



Practical theology: The past, present and future of a concept

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From an historical perspective, practical theology has been understood as a theological subdiscipline focused on pastoral activity rather than on classic theological sources. It is not, of course, true that pastoral concerns exclude detailed work with such sources. Nevertheless, the assumption has been widespread that a preference for practice at the very least sidelines detailed scholarly engagement with scripture, doctrine and tradition. In this article I shall examine why the concept of practical theology developed as it did and offer proposals for its further development today. It must be stressed at the outset that the specific objective will be to consider practical theology *as a concept*. It would be neither possible nor desirable to try to appraise the far larger body of work that might, in a loose sense, be designated ‘practical theology’ because, for instance, it has been presented at a practical theology conference or appears within the covers of an edited volume that has ‘practical theology’ somewhere in its title.

Several dangers may be listed of a purely pastoral understanding of practical theology. First, when pastoral activity is disconnected from theology’s classic sources, its underlying anthropology and intended outcomes necessarily have to be derived from secular discourses, such as psychology and sociology. These construct the human person and human society in ways that, from a theological perspective, might well be questionable. Second, an exclusive focus on pastoral competencies can encourage a privatized theology that accepts, or even becomes complicit in, the root causes of the problems that these competencies purport to address.¹ These might include power dynamics, dependency relationships and social or ecclesial hierarchy. Third, because of the time-lag that usually occurs when scholars of one discipline make use of findings produced in another, the findings that are produced by such a transfer are likely to be quickly superseded. As a result,

practical theologians and the practitioners who draw on their work can unwittingly promote outdated personal and social mores.

The fourth danger when practical theology develops a solely pastoral focus is a lack of relation to embodied, material life. When practical theology depends on the frequently abstract constructions of human flourishing derived from psychology or sociology, it is unclear what substantive contribution the subject is able to make to addressing the practical questions that Christians and others face in their daily lives. For example, what and how should Christians eat, given the many negative impacts that diet makes on ecology and health? How should Christians understand bodily impairment, in view of the increasing human capacity to make technological interventions to compensate what might be viewed as natural defects? In what kinds of domestic configurations should Christians live, in a socially-atomised world in which many kinds of relationship are possible? Pressing questions like these are fundamentally practical but not intrinsically pastoral.

In order to address new topics such as these, practical theology requires new and specifically theological methodology and content. Indeed, at a time when its social and ecclesial contexts are transforming, this is more important than ever. Practical theologians need to give new attention to concrete, lived practices, as unfolded in Christian scripture and tradition, in order to generate new discourses of relevance to the questions and problems of present-day society. This is especially true of those based in universities, where, despite cutbacks, practical theology is still publicly funded through research grants, teaching grants and other subsidies. In such institutions above all, practical theology needs to speak to a wide public.²



Practical theology: origins and continuities

The term *die praktische Theologie* is traceable to Friedrich Schleiermacher and notably to his *Brief Outline* of the theological curriculum to be taught in the newly-founded University of Berlin. Now the Humboldt-Universität, this was a liberal, state-run institution rather than one operated by the Church or private citizens. Moreover, it was an institution in which teachers were also researchers, and

teaching was therefore shaped by research. The *Brief Outline* constitutes the first programmatic reflection on the place and nature of practical theology in the modern university. Schleiermacher states that practical theology should be covered following ‘philosophical theology’. (By this, he meant a conceptually clear and internally consistent theology with general applicability rather than relevance only within a specific church.) Practical theology is also to follow ‘historical theology’, which Schleiermacher construed to encompass biblical studies, doctrine and ethics.³ He thereby saw these other subdisciplines as providing practical theology with its source material, which it then employed to shape church life.

Schleiermacher’s syllabus for his biennial lectures on practical theology offers a good impression of the content of the subject as he saw it. Delivered from 1812 to 1833, these lectures were posthumously collated and published by Jacob Frerichs.⁴ In them is outlined a distinct subdiscipline encompassing, in order, worship, song, prayer, preaching, catechesis, mission, pastoral care and ecclesiology. Because the Frerichs text was compiled from lecture notes it unfortunately includes few citations, which makes it difficult to trace the elements of the practical theology that is proposed to specific scriptural exegesis or doctrinal expositions, whether by Schleiermacher or others. What is notable, however, is the dependence of practical theology on the other theological subdisciplines.

As practical theology spread, in recent decades, to English universities, it was designated from the outset as pastoral theology.⁵ In Scotland, however, its birth and development were earlier and different, with Schleiermacher’s terminology, course content and order of exposition all closely followed. Appraisal of the development of practical theology as a subdiscipline in Scotland is therefore important for the current discussion. The *Brief Outline* probably informed the shaping of the curriculum, having been translated into English as early as 1850 by the London Congregationalist lawyer William Farrer and published in Edinburgh.⁶ Moreover, *Die Praktische Theologie* was in the theological libraries at Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrews.⁷

From 1921 there existed within New College, Edinburgh – which was, at that time, a United Free Church of Scotland college – a Department of Apologetics, Christian Ethics and Practical Theology.⁸

In 1924 the first course in practical theology was taught by the Reverend Bruce Nicol. The syllabus included preaching, worship and the sacraments, pastoral care, catechesis, church administration, and missiology at home and abroad. In 1927, Daniel Lamont was appointed Professor of Apologetics, Christian Ethics and Practical Theology at New College, with this position replacing a previous Professorship in Apologetics and Pastoral Theology. The process by which the College chair became a University chair was completed in 1939.⁹ This was in the wake of the 1929 union of the majority of the United Free Church presbyteries with the established Church of Scotland, which resulted in the chairs of the United Free colleges – New College; Trinity College, Glasgow; and Christ’s College, Aberdeen – being brought within their respective Universities.¹⁰ Practical theology at Edinburgh was thus placed on a similar footing to that established by Schleiermacher in Berlin. William Tindal, James Blackie, Duncan Forrester, William Storrar and Oliver O’Donovan followed Lamont in the Edinburgh chair. For a time, a Chair of Practical Theology and Christian Ethics was maintained at St Andrews, which from 1958 to 1987 was occupied notably by James Whyte.¹¹

To what extent was this early Scottish development of practical theology faithful to Schleiermacher’s vision? Schleiermacher viewed practical theology as more than ministerial training or pastoral formation. Rather, it was an academic subject deemed worthy of inclusion in the university curriculum in consequence of its scientific character and clearly defined relationships with proximate cognate disciplines.¹² Schleiermacher’s vision of the university setting of practical theology demanded of practical theologians equally high standards of source criticism, evidence and argument as those found in other disciplines and in the other theological subdisciplines. For Schleiermacher, to say that practical theology cannot be expected to attain similar standards due to being grounded in life experience or common sense would have been effectively to banish it from the university. In Scotland, however, as has just been explained, practical theology originated not in a public research university but in church colleges. In this setting, pastoral imperatives understandably came to weigh more heavily on the minds of teachers and students than those of research. This was especially the case in Glasgow, to the extent

that the University Chair in Christian Ethics and Practical Theology existed for a mere six years, its sole occupant being Arthur Gossip. Established in 1939, it was abolished in 1945 after the Church of Scotland's General Assembly determined that, because of the nature of its subject and the needs of ministry students, the chair should be based in Trinity College rather than the University.¹³ However, in Edinburgh and St Andrews, as has been seen, Schleiermacher's vision was more fully realised in the late 1930s, as the practical theology located in the United Free colleges became fully integrated into the University.

Within this university setting, the teachers of practical theology were mostly clergy and the bulk of the students were ministry students. In this context, the dependence of practical theology on the other theological subdisciplines was unlikely to be questioned, with this intra-theological dependence naturally more comfortable for both teacher and student than a reliance on non-theological disciplines. Thus the ecclesial orientation of practical theology persisted as established by Schleiermacher, on the grounds that the Church (understood as a community or association, not necessarily as an historic institution) provided the locus for shared religious feeling.¹⁴ This component of his blueprint for practical theology has continued into recent times.¹⁵

What may be said about the status of practical theology in this context? This is a vexed question in the interpretation of Schleiermacher. He is sometimes quoted, correctly – and especially by practical theologians! – as describing practical theology as the 'crown' (*die Krone*) of the entire theological enterprise. This echoes, probably unintentionally, the medieval regal imagery of theology as itself the queen of the sciences, and might be taken to suggest that Schleiermacher regarded practical theology as superior to the other theological subdisciplines because of its ecclesial orientation. But in his text the crown metaphor is closely preceded by another: that of philosophy as the 'root' (*die Wurzel*) of all theology.¹⁶ This pairing of metaphors suggests an alternative, organic interpretation of practical theology as a 'crown': not as superior to the other theological subdisciplines but as emerging from them in a similar way to that in which the crown of a tree is formed by its branches and cannot exist independently of them. If this is true, then Schleiermacher did

not favour practical theology above the other subdisciplines quite as much as is sometimes supposed. Indeed, as has been seen, practical theology could fit well within an institutional context where theology with strong doctrinal and scriptural elements was also the object of study and research.



Practical theology in Church and academy

So far in this article, the concept of practical theology and its practical outworking have been considered up until the recent past. Its ecclesial context has been prominent. The notion that practical theology *should* be ecclesially oriented is a useful corrective to the idea that it is the sole concern of clergy and ordinands. To affirm that the audience for practical theology is the whole Church is to acknowledge that ministry is an activity of that whole Church, not just of clergy and other ministers.¹⁷ Nevertheless, in today's climate it is necessary to consider whether even this broadened understanding of the audience of practical theology is sustainable. Continuing with the Scottish case, between 2002 and 2012 the Church of Scotland recorded a drop in communicant numbers of 27%.¹⁸ Elsewhere in Britain and Europe church membership is also falling, if not at quite the same precipitous rate. In view of these declining numbers it seems increasingly unlikely, either in Scotland or elsewhere in Europe, that the churches alone will provide an audience of sufficient size to sustain practical theology as a university subdiscipline. Moreover, and more significantly from a doctrinal viewpoint, the exclusive identification of the Church to which practical theology is oriented with visible church institutions is theologically unsound. I shall return to this important point later.¹⁹

It has already been recognized that practical theology might possess a broader remit than the ecclesial. In particular, the linkage of practical theology with Christian ethics in the course descriptors and job titles of the Scottish universities suggests that *any* topic of Christian ethical concern might, or even should, generate a practical theological response. Christian ethics is thereby seen as having the function of orienting practical theology to the topics it engages, just as Christian ethics is itself oriented as a result of its own prior interaction with systematic theology.²⁰ Positively, this opens the possibility that

practical theology might study and critique aspects of the secular social and political order directly, rather than via their significance for the Church.²¹ Moreover, the dependence on Christian ethics (and thereby, indirectly, on systematic theology) that this model supposes roots practical theology in normative, analytical theological discourse.²² In so far as this prevents practical theology from becoming a mere function of ongoing empirical activity or a commentary on such activity, such dependence is to be welcomed.

By allowing direct social and political critique, this model of practical theology's function and audience is undoubtedly an improvement on one that equates practical theology with ministerial activity, even the ministerial activity of the whole church. Nevertheless, it presents the topics that practical theology addresses as determined by Christian ethics. Moreover, if the topics of Christian ethics are determined by systematic theology, this determination is duplicated and practice is thereby doubly prevented from generating its own topics for reflection.

The idea that the fullest and most accurate understanding of reality will derive from the most abstract reflection has an ancient lineage, which is traced back standardly to Plato's *Republic*. There, the Guardians reign as philosopher rulers on the justifiable grounds that they have privileged access to the knowledge derived from the forms, which for Plato included both the content of knowledge and the motivation to act in accordance with that knowledge.²³ Platonic epistemology is frequently criticized on the obvious grounds that it is undemocratic and presents the visible world as a murky, contingent illusion. This is to neglect, however, the alternative understanding of truth that a more Aristotelian Plato presents in his later dialogues, including the *Philebus*. There, the good for human life is not abstract, contemplative knowledge of the forms, but the rightly-ordered, 'mixed' life in which different types of knowledge, including even true opinion, are synthesized in a 'road which leads to the good'.²⁴ Pure reason, in contrast, is no better than pure pleasure, lacking self-sufficiency or the capacity for perfection.²⁵ Even for Plato, therefore, the separation of theory from practice and the exaltation of theory above practice on the grounds that theory gives better access to truth are by no means as clear-cut as is typically supposed. His reasons for

discomfort about such a clear-cut distinction, being cross-disciplinary, have wider implications, including for systematic theology. They suggest a far greater mutuality between systematic and practical theology, which will be developed in the following section.

Practical theology's intra-theological dependence is problematic, however, not only because of the distorted conception of the theory-practice relation on which it rests. At least as serious is that this dependence prepares ground for its more insidious subordination to the non-theological disciplines and especially to the social sciences. Practical theology may then, wrongly, be reduced to an essentially empirical activity in which social injustice, economic inequality or other problems are surveyed and responses provided that broadly accord with Christian and secular morals. While such exercises undoubtedly manifest the Christian vocation to social responsibility, they are unlikely to be specifically theological in either content or methodology.

This relationship of practical theology to the social sciences and other empirical disciplines may usefully be compared with the relationship between theology and other disciplines prescribed in the medieval university. Theology, along with philosophy, was to be studied only after other subjects had been mastered.²⁶ The modern correlates of these other subjects roughly included English and other languages (grammar), argumentative subjects in the humanities such as history and political theory (rhetoric), mathematics and statistics (arithmetic) and performance art (music). These other subjects were viewed as intellectual preparation for theology rather than as substitutes for theology when the texts and ideas proper to it became too difficult, or as subjects that translated the findings of theology into terms that were more easily comprehensible. Indeed, during the High Middle Ages theologians who forsook theology for other subjects were often portrayed as dogs returning to vomit.²⁷ Although vomit is a natural biological product and part of life's rich tapestry, the analogy suggests a retreat from the ruminative, synthetic and intellectual task that is proper to theology, and especially, as I shall argue, to practical theology. In Philipp Rosemann's words, the scholar who effected such a retreat was seen as 'regurgitating intellectual food that has already been digested'.²⁸



The idea of practice

What are the alternatives to understanding practical theology as dependent either on other theological subdisciplines or on disciplines located elsewhere in the university? The neglected possibility I wish to pursue is that practice, far from being an outworking of theology, might provide the necessary setting for theology, doctrine and Christian ethics, and even be their precondition. Before advancing further, however, the definition of practice that is in use should be clarified. Notably, many discussions of practical theology do not differentiate it clearly from pastoral theology, or suggest that such differentiation is not even possible.²⁹ Another oft-repeated claim is that because different views exist of what practical theology is, the subject is impossible to define. This is unconvincing: just because different conceptions of a subject exist, it does not follow that every possible understanding is equally valid, nor that there should be no constructive debate between holders of competing understandings about the merits of their differing conceptions.

At a pragmatic level there is nothing wrong with an inclusive understanding of what counts as practical theology, not least because such an understanding recognizes the category to be broader than that of pastoral theology.³⁰ Nevertheless, conceptual clarity about the nature of an intellectual enterprise will aid and direct its further development. Because of the conceptual vagueness just referred to, for a clearer understanding of practice it is necessary to look outside the modern subdiscipline of practical theology to the work of the Thomist-inspired philosopher and Roman Catholic convert Alasdair MacIntyre. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre offers the definition of practice as: ‘any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity’.³¹ Although this definition is often cited, its full implications, both positive and negative, have not been explored. It is theologically suggestive because it does not restrict the category of practice to ecclesial practice, potentially encompassing both ecclesial practices and secular practices, including practices that might trespass

across this distinction. A second valuable aspect of the definition is its historicity. MacIntyre writes: ‘To enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extend the reach of the practice to its present point.’³² Every practice has a history, and every practitioner stands within an historical tradition. This includes the practical knowledge of technical skills as well as the internal goods, whether cultural, ethical or communal, by which a practice is characterized and sustained. To take an example, the history of the practice of baking encompasses the hard-won technical abilities to crush grain efficiently and to apply sufficient heat to dough, as well as goods such as the settlement and cultivation of land on which the grain may be grown, and also the acts of hospitality and sharing that bread makes possible.

By attending to practice’s internal goods, MacIntyre contests the instrumentalist reduction of value to external goods, such as the income generated if the bread is sold. Nevertheless, his definition of practice is theologically problematic on two counts. The definition quoted above was, in fact, incomplete. Following his reference to ‘trying to achieve [...] standards of excellence’, MacIntyre continues by stating that practices are engaged in ‘with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended’.³³ Humans, on his view, may develop their moral capacities and ethical knowledge by their own efforts, without any need of grace. The first problem with MacIntyre’s concept of practice can now be seen: it is too deeply implicated in an agonal Aristotelian ethical framework that iterates the Homeric warrior tradition, lauding the attainment of excellence and the acquisition of social and cultural capital.³⁴ Strikingly, MacIntyre argues that virtuous practice requires justice, courage and truthfulness. He does not regard humans as fallible creatures inhabiting a fragile world in which, rather than striving for justice, they hope for mercy; instead of fostering courage, they seek protection; in place of maintaining truthfulness, they repent of their falsity. At this point we see MacIntyre influenced by a traditionalist Roman Catholicism that, in deference to Aristotle, posits a realm of ‘pure nature’ within which humans may pursue at least some goods unaided by grace.

The second theological problem with MacIntyre's idea of practice is that it is epistemologically self-referential. As already recognized, MacIntyre rightly celebrates the goods internal to a practice in order to show how a practice is more than a set of technical skills exercised in order to obtain goods or to secure other external ends. But the theologian who wishes to probe the relation between doctrine and practice more deeply will require more than this. Is there, in fact, a *proper* externality to the goods of practices that are pursued within communities, and especially within Christian communities? In other words, is there a proper dualism of practice and doctrine?

At the level of routine daily functioning, practices such as buildings maintenance, catering and gardening are constitutive of the life of local churches.³⁵ They are preconditions for inhabiting a shared space and welcoming others into that space, as well as being activities in which a distinctively ecclesial life, which is egalitarian and communal, is lived out. Notwithstanding the current popularity of communitarian ecclesiologies, however, ecclesial life should not be viewed in postmodern terms as only an end in itself. However important the shared life that churches make possible might be, churches are also called to recognize and proclaim external truths beyond themselves. These truths are doctrinal and have objective theological content.

From an academic perspective, theologians need to consider more seriously the possibility that theology, including doctrine, is not simply made possible by practice, but rather, that theology depends on practice for its specific content.³⁶ As Craig Dykstra puts it in an incisive critical response to MacIntyre: 'Practices bear more than moral weight; they also bear epistemological weight. [...] Engagement in certain practices may give rise to new knowledge.'³⁷ Sarah Coakley makes a similar point more emphatically: there are 'theological insights available *only* through practices'.³⁸ In other words, practice is not simply one possible way to theological understanding, but a *condition for* such understanding. The *Rule of Benedict* provides a good example of this. In Benedict's community, the disciplines that governed the everyday material practices of worship, eating, clothing and work – which were themselves derived, in large part, from scripture – shaped theological discourse. For example, the brothers are to follow instructions immediately, thereby proving their obedience to

the Lord.³⁹ They are to sleep clothed and with a light burning in order always to be ready to respond to God's command.⁴⁰ All the property of the monastery is to be regarded as sacred, like the vessels of the altar.⁴¹ Guests are to be welcomed with great humility as if they were Christ himself, who is received in their persons.⁴² These and other connections between practice, ethics and doctrine are entirely missed by MacIntyre, who presents Benedict as a latter-day Aristotelian, despite the radically different and highly specific Christian character of Benedict's community.⁴³



From practice to theology

As already argued, practical theology in the present day needs to engage varieties of practice far wider than ministerial competences or church life. It might potentially encompass any complex, fitting and perennial dimension of human life and flourishing: hospitality, ecology, cooking, eating, drinking, clothing, gardening, travel, agriculture and architecture, to name but a few. The most ethically and doctrinally generative areas of practice are likely to be those for which there exist a tradition of biblical reflection, whether literal narrative, allegorical imagery, moral instruction, eschatological representation or some combination of these. If such biblical witness is present, elements of a lived tradition of how the particular practice has been conceived in specifically Christian terms are likely to be retrievable: few of the contents of scripture have not been put to practical service by Christian communities at some time or other. Finally, if scripture and tradition may be brought to bear on a specific practice, it is probable that the practice has contributed to the formation of doctrine, whether of God, Christ or the Spirit, creation, reconciliation, the last things or some other topic.

As the list of practices just offered in the previous paragraph makes clear, to call for a wider understanding of Christian practice is also to call Christian theologians to re-engage with culture. Others have already rightly argued that practical theologians need to engage with specific forms of popular culture such as film, music and media.⁴⁴ At a general level, however, Graham Ward defines culture as a 'symbolic

world-view, embedded, reproduced and modified through specific social practices'.⁴⁵ In order to understand culture, Ward avers, we need to remain alive to 'mediations of the real' that point beyond the mere facts of a practice and their description. In so doing, there will be enacted a 'new engagement of the theologically informed practices of the Christian with the larger social world that contextualises him or her'.⁴⁶ The humanities disciplines will be crucial collaborative partners in the task of reading culture, more so than those of the social sciences that practical theologians have frequently favoured. By re-engaging with the humanities, practical theologians have the potential to retrieve theologically rich deposits of prose, poetry, performance, image and artefact to support this endeavour, thereby performing an integrative function in the academy – including by acquiring relevant specialist knowledge in other disciplines where this intersects their theological knowledge.⁴⁷

An example of how scripture, tradition and doctrine might interact in the context of a particular practice is disability. This might seem an odd choice, being supposed to be a practice in which few people engage directly and that therefore possesses limited general significance. But as with any practice, to begin to address disability theologically is to begin to question assumptions about its definition, significance and extent.

Disability is a good example of a tradition in which the practitioner is, in part, already 'at home', if involuntarily.⁴⁸ Over the past twenty years, the topic has rightly captured the interest of increasing numbers of theologians and biblical scholars. A key early work was Nancy Eiesland's study *The Disabled God*, in which she contended that classical Christology has frequently been predicated upon a view of humanity as normatively able-bodied. Such anthropomorphisms, Eiesland argued, needed to be deconstructed if doctrine were to be freed from distortion. In fact, Christ experienced limitation in his incarnation, and even when risen still bore the wounds inflicted on him when disabled on the Cross.⁴⁹ For Eiesland, practical theology thus had a purgative function with regard to doctrine, impelling an unknowing of previously unchallenged tenets. Moreover, Eiesland's work is helpful for the present discussion because it was founded

on a personal protest *against* pastoral theology, which, she believed, assumed or even produced recipients who are powerless and marginalized and who accept pain without demur.⁵⁰

But practical theology also performs constructive theological and doctrinal roles, as in the recent work of Jeremy Schipper.⁵¹ This has demonstrated that people with disabilities are ubiquitous in scripture, where they are presented in a range of ways. Schipper counsels against the attempt to identify a single ‘scriptural’ view of disability. Rather, what emerges is a large collection of texts and images through which to think. Some figures with a disability, notably eunuchs, occupy positions of privilege and power, whereas others, such as lepers, are outcasts. Schipper also shows that significant resources have been lost in translation. The suffering servant of Isaiah 52:13–53:12, for instance – of marred appearance, beyond human semblance – is a figure with prophetic agency whose significance was probably due to a disability that subsequent interpreters have usually ignored. Schipper’s work shows that what is likely to emerge from a biblically-shaped practical theology of disability is not so much a coherent ‘theology of disability’ but a constellation of ideas and issues that connect with a range of doctrinal perspectives. For instance, whether Isaiah’s disabled, suffering servant is seen as possessing agency or suffering passivity has large implications for Christology and soteriology.

If practice thereby generates reasoning, then practice need not itself be comprehensively explicable nor justifiable on rational grounds. This is because such explication or justification will ultimately be grounded in the practice for which it is sought. The notion that the quest for such foundational justifications of practice is futile is found in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*, in which practice is presented as being, as it were, simply there. The very idea of attempting to explain (*erklären*) practice, Wittgenstein suggests, is misguided. The most that might be hoped for is that a practice be made plausible to like-minded people. What then of the practitioner herself? She might give up or change a practice if she comes to see that it depends on an error. Yet religious practices, Wittgenstein avers, are an exception to this.⁵² They seem to be deeper-rooted and harder to subject to rational interrogation than mere customs or conventions. They possess, at the very least, a stubborn remainder that cannot and

should not stand or fall on the basis of its conformity or otherwise with theory.

Frazer himself was, unlike Wittgenstein, highly sceptical about the religious practices he presented. When linking them implicitly or explicitly with Christian practices, his aim was to denigrate Christianity rather than to offer a new understanding of it.⁵³ Wittgenstein rightly chides Frazer for his narrowness of vision and his failure to recognise that the ‘principle according to which these practices are ordered is much more general [...] and we find it in ourselves’.⁵⁴ All humans are ceremonious animals, Wittgenstein contends, whether they be adherents of Classical religious cults, followers of British folk religion, or ordinary people today, whether Christian or not.

How might the practical theologian begin to understand and evaluate practice with reference to ethics and doctrine? Wittgenstein refers to ‘arranging the factual material so that we can easily pass from one part to another and have a clear view of it – showing it in a “perspicuous” way [*einer* „übersichtlichen“ *Darstellung*]’.⁵⁵ An understanding of a practice may be gained by perceiving the connections between its different associated elements and glimpsing something of its ‘inner nature’ – that is, of the circumstances that are omitted from the formal account of the practice, which might be termed its ‘spirit’ [*Geist*]. The act of understanding a practice is thereby not rationally deductive but synthetic and intuitive.

Wittgenstein’s acceptance of practice as being ‘simply there’ precludes hasty rational deconstructions of practice. It also underlies his view of practice as sometimes, at least initially, strange and disconcerting, and as requiring time to grow into. Yet practice might well demand greater theoretical interrogation than Wittgenstein allows. In particular, practices that are inherited might well need to be brought into critical, transformative dialogue with Christian ethics if they appear to be exploitative or unjust. In order to frame such a dialogue, an Hegelian corrective needs to be applied to the notion that, when practice and theory ultimately come into conflict, the inevitable victor must be practice.

Many would assume that, for Hegel, the situation would be the reverse: that theory trumps and dissolves practice, even when the two are not in conflict. In fact, he greatly respected religious practice and

all that came with it. On an attentive reading, his mature philosophy is reducible neither to a Rightist transcendent metaphysics nor a Leftist exhaustion of reason in experience. Rather, the triple mediations of nature, spirit and idea must be held together in an identity that does not simplistically exclude non-identity.⁵⁶ The result is a perpetually re-enacted mediation which, as such, requires for its subjects real, finite humans who are spiritual and rational. Moreover, religion is not concerned merely with the inward, infinite life, requiring equally the contingency of external, practical life. Hegel writes that, in religion, ‘infinite life now also develops itself outwardly; for the worldly life led by the subject also has its foundation on this substantial consciousness [of its essence, and of knowing itself in God], and the ways and means by which the subject determines its purposes in worldly life depend upon the consciousness of its essential truth’.⁵⁷ Put far more simply, ideas and spirituality shape real life. In the finite, directed mode of being that is determinate religion, practice has the specific role of bringing ‘to consciousness for the individual as something objective’ what is ‘there in human inwardness’. Furthermore, in practice ‘what is found within the individual is developed so that one knows it as the truth in which one abides’.⁵⁸ That is to say, spirit requires objective realization and recognition in practice.



Conclusion

This Hegelian correction of Wittgenstein opens the way to a richer account of practice than one limited to pastoral and professional ministries, whether in churches or other organizations. Practical theology is now seen to be rooted in transformative ethical activity that, although historically linked to Christian representation, might now have become detached from such representation. By addressing aspects of daily material life that the other theological subdisciplines have overlooked, the practical theologian will begin to recover the Augustinian truth that the boundaries of the real Church are not coterminous with those of the institutional churches. Rather, forms of implicitly churchly activity requiring theological interpretation may be found in secular society and culture. Furthermore, if, as Augustine also believed, the whole of human and material life is graced, all apparently

mundane activities and truths possess theological significance. It could be protested that, by following such a path, practical theology forsakes what should be its native institutional community. Alternatively, one might better contend that where practical theology is, there is the Church. By holding theology and practice in creative tension, rather than by seeking to dissolve the mutually generative polarity between them, the practical theologian may find and interrogate doctrine, ethics and traditions in new places.

Notes

- ¹ This point is well-made in Elaine Graham, “Why Practical Theology Must Go Public”, *Practical Theology* 1 (2008): 11–17.
- ² As is well-known, ‘public theology’ has grown as a distinct sub-discipline over the past 20 years. In an important exposition Duncan Forrester referred to this as ‘public practical theology’, but such a close relationship with practical theology is not usually perceived. See Duncan B. Forrester, “Public Practical Theology”, in his *Truthful Action: Explorations in Practical Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 107–25. For reasons that will become clear, the present article does not address the concept of public theology, although much of the case made is pertinent to it.
- ³ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study* [1811 and 1830 texts] (trans. Terrence N. Tice; Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1990), 131–71. For a useful overview, see Richard Crouter, “Shaping an Academic Discipline: The *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology*”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*, ed. Jacqueline Mariña (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 111–28 (especially 123–25 on practical theology).
- ⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Die praktische Theologie nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt*, ed. Jacob Frerichs (Berlin: Reimer, 1850). A critical edition *Vorlesungen über die Praktische Theologie (1812)* is projected in the series *Schleiermacher: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*,

- eds. Günter Meckenstock et al. (68 vols; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980–).
- ⁵ Elaine L. Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Mowbray, 1996), 59–61.
- ⁶ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology: Drawn Up to Serve as the Basis of Introductory Lectures; to which are prefixed Reminiscences of Schleiermacher by Friedrich Lücke* (trans. William Farrer; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1850).
- ⁷ One classic study that itself follows Schleiermacher’s trajectory asserts that his concept of practical theology made little impact in the Anglo-American world, but this seems untrue in the Scottish case. See Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology* (New York: Abingdon, 1958), 46f., 225.
- ⁸ For this history, see David Lyall, “Christian Ethics and Practical Theology”, in *Disruption to Diversity: Edinburgh Divinity, 1846–1996*, eds. David F. Wright and Gary D. Badcock (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 135–50.
- ⁹ Hugh Watt, *New College, Edinburgh: A Centenary History* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1946), 147f. For brief biography of Lamont, see 234.
- ¹⁰ See *ibid.*, 131–48; Stewart Mechie, *Trinity College, Glasgow, 1856–1956* (Glasgow: Trinity College, 1956), 36–8. Although similar developments occurred at St Mary’s College, St Andrews, their constitutional basis was different because the College was much older and already had a closer relationship with the University. See Ronald G. Cant, *The University of St Andrews: A Short History* (3rd ed.; St Andrews University Library, 1992), 164.
- ¹¹ Cant, *University*, 164.
- ¹² See Wilhelm Gräb, “Practical Theology as Theology of Religion: Schleiermacher’s Understanding of Practical Theology as a Discipline”, *International Journal of Practical Theology* 9 (2005): 181–96. Gräb is the current Professor of Practical Theology at the Humboldt-Universität.
- ¹³ See Mechie, *Trinity*, 43–44.
- ¹⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* §6, eds. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Berkeley, Calif.: Aprocryphile, 2011), 26–31.

- ¹⁵ E.g., Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1991); Duncan B. Forrester, “Divinity in Use and Practice”, in *Theology and Practice* (London: Epworth, 1990), 3–9; reprinted in *Theological Fragments: Explorations in Unsystematic Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 49–55.
- ¹⁶ Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline*, 14f. (1811 edn.).
- ¹⁷ John Swinton, “Practical Theology”, in *Religious Studies and Theology: An Introduction*, eds. Helen K. Bond, Seth D. Kunin and Francesca Aran Murphy (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 379–410.
- ¹⁸ *The Church of Scotland Yearbook 2013–14* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2013), 422. The number of communicants fell from 571,698 in 2002 to 415,705 in 2012.
- ¹⁹ An important response to societal shifts such as these has been the new professional doctorate in practical theology. This is grounded in a much expanded concept of profession as encompassing not just pastoring but social policy, management, politics, healthcare, community work and chaplaincy. (Zoë Bennett, “Theology and the Researching Professional: The Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology”, *Theology* 112 (2009): 333–43.) As such, it is greatly to be welcomed. Nevertheless, the professional doctorate in effect reconceives the pastoral paradigm within a range of more or less secular contexts rather than stepping outside that paradigm to an even more inclusive, academically-grounded understanding. Robin Gill, “The Future of Practical Theology”, *Contact* 56 (1977): 17–22, delineates with remarkable prescience the professional-academic distinction and argues for negotiating this by giving sufficient weight to the academic.
- ²⁰ Duncan B. Forrester, *Forrester on Christian Ethics and Practical Theology: Collected Writings on Christianity, India, and the Social Order* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 145–52 [1980], 205–13 [2007], 351–69 [1986]. In the 2007 chapter this position is nuanced by a more eschatological conception of church.
- ²¹ Alastair V. Campbell, “The Nature of Practical Theology”, in *Theology and Practice*, ed. Forrester, 10–20.

- ²² Duncan B. Forrester, “Practical Theology and Christian Ethics”, in *Truthful Action*, 45–57.
- ²³ Plato, *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey (2 vols; London: Heinemann, 1930–35), 1.314–423; 2.118–233.
- ²⁴ Plato, *Philebus* 61a, trans. Harold N. Fowler (London: Heinemann, 1925), 377. See John M. Cooper, “Plato’s Theory of Human Good in the *Philebus*”, *Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1977): 714–30.
- ²⁵ Plato, *Philebus* 67a, 397.
- ²⁶ Ralph McNerny, “Beyond the Liberal Arts”, in *The Seven Liberal Arts in the Middle Ages*, ed. David L. Wagner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 248–72.
- ²⁷ Philipp W. Rosemann, *The Story of a Great Medieval Book: Peter Lombard’s Sentences* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2007), 44, 49, drawing on Prov 26:11 and 2 Pet 2:22.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.
- ²⁹ As surveyed in Stephen Pattison and James Woodward, “An Introduction to Pastoral and Practical Theology”, in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, eds. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 1–19.
- ³⁰ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 5.
- ³¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd edn (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 187. This social conception of practice is strongly defended in Barry Barnes, “Practices as Collective Action”, in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, eds. Theodore R. Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina and Eike von Savigny (London: Routledge, 2001), 17–28. For Barnes, practices are not individual Kantian legislative acts for the whole of humanity. Rather, they are subject to change and development and, at an individual level, are non-routine.
- ³² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 194.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 187.
- ³⁴ Especially *ibid.*, 181–203.
- ³⁵ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 126–58.

- ³⁶ Miroslav Volf, “Theology for a Way of Life”, in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 245–63.
- ³⁷ Craig Dykstra, “Reconceiving Practice in Theological Inquiry and Education”, in *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre*, eds. Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg and Mark Thiessen Nation (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 161–82 (172).
- ³⁸ Sarah Coakley, “Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology”, in *Practicing Theology*, eds. Volf and Bass, 78–93 (88).
- ³⁹ *The Rule of St Benedict* 5, trans. Justin McCann (London: Sheed & Ward, 1976), 14f.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 22, 33.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.* 31, 39.
- ⁴² *Ibid.* 53, 57f.
- ⁴³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 199, 263.
- ⁴⁴ E.g., Elaine L. Graham, “‘What We Make of the World’: The Turn to ‘Culture’ in Theology and the Study of Religion”, in *Words Made Flesh: Writings in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (London: SCM, 2009 [2007]), 169–85.
- ⁴⁵ Graham Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 68, 173.
- ⁴⁷ Pamela D. Couture, “Feminist, Wesleyan, Practical Theology and the Practice of Pastoral Care”, in *Liberating Faith Practices: Feminist Practical Theologies in Context*, eds. Denise M. Ackermann and Riet Bons-Storm (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 27–49 (43), sees the practical theologian as performing this integrative function although as an unspecialized generalist.
- ⁴⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), 395.
- ⁴⁹ Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1994), 98–105. See further, if not uncritically, John Swinton, “Who is the God

- We Worship? Theologies of Disability; Challenges and New Possibilities”, *International Journal of Practical Theology* 14 (2011): 273–307 (281–6).
- ⁵⁰ Nancy L. Eiesland, “Things Not Seen: Women with Physical Disabilities, Oppression and Practical Theology”, in *Liberating Faith Practices*, eds. Ackermann and Bons-Storm, 103–28. See also Stephen Pattison, *Pastoral Care and Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 208–16. For an alternative approach to Eiesland’s, which seeks to redeem pastoral theology by grounding it in love, care and community, see Zoë Bennett Moore, *Introducing Feminist Perspectives on Pastoral Theology* (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002), especially 7–18.
- ⁵¹ Jeremy Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah’s Suffering Servant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*, eds. Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011).
- ⁵² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Bemerkungen über Frazers Golden Bough / Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*; English trans. A.C. Miles; rev. Rush Rhees (Doncaster: Brynmill, 1991), 2.
- ⁵³ Robert Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School: J. G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists* (London: Routledge, 1991), 62, 64–5.
- ⁵⁴ Wittgenstein, *Remarks*, 5e. See further Theodore R. Schatzki, *Social Practices: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), especially 98–110 on integrative practices.
- ⁵⁵ Wittgenstein, *Remarks*, 9e.
- ⁵⁶ Emil L. Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension in Hegel’s Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), 75–112.
- ⁵⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (3 vols; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984–87), 1.193, n. 25.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.336.