

Wilhelm Gräß

Practical Theology as a Theory of Lived Religion Conceptualizing Church Leadership

Abstract: An empirically based PT contributes to professional religious praxis within the church a conception of the communication of Christian faith as meaningful for people's intrinsically religious concerns and their search for meaning within their everyday lives. To this end, practical theology employs a general, formal-functional understanding of religion and the methods of empirical social research. Its practical aim focuses on the fluid development of compatible communications between, on the one hand, contemporary forms of religious expression, in all their hybridity and ambiguity, and, on the other hand, received forms of Christian expressions and symbols. As an analysis of the former, it is a theology of *religion in culture*; as a revitalization of the latter, it is a theology of *culture in religion*.

Zusammenfassung: Der Beitrag entfaltet die Praktische Theologie als empirisch fundierte Theorie gelebter Religion. Als solche gehört es zu ihren Aufgaben, innerhalb der Kirche einen Beitrag zur professionellen Konzeptualisierung der Kommunikation des christlichen Glaubens zu leisten. Die Praktische Theologie verwendet dazu einen funktionalen Religionsbegriff, der implizite Formen religiöser Sinndeutung mit einschließt. Auf diese Weise zielen ihre Absichten auf die Entwicklung von vermittelnden Kommunikationsformen zwischen überlieferten christlichen Traditionen und Symbolen einerseits, und zeitgenössischen Formen religiösen Selbstausdrucks andererseits.

DOI 10.1515/ijpt-2014-0008

1 Who is doing Practical Theology?

Practical theology (PT) is an academic discipline. Not simply a term intended to signify theology for lay Christians, practical theology is a discipline which academically educated theologians, acting as professional religious agents, like ministers or religious educators, undertake as a way of conceptualizing their praxis of

Prof. Dr. Wilhelm Gräß: Lehrstuhl für Praktische Theologie, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Unter den Linden 6, 10099 Berlin, Germany and Extraordinary Prof. at Stellenbosch University, Practical Theology and Missiology, Dorp Street 171, 7600 Stellenbosch, RSA, Email: wilhelm.graeb@theologie.hu-berlin.de

church leadership. And this, particularly with regard to communicating the Christian faith: preaching, religious education, pastoral care and all other practices of religious communication.

2 What is the purpose of Practical Theology?

The purpose of PT is to facilitate organization and leadership within the Christian church and its congregations and communities. Put another way, PT is the conceptualization of professional religious communication. Religious communication is only professional if it has the capacity not only to communicate a religion itself but also to communicate about religion. In doing so, professional religious communicators think about the ideal conditions under which their communication will be successful. They reflect on methods of the professional communicative praxis, concepts of leadership, preaching, worship, pastoral care and counseling, religious education and so on.

The challenge of church leadership today consists in the processes of constant transformation in which the church finds itself. The church is not the only location for religious communication anymore. Many people realize their religious needs and interest, and take care of it by themselves. Thus, the challenge for church leaders is to support this religious self-exploration.

Competent church leadership, which is to say, professional religious communication has to consider the church as a community in which the religious consciousness circulates. Church needs to see itself as a service provider of religion for humanity. It cannot act any more like an *authoritarian oversight board* which evaluates from above. The church has to help people who are seeking meaning in their lives to reflect critically on their religious orientations and their resulting attitudes towards life, even if such seekers act quite self-confidently. Competence in professional religious communication, for which practical theology is responsible, therefore means that church leaders assume a certain religious responsiveness for all people, even those who are atheist or without denomination.

So-called “atheists” talk about God frequently. A sign of their deep concern for concrete religious questions is their interest in questions like whether there is a “whole” to life, whether such a whole makes any sense, and whether it has concrete meaning in their lives. Religion is not belief in God. Religion is our human “sense and taste for the infinite”, as Schleiermacher recognized correctly.¹

¹ Cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion. Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (1799), ed. By Rudolf Otto, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht) 1967, 53; cf. Wilhelm

Today the church should present itself in public space, first, as a community of religious interpretation.² Second, it should present itself as a place for religious education and for critical communication about matters of belief. Third, and last but not least, it should construct attractive religious-aesthetic models for the world's people to live in. Therefore church leaders have to a) communicate in an interactive way, b) communicate the meanings which religion finds in life, c) acknowledge and advocate for individual's religious autonomy and ability to judge and d) maintain and expand religious-aesthetic worlds of experience in church buildings and liturgy.

Church leadership needs exactly those four skills, and therefore practical theology's purpose is determined by them. Practical theology's task to equip church leadership with those skills can be characterized as follows:

2.1 Church leaders have to communicate in an interactive way

The time in which church spokesmen communicated like medieval heralds proclaiming their news in front of an astonished audience has passed. "Generation Facebook" likes to *join* the discussions. People of this generation wish to declare their own opinions and to make their own topics subject of controversial debate. The important demand, made by Berlin Theologian Ernst Lange in the 1960s³, must now be reconsidered and reissued: The Gospel cannot be simply proclaimed, it has to be *communicated* by taking the challenges of the audience's situation into account. Further, it must be stressed that mediation of the church's traditional belief-content depends both on that belief-content being relevant in people's lives (and consequently in politics and society) and on the people themselves recognizing such relevance through their own insight and experience.

Church leaders have to address political and social topics that make sense, like the ecumenical movement did so successfully in the 1980s with their aims

Gräß, Schleiermacher's Conception of Theology and Account of Religion as a Constitutive Element of Human Culture, in: Wilhelm Gräß / Brent Sockness (eds.), Schleiermacher, the Study of Religion and the Future of Theology. A Transatlantic Dialog, Berlin / New York (de Gruyter) 2010, 335–348.

² Cf. Wilhelm Gräß, The Transformation of Religious Culture within Modern Societies. From Secularization to Post secularism, in: Arie L. Molendijk / Justin Beaumont / Christoph Jedan (eds.), Exploring the Postsecular. The Religious, the Political and the Urban, Leiden / Boston (Brill) 2010, 113–131.

³ Cf. Ernst Lange, Zur Theorie und Praxis der Predigtarbeit, in: Rüdiger Schloz (ed.), Ernst Lange. Predigen als Beruf. Aufsätze, Stuttgart / Berlin (Kreuz Verlag) 1976, 9–51.

“peace, justice and integrity of creation”. What are those topics today? Maybe they are the same. But they require a new profile, which is more “up to date”. Attention must be given to issues like globalization, the global financial crisis or the threat to peace by political-religious fundamentalism. All who speak in the name of the church should do it in a way that provokes controversy. For this inspires confrontation with the subject or issue of belief without concealing religious contexts or, oppositely, proclaiming an absolute given truth. Church leaders would be well advised to admit that for difficult ethical questions often no final answers can be found. Questions remain open, and one has to compromise – even in the perspectives of church and religious convictions. It is more important that church leaders become trustees for religion in open discourse. For instance, they have to call attention to religion where it is not seen at all. They have to point to the important role of belief and faith in scientific and economic sectors and to the frequent abuse of belief and faith in those arenas.

Church leaders should speak for a public social institution, without formulating “the” church’s position from a higher perspective. Public-ness today requires opportunities for participation for everybody. It would be completely inappropriate if the church claimed a certain “status confessionis” and on this basis denied the compatibility of differing concepts with Christian faith when it comes to questions concerning, for example, western military activity in Afghanistan, pre-implantation genetic diagnosis, active euthanasia, bank secrecy or global capitalism.

The index of competence that is the measure for practical theology and church leadership is the ability to answer the following question: How can we raise issues and take positions on religious questions in a distinctive way which is at the same time open to different opinions and inviting discussion?

2.2 Church leaders have to communicate religious meaning in a way that is attentive to individual experience and participation

Answers to questions concerning one’s self-identity or self-understanding that then guide one’s behavior are no longer provided externally, institutionally and in a pre-prepared way. Individual identity has to be worked out and negotiated again and again by the individual. Individual identity is not intrinsic but, rather, has to be acquired.

What does this work on a personal, separate identity look like? Each person must construct a self-understanding that brings one’s own behavior into correspondence with one’s experiences and resulting expectations of what is impor-

tant in life and what gives life meaningful content. Work on identity is an exercise in self-interpretation. It is work on a self-concept that produces harmony and reliability for one's expectations and behavior.

Professional religious communication today has to support this kind of work on self-interpretation.⁴ It will show its relevance in this way for people asking serious questions about the coordination of meaning and action in their individual lives. In other words, church leaders need to recognize that self-interpretation is not simply self-obsession but a religious exploration of meaning. In preaching, teaching and pastoral care, leaders need to make comprehensible what the acceptance of the biblical message means for individual self-understanding. Furthermore, they have to clarify how the Christian-religious self-understanding differs from other present forms of human self-awareness or, rather, how it can be communicated by those other forms.⁵

Individuals act in a sovereign way in the communication of belief. They decide for themselves whether and which religious self-interpretations presented in the church's communication of the gospel they want to accept as an element of their self-interpretation. As an empirical reality, church leaders play a smaller and smaller role in advising people today on what they must believe and how they must practice that belief. As a practical strategy, the task for church leadership should be to accompany and assist people in the process of understanding the ways experiences and actions interact to form meanings and beliefs, and how the subsequent implementation of beliefs contributes to one's identity.

2.3 Church leaders have to acknowledge and demand the individual's religious autonomy and ability to judge

People increasingly consider themselves capable and permitted to decide which religious views and forms suit them best. Often this use of religious freedom is regarded critically as a tendency toward patchwork religion or rather towards esoteric arbitrariness. But the formation of hybrid forms of religious belief goes hand in hand with the increase in individual autonomy in the modern period. People form their own opinions when it comes to religion, that is, when it comes

⁴ Cf. Wilhelm Gräb, *Religion als Deutung des Lebens*, Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus) 2006.

⁵ Cf. Wilhelm Gräb, *Predigtlehre. Über religiöse Rede*, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht) 2013.

to the formation of identity and of questions and answers concerning the meaning of life.⁶

With the opportunities offered by interactive media, people are able to take an active part in religious communication of their personal beliefs and interpretations of meaning in life in a sovereign way and without institutional links. In doing so, they often distance themselves from the church's guidelines. And, questions of correctness of belief aside, the language used by the church for the terms and conditions of belief is simply incomprehensible for many people. Church leaders do not respect people's sovereign, self-developing belief enough. Moreover, they do not listen enough to people and consequently do not respond in sensible, sensitive ways to people's self-developed religious views in their preaching and interpretation of tradition. Instead of looking at the religious feelings and opinions, and instead of carrying on and intensifying discussion with the church's tradition, people often feel misunderstood. The Christian message is not revealed to them in a way that means something for them and their lives.

To understand the lived religion of ordinary people is therefore the most important challenge of a practical theology qualifying for church leadership today.

2.4 Church leaders have to maintain and expand a religiously-aesthetically experienced world in church spaces and liturgies

What inspires and provokes in people the important questions concerning meaning in life and in turn the ways people take part in the public communication of belief depends to a significant extent on aesthetic preferences. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the ways we imagine church spaces and the liturgies we perform for the church's communication in the public sphere. Church meeting spaces and the liturgies celebrated in them render Christianity's religious interpretation of culture and culture of interpretation visible. These become visible, audible and tangible so that people's feelings and emotions are addressed directly and personally.

The architecture of church meeting space provokes a certain atmosphere. People are sensitized for deeper feeling, for examining their self-understandings and thereby for an encounter with God, the divine reason of their being. The performance of a grand oration, but just as well a techno party, in a time-honored

⁶ Cf. Wilhelm Gräß, *Sinnfragen. Transformationen des Religiösen in der modernen Kultur*, Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus) 2006.

church may create an atmosphere where people become intensely aware of the vitality of a sense of deep hope and trust within them. As a result, they might interpret the experience in a religious dimension as a divine gift of life.⁷

When people are engaged physically and sensually, and when they feel involved in a meaningful way in the church's affairs, the church presents itself as a public place facilitating a culture of religious interpretation. Church affairs then can be understood as a church service-worshipping community. The larger and the more vivid this community is, the higher the quality of experience in the service. But the church's affairs can be realized as well in an empty, aesthetically appealing and emotionally upbuilding church-space. It can be realized by hearing Bach's St. Matthew's Passion, even if most of the listening people are not concerned with the performed Passion's theology. The work of Christian religious interpretation can be continued as well in church buildings in which, alongside the presence of Christian symbols but without the presence of words, techno parties are celebrated.

What is crucial for religion happens at the subjective site of the individual, not in a spatial location. Religious experience consists in the work of self-interpretation through the construction out of experience. And in such experiences of religion, there is the promise of God's presence. Church leadership and professional religious communication are needed more than ever to offer assistance in such an encounter with God. Thereby, they contribute to the realization of the church's purpose. Then the church becomes a service-church for others, a venue for people to participate in the religious reality encountered in the course of life in a self-aware and self-critical way.

3 What is the praxis of Practical Theology?

It is important to differentiate between the professional religious praxis of educated religious agents and the praxis of lived religion. At the same time, PT provides a dynamic interface between these two. PT conceptualizes professional religious praxis in order to stimulate and to perform but also to criticize the praxis of lived religion. In the end, the praxis of PT is the formation of lived religion through engagement with the challenges of religious lives. It is the obligation of the professional religious agents whom PT serves to help people acquire a clearer

7 Cf. Jerome Cottin / Wilhelm Gräb (eds.), *Imaginationen der inneren Welt. Theologische, psychologische und ästhetische Reflexionen zur spirituellen Dimension der Kunst (Religion Ästhetik Medien Bd. 3)*, Frankfurt am Main (Peter Lang Verlag) 2012.

self-understanding of their religious attitudes, of their understanding of the Christian faith and of its relationship to other religions. In conceptualizing the praxis of the professional religious agent, PT has to know a lot about the empirical reality of lived religion within contemporary society.

What is meant by lived religion? There are a lot of misunderstandings in the practical theological debate about this term. Lived religion does not refer primarily to forms of belonging to a Christian community or to the church. Lived religion is a sense of the religious dimension of the human life.⁸

As far as PT understands itself as a PT of lived religion it has to develop a clear definition of the term “religion”: Religion is not merely something for people in church or another religious community. Religion is a human endeavor. Religion is a constitutive dimension of humankind. Religion in this sense should not be confused with the positive religions but, rather, belongs to the “*conditio humana*”. Positive religions are specific symbolic-ritual elaborations of people’s religious existence.

One could argue that an understanding of religion as a constitutive dimension of human life might appear unusual. But a fundamentally human religious reality, different from the narrower range defined by religious studies or sociology, appears through the understanding of practical theology I am outlining.

First, “religion” is of culturally and historically invariant importance. It is that dimension of human life that distinguishes the human from other forms of life. A high degree of self-awareness distinguishes human life from other forms of life. People want to understand why they live in this world and what life is all about. This search for meaning of the world “as a whole” and thereby for the importance of one’s own life “as a whole”, is religion. Religion, understood in this way, is a human self- and world-relation. *Concerning the dimension of the religious*, the *religious* is definitely not to be essentially linked to God. It does not include doctrines.⁹ Nor does it consist of certain symbols or rituals. The *religious* is openness, admitting that experienced reality cannot be equated with existence. All real things, whether they are encountered in everyday life or as a subject of scientific research, are related to certain references of meaning. It is in this move-

⁸ Cf. Wilhelm Gräb, Religion als humane Selbstdeutungskultur. Schleiermachers Konzeption einer modernen Glaubenslehre und Glaubenspredigt, in: Wilhelm Gräb / Notger Slenczka (eds.), Universität Theologie Kirche. Deutungsangebote zum Verhältnis von Kultur und Religion im Gespräch mit Schleiermacher, Leipzig (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt), 2011, 241–256.

⁹ Cf. Wilhelm Gräb, Die Lehre der Kirche und die Symbolsprachen der gelebten Religion, in: Ulrich Barth / Christian Danz / Wilhelm Gräb / Friedrich Wilhelm Graf (eds.), Aufgeklärte Religion und ihre Probleme. Schleiermacher Troeltsch Tillich (Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann 165), Berlin / Boston (de Gruyter) 2013, 137–154.

ment of referral that the different scientific disciplines – both the so-called natural and human sciences – emerge. The difference between these two scientific spheres consists of their different references of meanings concerning their relation to us as human beings. The natural sciences research reality without particular reference to the existential significance for human life of the conclusions reached. The human or cultural sciences explore reality with that existential referent fully in view as they seek to understand human beings in our various modes of searching for meaning in life.

Taken by itself, no particular framework of meaning through which we experience reality or simply which we study is necessarily religious. Rather, what is religious is the infinite, never objectively or comprehensively given context in which each individual framework of meaning obtains an ultimate significance. A religious person – that is, someone who develops a sense of religion – realizes that it is only if it is possible that all things do, ultimately, make sense, even if we ourselves do not understand how, that we can have any faith that our own acts are meaningful. *Trust in meaning, is what we may call the “religious” in relating to ourselves as humanity and to the world.*

Of course, religion that stands for an anthropological *dimension of the religious* can be found in religious denominations and is lived within them by being a member of one of them. But the religious itself should not be identified with religious groups. This religion is potentially available in each intentional human life. Lived religion is given in life more or less explicitly. As historic-cultural phenomena, religions are extremely ambivalent realizations of the religious. Their anthropological achievement is that they established a structure among human cohabitation and that they made humans sensitive to meaning in life. They supported moral criteria for good life and created ideals for social justice.¹⁰

All strong values, giving individual and social life a normative structure, giving them meaning and a moral quality, are founded in religiously sanctioned statutes or divine revelations. The formation of modern democracy finally produced a separation of jurisdiction and discourses of justice from religious justification and sanctions. But from that does not follow that moral and legal norms have lost all dimensions of *the religious*. In situations of cultural and social upheaval, the need for justification of law and morality, both of which address meaning and welfare, grows. Fundamentalist religious movements document the religious ambition for security, when they justify law and justice by religion and

¹⁰ Cf. Wilhelm Gräb, Religion und Glaube / Spiritualität, in: Kristin Merle (ed.), Kulturwelten. Zum Problem des Fremdverstehens in der Seelsorge (Studien zu Religion und Kultur 3), Berlin (LIT) 2013, 35–54.

thereby insert absolute normative order into society. By instrumentalizing religion for political purposes, they reject, and thus cancel, religion's inexhaustible and excessive nature. Religious denominations, too, still foster a sense of the religious. At the same time, they are able to neglect the dimension of the religious. This happens when they equivocate their view of God's will for the world with, indeed, God's will for the world – even though God is seen as highest existing being. Then religion turns God into a highest principle of world explication and an authority administrating world order but, in effect, subject to humans. It transgresses God's sovereignty, and God becomes a finite greatness instead of a provider of infinite freedom of choice for human beings.

For *the religious* to be a process and practice of meaning is not for it to explain the world or to give the world certain regulating principles. The point of religion is to set us human beings into a relation to an inexhaustible and excessive meaning of world and life “as a whole”. As a consequence, religion consists of people understanding themselves and their relation to the world “as a whole”, though as such this is never actively given to them. People remain searching for the purpose of the world “as a whole”, for meaning in life. They long for ways to bear unbearable suffering and to overcome a situation in which law and justice remain illusions. All of these searching attempts are instances of people living their religion.

PT as “practical theology of lived religion” has to do research about empirical forms of lived religion.¹¹ It has to find out how and where religion as the search for the meaning of life is lived today inside and outside religious communities, inside and outside the church or other established religions. PT has to ask where people have experiences of deeper meaning, religious experiences that become sacred moments of ultimate concern for them in their everyday life. PT has to do research about new forms of sensibility to the spiritual dimensions of life communicated via social media and other forms of popular culture like movies, arts and popular music. To investigate the broad field of hybrid forms of religion but also of transformations of the churches and Christian communities and of the spread of other traditional religions, PT has to do empirical research and it has to cooperate with Religious and Cultural Studies.

It should be obvious that PT cannot do empirical research about the empirical reality of lived religion without a theory of religion, an elaborated notion of the term “religion”, the relationship between the singular term “religion” and the different religions. PT needs a theoretical framework to discuss the relationship

11 Cf. Birgit Weyel / Wilhelm Gräß / Hans Günter Heimbrock (eds.), *Praktische Theologie und empirische Religionsforschung*, Leipzig (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt) 2013.

between religion as a constitutive anthropological dimension and culture as the field of the realization of the other dimensions of humankind, between established religions and popular religions, between indigenous knowledge systems and religious doctrines and rituals. Everything that religious and cultural studies are concerned with should also become part of PT – as far as PT becomes a theory of lived religion. Normative aspects will subsequently enter the debate not only from the theological side but also from the theory of religion and its critical concept of the role of religion within society.

4 Which concept of professional religious praxis does Practical Theology construct, based on empirical research of lived religion?

Practical theology, working with an empirically based critical hermeneutics of religion, enables a religious interpretation even of so-called “secular” culture. This does not mean that it takes leave of the church or the Christian communities. Rather, it points out ways for the church and Christian communities to adapt their practice to the changed culture of religion in society.

In view of the blurring of the boundaries between traditional religion and culturally fluid religion, the most important challenge of an empirically founded practical-theological theory of religion is to interpret religious meaning in ordinary forms of communication. Through empirical research, practical theology considers whether symbols in media or in ordinary, everyday communication could be and should be interpreted as religious: sometimes exactly this interpretation makes the most sense of those communications, decoding more of their meanings than other interpretations. This work of interpretation is operating in a religious capacity.¹²

Another key question of religious communication in Christian communities and therefore of the professional religious agents is an interpretation of traditional topics of the Christian faith in a way that is meaningful in light of the theory of religion here under consideration. This task calls practical theology to foster an atmosphere that encourages individual interpretation of Christian faith and translation of faith into localized cultural and linguistic discourses.

¹² Cf. Wilhelm Gräb, *Sinn fürs Unendliche. Religion in der Mediengesellschaft*, Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus) 2002.