1 Introduction

Of all the entries in the *International Handbook*, this chapter deals with one of the broadest and, dare I say, most important questions: How do practical theologians engage religion and social science? I say ‘broadest’ and ‘most important’ because the rise of social science lies at the heart of practical theology’s modern ascent, and social scientific analysis shapes almost all practical theological endeavors. Nearly all the chapters in the third part of this book deal with particular sciences (e.g., anthropology of religion; psychology of religion; sociology of religion). In fact, most chapters in the book as a whole display the value of social science in analyzing specific concepts (e.g., family; media) and practices (e.g., conversion; fasting). Despite the challenges in using social science, it remains an essential partner in practical theology, comprising a basic approach to the study of religion and, as I will argue, an essential component of practical theology’s twentieth-century rebirth and continued growth.

Engagement with social science raises all sorts of questions for practical theologians, however. How should we approach them? What is social science? What is religion? What kind of knowledge comes from each discipline or practice? What does theology gain from social science, and what, if anything, does religion and theology have to offer? Does social science have hidden values that demand analysis? Is it complicit with religion in imposing colonialist assumptions in its study of the ‘other’?

Although this essay will not answer these questions exhaustively, it provides initial tools for addressing them. The main focus is to show how the rise of social science sparked a rejuvenation of practical theology and became one of its most important theoretical approaches. I begin with a description of the growth of social science in the United States, focusing on psychology. I then turn to an analysis of methods, brief illustration, and a few of the dilemmas. In a way, this chapter provides a metatheory for a challenge that implicitly faces all the contributors to the *Handbook* and all practical theologians – how to relate religion and social science in doing practical theology.
2 Context: What Personal and Historical Perspectives Shape This Approach?

Standing in a lecture hall filled with psychology professors and students in 1977, I struggled to make my college senior project comprehensible. In talking about the intersection of religion and psychology in hospital ministry, I might as well have been on Mars. My campus – a small liberal arts college in the Midwest – exemplified a state of affairs that is still prevalent forty years later in social science departments of most universities around the United States. People harbor lingering suspicion about religious belief or incomprehension of religion as a valuable academic subject. This situation remains a problem not only for practical theologians but also for all scholars in religion.

Although I majored in psychology, it was not my psychology professor and advisor but a favorite religion professor who grasped my intersectional interests in religion and psychology and recommended that I spend ten weeks in a Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) program for my senior off-campus project. So, for a quarter of my final year of college, I was the sole twenty-year-old among two elderly Catholic sisters and four Protestant clergymen doing the yearlong chaplain residency to retool for a second career outside the parish. They adopted me into supervisory seminars like a mascot, and I absorbed new ideas, reading some of the earliest efforts to connect religion and psychology by David Roberts (1950) and Albert Outler (1954). Little did I know that terms like *pastoral counseling* had only been coined a few decades earlier by pioneering figure Seward Hiltner (1949). Although an unofficial unit in CPE as a college senior turned out to be a great, even life changing experience, putting ‘ministry’ and ‘therapy’ together did not translate easily to faculty and peers back home in the psychology department. Honestly, I am not sure that I understood myself how they related to one another except that both areas seemed convinced that they possessed truths about human behavior and how to make people and the world better.

So, what exactly does the engagement of religion and social science in practical theology entail and why is it important? As my story suggests, I bring only one perspective, but it is emblematic of what was percolating in the United States between the mid-twentieth century and the 1980s with ongoing implications for today.¹ As an undergraduate in the 1970s, I rode the last great wave of psychology’s US heyday. Only a couple decades earlier, during the 1950s and 1960s, pastoral counseling was the “glamour discipline” of theological education (Patton 1990, 851), a glorified position in theological and religious studies that it has lost in recent decades.

Fascination with psychology in the United States had begun with Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* at the turn of the twentieth century and his trip to Clark Univer-

¹ For a contrast, see Schweitzer (1999) on Germany.
sity in 1909. Freud came with Carl Jung on invitation from G. Stanley Hall. Hall had earned the first US doctorate in psychology at Harvard in 1878 and studied with William James who taught the nation’s first psychology class. Even as James spearheaded a new department in the 1870s, he remained skeptical about psychology as a discipline. However, in contrast to its lukewarm European reception, psychoanalysis took the United States by storm. Cultural critics like Philip Rieff claimed “triumph of the therapeutic” – a conversion from previous “character ideals” of “political man,” “economic man,” and “religious man” that had dominated earlier societies to the rise of “psychological man” (1963, 8–11). The new ideal was marked by what Freud himself called an “analytic attitude,” a kind of detached “anti-doctrine” that reduced human aims to the “private needs of private man” (Rieff 1963, 11–12).

So began the earliest US efforts to study religion and social science as a practical theological endeavor. A small but powerful array of early leaders, such as Roberts, Hiltner, Lutheran neo-orthodox scholar Paul Tillich, and humanist psychologists Rollo May, Erich Fromm, and Carl Rogers, gathered regularly in New York City to engage new psychological ideas, and Tillich and Reformed theologian Reinhold Niebuhr explored in their writing psychoanalytic hypotheses about desire, guilt, and anxiety. Gradually, this “culture of psychology,” as Don Browning (1980; 1987) dubbed it, infiltrated almost all theological schools, leading to new classes in pastoral care and new openings for professors with expertise in psychology, counseling, and chaplaincy. Hence, when I arrived at the University of Chicago Divinity School in 1978 to study with Browning, a doctoral area called Religion and Psychological Studies was thriving, even though, tellingly, it no longer exists today. Scholars familiar with Browning’s practical theology work may be less familiar with his earlier contributions in psychology and religion (e.g., 1966, 1973).

This interdisciplinary enterprise at the University of Chicago had roots running back nearly a century when Chicago’s President William Rainey Harper, a Baptist churchman, had joined liberal Christian leaders concerned that theology had “lost touch with the new social context” (Gilpin 1996, 86). Both Harper and Charles Eliot at Harvard insisted that theology had a place in the university, but only if it heeded the “modern spirit of science” in Rainey’s words (Gilpin 1996, 87). Rainey participated in what historian Clark Gilpin describes as the wider “American experience” – “the transition from theology done in the context of nationally established churches to theology done in the context of religious pluralism and the separation of church and state” (Gilpin 1996, xiii). The University of Chicago, including its new Divinity School established by Harper, became known for its receptivity to social science. It is in this context that Tillich (1951) advocated for a meditational relationship between experience and gospel in the early 1950s; Hiltner (1958) made a case for an even more mutual interchange in the study of “living documents” via psychology

---

2 “This is no science,” James remarked about psychology, “it is only the hope of a science,” cited by https://psychology.fas.harvard.edu/people/william-james (29.11.2021).
in the late 1950s and 1960s; and Catholic revisionist David Tracy (1975) modified Till-ich’s correlational approach to allow for a stronger constructive voice for secular sources in the 1970s.

In other words, by osmosis as much as conscious recognition, I benefited in my studies from sweeping developments in religion and social science. Even in the minority as a woman, I found a place in predominantly white institutions for my early curiosities about why people do what they do. Not surprisingly, when doing a book review years later, I wondered why the editors of *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (Brown, Davaney, and Tanner 2001) thought the turn to cultural analysis in systematic theology was so innovative. As I finished a dissertation in the mid-1980s on modern dying at the intersection of religion, medicine, and popular psychology, Browning, himself a Hiltner student at Chicago, was busy working with colleagues to create a new doctoral area of practical theology whose position in the school was also short-lived.

In summary, practical theology’s late-twentieth-century rejuvenation owes a great deal to the flourishing of modern social science, especially psychology. Indeed, practical theology might not have become the prominent discipline of today without the social science growth that preceded and ran alongside its own revival. Influenced by figures, such as James and Freud in psychology and Karl Marx, Max Weber, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu in sociology and anthropology, social scientists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—many of whom also doubled as philosophers—developed empirical methods dedicated to the investigation of persons, places, and politics. With the rise of these sciences, practical theologians found precisely the intellectual tools needed to analyze human behavior regarding religion. The avid interest among practical theologians in the human sciences continues unabated up to today. Resources in psychology and sociology have been especially useful in understanding persons in society and in informing individual care and social ministries.

Of course, attraction to social science has not been unique to practical theologians. Other scholars in religion also adjusted their primary intellectual partnerships throughout the twentieth century. Biblical, historical, and doctrinal theologians, for example, turned from philosophy, literature, and history to social science to expand their disciplinary capabilities. Some scholars describe this interest in psychoanalysis, anthropological fieldwork, statistics, and other subspecialties as a “turn to culture” (see Tanner 1997; Brown, et al. 2001).

Social science, however, has been uniquely important for practical theologians because of our professed interest in everyday religious practice and activity. Understanding lived religion and lived theology as enacted and not simply as believed or professed requires disciplines especially attuned to empirical observation and analysis. Moreover, to grasp the complexity of the distinctive subject matter of practical theology—realities such as how people worship, how parents treat children, how religious communities confront poverty—requires multiple resources beyond theology. In fact, most practical theologians believe that the subjects that we study cannot be adequately understood via one narrow discipline alone.
In grounding exploration of human life in social science rather than philosophy and history, practical theologians shifted attention from human nature as comprised by universal characteristics to more dynamic aspects of human living. While most twentieth-century systematic theologians focused on metaphysical matters such as free will or the nature of God, debating them philosophically, practical theologians raised different kinds of questions about personal, social, and historical actualities that shape religious conviction and action. In so doing, practical theologians initiated a new approach to theological anthropology that shifted attention from abstract depictions of body and soul to features such as behavior, experience, and practice that vary greatly from context to context. Although still invested in understanding human and divine nature, suddenly a whole new range of material became available for study across a rich cross section of human interaction.

3 Method: How Do Practical Theologians Engage Religion and Social Science?

How, then, should practical theologians engage religion and social science? Ian Barbour, a physicist who taught religion in a private liberal arts college in the upper Midwest, offers a useful portrait of the options. From the 1960s on, he focused his energy on science and religion, culminating in reception of the Templeton Prize in 1999. Concerned about sustaining faith in what he saw as a science-dominated world, he began his 1966 book *Issues in Science and Religion* asking, “Is the scientific method the only reliable guide to truth? Is man [sic] only a complex biochemical mechanism?” (Barbour 1966, 1) Three decades later, in *Religion and Science* (1997), he inquires, “What is the place of religion in an age of science? How can one believe in God today?” (Barbour 1997, xiii) Although he is more adept in showing what religion has to gain from science than the reverse, and he attends primarily to ‘hard’ sciences, telling the history through big men (mostly white) and big ideas, he still challenges the view of science as wholly other than religion and therefore supposedly the “most reliable path to knowledge” (Barbour 1966, 4). More important for my purposes, his typologies still prove fruitful in grasping different ways to relate the two enterprises.

In Barbour’s 1966 book, which some credit as creating the science-religion field, he describes three responses to modern science: theologians who draw sharp contrasts (e.g., neo-orthodox theology, existentialism, and linguistic analysis); those who draw parallels (e.g., liberal and process theology); and those who argue that theology and even God’s existence can be derived from science (e.g., natural theology). Linguists, for example, distinguish between science and religion as different language games serving divergent social functions, a position that George Lindbeck (1984) developed into postliberal theology and that resembles neo-orthodox theolo-

3 For a more fulsome treatment, see Miller-McLemore (2011).
gian Karl Barth’s claim from the 1930s that the technical knowledge of science can neither contribute nor conflict with revelatory truth. Barbour himself represents a position somewhere between his second and third groupings. In contrast to those who see science and religion as “strongly contrasting enterprises which have essentially nothing to do with each other [his emphasis]” (Barbour 1966, 1), he sees science as “a more human enterprise” and theology as a “more self-critical undertaking” than commonly understood (Barbour 1996, 4).

Two books later, Barbour turns these observations into a tighter four-part model, describing in detail four positions: conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration. Although biblical literalism and scientific materialism seem like opposites, they share basic commonalities typical of conflict models. They both “seek knowledge with a sure foundation” and believe that science and theology make competing exhaustive explanatory claims about reality. Hence, “one must choose between them” with only one yielding valid truths (Barbour 1997, 78). Today, John Milbank’s Theology and Social Theory and Richard Dawkins’s The God Delusion represent provocative opposing examples.

Independence models also place science and religion in separate spheres but less antagonistically, “as totally independent and autonomous,” each with “its own distinctive domain and its characteristic methods,” as Barbour observes. “Each must tend to its own business and not meddle in the affairs of the other” (Barbour 1997, 84). He locates the mid-twentieth century theologies of Barth and Rudolf Bultmann in this approach as well as more contemporary postliberal theologies influenced by Wittgenstein’s linguistic analysis. For those such as Lindbeck, religious language recommends an entire “way of life [...] a set of attitudes [...] particular moral principles” transmitted through religious communities (Barbour 1997, 87), whereas scientific language merely predicts and explains. Tillich’s neo-orthodox correlation falls partially in this camp because he argues that science provides insight into questions of existence, but answers come only from Christian doctrine.

By contrast, both dialogue and integration see science and religion as more akin than different, with science less objective and religion less subjective than presumed. Religion offers reasonable interpretations of human experience, using methods similar to science, and science involves presuppositions and moral commitments similar to religion. Scientific data are always theory-laden, subject to interpretation and creative imagination, and religion can be judged by scientific criteria (e.g., coherence, fruitfulness). In contrast to dialogue, integration argues for an even broader metaphysics that encompasses science and religion within a greater whole. Both liberals and conservatives who appeal to this position see as possible and desirable a larger combination of truths. Barbour himself finds science suggestive in formulating doctrines of creation and human nature and grasping divine ‘influence’, as he might say in process philosophy terms. Inversely, some evangelicals unite scripture and psychology under the belief that “all truth is God’s truth, wherever it is found” (Carter and Narramore, 1979, 13). Dialogue seeks no such synthesis or unity. It emphasizes the
differences between science and religion, even as it hopes to find ways each arena might influence the other.

Barbour’s typology makes the distinctions sound more pristine than they are. Even he combines tenets from three of the four positions in his own approach (e.g., see 1997, 105). Practical theologians display a similar complexity not only internally as individuals but also within the discipline. Many agree with South African scholar Jaco Dreyer’s (2012) argument for a respectful disciplinary pluralism. Most disciplines, he observes, are “characterized by instability, multiple traditions and intradisciplinary diversity” (Dreyer 2012, 41). Since diversity is “inherent” (Dreyer 2012, 35), the best response in Dreyer’s view, is to see disciplinary differences as “opportunity for ‘productive intellectual dialogue’” – a “dialogic pluralist response” – rather than melding differences into a common framework – a “unitary response” – or merely accepting but largely ignoring disciplinary conflicts – a “pluralist response” (Dreyer 2012, 49).

Measured by the sheer number of typologies created to depict different ways to do theological reflection in relationship to science and culture, practical theologians demonstrate a keen interest in the problem of the science-religion relationship, perhaps more than colleagues in other disciplines. Indeed, we might even say that we obsess about such questions. Typologies on bridging experience (including the sciences) with religious convictions are rampant in our literature, put forth by those in diverse political and confessional positions.

Catholic missiologist Stephen Bevans ([1992] 2002), for example, creates out of his missionary work seven models for engaging the cultural context (translation, anthropological, praxis, synthetic, transcendental, and countercultural). Meanwhile, evangelical theologian Charles Scalise (2003) proposes five models to help ministry students bridge seminary and congregations (correlational, contextual, narrative, performance, and regulative). Two years later, British Protestant scholars Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward (2005) offer seven methods of theological reflection for those within and beyond the academy (pastoral, literary, postliberal, congregational, correlational, liberationist, and contextual). And these three examples are just the short list! Dreyer names several others. Dutch scholar Gerben Heitink describes the normative-deductive, hermeneutical-mediative, empirical-analytical, political-critical, and pastoral-theological as marking a division that he says “coincides [...] with that proposed by others” (Heitink 1999, 171) a few decades earlier, such as German scholar Norbert Mette. Others in the 1990s depicted the different currents more simply. In the United Kingdom, Paul Ballard and John Prichard name four models: applied, critical correlational, praxis, and habitus (1996, 57–68); and Dutch practical theologian Gijsbert Dingemans (1996) distinguishes four paradigms: clerical, church, liberation, and individual.

Of course, none of these treatments single out social science. Social science is often subsidiary to broader questions about how to engage culture, the humanities, and other facets of modernity. Nonetheless, social science still figures prominently as one of the most important conversation partners with which practical theologians get
entangled in our effort to understand everyday life. Each model must come to terms with how to regard social science, from those who see it as “ancillary” (Heitink 1999, 171) to those who see it as absolutely requisite and constitutive, including empirical practical theologians who suggest that we “be fully conversant” in its methods (Heitink 1999, 174).

Many practical theologians, regardless of intellectual and confessional stance, adopt some form of correlation, which explains why Tracy has remained a pivotal figure. Years ago, he proposed a “revisionist theology” to respond not only to the “modern scientific disenchantment” with religion but also the “postmodern disenchantment” with science. This second “disenchantment with disenchantment” (Tracy 1975, 10) need not lead us back to a nostalgic restoration of pre-modern belief. Rather he aspires to a richer kind of conversation between science and religion that contributes to what he and others have called public theology or a continued commitment to making Christian faith intelligible for a wider non-Christian public while also using non-Christian resources to enrich Christian faith.

Correlational models come under regular scrutiny, of course. Two of Tracy’s doctoral students – Mark Kline Taylor and Rebecca Chopp – go on to use liberation theology to modify without completely negating its viability. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, they questioned Tracy’s view of human experience as universal and his distinction between experience and tradition as two separate poles. Their versions of correlation privilege – “those excluded or absent from the conversation” in Taylor’s words (1990, 64) – shift the aim in using social science from cognitive debate and objective empirical analysis to transformative practice, what Chopp calls a “critical praxis correlation” (1987, 132) and Taylor calls “cultural-political theology” (1990, 23) aimed at improving the condition of the marginalized. Other scholars challenge correlational categories and practices from anthropological, post structural, and de-colonial perspectives. Katherine Tanner (1997), having studied under Lindbeck at Yale, suggests that Christian theology is not a philosophical enterprise that stands above culture requiring correlation with secular sources but “a culture-specific activity” (Tanner 1984, 64). More recently, Carmen Nanko-Fernandez argues from a “Latinamente” perspective that “handy [correlational] frameworks” reflect an “obsession with method” in practical theology, separating elements like experience and tradition that “some of us never experienced [as] divorce[d]” (Nanko-Fernandez 2013, 39). Claire Watkins (2015), Director of the Theology and Action Research Network in England, uses Belgian theologian Lieven Boeve’s (2007) critique of correlation to argue for a non-correlational approach of “interruption” and “recontextualization”. Even Tracy (2011) revisits his model over three decades later and suggests a return to aesthetic and spiritual disciplines to dispel modern dichotomies such as theory and practice.

Nevertheless, although a correlational model has come under justified critique from a variety of angles, its usefulness in organizing research projects, course syllabi, and even social justice efforts endures. It is difficult for anyone, even those who adopt models of conflict, independence, or interruption, to avoid entirely some sem-
blance of religion-science correlation. More important, correlation presumes and de-
mands dialogue, and dialogue places particular demands on the sciences, asking sci-
entists to take religion seriously and to recognize when their own constructs expand
beyond scientific parameters into the territory of theology, ethics, and philosophy.
Dialogue occurs (or should occur) when religion makes claims about human experi-
ence that put it in the realm of science, when science becomes more than science,
when science becomes dogmatic, or when science and religion hold competing vi-
sions of the good life. In genuine conversation, there is presumably no last or ulti-
mate word.

4 Illustration: How Does Religion and Social
Science Work as a Theoretical Approach?

What can one know from the perspective of religion and social science? At this point,
a concrete illustration may prove more fruitful than further theoretical argument
about history and method.

In a class on theology and social science several years ago, I assigned a few
chapters from my book, Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Chris-
tian Perspective (Miller-McLemore 2003), to illustrate the use of religion and psychol-
ogy in doing practical theology. But I was still surprised when friend and colleague
Mary Fulkerson told me that she wished her Duke Divinity School colleagues would
read it. Like a fish in water, I hardly notice the fluidity that I presume between reli-
gion and social science. But Fulkerson has taught for most of her career at an insti-
tution where virtue ethicist Stanley Hauerwas’s suspicion of the secular social scien-
tes has reigned, especially the much maligned ‘therapeutic’. Critics blame
psychology for fostering individualism, encouraging divorce, spoiling children, and
much more. By contrast, the two institutions at which I have taught sustain long his-
tories of respect for social science and progressive causes. My first teaching ap-
pointment, Chicago Theological Seminary, appointed Graham Taylor to head the school’s
new department of Christian sociology in 1892 and hired Anton Boisen in the 1920s to
teach psychology of religion. Graham founded the profession of social work; Boisen
founded CPE.

The methods in psychology and religion that I use in Let the Children Come al-
ready shaped my first book on death and dying (Miller-McLemore 1988), another
complex human experience that, similar to childhood, a cohort of social scientists
had begun to examine and appropriate in the mid-twentieth century. In both
works, I examine prominent life phases – facing our end on one hand and raising
children on the other – and, to understand them, I weave together social science,
psychology in particular, and contemporary and historical theology. In Let the Chil-
dren Come, I urge theologians to quit “picking on psychology” for promoting the “me
generation” (Miller-McLemore 2003, 26) and take it more seriously when trying to un-
derstand children’s needs. “If any discipline has given children a fresh voice and special place, it is psychology” (Miller-McLemore 2003, 27). It is ironic and even sad to note that the “study of children became a respectable science at about the same time that interest in children [...] waned among Christian scholars” (Miller-McLemore 2003, 28). Major psychologists such as Freud’s own daughter Anna, Erik Erikson, and Robert Coles have spent hours upon hours with children, crediting them with deeper thoughts than children can put into words.

What then is learned from psychology? Psychology has the capacity to take us inside children’s lives with an uncanny empathy often missing in theology. I turn to Alice Miller who uses object relations theory to show how parents almost unavoidably misuse their children to gratify their own narcissistic desires, leaving children with “false selves” vulnerable to losing a sense of their own needs. Psychology “corrects Christianity” by insisting that “adults take the child’s point of view” (Miller-McLemore 2003, 39). Psychology shows the damage caused by lofty Christian ideals (e.g., a sacrificial godhead, sinfulness, obedience, submission, honoring parents), that often play out in harmful ways in the lives of real people, especially children, and it disproves truths that many Christians assume: “that strong feelings are dangerous, that a child’s will must be broken, that tenderness is harmful and order and strictness are good for children, that thinking less of oneself fosters altruism” (Miller-McLemore 2003, 44).

What are some of the limits of psychology, however, and what might psychologists learn from religion? Although emotionally astute, psychology promotes implicit normative visions (e.g., children as innocent), all the while failing to grasp children’s moral and religious complexity. Even though many Christians find Augustine’s views of sexuality and sin problematic, he did understand better than most contemporary psychologists why people do the distorted things they do in progressively insidious ways as they mature from children to adults. Even children and youths are fallible and prone to turning in on themselves. Classic Christian frameworks, such as Augustine’s in the fourth century or leader of the Radical Reformation Menno Simons in the early 1500s, grasp how iniquity evolves from near innocence in childhood to an ever-greater complicity as children move into adulthood. The likes of Augustine and Simons allow for an “incremental accretion of responsibility” on the part of children, youths, and young adults, making an important “place for human frailty, mistakes, destructive failures, and the need for amends and grace” (Miller-McLemore 2003, 67–68). Of course, it still took a psychologist, Bruno Bettelheim (1985), to challenge Christian distortions of discipline by reminding us of the term’s root, *disciple*, and noticing that Jesus invited obedience through alliance and invitation rather than chastisement and force. In this instance, Bettelheim confirms that religious traditions bear valuable ideas. In short, study of children illustrates a basic religion-science premise: “If Christian theology has erred on the side of moral mastery and condemnation, psychology errs on the said of moral naïveté” (Miller-McLemore 2003, 50).
5 Concerns, Debates, and Suspicions: What Are Some Problems with the Approach?

I conclude by briefly naming three challenges that arise in engaging religion and social science in practical theology. These are not the only debates, but they assume a certain primacy. First, in most academic settings, social science knowledge reigns over religious knowledge, which is often ignored, misunderstood, or suspected of subjective and even proselytizing biases. The so-called dialogue is largely one-directional, from religion to the sciences, and rarely the other way. Genuine partnership has never existed. Social scientists either fail to recognize theological scholarship or doubt its validity and relevance. This unfortunate dynamic leaves both disciplines bereft of what could be engaging interactions around several issues.

A second challenge centers around the tension between fact and value, empirical description and normative interpretation. Despite general acceptance of the postmodern maxim that all knowledge is shaped by power and context, many scholars still regard scientific knowledge as somehow above the fray, more objective and rational than religious knowledge. We prize the quantifiable over the qualitative and prefer arguments based on repeatable empirical experiment over those built around single cases (see Flyvbjerg 2006). Some practical theologians, such as Heather Walton (2014), turn away from social science because it cannot access knowledge that only becomes apparent through creative arts, and many more have noticed how science perpetuates racism and sexism. But few have sustained the kind of moral and religious evaluation of social science’s implicit assumptions that Browning modeled in his early work and others, such as Jeremy Carrette (2007), have pursued. Fewer still have extended a decolonial critique to our use of social science, which was essentially co-constructed with colonialism. Most practical theologians simply go on using social science even as we admit that it can perpetuate Western imperialism.

Third, interdisciplinarity presents inherent challenges. “Interdisciplinarity is constitutive of practical theology”, as Joyce Ann Mercer asserts (2016, 163); the very subjects that we study require “deft engagement of multiple fields of knowledge and methods of study.” However, our interdisciplinary aspirations also threaten our validity. Scholars in more rigidly defined areas accuse us of lacking disciplinary identity and expertise, and we ourselves reach unsurprising limits, knowing enough about other disciplines to be dangerous and not enough to wield their tools and insights wisely or well. As theologians we can never know enough to use social science as well as we should, and we fall prey to allowing social science to control our own terms until any unique theological perspective falls to the wayside.

Despite these hazards, engaging religion and social science remains absolutely core to practical theology regardless of where scholars, students, and ministers stand on a variety of issues. Social science helped resurrect practical theology as an arena of study, and it will remain at the forefront of practical theological research, teaching, and practice.
Bibliography


