Preface

Religion consists of people and places, ideas and artefacts, actions and utterings; and all is connected and lived in religious practices. Religious people worship together in cathedrals, living rooms and outdoor settings; they kiss statues and stones at holy places and pilgrimage sites; they teach their children in classes and camps; they engage in social work and political movements; they sustain old habits and forms; and they renew the old and invent new forms of practices. These practices unfold in a constant renegotiation of what Christianity and Church is today and how it should express itself in and as part of a local context and a world in continuous development.

This diverse, sometimes messy, highly context dependent and constantly changing conglomerate of Christian and religious practices is our main access to knowledge about Christianity to day – Christianity as it is lived on a day to day basis in local churches and congregations, in private life and in loosely connected groups or initiatives. Christian and religious practices are obviously the topic of practical theological research but practices as key to theological knowledge about contemporary Christianity reach beyond practical theology and into theology in general. Religious practices are not just ways of doing things, they are ways of theologising – wittingly and unwittingly.

With this book we wish to explore and discuss practice theory as significant and relevant to both practical theology and theology in general and thereby scrutinise practices as ways of theologising. So far practice theory has to a large extent developed within social theory and sociology, therefore the ambition is not only to forward the emerging conversation between on the one hand theology and practical theology, on the other practice theory, but also to reflect on how practice theory might likewise be productive with regard to religion. Inspired by accounts within sociological practice theory, which suggests it as a research program where practice theories are viewed as methodological, analytical and theoretical approaches, we want to reflect on possible relevance of practice theories in theological research with regard to methodological, analytical and theoretical implications. We approach this ambition in two different strands: The first section of the book engages in practice theory as theoretical approaches, whereas the second section seeks to exemplify the theological fruitfulness in practice theory by exploring different practices analysed by way of different practice theories.

The chapters in the first section, Practice in Theology, address various aspects of practice theories viewed as theoretical approaches about social practices. These chapters outline and discuss some of the pressing issues surrounding...
practice theory, which can also be made productive in relation to religious practices. The objective is to formulate and consider main features of practice theory, especially with an eye to its significance and relevance for theology and religious studies. A key point throughout is to unpack and ponder both possible implications and critical questions which might arise from seeing religion as well as theology in terms of practice according to a sociological theory of practice, that emphasises the visibility, concreteness, embodiment and materiality of practices. Furthermore, the aim of the first section is also to discuss the consequences of establishing the embodied and material as key points in research traditions such as religion and theology, which typically have been concerned with the invisible, mental, transcendent and transcendental.

In the second section, *Studying Practice as Theology*, different cases, types of practices or fields of practices are analysed and discussed. The character of the object of practical theology which is discussed at length in chapters in the first section resurfaces in the second sections as the chapters in different ways illustrate and explore the implicit claim that the object of practical theology does not present itself as a given, when working from practice theory. Rather, it presents itself through a diversity of practices where people feel connected in some way, prepared through some form of practice. This becomes clear through chapters which address a quite varied sample of practices in their relation with churches. The chapters in the second section provide concrete case studies of different practices, some of which are materially closely connected with churches, whereas others are not, but additionally the chapters also demonstrate a varied set of methodological approaches in practical theology, and they engage with different types of practice theories.

An important background and context for this book and the work it reflects, is the first conference in the Nordic network for theology and practice, arranged in Aarhus, October 2016. The goal of the conference was to engage in a discussion of the research implications of the theological engagement with practice theories and thereby also of the insight that theological reflection and knowledge is not separate from but rather embedded in actual practices. During the conference we wished to engage in the following questions formulated in the conference call:

What does “practice” refer to in the domain of religious life, and how can it be fruitfully investigated? How can theological understanding and knowledge be understood in terms of praxis, as theory formed and re-formed in practice? And what do these claims imply for empirical studies in theology and practical theology as a constructive and normative enterprise?
The aim of this book is to continue this discussion with a wider audience – in contexts and theological traditions not only similar to but also highly different from a Nordic and North European setting. Religious practices are radically local, contextual, and in constant movement between consolidating and renegotiating tradition. This is the reality of churches, and it is from this reality that theological knowledge about contemporary Christianity begins.

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Kirstine Helboe Johansen

Ulla Schmidt