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Practical Theology as Empirical Theology

1 Introduction

Christian Theology is devoted to reflexion on religion, life and faith, moreover it is a passionate intellectual participation and engagement in life. To deal with religion is interwoven with culture and everyday-life, with the encounter with reality in general.

The particular academic context of my presentation on Empirical Theology is the protestant theological faculty at Goethe University. The faculty's overall approach might be called liberal, Tillich's impulses play still an important role in several disciplines, as it is about theology's orientation towards a critical constructive relation to culture as well as to theories of culture. The research context of my study unit "Practical theology and RE" can be best indicated by key terms like "contextual theology" or "life-world oriented theology". The phenomena to be studied are manifold.

In Europe, within the frame of a post-Christian culture we find very different interest in ordinary people concerning a particular religious quality of their experiences in life. Some are highly interested to report almost any moment of their personal life in religious language. Others, although equally devoted and faithful, in their everyday encounters in many cases are not at all interested to distinguish or to qualify those events as being "religious" or "non-religious". A German sociologist of religion illustrates this with a nice anecdote. After the break-down of the Wall, people on the street in Berlin had been interviewed about their religious orientation. Due to suppression of practicing religion during socialist times, many people in former Eastern Germany never had any direct and authentic contact to Christian faith. A young lady, grown up in eastern Germany expressed her irritation about the very question and answered: "No, I am not particularly religious, I think I am just normal." (Matthes xxx).

Given the growing plurality of worldviews in late modern times, people are free and forced to make personal religious options, combining the traditional faith bodies with all sorts of new value systems, a situation P. Berger called the *Heretical Imperative*. And at least in Europe a growing number of people refuse making religious options at all with the result, that they don't have any longer access to what it means to participate in [institutionally mediated?] religious experience at all. The moral and political conflicts resulting from this situation is brilliantly depicted by the famous Swedish author and moralist Henning Mankell in his novel „Before the Frost“ from 2002. The plot is a fictional story about a really violent form of religion leading to cruel practice. The historical background of the story is about the followers of the fundamentalist Jim-Jones-cult-movement, that group, which 1978 collectively committed suicide. The dark figures in Mankell's story develop a destructive plan to extinguish anybody from earth who does not share their own most rigid morals concerning sexuality and abortion. The investigation is really a hard work, inspector Wallander and his team, for a long time don't get any successful solutions, further victims are killed. Once, in the midst of his investigation, a most irritating idea surfaces into Wallander's mind . The turn of the investigation "makes clear, that there is a religious dimension, which we probably did not take as serious as we should have done." (Mankell 2002, translation HGH).

2 Practical Theology

Today I want to present the overall task as well as a particular profile of Practical Theology, focusing on Practical Theology *as* Empirical Theology. In Germany, Practical Theology is one of the 6 regular disciplines, is an obligatory to be chosen especially by those students who prepare during a 4 to 5 years full program on theology to become minister

Already this title of my lecture might be highly irritating to many of you. Those who look for applied rules how to handle affairs tomorrow in their congregation might be disappointed not to find enough food on how to manage the daily routine of church life. Those, who are at the university engaged in empirical social scientific analysis, might be disappointed, because I will not follow their paradigm of the empirical. And finally some of those, who estimate themselves as theologians might have serious doubts whether the program indicated with such a title really is more than an oxymoron. Theology in itself is normative, but not empirical, they would argue.

However, these three poles are most relevant to my perspective on the discipline, because they indicate constituents of the reflective and engaged enterprise called Practical Theology.

- First: It has always been and is still essential for Practical Theology to relate to practice and religious life within congregations, though it does not simply affirm or double, what's going on there.
- Second: Practical Theology makes use of scientific models, concepts and methods developed to study religion in order to participate in academic research in general, though it has its own interest in relation to and difference from social sciences.
- Third: Practical Theology participates in overall theological reflection on faith, culture and life. However, it does so in a bottom-up way, starting with praxis in order to confront the imperialism of idealistic constructs of a "pure faith" with reality and lived life and in order to contribute to responsible praxis of religion in the midst of everyday life.

Theology as an academic enterprise, especially in its protestant traditions, stands for critical reflexion on religion. It stresses the rational pole of Christian religious traditions. And within the academy theology just as any other discipline, just as systematic theologians regarding interdisciplinary studies in science and religion, just as exegetical studies with its neighboring historical disciplines practical theology necessarily is obliged to communicate internal reflexion on religion in a comprehensive way with other disciplines of the university.

The internal organisation of academic theology is a product of many factors, rational decisions, pragmatic calculation as well as cultural trends. My Frankfurt faculty offers various programs. The set of areas or disciplines, chairs and eventually research centres in theology we know is a contingent and quite recent setup. If one considers the role of scripture in protestant traditions and does not reject the idea of academic theology in general, e.g. to have a discipline devoted to literary theory and hermeneutics of texts for many is plausible without further explanation. Likewise if there is within a denomination's Sunday celebration of the gospel an important genre devoted to sermons on biblical texts, in society based on knowledge it is quite at hand to develop a body of knowledge about rhetoric rules and good performance for a speech in order to effectively prepare preaching. The same is for pastoral care and counselling, for Christian education

This however is not the case when it comes to Practical Theology as a whole discipline. Things are more complicated, and many argue about the necessity of a separate discipline. Time and again two major objections occur:

- First: Rigidly spoken, the notion of a *practical* Theology is an absurdity, a misleading label. It provokes the question whether there could be also a theoretical theology, independent of a practical one. And if so, it follows the well known advise that a practical theology should be done at a place for practical clergy education,

- Second: Just for many of these, for people trained in (pastoral) counselling or in homiletics and working effectively in congregations, the use of specific field knowledge, and wisdom about how to do things might be acceptable. However people ask, if there is any sense or necessity to devote hours, weeks or even years of study besides this on an additional study area called Practical Theology.

The very name „theologia practica“ was used for the first time in 13th century’s scholastic theology, when for the first time there was dispute about theology’s general orientation: should theology be, a way to gain knowledge or rather a way to obtain practical ability (*cognoscere* or *operari*)? In any case, this debate reflects the insight that in principle all theology is oriented toward practise. It took a long time from the late middle ages to establish a recognised theological discipline called Practical Theology as it is common in many European Theological faculties. Different denominations developed different models or rationales for the evolving discipline. I will not bother you with historical details. To give a preliminary picture of the outcome of a centuries development, I take E. Farley definition. In his excellent article on Practical Theology he says:

Practical Theology is:

“(1) A field of study in *clergy education* covering the responsibilities and activities of the minister and usual included preaching, liturgics, pastoral care, Christian (church) education, and church polity and administration.

(2) An area or discipline in clergy education whose subject matter is the life and activity of the church as it exists in the present.

(3) An area or *discipline of theology* whose subject matter is Christian practice and which brings to bear theological criteria on contemporary situations and realms of individual and social action.

The three definitions indicate that practical theology is now being used in more than one sense” (Farley 1990, 934 italics HGH). Likewise the threefold description of doctoral studies in Practical Theology at Boston University contains a pluriform set of goals and issues (www.sthweb.bu.edu)

3 Empirical Theology

Today in almost every western country there we find research centres devoted to empirical studies of religion, may they be connected to practical theological faculty members or doing work in independent social scientific research institutes. Many of you will be familiar with the Boston project “Studying Congregations” (Ammerman et al 1998). For Germany I could mention the Cologne “Sinus-Study” (xxx) run by the Catholic church about religious participation and milieus or the Bertelsmann “Monitoring Religion 2008”. And there is a huge number of other institutes doing empirical research on religion next to these.

As to the empirical interest within Theology it is neither is an invention nor the sole property of Practical Theology. “Empirical Theology” as an explicit and programmatic formula has been labeled in the beginning of the 20th century, in remarkable theological efforts on both sides of the Atlantic. And that was long before practical theology got its present form.

One branch of Empirical Theology dates to the early Chicago School at the beginning of the 20th century. A prominent representative, Douglas Macintosh offered an elaborated approach in a study entitled „Theology as an Empirical Science“ (Macintosh, 1919). Inspired by the scientific ideals of English sensualistic and empiristic traditions of J. Locke and John St. Mill, he was interested in the analysis of ordinary people’s religious experience. Focussing on distinct variables of religious behaviour Macintosh tried to formulate veritable ‘theological laws’. It comes down to a ‘applied science’ form of empirical investigation that provides

knowledge to be used in practice. However, at the very bottom of this applicable conceptualizations lies a strong methodological concept. This is, namely, the idea to provide a consistent scientific categorical framework for the full range of religious experiences. I presume, addressing myself to American scholars of theology there is little need to go into details.

The second branch developed up in Europe. The Estonian German theologian Werner Gruehn was the first person in Europe coining the label ‘Empirical Theology’ (Gruehn, 1936). Like Macintosh, Gruehn focused on personal religious experiences. Using psychological tools of empirical investigation he was less guided by ideals of laws of science and more enthusiastic about a realistic turn to life in theology. As he put it: “Whoever once gained insight into the vivid life of this reality, will understand why whole areas of theology are foreclosed to contemporary people and must remain foreclosed...he will understand, that theology ought to be terribly nearer to reality, terribly more focussed and essential concerning its questions and answers in order to become inevitable for human beings of today” (Gruehn, 1936, p. XII my translation).

Empirical Theology as promoted by Gruehn followed an overall interest: to bring life back to theory, to bridge the gap between theology and modern reality. Instead of pure assumptions about reality he urged to research facts (“Tatsachenforschung”) about religious experience. And the results were supposed to present basic facts (“Grundtatsachen”) of psychic life. From his analysis of living human piety he intended to forward a substantial contribution to the understanding of faith, to the relation between God and human beings. Looking back to his approach, it is obvious that the tools and aims of his program really were poor and naïve in terms of modern empirical scientific methodology.

If we go beyond the explicit label “Empirical Theology” and identify the empirical dimension of theology with awareness to the experiential dimension of faith and of religion, we will easily find numerous prominent witnesses throughout the history of Christian life and of Christian theology. Speaking to you as a German theologian I should not omit to refer to the famous dictum of the famous German reformator M. Luther: “Experience makes a theologian” “Experientia facit theologum” (WA TR 1, 16,13; cf. Obermann 1974). As it comes to Methodist piety and theology, again we find quite substantial references to experience in Wesley’s theology. He elaborated a view on genuine faith, which does not only consist of knowing and doing but beyond these also in a particular form of orthopathy, which is a form of religious experience (Runyon 1998).

Given my rather restricted knowledge in historical matters let me jump to the 20th century and to practical theology. Within the renewal of the discipline throughout the last four decades the program of “Empirical Theology” developed only recently into prominent position, forerunner were especially H. van der Ven and his Dutch school of (Van der Ven 1993) and the English group round L. Francis (Francis 2004; 2005).

However the interest in experience and contact of theology with lived life played a mayor role in reconstructing and promotion the discipline, both, with practical and theoretical efforts.

One of the vital sources to renew theological education in better connection with life was promoted by one of the founding fathers of modern pastoral care, Anton Boisen. He had a vision not only on pastoral care but on theology on the whole. Not the classical hermeneutical path to understand traditional texts but the interpretation of actual practice of the Christian church became his starting point and aim as well. Boisen’s programmatic formula was to read also contemporary individual emotional life as „living human documents“ (Boisen 1936). This idea was picked up in this country as well as in many European countries and finally gave way to a new approach called pastoral psychology.

It especially inspired the hermeneutic turn of the discipline, which found its most powerful and effective theoretical gestalt in Don Browning's model of Practical Theology. His outline of reflective tasks of the discipline drew heavily on Gadamer's hermeneutics. Understanding Christian tradition and likewise understanding the actual situation is in his view describe a necessary circular process in order to shape better praxis. And he was actually most genius to identify issues in religious practice of people and congregations as theoretical problems. The aim of theological education was "phronesis", the habit of practical thinking in order to act effectively as leader in religious bodies.

It is remarkable that, next to the concepts of understanding and interpretation, Don Browning deepened on experience as essential source for religious life and. This twofold task of practical theology refers explicitly to D. Tracy's correlative model, which is about moving back and forth "between Christian texts and common human experience and language (Tracy 1975, 43).

In our context this idea deserves special attention. Already Tracy described the experiential in a first distinction between "personal" and "corporate" experience, its about *my* religious experience, and *our* experiences. Don Browning clearly shows the need to have even a closer look at the focus of "common human experience". Consequently, he made an attempt for further detailed analysis: "I propose we go one step further and differentiate common human experience into three poles or foci: (1) interpretations of the practices, inner motivations, and socio-cultural history of individual agents; (2) interpretations of relevant institutional patterns and practices; and (3) interpretations of the cultural and religious symbols that give meaning to individual and institutional action." (Don Browning 1991, 61).

On this issue in his "Fundamental Practical Theology" Don Browning displays again his theoretical genius, because he was able to combine the more continental inspired hermeneutic turn with elements of the American radical empiricism in line with W. James. Based on ideas like James' "pure experience" he opposed a restricted cultural-linguistic approach to theology. The analysis of linguistic forms does not give sufficient way to understand the "thickness of practice". And he emphasized the importance of experience as an independent source. Not at all neglecting the importance of scriptural traditions for understanding he stated: "Experience does things that break through the edges of our linguistic structures." This hint deserves further reflection.

Summing up the essence of this passage, one could say: the empirical interest of theology and of research in religion refers in manifold ways and in numerous lines to the experiential pole, however in different ways, and based on different methodologies. Reflective dealing with this objective in academic theology in all disciplines asks for conceptual clarification. Thus the question is: What do we really mean in Practical Theology, when we take religious experience as focal issue for theoretical analysis for Empirical Theology? What type of experience had Don Browning in mind, pointing beyond the "edges of linguistic structures"? Why not take up the conceptual basis elaborated in empirical social scientific disciplines for theological research in the empirical? Any undergraduate student would associate the empirical directly and exclusively to social sciences.

On the other hand there is a most critical question to the overall idea of an Empirical theology: are we as theologians anyhow allowed to support this methodical import into theology at all? Paul Tillich, one of the leading figures in 20th century theology discourse, made a fundamental objection against any methodological import of the empirical sciences into theology at all. In the midst of the 20th century, 1947, he expressed a fundamental methodological critique towards the use of empirical research within theology. As he stated,

“It is not a sound procedure to borrow a method for a special realm of inquiry from another realm in which this method has been successfully used. It seems that the emphasis on the so-called ‘empirical’ method in theology has not grown out of actual theological demands but has been imposed on theology under the pressure of a ‘methodical imperialism’, exercised by the pattern of natural sciences. This subjection of theology to a strange pattern has resulted in an undue extension of the concept ‘empirical’ and the lack of a clear distinction between the different meanings of ‘experience’ in the theological enterprise” (Tillich, 1947, p. 16).

Half a century later, one could argue, if Tillich’s reserve against the empirical does fit to current interdisciplinarity of all theological disciplines. Anyhow there is need for any attempt of Empirical Theology to qualify the concept of experience. If Empirical Theology will keep to drive *theology* the necessity to develop and to make use of a concept of experience, which fits to theological understanding of the issue, is evident.

4 Studying Lived Religion: an example

In my next step I will try to pick up both points, clarify the notion of experience and keep as well aware of Tillich’s objection, however neither follow social scientific methodology to the experiential nor just agree to Tillich. Rather my approach to Empirical Theology is in line with the hermeneutic pattern we just heard about from Tracy and Don Browning. I belong to those who take the study on lived religion as a particular research object of academic theology. In this very school at BU I am in quite good companion with this choice, as the program description of my BU colleagues runs: “...The discipline of practical theology must be carried out in close relation to the mission of the church and *lived religious experience*, that is, how faithful people live out their faith in social, political, and cultural settings.” (Boston description www.xxx) Our Frankfurt approach tries to elaborate practical theology on lived religious experience with impulses and conceptual tools especially from phenomenology.

To prevent misunderstandings, what follows now, is not an encyclopaedic description of Practical Theology in general and overall, however it makes choices, focuses on that issue, we continuously met in our tour so far. And, I will depict a particular model of Empirical theology, drawing on a particular concept of experience. No question, there are good reasons for Practical Theology to study more, to study practice of religious people (and not only faith traditions), professional activities of preachers and counsellors, the language of a religious educator, organisational forms of congregations and so on. Nevertheless it is reasonable to describe Practical theology related particularly to the objective of lived religion, because it permeates all practice, and it cannot be reduced to other factors of practice. If my proposal is sound, it will implicitly be plausible, why we need Empirical Theology and cannot just do with empirical research in sociology, psychology or neuroscience.

Following Husserl’s rule “Back to the things themselves!” I’ll start describing a concrete phenomenon of religious experience. Once the Catholic diocese in the German city of Aachen organised an interesting exhibition titled “What is holy to me?” (Aachen 1986). They chose a very open approach, asked young people to react on this question in any way they would like to do: writing a comment, delivering a photo, or a personal piece of utmost concern. Thus many youngsters reacted, next to texts dropped many funny things, a teddy, a guitar, a cross, even a provocative commentary like: „There is nothing holy to me !“

On top of page 21 of the exhibition catalogue we find a short text of a certain Jürgen, and a foto. The picture shows a stone and an empty slide frame in front of it. Jürgen’s comment says: *5 years ago during holidays with friends it came up to our mind: certain things and*

events you simply cannot photograph. This piece of stone is from a fjord in Norway. We internalised that particular moment intensely. And we never will forget that „picture“.

What we get from this document obviously refers to an experience. And as Jürgen delivered it to the stimulus “What is holy to me?” it indicates somehow a closer connection to what theoretical construction would call a religious experience. But this is not Jürgen’s concern. It is important to notice that the organisers in this project did not take interviews and ask people: ‘give me your description of religion or your definition of holy’, however they just chose for this open stimulus “What is holy to me?” Further on, in Jürgen’s reaction, no explicit religious term is used, not even the word „holy“, but only a simple object outside in nature, a stone and a slide and this peculiar comment. What the comment refers to however, in which Jürgen denies to photograph certain experiences, is evidently in itself an experience, and well an intense experience. Two German youngsters were on a hiking tour outside, perhaps during holidays, surrounded by high mountains and deep blue water of the fjord, they enjoyed the presence of the site, suddenly it was overwhelming them, and they got aware of the uniqueness of the situation.

From the short document we do not get the experience itself, but only small bits of the person’s description and articulation of it. However they refer to an experience previous to comment Jürgen dropped. The lines might touch us, because they clearly give witness of an intense personal encounter somewhere and some time at the boarder of everyday life, during holidays. We clearly see, the occurrence is of special concern to the experiencing subject, otherwise Jürgen wouldn’t have referred to it. Something unexpected and overwhelming happened with them encountering a particular situation, and in the midst of their life-world without any verbal stimulus spontaneous made them react with “aha!” about the mysterious structure of life: “You simply cannot photograph”.

Their reaction was *mindful*. What came up to their mind, to Jürgen’s mind, is not an objective fact, he gives the right definition about, it is rather a sort of confession, he is deeply convinced of. It is his personal approach, a way to express himself creatively, he does not react on an artificial interview stimulus, and does simply repeat a pattern of learnt religious knowledge, he has been taught earlier. Never the less it is about an issue, which scholars in theology and religious studies are most familiar with, which we would call the numinous structure of reality, which cannot be objectified without loosing its very essence.

So far my short example. If the content of this experience is roughly described, let me broaden the perspective and ask: How to conceive this religious experience in structural terms? What sort of experience does this all refer to? And what would be an appropriate theoretical pattern?

5 The concept of “lived religion”

In the next part of my lecture I would like to clarify my general conceptual approach to Empirical Theology, based on “lived experience”. There is in fact a valuable conceptual alternative to understand religious experience beyond early 20th “theological laws” of McIntosh, who copied natural scientific objectivism, and also beyond the enthusiastic nevertheless naïve appeal to “real life” of Gruehn. This alternative concept of experience draws on other aspects, and the notion of “lived experience” serves as key concept to this theory. Phenomenological analysis of the structure of everyday-bound experience can help us to clarify the structure of this type of experience.

* Referring back to the world of experience in everyday life is referring to the **life world** with all its self evidences, contingencies and pre-reflexive familiarities described by the late Husserlian theory (Husserl 1936). Life World constitutes the human subject's pre-scientific encounter with the world, thus emphasizing theoretically the relational aspect of experience. In the relational approach, the empirical basis is conceived as something "given" beyond the perceiving individual (the original meaning of 'data'), and only accessible through sensual experience of a human subject, being involved in the experiential process. Not the result of experience, rather the process of making/collecting/disclosing reality through experiencing is at stake.

* In modern theory of science there is a general agreement: the empirical coincides with the appeal to sensual perception. Likewise essential to the notion of lived experience is the foundation of experience in perception, however, it deals with a specific concept of perception. The "**primacy of perception**" to experience, which the French phenomenologist M. Merleau-Ponty talks about, is not a stimulus of a mechanistic body to the isolated Cartesian mind. Thus specifically *human* experience, rooted in perception does not take place in an abstract or intellectualistic way, nor in a causal-mechanistic way, but rather in a situated connection to a finite bodily subject of perception which is living and perceiving the world in a specific spatial situation. Through one's body, one understands the other and becomes aware of things. Perceptions grounded in the body, as meaningful gestures, as articulations, are like the subject to be understood through the body, even though these meaningful gestures occur in situations of daily life.

* Experiencing is always experiencing a something, intended in mind, however in embodied mind. Intentionality thus cannot be simply restricted to intellectual or other cognitive intentions of a reasoning subject. The human particular corporal existence has an intentional structure in itself. In every single situation, human beings always live their bodies towards the world. Thus, considering lived human experience, one has to admit: Our bodily intentions "already lead us into a world constituted for us before we conceptually encounter it in cognition." (Moran, 2000, 402).

* It is common to say "I make an experience". The phenomenological analysis of experience sharpens our eyes also for the reverse: experiences sometimes are doing something with us. They are not always the results of previously and consciously taken decisions to act. This emphasises the perspective for those layers of reality, where the subject, is inter-active, interwoven with reality, affected, touched, and perhaps even overwhelmed by things. There is a type of experience in human beings, which goes beyond pure strategic activities. It includes sometimes even inactive, more passive elements, elements described by medical scholars like Victor von Weizsäcker and F. Buytendijk as "pathic behaviour" (Weizsäcker 1947; Buytendijk, 1956).

A theory of lived experience picks up the old dream to gain immediate access to the "vivid life", not in order to abolish it however to transform and resolve it. Reflecting more detailed on the project of reconstructing Lived Religion shows that to fix vivid immediacy with human scientific instruments is a scientific illusion – however a most necessary and most fruitful one, because it tries to give conceptual clearness about the initial pre-conceptual basis of experience. As the German philosopher Waldenfels put it: "The chain of reflections hangs on a pre-reflective nucleus of vivid presence which can only be grasped afterwards by a sort of "after-awareness" (Waldenfels 2002, 6)

The concept of “lived experience” was first elaborated by the German 19th century philosopher W. Dilthey in his hermeneutic reflection on the nature of poetry. To quote Dilthey: “A lived experience does not confront me as something perceived or represented; it is not given to me, but the reality of lived experience is there-for-me because I have a reflexive awareness of it, because I possess it immediately as belonging to me in some sense. Only in thought does it become objective. (Dilthey 1906/1985, 223). And it is worth while to note the truly intercultural origin of the concept: Dilthey’s German original text only one word “Erlebnis”, and the English translation coined the notion of “lived experience”. The current German expression of “Gelebte Religion” simply refers to the detour via the English translation.

Recent continental hermeneutic philosophy of religion picked up this line of philosophy of life from Dilthey, James, Husserl and others and gave a profound analysis of the structure of religious experience. Here is no place to deal with internal philosophical differences between the phenomenological tradition I referred to and the philosophy of religion. Let me instead briefly indicate the major points:

* In order to understand the very type of religious experience connected to the life-world-perspective it is most reasonable, to reconstruct religious experience as a prominent and model case of specific human experience in general. No serious theoretical attempt to deal with religious experience can ignore the difference between the life-world-perspective and theoretically-detached reflection. However, experience grasped as matter related to the fullness of human existence can be adequately represented in the theoretical sphere only, if the description does right to the actual **first-person-perspective**. And this is especially relevant when it comes to religious matters. A sufficient description must take care of the subjective meaning which a particular experience has for the experiencing person as subject. Theory must not omit the point, “that the phenomenon to be explained, does only come up by way of the subjective meaning giving activity.” (Jung 1999, 265). This is not the same as automatically sharing or endorsing the individuals’ meaning of the experience. To have a concrete idea of this principle, think of Jürgen’s giving meaning to the experience.

* However, to frame it that way might be misleading. “Neither exist uninterpreted ‘religious data’, nor is the splitting between ‘internal perspective vs. external explanation’ exhaustive” (Jung 264). To talk about religious experience in a human sense is theoretically legitimate in a form, which relates to the *internal* relation between subjective experience and meaningful religious traditions. Lived experience might not be split up into primary experiences and secondary interpretations. The interpretation is to be conceived as creative act of the subject, using cultural symbols to articulate the inner experiences. This **articulation** is part of the experience, because it shapes that what is experienced. This crucial point of articulation refers to Dilthey’s triadic description of experience Erlebnis-Ausdruck-Verstehen (Lived experience – Expression – Understanding). Articulation as the integrative element of experience and meaning-giving has been recently elaborated further on by many scholars (Taylor, Joas, Jung). It bridges creative personal meanings of an individual experience with collective expressions of symbolic meaning. Thus to express one’s experiences, for a subject human being him- or herself there is more at stake, than using collective language patterns for labelling inner experiences. Quoting Joas it is “*rather... an interplay between the situation experienced, our prereflective experience, our individual articulation, and the cultural repertoire of interpretative patterns.*” (Joas 2002, 512). If you remember the example of Jürgen, this point is evident.

* No doubt: other types of investigating religious behavior of people are in existence, are legitimate on other epistemological ground, and lead to important insights in factors. The

science-and religion program in this school is only one example. This approach might also be most useful for decision making on church affairs. However, as it comes to religious experience, theoretical models, which take the phenomena at stake as objectifications and as separate objects of empirical reflection are defective at least in this point that they do not sufficiently take care of the life-world-rooted meaning giving perspective of experience.. Some of you certainly will notice that this counterposition to a naturalistic approach to the empirical following Diltheys prominent distinction between “Geisteswissenschaften” and “Naturwissenschaften”.

It would be an **intolerable reduction** of human experience, following conventional ideals of objectivity by way of theoretical explanation, to filter the meaning-perspective out of a subject’s interpretation of reality. The perspective ‘for-me’ of lived experience would be extinguished in favor of an objectivist perspective.. In the perspective of natural or social sciences, it makes sense to look for objective knowledge. However, some objectives are not simply to be objectified. Among other issues human experience cannot be transformed adequately in theory by a “View from Nowhere” (Nagel 1979).

6 Experience and the objectives of Practical Theology

Practical Theology has a strategic task to describe and reflect on religious praxis, and to give way to better praxis in accordance with the Gospel, might it be faith committed praxis in general or specific praxis of professionals. What does the theoretical reflection on the structure of lived religious experience lead to for a model of Practical Theology? What type of theory does Practical Theology, focussing on experience consists of? And what concrete issues will be analysed?

As to the later, in recent year at Frankfurt faculty a number of particular research projects have been done. Let me just indicate the basic idea of three pieces:

- Last year a long term project has been finished analysing a person’s experience through living together in everyday life with a Sony robot pet (Scholtz 2008). The results of this qualitative study help theology in its interpretation of “life” to keep in touch with forms of life, deeply influenced and changes by artificial intelligence.
- Last month another study has been submitted to the faculty as doctoral thesis which intends to analyse peoples’ religious experiences within participating in different forms of Sunday service. Inspired by the concept of “lived experience” it tries to investigate recent practical efforts of congregations to shape services more communicative. Moreover it tries to elaborate “experience” as theological category in order to reformulate critically the intention of protestant theology of liturgy
- * A current phenomenological study does research into religious experience of nature, starting with participant observation at “Schrebergarten”, and accompanying people during high mountain hiking tours, evaluating snapshot-habits of people during their vacations and other life-world-related praxis (cf.Grewel 2007).

It is my conviction, that Empirical Theology following lived experience includes enlargement of both, the material objects and the formal object of theological research (Failing/Heimbrock: 1998: Dinter/Heimbrock/Söderblom 2007). Recently the young Swiss Practical theologian D. Plüss in his 2006 inaugural lecture proposed a threefold answer to the question: Practical Theology should conceive its reflective task in three directions. Especially due to the complexity of experience it should undertake three types of theoretical efforts: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and action oriented theory. Combining these types of theory Practical Theology in his view is capable to deal adequately with the three origins of religious praxis, i.e. lived experience, articulation, and interpretation (Plüss 2008).

I share Plüss ambition that Practical Theology as an academic discipline has to develop a structural concept of its job within the academy. A problem of his proposal however is that it looks like a fairly additive solution, resembling by and large a conventional three steps model, first perception, second interpretation, third renewed action. As to the formal objective of Practical Theology I would like to indicate the surplus of Empirical Theology based on “lived religious experience” with points:

Broadening the concept of religion

Taking up the phenomenological impulse does open our eyes as theological investigators for religious behaviour outside the realm of explicit religious behaviour. The example of Jürgen of is unique, nevertheless it is also an example for a type of religious experience, in which people in everyday life, outside the rituals and activities of explicit religious bodies are behaving in a way relevant to theological interpretation. Theology which picks up this life-world-perspective does not restrict its perspective to belief and faith traditions, not even to “religious” objects. Rather it opens up its perspective towards an analysis of the culturally shaped forms and symbolic representations of life, to the overall question how people are related to reality in the experiential ‘pregiven-ness’ of their concrete life world encounter. This enables empirical theologians to study and reconstruct the pre-reflexive and pre-theoretical involvement of human beings with everyday life and culture. Likewise the concept helps to reinterpret those strata of religious praxis, which are undoubtedly part of corporal practice of faith groups: prayer, meditation, taking part in services.

This helps us to avoid a particular protestant short-cut in conceiving religion and religious praxis. The notion of “articulation” implies the idea that human religious praxis consists of a wide range of individual and collective patterns, to express of the individual’s experiences meaningful. Within the symbolic form our verbal instruments are only covering a bit. To repeat: Experience does things that break through the edges of our linguistic structures.”

Understanding the structure of human behaviour theologically:

Lived experience taken as fundamental category for Practical Theology gives way to a refreshed understanding of human behaviour. Whereas in Cartesian traditions human action, including religious praxis is usually conceived as being intended by a subject, and directed voluntarily towards an object, in lived experience we discover ourselves intertwined with reality. Some of these behaviours are going beyond active behaviour, let’s say in defining a frame of reference to attribute a religious meaning to objectives in reality in a transitive manner. This perspective is about the pathic element in the encounter of reality, to put it in P. Tillich’s words: “The presupposition of theology is that there is a special way in which reality imposes itself on us.” (Tillich 1946, 17). And this mode of reality is not restricted to any segment of culture labelled in linguistic conventions as “religious” or Christian”. However, related phenomena are important anthropological analogies to the theological interpretation of life from God’s passion in Christ.

Thus, the object of Practical Theology as Empirical Theology is Christian praxis within the life world as action and as aesthetic praxis, centred in the first-person-perspective, seen with a specific, pathic mode of perception,. The awareness of a human being interwoven with the active and re-active structure of life, with otherness, could serve as an understanding of reality in accordance with the dynamic and mysterious structure of life in theological interpretation inspired by the theology of Christ’s cross.

7 On methods

Decisive for any theological research is the clarification of methods in terms of general scientific standards. This is also vital for Practical Theology, if it shows the capacity to carry out research on sound methodological ground and to instruct researchers about what they really should do in the field. However it seems to be rather a long way from my reconstructive remarks on the experience of Jürgen to a substantial research project. It is not an easy task to transform reflection on the structure of experience into a design for appropriate methods.

In our “Introduction to Empirical Theology” (2007) we described largely methodological basis and methodical tools of research in connection to specific research objectives. We make extended use of methodical insights developed so far in other fields of phenomenological research like pedagogy (van Manen 1990), ethnography (Agar 1996) and other non-theological research models (Moustakas 1994). Like in any other empirical research one can identify genuine steps of an appropriate research process. However there is no fixed hierarchy, no subsequent line of methodical activities to accomplish in a prefixed order. Nevertheless one can identify characteristic and undeniable research activities and research habits, if the approach might be called “life-world-oriented”.

- * Turning to a phenomenon: Personal Discovery of the research focus
- * First Perceptions in the Field
- * Self-reflection on the Researcher as Subject
- * Evaluating relevant research perspectives of other empirical disciplines
- * Investigating the phenomenon in the field
- * Interpretation and representation
- * Communicative validation
- * Formulating new research questions

The challenge is to take essential conceptual tools and methodological insights from phenomenology and other disciplines engaged in field study, which in itself are non-theological, in order to contribute to the basic practical theological task in connection with empirical research. Given the limitations of time I just would like to note briefly three decisive points on how to understand methods in this type of research:

* In modern theology there is no discipline, which claims to use methods which are single only to theology, exegesis applies general linguistic methods, philosophy of religion makes use of general logic, and so on. A “religious” method to hermeneutics of texts or a “religious” statistics is fundamentally at odd with general principles accepted in the academy. The principle of “methodical atheisms”, or more precise: “methodical agnosticism” is largely accepted in theology, because it claims to participate in general academic discourse. This however does not exclude a particular “interest of knowledge” as Habermas has elaborated (Habermas 1969). Neither does it exclude to discern a particular theological research interest, as we have been largely told by Schleiermacher in his Encyclopedia (Schleiermacher 1830/1966) The overall theoretical *interest of theology* following from the analysis of “lived religious experience” is directed towards a view of humankind seen as inter-active subjects engaged in living relations. Opposite a positivist ideal of objectivity, this interest puts an emphasis on the concern for human beings as experiencing and knowing subjects.

* Any empirical research has a *reconstructive character*. This is particularly the case with empirical theological research on “lived experience”. Reconstructive approach, going back, is hardly able or interested in prognostic results. Using this model, one tries to reconstruct the pre ‘given-ness’ of the life world perspective of “immediate experience”. One tries

to do the impossible: to mark in conceptual language the intertwining of participatory immediacy and distending reflection which is decisive for religious praxis within the context of everyday life. Perception guided by phenomenology tries to reach back to life world in its immediate and complex experience, to religion as if it were in the process of becoming. This approach helps “to make use of language in such a way as to make present to us what is inherently pre-linguistic and therefore essentially not transposable into a set of precisely delineated propositional statements.” (van Manen 50). And this helps us to keep in mind this necessary reference point of any empirical phenomenon

* The type of research appropriate to grasp lived religious experience and their articulation will be more like *case studies*, developed in qualitative empirical research. In this case the “case” is the product of interpretive research, not the basis. The intention is hermeneutic reconstruction, the particular case will be related to ideal types. But case studies do not proceed inductively in order to produce generalised statements. The difference to the single case will not be explained by causal factors, rather described and interpreted in order to come to a fuller” meaningful understanding of the particular in its singularity and concreteness .

To be clear about the intention of this type of Empirical Theology, the pretension is not to develop a “better” or “more effective” methodology compared to social scientific empirical research. It can hardly contribute to the analysis of detached data or to the measurement of large-scale correlations. Rather it claims to enlarge the perspective of Empirical Theology by drawing on overlooked phenomena and by applying the relational concept of experience next to the detached model. Using the approach of “lived experience”, it is able to address other questions, and thus this type of theology follows other intentions in the analysis of experience with particular focus on elements and dimensions of the experiential side of reality.

7 Concluding Remarks

Ladies and Gentlemen, reaching the end of my lecture, let me conclude with some general remarks.

* The benefit from Empirical Theology to a school of theology in general might be to keep up reflected contact with religious life in congregations and in culture Christians are participating. It inspires a theological education and sharpens our eyes to have a closer look at the most familiar experiences, perceiving them with fresh eyes. If the task of Christians is to take part in God’s ongoing creation of the world, Empirical Theology contributes some intellectual tools to reconstruct this process.

* Practical Theology focusing particularly on “lived experience” helps theology in general to profile its indispensable role within the academy. In times, when “life sciences” are scoring very high, there is extra need to communicate the surplus of theological theory to the interpretation of humankind. Our epistemological reasoning provides secular arguments to enlarge an understanding of life and reality beyond restricted ideals of natural scientific objectivity.

* Third, Empirical Theology contributes to the coherence of the discipline of Practical Theology: Deepening into the nature of religious and human experience at best do not lead to a secondary body of knowledge separate from and independent of homiletics, congregational studies, faith development theory, pastoral care and so on. It rather reflects on basic processes and organizing concepts for praxis like reality, experience, language, action, and so on, which explicitly or implicitly are used, wherever theology is engaged in understanding and guiding Christian religious praxis.

* Finally, I would like to express my deep wishes to the progress of your new Center for Practical Theology at BU. You took the courage to a new research initiative which certainly will contribute to enlarge and profile the school within US-American partner schools. Looking at this initiative from the perspective of a guest and colleague from Europe I welcome your Center cordially. Frankly spoken, I am a little bit jealous, because you were the first to do it. Anyhow, we are grateful to you because you did it, and also we will profit from it. Your new institution will help to strengthen Practical Theology in the international scene as well.

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