Congratulations are in order. With this volume, the editors from Tübingen, Berlin, Atlanta, and Stellenbosch have completed a pioneering work, offering nothing less than the first practical theological handbook that represents a “global approach” (preface, 8) and brings together about 60 authors from all over the world (50 of whom hail from Europe, South Africa, and North America). This enterprise began in the context of forums that have existed for a good quarter of a century: the International Academy of Practical Theology with its biennial conferences and the International Journal of Practical Theology as a platform of textual, global scholarly communication. The International Handbook of Practical Theology (IHPT) thus sees itself as an expression, motor, and (tentative) result of the internationalization of practical theology as a larger process.

Within this process and conversation, the handbook takes a particular position. At first glance, it does so through all the things it does not do. The handbook does not summarize the state of practical theological debates in individual countries, language areas, or in various denominational or religious cultures. It also does not organize its knowledge along the lines of the traditional subdisciplines of practical theology. In fact, the editors programmatically decline to provide summaries of any kind: “We are not interested in an overview of knowledge” (3).

But at another glance, the IHPT takes a position through several foundational decisions. Firstly, it chooses “religion” (3) as its central concept, thus adopting a discursive approach and referring no longer primarily or exclusively to Christianity or any one specific religion (1). In its first main section, the IHPT investigates to what extent religion can be found in 17 “fields” that range from “aesthetics” to “sociability.” Here, the authors of the respective chapters elaborate how each of them theoretically grasps religion in their specific context (“Concepts of Religion in a Practical-Theological Perspective”, 11–245).

Secondly, the IHPT defines “Practical Theology [...] as an empirically grounded and hermeneutically elaborated theory of religious practice” (5). To delineate what practical theology is, it does not refer to theoretical approaches but to practices or
those who perform them and to the “material objects” used therein because: “Human beings [are] doing religion by means of their involvement in practices” (6). In this sense, the second main section, which is repeatedly designated as the heart of the book, is devoted to 28 practices ranging from “Artefact / Personal Belongings / Things” to “Wedding Ceremonies / Blessings / Partnership.” As the editors explain, “the chapters deliberately take an emic perspective and provide idiographic rather than nomothetic accounts of the practices” (6). To paraphrase: The case studies seek to uncover the knowledge contained in the practices (“embodied knowledge,” 7) and thus exemplify how religion is practiced, understood, and developed in practices (“Religious Practices in the Perspective of Agency,” 247–597).

Finally, IHPT presents all “theoretical approaches and scientific-methodological procedures” that can help to understand religion and religious practices. This opens the field to include 14 research settings from “Anthropology of Religion” to “Theories of Religious Communication.” Here, the editors include Religious Studies and its approaches (2). Moreover, they state that “Practical Theology is not part of the theoretical approaches as such” (7), and so its traditional disciplines with their methodological repertoires do not play a role (“Theoretical Approaches towards a Global Practical Theology”, 599–799) – with the exception of “Religious Education” (717–730).

The fruit of reading these 800 pages is not gaining an overview, but rather the impression of an enormous broadening of one’s horizon. Just as intended by the editors, the handbook draws attention to possible (new) objects of practical theological reflection, softening the usual coordinates in the process: “In the globalized world we [sc. as human beings, religious practitioners and researchers in PT] are involved in dynamic processes of cultural and religious transformation creating a complex entanglement between different religious traditions, cultures, discourses, communities, and practices. This entanglement is what we seek to highlight in this anthology” (8).

But this broadening has downsides, too, which deserve reflection. The consequence of foregoing generalizations and prioritizing the awareness of the “situatedness of the practices and the positionality of those reflecting on the practices” (6) is a focus on the micro-level and on individual cases. But what can these teach us with regard to other cases, other contexts? Judging from the IHPT, it would seem that practices customary or even prescribed in established religious communities have become uninteresting to practical theology, even when they need professional guidance. But do these practices not form the recognizable, somewhat permanent, and continually retrievable source from which the individually lived, liquefied expressions of religion also draw? Speaking from the perspective of an international community of researchers, it may be true that “cultural and religious boundaries are becoming more and more fluid and permeable within this discourse” (4, italics
added). But does that resonate at all with the people who cultivate religious practices in their contexts?

The brief introduction of eight pages hints at, rather than elaborates, the handbook’s concept ("Introduction", 1–9). To be sure, the conceptual choices of the "Handbuch Praktische Theologie" (eds. W. Gräb and B. Weyel, Gütersloh, 2007) shimmer through in its structure and concerns, as do those of "The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology" (ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Oxford, 2012). But in my reading, the IHPT does not explicitly address the objections that have been voiced regarding these paradigms nor does it consider alternative approaches, which exist in German-speaking countries as well as in the U.S., in Korea, and in Africa between the Sahara and South Africa. The closest the volume comes to such a discussion is in Birgit Weyel’s article “Practical Theology and Religion” (Part I, 219–232), which is the de facto elaboration of the handbook’s conceptual foundation.

To my mind, the IHPT also lacks a key section that would explain how researchers may establish relationships between all the context-specific individual cases and concepts in a methodologically controlled way. Do we not need a set of methods that allows us to relate phenomena and concepts from all over the world to each other – be it through comparative, historical, empirical-transnational, or other means? Must we not at least emphatically search for suitable methods? I believe this is particularly necessary if practical theology seeks to develop answers to “contextually specific challenges posed by religious communities and practices” (2).

As a practical theologian with a focus on religious education, I would like to illustrate this challenge, for which there certainly is no simple answer, with a closer look at some relevant articles. Ana T. Filipovic, Croatia, offers insights into a faith-based Catholic understanding of religious education in Part III (717–730), which is designated as a “theoretical approach” to “religious education”; Harold H. Horell and Mai-Anh Le Tran from the U.S. illuminate “Religious Formation / Educating / Religious Knowledge” as “religious practices” by presenting a historical study of the Religious Education Association and a typology of today’s scientific-theoretical modeling of religious education in the U.S. (Part II, 467–480). In Part I, religious education is somewhat touched upon in the contribution “Law and Religion” (155–168), in which Mouez Khalfaoui, Germany, focuses on Islamic understandings of the law. Among other things, he discusses questions of religious freedom. My question and concern is: What can really be gleaned from these studies for reflections on religious education in any context?

In short, the four editors have produced a remarkable and challenging, pioneering work. It is rich in material, unusual, and provocative. However, in my view, it is only partly helpful for “doing religion” and “doing practical theology” on site. Perhaps the handbook is ahead of its time with its theoretical design. Or, perhaps, it does not pursue a central aim of Practical Theology (as it is known in German-
speaking Protestantism) forcefully enough, namely to enlighten, critique, orient, and govern religious practice. The need for this arises when religious practice is perceived in the interest of “leadership” and the “purer representation” of religious communities (F. Schleiermacher). More than ever, a “global approach” faces the question: What is the guiding epistemic interest of Practical Theology?