

THE RECOVERY OF THEOLOGY AS A PRACTICAL DISCIPLINE

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In the year 1977 Helmut Gollwitzer argued that the most critical agenda for contemporary theology was the recovery of a more vital relationship between theological reflection and Christian life in the world. For this to happen, he suggested, theology must come to see itself as a second-order activity whose primary task is to mediate between present and future praxis. Put in classical terms, theology must recover a sense of being a *scientia practica*; i.e., at core a practical discipline.¹

Calls for recovering such an understanding of theology as a practical discipline have become increasingly common in recent years. These calls have surfaced within a variety of theological contexts, but have coalesced around a largely shared set of concerns. My purpose is to survey the various stimuli pushing for a recovered practical theology, both to provide a better understanding of the agenda they propose and to reflect on a key problem which such an agenda must face.

The fact that this is a call for a *recovery* of theology as a practical discipline suggests my starting point. One of the responses to the current malaise in theological circles has been an increase of historical investigation into the changing understandings of the nature of theology, seeking to determine what has brought us to the present situation. Of particular interest has been the shifting identifications of “practical theology.” A brief history of this term provides a helpful context for considering the current debates.

HISTORY OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

In the pre-Christian setting, the Greco-Roman world distinguished three types of theology (*theologia*). (1) mythical, which included poetic and mythical descriptions of the various Greek and Roman gods; (2) civil, which dealt with the religious ceremonies surrounding the civil religion of Rome; and (3) natural or rational, which involved philosophical reflection on the nature of Ultimate Reality.²

¹Gollwitzer, “Theorie und Praxis im theologischen Denken,” *Evangelische Kommentare* 10 (1977): 522–25.

²Cf. Frank Whaling, “The Development of the Word ‘Theology,’” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981): 289–312. Note that Whaling’s agenda is to provide historical warrant for a contemporary focus on philosophical theology. As such, he pays no attention to forms of early Christian doctrinal reflection that took place without the designation “*theologia*”—forms central to understanding theology as practical.

Given these precedents, it is significant that early Christians were hesitant to use the word *theologia*. Not because they neglected or rejected “theological” activities,³ nor because they totally avoided pre-existing *theologia*. While they rejected Greco-Roman mythology and civil religion, several early Christians engaged in apologetic dialogue with Greco-Roman philosophical theology. Apparently, they avoided the word *theologia* because they did not consider their “theology” to be mythical, civil, or philosophical; it was based in revelation and essentially practical in nature.⁴

Theology per se as Practical

Early Christian practice suggests a two-fold understanding of “theology,” i.e., knowledge of God.⁵ At the most basic level, it was understood as a *habitus* of the Christian believer, a cognitive and affectional disposition or orientation toward God, others, and creation. It might best be considered the implicit worldview that guided the temperament and practice of believers’ lives.

Such a disposition was not simply bestowed with conversion; it needed to be developed. This need defined the task of theology in its second major sense: the discipline of study, instruction, and shepherding directed toward forming theology/*habitus* in believers. The focus of such theology/ discipline was on understanding and communicating the nature of the interaction between God and humanity. To be sure, doctrinal teachings were increasingly divided into those dealing with soteriology (*economia*) and with God (*theologia*). However, early Christian theologians sought to base even the most metaphysical reflections about God on the life of faith and to draw from these reflections pastoral and soteriological implications.⁶

³Cf. Max Seckler, “Theologein: Eine Grundidee in dreifacher Ausgestaltung,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 163 (1983): 241–64. Seckler argues that it is seriously misleading to determine the meaning of “theology” for Christians from Greek precedents. Rather, we should focus on three forms or sources of Christian reflection: (1) exposition of texts, (2) rational interest in God (like Greek natural theology) and (3) the *sapiential* desire of faith to understand. Seckler correlates this threefold origin to the later threefold ordering of academic theology—biblical, fundamental, and doctrinal. This implies more of a division between these various forms of reflection than appears warranted at this stage. It was the later social situation of the university that fostered these splits.

⁴This point is argued by G. Mantzarides, “The Meaning of *theologia*,” *Kleronomia* 2 (1970): 103–20 (article in Greek with French summary).

⁵Edward Farley has provided an influential analysis of the changing genres of theology in *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). On early understandings, see 31–37.

⁶Note Augustine’s conviction about theology: “The only merit of this science is that from it a saving faith is born, nourished, defended, and strengthened.” (*De Trinitate*, Bk. 14, Ch.1.) Cf. Seckler, “Theologein,” 247.

The practical nature of early Christian theology/discipline was also evident in its social location.⁷ This was typically an episcopal/pastoral setting (concerned with shepherding Christian congregations) or a monastic setting (addressing the needs of the ascetic and mystical life). The form of theological activity appropriate to such settings was not the authoring of academic treatises on theological topics; it was the production of catechisms, liturgies, commentaries, and spiritual discipline manuals. The theological reflection demanded by such forms of theological activity is as rigorous as that of any other form. Their distinctive feature, however, is that they developed in response to the needs and questions of typical Christian life; e.g., “How should we pray?” “What does this verse mean?” “Should we call Jesus ‘God’?” and “How should we train up new Christians?”⁸

In its early medieval period, the social location of Western Christian theology began to switch to the newly emerging universities. At first, most such institutions were connected to either a monastery or a cathedral and retained the concerns of the earlier period. Accordingly, theology continued to be defined as a practical *habitus* which was fostered by theology/discipline. By the twelfth century, however, the cathedral universities in particular were separating from their previous homes and adopting an Aristotelian model of a theoretical science (theology/science) aimed at assimilating rationally demonstrated and ordered knowledge *for its own sake*.⁹

What was the effect of this shift in social location upon Western Christianity’s understanding of theology? It provoked the first debate, in the 13th century, over whether theology was really a practical discipline, i.e., dealing with humans and the things humans do, in light of God, or primarily a speculative science, i.e., concerned with contemplating God *per se*.¹⁰ Most, like Bonaventure, continued to view it as a practical

⁷A pioneering analysis of the history of the changing social locations of theology and the resulting effects can be found in Charles Davis, “Theology in Seminary Confinement,” *Downside Review* 81 (1963): 307–16 (on this point see 310–11). For a related analysis focusing on *current* differing socio-cultural settings, see Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 80–91.

⁸A good example is St. Basil’s *On the Holy Spirit*. This influential analysis of the interrelations of the Godhead was occasioned by the issue of whether Christians should pray to the Holy Spirit.

⁹Cf. Farley, *Theologia*, 35–38; Davis, “Seminary Confinement,” 311; and Schreiter, *Local Theologies*, 91.

¹⁰It is important to note that *theologia* (doctrine of God) and *economia* (doctrine of salvation) are commonly grouped under a larger heading by this time. At first, it is usually “sacred doctrine.” Increasingly it becomes simply “theology.” Thus, the debate was partly over which of the two original constituent parts of theology should be more dominant, or how to interrelate them effectively. Cf. Seckler, “Theologein,” 247–48.

discipline, even in its speculative moments, while Thomas Aquinas began to contend that it was primarily a speculative science.¹¹ This debate marked the end of the general agreement that theology per se was practical. Henceforth in the West, practical theology would become only one possible genre of theology.

Such was not the case for Eastern Orthodoxy! In the Greek-speaking Christian communities of this period, theological activity remained largely in the domain of monks and pastors/bishops. As such, it retained the forms of liturgies, catechisms, spiritual discipline manuals, etc. Thereby, it avoided the Western contrast between practical and speculative theology. Only in the 19th century did Eastern Orthodoxy establish contact with Western university theology and seek to emulate it. They have since regretted this move.¹²

Practical Theology as Spiritual Theology

Aquinas' view eventually came to dominate the independent universities. Likewise, it soon came to dominate Western theological debate and pastoral preparation. Thereby theology/science became the dominant model of serious theological activity. Among the consequences of this shift in genre were: (1) the primary form of theological activity became the preparation of comprehensive textbooks (*summae*) for university education, (2) anthropological issues and implications were largely confined to a single section of these textbooks, (3) the method of deciding theological issues increasingly became exclusively logical, (4) there often developed a useless subtlety of argument, (5) there was a prevalent danger of theological reflection crystallizing into petrified systems, and (6) doctrinal clarifications that were achieved had little influence on

¹¹See: Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Q. 1, Art. 4; and Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Book of Sentences*, Preamble, Q. 3. Cf. Yves M.-J. Congar, *A History of Theology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 119, 127–30; Ulrich Köpf, *Die Anfänge der theologischen Wissenschaftstheorie im 13. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1974), 198ff; and Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 231ff. This debate divided roughly along the lines of those who were in the now independent universities versus those in schools with continuing monastery ties, cf. Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 5.

¹²Cf. Alexander Schmemmann, *Church, World, Mission* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979), 129–44. For an overdrawn contrast between the theological styles of East and West, arguing that these date back to the development of the independent Western universities in the Twelfth Century, see Chrestos Yannaras, "Orthodoxy and the West," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 17 (1972): 115–31 (cf. Yves M.-J. Congar, "Neuf Cents ans Après: Notes sur le 'Schisme oriental'," in Congar, *et al.*, *1054–1954: L'Eglise et Les Eglises* [Editions de Chevetogne, 1954], 3–95, esp. 43–44). For moderating evaluations of Yannaras, see N.A. Nissiotis, "Orthodoxy and the West: A Response," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 17 (1972): 132–42; and Kallistos Ware, "Scholasticism and Orthodoxy: Theological Method as a Factor in the Schism," *Eastern Churches Review* 5 (1973): 16–27.

liturgy, etc. Overall, the relation of such theology to human life became problematic.¹³

What was the fate of practical theology under these circumstances? It did not simply drop from view. Indeed, it was championed for a while by Franciscans as a holistic alternative to the dominant Dominican schools.¹⁴ It was increasingly marginalized, however, into a separate genre of Christian reflection alongside theology/science. While the latter supposedly pursued a rigorous dispassionate analysis of truth as a whole, practical theology (increasingly under such names as mystical or spiritual theology) focused on understanding and inculcating Christian spirituality.¹⁵ This distinction itself demonstrates that doctrinal analysis and reflection on Christian life were drifting apart.

The separation of tasks was mirrored in a separation of social location in medieval Western Christianity. Theology/science was pursued in the independent universities while practical theology became the province of monasteries. Unfortunately, such a practical theology had little more connection to the lives of the majority of (nonmonastic) Christians than university theology. It might meet the needs of the ascetic-contemplative life, but it was only tangentially related to Christian life in the world.

The distinction between the genres of theology/science and practical theology noted in medieval Christianity continued in Roman Catholic circles after the Western Church split, and eventually carried over into Protestant circles as well.

The Reformation itself was, in part, a reaction against these medieval developments. For Luther, “True theology is practical . . . speculative theology belongs to the devil in hell.”¹⁶ Accordingly, Luther worked within the standard forms of theology/discipline (liturgies, catechisms, commentaries, etc.), rather than the theology/science textbooks. Likewise, while Calvin wrote a systematic treatise, its purpose was largely lay catechesis and he supplemented it with commentaries etc. More importantly, he repeatedly drew out the soteriological implications of even his most abstract reflections.¹⁷

¹³Cf. Congar, *History of Theology*, 137–42; Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973), 4–6; and Pannenberg, *Theology and Philosophy of Science*, 234.

¹⁴Cf. Johann Theiner, *Die Entwicklung der Moraltheologie zur Eigenständigen Disziplin* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1970), 348.

¹⁵A classic example is Thomas à Kempis’ *The Imitation of Christ*. Of course, such writings were not considered proper theology by the academic model, so they are typically surveyed in histories of spirituality rather than histories of theology.

¹⁶*Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1972), 54:22.

¹⁷Cf. Brian G. Armstrong, “The Nature and Structure of Calvin’s Thought According to the *Institutes*: Another Look,” in *John Calvin’s Institutes: His Opus Magnum*, edited by B.J. Van der Walt (Potchefstroom: Institute for Reformational Studies, 1986), 55–81

This resuscitation of theology/discipline was short-lived, however. Protestants were soon beset by an Orthodoxy/Pietism split that (contrary to either group's intention!) served to separate again the discipline of doctrinal reflection and the analysis of Christian life.

The influence of its university location led Protestant Orthodoxy to reappropriate and emphasize the model, and the problems, of theology as a theoretical science. It was assigned the task of constructing, from "orthodox" sources, a rigorous logically-ordered formulation of Christian faith. Meanwhile, practical theology slipped from view and, when mentioned, was construed as demonstrating the edifying significance of the faith thus determined.¹⁸ Such a demonstration was both necessary and difficult because faith (*theologia*) was now seen more as a set of intellectual affirmations than as a *habitus* that oriented Christian life in the world.

While Orthodoxy was construing questions of relevance for Christian piety as secondary applications of theoretical theology, Pietists were focusing primary attention on such relevance, seeking a theology oriented to (nonmonastic) Christian spirituality. What relation did they see between doctrinal theology and this "spiritual" theology? Most retained standard doctrinal textbooks on principle but focused all their creative efforts on developing spirituality manuals.¹⁹ This imbalanced focus implicitly suggests what some openly admitted—a devaluation of, if not aversion to, theoretical reflection.²⁰ Thus, while Pietism recovered and developed numerous insights into Christian spirituality, it lacked a clear emphasis on the need for the *habitus* of Christian faith to be formed and normed by the careful doctrinal reflection of theology/discipline.²¹

Practical Theology as Non-Technical Theology

¹⁸Cf. Hans Leube, *Orthodoxie und Pietismus* (Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 1975), 42ff; and Gerhard Ebeling, *The Study of Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 115. For a more positive reading of Reformed Orthodoxy, arguing that it retains more of a practical theology than its Lutheran counterpart, see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics. Vol. 1: Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), 205–25.

¹⁹Thus, while they developed some insightful spirituality manuals, e.g. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, when they established their own schools, they usually simply appropriated dogmatic texts constructed on the old loci-method, rather than developing a truly integrative approach (cf. Leube, *Orthodoxie*, 121).

²⁰Cf. the typical judgment of John Downname that the most profitable part of theology is "that which consisteth more in experience and practice, than in theory and speculation; and more principally tendeth to the sanctification of the heart, than the informing of the judgement and the increasing of knowledge" (quoted in F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965], 70).

²¹See Botho Ahlers, *Die Unterscheidung von Theologie und Religion. Ein Beitrag zur Vorgeschichte der Praktischen Theologie im 18. Jahrhundert* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1980), 63ff. Note that this is a judgement on the overall effects of Pietism, not the position of its best representatives—such as Spener. Likewise, such Pietist moves were more prominent in the Lutheran tradition than in the Reformed (Cf. Muller, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 294–95). Finally, this tension was more typical of Continental Pietism than in its English counterpart. Anglican theology had remained closer in style to early Christian theology, developing a Prayer Book and Homilies as its doctrinal standards. Thus, English Pietists tended to contrast themselves more with formal religion or Deistic rationalism than with doctrinal reflection (Cf. Stoeffler, *Evangelical Pietism*, 25).

The reconception of practical theology as a devotional or spiritual genre of theological activity was the dominant response in both Roman Catholic and Protestant circles to the ascendancy of the university model of theology/science. Another response, however, occasionally found expression. Put simply, practical theology was construed as a simplified version of academic theology, prepared for the non-professional. Perhaps the best example was the *Theologiae practicae Compendium* of Johannes Molanus in 1585. The work had its origin as a refresher course for students preparing for exams. It was basically a summary of the conclusions of Roman Catholic scholastic theology, stripped of all the disputation. While originally intended as a concession, such a presentation eventually became standard (especially at Jesuit seminaries) for students entering ministry rather than academic vocation. Such a practical theology was that taught “mere” pastors, while “true” theology was reserved for professional theologians.²²

Practical Theology as Moral Theology

The next major understanding of “practical theology” actually grew out of the move to distill the theology essential for pastors. Particularly after the reforms adopted at Trent, Roman Catholic pastoral education centered on training priests for the office of penance. Thus, the practical theologies prepared for pastors focused increasingly on expositing the decalogue, distinguishing vices and virtues, etc. Thereby emerged, during the early 17th century in Jesuit seminaries, the first independent texts in moral theology.²³

A similar move took place in Protestant circles. Beginning in the late 16th century Puritan writers developed a genre of “cases of conscience” literature to assist persons in making moral decisions. Eventually, this led some to associate moral theology with practical theology.²⁴

²²This general process is surveyed in Theiner, *Entwicklung der Moraltheologie*, 57–97. On Molanus, see 92–96. For a similar phenomenon in Protestant Scholasticism, see Ebeling, *Study of Theology*, 115. While he does not appear to intend such a deprecatory connotation, this general idea is suggested as well by Karl Barth’s distinction between regular and irregular dogmatics; in Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.1: *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975) 275–77.

²³See Theiner, *Entwicklung der Moraltheologie*, 97ff.

²⁴See Richard Osmer, *A Teachable Spirit: Recovering the Teaching Office in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 149–52.

Thus, by the 18th century it had become common in both Protestant and Catholic schools to designate texts which dealt with Christian *actions* “practical theology;”²⁵ as distinguished from “theoretical theology,” which dealt with Christian *beliefs*. Such a distinction was apparently modeled on Aristotle’s differentiation between *theoria* and *praxis*. Whatever its sources, it served to name a problem rather than solve it: What is the relationship between what we believe and what we do?

The impact of the Enlightenment, and Kant in particular, upon the model of practical theology as moral theology was complex. His differentiation between pure reason and practical reason was initially assumed to strengthen the distinction between theory and practice, and to treat practice as the application of previously-determined theory. Thus construed, practical theology became the moral application of theoretical theology.²⁶

Eventually it became clear that Kant’s program raised deep problems for the reigning distinction between theoretical and practical theology. His critique of pure reason called into question the abstract metaphysical claims of much current theoretical theology. To be sure, what he denied to pure reason (a basis for belief in God, the soul, etc.) he sought to recover through practical reason, which investigates the presuppositions of human moral actions. But this means that practical reason itself formulates the theoretical knowledge relevant to moral actions. An active debate continues over whether Kant construed moral philosophy as solely theoretical or as including both theoretical and practical moments. Either way, he undercut the equation of practical theology with moral theology.

Practical Theology as a Functional-Specialty Discipline

Before considering understandings of practical theology developed in response to Kant’s critique, it is important to highlight one aspect of what had already taken place. Practical theology was originally a characterization of the nature of theology per se. Then it designated a style of theology pursued largely outside of the universities. Now the debates are over its nature as one university discipline among others. Such debates are possible only because of a crucial shift that had taken place in the university itself.

It was noted that the universities were founded around the project of

²⁵See the discussion of this type of practical theology in Christoph Keller, “Zum Bedeutungswandel des Ausdrucks ‘Praktische Theologie’.” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 86 (1975): 215–19.

²⁶Cf. Keller, “Bedeutungswandel,” 217–18; and Dietrich Rössler, *Grundriß der Praktischen Theologie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986), 30–35.

a theoretical science. One assumption of this original project was that the knowledge (*scientia*) the university pursued was a unified whole. This single subject matter was considered to unite the various disciplines. The proliferation of knowledge with its resulting specialization began to undermine this unity. The tension eventually intensified into the “strife of the faculties” over their relative merits. The ultimate compromise was to turn the university into a mere aggregate of sciences, distinguished by their differing subject matters while (supposedly) united by their method.

The most important impact of this change on theology was not that it dethroned theology as the queen of the disciplines but that theology internalized the bifurcation of the scholarly quest. Theology/science became a collection of loosely connected sciences—often organized on the four-fold pattern: biblical studies, historical studies, systematic theology, and practical theology.²⁷

The theological status of the disciplines thus separated has always been problematic. From the beginning, “theology” was considered more properly a designation of systematic theology than the other disciplines. Moreover, their contribution to systematic theology was far from clear. This was particularly the case when, under the influence of the Hegelian *Encyclopedia*, systematic theology was construed as devoted to constructing a system in which every item of theological interest must be subsumed under, or derived from, a single principal idea.²⁸ On such a model, systematic coherence became a more important criterion for making theological decisions than exegetical basis, historical precedent, or relation to Christian life.

In other words, practical theology had become a university discipline distinct from theology “proper.” The prospects of such an arrangement helping overcome the split between doctrinal reflection and consideration of Christian life are surely dim.

Practical Theology as Pastoral Theology

Those prospects were made even dimmer by the typical response to Kant’s undermining of the identification of practical theology with moral theology. This response was to distinguish between the theoretical foundation of morals (which was reintegrated with doctrinal reflection) and the application of this moral theory, the remaining task of practical theology.²⁹

²⁷See the discussion in Farley, *Theologia*, 39; and Farley, “Theology and Practice Outside the Clerical Paradigm,” in *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church and World*, edited by Don Browning (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 23–24.

²⁸Cf. Congar, *History of Theology*, 180; and Charles Wood, *Vision and Discernment* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985), 16, n. 23.

²⁹Note the examples in Keller, “Bedeutungswandel,” 218. Distinguish this practice of having *both* a theoretical and a practical aspect of moral theology from the division Theiner notes (*Entwicklung der Moraltheologie*, 39–55) between *alternative* conceptions of moral theology as either practical or speculative.

While such a recognition that foundational moral reflection is really inseparable from doctrinal reflection is to be welcomed, the remaining role for practical theology is problematic. It was now a mere “application” discipline, applying to Christian practice the theories that systematic theology had previously developed.³⁰ Since the theories that it was to apply were typically developed with little reflection upon Christian practice itself, such application was hardly self-evident. Indeed, there was a strong temptation to suspect that the theories were irrelevant and could simply be ignored, opting instead for mere pragmatic actions.³¹

Moreover, the subject field of this newly-defined theological application discipline proved to be volatile. Early in the 19th century there were those who continued to construe its field of practice as general human life. Particularly after Schleiermacher’s suggested theological encyclopedia, however, this field was increasingly narrowed: first to ecclesial practice, then to the practice of the clergy.³² That is, practical theology became pastoral theology, a discipline aimed at preparing ministers to handle the technical aspects of their profession. At such, it was now only indirectly related to guiding the formation and decision-making of Christians in the world. This progressive narrowing of focus was often accompanied by yet one more change in social location: theology, at least that concerned to be church-related, moved out of the university into self-standing or largely insulated seminaries, further separating clergy education from general education.³³

RECOVERING THEOLOGY AS A PRACTICAL DISCIPLINE

In our historical survey we observed the qualification “practical” move from being ascribed to theology per se, to designating only certain types of theological activity (either within the university curriculum or as an extra-curricular alternative) which were clearly distinguished from primary doctrinal reflection, typically designated “systematic theology.” In contemporary theological discussion a variety of concerns and emphases are coalescing around the agenda of recovering an understanding and practice of theology that is, at its core, a practical discipline.

³⁰Cf. Farley, *Theologia*, 135.

³¹I am using “pragmatic” in the pejorative sense of deciding issues in terms of “what will work,” without sufficient consideration of whether the actions thereby adopted are compatible with a larger authenticating worldview. While the classical approach to theology as a practical science always included consideration of human situations and needs in its decision making, it did not allow these considerations to nullify questions about what was normatively Christian.

³²This process is chronicled by Edward Farley in “Interpreting Situations: An Inquiry into the Nature of Practical Theology,” in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*, edited by Lewis Mudge and James Poling (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 1–26.

³³See Davis, “Theology in Seminary Confinement,” 311ff.

Reconceiving the Specialty Discipline of Practical Theology

One of the most intense areas of recent debate about theological method has focused on the nature and goal of the specialty-discipline practical theology.³⁴ The major concern of this debate has been to overcome the restrictions of its identification with pastoral theology: (1) the narrowing of its subject field to clerical practice and (2) its construal as a mere “application” discipline.

The reconceived practical theology that is advocated either becomes again essentially moral theology, or it is assigned the task of reflecting on current Christian praxis, with the goal of transforming it into more authentic forms. This latter task entails mediating between current praxis and the normative convictions of Christian faith. Once the specialty-discipline of practical theology is defined this broadly, however, one wonders what remains for systematic theology. Thus, many of those calling for a transformed practical theology have realized that they are really calling for the recovery of a model of theology per se as a practical discipline—like that preceding the dominance of Western university theology/science.³⁵

Reintegrating Ethics and Doctrinal Reflection

Another relevant contemporary emphasis is the growing concern within the arena of Christian ethics to overcome the separation between doctrinal theology and ethical reflection. I noted the origins of this separation above, and how it called into question the relationship of what we believe about the nature of reality to what we believe we should do. Thus, it is not accidental that those who call for a restored connection between doctrinal theology and ethics have considered this move a return to understanding theology per se as practical.³⁶

Perhaps the strongest support from the general field of ethics for retrieving an understanding of theology as practical has come from those

³⁴For a detailed discussion and bibliography of this discussion, see Randy L. Maddox, “Practical Theology: A Discipline in Search of a Definition,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 18 (1991): 159–69.

³⁵Perhaps the best example is Brian Pettifer, “Education and the Knowledge of God: Towards a Model of Theology as a Practical Discipline,” in *The Foundations of Pastoral Studies and Practical Theology*, edited by Paul Ballard (Cardiff: University College Faculty of Theology, 1986), 65–77. See also, Thomas Ogletree, “Dimensions of Practical Theology: Meaning, Action, Self,” in Browning, *Practical Theology*, 83–101.

³⁶See especially James Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, Vol 1: *Theology and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 158–59. See also, Hugo Assmann, *Theology for a Nomad Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973), 92–94. For a discussion of the need to hold ethics and doctrinal theology in tension which stops short of truly integrating them, see Wolfgang Thönissen, *Das Geschenk der Freiheit: Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis von Dogmatik und Ethik* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald, 1988).

who focus the discipline more on understanding and cultivating the abiding virtues (character) which guide life than on determining abstract principles of ethical judgment. This emphasis on the need to *form* the cognitive and affectional character from which “proper” life flows carries clear parallels to the early Christian understanding of the relationship of theology/*habitus* and theology/discipline. Thus, it is hardly surprising to find Stanley Hauerwas, a leading proponent of this move, arguing:

If theological convictions are meant to construe the world—that is, if they have the character of practical discourse—then ethics is involved at the beginning, not the end, of theology. Theological discourse is distorted when portrayed as a kind of primitive metaphysics. . . . Theology is a practical activity concerned to display how Christian convictions construe the self and world.³⁷

Recovering the Social-Political Dimensions of Theology

The concern for recovering a truly practical theology is even stronger when the focus moves from the primarily individualistic moral issues emphasized by the Enlightenment to the social-political issues highlighted by Marx. (Note Johann-Baptist Metz’s description of how this movement in his thought led to his development of a “practical fundamental theology.”³⁸) For this reason, it has been common for political and liberation theologies to include extended discussions of the need for reconceiving theology in a way that acknowledges more clearly its integral relation to the social and political dimensions of Christian (and human) life. As Rebecca Chopp has put it, for liberation theologians “theology is known as a practical activity, characterized by its concreteness in dealing with particular events, stories, and witnesses rather than limiting its role to the analysis of general concepts of existence and tradition.”³⁹

Calls to Deprofessionalize Theological Reflection

Another movement that has lent support to the agenda of recovering theology as a practical discipline is the growing call to deprofessionalize theology,

³⁷Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 54-55 (cf. xvi-xx). See also the discussion in Paul Giurlanda, *Faith and Knowledge: A Critical Inquiry* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 256–88.

³⁸Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1980), 53.

³⁹Rebecca Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), 140. For other particularly relevant discussions, see: Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987); Matthew Lamb, *Solidarity with Victims: Toward a Theology of Social Transformation* (New York: Crossroad, 1982); Dermot Lane, *Foundations for a Social Theology: Praxis, Process, and Salvation* (New York: Paulist, 1984); Metz, *Faith in History*; and José Miguez-Bonino, “Theology as Critical Reflection and Liberating Praxis,” in *The Vocation of the Theologian*, edited by T.W. Jennings (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 37–48.

allowing the “people” to participate and making the needs of the whole People of God a primary concern.

This current agenda must be carefully distinguished from an earlier attempt to develop a practical theology for laity. That attempt took place in German theological circles near the end of the 18th century, in response to the newly emerging educated middle class. This group constituted a *lay* audience interested in the major conclusions of recent theological reflection, though having neither the background nor the desire to consider all of the details. Of particular interest to them were those aspects of theology that most immediately impacted the moral decisions of life. Accordingly, a genre of popular theology, frequently called “practical theology,” emerged, aimed at distilling such information and presenting it in terms understandable to a lay audience.⁴⁰

While the concerns of this attempt to involve non-professionals with theology are understandable, it actually increased the split between academic theology and lived piety, by formalizing the assumption that non-professionals play no *constructive* role in doctrinal reflection but are merely an audience for its conclusions. The current call for deprofessionalizing theology demands more than a translation of academic theology for the laity. It calls for the *practice* of theology to be reformed so that it will involve the entire community more intimately.

This concern is not new. It has often been found in Western Christian traditions that were marginalized by the mainstream.⁴¹ Likewise, there has been a long tradition of lay theologians in Eastern Orthodoxy. However, the call for involving all people in the practice of theological reflection is now finding an increasing constituency throughout the Christian community.⁴² To the degree that the isolation of typical university and seminary theological education contributed to the loss of a truly practical theology, this call fosters its recovery.

Critiques of Western Scientific Rationality

More important in the long run than the simple rejection of the university model of theological education and its accompanying professionalization of theology may be the increasing philosophical critiques of

⁴⁰See the discussion in Volker Drehsen, “Theologia Popularis: Notizen zur Geschichte und Bedeutung einer praktisch-theologischen Gattung,” *Pastoraltheologie* 77 (1988): 2–20.

⁴¹Cf. Marlin Jeschke, “How Mennonites Have Done and Should Do Theology.” in *Explorations of Systematic Theology from Mennonite Perspectives*, edited by Willard Swartley (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 9–16.

⁴²E.g., Samuel Amirtham & John Pobee, “Introduction,” in *Theology by the People. Reflections on doing Theology in Community* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), 1–26; Georges Casalis, *Correct Ideas Don’t Fall from the Skies: Elements for an Inductive Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 16ff; and Pettifer, “Education,” 76.

the model of scientific rationality that has dominated Western thinking and university education.

One focus of these critiques has been an insistence that all human knowing is embedded in tradition and community. Another focus has been the desire to overcome the narrowing of Western intellectual concern to the universal and the absolute; recovering a sense of the importance of the particular, the timely, and the local. Perhaps the most central focus has been the search for a more authentic understanding of the relationship of theory and practice. Increasingly, contemporary philosophers have rejected two tendencies: (1) merely deriving practice from theory and (2) seeing theory as a mere reflection of practice. Instead, they have argued that authentic human actions, as contrasted with mere technique, are both meaning-discerning and meaning-laden. They have typically utilized the term “praxis” to capture this dialectical relationship between action and reflection. Praxis, thus, designates “creative action, inspired by critical reflection, that gives rise to both change and insight.”⁴³ An authentic rationality would be embedded in such praxis.

Stephen Toulmin has characterized the overall agenda of these current philosophical critiques as “The Recovery of Practical Philosophy.”⁴⁴ Thus, it is only natural that an appropriation of these same concerns into the discussion of the nature of theology should lend support to the recovery of theology as a practical discipline, as Francis Schüssler Fiorenza has shown.⁴⁵

Rejecting Theological Foundationalism

One specific theological conclusion that the critique of the dominant model of scientific rationality has suggested for some theologians is the rejection of foundational or essentially metaphysical approaches to theology, arguing instead that the primary purpose of doctrinal reflection is the functional norming of Christian discourse and life.⁴⁶ Such an emphasis on the praxis-norming *function* of doctrine is clearly central to a model of theology as a practical discipline, although it is not obvious that

⁴³Lane, *Social Theology*, 4.

⁴⁴*American Scholar* 57 (1988): 337–52.

⁴⁵See Fiorenza, “Foundations of Theology: A Community’s Tradition of Discourse and Practice,” in *Catholic Theology in North American Context*, edited by G. Kilcourse (Catholic Theological Society of America, 1987), 107–34.

⁴⁶The leading examples are: George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984); and Gerhard Sauter, *Wissenschaftstheoretische Kritik der Theologie* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1973), 323ff. See also, David Kelsey, “Biblical Narrative and Theological Anthropology,” in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, edited by Garrett Green. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 121–43.

it necessarily entails a total rejection of metaphysical or foundational concerns.⁴⁷ Indeed, this same basic point can be found, without the total rejection of foundationalism, in recent descriptions of the basic Christian convictions and tempers as an “interpretive worldview” that guides Christian life.⁴⁸

Reaffirming First-Order Theological Activities

Many of the theological currents already discussed have contributed to a renewed interest in the theological importance of activities like creating liturgies, composing hymns, and shepherding discipleship—due to their direct contribution to forming Christian character and influencing Christian praxis. Indeed, there is a growing cohort of theologians who argue that such activities are actually the most primary form or first-order level of theology!⁴⁹

Such an emphasis should not be construed as a rejection of rigorous, often complex, doctrinal reflection. Indeed, since the concern is for the legitimate formation, or reformation, of Christian character, doctrinal reflection on liturgies, hymns, etc. is crucial. It is, however, a second-order activity, in the sense that it is a step further removed from Christian praxis—which gives rise to authentic theological reflection and toward which such reflection is ultimately directed. Likewise, liturgies and other primary forms of theological activity need to be recognized as a source for doctrinal reflection, not just an object thereof.⁵⁰

The emphasis on the theological role of liturgy, hymns, etc. has been closely connected to the renewed awareness of and dialogue with Eastern Orthodox theology in Western Christian traditions. I have already noted that the Eastern Orthodox tradition was not as affected by the university paradigm of theology and thus remained closer to the earlier practice of theology/discipline. Thus, the renewed contact with this tradition has been another stimulus for Western theology to recover an approach to

⁴⁷Cf. the critique of Lindbeck in Geoffrey Wainwright, “Ecumenical Dimensions of Lindbeck’s *Nature of Doctrine*,” *Modern Theology* 4 (1988): 121–32; and Timothy Jackson, “Against Grammar,” *Religious Studies Review* 11 (1985): 240–44.

⁴⁸This approach has been particularly attractive to those in the Reformed tradition; e.g., Arthur Holmes, *The Making of a Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1985); James Olthuis, “On Worldviews,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 14 (1985): 153–64; and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Educating for Responsible Action* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980).

⁴⁹For example, E.J. Kilmartin, *Christian Liturgy: Theology and Practice* (Kansas City, MO: 1988), 1:93-9; Lane, *Social Theology*, 141ff; Geoffrey Wainwright, “In Praise of God” *Worship* 53 (1979): 496–511; and Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

⁵⁰Cf. Theodore Jennings, “Theology as the Construction of Doctrine” in Jennings, *Vocation of Theologian*, 67–86; Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1984), 21–22, 74; David Power, “Cult to Culture: The Liturgical Foundation of Theology,” *Worship* 54 (1980): 482–95; and Seckler, “Theologein,” 246.

theology that is more related to the daily praxis of Christian worship and life.⁵¹

DESIRED CHARACTERISTICS OF A TRULY PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

What are the major characteristics that are advocated as essential to theology as a practical discipline?

I noted in my historical survey that one contribution to the growing separation between doctrinal reflection and Christian life was the bifurcation of the theological sciences in the university curriculum. It is appropriate that one of the characteristics advocated for a recovered practical theology is that it seek to unify the various theological concerns (tradition, Scripture, experience, reason, etc.) around the common focus of norming Christian praxis. As Thomas Ogletree has put it:

Practical theology is not one of the branches of theology; the term practical rather characterizes the central intent of theology treated as a whole. Where distinctions are made among discrete theological tasks, it is better to speak of the dimensions of practical theology, not of practical theology in opposition, let us say, to historical theology or philosophical theology.⁵²

Ogletree's point is not to deny the legitimacy of giving attention to the various dimensions of theological interest, but to emphasize that what bestows their theological nature is precisely their contribution to norming Christian praxis.⁵³

Second, a practical theology should be holistic. This concern is typically

⁵¹See especially, Schmemmann, *Church, World, Mission*, 117ff; and Anastasios Kallis, "Theologie als Doxologie: Der Stellenwert der Liturgie in der orthodoxen Kirche und Theologie," in *Liturgie - Ein Vergessenes Thema der Theologie?* (Freiburg: Herder, 1986), 42–52.

⁵²Ogletree, "Dimensions of Practical Theology," 85. A similar move was advocated by Helmut Gollwitzer, "Theorie und Praxis," 525.

⁵³This is a significant difference of emphasis from several other recent depictions of the theological enterprise in terms of three disciplines, only one of which is practical theology. For example, see Schubert Ogden's concern to avoid confusing practical theology with systematic theology or historical theology in "Christian Theology and Theological Education," in *The Education of the Practical Theologian*, edited by D. Browning (Atlanta, GA: Scholar's Press, 1989), 21–35. Likewise, David Tracy emphasizes the distinct tasks and audiences of fundamental theology, practical theology, and systematic theology in "The Foundations of Practical Theology," in Browning, *Practical Theology*, 61–82. In almost all such cases, emphasis on these distinctions ends up maintaining that the most important questions for doctrinal reflection per se (systematic theology), have more to do with their accountability to university norms of rationality than to Christian praxis as a whole. This emphasis is explicit in Ogden. While Tracy relates fundamental theology to the university and systematic theology to the Christian community, his own work on systematic theology so far has been almost exclusively concerned with defending its possibility to the university. See my discussion of his project in *Toward an Ecumenical Fundamental Theology* (Chico, CA: Scholar's Press, 1984), 153–54.

expressed in the demand that theology be concerned not only with orthodoxy but also with orthopraxis, i.e., seek to norm not only ideas and confessions, but Christian action in the world. Thanks to the influence of political and liberation theologies, such a desideratum is now widely accepted. More recently, some theologians have suggested an even broader criterion of a holistic theology. Drawing on the insights of “character ethics,” they have argued that a truly holistic theology must be concerned not only with orthodoxy and orthopraxis but also with orthopathy,⁵⁴ i.e., when theology is pursued as a practical discipline, a central task will be the norming of those forms of theological activity that most actively shape human character.

A third characteristic is the primacy of praxis in theological method.⁵⁵ Existing praxis, both Christian and general, should be the starting point and ultimate goal of theological activity. This requirement is not the same as advocating that theology derive its norms from praxis. It is to claim that the needs and challenges arising from Christian praxis in the world are what spark authentic theological activity.⁵⁶ Thus, the practical theology being advocated today must be distinguished from that championed by Ernst Troeltsch. Troeltsch had been influenced by Schleiermacher’s model of a *Glaubenslehre*—an articulation of the doctrine *currently expressed* in the Church (cf. *Brief Outline* §97). While Schleiermacher had considered this a subdivision of historical theology, Troeltsch (under the influence of Hegel’s notion of praxis as the unfolding of the Idea implicit in history) designated such a study of the historical embodiment/expression of beliefs a practical theology. He presented this practical theology as a direct alternative to the perceived traditional practice of imposing a dogmatic definition of faith upon the present church, arguing that it was a more useful guide to ordinary Christian life.⁵⁷ Of course,

⁵⁴Interestingly, some of the clearest recent attempts to interrelate orthodoxy and orthopraxis with a concern for correct affections have been developed in an attempt to articulate John Wesley’s theological activity; e.g., Gregory Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1989); Henry Knight, “The Presence of God in the Christian Life: A Contemporary Understanding of John Wesley’s Means of Grace” (Emory University Ph.D. thesis, 1987); and Theodore Runyon, “A New Look at ‘Experience,’” *Drew Gateway* 57.3 (1988): 44–55.

⁵⁵E.g., Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 50.

⁵⁶On this often misunderstood point, see Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 190, 200.

⁵⁷See Ernst Troeltsch, “Rückblick auf ein halbes Jahrhundert der theologischer Wissenschaft,” *Gesammelte Schriften* (Tübingen: JCB Mohr, 1913), 2:193–226 (English translation in *Ernst Troeltsch: Writings on Theology and Religion*, 53–81, edited by R. Morgan and M. Pye [Atlanta: John Knox, 1977]); and Ernst Troeltsch, “The Dogmatics of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,” *American Journal of Theology* 17 (1913): 1–21 (reprinted in *Gesammelte Schriften* [Tübingen: JCB Mohr, 1913], 2:500–24). For a good secondary analysis, see Walter Wyman, *The Concept of Glaubenslehre: Ernst Troeltsch and the Theological Heritage of Schleiermacher* (Chico, CA: Scholar’s Press, 1983), 12, 97ff.

the emerging Neo-Orthodox movement quickly rejected his assumption that current Christian praxis should have absolute primacy over previous Christian teachings and life. The present articulations of theology as a practical discipline take this concern into account.

Nor is the requirement that theological reflection always be directed back to praxis a rejection of careful doctrinal reflection. It is an affirmation that doctrinal reflection should be pursued to the point of discerning the anthropological and soteriological implications of *all* doctrines (e.g., see Metz's discussion of the practical nature of the Christian idea of God).⁵⁸ It is also a commitment to the indispensable task of relating all such second-order doctrinal reflection to the primary theological activities that address directly the concerns of Christian praxis in the world.

Fourth, a truly practical theology should be inherently transformative. That is, it should seek not only to understand but also to correct Christian life. As Dermot Lane has put it:

The understanding of knowledge and truth operative in the primacy of praxis is one of transformation in contrast to the more traditional understanding of knowledge and truth as simply disclosure or correspondence or conformity or verification. These latter tend to maintain the status quo whereas an understanding of knowledge and truth as transformation challenges theology to go beyond the status quo.⁵⁹

A fifth characteristic has been a particular emphasis of those concerned to overcome the isolation of theology from the community of faith that professionalization has fostered. They stress that theological activity needs the reflection of the breadth of persons involved in Christian praxis to preserve its vitality and wholeness: it needs to be communal in its process.

Some aspects of the desired communal nature of a practical discipline of theology deserve attention. First, the point at issue here is not just that every individual has a duty to theologize but that this activity is best done in community, by persons living together in faith. Second, there should be a particular concern to involve members of the community most likely to be excluded, i.e., the poor, oppressed, or exploited. Third, while this emphasis specifically rejects the restriction of theological reflection to an elitist group of professional theologians, it does not exclude them. They too are a part of the community. However, as Samuel Amirtham and John Pobee have phrased it, it is crucial that "what the theologian does is *in the context of* and *with* the people, not *for* the people gathered as a community of

⁵⁸Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 51, 67. See also, Pannenberg, *Theology and Philosophy of Science*, 234.

⁵⁹Lane, *Social Theology*, 67. See also, Chopp, *Praxis of Suffering*, 151.

faith.”⁶⁰ Finally, while it is crucial to draw on the insights and wisdom of the entire Christian community in doing theology, this should not be construed as reducing theological judgments to “majority rule.”⁶¹ Criteria of authenticity for Christian life and belief would remain, and keeping the community self-conscious of these may be the most important contribution of professional theologians to a communal practical theology.

A sixth characteristic, with perhaps the widest consensus, is the demand that practical theology be contextual. It would not focus on the search for universal unchanging expressions of Christian faith. It would undertake the demanding work of wrestling with both the Christian revelation and the particular sociohistorical situation until it discerned particular authentic embodiments of Christian faith. As Julian Hartt has put it: “Having a theology is a matter of being able (or at least being committed) to convey an authentic sense of the Christian view on whatever is of such moment to call for such a display; and in concepts and images appropriate both to the viewpoint and the situation.”⁶²

This approach has received significant attention in recent years. In the process, some specific clarifications have emerged. First, it has been argued that the context relevant to theology must be defined broadly, including the social and political dimensions of Christian life, rather than being reduced to “individual human experience,” as has been typical of Western liberal theology.⁶³ Second, it has been stressed that, in its search for contextually relevant theological expressions, an authentically Christian practical theology must constantly guard against relativism.⁶⁴

Finally, a truly practical theology should be occasional, i.e. concerned more to address pressing issues as they arise than to formulate programmatically an abstract theological system. To quote Hans Frei:

In a certain sense theologians have to proceed in a piecemeal fashion, confronting one problem or question at a time. In doing so they must be careful not to

⁶⁰Amirtham and Pabee, “Introduction,” 7. Their entire introduction focuses on this topic. See also Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite & Mary Potter Engel, “Introduction,” in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 1–15.

⁶¹See the cautionary words in this regard in: Rebecca Chopp, “Practical Theology and Liberation,” in Mudge & Poling, *Formation and Reflection*, 124 (and Mudge & Poling’s introduction, xiv).

⁶²Hartt, “The Pursuit of Practical Theology,” *Drew Gateway* 39 (1968): 16–28; here, 23.

⁶³The Western liberal theological project addresses, at best, only *one* context of contemporary Christian life. For stinging critiques of this project, see: Amirtham and Pabee, *Theology by the People*; Chopp, “Practical Theology and Liberation;” and Thistlethwaite & Engel, *Lift Every Voice*.

⁶⁴For particularly helpful discussions of this aspect of contextualization, see: Robert Brown, “What is Contextual Theology?” in *Changing Contexts of Our Faith*, edited by Letty Russell (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 80–94; Douglas Hall, *Thinking the Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 69–144; and Schreier, *Constructing Local Theologies*.

foreclose other issues which are not at that point up for consideration. This seems a better procedure than the endeavor to reduce all questions in theology to a basic systematic position which can be applied ready-made to any and all problems that come along.⁶⁵

This emphasis correlates with the turn toward concrete praxis as the stimulus and goal of theology. In Aristotle's original distinction between *theoria* and *praxis*, he had argued that considerations of praxis require a unique wisdom for interrelating the universal with the particular. His term for this wisdom was *phronesis*. In large degree the move toward recovering theology as a practical discipline could also be seen as the move toward recognizing that theological reflection, in its most primary sense, is such *phronesis*.⁶⁶

PROBLEM OF CONSISTENCY IN A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Such are some of the characteristics currently advocated for a truly practical theology. Undoubtedly, many issues regarding the recovery of theology as a practical discipline remain. What, for example, are the implications of such a reconceived theology for the structure and process of theological education at all levels?⁶⁷

Perhaps the greatest concern expressed about the proposed model relates to its occasional and contextual nature.⁶⁸ It is sparked by issues in particular situations and tends to adopt unique emphases or strategies appropriate to each situation. This suggests two potential problems. (1) such an occasional approach to theology would not directly facilitate

⁶⁵Frei, "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," *Christian Scholar* 49 (1966): 263–306; here, 274–75. See also, Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, xx; and Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 10.

⁶⁶The modern recovery of appreciation for *phronesis* is indebted particularly to Hans-Georg Gadamer. Perhaps the best brief analyses are Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 47–49; and *Idem*, *Philosophical Profiles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 99. For insightful applications of this model to theological reflection, see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Theory and Practice: Theological Education as a Reconstructive, Hermeneutical, and Practical Task," *Theological Education* 23 (1987, Supplement): 113–41, esp. 136; and Rodney J. Hunter, "The Future of Pastoral Theology," *Pastoral Psychology* 29 (1980): 58–69.

⁶⁷See especially, Farley, *Theologia*; Edward Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Thinking Theologically about Theological Education," *Theological Education* 24 (1988, Supplement): 89–119; Thomas Groome, "Theology on Our Feet: A Revisionist Pedagogy for Healing the Gap between Academia and Ecclesia," in Mudge & Poling, *Formation and Reflection*, 55–78; and Joseph Hough & John Cobb, *Christian Identity and Theological Education* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars' Press, 1985).

⁶⁸Note, in particular the worries expressed by Edward Farley, one of the advocates of recovering theology/*habitus*: Farley, "Systematische Theologie in einer systemfeindlichen Zeit," in *Entwürfe der Theologie*, edited by J.B. Bauer (Graz: Styria, 1985), 95–125; here, 103.

comprehensive theological awareness. (2) It is possible that the demands of the situation would so dominate theological reflection that there would be no connection or consistency between the various situation-related theological judgments.

Clearly the second of these potential problems is the more troubling. A fragmentary theological understanding could still be authentic in the issues it treats. While comprehensiveness is laudable, it does not appear to be essential to human praxis. By contrast, a lack of reasonable consistency in theological judgments would surely weaken confidence in any claim to truth, thereby jeopardizing the norming of praxis. This explains why a concern for consistency in its major doctrines is characteristic of all religions.⁶⁹

At the same time, the most common way that the concern for consistency came to be expressed in systematic theology was for all theological claims to be derived from or subsumed under a single Idea. Such a tight system was often attained only at the expense of exegetical and contextual considerations. Obviously, this approach is not going to be attractive to a proponent of theology as a practical discipline. But what options are there?

Some have claimed that it is the intrinsic consistency of the basic Christian mythos that grants consistency to situation-related reflection.⁷⁰ While helpful, this suggestion fails to explain how there can be (as there surely are) alternative consistent readings of this one mythos. Recognizing this latter fact, some have recently argued that what gives consistency to particular theological traditions are not unchanging doctrinal summaries, or a theoretical Idea from which all truth is deduced or given order in a system. Rather, it is a basic orienting perspective or metaphor that guides their various particular theological activities.⁷¹

I suggest that this identification of the unifying function of an orienting metaphor in a theological tradition provides a helpful analogy for addressing the issue of consistency within situation-related theological judgments. Perhaps what provides consistency is that each of the situations is addressed in light of a common *orienting concern*. Particular

⁶⁹Cf. William A. Christian, Sr., *Doctrines of Religious Communities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), esp. 43–44.

⁷⁰This is Farley's solution: ("Systematische Theologie," 103–4).

⁷¹Peter Slater has argued this at length (in terms of a "central symbol") in *The Dynamics of Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 28–46. Stephen Pepper has developed an analogous discussion of "root-metaphors" to explain the existence of different schools of philosophy in *World Hypotheses* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1942), 84–114. H. Paul Santmire has appropriated Pepper's analysis (in terms of a "theological motif") for understanding different Christian theological understandings of creation in *The Travail of Nature* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 14–15. These discussions should be distinguished from the Lundensian motif-analysis of religions. The Lundensians were seeking a unifying motif for each distinct religion. These investigations seek to understand differing consistent schools *within* a single religion.

responses would vary as appropriate to their situation and yet remain coherent because each situation is addressed from a consistent perspective.⁷²

This suggestion needs some explication. First, I have designated this factor an orienting “concern” because it is not simply one theological concept or metaphor among others. It is a perspective within which one construes all of the typical theological concepts.⁷³ For example, the absolute unconditionality of grace was not so much a particular doctrine of Martin Luther as a fundamental conviction that found expression in every doctrine and theological context he addressed.

Second, a person’s or community’s orienting concern is typically employed in an implicit manner. It need not be self-consciously chosen. It is often presupposed, being imbibed with one’s earliest theological nurture. It functions in theological reflection as a way of thinking that seems so natural and inevitable that it is seldom directly scrutinized.⁷⁴ Rather, it is the light in which all else is scrutinized.

Third, since an orienting concern is usually implicit and more overarching than typical theological concepts, there is little danger of it being used as an architectonic Idea from which all other theological affirmations would be deduced, or under which they must be subsumed. Its role is not to be the fountain from which doctrines spring, but the concern which guides the interpretation, relative emphasis, and interweaving of theological affirmations and practices. Moreover, one need not have a comprehensive summary of the claims consistent with a particular orienting concern prior to engaging in theological reflection. In fact, it is precisely the search for consistent expressions in relation to new issues that enlivens a theological tradition.

Fourth, it is possible for a particular theological tradition to operate with more than one orienting concern. However, if Peter Slater is correct that traditions seek coherent clusters of primary symbols and that there is typically a central symbol that provides this coherence, then the relative primacy of one orienting concern within any specific tradition is likely.⁷⁵

Finally, given Christianity’s salvific nature, Christian orienting concerns

⁷²Note Douglas Hall’s admission of the importance of an orienting “point of view” (the *theologia crucis*) in his recent attempt to recover a more praxis-related and contextual approach to theology. Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 22ff.

⁷³See Gerhard Sauter’s distinctions between the various types of theological concepts. His “concept with an orienting function” comes close to what I have in mind. Sauter (and Alex Stock), *Arbeitsweisen Systematischer Theologie: Eine Anleitung* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1976), 151–56.

⁷⁴Cf. Santmire, *Travail of Nature*, 15.

⁷⁵See Slater, *Dynamic of Religion*, 30, 33.

characteristically focus on the general issue of *how* God interacts with humanity.⁷⁶ Subtle differences on this issue are what distinguish the various Christian theological traditions. For example, is protecting God's sovereign freedom in all human interactions our major concern, or is it the validation of the call for humans to become truly Christ-like?

In summary, my basic suggestion is that it is the functioning of such an orienting concern that accounts for the relative consistency that has existed in Christian theological traditions and that holds promise for providing coherence among various occasional theological activities in any recovered practice of theology as a practical discipline.

The most obvious way to test this suggestion further would be to study examples approximating the type of situation-related, praxis-concerned theological activity being called for. In light of my earlier analysis, that would mean looking particularly outside the time period and cultural location of the dominance of university theology; e.g., the early Church, Eastern Orthodoxy, marginal Western traditions, and Anglicanism.⁷⁷

⁷⁶Compare this to David Kelsey's discussion of how a *discrimen* guides theological criticism of Scripture in *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 159ff. His *discrimen* comes quite close to what I mean by an "orienting concern." He argues that a *discrimen* focuses on the question of the *mode* in which God is present among the faithful (160).

⁷⁷For one example of such a study (within an Anglican context), see Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood, 1994).