

‘QUO VADIS’ PRACTICAL THEOLOGY? A RESPONSE

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...any group of “outside educators” who have grown up, lived and studied, in a privileged situation, must “die as a class” and be reborn in consciousness – learning always even while they teach, and working always “with” (not “on”) the nations and the people that invite their aid (Freire, 1978:3).

Where are we heading in our Context?

Practical theology is about life and death (John 3:16; 13:36; Amos 5); and in post apartheid South Africa confronted with extraordinary difficult and broken socio-economic conditions characterised by a new escalating pattern of oppression. “The fractures of oppression are never simple fractures. They are all compound, complicated enough to undercut all that we do in the daily exercise of our work of care. the social concerns of humankind – the fractures we experience – are so great that they seem to call us away from the brokenness of particular persons, away from a concern for the lost sheep we serve to a fear for the lost of all sheep” (Patton, 1988:28). Practical theology, as a theological discipline, should be in constant tension and conflict with social responsibility, suffice to say as long as social change does not become an end in itself (Patton, 1988:28).

The question therefore arises: What difference/meaning, if any, did and is practical theology making in the spiritual, socio-economic, political, moral and cultural realities of its members and broader society, for the last 15 years in South Africa. Evidence in the public domain as well as within church contexts tends to reveal a frightening and disturbing picture of a resurgence of ‘old oppressive and undignified’ socio-economic, political, cultural and moral practices (Dames, 2009). This is especially evident *in and through the way* ordinary citizens and leaders in South Africa, and in churches, use discourse (narratives) to (re)produce, in subtle, conscious and unconscious ways, practices of oppression and dominance (Dames, 2009). Local political, cultural and socio-economic realities and recent global economic meltdown are fostering fundamentalism, classism, elitism and individualism on an exponential scale and threatens our costly earned democratic ideal of a free, non sexist, equal and just society. Practical theology should train prospective ministers within and for the contemporary South African and African context, and not in isolation of it.

Where are we heading in Postmodernity?

Postmodernity,¹ on the other hand, is questioning Christian *ways* of interpreting the Christian faith (specifically in light of contemporary existential challenges). The world of today is severely threatened by human destructiveness. This raises the question that “the task of reinterpreting the faith cannot be left to the academic theologians alone. What we believe, whatever our religious tradition, must involve all our capacity for imagination encountering the present fact of human destructiveness and reinterpreting our faith in the

¹ “We are in the age of postmodernity. The mark of this is a suspicion of all claims to universal truth. Such claims have to be deconstructed. The “metanarratives” told by societies to validate their claims to global power are to be rejected. There are no privileged cultures and no privileged histories. All human cultures are equally entitled to respect. There are only different “regimes of truth” (Michel Foucault) which succeed one another” (Newbigin, 1995:30ff).

light of that fact” (Patton, 1988:31). Leonardo Boff (1994), in this regard, introduced a new theological methodology, eco-theology, in an attempt to bring the “experiences of people” in relation with the official theological discourse of the church (Dingemans, 1996:90). Suffice to state that the neighbour in need is the only place where we find God in the world (Schrage, 1988; cf. the Confession of Belhar). Van der Ven’s *intradisciplinarity* approach calls on theologians to learn about social science methodologies, in terms of their own (theological) questions and objectives. However, most practical theologians continue to cooperate uncritically with social scientists² in an interdisciplinary way. Practical theology’s focus and intention is, however, primarily the description or analysis of the praxis; explanation of the praxis; defining of the normative; and ultimately an improved and transformed praxis, in light of a pneumatological-and-Christopraxis (Dingemans, 1996:92).

Where are we heading with Practical Theology?

Practical theology is a reciprocal process of reflecting on, doing-being functions, (and designing) (cf. Aristotle) the Praxis of the Trinity in and through the praxis of the Faith Community towards the praxis of the world. It discerns, acts in and through and applies the praxis (intention, vision re salvation, love, peace and righteousness) of the Trinity through discernment, in doing-being functions (communicative actions) and crafting of faith practices in, with and through the Church for the salvation, healing reconciliation of a broken world. The ultimate and penultimate continuum (cf. Bonhoeffer in De Haan) of the faith community’s conscious, doing-being functions, and crafting of faith practices is based on a holistic anthropological, hermeneutical, ethical, contextual, scriptural, traditional, pneumatological, missio-transformational and eschatological methodology.

Theology could be defined with the metaphor of a motor vehicle; the various sub-disciplines make up the different parts of the vehicle; of which practical theology is the power/engine that crafts motion and transformation for the motor vehicle to move in and through familiar and unfamiliar territories on a journey of discovery, growth and enrichment (Burger, 1991, *Die dinamika van geloofsgemeenskappe*).

Where are we heading with Academic Theology?

The emerging new field of practical theology has directly challenged the ‘remote controlled’ paradigm and methodology of academic theology from the perspective of the realities and practices of the Christian faith within the church and society:

Theologians of the reformation and counter-reformation should be defined as practical theologians, in re-shaping the practices and teachings of the churches in their eras, in light of new historic circumstances and challenges. Theology in any of these now “classical” eras had more the character of *theology habitus* than of the theological sciences. It was concerned with the shaping or re-shaping of the practices of the church so that they reflected faithfulness to Christ and formed congregations of folk through whom Christ could make his appeal in the world. They were “local” theologies,

² The value of social practice for theological training should, however, not be overlooked: “...when we are dealing with social practice in which the struggle for production, class conflict, and creative action are all dynamically interrelated, we discover that education is a process that takes social practice as the basis for learning and study. Education is itself a dimension of social practice. It seeks to know the reason for the practice and, through this knowledge as it deepens and develops, it also seeks new practice that is constant with the overall plan for the society. ...A society that seeks to live the radical unity between practice and theory overcomes the dichotomy between manual labour and intellectual labour. The result is a totally different model of education. In this model the school – whether primary, secondary or university level – is not essentially different from the factory or the farm, nor does it stand in opposition to them” (Freire, 1978:89-90).

addressing the concreteness and specific challenges of particular times and places. Under the impact of these challenges they shaped powerful interpretations of experiences of revelation and of the documents of scripture and tradition. Practical theology says, however, that we should be more concerned to imitate their faithfulness and creativity, in response to divine inspiration, without slavishly trying to systematize and apply *their* practical theological solutions to *our* challenges in the present. At the heart of practical theology's self understanding and effort to communicate its work we find the retrieval in theology and philosophy of the ancient concept of *praxis* (Fowler, 1995:3).

This brings us to Aristotle's definition of knowledge referred to as the ability to achieve the highest Greek vocation, namely *good political leadership*. Knowing was viewed as collective (not individualist) *phronesis* or "practical wisdom" referred to as *praxis, theoria* (action and reflection, informed by different interests and contexts, and employing different methods) and *poiesis* (creative skill) (Fowler, 1995:3). Practical theology ought to base itself on an Augustinian philosophy, *credo ut intelligam* (I believe in order to know). Augustine defined the way of knowing with the faithful acceptance of the reality that God revealed himself in Christ (Newbigin, 1995:5). The Aristotelian premise of the biblical tradition as the starting point for thought taught that:

...we begin by asking questions, and we formulate these questions on the basis of our experience of the world. In this enterprise we are in control of operations. We decide which questions to ask, and these decisions necessarily condition the nature of the answers. This is the procedure with which we are familiar in the work of the natural sciences. The things we desire to understand are not active players in the game of learning; they are inert and must submit to our questions. The resulting "knowledge" is our achievement and our possession (Newbigin, 1995:5).

Furthermore, there is another way of knowing, especially within a pluralistic, secularist and postmodern world:

It is the kind of knowing that we seek in our relations with other people. In this kind of knowing we are not in full control. We may ask questions, but we must also answer the questions put by the other. We can only come to know others in the measure in which they are willing to share. The resulting knowledge is not simply our own achievement; it is also the gift of others. And even in the mutual relations of ordinary human beings, it is never complete. There are always further depths of knowledge that only long friendship and mutual trust can reach, if indeed they can be reached at all (Newbigin, 1995:6).

The aforementioned knowing in terms of personal and communal relations, is a radical break with intellectual and individualist kind of knowing which is often associated with the natural sciences (Newbigin, 1995:6).

Groome (1980:153) refers to Aristotle's three distinctive ways of relating intelligently to life, or three human activities from which understanding could arise. These represent the speculative life, the practical life, and the productive life.³

The Aristotle and Marx traditions of *praxis*⁴ inform practical theology in developing faith practices of the churches and their missions. *Praxis* also fosters critical and creative

³ "The speculative life is the life of contemplation and reflection. The practical is an ethical life lived in a political context. The productive life is the life devoted to making artifacts, or to artistic endeavours" (Groome, 1980:153).

⁴ For Aristotle, *praxis* was the ongoing integration of action and reflection through which the political process maintained and adapted the practices of the city state necessary for its flourishing and maintenance. For Marx, on the other hand *praxis* came to connote intentional action strategically aimed at the overthrow of the present patterns of economic and political domination and their replacement by the classless society (Fowler, 1995:4).

efforts of transformation towards greater faithfulness and effectiveness of the church's witness in society (Fowler, 1995:4). "...we cannot afford to build theological approaches around a commitment to *praxis* without finding ways theologically to help communities of faith correlate their own efforts at faithfulness with the ways God's spirit is present and active in our world" (Fowler, 1995:10).

Where to with our Sciences of Knowing?

Matthew Lamb (in Fowler, 1995:7) argued in *Solidarity with Victims* how most influential theologies of the twentieth century virtually always approached the churches from the standpoint of the priority of theory. Practical theology is basically a "problem-posing" theology (Fowler, 1995:7). It opposes docetic theologies that compartmentalize the spiritual and the physical, and that shrink the concerns of the church to the private and spiritual needs of its members (1995:8). Nouwen's (cited by Louw, 2009) creative ministry paradigm offers a possible solution. It dissolves the dualism between professionalism and spirituality; deity and community; obligation and opportunity; formality and integrity; doing and being; denomination and fellowship; power and weakness; manipulation and diaconal service.

At the heart of the Christian message was a new fact: God had acted – and let us remember that the original meaning of "fact" is the Latin *factum*, "something done". God had acted in a way that, if believed, must henceforth determine all our ways of thinking (Newbigin, 1995:3).

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Polanyi invites us to consider whether we are not operating with an entirely false and deceptive idea of certainty. It is the dominance in the public mind of this false and illusory ideal of certainty which hopelessly confuses the debate among Christians about the certainty of their faith (Newbigin, 1995:44).

The question of how our whole approach to Christianity is being conditioned by modernity should be addressed. Theology has been divided analytically into various interdisciplinary theological sciences, "ologies": soteriology, harmatology, eschatology, etc. McLaren (2001:24) consequently defines this as a dissection of God, a "theosection", a dissection of the Bible, and one could also insist, of the faith community. This dissection led to the reality where:

...training for the Christian ministry was assimilated to the critical methods of modernity, thousands of prospective ordinands in their earliest months of theological training had to be gently but firmly moved from the confessional position to the scientific one". The "historical-critical method" for example, became the only proper method for interpreting the ancient Christian texts (Newbigin, 1995:79-80).

The application of empirical (van der Ven) or hermeneutical (Gerkin) methodologies in practical theology may, as a result, render practical theology as an academic discipline that meets modern university standards (Dingemans, 1996:96).

The modern age began with the daring program of Descartes, a program encouraged by a cardinal of the church and designed to banish scepticism once and for all by establishing the method by which indubitable certainty could be obtained. Neither faith nor probability would suffice. Certainty was possible, and we ought to be content with nothing less. It is deeply ironic that this method has led us directly into the profound scepticism of the postmodern world. The greatest product of the modern age is the work of science, a work

which has transformed the human situation and continues to do so. Yet there is now a profound scepticism about science itself. It is recognized as a unique avenue to power (and the greater part of scientific work is now directed towards the achievement of power – military, industrial, and commercial, *as well as academic and institutional maintenance church structures*), but it is not perceived as a pathway to wisdom (Newbigin, 1995:30ff).

The development of practical theology has been characterised by intensive and conflicting debates in securing its 'place and role' within the Theology⁵ discipline. Needless to say that it may still be viewed as an odd or even 'irrelevant' theological discipline. At the heart of this debate lies a fundamental premise that dictated and determined the origin, ordering and application of knowledge, its culmination into the epistemology of modern science.

Building Creative Hermeneutical Faith Communities!

Practical theological thinking, however, ought to be at the core of a *hermeneutical* activity. The community of faith is a *community of interpretation*. "Jesus did not write a book which would have served forever as the unquestionable and irreformable statement of the truth about God. He formed a community of friends and shared his life with them" (Newbigin, 1995:89).

A hermeneutical faith community interprets situations and its contemporary challenges in the light of God's Praxis. It relates contemporary contexts thru a mutually critical correlation with interpretations of the normative sources of the Christian tradition and practices (Fowler, 1995:6). Hans Georg Gadamer (*Truth and Method*) in Fowler (1995:6-7)

⁵ "Edward Farley, a systematic theologian, broke the dichotomy between "pure" and "applied" theology by distinguishing between four major phases in the development of theology as a core activity for the church and eventually, the university, namely: (1) theology habitus (from the New Testament church until the Middle Ages) – theology as knowledge of God pursued through the disciplines of prayer, study, liturgical participation, and the practices of discipleship. *Theology habitus* aimed toward the formation of persons and communities in accordance with the revealed knowledge of God. (2) Theology Science from the 2nd-4th centuries signified the intellectual responses (in the great *Summas* of Thomas Aquinas) of the church to the challenges of heresies within and of competitive intellectual ideologies from without (with the rational reconciliation of the recovered philosophy of Aristotle with Augustinian theology). Theology emerged as the dominant ordering framework for grounding all human knowledge in the west. Theology as science ("queen of the sciences") provided the intellectual energy and thrust for the founding of the great medieval universities, until and well beyond the Counter Reformation. (3) The Renaissance and the Reformation period with their respective returns to classical and biblical foundations characterised a fresh retrieval of humanistic traditions, unshackled from theological control, and gave fresh impetus to scholarly study. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries symbolised the dawning age of scientific inquiry, which resulted in the rise of the modern research university, with its beginning of the transformation of education for the classical professions into the work of specialized disciplines of research. Theology as the post "queen of the sciences" alienated with the emerging "scientific" disciplines of history, philosophy, philology, and rationally grounded ethics, from which various departments of specialized theological study began to form. *Theology Science* became *theological sciences* fostering a unity of a working relation between disciplinary specialities in theology contributing to the professional grounding of university-educated pastors and priests. Schleiermacher's proposal for the role of practical theology as the place where the theological disciplines meet to inform the work of ecclesial science provided one such influential rationale for the continuing presence of theological faculties in the now secularizing universities. Theological specialisation eventually and inevitably led to diminished conversation and collaboration *between* the disciplines, and often to a growing distancing of their work from that of the ministries of the churches. (4) *Systematic* or *dogmatic theology* now separated from History of Christian Thought, from Ethics, and often from Biblical Studies, became itself a specialised discipline. In academic circles it has increasingly given attention to issues of methodology and concerns about the legitimation of its work as a discipline. In the latter third of this century academic systematic theology, has on the whole, become increasingly remote from the practices of Christian faith in the churches and in our societies" (Fowler, 1995:2-3).

refers to this process as a creative “fusion of the horizons” of interpreted social reality with those of interpreted Christian normative sources”. This dualism constitutes both “the hermeneutical (interpretative) and correlational approach between ongoing interpretation of Scripture and tradition in correlation with present situations and challenges, engendering change in church practices whilst honouring continuity and keeping faith with scripture and tradition” (Fowler, 1995:7). Schreiter and James Howell (in Fowler, 1995:7) “challenged and helped practical theologians to recognise that change in the practices of religious communities must begin with helping congregations face and name the points at which their practices are inadequate, unfaithful, or both”.

Building the Faith Community’s Public Witness!

The task of practical theology today should be in guiding Christian churches in the shaping and reshaping of their public witness, especially in a postmodern and secular milieu. It’s work should be grounded “in a vigorous life of worship, prayer, proclamation and study of scripture and tradition. If practical theology is to help churches unmask the pretences of secular value structures and the seductive injustices of capitalist and market economies, communities of faith have to be grounded deeply in an alternate set of stories, and be equipped with an alternate set of virtues”. Practical theology needs to do its work in two languages: the language of prayer, praise and proclamation “behind the wall,” and the languages of public discourse “on the wall” (II Kings 18 and 19) (Fowler, 1995:9).

Practical theology arises out of and returns to the local, the concrete and the contextual situations in which the church functions. It should seriously avoid ideological captivity and entrapment in abstractions. Simultaneously it should endeavour to offer a relevant and powerful depiction that will enable us to see the subtle depths and awesome patterns of God’s suffering presence and providential power in preserving, healing and redeeming God’s beloved creation. An all of this that we, and those whom we teach, may be moved, empowered and guided in making ourselves more fully a part of God’s work in our time and in our places (Fowler, 1995:11).

Fowler (1995:7-9) identified, therefore, the following aspects as core characteristics of a practical theological approach, namely: praxis-theory-praxis; contextual, local, and stay close to experience; theology habitus; includes, but is not limited to reflective work in the functional areas of ecclesial practices; works in two languages: the “*language behind the wall*” and the “*language on the wall*”.

Building Faith Communities of and for Liberation!

I opt for a (pneumatological and eschatological) liberation paradigm of PT within the scope of and as an embodiment of both the clerical, church and the individual paradigms. The main emphasis in contemporary practical theology is on the internal and external functioning of the church. This should include the liberating work of the gospel in society and in the life of individual believers. A combination of three basic PT conceptions should, therefore be sought, namely: “empirical-analytical”, “hermeneutical”, and “critical-political” methodologies (Dingemans, 1996:84-87); to attend to the church’s vocation in South Africa’s current challenging context.

Where are we Heading?

The (post)Modern Church may not escape the power and influence of the modern scientific project. The danger of a Christological epistemology that maintains the modern scientific epistemology and upholds dualisms and establishing a bipolar tension between theory and

praxis, action and reflection, power and powerless, human dignity and human oppression, remains an open question. A new hermeneutical community is required:

When people are able to see and analyse their own way of being in the world of their immediate daily life, including the life of their villages, and when they can perceive the rationale for the factors on which their daily life is based, they are enabled to go far beyond the narrow horizons of their own village and the geographical area in which it is located, to gain a global [theological] perspective on reality (Freire, 1978:57).

When Human Dignity comes Home!

De Haan (2006:5,7) illustrates the importance of the past as 'penultimate power of good' in its multidimensional form during Bonhoeffer's imprisonment: "In the expression of his feelings in the poem *Who am I?* we can see something of the "edges of life" in prison. In the end it's the 'ultimate power of good' from which a human being is held. Human dignity is ascribed to us from God in heaven. ...in the end human dignity only comes from the ultimate, from the outside gift of love of God by which human beings are justified and therefore dignified. From the 'Ultimate Power of Good' in which all powers and times flow" (De Haan, 2006:7).

Jesus was certainly skilful in His relationships with people and was not afraid to use His insights into the stirrings of the human heart. But when asked about the source of His knowledge, He said:

My teaching is not from myself; it comes from the One who sent me. When a man's doctrine is his own, he is hoping to get honour for himself; but when he is working for the honour of one who sent him, then he is sincere and by no means an impostor (John 7:16-18).

The minister who cares for people is called to be skilful but not a handyman, knowledgeable but not an impostor, a professional but not a manipulator. When he is able to deny himself, to be faithful and to understand the meaning of human suffering, then the man who is cared for will discover that through the hands of those who want to be of help God shows his tender love for him (Newbigin, 1995:64-64).

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