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Christiaan A. M. Hermans

From Practical Theology to Practice-oriented Theology

The study of lived spirituality and lived religion in late modernity

Abstract: The article claims that PT needs to change as a discipline in three directions. First, we cannot longer lump every person in our category of religion based on the normative conceptions of our own (Christian) religion. We need criteria to distinguish between normal experiences, spiritual experience and religious experience. Secondly, the process of opening up the material object of PT has decentred the (all-knowing) theological scholar who builds theory on lived spirituality and / or religion. Thirdly, we need to develop a new form of methodology to build theory on practical reasoning, namely practice-oriented methodology.

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Beitrag fordert eine Entwicklung der Praktischen Theologie als wissenschaftlicher Disziplin in drei Hinsichten. Erstens kann die Praktische Theologie nicht länger alle Formen menschlicher Bedeutungskonstruktionen normativ als „Religion“ benennen. Zweitens hat der Erweiterungsprozess des materiales Objekt der Praktischen Theologie in den vergangenen Jahrzehnten gleichzeitig auch die Dezentrierung des all-wissenden theologischen Subjekt der Kenntnis verursacht. Drittens muss die Praktische Theologie eine neue empirische Methodologie entwickeln, die Theorien auf der Basis von praktisch-religiöser Kenntnis entwickelt. Einen solchen Ansatz nennt der Verfasser praktisch-orientierte Methodologie.

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1 Practical reasoning

Practical (Christian) theology builds theological theory on practical reasoning in actions (individual or collective) considered to be spiritual and/or religious (notably Christian). I will not use the name pastoral theology which is the official

Christiaan A. M. Hermans: Chair Pastoral Theology, especially Empirical Theology, Radboud University Nijmegen, Research fellow, UNISA, Pretoria, South Africa, Van Heemstraweg 69, 6645KG, Winssen, the Netherlands, Email: c.hermans@ftr.ru.nl

name of the discipline within the Catholic theological encyclopaedia. This name suggests that the material object of the discipline is restricted to actions of the pastor.¹ Instead, I will speak of practical theology (PT) as such though strictly it should be practical *Christian* theology. Analytically, there is also an Islamic, or Jewish practical theology.

Most scholars will agree that practical theology relates to forms of practical reasoning of human beings. It is a kind of reasoning which arises in the process of understanding oneself. Birds do not ask themselves who they are; human agents do because they lack immediate self-knowledge. Human beings need to understand the (symbolic) meaning of their actions in order to come to self-understanding.²

Practical reasoning refers to the reasons (how? why? what?) and rules for acting and suffering as belonging to a certain community of knowledge which share a certain background knowledge.³ Within a community of knowledge, agents share a certain understanding of the self, others and the world. For example, a congregation or a religious denomination is a community of knowledge in which people share a certain understanding of their way of life in naming God.⁴ Reasons include ideas about the goals and aims (what to do?), strivings of the human will (how to choose?), emotions and feelings (how does it affect me?) and action-tendencies (how to do it?). Rules for acting are incorporated in the practices – for example, a religious ritual such as baptism incorporates certain categories of meaning (for instance, human beings as image of God, salvation from original sin) which symbolizes the meaning of this action in the “name of God”⁵.

Practical reasoning arises from the discrepancy between an actual and desired situation, which practical theologians often refer to as “crisis”: “Religious communities go from moments of consolidated practice to moments of deconstruction to new, tentative reconstructions and consolidation. Then a new crisis emerges and the communities must launch into the entire process once

1 Karl Rahner, *Practical theology in the Totality of the Theological Disciplines*, *Theological Investigations* vol. 9, New York (Herder & Herder) 1972, 101–102. First published as: Karl Rahner, *Die praktische Theologie im Ganzen der theologische Disziplinen*, in: Eberhard Jüngel / Karl Rahner / Manfred Seitz (eds.), *Die praktische Theologie zwischen Wissenschaft und Praxis*, München 1968.

2 Paul Ricoeur, *Practical reason*, in: Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Reason. Essays in Hermeneutics II*, Evanston (Northwestern University Press) 1991, 189.

3 Ricoeur, *Practical reason*, (n. 2), 193.

4 This formula is based on Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Chicago (University of Chicago Press) 1992. However, I add “in a sustainable world” to his definition of the good life.

5 For the expression “naming God”, see Paul Ricoeur, *Naming God*, in: Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred. Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. by Mark I Wallace, transl. David Pellauer, Minneapolis (Fortress Press) 1995, 217–235.

more.”⁶ The word “crisis” may give a connotation of exceptional (that is not normal). Individuals or communities may indeed struggle not to know what to do or lose any sense of acting in the name of God. But, this need not happen. Practical reasoning is a normal process of deliberation in action and on action. Actions always have a goal-directedness and involve the human will (making choices). We may question whether our actual goals are the desired ones and whether our actual will is in line with what we consider best. Practical reasoning emerges in this discrepancy between the actual and the desired. I will illustrate this both at the individual level and at the level of organizations (congregations, churches). For individuals, the division between the actual self and the desired self is the core problem which they need to deal with. William James considers it characteristically human to experience a divided consciousness (not having the right will; not pursuing the right goal). Everyone experiences some level of discordance or heterogeneity, and normal development seeks to unify the self (in terms of wholeness, fullness).⁷ The desired state at the individual level is the self who knows what to do, what to strive for, with the right will; in one word: the self that has found its destiny (fullness). From a psychological perspective, this unified self is a state of psychological equilibrium.⁸ From the perspective of self-interpretation, however, it expresses a normative idea of a good life with others in just institutions and a sustainable world. For congregations or churches, this discrepancy shows up in the division between the historical manifestation of the church (what *is*) and its essence as the Church of Christ (what *ought* to be). The church “is not simply its being in essence perpetually present in a space-time always external to it, but the historical form of this essence – unique in each instance – to which the Spirit of the Church calls it through its particular and unique historical situation.”⁹ As a result, the church constantly needs to reflect how it actualizes herself in the context of and in response to the historical situation. According to Rahner, “practical theology is the scientific organization of this theological reflection.”¹⁰

6 Don Browning, *A fundamental practical theology. Descriptive and Strategic proposals*, Minneapolis (Augsburg Fortress Press), 6.

7 William James, *The varieties of religious experience. A study in human nature*, New York (Collier Books) 1961 (original 1902). See chapter 6/7: “The sick souls”, 114–142 and chapter 8: “The divided self”, 143–159.

8 Patrick McNamara, *The neuroscience of religious experience*, New York (Cambridge University Press) 2009, see chapter 2: “On the self and the divided self”.

9 Rahner, *Practical theology in the Totality of the Theological Disciplines* (n. 1), 102.

10 *Ibid.*, 103.

PT develops theory about practical reasoning of human agents considered as spiritual and / or religious beings. The option for lived practical theology does not imply that the task of PT is to develop theory *in* the Christian faith. In practical reasoning, we need to distinguish between first-order discourse and second-order discourse. First order discourse consists in the reasons which human agents (believers) use naming God in their quest for understanding their actions; second order discourse comprises the concepts which scholars use in building theory based on the reasoning of human agents who interpret their actions in the name of God. If PT is theory *in* first order discourse, e.g. theory *in* the faith of the Christian (epistemic) community, than practical theology would essentially be “religion-in-the-making”¹¹. It takes on a strong rationality in the sense of some special, intuitive or privileged knowledge of the material object (the Christian knowledge of God) that cannot be challenged or methodologically tested. This position fails to do justice to the principle of fallibilism that characterizes the theory building of the academic (epistemic) community. Fallibilism implies that “our claims to knowledge are legitimized not by their origins – for the origins of knowledge are diverse and fallible – but rather by the norms and rules of inquiry itself.”¹² Or, to put it differently: we need to distinguish between the context of discovery (the Christian epistemic community) and the context of justification (the academic epistemic community). In the context of justification, there is no privileged knowledge. All knowledge has to pass the test of falsification. Some practical theologians (especially those working in seminaries) define their discipline as theory *in* faith. If PT want to be an academic discipline (which is my position), it needs to be second order discourse about practical reasoning on human agency seen as spiritual and / or religious.

2 Lived spirituality and lived religion

I think that religion cannot be defined without defining spirituality. Most of us will frame religion in the context of late modernity with its characteristics of rationalization, individualisation, globalisation and acceleration. I know, I have

¹¹ Linell E. Cady, Territorial Disputes. Religious Studies and Theology in Transition, in: Linell E. Cady and Delwin Brown (eds.) Religious Studies, Theology, and the University. Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain, New York (State University of New York Press) 2002, 110–125.

¹² Richard Bernstein, Praxis and Action, Philadelphia (University of Pennsylvania Press) 1971, 175.

always done this myself¹³ and never felt the need to define our field of inquiry beyond the term religion. Increasingly though, I feel uncomfortable with this position. Probably my academic unrest is fuelled by the Dutch situation where only about 40 percent of the population define themselves as religious. If most Dutch are not defining themselves religious, how does one interpret their identity which is not completely unlike religious people and yet distinct from religion? On this point I sharply disagree with colleagues (see Wilhelm Grab in this issue) who define religion as “the sense and taste for the ultimate”. If everybody with a sense for the ultimate is defined as religious, our category would include two types of people. Type A are persons who have a sensibility and taste for the infinity “full stop”, nothing more beyond this feeling of the human heart. Type B are persons for whom this experience is an encounter with something beyond what Schleiermacher calls the universe and what influences human beings.¹⁴ This is not to be equated with a belief in God, but it is an experience of the universe (the infinite as a whole) on the human person. Type A and type B persons are decidedly different. If we lump them together, we fail to make a distinction that is theoretically relevant and empirically less offensive to (at least some) type A people who do not want to be defined as religious persons.¹⁵

What is this unknown territory if we cannot call it religion, and is it yet defined by a movement of self-transcendence? My argument is based on two recent studies of religious and spiritual experiences (abbreviated RSE's) by Ann Taves¹⁶ and Wesley Wildman¹⁷. Taves is a religious studies scholar, Wildman a theologian; and both work within the cognitive paradigm. What follows is first my own definition of RSEs, then go on to mark out the territory in five steps that connect and distinguish the different types of experiences.

First two definitions to guide the reader:

13 For example, Christiaan A. M. Hermans, *Participatory Learning. Religious Education in a Globalizing Society*, Leiden (Brill) 2003, 18–82. And recently: Hermans, *Towards a ‘U-turn’ by the churches. How not to possibilise the future*, in: *Religion and Theology* 19, 2012, 237–264.

14 Schleiermacher. *On Religion. Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, ed. by Richard Crouter, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 1988, 24: “All intuition proceeds from an influence of the intuited on the one who intuits, from an original and independent action of the former [...]”

15 I think that this problem goes back to the definition of intuition as immediate perception, and the connection between intuition and feeling, but this discussion is beyond the scope of this article.

16 Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered. A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things*, Princeton (Princeton University Press) 2009.

17 Wesley J. Wildman, *Religious and spiritual experiences*, New York (Cambridge University Press) 2011.

Spiritual experiences are experiences of ultimate meaning, which are existentially relevant, unexpected and sometimes (but not necessarily) objectively strange compared to normal experiences and to a usage-dependent part of religious experiences.

Religious experiences are experiences related to human acting and suffering in the name of God, but are not necessarily also spiritual.

We now proceed to outline the territory of RSE's in five steps, each making a distinction between different types of experience. Firstly, we need to distinguish normal experiences from unexpected ones that are existential relevant. Secondly, we can within the latter category distinguish anomalous and ultimate experiences. Thirdly, ultimate spiritual experiences can be anomalous and non-anomalous. Then we distinguish fourthly spiritual experiences that are culturally set apart, and which are not. And fifthly, between spiritual and religious experiences.

As a first step, we distinguish normal experiences from unexpected and existentially relevant experiences. Normal experiences simply do not catch our attention because life goes on without notice. If I always eat cereals at breakfast, I will probably not remember precisely what I did on one specific morning in April 2013. When something unexpected happens (for instance my brother calls to tell me, his wife died in a car accident), this moment becomes different from normal experiences. Unexpectedness can increase relevance; it can not create relevance. Say you are catching a train that is ten minutes late, and the driver of the train looks like my diseased father, this hardly creates unexpectedness because missing my train has little relevance. What is of existential relevance to every human person is the so-called divided self, the experience that my actual self is not my true self.¹⁸ Human beings are the only living organisms that seem to experience this division. It can be experienced in a cognitive mode (not knowing my true self); an affective mode (feeling bad, negative, without hope); or a volitional mode (when the will is defective). Human beings want to overcome experiences of a divided self because the self is experienced as being in conflict with itself. The ideal self (Taves) or possible self (McNamara) is a unified self: knowing my true self, feeling good (happiness) and having the right will. Unexpectedness can be conceptualised by the idea of contingency. The German philosopher of religion, Kurt Wuchterl, has coined contingency as “other-than-rational”: rational being what we can necessarily and sufficiently explain.¹⁹ Contingency is something that

¹⁸ McNamara, The neuroscience of religious experience (n. 8).

¹⁹ See the title of his book: Kurt Wuchterl, Kontingenz oder das Andere der Vernunft [Contingency or other-than.reason], Stuttgart (Franz Steiner Verlag) 2011.

can possibly happen in life, but not necessary and yet actual in the life of some person. Contingency has four characteristics: (1) in an epistemic sense, there is no sufficient grounds to explain what happened; (2) no human action that can transform the situation into such an (necessary) order; (3) the situation is experienced as having an existential value, and (4) this unexpectedness can give people to think (about fullness beyond what is contingent).²⁰

The second step comprises a distinction between two main types of experiences in the category of existentially relevant, unexpected experiences. The first type consists of anomalous experiences that are marked by objective strangeness or in violate in some people's expectations.²¹ Anomalies include unusual natural events (earthquakes, eclipses), unusual specimens of living creatures (an animal with five legs), unusual sensory perceptions (extrasensory perceptions, past life experiences, contact with the dead) or "wondrous" events which seem to defy natural laws (miraculous healing, psycho-kinesis). The second type comprises ultimate experiences marked by subjective significance of absoluteness, finality, wholeness. The interpretation of absoluteness depends on one's conception of the good life. Different people (communities, cultures, religions) interpret the absolute differently. Ultimate experiences come in two forms: an orientation type and a transformation type.²² Orientation refers to ultimate concerns regarding the self, others and the world – in other words a conception of what lies beyond the divided self. Transformation refers to the self's changes towards a (more) unified self: a gradual process of overcoming the divided self.²³

We are now in a position (and this is step three) to define spiritual experiences which comprise all experiences of ultimate meaning that are existentially relevant and unexpected. Some spiritual experiences are ultimate (being subjectively perceived as absolute) and at the same time anomalous (objectively strange) but not all spiritual experiences are anomalous. Some anomalous experiences (such are extraordinary perceptions, telekinesis or epilepsy) have no ultimate meaning, in which case they are not considered spiritual. A final instance of spiritual is a usage dependent part of religious experiences that are not also experiences of ultimacy.²⁴ Nancy Ammerman illustrates this in her recent research on spirituality. She identified a so-called theistic cultural discourse on spirituality which includes the element of practices to develop or maintain one's relationship

20 Wuchterl, *Kontingenz oder das Andere der Vernunft* (n. 19), 36–37.

21 Taves, *Religious experience reconsidered* (n. 16), 38.

22 Wildman, *Religious and spiritual experiences* (n. 17), 85.

23 See Christiaan A. M. Hermans, *Spiritual transformation. Concept and measurement*, in: *Journal of Empirical Theology* 26, 2013, 165–187.

24 Wildman, *Religious and spiritual experiences* (n. 17), 81.

to God²⁵, such as prayers, lighting a candle, chanting, singing psalms. These are not necessarily experiences of absoluteness, finality or wholeness. Sometimes religious people simply perform these practices as what they regard their religious “obligations”.

The fourth step is to distinguish spiritual experiences that are culturally “set apart” from those that are not. Emile Durkheim introduced this notion of “things set apart and forbidden” into the study of religion. Some spiritual experiences are so singular as to be considered priceless (things that cannot be seen as commodities – not for sale!).²⁶ Examples are a pilgrimage site, a rite of passage, an ancestral burial site or meditation practice. Not all spiritual experiences are culturally set apart. I might, for instance, have an anomalous experience of seeing white transparent figures that alert me to the ultimate meaning of unity with nature. If I cannot share this experience, it will not become an experience “set apart” in culture. We need to avoid defining “spiritual” as personal, or extra-institutional, as opposed to “religious” as an institutionalised communal phenomenon.²⁷ The line between “spiritual” and “religious” is more porous than the binary distinction between “personal” and “institutional”. Spiritual experiences that are “set apart” have a special place in the cultural memory of groups or society: not only should they be deemed important but people should also feel motivated to share and spread them.

The fifth and final step is to distinguish between spiritual experiences and religious experiences. Religious experiences are characterised by the presence of superhuman agents (God, angels and the like). The same experience can be either religious or nonreligious depending on whether it is attributed to a superhuman agency or not.²⁸ Religious experiences are spiritual experiences when they convey ultimate meaning for a person.

For religious people God is the ultimate reality in which human beings can overcome the divided self (not being one’s true self). God is both the source and the ultimate destiny in becoming one’s true self. Even a proper understanding of what it means to be one’s true self is found in God and not in finite human beings. Not all religious experiences are spiritual, because they do not always involve ultimate meaning for those who experience them – think of an activity like

²⁵ Nancy Ammerman, *Spiritual But Not Religious? Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion*, in: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52/2, 2013, 258–278, 266.

²⁶ Taves, *Religious experience reconsidered* (n. 16), 26.

²⁷ Ammerman, *Spiritual But Not Religious* (n. 25), 276.

²⁸ Jan van der Lans, *Religieuze ervaren en meditatie. Een godsdienstpsychologische studie* [Religious experience and meditation. A study in psychology of religion], Deventer (Van Loghum Slaterus) 1980.

arranging flowers in church, drinking coffee with a women's group in a faith community, or organising a church fête. It might even be designed to convey ultimate meaning (cf. a prayer meeting), but the participant does not experience it like that. So we need to distinguish between religious experiences that are also spiritual experiences and those that are not.

3 Whose actions? What knowledge?

The history of PT shows that the material object has widened since the middle of the 20th century. In line with this, new questions emerge that are changing the face of the discipline. I shall postulate that we need to reflect on the researcher as well as the subject of research. If we do this, we see that the process of opening up the material object of PT coincides with a process of decentring the subject who builds theory on lived spirituality and / or religion. Or differently expressed: in expanding the subject researched, the researcher moves out of the centre on lived spirituality and / or religion. To put it differently, in the same movement of expanding the subject of the researched, the researcher moves out of the centre from which theological theory is built.²⁹ In this section, I will elaborate this thesis.

Let me frame this development in the history of the university where I work. I am the third to hold the chair of pastoral theology in the theological department of Radboud University, Nijmegen. The first to hold it, was Prof. Frans Haarsma in 1964, a priest who taught at the archidiaconal seminary at Utrecht before his appointment to the Radboud university. Practical theology up to then could be characterised in terms of a clerical paradigm: the material object of PT was the praxis of the ordained pastor. Haarsma criticised this paradigm in two respects: firstly, the restricted focus on pastoral training and technology ("how to"), and secondly he criticized the character of applied theology as based on a wrong conception of the connection between theory and praxis.³⁰ Note, however, that this critique emerged at a time when PT as a discipline entered the university.

²⁹ There is a third movement included in this development, namely from strong to weak rationality. Lack of space prevent me to elaborate on this. See Christiaan A.M. Hermans, *Narratives of the Self in the Study of Religion. Epistemological Reflections Based on a Pragmatic Notion of Weak Rationality*, in: Maaïke de Haardt / Miachel Scherer-Rath / R. Ruard Ganzevoort (eds.), *Religious Stories We Live By. Narrative Approaches in Theology and Religious Studies*, Leiden (Brill) 2013, 34–43.

³⁰ Johannes A. van der Ven, *Wat is pastoraal theologie? Een analyse van het werk van Frans Haarsma*, in: Johannes A. van der Ven (ed.), *Toekomst voor de kerk? Studies voor Frans Haarsma [Future of the church? Studies in honour of Frans Haarsma]*, Kampen (Uitgeverij KOK) 1985, 16–17.

What we see is that not just the researched subject is changing, but also the position of the subject of the researcher (from a priest who is teaching at a seminary to a university scholar who is a priest).

In 1964, the first volume of the “Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie” [English: Handbook of pastoral Theology] is published widening the material object of PT to include every active believer of the Church. Haarsma will edit a Dutch version of the first and part of the second volume of the book. However, this ecclesial paradigm expands the material object of PT to take in all members of the Church. From a theological perspective, this boundary may be criticised from the width of the history of salvation and the length of the Church’s eschatological perspective.³¹ Van der Ven calls it a decentring of the Church to what is beyond (the kingdom of God). The paradigm that goes beyond the boundaries of the Church is called the paradigm of Christianity in the coordinates of Church and society by Van der Ven. Within this paradigm, the object of PT includes not only acts of liberation, justice and care by believers (members of the Church) but also those of non-believers who act on the same principles in society.

But also this process of widening of the material object of PT sets a new boundary, namely what from a Christian perspective can be regarded as actions of liberation, justice and care (in the name of God). There are Christians who act in the name of God-as-known-in-Jesus-Christ but there are also people from other religions, who act in the name of God-as-they-understand-it. This can be called an intercultural or interreligious paradigm of PT. As we have seen, this widening of the material object of PT (i.e. the subject acting in the name of God) implies a decentring of the researcher (Christian theologian) as a privileged holder of knowledge. Every process of knowing proceeds from the known (shared knowledge within an epistemic community) to the unknown (new knowledge). In an intercultural or interreligious paradigm, the Christian theologian is no longer the privileged source of knowledge about acting in the name of God, because people from different religions have a different understanding of the name of God. To theorise on the object of research (believers from different religions acting in the name of God), the researcher needs to move from the centre to the margins of knowing.

Have we reached the limits of our research field? Not yet – since some people, rather than acting in the name of God, build their lives on what they understand to be ultimate. I think this boundary is a hard one, because many theologians like to presuppose that all people are religious albeit in an anonymous, implicit or hidden manner. Can we leave this centre of knowing and still be theologians? Can

31 Van der Ven, *Wat is pastoraal theologie* (n. 30), 23.

we theologically accept the self-understanding of people (that they are non-religious) and refrain from implicitly relating them to God and seeing them as anonymous believers? Can we accept that “spiritual but not religious” is as valid as “spiritual and religious”? Can PT move into the unknown territory of lived spirituality in late modern times, the field of contested interpretations of the ultimate, and accept that Christians do not have superior knowledge?

4 Practice-oriented methodology

What research methodology is fit to study lived spirituality and / or lived religion? I propose to focus on practice oriented methodology. I think this is the decisive move for PT and therefore I propose to change the name of practical theology to practice-oriented theology. Most theory propagated under the name of practical theology is not practical but theoretical, in the sense that it formulates an answer to theoretical questions about human actions in the name of God. It is comparable with brain researchers basing prescriptive knowledge on learning on experimental research about how the brain works. There is a big gap between theory about the brain and an understanding of how students solve a mathematical or moral problem. The only way to build theory on problem-solving acts is to study the practice of problem solving. This does not mean that theory about the brain (and/or mind) is irrelevant, but one should not claim that it is practical in the sense of helping teachers and students in the practice of teaching and learning. It does not! In my own scholarly career I did not encounter this problem until I started a centre for research on Catholic schools at the Radboud University, Nijmegen in 2001. We developed theory based on theoretical questions solving theoretical problems, for instance, how children can link biblical stories to their own life story³² or how teachers can develop student virtues on citizenship.³³ We thought it would be the best way of helping practitioners to improve; but when we tried to train teachers according to this theory, we found that we had to translate and transform that knowledge to connect it to the action problems of teachers and students. To do so, we needed to build new theory based on the problems teachers experience in practice, and to change that practice. The knowledge we had developed did nothing to help practitioners develop professionally. To understand and support acts by individuals or collectives that are perceived to be

³² Theo van der Zee, *Religious ideas, feelings and their interrelationship. Research into the effects of religious education in parables on 10- to 12-year olds*, Münster (LIT Verlag) 2007.

³³ Frank Willems, *Stimulating Civic Virtue in Students. An exploratory Study of Teachers in Dutch Catholic Primary Education*, Münster (Waxman) 2013.

spiritual and / or religious, we need to research their problems. This is what we call practice-oriented research.

Practice-oriented research starts with problems of action (decision making; discernment; re-constructing one's life story; knowing how to communicate experiences in the name of God) rather than theory. A problem of action may be defined as not knowing how to proceed from the actual to the desired situation, which may be a real possibility (something-that-can-be) in the sense that people are willing to orient their actions towards it, thereby transforming the actual towards the possible. A theoretical problem arises from a theoretical issue such as being unable to describe or explain some phenomenon in terms of the actual theory. The goal of this research is to expand our theory. One can study praxis, but it is not done not from the perspective of that praxis and in order to improve or transform it.

There are two types of practice oriented research: intervention research and design research³⁴. In the first case, the problem is an improvement of the actual situation; in the second case, there is no actual situation (defined from the perspective of the possible which might not at all be perfectly clear at the start!)³⁵, but rather the focus is on the construction of the ideal which could be used in practice to transform the actual. While intervention research bridges the gap between the actual and the ideal from the perspective of the actual, design research bridges it from the ideal to the actual. Intervention research can be structured according to the intervention (or policy) cycle: starting with an analysis of the problem, diagnosing its context and the causes of the problem, defining conditions for solving it, formulating indicators (condition) for the ideal, making an intervention plan, monitoring and evaluating the intervention, and reflecting on what one has learnt in the course of the intervention. Intervention research may cover the whole cycle of intervention or it may focus on one element of the cycle, in which case it may be named after the various phases of the intervention cycle: problem-raising research (or needs research), diagnostic research, planning research, (intervention or) effect research and evaluation research.

Design research is focused on developing a material artefact that helps to create the desired situation, such as a protocol of short-term counselling in spiritual guidance for non-believers or a prototype of an *impossible* act of forgiveness in a traumatic situation of ethnic conflict, which makes it impossible for communities to build a new future together. On the other hand, design research

³⁴ Piet Verschuren, *Praktijkgericht onderzoek. Ontwerp van organisatie- en beleidsonderzoek* [Practice-oriented research. Design of organisational and policy research], Den Haag (Boom academic), 154–168.

³⁵ Situation of spirituality and / or religion in late modernity.

can also produce an immaterial artefact that incorporates the conditions, specifications and / or principles of the desired situation – for instance, liquid church communities in late modernity. An immaterial artefact is not a realized example of the desired situation but a “drawing board scheme” of it or the principles that need to be met to develop new practices of church in the future.

Practice-oriented research methodology is not the same as action research, but neither is it something totally different. Practice-oriented methodology, as developed in the past decades, incorporates a knowledge stream of theory development and a practice stream of change.³⁶ The knowledge stream aims to generate transferable³⁷ knowledge; the practice stream aims to transform a situation from the actual towards the desired.

Without the knowledge stream it does not qualify as academic research. This, in essence, is the critique of action research developed from the middle of the 20th century, for example in educational science. The main reason for action research was that something had to be done, but the need to understand precisely what influenced the process of change was neglected.³⁸ Practice-oriented research methodology not only transforms practice; it also sets out to build transferable knowledge of action. On the other hand, the knowledge stream without the practice stream would merely be “old” theoretical research. In practice-oriented research, the knowledge stream and the practice stream should go together.

How is transferable knowledge developed? I conclude my argument with two ways of constructing this type of knowledge. The first way is to use a multiple case study methodology.³⁹ Where the cases allow for a difference at the individual level, they can be compared in order to build theory that is transferable beyond individual cases. A multiple-case methodology allows switching between the practice stream of transformation and the knowledge stream of theory-building. If the cases are selected in sequence, one can continue selecting new cases until

36 Daan G. Andriessen, Designing and testing an OD Intervention. Reporting Intellectual Capital to Develop Organization, in: *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 43, 2007, 89–107.

37 Which is not the same as “generalizability” of research results in a population. But I like to formulate a provocative thesis here: I have never read any study in practical theology which met all the conditions of sampling and data-collection to be able to state that its results were generalisable. Or to formulate it positive: all the theory building as I know it (definitively including everything I have been doing) is explorative research where every claim of generalizing results is out of order!

38 Harold L. Hodgkinson, Action Research. A Critique, in: *Journal of Educational Sociology* 31, 1957, 137–153.

39 Daan Andriessen, Kennisstroom en praktijkstroom [Knowledge stream and practice stream], in: Joan van Aken / Daan Andriessen (eds.), *Handboek ontwerpgericht wetenschappelijk onderzoek* [Handbook design-oriented scientific research], Den Haag (Boom Lemma), 90–91.

saturation point is reached. Secondly, in building knowledge we should try to understand the mechanisms that generate change in a specific context. We need to go beyond the kind of logic that can be expressed in the formula “if A, then B”. This may be called “IO logic”: a given intervention leads to a given outcome.⁴⁰ This logic is decontextualised and does not clarify the mechanism that generates the transformation. Practice-oriented logic needs to produce so-called “CIMO-logic” which involves a combination of a problematic context [C], for which the design proposition suggests a certain intervention type [I], to produce, through specified generative mechanisms [M], the intended outcome(s) [O].⁴¹

Practice-oriented methodology is intended to generate transferable knowledge of actions towards a desired situation (which in theological terms incorporates human actions towards the possible or “what-can-be”) in a problematic context. It is being developed (as empirical research methodology) in nursing studies, education, management science, medical science, and other disciplines that develop action theory in decision-making situations. We need not invent the wheel! I think it is time for PT to follow this trend and study human practices of lived spirituality and lived religion in late modernity. Let’s transform practical theology into practice-oriented theology!

40 David Denyer / David J. Tranfield / Joan Van Aken, Developing Design Propositions through Research Synthesis, in: *Organization Studies* 29/3, 2008, 396.

41 Ibid.