practical theology is an academic form of knowledge that cannot be – nor should be – considered apart from its constructive character and embedded context.
How one classifies or delineates a particular field of study is a central question. The outcome of this sort of reflection on the nature of practical theology helps not only the one practicing to obtain information but it can also strengthen the possibility for dialogue in inter-cultural and global contexts. Kathleen A. Cahalan und Gordon S. Mikoski have chosen a similar approach, in that they liken the field of practical theology to a conversation consisting of many voices (Cahalan and Mikoski 2014, 271), the similarities and differences of which they can only make explicit in the conclusion at the end of their book. However, the foundations and presentation of practical theology are in many ways confined to a particular framework. This expresses itself in select processes and decisions. What issues and what objects are being dealt with – and which are excluded? What literature is consulted? What names are mentioned, and which names are not? How is the material organized and what logic does the ordering of chapters follow? The problem is not that these decisions must be made, but rather that they are not known to authors. It is not as if these have been made transparent and key features have been established as norms. Against the background of this only hinted-at problem, I have made two basic decisions for my presentation. First it seems helpful to me in the first place to state the tensions and ambiguities in practical theology, without having to clarify them in one way, or disambiguate them in another (cf. the approach of Mercer and Miller-McLemore 2016). This therefore takes into account what has often been described in the history of practical theology as the “constitutive uncertainty of its foundations and objectives” (Krause 1972, xx). This uncertainty is not a flaw; it lies established in the very dynamic of the discipline: its openness to practical issues in the Church and in Christianity (Albrecht 2000, 321). Second, on the other hand, this treatment of practical theology does not claim to cover the (singular!) practical theology for the German-speaking world or even continental Europe. While a surface-level representation such as this might offer some orientation, it also brings with it unsatisfactory oversimplification.

Furthermore, one must avoid the risk of eurocentrism, by, for example, singling out Continental Europe as the home of major theological developments. “It is probably not claiming too much to say that Continental Europe was the cradle of practical theology, at least of practical theology as an academic discipline” (Schweitzer 2012, 465). Indeed, there very well may be comparable developments, similarities, parallels, and mutual influences in other countries. Overview-sketch presentations frequently unfold master narratives, which assert claims of origins and simple cause and effect relationships. In these historical arch-narratives, the reciprocity of influences, as well as the complexity of practices often go ignored. To avoid this, the following sketch only attempts to describe the constitutive challenges which arise when considering the task of Protestant practical theology in a specific institutional context – namely a public university in southern Germany. It does intend to project these issues unilaterally.
3 Tensions due to the History of Practical Theology in Germany

I understand practical theology to be an academic discipline which in the German-speaking context is taught within a theology department. The encyclopedic rationale for the field is closely tied to its institutionalization in the historical context of the Berlin University reform in 1810. Friedrich Schleiermacher, who at the time worked as an advisor to Wilhelm von Humboldt, contributed substantially to the model of the reform (Weyel 2006b, 51–55). Although Schleiermacher himself was opposed to the formation of an independent chair for practical theology, his vision for the university (Schleiermacher [1808] 1964) and his theological encyclopedia, the brief outline (Schleiermacher [1810/11] 1998), led to the establishment of practical theology as a discipline and the scientification of its theory and practice (Barth 2017; Gräb 2017; Weyel 2022). The scientific reformulation of theology that occurred in this neo-humanist university context continues to shape the understanding and regulation of practical theology in the German state-church today. In proceeding I will go deeper into this historical background.

3.1 The Scientification of the Relationship between Theory and Practice

The Prussian university reform was characterized by the neo-humanist education ideal, which sought to train people in independent, scientific work, as opposed to a more general formation. Related to this was the view that one can only react to societal changes sustainably through self-education and the ability to make independent judgments. Academic study accordingly intended to make a long-lasting and high-quality contribution to one’s qualification for a given job, thereby doing away with strict qualification requirements. This is also the case for theology, which at the institutional level of the university is regarded as a positive science. The object of theology – insofar as it concerns the action-oriented side of Christianity – is “the qualification of competent leadership for the Christian Church” (Gräb 2017, 399).

This readjustment of theology brought about long-lasting effects, which, although they were a reaction to societal changes in the 19th and 20th century (Drehsen 1988; Drehsen 2007), continue to shape today. Some of the ramifications of this shift include the differentiation between the Church and Christianity – a concept which brought about the strict separation of religious practice from theological reflection – as well as the relativization of various claims to validity through a growing historical consciousness (Laube 2007, 64–68). Against the backdrop of the growing need for reflection and orientation, religious practice was raised to the rank of a narrowly defined and institutionalized object of academic study. This vision took as a prerequisite the awareness of a necessary differentiation between theology as a form of re-
reflection and religious practice as the exercise of religion. Schleiermacher placed religious practice at the center of all theology where it formed the connection between the various theological disciplines: “Theology is a positive science the parts of which are only connected to a whole by their common relationship to a specific faith i.e., by their relationship to Christianity” (Schleiermacher 1998, §1; o.t.). In light of today’s growing religious pluralization, it is worth noting that this model does not only apply to Christianity but rather can speak to any number of faiths. The understanding of theology as reflection on religious practice by religious communities was not, for Schleiermacher, an explicitly Christian or Protestant model. It requires only a commitment to community building and an interest in scientific self-reflection. Certainly, this theological model impacts how various religious communities in Germany operate – for example various Islamic groups. Nowadays if these groups wish to achieve official state recognition, they must abide by this model. Hence, we hear people speaking today of the “churchification” of Islam (von Sydow 2010).

The relationship between theology and Christianity in Schleiermacher’s model contains both a functional as well as a substantial aspect; these are rooted in the material essence-defining of Christianity. The unity of theology consists in the “substantial-functional dual constitution of the Wissenschaft of Christianity for the promotion of Christianity” (Laube 2007, 81; o.t.). By this essence-defining of Christianity we are not to understand some speculative principle or dogmatic which is subject to critical, empirical verification. For Schleiermacher Christianity comes into view as a historical phenomenon; its essence is determined by historical analyses of the status quo, not by metaphysical or supernatural characteristics. The essence of Christianity is obtained in the analysis of its historical manifestations. It consists of a “reflected historicity” (Laube 2007, 81; o.t.). The essence of Christianity, therefore, cannot be located outside of history; it is woven into history and can only be derived from it through processes of reconstructive interpretation. Dogmatics is therefore properly considered part of practical theology, in that it leads to critical self-reflection of how Christianity developed and became what it is.

This course set out in the early 19th century continues to have an impact in many respects. Practical theology is an academic field whose relationship to its subject is in need of constant re-explanation. In Germany the academic field of practical theology is somewhat of a balancing act: it must emphasizes its relationship to practice, while at the same time maintaining proper distance. Practical theology does not understand itself as applied science. On the one hand it must uphold its practical relevance for its practitioners, while at the same time maintaining its academic integrity with other fields at the university.
3.2 Formation for Clergy and Teachers as res mixta (The Working together of Religious Communities with State Involvement)

To this day, the churches in Germany hold that the training for pastoral ministry should mirror that of other careers; theological study at a (state) university should be a prerequisite for the obtaining of a church office. This decision was maintained even after the Church and State in Germany separated from one another in 1919. Still today the participation of religious communities (churches) and the state involvement in the education of religious teachers and clergy are intimately intertwined through legal relations (Christoph 2009). The state’s interest in the academic training for religious teachers and ministers (pastoral jobs) has been recently renewed (2014) through the establishment of centers for Islamic theology in Germany. On the one hand, this historical state-church model is expanding to encompass other religious communities (and is therefore strengthened); on the other hand, there are political voices emerging who, in light of growing religious pluralization and diminishing numbers of church membership, plead for a reduction of state involvement in religious education and to allow for self-management among religious communities.

Different theologies are confronted with both the expectations of the church community and those studying for religious occupations (for example those who are doing apprentices in a church). Theologies are therefore faced with the challenge of integrating the practical-religious needs for the general community, while keeping in view the professional interests (especially course curriculum) of the students who are training to become teachers, ministers, and to occupy other professions in the religious fields. These occupations have the central task of determining the proper subject matter for practical theology, as well as the objectives of doctrine and research. For this reason, the current model for the study of Protestant practical theology is oriented toward the tasks of preaching, pastoral ministry, and education. Even recent practical theology textbooks which attempt to closely conform to curricular requirements follow this profession-oriented principle (Karle 2020; Fechtnere et al. 2017). In a way, the pastoral paradigm is reproduced in class and the body of knowledge of practical theology is connected back to its assumed relevance for career preparation. In order to ensure the development of practical theology is oriented solely toward profession preparation, textbooks have been expanded to include reflections on the general framework of religious practice (e.g., religion in modern and late modern era, individualization, and secularism (e.g., Fechtnere et al. 2017). The constructive character of practical theology is especially evident in these descriptions. On the one hand, the character of practical theology remains abstract. On the other hand, theories in practical theology are contextualized – developed in light of the descriptive categories of modern, late modern, and postmodern. One theoretical model by Wolfgang Steck takes an inductive approach – it integrates numerous independent theoretical elements into his presentation and in a detailed
manner seeks to identify the core profile of specific and selective manifestations of actualized, lived out religion.

“In order to maintain the authenticity of practical religion and at the same time shield it from theoretical alienation, empirical manifestations of contemporary Christian practice are not observed from the distant perspective of academic theorist, rather they are represented as they are themselves: partly in their immediate social-cultural expression, partly as presented in its own reflective self-description” (Steck 2000, 16; o.t.). Only in the subsequent interpretation of this system of categories is a practice theory drafted that aims to integrate reflections developed in the practice itself.

3.3 Practical Theology as Theology

By virtue of its institutional context, practical theology is placed alongside her theological sister-disciplines as part of an organized whole (a theology faculty or department). Administrative matters that pertain to the teaching of and commitment to evangelical theology (for example granting degrees, conferring venia legendi, establishing study regulations) fall under the jurisdiction of confessional theology and are shielded from outside influence. What falls into the area of facility administration and what should be left to the influences of confessional principles remains to be negotiated by the university administration, state department of science, and the evangelical churches. Since education policy in Germany lies within the sovereignty of each specific federal state (Bundesland) and the status of the Faculty of Theology belongs to the res mixta of the church and state, church agreements are negotiated and closed at the state level (for Tübingen: Baden-Württemberg). In the Evangelical Church Contract Baden-Württemberg (Evangelischer Kirchenvertrag Baden-Württemberg), which merged the church territories of Baden and Württemberg, it was established that evangelical theology would be taught at the University of Tübingen, and an adequate endowment would be granted on the part of the state:

The Evangelical-theological departments at the Universities of Heidelberg and Tübingen remain for the cultivation of the teaching and research of evangelical theology – an integral part of European academic culture – and for the academic formation of pastors and teachers in school religious education. An adequate representation of the five core theological subjects ranging from philosophy of Christian religion to ancient languages is guaranteed. These five core subjects include Old Testament, New Testament, Church History, Systematic Theology, and Practical Theology. (Evangelischer Kirchenvertrag 2007, Art. 3; o.t.)

The number of appointed chairs (15) was explicitly noted at the time of the unification; it remains to be seen whether this specification is to be understood as normative or descriptive. There is also the question of whether the state interest in maintaining academic theology will remain in the future and whether the cost for its maintenance will increase as the number of students decrease. Among interdiscipli-
nary classes, courses of study, support agreements, and research societies, there are numerous models that do not question academic theology itself as an organizational unit. Since theology is represented at the *Universitas Litterarum*, it is viewed by other disciplines as a cooperation partner and vice versa. As such, theological study can pair itself with other disciplines and form combined degrees or courses of study and research societies for which there exist third party funding opportunities.

The institutional framework of the state church treats protestant theology as a science to which practical theology belongs as a core subject. This means that practical theology is permanently linked to the sister disciplines with whom it forms course plans and degree programs and with whom it enters conversation. In this interdisciplinary vision we get a better glimpse of theology as a whole as well as what protestant theology actually is, when it is viewed as its own subject and not merely as a husk. The question of what makes practical theology a unique discipline with its own theory; it should not be treated as merely a bridge builder between other theological disciplines and church practice. The move toward empirical methods in the past centuries has contributed to the establishment of practical theology’s independence from systematic theology and exegesis. Reception arenas also help; this sort of empirical research frequently arouses interests in church settings (pastoral conventions, academies, church administrations). Additionally, by using shared methods and closely connected theoretical approaches, opportunities arise for cooperation with other empirically oriented fields apart from theology. Despite this, however, the “fundamental problem” is still not totally resolved (Albrecht 2011, 23; o.t.). The problem “lies in the tension between the goal of practical theology to have specified rules for its craft which do not raise scientific claims and the expectation to have scientific justifications for these rules on hand, which do not collide or compete with the goals, procedures, or topics of concern for other theological disciplines” (Albrecht 2011, 23; o.t.).

### 3.4 Practical Theology and Other Forms of Knowledge

While reflections on the relationship between theory and practice find their place in the academy, other forms of knowledge which do not conform to academic standards or follow academic rules of discourse are directed to other institutions. Following the model whereby one begins with university study followed by hands-on training in field (paid internships, apprenticeship) and keeping the commitment to the principle of life-long learning, further education in other forms of knowledge can be added onto one’s course of education. From the perspective of the academy, the standards of knowledge in the non-university, church contexts (for example in seminary) fall far short. From the perspective of the churches, academic practical theology is out
of touch with real life and its relevance to practice is questioned. From the history of practical theology, many examples of this can be called to mind. Of course, these are not limited to mutual criticism or the juxtaposition of different forms of knowledge. The integration of internships as part of academic study, the appointing of practitioners to university teaching positions, the reading of academic literature in seminary courses, the invitation of professors to courses for professional development of pastors and other church-related professionals and seminars, are all ways examples of attempts to bridge the gap between different forms of knowledge, even if through such encounters the differences between them are made more evident. On the one hand, practical theologians can provide insight when invited to serve on advisory councils and boards in churches, on the other hand these visits could be occasions for their own knowledge acquisition.

Approaches that apply the concept of theology to religious subjects with programmatic intention can also be classified as attempts at integration and bridge-building (Luther 1987). For example, academic theologians often take statements gathered empirically from children and youth and link these to theological concepts (children’s theology, youth theology) (Schweitzer and Schlag 2012; Zimmermann 2016). Paradoxically, in doing so, the theories developed from within an academic culture and constructed according to its own inner logic, are undermined at the same time they are carried on. In proceeding, the concept of theology will first be made ambiguous, so that by detailing the criticism of children’s theology it will in turn be clarified.

The concept of a collaborative practical theology integrates different forms of knowledge that work together constructively, by differentiating their respective roles in the pursuit of knowledge (e.g., de Roest 2019). Academic practical theology can bring practitioners into the research process who can provide different perspectives from their various communities. The knowledge of these practitioners is valuable – increasing both the utility and the benefits that the research can then contribute back to the practice. In my assessment, this integrative approach is particularly strong. It allows me as a scholar to systematically reflect on the discussions in my field and consider how they are present in ethnographic contexts. At the same time, however, when practical theology proceeds collaboratively, it remains open to tensions. Said otherwise: the practice of research requires one to reflect on the constructing and manufacturing character of sociality and intersubjectivity while keeping view toward practitioners. Ethnomethodology has brought attention to problems regarding the governing rules of the field, particularly as they relate to conversations with bureaucratic organizations and entities. Often in my work I find myself in “situations of justification” (Bohnsack 2017, 42; o.t.), whose definitional fixations and interpretations I do not carry over to the realm of research. The envisioned practical utility assumes that the researcher improves and adapts according to the needs of practitioners in the field. I will take up again the question of the object of practical theology and its character as theology in a line of thought which attempts to present the object and theory of practical theology via the concept of religious practice.
4 Religious Practice: The Subject and Formation of Practical Theology

4.1 Religion as Lived Religion

What we identify as religion in a pluralistic society must be marked and identified in connection to a concept of religion as religion (Matthes 1992). The variety and diversity of religious practice correspond to contexts in which we live. In our case, religion is embedded in conditions marked by individualization and pluralization. The concept of “lived religion” takes up as its object the embedding of religion in various life contexts (see the chapter of Ruard Gaanzevooort in this book). Since practical theology identifies “lived religion” as its object, it carries with this claim the assertion that it makes a principal contribution to an overall theory of Christianity. Practical theology assumes, “that there is no phenotype of religious people which exists independent from the construction of a normative, scientific concept of religion” (Pfleiderer 2002, 33; o.t.). Theories of a lived religion are “strategies to make religion visible.” (Pfleiderer 2002, 33; o.t.) These strategies are critical toward theories of secularization, which attach themselves to the dwindling of institutionalized religion and the disappearance of religions as a whole. A large part of the empirical-qualitative work in practical theology (which has emerged in the last twenty years) is connected to the work of Thomas Luckmann (1991) – namely the making visible of what he describes as “invisible religion.” This approach surveys processes of constructing religion, structures of everyday life (Merle 2011), and biographical interpretations (Gräb 1998). Since religion is lived out in various and individualized ways, it must be first named and identified as religion. It belongs to the very nature of practical theology that both in research and when working with its subjects, it is always developing its understanding of religion anew. Any work on the concept of religion is in principle interminable since our understanding of religion cannot be explained apart from the concrete manifestations of its practitioners. In this context there is also the task of the operationalization of religion, which seeks to treat these in a methodologically controlled manner, according to their various contexts. The research processes, between the work on the concept of religion and empirical survey, lead to a hermeneutical circle of mutual clarification (Weyel 2013).

4.2 Religion as Social Practice: Perspectives on the Social Nature of Religion

Against the focus on the religious subject and the individualized forms of religion beyond institutional contexts (e.g., churches), the question of the social and cultural embeddedness of religion also presents itself. An empirical-phenomenological ap-
proach to religion maintains a constant reference to cultural interpretive patterns, narratives, etc. without reconstructing some underlying phenomenon of consciousness of the surveyed subjects. Interpretations of religious experience are tied to the signs, images, and texts transmitted by a given society or culture. In the wake of material, special, and digital turns, artifacts, spaces, and technologies also come into view. Following and building on the concept of “lived religion” is the more recently developed emphasis on religion as social practice. The stress on social practice seeks to integrate the social dimension of religion into our understanding of religion as a concept. Religion is something that is always lived in specific forms, from within certain culturally transmitted norms; it is given to an individual, but the individual can adjust its form and modify it in an individual way. The religious person is thus characterized neither as an individual purely shaped by their own subjectivity nor a “marionette in a theater of social practice” (Laube 2015, 47; o.t.). Religious practice is embedded in concrete social relations determined by “doings and sayings” (Laube 2015, 47; o.t.; according to Schatzki 2002). These social interdependences provide patterns of religious practice that are fairly stable. In addition to the doings and sayings, the concept of social practice also conceptualizes mindset as part of interactive i.e., mutual practices. Alongside the interactivity of social practice, its reflexivity is also important. What should be identified as religion is not always strictly determined. Rather it is constantly identified anew amidst various social practices – even when it is not explicitly identified, it remains implicit.

4.3 A Theory of Religious Practice as Theology

Practical theology shares methodological approaches and vocabulary with religious studies, sociology of religion, psychology of religion, cultural studies, and others. One might ask then whether there is an essential difference between the discipline of theology and the study of religion, or whether all empirical religious research should rather be shared among participants of all possible disciplines. The fields of theology do not possess research methods that are exclusive to them alone; rather theology shares the canon of methods with the humanities, social, and cultural sciences. The institutional expansion of the theological disciplines is a foundational decision that promotes scientific reflection on religion – it seeks to understand how religions are lived out in communities of faith in Germany. The fact that theology has a scientific nature and at the same time confessional-religious “ties” is thus viewed positively. Theology as an academic discipline does not exist solely to serve the self-understanding of religions in society or to work against the emigration of religious communities out of society. The presence of a religious scholar in the field should therefore not be viewed as a hindrance to research and teaching, rather the opposite: an occasion for productivity. The personal commitment between the scholar and the object of her study is made transparent by the institutional setting of theology. It is possibly this transparency with one’s personal commitments that
sets theology apart from other academic fields dealing with religion. The freedom and potential for reflection that practical theology holds towards confessing communities is owed to its conversations with other disciplines and its institutional location, which places it both near and far from the lived religion of these communities. One might ask then whether this same transparency of a scholar’s personal commitment to her field of study might be a useful methodological move in other fields. In ethnology, proximity and distance to the object of research is both reflected upon and methodologically enacted. The clarification of the social position of the researcher plays an important role, especially in connection with the methodology of the participatory observation. Participation and observation are conceived as an “ongoing changing of registers” (Breidenstein et al. 2013, 67; o.t.) which make it possible to approximate and observe cultural practices and trace the meaning and relevance attributed to these practices. On the other hand, however, it must at the same time be possible to take the perspective of reflective distance. Neither proximity nor distance alone allows for good ethnography; it is rather the “double movement” between participation and observation, proximity, and distance. “Both ethnographers, the ‘native’ and the ‘foreigner’ confront this demand, only from different starting points” (Breidenstein et al. 2013, 68; o.t.). The oscillation between proximity and distance and the reflection on changing registers is an epistemic model for those disciplines concerned with lived religion. In any case, as I understand it, it is the model for practical theology. Theoretical approaches under the umbrella of practice-theory which have provoked a wide resonance in practical theology in recent years are, in my view, helpful, precisely because they create space for multi-perspective research approaches and bring practical theology as itself a form of practice into consideration.

Bibliography


