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Lived religion: the praxis of Practical Theology

Abstract: Taking the case of “spiritual gardening” as a starting point, this paper reflects on praxis as the object of practical theology. Praxis is understood as the domain of lived religion and focuses on what people do rather than on official institutionalized religious traditions. Praxis refers to fields of practices like care or community building and to the patterned configurations of action, experience, and meaning. In pluralized, secularized, and deinstitutionalized contexts, these fields should not be limited to explicitly religious or specifically Christian domains but include the broader field of spiritual and existential practices. Three practical theological perspectives in studying lived religion can be distinguished: pastoral/ecclesial theology, empirical theology, and critical theology. In all three perspectives practical theology is a form of concerned engaged scholarship.

Zusammenfassung: Den Ausgangspunkt dieses Artikels bildet das Beispiel des “spiritual gardening”, von dem aus die Bedeutung der Praxis als Gegenstand der praktischen Theologie reflektiert wird. Praxis wird dabei aufgefasst als Domäne der gelebten Theologie und konzentriert sich auf das Handeln von Menschen im Gegensatz zu offiziellen institutionalisierten religiösen Traditionen. Praxis bezieht sich in diesem Sinne auf Tätigkeitsbereiche wie Fürsorge oder Gemeindebildung und auf das strukturelle Muster von Handlungen, Erfahrungen und Sinngebung. In pluralisierten, säkularisierten und entinstitutionalisierten Kontexten sollten diese Bereiche nicht auf explizit religiöse oder ausdrücklich christliche Gebiete begrenzt werden, sondern sollten auch das weitere Feld der spirituellen und existentiellen Tätigkeitsbereiche mit einbeziehen. Drei praktisch theologische Perspektiven können im Studium der gelebten Religion unterschieden werden: pastoral/kirchliche Theologie, empirische Theologie und kritische Theologie. Innerhalb all dieser Perspektiven beschreibt der Artikel die praktische Theologie als eine Form der engagierten Wissenschaft.

DOI 10.1515/ijpt-2014-0007

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Introduction

Maria is a 50-year old woman, living in a small village in the Netherlands. A few years ago, she quit her job as a secretary, as she found the workload too heavy and the modern, professional environment increasingly difficult to negotiate. Since then she volunteers in a hospice.

One year ago, Maria engaged in a new hobby that she had been aspiring to for years: gardening. Together with a friend, she started cultivating a small allotment. To her own surprise, gardening became a “spiritual” activity for Maria. Having worked in her garden all year long, and having witnessed nature in spring, summer, autumn and winter, she became aware of “cycles of nature, the beginning, spring, turning point and decline”, as she described during an interview. “Humankind”, she added, “has lost attention for the turning point and the decline of life. We only want birth, youth and beauty, but we close our eyes to decline. Decline causes anxiety. We frenetically hang on to youth and beauty and deny other phases of life. Through gardening, I learned to accept and appreciate the cycles. Appreciating them brings acceptance, satisfaction, and peace. Looking at what is, not at what should be.”

For Maria, gardening is much more than a hobby. It is an existential and spiritual activity that helps her, as she said, “accept my own mortality”. There seems to be a connection between her volunteer work in the hospice and the meanings she attaches to gardening. It makes sense to interpret the language she uses as analogous to the feminist theology of flourishing as proposed by Jantzen¹ as critique of and complement to male dominated metaphors. We can even describe gardening as a devotional activity, built on the importance of performative practice, skillful effort, repetition and results². One could add that essential to gardening is the fact that our efforts facilitate the outcomes, but do not define them. Rather, our performance sets the stage for receiving life as a gift.

We take gardening as an illustrative casus for the question we address in this article: what is the object of study of practical theology? In what sense would practices such as gardening be relevant for practical theology? We discuss four issues related to the role of praxis in practical theology: the concept of praxis as the object of study; the concept of lived religion as its domain; the methodology required to study this praxis; and the concerned and engaged involvement of the researcher in the praxis studied.

1 Grace Jantzen, *Feminism and Flourishing. Gender and Metaphor in Feminist Theology*, in: *Feminist Theology* 4/10, 1995, 81–101.

2 Tom Jenkins, *Devotional Gardening Tools*. Paper presented at the CHI '13 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Paris 2013.

The concept of praxis

It is widely acknowledged that practical theology has ‘praxis’ as its object of study and reflection. However, what praxis means and what it refers to, is far from evident. We argue that the notion of praxis emphasizes one particular dimension of religion: the dimension of *action* or – somewhat broader – the ways in which religion is lived.

Aristotle’s concept of praxis (πραξις), rediscovered and redefined by Arendt³, MacIntyre⁴, and others, is one of the founding notions of action in practical theology’s history.⁵ For Aristotle, discussing the notion of praxis in the context of ethics, it referred to the domain of *acting* and *doing*, as opposed to abstract, theoretical knowledge. According to Aristotle, ethics is not a theoretical endeavor, but a practical one: morality is a quality of acting and doing, instead of thinking, contemplation and theorizing. Ethics, in other words, is about the way people *act* in moral respect. Moreover, for Aristotle, praxis is distinguished from “poiesis” by the fact that the aims or ends of praxis are internal to the actions itself, whereas the aims or ends of “poiesis” are external. Although MacIntyre critiques this distinction (especially the suggestion of external aims in poiesis), Aristotle’s interpretation is a profound understanding of the more than instrumental nature of praxis.

The concepts of praxis and lived religion focus on *what people do* rather than on ‘official’ religion, its sacred sources, its institutes, and its doctrines. As such, practical theology has much in common with what in disciplines like anthropology, sociology, and media studies, is known as ‘the practical turn’: the turn away from institutes and (cultural) texts to the everyday social and cultural practices of ordinary people. In media studies for example, Couldry pleads for a discipline that refers “not to media as objects, texts, apparatuses of perception or production processes, but to what people are doing in relation to media in the contexts in which they act.”⁶ In sociology and anthropology, scholars like Bour-

³ Hannah Arendt, *The human condition*, Chicago (University of Chicago Press) 1958.

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame (University of Notre Dame Press) 1981.

⁵ Johannes A. van der Ven, An empirical or a normative approach to practical-theological research. A false dilemma, in: Johannes A. Van der Ven / Michael Scherer-Rath (eds.), *Normativity and empirical research in theology*, Leiden (Brill) 2005, 101–135; Duncan B. Forrester, *Truthful action. Explorations in practical theology*, Edinburgh (T & T Clark) 2000; Wilhelm Gräb, *Lebensgeschichten, Lebensentwürfe, Sinndeutungen*, Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus) 2000; Ted Smith, *Theories of practice*, in: Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, Chichester (Wiley Blackwell) 2012, 244–254.

⁶ Nick Couldry, *Media, society, world. Social theory and digital media practice*, Cambridge (Polity Press) 2012, 35.

dieu⁷ used the notion of “practice” to refer to the human capacity for invention, rebellion, distancing and improvisation with respect to the broader social and cultural order, thus recognizing human agency. In the sociology of religion, the notion of practice is used to refer to the everyday, lived religion of ordinary people, as opposed to formal, institutionalized religion, thus criticizing an influential bias in this discipline. As Berger argues in his foreword to Ammerman’s *Everyday Religion*: “Much of the sociology of religion has dealt either with [...] institutions – that is, broadly speaking, with the internal conditions and the societal role of churches – or with survey data covering the beliefs and behavior of large populations. Obviously, both procedures have yielded important insights. But what both have in common is remoteness from much of what constitutes the reality of religion in the lives of many people.”⁸

When we determine praxis as the object of study in practical theology, we refer to the everyday religious practices of many people: what people *do* in religious respect. The notion of praxis, however, includes more than practices alone. Hence praxis needs not to be reduced to practices. A praxis should rather be considered as a *field of practices* with aims internal to that field and with a variety of actors. Care, for instance, is such a field of practices. The concept of ‘care’ covers a field of practices that are of interest for the practical theologian: conversing, being present, paying attention, cleaning, comforting, asking, receiving, meditating, and so on. This praxis is not limited to practices of the caregiver, but includes the complementary practices of the receiver of care.

At this point, Mager warns against the easy adoption of the notion of lived religion and claims that we should remain with an action-centered concept of practice rather than broaden the object to encompass all religious and spiritual experiences.⁹ In our view, however, Mager’s action-centered concept gives undue priority to active over receptive participation in the field. It prioritizes the action of clergy rather than lay people, preaching rather than listening, caring rather than receiving care. The notion of praxis as a field, a patterned configuration of action, experience, and meaning, includes and transcends these activities into a more integrative understanding of what is going on.

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 1977.

⁸ Nancy T. Ammermann (ed.), *Everyday religion. Observing modern religious lives*, New York (Oxford University Press) 2007, V.

⁹ Robert Mager, *Action Theories*, in: Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, Chichester (Wiley Blackwell) 2012, 255–265.

Praxis and lived religion

Having delineated praxis as practical theology's object of study, let us return to our particular example of praxis that we introduced above. Gardening, with its connotations of "hobby" and "leisure", will probably not immediately qualify as a possible object of study for many scholars engaged in theology and religious studies. Both disciplines have a tradition in research and reflection on "religions" (Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism) and/or "official", institutional religion: its institutional settings, dogma's, theological systems, rituals and beliefs. Leisure activities may easily be neglected by theologians as mundane and trivial activities.

We, however, champion a practical theology that includes activities like gardening precisely for the fact that for many participants, such activities are far from trivial, but rather highly meaningful ways of being in the world. The recent *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* attests to this in highlighting practices like eating, loving and consuming as ways of life pertinent to the discipline.¹⁰ Other scholars focusing on lived religion included photography and classroom experiences¹¹, grocery store checkout lines and fantasy funerals¹², celebrity culture¹³, and secular music¹⁴. Our own investigations included practices and phenomena like movies, commercials, pop concerts, pop songs, fantasy, pubs, dance events, Second Life, internet pet mourning rituals, blasphemy debates, and art.¹⁵ We take a profound interest in these phenomena of everyday life and popular culture because for many people they may relate somehow and to some degree to notions of sacredness¹⁶, transcendence and existentiality, as Maria's story testifies.

10 Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, Oxford (Wiley Blackwell) 2012.

11 Wolf-Eckart Failing / Hans-Günther Heimbrock, *Gelebte Religion Wahrnehmen. Lebenswelt – Alltagskultur – Religionspraxis*, Stuttgart (Kohlhammer) 1998.

12 Kevin J. Vanhoozer / Charles A. Anderson / Michael K. Sleasman, *Everyday theology. How to read cultural texts and interpret trends*, Grand Rapids (Baker Academic) 2007.

13 Pete Ward, *Gods Behaving Badly. Media, Religion, and Celebrity Culture*, Waco (Baylor University Press) 2011.

14 Tom Beaudoin, (ed.), *Secular Music and Sacred Theology*, Collegeville (Liturgical Press) 2013.

15 Eg., R. Ruard Ganzevoort, *Framing the Gods. The Public Significance of Religion from a Cultural Point of View*, in: Hans-Georg Ziebertz (ed.), *The Public Significance of Religion*, Leiden (Brill) 2011, 95–120; Johan Roeland / Stef Aupers / Dick Houtman, *Fantasy, Conspiracy and the Legacy of the Counterculture. Max Weber and the Spirit of Contemporary Popular Culture*, in: Adam Possamai (ed.), *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions*, Leiden (Brill) 2012, 401–422.

16 Cf. Rudolf Otto, *India's religion of grace and Christianity compared and contrasted*, New York (MacMillan) 1930.

The attention for such variegated practices within practical theology clearly signals an evolution of the discipline. Whereas the term “practical” used to refer to the praxis of ordained ministry and – more recently – to practices of Christian faith communities in a broader sense, it nowadays includes much more. Many praxes or fields of moral, existential, and religious practices are of interest for practical theology. This includes conventional fields like care, education, church, and politics, but also fields like media, leisure, and sport. In principle, every praxis carries potential topics for practical theological research. To count as such, however, the research focus should be on a religious dimension of that praxis and/or the research perspective should be religious.

This raises the next question: what is religion? Since we include fields such as media, leisure and sport as our object of study, one may have noticed that our conceptualization of religion moves beyond more classical definitions in our discipline. Our example of gardening is a case in point. As a praxis, gardening tends to be excluded by most definitions of religion, be they substantive, functionalist or phenomenological.¹⁷ In gardening, there is no reference to gods, spirits, transcendence, supernatural beings, myths, beliefs, and formal rituals – elements that make up most substantive definitions. The absence of strong community feelings and a group or “church”, a shared totem, a system of symbols, and a shared cultural order of meaning, makes gardening fall outside the famous functionalist definitions proposed by Durkheim – “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community, called a church, all those who adhere to them”¹⁸ – and Geertz – “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”¹⁹ And although a certain feeling of sacredness and “the numinous” may be part of the gardening experience, the absence of mysterious otherness makes it difficult to apply Otto’s²⁰ phenomenological definition of religion to gardening.

17 Cf. Ward, *Gods Behaving Badly* (n. 13).

18 Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, New York (Free Press) 1912, 62.

19 Clifford Geertz, *Religion as a cultural system*, in: Michael Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, London (Tavistock Publications) 1966, 1–46.

20 Otto, *India’s religion of grace and Christianity compared and contrasted* (n. 16).

And yet, there are “parallels”²¹ between religion and for example barbecues²², soccer or rugby fandom²³, dance events²⁴, or gardening²⁵. In Maria’s account of gardening, there is a certain sense of sacredness. There is an existential search for the acceptance of mortality. There is the meditative reflection on the cycles of life and nature. There is a feeling of peace. To understand the profundity of this praxis, it thus makes sense to define gardening in her case as “quasi-religion”²⁶ or “para-religion”²⁷. Lynch locates the similarities between religion and popular culture in the existential, social, and transcending dimensions of both.²⁸

Our pluralized, secularized, and deinstitutionalized religious context requires us to adopt a broader perspective to the field we define as lived religion, but we still need to delimit the field. We would take our starting point in the social constructionist insight that the meaning of a concept originates in the social discursive practice and not in the realm of phenomena or in the realm of mental ideas.²⁹ In other words: the quintessential question is not whether something is or is not ‘religious’, but what it means when someone defines something as religious or not. What are the possible worlds one can engage in or the relations one can participate in by defining something as religious or not? This approach thus focuses on the performative nature of our language. The labeling of something as religious or not becomes itself an aspect of the praxis we study and of our analysis.

We would not, however, want to restrict ourselves fully to self-report. Eventually practical theology is faced with the challenge of developing/finding a new theory of religion in which we can do justice to the increasingly diverse field we study. Obviously, this raises the question of false positives and false negatives. If

21 Ward, *Gods Behaving Badly* (n. 13).

22 Wade C. Roof, *Blood in the barbecue? Food and faith in the American south*, in: Eric Mazur / Kate McCarthy (eds.), *God in the Details. American Religion in Popular Culture*, New York (Routledge) 2010, 108–119.

23 Jordi Xifra, *Soccer, civil religion, and public relations. Devotional–promotional communication and Barcelona Football Club*, in: *Public Relations Review* 34/2, 2008, 192–198.

24 Graham St John, *Electronic Dance Music Culture and Religion. An Overview*, in: *Culture and Religion* 7/1, 2006, 1–25.

25 Jenkins, *Devotional gardening tools* (n. 2).

26 Eric Mazur / Kate McCarthy (eds.), *God in the Details. American Religion in Popular Culture*, New York (Routledge) 2010, 12.

27 Ward, *Gods Behaving Badly* (n. 13).

28 Gordon Lynch, *Understanding theology and popular culture*, Oxford (Blackwell) 2005.

29 Kenneth J. Gergen, *Social construction and practical theology. The dance begins*, in: Chris Hermans / Aad de Jong / Gerrit Immink / Jan van der Lans (eds.), *Social constructionism and theology*, Leiden (Brill) 2002, 3–22.

our concept is too broad we include too many phenomena as ‘religious’; if it is too limited we exclude too many. But this is not a new concern: our traditional concepts of religion count many false positives among traditional shapes and many false negatives in non-traditional areas. We could question for good reasons whether attending a soccer match ‘really’ is religious, but the same critique might apply to attending a church service.

To conclude this section, we propose to define religion as the transcending patterns of action and meaning, emerging from and contributing to the relation with the sacred.³⁰ This definition accepts that there can be a variety of what counts as sacred in the lives of people, from institutionalized traditions to idiosyncratic experiences. We consider the relation with the sacred to be the core denominator for the field we call religion. Within this field we study the patterns of action and meaning that somehow transcend our everyday existence.

Methodologies for studying praxis

In its focus on praxis, practical theology has evolved out of three historically different styles of theology with differing concepts of and methodological approaches toward praxis: pastoral theology, empirical theology, and public theology. These three styles correlate with the three audiences Tracy³¹ described. Pastoral theology is closest to the audience of the church; empirical theology to the audience of the academy; public theology to the audience of society.

The history of practical theology as pastoral theology dates back at least to the middle ages where theologians differentiated between *theologia practica* and *theologia speculativa*. The first had to do with the practices of faith in real life here on earth, the latter with our conceptions of the divine in its transcendent and revealed mode. This practical theology was deeply rooted in the clerical life and focused on the improvement of the praxis of ordained ministry. Until today, many practical theologians dedicate their efforts to training clergy, which implies a personal and communal spirituality for trainer and trainee. By consequence, this type of practical theology has devotional overtones in its methodology and is committed to support and strengthen the religious praxis of faith communities. In

30 R. Ruard Ganzevoort, Forks in the road when tracing the sacred. Practical theology as hermeneutics of lived religion. Paper presented at the International Academy of Practical Theology, Chicago 2009.

31 David Tracy, The analogical imagination. Christian theology and the culture of pluralism. New York (Crossroad) 1981.

performative terms, it aims to create the space in which the sacred can occur, in which the presence of God can be experienced.³²

The history of practical theology as empirical theology is closely connected with the emergence of the social sciences, including the social scientific study of religion. The main aims are of an academic nature: the description and analysis of the (broadly conceived) praxis of lived religion. It should come as no surprise that this type of practical theology is closer to religious studies than to confessional theology. This type of practical theology strives to comply with rigorous academic standards for qualitative and quantitative empirical research and publishing.³³

The history of practical theology as public and/or contextual theology includes liberation theology, feminist theology, and similar currents of theological thinking that take a critical stance toward societal praxis and look for possible contributions from the religious tradition. Usually this type of practical theology applies a hermeneutic of suspicion, builds on critical theory, allows for subjective voices of the marginalized, and aims at emancipation or liberation. Praxis here is the liberating effort to change society. By implication, the methodologies are more hermeneutical and personal, including for example action research.³⁴

Practical Theology as concerned scholarship

Practical theology is the theological study of the praxis of lived religion. Whether this is elaborated in terms of pastoral, empirical, and/or public theology, the practical theologian is almost by necessity a concerned or engaged scholar. Building on Ricoeur, Dreyer³⁵ describes the hermeneutical dialectics of the researcher's relation with the praxis (s)he investigates. According to Ricoeur, every objectifying knowledge is preceded by a relation of belonging that is never completely available for our scrutiny. We are always somehow embedded in that praxis. The methodological distantiation creates relatively autonomic knowledge that allows us to criti-

³² See e.g., Terry Velting, *Practical Theology. On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Maryknoll (Orbis) 2005.

³³ See e.g., Johannes A. van der Ven, *Practical theology. An empirical approach*, Leuven (Peeters) 1998.

³⁴ See e.g., William F. Storrar / Andrew R Morton (eds.), *Public theology in the 21st century*, Edinburgh (T & T Clark) 2004.

³⁵ Jaco S. Dreyer, *The researcher. Engaged participant or detached observer? A reflection on the methodological implications of the dialectics of belonging and distantiation for empirical research in practical theology*, in: *Journal of Empirical Theology* 11/2, 1998, 5–22.

que the ideology of the praxis we study, even if it is our own praxis. This distanciation and critique are at the same time an instance of our appropriation of the praxis. The research outcomes lead to a new relation of researcher and praxis, often in the form of new knowledge, new possible modes of action, or new inspiration.

Most practical theologians would see this relation with praxis not as a problem, but as intrinsic part of the discipline. They define their scholarship as concerned or engaged scholarship: practical theological research aims not only to describe and analyze praxes, but also to improve them. While ‘neutrality’ and ‘objectivity’ may be strived for in the empirical phase of research in order to construe reliable knowledge, strategic and hermeneutic research perspectives bring in normative evaluations and judgments from engaged scholars. Hence practical theology has much in common with the tradition of Action Research in the social sciences: a tradition of concerned research that aims to improve social practices.³⁶

As the praxis we study implies patterns of action and meaning, it is never free from interests, power differences, and ideologies. This requires practical theology to critically reflect on the question whose praxis is foregrounded and which actors are privileged in the approach they take to research. Methodology is not a neutral issue but already carries normative ramifications. A ‘preferential option’ for the praxis of the disenfranchised is an ethical requirement. Whose praxis will be seen, whose voice will be heard? It is here that the practical theologian cannot and will not avoid normative judgments.

Conclusion

For Maria, the praxis of gardening seems to be a spiritual one. If we want to fully understand what that means, we have to take it seriously as a field of practices that is not to be instrumentalized but has intrinsic ends. The meanings this praxis entails include meanings normally associated with traditional spiritual or religious practices. It connects her to what is sacred to her and helps her navigate fundamental issues of life and death. For practical theologians working in a pluralized, secularized, and deinstitutionalized context, praxes such as gardening provide meaningful access into the hidden or implicit spiritual lives of people today. Probably this and other praxes first and foremost require an empirical style of practical theology, but the insights of such a study might be connected with a pastoral theology of mindful attention, fostering meditation and

³⁶ Patrick J. M. Costello, *Action research*, London (Continuum) 2003; Elizabeth Koshy / Valsa Koshy / Heather Waterman, *Action research in healthcare*, London (Sage) 2011.

a public theology of stewardship amidst the ecological threats of our times. Whichever mode we choose, we do so because for Maria – and therefore for us – this praxis is not mundane or insignificant, but full of spiritual meanings.