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## **The Cultural Context of Practical Theology – A German Perspective**

Let me start with a few introductory remarks. The topic of this section of our conference is "Practical theology in diverse cultural contexts". This can mean that we are to report about the state of practical theology in our respective countries. In my understanding it may, or even should, also mean that we are to address the more general issue of the contextual nature of practical theology. In my statement I will attempt both – to give you some information about practical theology in Germany and to address the question of cultural contextuality of practical theology.

I have three points: I will start with some general considerations about the question of cultural contextuality in practical theology. Second I will apply the question to the German situation. And third I will ask what cultural contextuality might mean for international discourse on practical theology's contribution to the struggle over the future of the church.

### **1. The Meaning of Cultural Context for Practical Theology: Some General Considerations**

In our everyday work as practical theologians we do not think about the contextuality of our theorizing. Rather in most cases we work within a given frame of reference which results from a particular religion and from a particular cultural situation. For the most part, contact and cooperation in the university or in the field will not challenge the contextual cultural limits of practical theology. But as soon as we enter into international dialogue we will in fact realize to what degree our theories are limited by cultural context.

For me this became clear three years ago when we had a first international symposium on practical theology at Tübingen. At this symposium we hit upon a clear example of the cultural limitations of language which actually caused much confusion in our discussions. The term which this was all about was a simple one: *the church*. It was quite impossible for us to translate or even clarify the meaning of the term *church* between Germans and Americans. Obviously the respective background assumptions were so strong that mutual understanding was almost excluded.

From this experience the question arises if a conference like ours is even possible. Can practical theology be done across cultural boundaries? Can there be a general practical theology, of international scope and with intercultural validity?

When Friedrich Schleiermacher fathered the new discipline of practical theology he also raised the question what scope this discipline could have. He asks if practical theology might be the same for protestant and catholic theologians, and if it could claim validity beyond Germany. Schleiermacher's answer to the question of the denominational character of practical theology is fairly typical for his dialectical style. He contends that both, a purely positive and a purely negative answer would be equally mistaken. The truth, he says, is in between both answers. "Some rules will be identical for both churches; but when one goes into detail, the difference between the principles also becomes visible here" (*Praktische Theologie* 51). For him, the different relationship between clergy and lay people in the protestant and catholic tradition necessitates different practical theologies. And because of the international differences in the structure of churches and in the traditions of worship practical theology can only be developed at a national level.

Schleiermacher's concern with the limits of practical theology is no coincidence. Neither is it due to protestant apologetics against catholicism. Rather it follows quite systematically from his understanding of practical theology itself. If practical theology has its place at the juncture of theological principles on the one hand and the historical development of church and Christianity on the other, then the scope of practical theology goes as far as the acceptance of these principles and as far as the given cultural and historical context.

My term *cultural and historical context* is of course rather vague. What are the limits of such a context? How can they be specified? Schleiermacher's answer refers to language. For him historical and practical disciplines are dependent upon a common language. For mathematics which can be communicated through abstract formulas this is different. For practical or technical disciplines like education or practical theology however, the boundaries of theory coincide with the boundaries of language.

So for Schleiermacher the extension of practical theology is contingent upon shared principles of a religious community and upon the linguistic and cultural context.

## 2. **Praktical Theology in Germany: Denominational, Regional and National Contextuality**

When we look at the development of practical theology in Germany Schleiermacher's point of view seems to hold true in many ways. In Germany practical theology has clearly developed along cultural and denominational lines. At the same time, however, there is a growing need for communication and cooperation between the various strands of practical theology in Germany.

Let me specify this observation with three cases: protestant and catholic practical theology; practical theology in east and west; and finally the national limitations of the practical theological discussion.

a. Practical theology in Germany has developed in two distinct traditions, protestant and catholic. There have been several points of inter-connection, and you may also observe many parallels in the respective developments on either side. Until recently or even until today, however, protestant and catholic practical theology in Germany cannot be considered a unified discipline.

Seen from a demographic perspective this may be surprising since there are no more parts in the country which would be exclusively protestant or catholic. The denominational distribution of the population is mixed throughout the country, with the exception of the former GDR where there are approx. 25% protestants, 5% catholics and 70% who claim no affiliation with any religious body. It seems that the difference of theology is strong enough to create two different practical theologies in Germany, irrespective of the cultural situation.

Increasingly, however, both practical theologies encounter quite parallel challenges, especially in respect to the future of the church. A drop in church membership, decreasing participation in church services, lessening support from families for Christian nature, discontinuities in the religious orientation between the generations — all these main issues on today's agenda of church leaders are to be found with catholics as well as Protestants.

b. My second case are the differences between practical theology in east and west. In the last 40 years practical theology in east and west have gone different ways in Germany. From a common starting point in 1945 they have developed along their own lines. Again there has been continuous contact between practical theology in east and west and there has certainly been a certain amount of exchange. Nevertheless even today, under the conditions of national and political unity, practical theology in east and west have not grown together.

In this case it was most of all the cultural and political situation which caused the different developments. Different societies with different presuppositions for the development of the churches have brought about different practical theologies, maybe even different understandings of practical theology itself. In the west practical theology is much closer to the social sciences. In many cases practical theologians specialize in cultural analysis which they consider to be crucial for their work. In the east the relationship between culture and theology is more distant. The hostility which the church encountered with the socialist government as well as a stronger theoretical division between religion and culture are the backdrop of practical theology there. This is not to say that practical theology in the east was or is in favor of splendid isolation. There have been quite remarkable efforts to work for "the other", to have a church not for oneself but "for others", as it was called with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's phrase. But nevertheless its own self-definition in respect to culture in general had to develop differently under the auspices of a socialist state.

Given the unification of church associations which followed the national unity, today's challenge lies in the cooperation between practical theology in east and west. In many cases it is necessary for the future of the church that the church can speak with a single voice. But how will the church be able to do so as long as there is no agreement between practical theology in east and west?

c. My third case is of a somewhat different nature. This time I do not want to compare different developments within Germany. Rather I want to look at practical theology in Germany as whole. Here, the issue of cultural contextuality becomes visible in that practical theology in Germany has for the most part developed within a close national community of discourse. The scientific community which is addressed, and which in turn is listened to, is a strictly German community.

This is remarkable at a time when other fields of theology have clearly widened their audience to include scholars from many other countries whose voices can no longer be excluded from the conversation.

In practical theology no such widening of audiences can be observed (unless we consider our own enterprise here as a future point in case). Even in the past, however, there have been a small number of exceptions to the rule of exclusively national development. These exceptions are of special interest here because they show how practical theology has relied on means of communication which are different from its own indigenous body of theory has gained influence mostly in American practical theology and, later on, has attracted similar atten-

tion in Germany. This is especially true for the pastoral counseling movement and for the influence of Rogerian psychology.

The other example of international exchange has to do with the social sciences, especially with the sociology of religion. Sociological theories like the functionalism of Talcott Parsons or the phenomenology of Peter Berger have equally influenced practical theology in Germany, in the U.S. and in other countries.

From this we may conclude that international and intercontextual contact and exchange in practical theology did not happen through practical theology itself but rather through external media. Especially the social sciences and psychology have functioned as media of inter-cultural and intercontextual communication for practical theology.

### **3. Cultural Contextuality, International Dialogue and the Struggle over the Future of the Church**

What is the possible contribution of such considerations on the cultural contextuality of practical theology concerning the struggle over the future of the church? Are there any implications for this struggle? And given the cultural contextuality of practical theology — how is international dialogue possible?

Given the observation that international exchange in practical theology has taken place through the media of psychology and of cultural analysis two expectations may be formed. The first expectation concerns the techniques which were designed in practical theology. Can international dialogue lead to the identification of certain techniques and, moreover, of quality standards for such techniques which could claim international authority? Should we strive, just like in psychology and medical science, for an international professional agreement on what procedures are to be considered legitimate and effective in practical theology?

What clearly speaks against such aspirations is the paradigmatic shift which can currently be observed in pastoral theory in the U.S. as well as in Germany. Psychology and psychoanalysis no longer are considered the prime sources for pastoral care. Rather, there has been a clear turn towards ethics and hermeneutics which are now seen as the decisive background for the future development of pastoral care. Although the relationship to psychology is not given up altogether there is a notable shift in the direction of hermeneutical and ethical analysis.

The reason for this shift in pastoral care and practical theology is to be found, at least among others, in recent cultural developments which include a more critical stance towards psychological professionalism. Again a different cultural situation requires a different response from practical theology. When people have become sceptical of psychology's promises the pastoral care can no longer profit from a psychological identity either.

This brings us back to cultural analysis in general. Does cultural analysis offer more of a platform for international dialogue? Can such analysis contribute to the struggle over the future of the church?

In my opinion this will in fact be the case if cultural analysis is to mean intercultural comparative studies in practical theology. This kind of studies has proven its usefulness in various other fields like sociology and anthropology. It may also be of help in practical theology's attempt to become clear about the future of the church.

One of the focal points of the struggle over the future of the church in many countries today is the question of *modernity*. How should the churches respond to the challenges of modernity? Have churches already gone too far in adapting themselves to modernity, or do they still have to face up to modernity because they have remained premodern in their state of development? — This question can of course be answered through practical theological studies within one's own context, say the German or American cultural situation. In many ways, however, comparative studies of the situation in different countries may shed some new light on this question.

What may become clearer through such comparative attempts is the effect of certain social and religious institutions or of certain church policies which exist in one country but are absent in the other.

To mention at least one example let me point to the question of religious education in public schools which we have in Germany. This institution has come under much dispute after the German unification. Can the consequences of the absence of religious education in public schools be studied by looking at the situation in the U.S. where no such classes exist? This would be a topic to be examined through comparative studies.

Of course many difficulties will have to be solved if such comparisons are to work. Is it even possible to isolate the effects of a single institution like religious education? In spite of such questions it seems promising to me to undertake such comparative studies (and the IAPT might offer an occasion to actually do so).

Even now, without the grounds of academic scrutiny, international comparisons play an important role in the struggle over the future of the church. Opponents of religious education in public schools in Germany point to the U.S. in order to show that the future of the church acutally does not depend on this kind of educational support.

If practical theology is to contribute to the struggle over the future of the church and if it is to do so, at least among others, through international dialogue the method of choice is the *comparative study of church, culture and religion*.