

On Becoming a Practical Theologian: Past, Present and Future Tense

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2**Abstract:**

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4This article takes an autobiographical approach to the development of practical theology as a discipline over
5the past thirty years with particular attention to the author's own context of the United Kingdom. The
6unfolding of my own intellectual story in relation to key issues within the wider academic discourse
7provides an opportunity to reflect on some of the predominant themes and trends: past, present and future.
8Changing nomenclature, from 'pastoral studies' to practical theology indicates how the discipline has moved
9from regarding itself as the application of theory into practice, into a more performative and inductive
10epistemology. This emphasis continues to the present day and foregrounds the significance of the human
11context and the realities of lived experience, including narrative and autobiography. Whilst the
12methodological conundrums of relating experience to tradition and theory to practice continue, further
13challenges are beckoning, including religious pluralism; and so the article closes by surveying the prospects
14for a multi-cultural practical theology.

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16**Key terms:** Practical Theology; narrative; autobiography; academic discipline; inductive epistemology;
17methodology; lived experience; multi-cultural

18 1. Approaching Practical Theology Autobiographically

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20 In responding to an invitation to make a contribution to a *Festschrift* to celebrate the life and work of such
21 an eminent scholar as Yolanda Dreyer, it seems appropriate to approach such a task autobiographically, since
22 on such an occasion one's mind turns to the convergence of 'life' and 'work'. In recent years, practical
23 theology has undergone something of a turn to the self, a move which, as I shall argue later, is the latest in a
24 number of re-orientations: from applied theology to theological reflection on practice; from a clerical
25 paradigm to the study of the religious practices of everyday life; from theology as propositional knowledge
26 to practical wisdom.

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28 As one way of thinking myself into this project, I have chosen to begin by locating myself, and to consider
29 how my own personal and intellectual autobiography has intersected with the development of the discipline
30 of practical theology: past, present and future. I find myself, then, reflecting on different levels of my own
31 history, as well as various understandings of the nature of practice and what renders that 'theological': my
32 own personal faith journey; my pedagogical and supervisory practice in helping new forms of knowledge to
33 emerge, including practice-based research in theological studies; and what it means to consider the realms of
34 practice and experience as theologically significant – as ways of 'talking about God'. I offer these reflections
35 as a contribution to the continuing conversations within the community of discourse that is practical
36 theology.

37 2. Past tense: a quest, a cause and a profession

38

39Perhaps I have always been a practical theologian, even though my introduction to formal academic
40theological studies did not take place until I began postgraduate study in what was then called ‘Social and
41Pastoral Theology’ at the University of Manchester in the mid-1980s. My own personal Christian formation
42took place during my undergraduate days, within the Student Christian Movement (SCM). Historically,
43SCM emerged out of the student overseas missionary societies with their emphasis on promoting vocations
44of service (Tatlow, 1933; Boyd, 2007). It was at the forefront of the modern ecumenical movement whose
45watchword was, ‘Doctrine divides but service unites’ (Wainwright, 2005): a hope that despite
46denominationalism and disunity, the churches could advance in a common cause of practical witness to
47society, and that the causes of social reform, justice and human welfare were living expressions of the
48Gospel.

49

50When I later worked for SCM in England in the early 1980s, recruiting new members and supporting local
51groups, I saw as lying at the heart of my work the task of enabling students to think about their faith, to
52apply to their Christian commitment the same kind of rigour and seriousness they would adopt with their
53academic studies. From those early experiences, possibly, were sown many of the seeds of my subsequent
54attraction to practical theology: a concern for the practical and ethical dimensions of religion; a conviction
55that there are no ‘no go’ areas for Christianity, intellectually or materially; that even if the beliefs of a
56divided Church may compromise its credibility, its authentic mission is to be found in its practices of service
57and justice; and a sense that there are no easy answers, only that the journey of enquiry has to be rigorous
58and self-critical.

59

60**What’s in a name?**

61

62My first degree had been in social science, so when I enrolled on my MA I wondered whether a lack of
63undergraduate systematic theology would put me at a disadvantage. In fact, I discovered that many of the
64skills and conceptual frameworks I already had were well-suited to the ‘Manchester school’ of practical
65theology, which valued the empirical and experiential as foundations for theological understanding. The
66view was that serious contemporary theological engagement needed to respond to the questions posed by the
67world around us. This included the challenges of the human life-cycle, broader issues of identity in the face
68of questions of power and difference (such as sexuality, gender and race), a desire to root theological
69reflection in its wider economic and social contexts, a growing awareness of the impact of globalisation, and
70so on. At that time, too, I think I was catching the wave of two important moments in the development of
71practical theology in the academy. Superficially, they were evident in the changing nomenclature of the
72discipline, but this also represented a significant shift in self-understanding as well.

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74i. **From ‘pastoral studies’ to ‘practical theology’:**

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76For most of the twentieth century in the UK pastoral or practical theology was identified with training for
77ordained ministry – such as clergy handbooks on the conduct of pastoralia – or as derivative of
78psychotherapy, focusing on pastoral care, using humanistic principles that were often derived from Christian
79theology such as unconditional positive regard but which generally had lost touch with the practices and
80doctrines of Christian tradition.

81

82There were, however, signs that new perspectives were emerging. In an article entitled ‘Pastoral Theology:
83Towards a new Discipline’ (Dyson, 1983), Tony Dyson, who was to become my doctoral supervisor at
84Manchester, was beginning to construct a fresh agenda. Whilst it was a relatively brief and speculative
85intervention in many respects, it proved highly influential in advancing the debate. Dyson argued that the
86vogue within pastoral ministry training for forms of psychotherapeutic training was ‘symptomatic of the
87search for a trouble-free zone of inwardness’ (1983:20) in which awkward questions about the authority of
88Scripture, tradition and church practice upon contemporary ministry could be suspended and ignored.
89Similarly, the predominance of the ‘apprenticeship’ model of pastoral training for clergy reinforced a certain
90lack of rigour or openness to fresh ideas or forward thinking. The urgent and vital challenges to the
91churches of secularization and cultural pluralism, economic and social injustice, even questions about

92personal identity and the self, were submerged under the weight of what Dyson called ‘warm personalism’
93(Dyson, 1983:3). Presciently, too, he warned that the male-dominated nature of the Church and of the
94theological canon itself required a thorough-going reconstruction of core beliefs and assumptions regarding
95the human person, the nature of power, spirituality and care in favour of more inclusive, rigorous and
96progressive understandings.

97

98Conscientious student that I was, I adopted Dyson’s agenda for myself and took it further. My master’s
99dissertation examined the lack of attention to the pastoral needs of women in the literature, concluding that
100its dominance by a clerical, androcentric paradigm silenced the voices and lives of women (Graham, 1990,
101Graham, 1989). In my doctoral work, I addressed Dyson’s speculation that huge areas of theological
102understandings about the human person remained almost completely unexamined. So for example, in the
103debate about the ordination of women to the priesthood (in the Church of England and Roman Catholic
104Church), I questioned what it meant to say that women priests would bring ‘feminine’ qualities to ministry.
105It seemed to me that this was importing all sorts of assumptions about gender difference and identity that
106were largely unexamined and undertheorised (Graham, 1989; 1990). It revealed a need to interrogate the
107deeper questions and underlying presuppositions – in other words, to become more sophisticated and self-
108critical about the concepts and ‘regulative ideals’ shaping pastoral ministry and other aspects of the Church’s
109life. Subsequently, my PhD was an attempt to interrogate into what different disciplines were saying about
110gender identity, gender roles and gender relations, and what the implications might be for the way theology
111talked about what it means to be human (Graham, 1995).

112

113My own emerging research interests reflected a wider disciplinary reorientation away from ‘pastoral studies’
114to ‘practical theology’. In time, my insights were also instrumental in helping to make the transition beyond
115the therapeutic and clerical paradigms, bringing a more robust theoretical framework to bear and
116undertaking a more searching investigation into the conditions under which the ‘action-guiding world-views’
117of Christian communities were actually engendered. This also entailed a move away from a primary
118objective as training for ordained ministry, towards an investigation into the whole church as a community
119of practice. Increasingly, this was understood as the context in which ‘ministry’ of many kinds took place,
120from Christian formation and nurture, to worship, to pastoral care, to community engagement and outreach,
121to public statements on social issues.

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123ii. **From ‘applied’ to ‘practical’ theology:**

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125This was also a time of a shift away from the language of ‘applied’ theology (although it is still something
126one encounters) to that of ‘practical’ theology. This was part of a questioning of an established curricula
127pattern which began ministerial formation with the study of doctrine, Church history and Bible and only
128subsequently thinking about practice, often post-ordination, via odds and ends of pastoralia, or ‘hints and
129helps’ (Hiltner, 1958).

130

131Debate also centred on the legacy of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), often credited as the founding
132figure of modern practical theology, whose characterization of theological studies as a tree in which
133philosophy formed the roots, Church history the trunk and practice the branches, reinforced a hierarchy of
134knowledge which privileged ‘theory’ over ‘practice’ (Campbell, 1990). Instead, by the 1990s, the literature
135in practical theology was talking increasingly about a project of beginning with and from practice and
136experience:

137 ‘... from practice to theory and back to practice ... Or more accurately, it goes from present theory-
138 laden practice to a retrieval of normative theory-laden practice to the creation of more critically held
139 theory-laden practices.’ (Browning, 1991:7)

140

141Similarly, the influence of the theologies of liberation, with their emphasis on beginning with the everyday
142issues of life as the foundations of theological reflection, was absolutely crucial in the task of turning
143theology on its head so that experience and practice informed doctrine, and not the other way around
144(Graham, 2000:108-109; Graham, 1996).

145

146 Practical theology came to be more clearly distinguished from its systematic sibling, which was about ‘the
147 ordering of beliefs about God, the church, or classic texts’ (Miller-McLemore, 2011: 14). By contrast,
148 practical theology was finding a disciplinary coherence in the very theological nature of practice, whether
149 those were explicit practices of faith, or the routines and rituals of everyday life; and whether they were
150 Christian, non- or post-Christian, institutionalised and informal. Practical theology was beginning to think of
151 itself as ‘a primary, performative religious activity that happens in and through ordinary adherents, and often
152 by means of their practices.’ (Nieman, 2002:202)

153

154 The pastoral disciplines of personal care, social action, worship and initiation were thus achieving a renewed
155 currency, as more than the 'applied' offshoots of a body of propositional theory that transcended the contingency
156 of human activity. Rather, the ways in which Christians choose to organize their ways of being in the world --
157 relating to one another in community, and of enacting ritual, care and spirituality -- were held to constitute the
158 language of authentic identity. Practical theology therefore functions in order to enable communities of faith to
159 'practise what they preach' (Graham, 2000:106). The task of the critical practical theologian is to examine how
160 (embodied) pastoral practices constitute a 'Christian' (or faithful) identity - an identity which is always already
161 performative (Graham, 1996). If theological values have any substance, they will exist in primary form as
162 bodily practices – in activities of care, worship, proclamation, transformation - and only derivatively as
163 doctrines and concepts. Practical theology essentially gives voice to the 'body language' of the Christian faith.
164 Pastoral practices are sacraments of the divine at work in human relationships; and the vocation of the Body of
165 Christ is thus to 'become the flesh of our words' (May, 1995:88).

166

167 ‘... the specific practices by which we respond to God’s grace – practices such as prayer, forgiveness,
168 and hospitality – bear knowledge of God, ourselves and the world that cannot be reduced to words,
169 even though words are often important in helping us to learn and participate faithfully in them. Such
170 practices embody certain kinds of wisdom and foster certain kinds of intelligence when engaged in
171 serious and critical ways.’ (Bass & Dykstra, 2008: 358.)

172

173 Increasingly, then, throughout the 1990s practical theologians moved away from the language of ‘applied
174 theology’ to describe their work, in favour of terminology such as ‘practical wisdom’ (Bass, *et al.*, 2016;
175 Graham, 1996; Browning, 1991). All theology is ‘practical’ because it serves as the ‘compass’ for our lives
176 together: orientating our aspirations and actions about justice, flourishing, community, forgiveness, the fruits
177 of the spirit in the living reality of God. Doctrine emerged historically not for its own sake but in order to
178 give shape to Christian discipleship – to provide the words that enabled and gave life to faithful action.
179 Theological understanding is not an abstract principle awaiting application in practice or as it ‘translates’
180 from theory into action. It is always already ‘embodied, situated knowing-in-action’ (Bass, *et al.*, 2016:2).

181

182 Present tense: Some staple precepts of Practical Theology

183

184 It is instructive to see how these emerging ideas have developed over the past thirty years and have created a
185 number of the characteristic preoccupations of our contemporary discussions.

186

187 **i. The relationship of theory to practice**

188

189 Eric Stoddart characterises practical theologians as ‘bi-directional’:

190 ‘... Practical Theologians are congenitally more comfortable with the notion of two-way rather than
191 one-way streets. Practical Theologians will ... hold that people’s practice is informed, shaped,
192 perhaps, by doctrine – or even dictated by it. But ... Practical Theologians want to keep asserting
193 that doctrine is informed, shaped and even dictated by practice.’ (Stoddart, 2014:xii)

194

195 Practical theology regards practice as significant in a number of ways. Firstly, this emphasis on practice is
196 intended to foreground *the significance of the human context and the realities of lived experience* as the
197 domain in which Christian ministry or action takes place. Practice denotes the ‘embodied expression of
198 particular kinds of knowledge’ (Stoddart, 2014: 3). Whereas ‘practice’ may denote something quite
199 routinized and unreflective, the term ‘*praxis*’ points towards something that is more reflexive, that is both

200value-directed and value-laden. It is the meanings we bring to practice and the meaning-making associated
201with our actions.

202

203And that takes us to a second dimension of why theology is practical. Theology is *practical*, but practice is
204also '*theological*' - 'practice is taken to be theologically significant' (Beaudoin, 2016:9). This is why it
205differentiates itself from anything approaching 'applied' theology, because theology does not simply end in
206practice, but begins there as well. No theologian is going to admit to their theological study as being
207' impractical' in the sense of having practical bearing; but what really differentiates practical theology is, I
208believe, this second turn to practice as the source and origin of theological understanding:

209 '[T]heology [is] a practical discipline. It is the intellectual reflection on the faith we share as the
210 believing community within a specific cultural context. But it has as its goal the application of our
211 faith commitment to living as the people of God in our world.' (Grenz, 1993:17-18)

212

213In the work I did with Heather Walton and Frances Ward in the early 2000s, our aim was not so much to
214produce a handbook for exercises in theological reflection as to re-contextualise the history of Christian
215doctrine and put forward just such a manifesto for regarding all theology as practical – from start to finish.
216So we argued, on the one hand, that theological discourse begins (and ends) in practice: theology itself is
217engendered by the imperatives of discipleship and lived experience (Graham, Walton & Ward, 2005).
218Historically, certain key practical challenges and tasks prompted the need to construct a Christian world-
219view:

220 □ Initiation and nurture, or the formation of character

221 □ Circumscribing the boundaries of belief, or building communities of faith

222 □ Communicating the gospel to the wider world (Graham, Walton & Ward, 2005:10-11)

223

224However, this consolidated further (as I had begun to do in *Transforming Practice*, 1996), into a sense that
225these lived experiences and faith practices actually constituted a kind of 'performativity' in respect of
226theological truth-claims. This is the third movement of practical theology: not just to say that theological
227adequacy is tested in practice or as it translates into action, but that theology is primarily performative and
228enacted, and only secondarily or derivatively written down and systematized. Here, the influence of
229postmodern and liberationist thinking is notable: theology is practised as *orthopraxis* first, and systematized
230as *orthodoxy* second (Graham, 1996; 2000). Theology is sacramental, incarnational and enacted: it is talk
231about God as embodied in faith-filled practices.

232 'The aim of theology is not to work out a system that is enduring so much as to meet everyday
233 experiences with faith – and to express that faith in terms of everyday experience. Theology is an
234 ongoing process. It is the *habitus* of praying Christians, of reflective ministers, and believing
235 communities.' (Bevans, 2014: 49)

236

237Trying to understand human action and thought and the meanings inherent in practice – including their
238theological bearings – requires sophisticated methods of enquiry and interpretation. In turn, how these
239meanings constitute 'action-guiding world-views' for their actors – and whether one rests with a descriptive
240account or moves into normative and transformative mode – draws one back to the world of actions and
241practices. So whilst most practical theologians would sign up to Don Browning's characterization of
242'practice-theory-practice' it is by no means straightforward. We need to see how practices are always theory-
243laden, and theory, or concepts, or doctrines, are themselves forms of meaning-making that serve practice.

244

245If this is the case, then to be a practical theological researcher is to enquire into these embodied expressions
246of situated knowledge. This implies taking context seriously – hence Paul Ballard's call to attend to 'the
247concrete, historical and immediate reality' confronting the Church, in order 'to equip the People of God in
248the service of the world' (Ballard, 1992: 5).

249

250 **ii. Interdisciplinarity**

251 'Interdisciplinarity is constitutive of practical theology.' (Mercer, 2016: 163)

252

253This leads me to the next distinctive quality of contemporary practical theology, as characterised by its
254dialogue with other theological and Biblical disciplines, as well as the social and human sciences. Given the

255contextuality and complexity of the field of study, it is perhaps inevitable that practical theologians should
256argue that no single methodology or interpretative framework is able to do such a process of enquiry justice.
257Practical theologians therefore have to call upon a variety of research methods and tools. Furthermore, the
258researcher is themselves embedded in and complicit with the field of activity to be studied.

259 'The primary locus of theology is not academia nor even ecclesia, but human history as it unfolds in
260 the world ... This means that the praxis of God in history as it is co-constituted through human
261 praxis is our primary text and context for doing theology. And because the whole created order and
262 the activity that constitute human history are potential disclosures of God to us, then all the human
263 sciences, disciplines of learning, and ways of knowing are potential resources for our theologizing.'
264 (Groome, 1987:61)
265

266As Joyce Ann Mercer observes in her discussion of my work on theological anthropologies of advanced,
267'post-human' technologies, a willingness to locate oneself at the 'intersections' of discourse can bring a
268refreshing openness to new theological meanings (Mercer, 2016: 227-228). Equally, however, there are
269corresponding risks, such as incoherence or naivety in the face of complex and diverse bodies of knowledge.
270Even more controversially, a commitment to interdisciplinarity within practical theological method
271represents, for some, a dilution of the explicitly theological voice. This locates us on one of the chief fault-
272lines of Christian tradition and theological study, which is the question of the relative status and authority of
273tradition versus experience; or of the balance between theological and non-theological sources and norms.
274As the early Christian writer Tertullian was reputed to have asked,

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276 'What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the
277 Church? What between heretics and Christians? Away with all attempts to produce a mottled
278 Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputations after
279 possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel!' (Tertullian, 1953:36)
280

281As this famous passage suggests, Tertullian was opposed to any kind of accommodation to pagan
282philosophy, which is a strand of theological thinking that continues to this day. It is perhaps represented in
283twentieth century theology by the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) who was sceptical of liberal
284Protestantism's optimism towards the self-evident advance of modern civilisation and the capacity of human
285reason to discern the truth. For Barth, salvation came not from human wisdom but from divine self-
286revelation alone, in the form of the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ. Such revelation transcended and
287erupted into human culture (Barth, 1928).

288
289This is often seen as in direct contrast to practical theology's emphasis on experience and interdisciplinary
290attention to the world – whether that is the narrative self-disclosure of Anton Boisen's 'living human
291document', or Schleiermacher's faith in the universal instinct of human religious experience, or the
292liberationists' emphasis on the imperatives of the world's injustices as constituting the primary text of
293theological study. Certainly, the tension between the inductive and the deductive within practical theology,
294which was perhaps submerged in the latter part of the twentieth century when liberal and correlationist
295perspectives tended to hold sway (Pattison & Lynch, 2005) has re-surfaced in recent years – an issue to
296which I shall return shortly.

297

298 **iii. The Reflexive Turn**

299

300We are beginning to come full circle, to the autobiographical or autoethnographic nature of much
301contemporary practical theology (Bennett and Rowland, 2016; Beaudoin, 2008; Miller-McLemore, 1994;
302Pattison, 2000; Stoddart, 2014; Walton, 2015). This 'reflexive turn' in practical theology mirrors similar
303trends across the humanities and social sciences. Insights from the sociology of knowledge, including
304postmodern and feminist perspectives, have cast doubt on epistemologies that lay claim to neutrality and
305objectivity, insisting on critical attention to the material and ideological circumstances within which claims
306to truth are constructed (Harding, 1991). This calls for a greater degree of transparency on the part of the
307researcher, and is formalised in disciplines such as action research (Stringer, 2007) and forms of reflective
308practice (Schön, 1983; Moon, 2006) by which the processes of formation and reflection can be more closely
309charted and interrogated. Such an approach repudiates the belief that research can be conducted through a

310long lens, as it were, in such a way that the researcher themselves is unaffected by the process. Certainly
311within the social sciences, such strict objectivity is untenable; anyone dealing with the realms of human
312value, meaning and understanding recognises that levels of interpretation are unavoidable; research
313methodologies take account of the 'storied' and hermeneutical nature of human culture. This is both an
314individual process of formation but also one that is shared within particular communities of practice.

315It is not about reducing practical theology to autobiography but seeing how our own standpoints and
316concerns have informed our intellectual and academic interests, and *vice versa*. In the interests of integrity
317and transparency, the self as researcher, as one who brings particular presuppositions, questions and interests
318must be prepared to 'write themselves in' to the text of their research. This practice of locating and
319declaring ourselves is not simply a question of stating who we are as a set of statistical or physical facts, or
320of inflicting our personal life histories on a captive audience. It involves being aware of one's own pre-
321commitments, and how the practices of research may in themselves be challenging or reshaping one's own
322relationships to the field. It entails more than simply 'reflecting' in the sense of thinking deeply about
323something, but of identifying how we are simultaneously both the subjects and objects of our own
324experience. It is to apprehend ourselves not just as the authors and subjects of our lives, but as the objects of
325factors (historical, familial, social) that pre-date our births; and to train ourselves in the techniques of being
326able to turn the mirror of reflection back on ourselves – almost to see ourselves coming back. In turn, the
327practices of opening that out to scrutiny – journalling, autoethnography, spiritual life writing – become part
328and parcel of the researcher's tool-kit (Walton, 2014: xxxi-xxxiii). 'Reflection' and 'reflexivity' are thus
329closely allied but differentiated:

330 '... reflective processes are characterized by acute observation and analysis of roles and context.
331 Reflexivity takes this critical work a step further and also interrogates the position of the "self" who
332 observes.' (Walton, 2014:xii, n.1)

333

334'My story', then, is more than simply an account of events, but instead an artifice constructed in order to
335represent myself back to the world and to myself. The reflexive self acknowledges the conventions of that
336representation and how it can contribute to greater self-knowledge and understanding. Furthermore, a
337reflexive, transparent and autobiographical approach to practical theology is essential if it is truly to be
338liberated from the hegemony of abstract reason and the privileging of theory over practice, as Dorothy Bass,
339Kathleen Cahalan, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, James Nieman and Christian Scharen argue (2016). In seeking
340to commend and expound practical theology as 'practical wisdom', they begin from the precept that
341theology is first and foremost performative. The life of faith is pursued in everyday situations; and what they
342term 'the intelligence of practice' (2016:1-19) is enacted as people draw upon and inhabit their traditions.
343Yet these traditions are not simply doctrinal or propositional, but embodied in practices: of praying, eating,
344creating, making and communicating (Bass, *et al.*, 2016; see also Miller-McLemore, 2011). Bass *et al.* insist
345on demonstrating this by intentionally beginning with the practices of everyday life and writing about
346'concrete situations where the kind of engaged, embodied knowing that belongs to discipleship is visible.'
347(Bass *et al.*, 2016:16).

348

349Similarly, introducing his 2014 book, *Advancing Practical Theology*, Eric Stoddart tells his readers, 'I want
350to crave your indulgence for an autobiographical account' (Stoddart, 2014:1), and proceeds to tell the story
351of his journey towards being able to self-identify as a practical theologian. It is interesting that he feels
352obliged to begin like this, with an apology, and a need to seek permission. It suggests, perhaps, that the
353weight of academic convention is still inclined to discount personal experience and to suspect those who
354refuse to 'leave themselves off the page' (Graham, 2013:9).

355

356Yet Stoddart chooses to utilise his own story as a critical lens through which to examine some of the chief
357facets of his evolving understanding of, and engagement with, the discipline of practical theology as he
358encounters it in a number of different contexts. He uses the device of journeying, in which a trip to South
359Africa becomes pivotal in stimulating other shifts - religious, professional, intellectual, emotional. His
360recounting of this journey then becomes (to mix metaphors a little) a mirror that is held up in order to
361subject himself to critical scrutiny. He portrays it as a process of transformation: a movement from a
362relatively conservative and traditional theological position towards a different, more open, stance. In the
363process, he comes to affirm certain precepts, such as an emphasis on divine revelation through human
364experience as well as revealed tradition; the need to place practices of personal and pastoral care within

365broader socio-economic factors; and how faithful reading of sacred texts must be accompanied by careful
366and searching attention to one's context. But these realisations came to him in pieces, as it were, and it was
367only as he began to be more deeply immersed in the world of practical theology that he could see how as a
368discipline it enabled him to make sense of these fragmentary episodes of his emerging 'critical discipleship'
369(2014: xv).

370In a remarkable collaboration between New Testament scholarship and practical theology, Chris Rowland
371and Zoe Bennett have developed some striking perspectives on the nature of seeing, reflection and
372discernment in relation to the production of knowledge. In considering how one may strive for greater self-
373understanding, awareness of one's own location – social, economic, cultural, ideological – is a necessary
374step on the road to what they term 'critical subjectivity' (Bennett & Rowland 2016:151). Bennett &
375Rowland contrast the fixed, solipsistic gaze of Narcissus at his reflection in the lake in Caravaggio's famous
376painting with the more distorted, fluid and multi-dimensional images occasioned by looking onto the surface
377of "the Bean", a famous urban sculpture in down-town Chicago. Rather than assuming reflection to be a
378simple matter of holding up a mirror to nature, we may acknowledge that it is more a question of choosing
379to see 'through a glass darkly' in ways which acknowledge our hidden biases and yet locate ourselves more
380authentically. 'We are bound to see and understand partially; it matters to know what the "parts" are that we
381are seeing, and how our way of seeing both reveals and distorts.' (Bennett & Rowland, 2016: 3-4) To see –
382to judge – to act: at the heart of this is critical reflection on ourselves and our situation, allowing different
383elements of our context to illuminate one another:

384 'To see your own reflection is not necessarily to know the full "truth" about yourself; nor is seeking
385 to see your own reflection always a safe practice ...

386 Furthermore, the image of looking into a pool of water, or a bedroom mirror, is too simple to denote
387 the practice of reflexivity. Anyone who has visited Chicago and seen Anish Kapoor's "Cloud Gate",
388 popularly known as "the Bean", will have seen a vastly more complex form of "self-reflection". In
389 this massive sculpture with a highly reflective surface of seamless stainless steel plates, curved and
390 shaped like a bean, your reflection is distorted by the curves and given a context within the also-
391 distorted reflections of the crowd, the clouds and the skyscrapers of down downtown Chicago. As
392 you move and look from another angle your own reflection changes. People take pictures of
393 themselves taking pictures of themselves, taking pictures of themselves. The process of self-
394 reflexivity is infinitely regressive. The more clarity the more mystery, leading to more clarity and
395 thence to more mystery. This is the heart of the ongoing task of self-reflexivity.' (Bennett &
396 Rowland, 2016:152)

397

398Certainly, practical theology is growing in confidence to state its own implicit values – such as by adopting
399forms of action research in which the location and subjectivity of the researcher and a commitment to
400broadly transformative, collaborative and egalitarian ends are clearly stated. This turn to reflexivity thus
401represents an attention to the contextual and autobiographical nature of practical theological knowledge. Yet
402it also signals an emerging emphasis on the everyday narratives and practices of faith, as they are read
403inductively for what they reveal as enactments of theological worlds or truth-claims. This may reflect in part
404the deinstitutionalisation of post-secular Christendom, the decline of institutional religion in the West and its
405mutation into expressions of grassroots, informal spirituality. It may also reflect, culturally, a renewed, but
406more sophisticated, form of personalism, with an emphasis on subjectivity, conscience and personal
407experience (post-Schleiermacher) as constituting the essence of religion. This shift to practical theology as
408the 'hermeneutics of lived religion' (Ganzevoort & Roeland, 2014: 99, n. 30) may therefore presage a
409further, long-term, relocation of practical theology moving beyond creedal, organised Christianity into the
410terrain of wider cultural practices.

411

412 3. Future Tense: Current and future challenges

413

414 i. **Sources and Norms**

415

416I have already hinted at this particular contention within contemporary practical theology. Increasingly,
417scholars are asking how practical theology is different from the social sciences or other fields of professional
418training. Whilst there would be consensus amongst all practical theologians as to the theological and values-
419based nature of their pursuits, quite what that looks like is more controversial. Certainly, given our concerns

420for practice, we feel an accountability for the outcomes of our research; we hold particular views about the
421importance of human flourishing and wish to nurture forms of action that contribute towards the values.

422

423But beyond that, there is some dispute as to how far the sources and norms of Christian tradition in all its
424forms should set the agenda for the way these values are articulated. Over recent years, this has emerged as
425one of the most debated areas within practical theological research. For a long time, the predominant
426position in practical theology has probably been the liberal-correlationist perspective. This would argue that
427theological understanding emerges dialogically from many different sources: the received and historic
428tradition, cultural context (such as science, philosophy, the arts or human sciences); and personal or
429communal 'experience'. This position is associated with Paul Tillich and David Tracy. Stephen Pattison's
430appropriation of the revised form of critical correlation (Pattison, 1989) draws on the idea that theology is
431comprised of many different sources and that material from the social sciences, popular culture, literature,
432non-Christian philosophical and psychological insights, feminism and other disciplines provide significant
433insights and correctives to the repositories of faith.

434 'The underlying methodological position within mutually critical correlative models is that
435 theological truth is emergent and dialectical and as such requires partnering with other sources of
436 knowledge that will enable clarify and revised ecclesial practices ... Within the method of mutual
437 critical correlation, the primary task is therefore to initiate a two-way conversation between the
438 social sciences, in this case ethnography and theology, with both partners open and willing to listen
439 and respond to the insights gained from the other. The division of labor between the two is assumed
440 to be more or less equal ... At one level this seems fine. It opens up the opportunity to challenge
441 aspects of Scripture and tradition that may have become distorted, forgotten, or deliberately
442 overlooked.' (Swinton, 2012: 86)

443

444However, critics of this perspective have argued that in adopting this kind of interdisciplinarity, theology is
445implicitly offering itself as a hostage to alien, non-theological world-views for its account of 'reality'. It will
446find itself accommodating to suit these presuppositions, such that human horizons and perspectives
447overshadow God-given principles. Instead, theology must always be normative and responsible for
448establishing the 'first-order' claims about any given situation. This alternative perspective has been
449influenced by forms of post-liberal or confessional theologians, such as Karl Barth and his twenty-first
450century heirs such Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank. Here, there is a greater emphasis on the
451distinctiveness of Christian identity. The practices of the church, attested to in Scripture and tradition, form a
452distinctive polity through which theology engages the world. Practical theology is primarily concerned with
453the practices of the church and with theological renditions of the human condition.

454

455An example of this in practical theology in the UK would probably be the work of John Swinton and Harriet
456Mowat, who regard practical theology as a conversation between different sources and norms, but conclude
457nevertheless that theological tradition as received must be afforded primacy over experience. As they say,
458'qualitative research tells us *nothing* about the meaning of life, the nature of God, cross, resurrection or the
459purpose of the universe' (Swinton & Mowat, 2016:89). Yet this seems to me to over-state the case. Is it
460really true that the world beyond the church is devoid of meaning? Can there really be no correlation,
461critical, mutual or otherwise? Even if we consider tradition to be normative, which and whose interpretation
462of it; can it be considered such a monolith?

463

464The new *Ecclesiology and Ethnography* group probably represent a more modified version of this view
465within practical theology, with their call for researchers to declare their theological presuppositions and
466objectives. In many respects, the emergence of this network is a reflection of the huge growth in practical
467theology over the past thirty years, and especially the explosion of interest in qualitative research, beginning
468in congregational studies and moving into other forms of ethnography, or participant observation (P. Ward,
4692012:6-9). Representatives of this strand insist on the presuppositions and pre-commitments of the
470researcher. Their objection is that practical theology has appeared to use ethnography as a methodological
471tool within a qualitative vacuum, whereas they envisage that fieldwork is always conducted from within 'a
472traditioned ecclesial expression' (P. Ward, 2012:3). The practical theologian is more than a disinterested or
473neutral observer; rather, he or she is involved in a form of ecclesial service in being able to interpret the
474church back to the church and ensuring that practice is theologically informed. There is frequently too much

475distance between the ‘theological representation of church and the lived social reality of Christian
476communities’ (P. Ward, 2012:5). But this has to be a process of ethnographically-driven representation that is
477itself formed by Christian tradition. This entails ‘... a constant interaction between theories and principles
478generated from the theological tradition, and careful participative observation of the particularities of an
479ecclesial situation.’ (P. Ward, 2012:2)

480This may seem uncontroversial, except it seems to me to be in danger of surrendering the independence of
481practical theology as merely the service of the Church. There is a risk we end up reinscribing an exclusively
482ecclesial mindset or the ‘clerical paradigm’ (Farley, 1983) which *reduces* practical theology to, and conflates
483it with, ecclesiology – and thereby limits its critical independence, at the expense of both its academic
484freedom and the hard-won critical perspectives of liberationist, feminist, Black, Womanist and queer
485theologians over the years. Practical theology cannot be reduced to some kind of ‘Christian sociology’ which
486(a) assumes hard-and-fast ecclesial boundaries or (b) imagines that lived reality is somehow a rendition of
487doctrinal propositions. This may actually do a dis-service to our context of study, by inhibiting our critical
488apprehension of the novelty or improvisatory nature of practice and reinscribe regressive models of
489‘tradition’. The reality is, however, that most ethnography, at macro and micro level, is ‘messy’ (F. Ward,
4902004) because people’s lived experience and practice is highly heterodox and characterised by ‘blurred
491encounters’ (Baker & Reader, 2009) across boundaries of faith, identity and belief.

492

493Certainly these kinds of critiques of the correlational position helpfully expose the extent to which all
494researchers bring values into the conversation and to which all disciplines and not just theology, are value-
495laden. But it is something of a misrepresentation of liberal correlational theology to say that it has simply
496been practising a kind of naïve realism whereby it does not process the accounts it receives from social
497analysis through an evaluative filter. It is not accurate to claim that in valuing the concrete, empirical and
498contextual by undertaking qualitative inquiry using social scientific tools, practical theology loses its right to
499be called Christian or inevitably capitulates to a form of methodological atheism.

500

501In reality, then, Christian identity, practice and belief has always developed in constructive engagement with
502the cultures in which it has been embedded. Indeed, Christian identity itself is not ‘a matter of unmixed
503purity, but a hybrid affair established through unusual uses of materials found elsewhere.’ (Tanner,
5041997:152)

505

506This is not a new debate, as the age-old tension between the ‘secular’ wisdom of the Athenian academy and
507the theological tradition of the faith-communities of Jerusalem attest. Even liberation theologians, however,
508identify that there needs to be a ‘pre-commitment’ to the Gospel before anyone can engage in (Marxist)
509social analysis (Boff & Boff, 1987:22-23). So as Zoe Bennett argues, this is not a straightforward choice
510between ‘the text of the Bible’ and ‘the text of life’, in which each fears the ‘tyranny’ of the other (Bennett,
5112013:134). Instead, we probably need to move beyond the simplistic and static binary of ‘correlation
512between *the* Christian tradition *and* contemporary experience’ (Miller-McLemore, 2011:17), to consider
513how, in specific cases, all the inherent values and world-views in a situation are constructed within a
514dialectic of sources and norms, both religious and secular.

515

516 ii. Cultural Pluralism and Multi-Culturalism

517

518 ‘It is threatening for many practical theologians to imagine releasing a Christian center for practical
519 theology, but that is exactly what confronts us, with no guarantee of what comes next.’ (Beaudoin,
520 2016:12).

521

522In expressing this sentiment, Tom Beaudoin is identifying a further, as yet uncharted, frontier in practical
523theology: that of inter-faith dialogue. He argues that practical theology has been heavily invested in
524constructing and perpetuating what he terms ‘Christianicity’, or the citation of dominant Western norms and
525understandings of what may count as legitimately and authentically religious. This translates into the
526effacement of expressions of Christianity from the global South, but also a resistance to consider how far
527practical theology can cross the boundaries of other religions.

528

529 'Practical theology is still quite far, in general, from being able to relate with the depth of creativity
530 and criticality to its Christian heritage that a postcolonial, two-thirds-world-attentive global situation
531 requires.' (Beaudoin, 2016:18)

532

533 So does that present practical theology with a new challenge, to properly face up to such a religious and
534 cultural pluralism? As a community of researchers, should we be looking to develop a multi-faith practical
535 theology that fully addresses traditions other than Christianity? This is a long way from *Ecclesiology and*
536 *Ethnography*, of practical theology in the service of a specific faith community. Can it be done? What would
537 be the merits of it?

538

539 Any adequate response will not be achieved by simply striking out the nomenclature of 'Christian' and
540 attempting to insert a new religious label in its place, in some kind of 'cut and paste' exercise. For a start,
541 what each tradition counts as authoritative and significant in terms of its key sources would vary. In Jewish
542 and Muslim traditions, for example, much of what Christians would consider under the categories of
543 'pastoral care' or 'ministry' would better be cast in terms of judicial interpretation of legal tradition. On the
544 other hand, there is some literature within Judaism that deals with leadership in congregational and
545 voluntary organizations: rabbinic ministry as pastoral care, liturgical and ritual presidency; teaching and
546 instruction in the faith. But how far is that a tradition that has actually been partially 'Christianised'?
547 Similarly, whilst Buddhist practitioners warm to the emphasis on the practices of faith – meditation,
548 mindfulness, discernment and so on – it's not easy simply to transpose its many and heterogeneous traditions
549 and texts into a body of knowledge.

550

551 In a recent article speculating on the prospects of an Islamic practical theology, Nazila Isgandarova argues
552 that there is scope for an approach that takes account of the lived experience of faith; that considers how
553 tradition (however conceived) shapes contemporary practice; how the present-day lived experience of
554 diverse diasporas are having a bearing on traditional customs; how enquiry into specific ways of life at the
555 grass-roots feeds back into scholarly traditions of hermeneutics and textual interpretation. She is essentially
556 calling for a move from a primarily textual tradition into studies of the *praxis* of faith that is embodied in
557 such staple practices as pastoral care, spiritual direction and Islamic education.

558

559 'The question is how practical Islamic theological studies may help Muslim religious leaders and
560 clergy to connect their theological understanding to the everyday experience of Muslims in the
561 community, society and the world. The second question ... relates to the daily life practice of Islamic
562 faith and tradition: "How do the daily life practices gain an "epistemic weight" in the production of
563 new knowledge in practical Islamic theology, where Islamic doctrine, tradition, and the "living
564 human document" hold a central position?"' (Isgandarova, 2014)

565

566 Isgandarova points to Muslim chaplaincy work in public institutions as one of the places where a new
567 sensibility can be generated. Similarly, Asgar Rajput, a British prison chaplain, has argued that Muslim
568 presence in chaplaincy contexts has tended to proceed along the lines offered by Christian structures and
569 presuppositions that are based on paradigms of ministry, theology and community. However, these have not
570 necessarily been particularly productive or creative. Instead, Rajput argues for a new, emergent model to
571 develop, a 'hybrid' version that is based on a synthesis of institutional demands, Islamic theology, the
572 realities of public perceptions of religion (at the moment heavily dominated by fears of radicalisation) and
573 the practical needs of the *umma* (Rajput, 2015).

574

575 Certainly, then, a religiously plural practical theology will not simply be an extension of Christian practical
576 theology. There will need to be some kind of common forum created in which many different traditions can
577 converge – but is that yet possible on equal terms? Certainly there are many places in which dialogue might
578 take place; and such a process might indeed begin with the current emphasis of Christian practical theology
579 upon truth as performative and pragmatic. The shared realms of activities such as broad-based and
580 community organizing, advising on religious literacy and promoting social justice and human rights, and
581 places such as chaplaincy, might offer the most creative opportunities for such *rapprochement*. Maybe those
582 things have to happen outside the recognised centres of power such as academy or male-dominated
583 hierarchies. It may not yet be possible to predict yet where those conversations are taking place, and where

584they might lead. I wonder, however, whether the future of multi-faith dialogue in practical theology might
585actually begin, as with the early ecumenical movement over a century ago, not in attempts to reconcile
586doctrine but in shared commitments to practice: though doctrine and tradition may divide, it is service in the
587name of a common good, a higher good, which will unite.

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