

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

## Toward Greater Understanding of Practical Theology

**Zusammenfassung:** In diesem Beitrag antwortet Bonnie Miller-McLemore noch einmal auf die Antworten der unterschiedlichen Autorinnen und Autoren auf ihren Vortrag des IAPT-Kongresses in Amsterdam und setzt sich dazu differenziert und pointiert in Beziehung zu den unterschiedlichen Positionen.

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The day my official responsibilities for the International Academy of Practical Theology conference began, I too went to the Van Gogh Museum, likely a “highlight” for many conference participants besides Pete Ward (see his first footnote). I had an experience bordering on, should I say, ecstatic? Or, perhaps it is safer or more accurate simply to say I was deeply moved. *The beauty of the art. The effort and focus behind it. Bold yellow flowers, undulating starry nights, humble bedroom furniture. The actuality of the museum itself and the attentiveness of my museum neighbors. The quiet. The movement into a posture of receptivity. Van Gogh’s personal and artistic craziness.* Though far from what I think Ward means when he says “the Church,” I was lifted up, inspired, even renewed in faith. Surely not the intent of either museum staff or Van Gogh himself. But who knows? Perhaps they knew something of the God I imperfectly try to love or what Wilhelm Gräb calls an “encounter with unconditionality”?

Where is religion located? What is it? Indeed, what is *theology* and how does one study it? Most critical, how does practical theology understand and contribute to the study of both religion and theology? In one way or another, all the responses take up definitional labor essential to sustaining a discipline—an exercise in self-examination that Friedrich Schweitzer identifies as a “distinguishing strength ... something that other (theological) disciplines could even learn from.” I agree and I’m grateful for the six responses to my efforts in this direction. Each stands on its own as a substantive contribution. I want to acknowledge some of the highlights around four themes—the place of the church, the role of theology, and theology, the impact of location, and the nature of theory—while also making corrections and identifying topics and questions for further deliberation.

## “The Church” and Practical Theology’s Subject Matter

Ward and I agree, perhaps in slight distinction to Schweitzer and Dreyer, about the need to understand theology in the midst of the everyday as among practical theology’s key tasks. In fact, the prioritization Ward desires of starting practical theology in the ordinary is precisely the logic that structures the four parts of *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*. He might appreciate my introductory chapter that explains why the volume begins with faith active in everyday life. “By beginning with constitutive *activities* of daily life, the book intentionally subverts the usual order of affairs in practical theology overviews .... Rather than starting with the discipline ..., the book starts with the particular .... Practical theology either has relevance for everyday faith and life or it has little meaning at all.”<sup>1</sup> Reading the chapters in Part I might also ease Ward’s concern about the “absence ... of traditional theologizing” in the volume. Authors attend closely to daily activities of faith as mundane as eating and blessing in order to perceive the doctrinal and the biblical woven into them. Even authors of more theoretical chapters, such as those on ritual theory as a method or on biblical theology as a curricular area, cannot “edit out the doctrinal” as Ward fears.

My difference with Ward and greater affinity with Schweitzer, Streck, and Gräß is over where the church and theology reside, a question that runs through the responses (except for Dreyer). Ward relegates to a footnote his admission of “stolen hours” in the museum. The rest of his response locates theology solidly in “the Church,” a phrase repeated throughout his essay, perpetuating the illusion that some such ecclesial form actually exists out there and that it is positioned over against the academy: “The natural environment ... for ‘theology’ is not the academy it is the Church.” But I think that we do well to avoid strict binaries between “ecclesial conversation” and “secularized academy.” Binaries perpetuate power struggles and cover over how church bleeds into culture, religious language into secular, and vice versa.<sup>2</sup> So, in contrast to Ward, *phronesis* isn’t any more secular or non-theological than *habitus*, a word he favors that also has origins in Aristotle. He and I agree that practical theologians need to be more theologically articulate but I’m less sure certain words are indelibly of “the Church” or, inversely, non-revelatory. The church is more complex and am-

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1 Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *The Contributions of Practical Theology*, in: *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, London (Wiley/Blackwell) 2012, 7.

2 I’ll return to the binary of *phronesis* versus *episteme* that Dreyer revives and incorrectly attributes to me.

biguous than this.<sup>3</sup> Most of us occupy several fluid cultures in churches and beyond.

Ward and I agree, however, perhaps in contrast to Schweitzer and Dreyer, that the academy has been negligent of the knowledge within church practice. But this should not be misread, on my part at least, as an argument for a new clericalism or an anti-intellectualism. I do not “reject,” as Schweitzer supposes, the diagnosis of the clerical paradigm or suggest we “leave ... this paradigm behind.” I agree with the critique of education designed wholly around skills for pastors and the restriction of practical theology to ministerial matters. I want to *modify* the paradigm’s *overuse* as an exhaustive explanation for all that’s wrong with theological education and practical theology. Its overuse has led us to ignore other problems, including dependence in theological studies on theories removed from practice or what I have called the “academic paradigm.”<sup>4</sup> This does not mean, however, that I identify abstract theory as *the* one and only problem or “reject” it outright, as Dreyer suggests. We do not need to “overcome” the clerical *or* the intellectual, an impossible, unnecessary, and inane feat even if we aspired to it.

Both Gräß and Streck provide welcomed alternative portraits of the church and theology, and they do so in complementary fashion, Gräß through conceptual argument and Streck through rich descriptive narrative. Whereas Streck offers concrete illustration of new modes of practical theology, Gräß supplies what I did “not set forth,” as Schweitzer correctly observes: “a comprehensive understanding of the discipline” (and perhaps the kind of “unitary” definition that Dreyer criticizes). Gräß states simply, “Part of the lived practice of Christianity is the church as an institution, but the church [notice, no capital; the devil is in the details] does not exhaust what Schleiermacher understood by Christian practice.” In fact, “Church and what is preached and taught in church plays a comparatively small role in the production of religion in everyday life.”

Streck, in turn, describes insights gleaned through a graduate school project aimed at studying and responding theologically to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in four seminaries in Latin America (Bogota, Buenos Aires, San José, and Sao Leopoldo). Distinct from Ward, neither the Church nor students provide her main epistemological test case. Practical theology’s veracity is assessed at the “grass-

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<sup>3</sup> An early warning about romanticizing the church appears in Rebecca S. Chopp, *Practical theology and Liberation*, in: *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*, eds. Lewis ... Pfling, Philadelphia (Fortress) 1987, 124–125.

<sup>4</sup> See Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *The ‘Clerical Paradigm’: A Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness?*, *International Journal of Practical Theology* 11, 2 (2007), 19–38. This is also published as chapter 7 in Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline*, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 2012.

roots” among those suffering (“marginal groups,” including increasing numbers of women and elderly). Many students “are not related to their churches or have changed churches or dropped out of them,” a “clientele” for whom the “issue of ecclesiology ... is quite remote.” They are enrolled in programs now accredited as “Religious Sciences” rather than “Theology” degrees limited to “the local Church.” Moreover, churches themselves differ. Whereas some support a compassionate response to HIV/AIDS, others “position themselves as an obstacle to prevention and treatment.”

So where is “the Church” for practical theology? Ward cites Kathryn Tanner’s *Theories of Culture* among the critics of liberal revisionist theology but he does not appreciate her equally incisive critique of postliberal assumptions about cultural uniformity and “the Church.” She uses postmodern modifications of the notion of *culture* in anthropology to argue that one seldom finds Christian narrative and tradition in the static, monolithic, self-contained form assumed by postliberal theologians. Church cultures are “plural and shifting” rather than “homogeneous, stable, and unified” in Tanner’s words.<sup>5</sup> Hence, as Gräß argues using sociologist Armin Nassehi, people “absorb and combine a variety of ideas and fragments from different religious cultures and symbols” making it much harder to “uphold the consistency requirement that traditional theological dogmatics has for so long held dear.” The “contents of faith represented by church constitute just a collection of symbols ... freely combined if they are known at all.” Or, again, the “*determination of practical theology’s content does not need to coincide with the church and dogmatic self-interpretation of the Christian faith*” (Gräß’s emphasis). Practical theology can recognize religious forms “beyond the expressly theological and churchly.”

## So What’s *Theological* about Practical Theology?

As this discussion makes evident, one benefit of international dialogue is its initiation of important conversation across countries and continents. Respondents challenge each other and not just me. Streck’s and Gräß’s portraits might make Ward and Rick Osmer a little nervous. Ward and Osmer both see practical theology as a theological discipline more closely aligned with a church theology where doctrine and scripture have a central place. Gräß’s definition probably

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5 Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Minneapolis (Augsburg Fortress) 1997, 47, 53.

won't appeal to the "more conservative" scholars who Osmer believes liberals need to welcome into the discipline and who "grant authority to Scripture." Osmer also wants us to reduce the "epistemic weight" given to the knowledge within practice in light of the authority of Scripture, tradition, and reason. He argues that "knowledge rising out of practice is ... only one" of the "sources of constructive work." He's right about this but, as with "the Church," these other three sources are also complex and ambiguous.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, I'm not sure I'd collapse "knowledge arising out of practice" into a "form of experience." Is practical knowledge the same as experiential knowledge? Its boundaries with other epistemic sources seem more porous to me. That is, practical knowledge arises not only through personal or social *experience* but also in the midst of tradition (e.g., worship), through scripture (e.g., *lectio divina*), and as a form of reason itself. Even if practice and experience are similar, practical theological knowledge is still our expert subject matter, worthy of greater study and status than it has been accorded, just as scripture is the expertise of a biblical scholar or tradition the expertise of the religious historian regardless of where they ground their constructive work.

If Streck's and Gräß's characterization of church and theology makes Ward or Osmer nervous, the neglect of such reflection in Dreyer might bother them more, even though it's more subtle. The term *Christianity* never appears in his response, *Christian* is mentioned once parenthetically, and *church* hardly appears at all (whether as the Church, churches, religious communities, experience, or other such references). It is unclear what place religious life and practices have in his disciplinary overview or whether anxiety or even aversion toward churches or confession lies behind his silence.

In turn, I wonder whether Ward's efforts to return practical theology to the Church would have a place in Dreyer's dialogical pluralist model. Of the six responses, they stand at different ends of the spectrum on church and theology and, perhaps not coincidentally, they both use the dubious metaphor of "war" to depict disciplinary developments. Dreyer describes stereotypical conflicts between a "scientific European" and "practical American approach" that no longer seem especially relevant. And Ward overlooks how much the conversation has evolved since George Lindbeck's original 1984 typeset of "turf wars" between Yale postliberal theology and David Tracy's Chicago revisionist theology. Even if

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<sup>6</sup> Osmer lifts up James Poling's recent *Rethinking Faith: A Constructive Practical Theology*, Minneapolis (Fortress) 2011 as a good example of a return to theology. But I'm less confident that Poling's creed-based approach is a good model for constructive theological work in practical theology. It falls too easily into a rather non-practical movement from proclamation of beliefs to illustration in practice.

practical theology has “located itself firmly on the experiential-expressive side,” as Ward contends, its scholarship has progressed past the Tracy-Lindbeck binary.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Osmer provides in his list of six “strands” a helpful overview of the plurality of options for engaging practical theology.<sup>8</sup> Dreyer cites several other examples of scholars who have classified the diversity in the field. In other words, there are many ways to challenge what Ward sees as modernity’s problematic theological legacy besides postliberal efforts to shore up local church communities and narratives. The “*modernist* paradigm” may be “collapsing,” as he observes. But this doesn’t mean that *modernity* in its entirety was a disaster or that its intellectual tools are dispensable. Without modern notions of equal rights, for example, the International Academy would be far less international and a few of us wouldn’t be writing scholarly articles at all. In short, modernity is not simply *modernist* (i.e., bad), and liberal traditions that marked modernity can be reformed.

Gräß provides a good case in point. He rehabilitates for postmodernity Friedrich Schleiermacher’s portrait of practical theology as absolutely “constitutive” of theology defined as a science devoted to the “empirically given and observed practice of lived Christianity.” Among the various kinds of theologies, practical theology is best suited—Schweitzer even says “indispensable”—to understanding the hybrid developments in religious practices today that, in contrast to Ward and Osmer, can no longer “be adjudicated by a normative, dogmatic pronouncement in the Christianity of the modern world.” Gräß wants to overcome the “church-theologian self-reference” in order to recognize more fully what functions today as religion. Religion is not an ontological or metaphysical term; it operates “formally and functionally as ... discursive.”

Why the Van Gogh museum might be a “highlight” for many conference goers is a question Ward doesn’t ask but Gräß explains, at least indirectly. For Gräß, people are still living in experiential-expressionist terms and their religious expressions don’t always measure up to traditional truth claims of classical Christianity. Whether people turn to the church, other religions, or something else rests largely on whether these practices foster meaning. The museum may be largely “secular” but it isn’t surprising that people can extrapolate, recombine, and

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7 Tracy himself argues that the revisionist position never presumed a kind of pristine uninterpreted, monolithic or universal religious experience. Hermeneutics by definition grapples with the historically-embedded and narratively-driven pre-understandings of all religious claims. See David Tracy, Lindbeck’s New Program for Theology: A Reflection, *The Thomist* 49 (1985), 460–472 and *Pluralism and Ambiguity*, New York (Harper & Row) 1987.

8 For another overview of practical theology “schools,” see Kathleen Cahalan, *Three Approaches to Practical Theology, Theological Education, and the Church’s Ministry*, *International Journal of Practical Theology* 9 (2005), 63–94.

reconstitute “religion” and even “Christian theology” within that context; in fact, given the mishmash of secular/religious postmodern life, they have no other choice. So, for Gräß, Streck, Schweitzer, and me but less so for Ward and Osmer, society as much as the church is the “public” with which practical theology most identifies its subject matter, as Tracy himself argues.<sup>9</sup> In Gräß’s German liberal Protestant tradition, a practical theology of society or culture does the job of “transposing biblical and dogmatic doctrines into the key of modern culturalization of religion” and of reading “cultural phenomena and practices in a religious manner” (this sounds to me a lot like Paul Tillich’s theology of culture). For Streck, who is shaped as much by liberation theology as by Schleiermacher, theology is “not confined to a local parish”; it requires one to “step out” into society.

My question for Gräß, Schweitzer, and Dreyer is what does Christian *theology* have to do with their design of the discipline? Dreyer doesn’t talk about practical theology as *theology*. The only time he uses the term is to name the discipline in conjunction with the term *practical*. Is this omission of practical theology as a constructive theological enterprise what Osmer recognizes as “social science lite”? Both Gräß’s and Schweitzer’s reflections on theology are more substantive. However, for Gräß, theology seems to stand above the fray of analysis as final judge. He alludes to heated debates in religious studies about the term *religion* and growing recognition that its history in Western academic institutions reflects a colonialist effort to classify other societies through external and often hegemonic Christian ideals.<sup>10</sup> But he doesn’t acknowledge that *theology* itself deserves comparable interrogation. Why does theology and presumably *Christian* theology get to adjudicate what functions as religion or not? Theology is a Christian-centric concept that Western educated and colonizing elites reserved for their own special domain and imposed on the conquered. Practical theology is one among a number of movements in the last fifty years, alongside political and liberation theologies in particular, that suggest a need to examine the imperialist politics behind the construction of *theology* and its recognized *theologians*.<sup>11</sup> Further interrogation along these lines might contribute to what

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<sup>9</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination. Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, New York (Crossroad) 1981, 57.

<sup>10</sup> See Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India, and the ‘Mystic East,’* New York (Routledge) 1999; Paulo Goncalves, *Religious ‘Worlds’ and the Alien Invaders. Differences in: Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip Goodchild, Burlington, VT (Ashgate) 2003, 115–134.

<sup>11</sup> Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, Maryknoll, NY (Orbis Books) 1976 and more recent work by Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, New Haven (Yale University Press) 2010.

Schweitzer describes as a necessary “interreligious turn.” The observation he makes about Germany is true for most contexts where academic practical theology operates: serious consideration of other religions and their practical theological dimensions is a growing edge for the discipline.

With Schweitzer, I’m just not sure what he means by *theological*. On one hand, his characterization of practical theology is of a piece with Gräß’s, which is not surprising given their common national context. Schweitzer argues that attending to lived religion deserves “as much care and expertise ... as ... the texts of the Christian tradition.” On the other hand, why does he say that only Part III and IV of *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion* on practical theology as curriculum and discipline “are in general use” in his Protestant German context? Part I and II are devoted to understanding theology in the midst of daily life, providing illustration (Part I) and methods (Part II) to perform at least part of what Schweitzer depicts as a key “cultural turn” in practical theology toward a “religious hermeneutics of contemporary culture.” What makes a method theological, he says, is its “specific use for theological purposes.” But he doesn’t explain or illustrate what such a purpose looks like. Although I include “normative” when I argue that practical theology is more than descriptive and empirical, I do not equate normative and theological. I consider *theological* as inclusive of but ultimately more than the *normative* (e.g., ethics and prescription). *Theological* includes something of the *transformative* and transcendent, the “unavailability or unobservability” to borrow Gräß’s terms, or even “light inaccessible” to use Anselm as quoted in Ward.

Perhaps the distinction lies in whether one studies lived *religion* or lived *theology*. In an attempt to define practical theology, I foreground theology and describe practical theology as “a general way of *doing theology* concerned with the embodiment of religious belief in the day-to-day lives of individuals and communities.” I go on to say, “Where historians and sociologists of religion have begun to examine *lived religion*, those who engage in practical theology investigate *lived theology* and *lived faith*, extending interest in rituals and practices to questions about how theology or knowing and loving the divine takes shape in everyday life and how everyday life influences theology.”<sup>12</sup> This distinction between lived religion and lived theology has caused consternation among a few readers. Is this distinction valid? I’m still exploring this question. I invite readers to join me.

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<sup>12</sup> Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology* (n.4), 103, emphasis added in the first quote. The definition also appears as “Practical Theology,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, eds. Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams, Washington, D.C. (Congressional Quarterly Press) 2010, 1739–1743.



Regardless of the eventual answer, many practical theologians, such as Ward, Streck, Osmer, and myself, are interested in theology. Streck provides a good picture of one reason why. She faces the challenge of relating theology to a “specific thematic”—the quintessential question that scholars in other theological disciplines often ask practical theologians. “What is *theological* about X anyway?” What makes children or work or HIV/AIDS or any other such (practical) subject *theological*? This question may simply be of greater interest in the United States and Latin America than in Germany or South Africa. Perhaps this is partly because such questions matter for religious life and its leaders even though they are not quite questions about which scholars in religious studies or other university disciplines care.

Regardless of how one answers the question of what is *theological* about practical theology, it is worth noting that practical theologians debate, even disrupt, commonly accepted uses of the term *theology*. I like Ward’s quote from Anselm because it suggests the need for an academic theology that includes doxology and appreciates the desire of students to integrate study, ministry, and prayer.<sup>13</sup> Yet, at the same time, we live in a “secular age,” as Charles Taylor argues, where belief in God is now “only one human possibility among others.”<sup>14</sup> Profession of faith no longer stands on its own as an obvious truth or reality. I began this response with rapture at the museum but I cannot assume a world in which readers give me instant credibility because of such claims. Indeed, the reverse is more likely.

## Location, Location, Location

As the saying goes in US real estate, the three top predictors of property value are “location, location, location.” The same holds true for definitions of practical theology. My own remarks inevitably reflect the “disciplinary situation” in the United States more than “other parts of the world” as Schweitzer’s says. If one

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<sup>13</sup> This theme appears in David Tracy’s work and 2009 IAPT address on the problems of the separation of theory from practices in modernity. See *A Correlational Model of Practical Theology Revisited*, in Ed Foley, ed., *Religion, Diversity, and Conflict*, Berlin (Lit Verlag) 2011, 55–59. He refers to Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, Oxford (Blackwell) 1995. For other examples, see Jean LeClerq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, trans. Catharine Misrahi, New York (Fordham) 1982, and Don E. Saliers, *Worship as Theology, Foretaste of Glory Divine*, Nashville (Abingdon) 1994.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge (Harvard University Press) 2007.

learns anything from these six responses, it is the practical theological truism that location matters. Practical theology differs, sometimes radically, as one moves around the globe, even in our limited sample of Brazil (and Latin America), the United States, Britain, Germany, and South Africa. Streck, Ward, Schweitzer, and Dreyer comment explicitly on their contexts (though Dreyer considerably less). Gräß and Osmer do not, but much can be read between the lines about Gräß's European postmodern, post-Christian milieu and about the Reformed Protestant organization of theological studies at Princeton where Osmer teaches.

Osmer, Schweitzer, and Dreyer all say in one way or another that we should be careful about claiming too much for our own relative definitions. I agree. The explicit identification of national differences and self-correction is exactly the kind of discussion I've wanted and missed from my earliest days in the Academy (rather than the perpetuation of stereotypes Dreyer describes at the 1999 IAPT conference). As I note in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion*, "Sometimes when scholars use the term *practical theology* in international meetings and publications we think we are talking about the same enterprise when we are not."<sup>15</sup> Reflection on context also provokes a return to early sources, such as Dietrich Rossler and Gert Otto in Schweitzer or Clement Rogers in Ward (or Hiltner in my own case), and prevents us from reinventing the wheel. Practical theological interest in context makes global engagement all the more requisite, perhaps even a distinct disciplinary attribute. In my work on the *Companion*, I note how seldom other volumes in the series, such as the *Companions* to modern and postmodern theology, attend to world developments or include authors outside northern and western hemispheres.<sup>16</sup>

Practical theology as a discipline seems to be doing better in Britain and Germany than in the United States and better in all three countries than in Brazil and Latin America in general. In Germany, Schweitzer says, it "has become much more established and ... its status as a theological discipline of its own right is not contested anymore," although he qualifies this in his final conclusions about its contributions to empirical study of religion. In Britain, according to Ward, students in professional positions in the church or faith-based organizations flock to burgeoning postgraduate programs, often paying their way, because they desire a theological angle on their work that they cannot find elsewhere.

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<sup>15</sup> Miller-McLemore (n. 2), 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

The discipline's boundaries also seem more wide ranging in Britain and Germany than in the United States or Brazil. In Britain, practical theology has tapped "into a felt need" in Ward's words. Much of what Schweitzer describes as practical theology's "four tendencies" or emerging responsibilities in Germany are actually covered by other disciplines in the United States. Rarely do US practical theologians claim expertise on the individual as subject. Instead the "subject-oriented turn" is manifest in US pastoral theology.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile US sociologists of religion more than practical theologians attend to the "cultural turn" or "transformations of Christianity within contemporary culture." Comparative theologians and historians of religion study the "interreligious turn" or the growing "multireligious situations or landscapes." Finally, with a few notable exceptions,<sup>18</sup> few scholars show interest in studying what Schweitzer describes as "church development" besides sociologists and they seldom venture into the constructive theological work of "*practical theological ecclesiology*" (his emphasis) that Schweitzer says has "become a very lively field of its own."

Unfortunately Dreyer's comments on his context are minimal. His one- or two-sentence statements under each of his six disciplinary "dimensions" or "perspectives" (philosophical, anthropological, etc.) on practical theology in South Africa say little about how it is faring as a discipline. Nor does he mention what might be powerful influences on its development. I think, for example, of the history of South African practical theology as inextricably forged within the still binding ties of the Dutch Reformed Church or its strong connections with Dutch universities rather than other African universities (with the ease of flying between South Africa and the Netherlands rather than intra-continently in Africa paradigmatic). These influences were apparent when I attended the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa in January 2011. It was also clear that native African theologies and religions are exerting new pressures and that universities have changed radically in post-Apartheid years not only in terms of racial and ethnic make up but also in terms of economic assessment of academic work, making it

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**17** So US pastoral theology is actually less ecclesial or less church- and pastor-oriented than US practical theology and more focused on psychology and the individual. Hyper-anxiety about individualism has led some postliberal theologians, such as Stanley Hauerwas, to ridicule the pursuit of the "therapeutic," personal autonomy, and disciplines associated with such values.

**18** Movements in this direction include recent British-US interest in ecclesiology and ethnography (<http://ecclesiologyandethnography.wordpress.com/about/>), a relatively new academic association, The Academy of Religious Leadership (<http://www.arl-jrl.org/>), and ongoing developments in congregational studies centered at Hartford Institute for Religious Research ([http://hrr.hartsem.edu/cong/congregational\\_studies.html](http://hrr.hartsem.edu/cong/congregational_studies.html)).

harder for practical theology to justify itself. So, ironically, even as Dreyer calls for recognition of contextual diversity, he doesn't tell us much about the nuances and challenges of his own situation, thus giving his proposal a slightly ethereal flavor.

Although Osmer also doesn't comment on how his context colors his perceptions, I wonder whether his desire to give scripture a grander place and his argument for greater interdisciplinarity reflects Princeton's retention of a fairly strict fourfold division between areas of study.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, I have been immersed in interdisciplinary contexts and projects for a long time and this affects my thoughts.<sup>20</sup> My portrait of practical theology is significantly influenced by participation in the creation of a new Ph.D. curriculum in Theology and Practice at Vanderbilt that stresses interdisciplinarity as a key aim. Since 2006, our Graduate Department of Religion has admitted doctoral students across eight disciplinary areas in religion into a curriculum that hopes to cultivate through common course work patterns of collegial interchange from the beginning of doctoral study. So the "interdisciplinarity" (or Gräß's "intradisciplinarity") among practical, exegetical, historical, and dogmatic or systematic disciplines that both Osmer and Gräß stress has been a central part of my teaching and research for the past decade.

Streck's context is the most distinctive. Her remarks explain in part why the Academy has made minimal headway in Latin America. As study director of the Theology and HIV/AIDS Latin America project, she faces unique pressures *not* to refer to practical theology at all. The aversion partly comes from perceptions of practical theology as not really *theological* either because of its supposed oversight of the Bible or its equation with pastoral theology and its reduction to psychology. Such misperceptions are not surprising for at least three other reasons. First, *practical theology* is not a common term in a majority Catholic context. Despite twentieth-century Catholic advocates for the creation of a dis-

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<sup>19</sup> Had he wanted to locate himself, Osmer and Gordon Mikoski have a new book that elucidates the history of practical theology at Princeton, *With Piety and Learning. The History of Practical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary*, Berlin (Lit Verlag) 2012.

<sup>20</sup> My interdisciplinary involvements partly began with Don Browning's *Family, Culture, and Religion* project, structured around the model in Browning's *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*, Minneapolis (Augsburg Fortress) 1991) and continues through my participation in childhood studies and religion research, including consultation on Terence E. Fretheim and Beverly Roberts Gaventa, eds., *The Child in the Bible*, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 2008 and in the interdisciplinary Lilly consultation on practical theology that led to Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, eds., *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 2008. Part III of *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion on practical theology in the curriculum* also presumes interdisciplinary interchange between all disciplines in theological studies.

cipline, failure to institutionalize practical theology in the academic structures of Catholic doctoral education is even more acute in the southern than in the northern hemisphere.<sup>21</sup> And without institutional infrastructure, practical theology will languish.<sup>22</sup> *Pastoral theology* may have wider recognition but it refers to “praxis done in Christian communities,” not to an academic discipline. Second, liberation theology provides ample “common ground” where it is already “expected that when Latin American theologians write a text they usually refer to the social context.” Finally, similar to the United States lately, systematic theologians now “deal with practices” previously “considered pertinent to Practical Theology,” including scholars working in gender and feminist studies. Other nomenclature has arisen to depict these efforts, such as *theology of human action* or *public theology*.

Here Streck raises the most difficult question of all: Who needs practical theology anyway? Reading her remarks reminds northern hemisphere practical theologians that we swim in an incredibly small pond on at least three levels. First, the growing majority Christian world in the southern hemisphere has other priorities. She looks across the ocean in “South-South communication” on a similar HIV/AIDS project in Africa rather than the usual gravitation to the “northern episteme.” Second, not only is northern hemisphere Christianity in the minority but Schweitzer and Streck both remind us that Christianity is one of many religions. As already noted, programs in Latin America are now accredited as “Religious Sciences” rather than “Theology.” Third and shrinking the pond even further, religious studies itself is only a small part of contemporary universities. Earlier this month I watched as doctoral diplomas awarded in math, science, engineering, business, medicine etc. far outnumbered humanities and, even more, religion within the humanities. As Schweitzer implies, religious studies now has to prove itself in a market economy where its value seems excruciatingly questionable.

I’m grateful for our disciplinary scholarship but the “fundamental practical theology” that Don Browning envisioned as taking over is a small, even dimini-

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21 See Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Beyond Pastoral Theology: Why Catholics Should Embrace Practical Theology*, in: Wilhelm Gräb and Lars Charbonnier, eds., *Secularization Theories, Religious Identity and Practical Theology*, Zurich/Berlin (Lit Verlag), 2010, 392–397 and *Pastoral Theology or Practical Theology? Limits and Possibilities in Keeping the Faith in Practice: Aspects of Catholic Pastoral Theology*, eds. James Sweeney, Gemma Simmonds and David Lonsdale, London (SCM Press) 2010, 99–116.

22 The institutionalization of practical theology as an academic discipline matters. One reason why Richard Hays can ignore practical theology, as Osmer observes, is that he works in an institutional context of Duke Divinity School where it has had minimal disciplinary place.

shing, drop in the sprawling bucket of contemporary knowledge. My own religious formation occurred in a reform movement that emerged in US Protestantism during the Second Great Awakening. Today the movement that began as an effort to reunite all Christians around “no creed but Christ” has split two times and the liberal stream to which I belong risks dying out. But I sometimes think it has done its work—demanding reform around some basic gospel “truths”—and can now let go of its need for institutional survival. Perhaps there are analogies for practical theology. Has it done its work and can it now be reabsorbed back into other institutional structures or does it deserve a continued place?

## A Sixth Misunderstanding: Theory/Practice Stand in Binary Opposition

Before we call it quits, practical theologians have at least one more contribution to make on a sixth misunderstanding that the responses perpetuate—that *theory and practice stand in binary opposition*. Practical theologians wrestle with theory and practice more than other theological studies scholars and well we should. It is among the “plurality of tasks,” to use Schweitzer’s words, that falls to us. I encourage us to get on with this work. Practical theology as a discipline could stand to do more conceptual labor on the nature of both theory and practice. This has been on my mind since Osmer asked a tough question in the plenary about my understanding of theory. As he shows in his response, some attention has gone to different uses of practice.<sup>23</sup> Insufficient attention has gone to the role and function of theory.

Confusion about theory and practice abounds in the responses: On one hand, Ward worries that practical theologians have an unfortunate “predilection toward the discussion of practice in abstract terms,” a problem he says tainted the conference. Although my remarks “stood out” because of my attention to the ecclesial and theological, he still thinks I am “overly theoretical” and not focused sufficiently on “the particular and the lived.” Schweitzer, on the other hand, values my address because it is “quite ‘intellectual.’” For him, in contrast to Ward,

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<sup>23</sup> Osmer says people use “different understandings of practice” but he might have been even more specific, defining explicitly how the parties he mentions use the term. For an example, see Ted Smith, “Teaching History in a Practical Class,” *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 2008, 217. See also, Dorothy C. Bass, “Introduction,” in Miroslav Volf and Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 2002, 5–6.

the discipline is “not ... theoretical enough.” Since I’m invariably a both/and thinker, someone who mediates polarities (perhaps inevitable as a middle child between two brothers), I’m not surprised to receive opposite reactions. It probably means I’m doing something right. However, Dreyer’s erroneous portrait of my position tells me that I have not been clear enough. His twofold caricature—that I frame “academic theology as the problem” and that I want to impose this on everyone as the normative model—is unfortunate because his argument stands well enough on its own without setting me up as a straw man.

On the relationship of theory and practice, Schweitzer has the better grasp of my intent. To Ward, I would say there is a time and place for abstraction, intellectual conceptualization, even distance from lived religious practice, and, for me at least, academic conferences are a primary place. Before flying overseas for this conference, I gave a rendition of my presidential remarks at a biannual denominational assembly luncheon.<sup>24</sup> There I led with the particular, even as I covered some of the same ideas. Many scholars make such choices but these deliberations may be especially characteristic of practical theologians. I really appreciate Osmer’s reminder that theological “genres” change over time, from catechetical oration to the *disputatio* of medieval universities to Reformation catechisms to the relatively recent advent of modern theology as a genre devoted to doctrine. Not only do we need to become “clearer” about genres distinctive to practical theology, as Osmer contends, I imagine Dreyer, Schweitzer, and Gräß might want to add to Osmer’s list (e.g., “empirical studies of lived religion”). I also think we should continue to consider new genres that disturb conventional assumptions about theology and enliven ways of sharing research during conferences and otherwise.

There are two places, however, where Schweitzer slightly misreads me. He wonders whether my critique of theological “intellectualism” panders to common ridicule of useless ivory tower academics, inviting a return to “emotional aspects or practical experience” as sufficient alone. Second, he suggests that I seek to “identify practical theology ... as a whole with a case-study approach.” Let me start with the latter because Dreyer also believes I trade case study for survey and collapse practical theology into this approach. Addressing this misunderstanding will lead to a response to the first.

I use Bent Flyvbjerg’s defense of case study not to defend or prioritize case study but to mount a different argument about the nature of knowledge itself.

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<sup>24</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Academic Theology and Disciple Dissent*, *The Disciples Divinity House Bulletin* vol. 81, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 11–14. Almost all my writing mixes to some extent abstract/theory (e.g., references to published scholarship) and concrete/practice (e.g., personal story).

That is, I challenge the assumption, to use Flyvbjerg's words, that "general, theoretical (context-independent) *knowledge* is more valuable than practical (context-dependent) *knowledge*."<sup>25</sup> Rather than setting up an "opposition between the theoretical and the practical" in Schweitzer's words, I'm contrasting two different kinds of knowledge (among others), both of which have value and involve theory to some extent. In other words, this is not a zero sum game in which theory and practice stand in inverse and mutually exclusive relationship. It is possible to increase appreciation for practical knowledge without decreasing the value of theoretical knowledge. So, rather than "replacing" or challenging the "priority of theory," I'm trying to complexify the nature of knowledge. I examine theory's limitations not to overthrow it but to remind us of its relative stature. Problems arise when theory is narrowly defined as only what is known through analytical rationality. In addition, as sociologist Pierre Bourdieu suggests in Flyvbjerg's words, "something essential may be lost" through the summarizing or generalization required by theory.<sup>26</sup> The "order of human affairs," as Aristotle recognizes, does not lend itself easily to systematization.<sup>27</sup>

So, by "cognitive captivity of theology" I do not mean the usual complaint about the irrelevance of academic theology or theory. I mean something more focused: academic theology's distance from practice as a source of knowledge. Theology tends to get stuck in ideation removed from lived knowledge (e.g., about the nature of God). And theology is often equated with an activity performed by academic elites and not by Gräb's "man in the street" who reads the Dalai Lama's advice column in the *Bild-Zeitung*. This "man" is often seen by academicians as incapable of performing theology even though it seems evident that some kind of theologizing is going on.

These comments should address Dreyer's concerns. But unfortunately he doesn't just misread me; he miscasts my position in two ways—for my "anti-theoretical bias" and my desire to inflict this view as normative. He says I foster a division—"either *phronesis* or *episteme*"—that I have worked hard to disrupt in all my work. In my plenary I criticize the dualism between theory and practice (that Dreyer resurrects and attributes to me) by extending Tom Groome's useful idea that practical theology is interested in the "inextricable interconnections" or non-hierarchical fluid "holistic interrelationship" between at least *three* (not two)

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<sup>25</sup> Bent Flyvbjerg, "Five Misunderstandings about Case-Study Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (April 2006): 221, emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup> Flyvbjerg, "Five Misunderstandings," 239. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge (Cambridge Press) 1977, 8, 15.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, Evanston, Illinois (Northwestern University Press) 1991, 199.



kinds of knowledge—*phronesis*, *episteme*, and *techne*. *Techne* adds a third unwieldy element that disrupts the polarity between *episteme* and *phronesis*. I have argued for *techne*'s place in an enriched portrait of knowledge in other writings.<sup>28</sup> It is worth wondering why Dreyer says nothing about *techne* or *poiesis*, given their unavoidable role in religious life and leadership as craft, practice, activity, creation, profession, performance, and so forth.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the absence of comment reflects the distance of his teaching context from such concerns?

As I argue elsewhere and I think Dreyer and I agree, academic theology is a “material social practice among others,” in Tanner’s words, on a “continuum with theological activity elsewhere as something that arises in an ‘organic’ way out of Christian practice,” and not a “purely intellectual activity.”<sup>30</sup> I am not trying to “turn the tables” on academic theology therefore. To the contrary, in my introduction to *Christian Theology in Practice* I use James Nieman’s words to argue that,

[T]he effort to redefine theology and the discovery of practical theology is not a “ruse for turning the tables,”... imposing a “new hierarchy” with practical, pastoral, congregational, or some other form of theology “at the peak.” Rather it is an attempt to locate power at a variety of junctures in the life of Christian faith. Since theology “always occurs locally,” as Nieman argues, the “challenge is to define theology broadly and flexibly enough to be recognizable across different times and places as well as various expressions of the church.”<sup>31</sup>

My affirmation of a kind of democratization of power in the study of religion and theology should also help rectify Dreyer’s second misportrayal—that I’m attempting to impose a “*phronetic*” approach as *the* unifying disciplinary framework. To the contrary, my plenary maintains that practical theology is “multivalent” (*not* simply defined), a discipline with “loaded and overlapping meanings [that] appears in a broad array of spaces and places.” I warn against “abbreviated

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**28** See, Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice*, chapters 7 and 8. These chapters were previously published as “The ‘Clerical Paradigm,’” and “Practical Theology and Pedagogy: Embodying Theological Know-How,” in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, eds. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 170–190.

**29** See Heather Walton, “Poetics,” in Miller-McLemore, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, London (Wiley/Blackwell), 2012, 173–182.

**30** Tanner (n. 5), 71, 72.

**31** James Nieman, *Theology in the Sermon*, in: *New Interpreter’s Bible Handbook Preaching*, gen. ed. Paul Scott Wilson, Nashville (Abingdon) 2008, 491 and *Attending Locally: Theologies in Congregations*, *International Journal of Practical Theology* 6/2 (Fall 2002), 202, cited in Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice*, 4.

mantras commonly used by scholars lately to define the discipline,” such as the study of the “relationship between beliefs and practices” that while “valid snapshots ... leave much unsaid” about the diverse pursuits and attributes within the discipline. Commitment to disciplinary pluralism also shaped the editorial decisions behind a volume that Dreyer himself holds up as an example of “diversity within the discipline”—*The Wiley-Blackwell Companion*. Elsewhere I criticize Edward Farley’s nostalgia for theology as “one thing” in his influential *Theologia*. For Farley, “specialization equals fragmentation,”<sup>32</sup> whereas in my view, “what is needed instead is a clearer definition of the diverse kinds of theological engagement and their connection.” I argue for “theology as ‘many’ rather than ‘one thing,’” underscoring the “different ways of doing theology demanded by different contexts.”<sup>33</sup> Finally, I share reservations about disciplinary introductions and overviews that tend to reduce the discipline to one model, such as Browning’s own *Fundamental Practical Theology* (despite its influence) and Osmer’s more recent *Practical Theology: An Introduction*.

Given the realities of postmodernity, seeking any kind of unitary position seems dim-witted at best, delusionary at worst. Nor am I a libertarian pluralist who cares only about my own specialized interests in religion, psychology, and culture, although I have plenty of colleagues who do not see why I have spent any time at all on practical theology. I’m sorely tempted to follow them and cannot help but see my efforts to build wider disciplinary coherence, such as service as IAPT president or editor of *The Companion*, as something I’ve done for a limited time on my way back to what I’d really like to be doing.<sup>34</sup> But leadership in a doctoral program has forced me to consider the comprehensive infrastructure of the study of theology. This doesn’t mean, however, that I am arguing for *phronetic* practical theology as the gold standard. To state my intent again and to correct the sixth misunderstanding that practice opposes theory and case study triumphs over survey: *I argue for a richer understanding of diverse kinds of knowing and their complex interrelationship, especially when the subject matter is religion, theology, and practices of religious life and communities.*

In short, I agree with Dreyer’s “dialogical pluralist approach to intra-disciplinary diversity in practical theology” and I appreciate the clarity with which he develops this position. He pursues just the kind of scholarship I’m glad my paper provoked—research on disciplinary construction that can help us conceptualize

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Edward Farley, *Theologia. The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*, Philadelphia (Fortress) 1983, 54 or 141–146.

<sup>33</sup> Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice*, 183–184.

<sup>34</sup> I’ve been glad to labor for the discipline, I’ve been in a good position to do this work, but I still don’t consider it my favorite work.

developments in practical theology. And he offers an extremely useful distinction between unitary, pluralist, and dialogic pluralist responses to disciplinary diversity. Dialogic pluralism is a wonderfully helpful proposal.

What I find unhelpful and unnecessary is Dreyer's rhetoric—he creates a parody of my paper to better portray his own position, imagining antagonisms that are not there. This seems like an adversarial step that he doesn't need to take, especially if he wants dialogue (“truly listening” to “each other”) that includes those, such as Ward, who locate practical theology in the Church. When he asks rhetorically, “Do we have to ‘overcome’ the ‘legacy of the academic paradigm?’” he puts “overcome” in quotations as if this was *my* word. But *overcome* is his word, not mine (modify, yes; overcome and defeat, no). Nor do I present the problem as a choice between “either *phronesis* or *episteme*” or make a case for a “*phronetic* practical theology” or “*phronetic* approach”—again Dreyer's phrases, not mine. My only use of the term “*phronetic*” is in critique of Bernard Lee's term “phronetic theology,” which Lee creates in a regrettable move to eschew the term *practical theology* and its standing as a discipline.

In actuality, our views on disciplinary diversity are far closer than Dreyer suggests. It is hard to disagree with what Schweitzer states most clearly, “practical theology needs a plurality of methodological approaches.” I support this plurality. In my reclamation of practical knowing and the place of Christian theology, I do not make “*phronesis* ... the only appropriate knowledge goal” or disallow “room for other approaches.” These are misrepresentations in a win-lose battle of Dreyer's own making, something I thought he wished to avoid. Once again, I have to ask whether my remarks evoked this response because of his own context. Does he find himself in a situation where “a constant war” between practical and academic paradigms persists? My own context is closer to the one Osmer portrays where diverse “strands” are operative. Whatever the case, “divide and conquer” is a colonizing strategy the British used to subdue the colonized. Practical theologians should try to avoid pressures toward division. I don't think it helps to fight one another when more serious adversaries lie elsewhere.

Schweitzer and I agree, I think, that what is needed is something more along the lines of theories that include the “emotional dimension” or practical philosophies akin to US pragmatism combining sophisticated reasoning and practical accountability, theories that are “close to practice” *and* scientific (rather than Dreyer's portrait of the “American approach” as “close to practice and less scientific”). No discipline exists without the creation of theories, although theological studies as a whole tends to borrow theories from disciplines as far afield as philosophy, neurology, and organizational science to understand its primary subject matters of sacred text, tradition, ultimate reality, and lived faith. As Schweitzer indicates, practical theologians must produce theory or suffer intellec-

tual demise in terms of funding and otherwise. This is one reason why I have admired Dreyer's own research so much. If our discipline is to survive, we must sharpen reasoning and argument at every level. I tire of reading doctoral and grant applications or letters for promotion to tenure that focus on personal anecdote and not on the development and debate of scholarly ideas and traditions.

At the same time, practical theology has a unique task among theological disciplines: its theories must be "of use." Here Ward and I agree: theory is not an end in itself. As he concludes, the wider concern lies with the value of "the lived." Attending to the lived is not an easy task. Streck's response comes the closest to elucidating the challenge not just for practical theologians but also for colleagues across theological studies. "Something different is going on" when faculty in four Latin American schools must think about what their scholarly expertise in bible or philosophical theology has to do with a live issue. It is no surprise that "not all teachers were so pleased that they had to introduce the subject [of HIV/AIDS] in their well planned classes" or respond to students who demanded that they think in genuinely practical theological terms. Thus, the same faculty who ask us conceptual questions about "what is theological about X?" have their own troubles of a practical sort.

This response has grown longer than I intended, surely enough conceptual heavy lifting to compensate for the subjective confession about my Van Gogh museum experience with which I began. However, I think any audience—academic or lay—will get more out of intellectual efforts if they are grounded, particularized, and transparent to specifics in one's own life. This is a practical theology commitment that shapes my writing and teaching but need not dictate how other theologians approach their work. Ultimately, I want to end where I began my presidential address—with a note of gratitude. I am grateful for the opportunity to enter into dialogue with colleagues and engage a variety of ideas more deeply. Schweitzer reminds us that the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Academy and so an appropriate and good time to for reflection on progress and growing edges.



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