Making space for the religious other in practical theology: The need for broadening the discipline beyond traditional paradigms

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Religious spaces are changing, recently most visibly through migration. This implies that migration does not only have consequences on a material level, but also in terms of the religious traditions and self-understandings of countries or societies as well as religious bodies and individuals. Religious change is not always welcome, but often connected to prejudice, rejection and aggression. What should be the role of practical theology in this context? This article argues for a dual focus. First, it discusses new analytical tasks referring to religious change and reactions to it. Second, it identifies and evaluates strategies for accompanying the processes of religious change. In the past, this task was mainly connected to religious education. In the meantime, it has also become a topic in diaconal and liturgical contexts as well as of pastoral care. More far-reaching questions concerning the presuppositions of practical theology still need to be posed.

Introduction

Religious spaces are changing, like other spaces in Europe, recently most visibly through migration from Muslim countries. This implies that migration does not only have consequences on the level of providing physical space and material resources to people new to a country, but also with respect to the religious traditions and self-understandings of countries or societies as well as of religious bodies and individuals.

Religious change is not always welcome. Often it is connected with prejudice, rejection and aggression. What should be the role of practical theology in this interreligious context? It seems that this question has not received adequate attention, certainly not in the past and only in part at present. At the same time, the question of how practical theology should react to interreligious issues seems to be more and more inescapable, not only from the standpoint of the contemporary situation in society but also the self-understanding of this discipline,

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i. e. the question of how best to keep theology in close relationship with the changing social, cultural and religious realities of the times.

The aim of this article is to point out new tasks as well as a broader understanding of practical theology with respect to its religious presuppositions. After analyzing the neglect of interreligious issues in practical theology, this article suggests three kinds of tasks—*analytical tasks* for describing and deciphering the contemporary situation, *practical tasks* in terms of developing strategies for practice, and finally, *evaluative tasks* that critically accompany respective forms of practice. While these tasks are considered of core importance for broadening the

scope of practical theology vis-à-vis today's challenges, arising as they do from situations of migration and interreligiosity, an even more far-reaching need is identified for changing the *discipline of practical theology* itself. The now traditional shape of a practical theology premised on overcoming the limitations of the "pastoral paradigm" and also of the "clerical paradigm", as it has been called in practical theology discussions since the 1980s, must again change in order to accommodate the changing situation of increasingly multi-religious societies.

The author of this article is working in Central Europe or, more specifically, in Germany. Unavoidably, this background makes itself felt throughout the chapter. Yet, it is also obvious that the basic issues of migration and interreligiosity, or religious pluralism, are global phenomena encountered by practical theologians in most countries of the world (for one recent example from South Africa, see Renkin 2017). This is why the suggested changes concerning practical theology can be important beyond a European context.

The challenge: the neglect of interreligious issues in practical theology

As one can see from, for example, textbooks on practical theology from the past and present, interreligious issues have traditionally not been part of the scope of this discipline. While there have actually been vivid and controversial debates about the scope of practical theology—if it should primarily inform the individual pastor or if it should refer to the church or to society—the increasingly multi-religious situation characteristic of many countries today has not been addressed in such debates. Historically, this lack of interreligious awareness, especially in contributions concerning the foundations of the discipline, is probably due, first of all, to the presuppositions prevailing at the time that practical theology first emerged in Central Europe, i.e. the first half of the 19th century (*cf.* Schleiermacher 1850; Nitzsch 1847). Yet even with the re-emergence of this discipline at an international level during the 1980s, there was no subsequent re-evaluation of practical theology's relationship to interreligious questions (see Browning 1983a). It seems that interreligious perspectives have largely been absent from the foundational discourses concerning practical theology as a discipline, which has long been preoccupied with different matters.

The picture changes, at least to some degree, when one also considers the different sub-disciplines of practical theology. Yet again, the process of not only addressing, but of also fully integrating, interreligious perspectives has been rather slow. In order to demonstrate this point, some brief remarks must suffice:

- First of all, it was *religious education*, especially in the United Kingdom, which started making multi-faith situations in the school classroom a core subject of discussion in the 1960s and early 1970s (*cf.* Hull 1984; Jackson 1997). This was due, among other things, to the post-Commonwealth immigration to the United Kingdom, which, in comparison, to other European countries, witnessed the relatively early immigration of non-Christians in the late 1940s—Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. Moreover, the context of the state school led to more immediate encounters between teachers of religious education and members of other religious traditions than was the case for pastors in the local parishes. Since then, interreligious education has become one of the core topics in many countries (*cf.* Engebretson et al. 2010; Schweitzer 2014).

- Similar presuppositions are characteristic of many settings in which *diaconal work* takes place today. In retirement homes, hospitals, soup kitchens, charity shops, refugee shelters, and so forth, clients often have no Christian background but rather belong to non-Christian traditions. Moreover, the personnel, especially in care-giving institutions in Europe, come from many different countries and also from different religious backgrounds. This is why interreligiosity has also been a topic in diaconics (Schneider-Harpprecht 2004). For example, the acquisition of interreligious competence is now viewed as an important task in training future care-givers (Merkt et al. 2014).

- At least in some cases, *pastoral care* is directly connected to diaconal work and takes place in respective institutional contexts. Pastoral care-givers therefore also have been faced with the task of working with people from non-Western cultural and non-Christian religious backgrounds and adherences as opposed to more traditional settings of pastoral care within parishes. During the last two decades, the pastoral care discussion has become more and more aware of the need to include intercultural and interreligious issues (*cf.* as early examples Lartey 1987,

1997; overviews by Federschmidt and Louw 2015; Elsdörfer 2013; Liefbroer et al. 2017).

The same is not true, for example, for *homiletics*, although from my point of view it would make sense to also do research on preaching from the perspective of how a multi-religious world is—and can or should be—addressed in sermons. Taking into consideration, for example, the fact that sermons refer to the Trinity in situations where one's Muslim neighbors tend to take offense with exactly this type of Christian teaching could be a starting point for a kind of preaching consciously situated in a multi-religious world. Christological topics would be another core example. At least according to my own personal experience, however, such preaching rarely takes place. Moreover, more systematic bibliographic searches for models of preaching and interreligiosity at an international level did not show many results.

We are also now witnessing the beginning steps of integrating an interreligious dimension in *liturgics*. The interreligious peace prayers in Assisi organized by Pope John Paul II have become a symbol in this respect, but there are many more examples and developments in this direction (for a recent overview, see Moyaert and Geldhof 2016).

More examples could be added, for example from missiology (which sometimes is considered part of practical theology) or from research connected with the traditional sub-disciplines of practical theology. Yet, the point I want to argue here seems clear. The awareness of the need for addressing interreligious issues is growing in a number of practical respects. Yet, it seems fair to say that the process of integrating respective tasks with the structures and with the disciplinary presuppositions has only just started.

Tasks of practical theology concerning interreligiosity

How can the tasks of practical theology vis-à-vis multi-religious situations be specified? What makes these tasks part of practical theological research? In the following section, I want to suggest three groups of tasks that should be pursued more clearly in the future. Especially the third task, which relates to evaluation, appears to have been widely neglected.

Analytical tasks: analyzing the situation

For many European countries, the year 2015 marked a time when the number of refugees coming into the country was much higher than in previous years. In Germany, the number was well over one million (the equivalent of between 1 and 2 % of the total population). This experience led to many controversies and, among other things, to strong and hostile reactions from rightist movements. The religious background of the refugees often played a role in such reactions, although it was hard to say what people really meant when they referred to "Arab immigrants" or to "Muslim immigrants". In the 2017 election of the German Parliament, a right-wing party was elected into this parliament for the first time since 1945.

In such a situation, a clear analytic interpretation of the situation is of special importance. Providing such an analysis is, therefore, a primary task of practical theology—a task which it shares with other non-theological disciplines, but to which it brings a special religious expertise.

Key questions for this first task are as follows:
- What religious changes are taking place?
- What are the reactions to such changes? In what sense are they related to religion?
- How is the situation in churches? In society at large?

Generally speaking, churches and church-related volunteers in Germany were—and still are—very committed to helping refugees in finding access to support, for example housing, food, clothing, medical aid and language programs. This corresponds to the official stance taken by the church leadership in the country. Yet as social science studies have shown, the challenge of combatting prejudice against "foreigners" or the religious other even within Christian churches is often neglected (see Decker at al. 2016, 42). It is one of the tasks of practical theology to uncover such negative developments, no less than to study and reinforce the positive and welcoming reactions to be found among members of the Church. Without clear analysis of the problematic factors (which do not fit with the official image of the Church and which therefore are not highlighted by the Church leadership or by empirical studies commissioned by different churches; as an example from Germany, see EKD 2014), it will not be possible to effectively address them.

Practice-oriented tasks: developing strategies

The understanding that practical theology should take on the task of developing practical strategies is not shared by all understandings of the discipline. Friedrich Schleiermacher's well-known definition of practical theology as "theory of practice" (i. e. it is not practice itself, Schleiermacher 1850, 12) is then understood to mean that practical theology should presuppose the practice it means to analyze rather than produce it. There is certainly some wisdom in this understanding. It is not always the case that an academic discipline is really prepared for practical tasks. Its main expertise is in research rather than practical action.

In a field like education, with which I am most familiar, the division of labour is nonetheless not always so clear-cut. Theory and practice can go hand in hand, for example, with the development of strategies for interreligious education. Key questions for this task are as follows:

- How can people be supported in really getting to know the religious other?
- How can the ability or competence of perspective-taking—taking the perspective of the religious other as a core presupposition of understanding and respecting the other—be fostered?
- How can attitudes that allow for openness towards the religious other be supported, while attitudes like xenophobia and ethnocentrism be kept at bay?

These questions were at the center of one of our recent research projects, which dealt with religious education in vocational schools (schools that serve pupils being trained for types of employment that do not require an academic education—a group which often is viewed as especially prone to stereotypes) (see Schweitzer, Bräuer and Boschki 2017). The project addressed general topics regarding the relationship between "Religions and Violence", but it also took up the recent focus on "Islamic Banking" (banking based on the Quran, which does not allow for the taking or paying of interest and, therefore, no financial speculation)—a topic which seemed to be of special interest to the future bank clerks who were part of the project. In both cases, the development of teaching units was carried out together by researchers and experienced practitioners, i. e. between theory and practice.

With both teaching units, the aims were in line with the questions or aims mentioned above. What made this project especially interesting, however, was that it also included what I want to describe as a third task for practical theology.

Evaluation-oriented tasks: testing the effects of practical strategies

Generally speaking, there has often been a lack of realism in the field of practical theology. Even more than 100 years ago, practical theologians like Friedrich Niebergall complained about this lack, which they considered detrimental to the whole discipline (see Niebergall 1916). Yet until today, efforts to critically evaluate the possible effects of certain strategies have remained rare. In part, this is due to the often quite complex settings in which such strategies are employed and which make it difficult to do research in a valid manner. In most parishes, attempts at evaluation may appear misplaced from the beginning, to the ministers no less than to the parishioners. Moreover, such research is especially demanding when carried out according to the rules of social scientific research, for example with several measuring points and with control groups—criteria which are difficult to meet under any circumstance. Last but not least, there always is the tendency to be content with the good theological or ethical reasons that speak for certain actions as well as with the certainly best intentions of those involved, for example as church workers or volunteers.

In our own work, especially with the research on interreligious education mentioned above, we had the chance to also look into the actual effects of the teaching units developed as part of the project (see Schweitzer, Bräuer and Boschki 2017; for a detailed description, see Losert 2017). We were able to design special questionnaires as instruments for measuring these effects. Moreover, we were able to administer the questionnaires three times to the same groups of pupils, at the beginning of the respective teaching unit, after its completion and approximately six months later. In part, the results were encouraging, but in part they were also disappointing or at least sobering.

Three main results can be described briefly in the following manner:
- The clearest results could be stated as part of the *knowledge component*. The pupils in both experimental groups showed a greater increase in reli-

gion-related knowledge than those in the control group.

- Results for religious *perspective-taking* were mixed. While some of the pupils showed an increase in this component, others showed no increase. More detailed statistical analysis makes it likely that a teaching strategy directly related to the life-world or professional context of the pupils was, contrary to educational expectations, less effective than a more traditional teaching strategy based on a general topic like "religions and violence". It was also noted, however, that insofar as increases in the competence of perspective-taking were achieved, some of these increases also showed up several months after the experiment had concluded, while others did not. In other words, at least some of the learning effects achieved at the end of the intervention had disappeared some months later.

- The pupils' *attitudes* did not change more in the experimental groups than in the control group. In other words, the treatment had no measurable effects on religion-related attitudes—which was considered quite disappointing because such changes appear to be most desirable, for example in overcoming xenophobia.

This is not the place to go into more detail about this research project. I am mentioning it here only for the purpose of demonstrating the need for critical evaluative research. While the intentions of the teaching intervention certainly were quite in line with the idea of making space for the religious other, the results were much more limited than expected. Good intentions obviously are not enough—not with teaching and also not in other fields of practical theology.

Interreligiosity and the shape of the discipline

Based on the different tasks described above, it is obvious that interreligious questions need to be included in the work of practical theology much more than has been the case thus far. There is a need not only for practical initiatives, but also for redesigning practical theology itself. A lack of interreligious awareness would cause the discipline fall short of one of its main aims—the reference to the contemporary world, especially in terms of religion. The understanding that I want to recommend in this fi-

nal section goes much further than only having a broader thematic scope in practical theology. Instead, the suggestion is that the foundations of the discipline themselves have to be aligned in a new manner. Such a realignment is needed for the discipline in order to gain a new perspective, one which then can also make itself felt in the various fields of practical theology's work. In other words, my suggestion is not only of interest in terms of theory building, but it entails palpable practical consequences as well.

As pointed out in section 1, practical theology emerged as an academic discipline at a time when, at least in Central Europe, there was no multi-religious presence. Next to the overwhelming Christian majority, there was only a small Jewish population, but Judaism at the time was deplorably not considered worthy of equal respect. Moreover, most people could not even imagine that worldviews based on atheism could ever be accepted—a limitation which can be seen most clearly, for example, even in John Locke's famous "Letter Concerning Toleration" (see Locke 1983, 51). The classics of practical theology who have been quoted as the founders of the discipline until today, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1850) and Carl Immanuel Nitzsch (1847) in the first place, did not think of how to relate to non-Christian views in their understanding of the discipline. They obviously saw no reason to do so—and if they had tried to do so, they would probably not have been understood. Interestingly, in his speeches about religion Schleiermacher addressed questions that could be seen as part of a theology of religions (see Schleiermacher 1967). Yet in his practical theology, he made no such references to this issue.

When an interest in practical theology re-emerged in the 1980s, in Central Europe as well as in the United States, again interreligious issues did not play a role. The idea then was to broaden the scope of practical theology, but not in order to include a multi-religious perspective. Since the discussions of the 1980s and 1990s can still be considered, at least to some degree, foundational in relationship to today's understanding of practical theology (among other things, they led to the founding of the International Academy of Practical Theology), it seems worthwhile to consider the respective arguments more closely.

When looking back at the discussions from the standpoint of two important books, *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and the World* (Browning 1983a) and *Practical Theology—*

International Perspectives (Schweitzer and van der Ven 1999), it seems obvious that many of the contributions moved in two directions, broadening the understanding of practical theology beyond the Church and developing a methodology suitable to this context.

- On the one hand, the emerging views of the 1980s in the United States were trying to overcome what Edward Farley had influentially described as the "pastoral paradigm" and the "clerical paradigm" of practical theology in order to broaden the discipline to account for more of a "societal paradigm" (see Farley 1983). In a similar vein, the German practical theologian Dietrich Rössler developed an understanding of practical theology in relationship to what he called the three forms of Modern Christianity—individual Christianity, ecclesial Christianity and societal Christianity (Rössler 1986, 1999). These attempts were also meant to allow for establishing practical theology as an academic research discipline, alongside the social sciences, instead of a discipline merely providing practical advice to individual pastors (the traditional "pastoral paradigm").

- On the other hand, especially in the case of Browning, this implied developing a clear methodology for practical theology, one which included analytical as well as strategic procedures but was always based on principles that could be publicly accounted for (Browning 1991).

In this understanding, public accountability also had to do with the pluralism that was considered characteristic of the time (Browning 1983b). Arguments had to be based on reasons that would not only make sense to pastors or other church members but to a much wider audience as well. This audience was not to be limited to Christianity, but should likewise be open to secular worldviews. Non-Christian religions, however, were not addressed at that time. It was only more than 20 years later that Browning showed remarkable interest in, for example, understanding family structures and childrearing in non-Christian religions (see Browning and Bunge 2009). Yet the understanding of "pluralism" in the 1980s clearly did not include such interests.

In sum, one can say that the new practical theology of the 1980s, which still exerts considerable influence today, developed along an axis ranging from the individual pastor towards society at large (theo-logically speaking, towards the "world"). This was an important step in terms of broadening the understanding of practical theology, but it is no longer sufficient today. There needs to be a different axis of development that expands our understanding of practical theology along the parameters of the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions. This also includes the need for a more inclusive understanding of pluralism, for example one that goes beyond the traditional polarity between the religious and the secular.

If this is true, the now traditional critique of the pastoral and clerical paradigm of practical theology is no longer sufficient. Practical theology needs to include interreligious issues not just as an addition that can be grafted upon its existing structures. Just like the classic figures of the discipline, be they from the first half of the 19th century or the time towards the end of the 20th century, made their changing situations the starting point for developing the discipline by opening it up beyond pastors and beyond the church, so practical theology today needs to be brought in line anew with a changing situation. In other words, practical theology as a discipline must now be developed within the parameters of a religiously plural society and global world.

What would this imply for practical theology? To my understanding, it would mean that the core concepts upon which practical theology has been premised from its very beginnings have to be reexamined and reconsidered. At this point, only some preliminary directions in which this reconsideration could lead will be mentioned:

- First of all, it is the very understanding of religion informing the discipline that now has to be expanded in order to explicitly include non-Christian religious traditions and convictions. It makes a difference if one only takes the varieties of Christian religion into consideration or if space is made for non-Christian varieties as well.

- Second, the understanding of practice to which practical theology refers has to be broadened in such a way that the encounter between different religious bodies as well as that of individuals belonging to different religious traditions can become a core topic of practical theology. More and more often, such encounters are characteristic of the situations addressed by practical theology. Does this imply that there are new forms of practice to be studied in terms of practical theology?

- Third, there is a need for some kind of theology of religions that can help practical theology in

working with conflicting religious truth claims. In the meantime, many different kinds of theologies of religion have become available, mostly in the field of systematic theology. What do they mean for practical theology? Does practical theology have to make a contribution to this theology?

Admittedly, these are only some of the questions that need to be addressed. It would take more than a single article to explore them. Most likely, it will also require joint efforts by groups of practical theologians to develop convincing answers.

Conclusion

As has become obvious in this article, the increasingly multi-religious situation of the present poses a number of challenging tasks for practical theology. There are good reasons that practical theology should not bypass these challenges, not only in terms of the needs of individuals and groups, which should be addressed in their religious dimension, but also because of the possible religious conflicts involved. Instead, it is the very identity of practical theology itself which is at stake here—an identity that is premised on doing theology in close relationship with the contemporary world.

At the same time, the identity of the discipline will not remain the same if practical theology is really willing—as it should be—to make interreligious issues part of its work, including its own self-understanding. The interreligious dimension was not included in the foundations of practical theology, not in the beginning when the discipline first developed nor when it was re-established in the late 20th century. The 21st century could be the time to make up for what, from today's point of view, must be considered a serious shortcoming of practical theology. Making space for the religious other means changing religious spaces and also changing practical theology.

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