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An Empirically Oriented Approach

Basic assumption

My definition of practical theology runs as follows: *Practical theology is the empirically orientated theological theory of mediating the christian tradition in the praxis of modern society.*

This definition makes clear that the tension between normativity and context belongs to the key-questions of practical theology. Mediating between the Christian tradition and modern society is the core of practical theology – which thus affects the individual, the church and society. Such mediation requires an ongoing critical interrelation between theological theory on the one hand, and the context of modern society on the other.

Text and context

An important question is how theological theory (taken as text) and modern society (taken as context) relate to each other. It is incorrect to characterize this relationship in terms of norm versus description. The relationship between 'text' and 'context' is extremely complicated. What I have called 'text' has been determined to a high degree by the context of the past, by cultural developments and historical events. This of course also applies to the text of the Bible itself, that has to be interpreted in the cultural and historical context of its authors. Furthermore, what I have called 'context' has been influenced by an authentic long-term experience of Christian faith and exemplary Christian life. This being so, the context in turn has gained a normative sense. Thus context becomes text.

There is no reason to characterize this, my approach in terms of 'natural theology´. The theological background of this position is the thesis that divine proclamation and action always have to be mediated; and come to us in the way of human speech and action. Revelation always will be mediated by religious experience. Here I refer to the Biblical concept of Covenant and to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Covenant means a way of partnership between God and man, in which God is the initiator but man plays an important role as a repon-

sible partner. Similarly, Christian pneumatology clearly states that the work of the Holy Spirit never takes place at the expense of our essential humanity. On the contrary, it finds its central focus in restoring the human person to freedom and responsibility. The relationship between God and human beings can be characterized as cooperation and partnership.

From the above I conclude that the deductive approach (starting from the text) and the inductive approach (starting from the cultural context) are complementary to each other. In practical theology we presuppose a correlation in which text and context permanently evoke each other. The structure of practical theology indeed is a bi-polar one. Research of the context leads to a new interpretation of the text. And this reinterpretation of the text, in turn, sheds a new light on the actual situation.

Empirical orientation

In this vision, the empirical approach gets a theological importance. I have defined practical theological research as `empirically orientated´. The notion `empirical´ is not the opposite of the notion `hermeneutic´. Rather, they are in line with each other. Practical-theological research of the relationship between text and context is hermeneutical by nature, but empirical by design.

It is hermeneutical by nature because the research is directed to a process of understanding: i.e. the understanding of the meaning of the Christian tradition in the context of modern society. It requires an empirical design, because practical theological research chooses its starting point in the actual situation of church and society. This situation has to be understood as a situation of action, that has to be explained by empirical research but interpreted by theological theories. By relating one to the other we discover the innovative possibilities: as to how the mediation of the Christian tradition can be subservient to the renewal of the praxis of faith.

A relevant practical-theological question arises here, that has to be elaborated in a research design. „Under which conditions and how can concrete religious actions be influenced in such a manner that they better represent God's work of liberating human being and the world in which we live?"

With the last phrase, 'better represent God's work ...etc', a normative hermeneutical concept has been introduced. This concept is not

Scriptural as such. But it arises from the explanation of the Scriptures in our historical and cultural context. It has been mediated by experience and thus is open to improvement.

In our twentieth century setting, we have learned to interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ in terms of hope: the hope of the Kingdom of God liberating the people who are being violated and oppressed. This is our critical hermeneutical frame of reference. Thus our confrontation with the reality of oppression and hostility has led to an interpretation of the gospel in terms of liberation — which, in turn, gained normative meaning in re-reading the Scriptures and the Christian tradition. We know: 'God is love' (1 John 4,16) and 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (2 Cor. 3,17). Along this line then I will define in our context the core of the Gospel, the salvation of Christ.

Theory and praxis

The approach, introduced above, presupposes a hermeneutical concept of theology as a whole. And a circular understanding of the relationship between theory and praxis. Let me elaborate.

Theology in the context of modernity since Schleiermacher, takes as its object of reflection not God but the Christian tradition of faith. This tradition must be understood as one that connects Fides Quae and Fides Qua: the content of belief and the experience of faith. Theology shows a fourfold pattern as it refers to the Christian faith. We know Christian faith from its sources (biblical theology), by its tradition (systematic theology), in its former (church history) and contemporary shapes (practical theology). These various perspectives are segments of an hermeneutical circle of understanding, making understandable and coming to understand. Practical theology chooses its starting-point in the way people will come to understanding. From this point of view practical theology asks its own questions about the both of the other two hermeneutical perspectives.

I can also elaborate the above point by referring to the interaction of theory and praxis. Theological theory always has an historical, i.e. provisional character. It shapes the methodological outcome of the mode in which people in their own context — and with their particular frame of reference have come to understanding. A dogma is congealed experience and must be made liquid again. Then it regains its original character of 'doxa'. A confession of faith is the fruit of the religious experience of a qualified group of people in a given cultural and social context.

For example, the formulation of 'Providence' arrived at by believers in the time of the Reformation – a time in which people felt very much dependent on forces of nature – cannot be normative for christians today. The relationship between the image of God, the portrayal of human beings and their world view in the traditional understanding of Providence, indeed presupposes a different perception of the 'environment' than that generally held today. The modern perception is deeply influenced by concepts as human autonomy and responsibitity. Thusly oriented, the empirically orientated research questions run as follows:

– Who were those people and what were the circumstances under which they have formulated the confession of God's providence in the way they did?

– Which Scriptural and (church)Traditional normative ideas do we discover in this formulation?

– Who are the people we meet today and how can we arrive to a modern understanding of Providence relevant to our perception of environment?

– How can we express today the experience of Providence in a liberating praxis?

To summarize: All theological theory is historically mediated and determined by social and political influences. Every praxis contains an implicit theory. And every theory presupposes a concrete praxis. The inductive method of practical theology starts with empirical research of the actual experience of people inside the context of modern society.

A theory of action

How do we envisage such a theory of action? Assuming a close connection between its empirical and hermeneutical perspectives, I take as my starting point the theory of Ricoeur. Ricoeur asserts that the paradigm of text interpretation can also be applied to the interpretation of action situations. In linguistics we can differentiate between spoken and written language. Likewise we can distinguish action as deed from action as a social phenomenon that is the result of many human deeds. In the latter case, a situation of action can be read as a text. Because of the symbolic character of human action, all such action contains the dialectics of event and meaning.

An action is characterized by a structure that can be analyzed in the same way as a sentence. We can analyze an action with the help of

the following questions or steps: *Who does what* (in relation to whom), *where, when, why and how*?

The above interrogative sentence indicates to (1) the actor — who did something?, (2) the kind of action — what did he do?, (3) the mode — how did he do it?, (4) the context — where, when and under which circumstances he did it; and (5) the motive of the action — why did he do it?

During the preparation of this presentation I was not able to make use of the description of the different contexts, which would be presented in this conference. For this reason I will use an example which I have elaborated in my recent book 'Praktische theologie' (1993).

On Eastern Sunday 1993, a minister of a Methodist community in one of the black townships near Johannesburg (S.A.) preaches about the hope for a peaceful living together for people of different races. This message is based on the proclamation of the Gospel, the resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Kingdom of God — and it invokes people to abandon violent action. Here we deal with a complicated action situation. Following Ricoeur, we can differentiate three dimensions in this case.

— *A state of affairs:* The case refers to a context (place and time) and a situation (the increasing tension between black and white). Here, a religious service takes place. This action has a structure (who, what, where, when and how), that we can describe. We call this the locutionary level of action. In the connection between event and meaning the noematic structure of the action becomes visible.
An activity: we mean a religious service and, more precisely, a sermon about a text from the Scriptures. The typical quality of theological action finds its expression in the reference to the written tradition that has to be interpreted. The contemporary historical situation can be interpreted in a symbolic way: from the perspective of the Kingdom of God. The story of the resurrection has been connected, in a narrative way, with the actual situation of insurrection. The connection of event and meaning gives the action impressive strength. It implies a promise for the future. We call it the illocutionary level of action.
— *A realization:* we mean the result of the action of the preacher in this liturgical context. In this case, we point to the appeal for nonviolence. Those present were motivated to work out a way of living together peacefully. Such can evoke anxiety, but also can have the effect hope. That is the perlocutionary level of the action.

A critical perspective may not be forgotten here. It can be expressed in the question: 'Cui bono'? Is this minister a representative of the establishment? Or can his appeal for reconciliation be interpreted as an attempt to realize a new order?

Model of analysis

We elaborate this example with a model of analysis. The central question is the following: Who does what (against whom)? Implied here are three different perspectives:

—   Who does what: *why/about what*? (1)
—   Who does what: *where/when*? (2)
—   Who does what: *how/what for*? (3)

(1) The first perspective indicates the intentional or referential aspect of an action: the theological motives related to the Christian tradition. We call this the hermeneutic perspective of action.

(2) The second perspective refers to the context, the situational aspect of action. In this example we have to do with structures of action. And with several variables: preacher, hearers, the worship service etc. This is the empirical perspective of action.

(3) The third perspective refers to the instrumental or teleological aspect of action. In this example, it is the medium of preaching as a way of communicating, directed towards the purpose of reconciliation. We call this is the strategic perspective of action.

It will be clear that empirical and hermeneutic elements are closely interrelated. With a view to empirical practical theological research, we can elaborate a design. We can choose between a quantitative or a qualitative approach. Or we can combine both of these.

A qualitative research proposal requires — in the above case — a way participating in the religious service and an analysis of the sermon. And comparing the latter with the text of other services that have been celebrated that same Sunday. Churchgoers can be interviewed with the help of an open-structured questionnaire about their experiences. In this way, we can investigate the effect of preaching in a defined context. And can gain from this an indication as how the Gospel is (can — or should be) communicated in comparable situations.

A quantitative research proposal requires a broader survey among ministers and churchgoers: about the conditions and effects of

preaching in a defined social situation. There is a great many variables which have to be elaborated.

In the research program of the Institute of Practical Theology in our faculty, we usually try to combine qualitative and quantitative methods. Depending on the theoretical framework, two approaches are open to us. If we have an elaborated theory and well-defined hypotheses, we can analyze an amount of sermons: in an effort to select different types of preachers and different styles of preaching. For this operation we make use of a survey.

Next we can select some preachers, representative of different types of preaching. Then, by interviewing them, we can get a deeper insight in the aims and theological backgrounds behind their different styles of preaching. When we only have an – as yet – unproven theory, we opt for an exploratory kind of research. Using participatory observation and interviewing methods, we try to discover variables in preaching. When we have found these, we can rectify incorrect insights and elaborate a more reliable homiletical theory.

Empirical research always starts from a hermeneutically defined situation of action. And always implies a practical theological aim: to serve the cause of improving homiletical theory for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Context Western-Europe: Individualization and church-membership

I'll give you another example. Actually, we (the research group of our faculty) are elaborating on a program 'Church-membership and participation in the local church'. The background of this program is the ongoing tendency of churchmembers leaving the church, the process of secularization. We investigate the culture and the structure of local communities belonging to the main reformed churches in the Netherlands and the participation of their members in the processes of individualization and subjectivity. These processes characterize the context of Western-Europe.

The research questions run as follows: What has changed the way people experience their churchmembership in modern time? What kind of tension can we observe between the experiences and expectations of church members and the expectations and requirements of church leaders about their members behavior? How do we judge

those requirements in relationship to the Scriptures and the tradition of the church?

First, we had to work out a theoretical framework concerning concepts of individualization and ecclesiology. We understand individualization as an ongoing process of leaving traditional life patterns (family, village, neighbourhood). The individual becomes more independent and autonomous. The shadow side of this development can be that people who are dependent on others and on the community as a whole become more lonely and isolated.

From the view of ecclesiology, we can identify six types of community:

— the church as a sacramental community, stressing ritual and worship;
— the church as a charismatic community emphasizing the different talents of the individual members;
— the church as a confessional community stressing the purity of church doctrine;
— the church as a solidary community emphasizing the diaconate in relationship to the poor and oppressed;
— the church as a 'folkchurch' with incidentally participation of the members (baptism, marriage and funeral);
— the church as a 'liberal' community with optimal freedom for the individual. Investigating the practice we expect to find mixed types also.

In the next phase, we have to develop an empirical research design investigating six main reformed communities. Our methods are analyzing the content of documents (minutes of meetings for instance), participatory observing and interviews. Next we shall develop a questionnaire, concerning the results of our qualitative research in relationship with the different types of community. The results shall be evaluated with help of literature. At the end, we hope that we can formulate suggestions to initiate a model of community development honoring processes of individualization and subjectivity at one hand and normative ecclesiological insights at the other.

Finally, I hope that I have offered you a clear view of the empirically orientated approach in the field of practical theology, especially in the Netherlands.

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