

# Can “God” be reformed? Musings on a Faithful and Responsible Practical Theology

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The article examines recent publications in the field of practical theology, to see how the “God” reference is invoked. It addresses a tendency to downplay this reference in favor of a scientific analysis of “lived religion”. While acknowledging the harmful aspects of many traditional views of God, the disqualification of the “God” reference in a highly secularized world, and the need for new perspectives on the spiritual dimension of life, the article argues in favor of a God-centered theological endeavor anchored in a clearly identified religious or spiritual tradition. Faith is understood here as a dialectical process of listening and responding to the divine as perceived in human experience. Practical theology is presented as a reflexive task within and about this process. By its very nature, the “God” reference calls for reform, not only of our representations of the divine, but of our lives and of our world.

You, God, are my God,  
earnestly I seek you;  
I thirst for you,  
my whole being longs for you,  
in a dry and parched land  
where there is no water. (Ps 63:1)

Could this be the prayer of practical theologians? If it were so, what would it say about our identity and activity? That the quest for God is central to us. That our *longing* is rooted in a sense of *be-longing*, expressed both in naming God and in addressing ourselves to God. That *be-longing* to God, far from implying a form of possession or achievement, compels our search for God. That this search is not merely a rational venture, but a holistic one, which involves us entirely. That our thirst is exacerbated by our location and, in turn, unveils the true nature of this location: “a dry and parched land where there is no water”.

Such a prayer is subjectively grounded and God-oriented. But most forms of practical theology today do not work this way. Despite recent challenges

coming from feminist and postcolonial approaches (Dreyer 2016), subjectivity is still downplayed in research methodologies pledging allegiance to the classical scientific method. And in the context of highly secularized Western societies, practical theological research rarely foregrounds the quest for God, whatever the inner faith incentives of the researchers might be.

I muse about the “God” reference in practical theology as a contribution to the ongoing reflection on the identity and methods of the field. I ask a simple question: what makes practical theology a *theological* endeavor? Is it still about God or gods (*theos*),

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or has it moved on to other matters, in the way philosophy has come to grapple with all kinds of issues hardly related to the love of wisdom (*philo-sophia*)? Common answers to that question can be summed up as follows: 1) “Practical theology is theological in that it studies ‘godly matters’, aka religions.” But even if we agreed that religions deal with God or gods, which is certainly not self-evident (Despland 1979), the different sciences of religion (*religionswissenschaft*) that have developed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century claim to do precisely that—to study religion—and they insist their task is *non-theological*. The question rebounds: what constitutes a *theological* study of religion? 2) “Practical theology builds ‘theological theories’ about religious practices.” But apart from the obvious tautology here, the question remains: in what sense are such theories *theological*? To make progress here, I believe we must go beyond the objects and methods of practical theology, and examine our stance (*where* we are), the nature of our quest (*what* we are looking for), and our purpose (*why* we do what we do).

I write from the context of Quebec, Canada, which has experienced a rapid transition from a strong embeddedness in Catholicism to advanced secularism in a few decades (Lefebvre 2000; Lefebvre 2007; Nadeau 2009). Beyond even secularism, a persistent anti-religious resentment—which the political theorist Gilles Labelle (2006; 2011) calls an “anti-theological wrath”—simmers in the media, the academy, and the whole of society. Although this attitude aims at religion and not theology per se, it has caused, amongst other casualties, the extinction of most theological faculties in barely 20 years (Mager 2016a). One might blame those faculties, as if they were simply on the decline; however, as a rule, they were precisely doing what most practical theologians are calling for today—facilitating creative transactions between church, society and academia (Baum 2014).

## A snapshot of the field

Such generalizations hardly honor the variety and profundity of the current practical theological literature; still, I suggest that they resonate *prima facie* with mainstream activity in the field. To test them, I thematically and rhetorically analyzed a year-long (2014) production of the *International Journal of Practical Theology* (IJPT) comprising fifteen articles in order to see how “God” is invoked.

I present the results of this analysis in broad strokes.<sup>1</sup>

Three articles are in the sub-field of social care. They suggest that the perspective of God’s love (Goodall 2014; Norris 2014) or naming a person as God’s child (Swinton 2014) can transform a caregiver’s understanding, attitude and practice towards people living with dementia or other afflictions. A traditional faith perspective is fully operational here: practical theology is about “reflecting critically on Christian practices as they interrelate with the practices of the world” (Swinton 2014, 245). Goodall suggests that practical theology investigates “what God is doing in the world” (Goodall 2014, 250). Similarly, a fourth article aims at helping Christians develop “a God-like unity of personality through both their work and religious ideals” (Blosser 2014, 54) in order for them to “rightly respond to God’s presence in the world” (52), especially the business world. A fifth article offers a typology of catechetical environments; references to God appear amongst the various elements of the Christian faith addressed by catechesis (de Kock 2014). A sixth text makes a methodological call for a more God-centered “description, analysis and reconstruction of religious practices” (Immink 2014, 127). Those six articles refer to God in ways that presume that a religious tradition is shared with the readers. The readers are supposed to know what is meant by God’s love, presence, action, personality and so forth. The articles are about Christian practices, though Immink extends the interest of practical theology to other forms of “lived religion” (Immink 2014, 132).

Immink’s contribution is related to other texts authored by Wilhelm Gräb, Christiaan Hermans, Friedrich Schweitzer, Ruard Ganzevoort and Birgit Weyel who, along with Jaco Dreyer, all took part in a panel discussion on methodological issues at the 2013 Conference of the International Academy of Practical Theology held in Toronto (Canada). Most of these texts converge in the way they see lived reli-

<sup>1</sup> A downside of proceeding this way is that I will not engage the conversation with the many formidable volumes published recently which address my methodological concerns in different and insightful ways (such as Miller McLemore 2011; Cahalan and Mikoski 2014; Wolfteich 2014; Wolfteich and Dillen 2016; Mercer and Miller-McLemore 2016). This limitation is necessary to keep my inquiry focused on a clearly defined sample of texts.



gion as the object of practical theology and scientific theory building as its main task.

They present the concept of lived religion in different ways. As a whole, it aims at the experiential and practical dimensions of religion, in distinction from their institutional forms (organizations, sacred texts, dogmas, etc.). The authors strive to distance religion from a direct reference to God (thus Gräb 2014, 109: “the religious is definitely not to be essentially linked to God”), though Immink insists on the necessary “interaction with the divine” (2014, 132) and Hermans on “superhuman agents” (2014, 120). In their definition of religion, those authors prefer to rely on other concepts such as transcendence, sacredness, otherness, the ultimate, the ineffable, and spirituality. As I understand it, they define religion in reference to anthropological concepts akin to the divine but distinct from it, thus justifying the theological endeavor while letting go of any definite understanding of God. These concepts target an anthropological (and theological) reality believed to be perceivable in “spiritual and existential practices” (Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014, 91), or more specifically under the form of “culturally mediated objectifications and externalizations” of otherwise unseizable inner experiences (Weyel 2014, 155, citing Clifford Geertz). For the practical theologian studying the “lived spirituality and/or religion” of people, God can only be objectified as “God-as-they-understand-it” (Hermans 2014, 122).

These authors emphasize that lived religion becomes the object of theory building, a task which secures the scientific status of practical theology within the academy. Hermans writes: “If [practical theology] want [*sic*] 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.” (Hermans 2014, 116) Weyel acknowledges the tensions created in some theological or ecclesial milieus by “[the] scientifically devised difference between the practice of religion and the theory construction which refers to that practice” (2014, 151), but she believes that “[the] institutional differentiation of practical theology into empirical cultural hermeneutics and an action-oriented science, which is focused on the profession, has the advantage of the two being able to relieve and complement each other.” (154). Our authors consider that the scientific task thus conceived is fully theological, since lived religion is the object of “theological study” (Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014, 99) or “theological theories” (Hermans 2014,

113; Gräb 2014, 112). But they themselves ask: “How will theological theory on religion differ from other theories on religion?” (Hermans and Schweitzer 2014, 90) Such a theology is no longer religiously affiliated to a religious tradition; it is not about building “theory *in* faith”, but theory about the different manifestations of lived religion (Hermans 2014, 116). In this sense, none of its key features requires (or justifies) it to be Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist practical theology.<sup>2</sup>

## Five concerns

Understanding practical theology as the scientific study of lived religion has obvious advantages. It unlocks the tight link between the theological endeavor and traditional, normative, institutionally-defined views of God. It renders possible a critique of those views, in terms of their theistic, deistic, paternalistic and otherwise hidden underpinnings. The traditional representations of God no longer create the standard by which the burgeoning “spiritual and/or religious” experiences of our contemporaries are described and assessed. Practical theology thus acknowledges the decisive shift from a traditional Western civilization based on a God-given order, to diversified modern societies which are no longer religion-driven. It widens its field of interest to all sorts of experiences of the divine, anthropologically understood in terms of sacredness, otherness, transcendence and the like. By adopting a resolute scientific stance, it strives to strengthen the status of theology within the academy, as complement to and in dialogue with other sciences devoted to the study of human phenomena.

Nevertheless, those advantages might be obtained at the cost of the integrity of the theological discipline. I make this blunt—maybe even offensive—statement in order to advance the methodological discussion. My concerns are fivefold.

First, such a practical theology does not differ in essence from the various sciences of religion. As in-

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2 Bhikshuni Lozang Trinlae’s “Prospects for a Buddhist Practical Theology” (2014) is in search of a middle ground. It fully subscribes to an understanding of practical theology as “an empirically descriptive and critically constructive theory of religious practice” (12, quoting Gerben Heitink), but it tries, nonetheless, to maintain a location of that theoretical activity under the authority of specific religious traditions (13).



licated by David Hall (1997, vii), the very notion of “lived religion” is inherited from the French sociological tradition of Gabriel Le Bras (1942; 1945) and his followers. For decades now, the various sciences of religion have paid close attention to different facets of lived religion, including discourses, practices, experiences, phenomena, engaging both descriptive and hermeneutical issues. When compared to the psychology or sociology of religion, practical theology, so understood, becomes not “just” science of religion (Weyel 2014, 151), but *precisely* science of religion. The sciences of religion, and all forms of science, offer tremendous value to practical theological endeavors, but I wonder where and how any form of science of religion becomes a theological endeavor.

Second, the reference to “theological theories” or “theological concepts” does not constitute in itself a satisfactory solution. What do such expressions entail? One of two things. Either theological concepts such as salvation, revelation, nirvana, or the like are harvested from theological traditions, and in so doing, the analysis does proceed from some specific tradition and should be clear about this root. Or those concepts are developed around a “dimension of the divine,” perceived and interpreted in the phenomenon of lived religion. But then we end up with a multiplicity of concepts (sacredness, otherness, transcendence, ultimate meaning, etc.) which seem interchangeable. Aren’t these concepts terribly abstract? Do they refer to “the same thing”? Do they offer a convincing testimony to some universal spiritual dimension of human life? Don’t these concepts belong primarily to discussions in anthropological philosophy and philosophy of religion, rather than to theology *per se*?

Third, the methodological “distance” inherent in a modern understanding of science (Weyel 2014) comprises a renunciation to any “special, intuitive or privileged knowledge of the material object” (Hermans 2014, 116). To what extent is this form of science up to the task of granting deep knowledge about what is at stake in experiences of the divine? Trinlae (2014, 10) quotes Roger Jackson who writes: “it may be a hallmark of ‘religions,’ and at least one way of distinguishing them from ‘philosophies,’ that their adherents cannot rest content only with pondering the ultimate; somehow, they must gain access to it, either directly or indirectly.” Theologians—like all intellectuals—tend to overemphasize ideas over practices and experiences; they must constantly remind themselves that “meaning” is not just

“food for thought” but an all-encompassing challenge crossing all aspects of life, including work, relationships, art, politics, and, as such, requires multifaceted forms of intelligence and enquiry involving as much personal commitment as it calls for “distance”. For instance, Swee Hong Lim’s article on “musicking” suggests that music is a deeply constructing form of art that challenges practical theology to develop “a theo-music aesthetics approach” (2014, 305). One would hardly restrict the study of music to the scientific apparatus of musicology, nor would we imagine that the learning sciences could stay free of bodily engagement within the struggles of education. As Karl Rahner (1978, 16) wrote: “It is precisely we theologians who are always in danger of talking about heaven and earth, about God and man with an arsenal of religious and theological concepts which is almost limitless in its size and proportion. We can acquire in theology a very great skill in talking and perhaps not have really understood from the depths of our existence what we are really talking about.”

For such reasons, “theory building” may not satisfactorily express the theological endeavor. *Theoria* evokes the visual stance of the onlooker who watches what is going on “at a distance”; in what ways—if not by the typical bias of the Greek philosophical thinker—is the knowledge obtained in this way superseding the one developed through *praxis*? In this sense, isn’t theology as a whole—and not only practical theology—better served when it is conceived and exercised as a form of *theoria* developed within (and not just about) religious/spiritual *practices* (*fides quaerens intellectum*)?

Finally, insofar as theologians do not feel bound by a religious tradition and stay distanced from the religious practices they study, how can they hope to overcome the “elevation of the descriptive over the normative” which is typical of the modern academy, at least in principle (Trinlae 2014, 11, quoting Roger Jackson)? As put by Hermans and Schweitzer themselves (2014, 90): “Are we making prophetic theological interpretations, or do we study people who make prophetic interpretations?” Most practical theologians claim to be “engaged scholars” (Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014, 100) who offer “value-driven strategies” (Graham 2014, 197). But where do we find and how do we justify the criteria of our critical stance? Ganzevoort and Roeland (2014, 100) thus write: “A ‘preferential option’ for the praxis of the disenfranchised is an ethical requirement.” Why so? The neutrality of science has long been ques-



tioned (Polanyi 1952; Kincaid, Dupré, and Wylie 2007); science-based ethics and personal values are hardly satisfactory answers (Jenkins 2013). In a nutshell: “in what name” do the practical theologians speak?

## An anti-theological modern context

In advancing these critical elements, I do not advocate a neo-orthodox stance. The traditional Christian foundations of the Western world are irremediably broken. Modernity and its postmodern developments display worldviews and social (dis)orders which no longer rely on the Christian God as their foundation, apex or even central figure. Typically, in their multiplicity of forms, with their emphasis on reason and science, and their rejection of the “sacred trinity” of religion/authority/tradition (Arendt 1968), dominant modern and contemporary discourses are explicitly and intentionally *anti-theological*. Many of our contemporaries hold that a God who is out of space and time, who cares more for souls than bodies and who has proven to be hopelessly entangled with the politics of power and violence, can neither be redeemed nor “reformed” and would better be buried with the religious past. Traditional churches experience a sharp decline in most Western countries and tend to be shooed away from the public sphere.<sup>3</sup> In most countries, this disestablishment of churches and of the whole Judaeo-Christian tradition is reflected in the academy, where they are often associated with obscurantism and regressive ideas.

In this trying context, many Christians, churches and theologians are tempted to uphold traditional views of God against all odds, even when they are not necessarily keen to restore Christendom. But many others have long realized how the God of Christendom became an ossified, perverted and oppressive figure, an *idol* rather than an *icon* of the true God. Authors like Jean-Luc Marion (1991) have tried to untangle the tight knots linking God and the “Supreme Being” figure. Vast biblical, theological and pastoral endeavors have sought to renew the understanding of the Judaeo-Christian God, showing, amongst other things, how the ways we understand

and relate to God are entrenched in history and subject to criticism, in the very name of God. In our societies, cultures and academic circles, theologians are tempted in two directions: either to entrench themselves within traditional views, at the risk of losing public significance and relevance, or to abandon the God reference altogether, at the risk of alienating themselves from what they are about (Lison 2000). Most keep working on “the transfer of knowledge between university, society and church” (Weyel 2014, 159) in countries where such an interface still seems to be operational. But under the pressure of intensifying secularization, this could be less and less the case in many areas of the world, such as Quebec, where theology struggles to find research funding and to remain within the universities.

## Listening and responding to God

I understand, appreciate and partake the vast efforts made by practical theologians to study attentively their contemporaries’ experiences and practices and thus to “trace the sacred”, as Ruard Ganzevoort (2009) perceptively puts it. This rightfully leads them beyond the boundaries of traditional religions. I believe, however, that the theological edge of this endeavour depends upon the “critical faithfulness” (Stoddart 2014, 346) of the practical theologian towards a clearly identified religious tradition or belief system. A purely scientific stance risks to lose sight of what is at stake, which is the experience of the divine and the responses it incites. This calls for an ongoing “reform” of the “God” reference within the reflexive process of listening to the divine and of responding to it in today’s world.

God does not essentially appear as an *object* of our experiences and practices, but as what addresses them and happens to them in such a way that they are either gracefully transfigured or radically questioned. In a luminous chapter of his book *Raisons communes*, the sociologist, philosopher and theologian Fernand Dumont puts it in secular terms: as transcendent beings entangled in a historical process of humanization, we are judged by our deepest values long before we reflect upon them (Dumont 1995, 211). If this is so, the theological endeavor is concerned about human experiences, practices and situations insofar as they are epiphanic, that is, impacted by—or craving for—God’s grace. This grace cannot be objectified as such, nor can it be put at a distance in order to be simply examined “objective-

<sup>3</sup> In his analysis of the Scottish referendum, Eric Stoddart (2014, 318) indicates that “the single reference to the church in Scotland during a tableau broadcast to millions around the world was to avoiding ecclesial influence.”



ly” or “theorized.” Rather, these experiences, practices, or situations can be discerned critically, reflected upon, meditated “from within.” In this sense, to use biblical symbolism, theology is first and foremost a matter of *listening* to what manifests itself as the living God (“*Shema Israel*”). Reflection appears here as an inner dimension of that listening attitude and not as some afterthought detached from the demands of listening. Moreover, I believe there is no decisive reason to restrict the field of these experiences (or practices, or situations), and thus the scope of practical theology, to what Westerners call “religion” or even “spirituality”. In this 21<sup>st</sup> century more than ever, the most crucial challenges facing humanity, both individually and collectively, transcend the distinctions between religion and secularity, spirit and matter, sacredness and profanity, public and private, and the like. For instance, how can we collectively care for a world which we contribute to desacralize and dismantle everyday, by our very way of living? How can we favour and nurture specific cultural identities in a globalizing world? On what ground (religion, reason, wisdom?) can we establish ethical principles and get them to deal with our ever-expanding ability to manipulate the living? By which enchantment can we hope to neutralize the demonic dynamics of war?

Epiphanic phenomena are not simply there to be heard and felt, but they inherently call for a practical response. How to *respond* to the innermost challenges of our lives, personally and collectively, is the crucial theological problem. In this sense, theology is practical through and through. Many theological sub-disciplines deal essentially with the past—what our predecessors considered divine revelation and how they responded to that—and operate as post-mortem analyses. But practical theology deals with the living: our hopes, our fears, our struggles and the practices we devise to become better humans. “God is not the God of the dead but of the living” (Mt 22:32). Practical theology is “practical” not only because it is concerned with practices but, more fundamentally, because faith is structured as a dialectic of *listening-responding* (or, in this sense, theory and practice). In biblical terms, again: Jesus praises the person who “*hears my words and puts them into practice*” (Lk 6:47). Faith entails practical requirements. Likely, the listeners’ answer to Peter’s preaching at Pentecost is practical: “When the people *heard* this, they were *cut to the heart* and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘*Brothers, what shall we do?*’” (Acts 2:37) Consequently, practical theological

methodologies cannot remain at the threshold of concrete action and should comprise a theological proposal (Mager 2016b), such as the 5<sup>th</sup> phase (precisely called the “response”) in Thomas Groome’s methodology (Groome 1991; Stoddart 2014), or the 3<sup>rd</sup> phase of the classical see-judge-act sequence underlying many forms of theological reflection.

Can “God” be reformed? For many believers, this question has a blasphemous twist: “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” (Heb 13:7–8). But God does not seem to be such as to be confined within religious institutions, even the most revered ones (the Ark, the Temple, the Bible, the Magisterium). A long theological tradition has taught us to deny whatever we profess about God, in the very moment we profess it; other religious or philosophical schools raise similar requirements. A specific theological impulse encourages theologians, as all believers, to seek God beyond the boundaries of church experiences and structures. We may then realize that “reforming God” becomes a matter of re-forming our world and ourselves in response to what we perceive and understand as God’s presence, or God’s word, action, spirit, love. “Reform,” understood both as “re-creation” and “new creation”, might be what the very experience of God is all about.

Because your love is better than life,  
my lips will glorify you.  
I will praise you as long as I live,  
and in your name I will lift up my hands.  
I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods;  
with singing lips my mouth will praise you.  
On my bed I remember you;  
I think of you through the watches of the night.  
(Ps 63:3–6)

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