

The space of practical theology at Faculdades EST in Brazil and its contribution to Latin American theological practices

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Since the nineteenth century, the churches of the Reformation have had a prominent place in Latin America. The reflection on and development of a pastoral, and later, of a contextualized practical theology has become a reality. The goal of this chapter is to study how practical theology is constituted from a practical and theoretical standpoint in one theological school, in this case the School of Theology at Faculdades EST in southern Brazil. First, it addresses how, in the beginning, the school's emphasis was on the education of the pastors for the development of parishes. Later, this emphasis shifted to a theological praxis for peace and social justice motivated by Latin American liberation theology in the church as part of a renewed search for its identity. With the implementation of the Graduate School of Theology, the discipline of practical theology, together with its sub-disciplines, has tried to assert its own identity in critical dialogue with the demands of a changing social, cultural and political context, religious diversity and issues of gender, corporeity and research in partnership with other areas of knowledge. The publication of a compendium of practical theology at the end of the 1990s points to this new stage. The present challenge is to understand the perspectives for practical theology in this concrete space, while also considering the current situation of global and local political changes, to effectively respond to the social and ecclesiastical challenges.

Introduction

In this chapter, we want to focus on practical theology and particularly on how the theoretical reflections of this discipline are taught in the School of Theology at Faculdades EST in southern Brazil. We briefly discuss the creation of the School of Theology in an earlier period when the teachers were pastors and only taught part-time until the consolidation of a college with teachers who then began to work full-time. It is important to consider the great transformations that took place in the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB) during the 1950s and 1960s, a time when the church first recognized itself as a Brazilian church, breaking its relationship with the German church

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due to World War II and its consequences. The time of teaching in German came to an end, and teachers and pastors had to be trained in the Portuguese language. The urbanization of Brazil and the political and social system in the country brought significant changes to a theological practice that was no longer European, but Latin American, and under the influence of liberation theology, which changed all reflection on theological practice from that point onwards. The main objective of the text is to present





the development of a space for practical theology at Faculdades EST and its contribution to Latin American theological practices.

The text is divided into three parts: the first part looks at the beginnings of practical theology as a discipline and its development at the theological school, while the second part is about the manual devised for practical theology at a time when it was already consolidated as a discipline with its own sub-disciplines and the third part discusses the current challenges for a discipline continuously updating itself and responding to the personal and social needs within that context. As the first book on practical theology was only written in 1998, it was necessary to look for contributions from previous texts at the School of Theology, in theological journals and in reports of teachers and pastors who had been students and teachers at various periods. This helped us to bring together the pieces of the puzzle on how practical theology was done in prior decades. The contact with the people we interviewed was extremely important because it allowed us to clearly grasp the years of the discipline's formation and the pastoral practice that was developed during those decades, which is information not often found in publications.

Practical theology and the education of pastors for the building of congregations

The creation of a School of Theology for the IECLB in Brazil arose from a great need to train pastors. The IECLB church was largely a rural church and, even in an urban context, continued to have a rural character. When the School of Theology was created in 1946, the objective was "the theological education of pastors for Brazil, taking into account the reality experienced by the members of the congregations" (Fischer 1986, 23). The School of Theology was intended to be a "spiritual center for the whole Church, through retreats, conferences for pastors, teachers and lay people, publications, etc." (Fischer 1986, 22). It is known that most of the first students were experienced practitioners (Weingärtner 1986, 33). This means that they were graduates of the Pre-Theological Institute who had received an introduction into theology and then went to work in congregations that lacked pastors. They were called "substitutes" (Dreher 2008, 58). Those who completed the course at the Institute generally went to Germany to further study theology and then returned as pastors.

The first professors of practical theology were Pastor Warnke, who taught homiletics, Pastor Strohmann, who taught liturgy, and Pastor Müller, who helped in pastoral care. Shortly after Reverend Schlieper taught practical theology, his successor was Dr. Weingärtner. In the first phase, teachers at the School of Theology were parish pastors and only taught part-time. This was an opportunity to confront our theological world, which always threatened to become somewhat esoteric, and to come to terms with the realities of the surrounding world (Weingärtner 1986, 39). The School of Theology was conceived according to the German theological education model, which is understandable since the IECLB is a church that emerged as a result of German immigration.

Studies of the Bible, history and systematic theology occupied a primary place, so to speak, while practical theology had only a secondary place. The classes, as well as the literature, were all in the German language, which undoubtedly contradicted the need to train pastors for the Brazilian context. However, it should be remembered that most teachers were German immigrants and spoke German, despite the prohibition against speaking that language during World War II. There was a handbook in German for Sunday worship services and a manual for occasional services, baptisms, confirmations, marriage blessings and Holy Supper for the sick and those about to be buried.

From the 1960s onwards, the ongoing cultural changes affecting Brazilian and Latin American society were also reflected directly in the Christian churches. Whereas Brazil became an urban country that in many ways came to resemble the countries of the northern hemisphere, social exclusion intensified. The migratory movement and urbanization led the IECLB to expand to other parts of the country and to increasingly present itself as a church with Brazilian traits. Because of this, members of the congregations gradually ceased to speak and understand German, and Portuguese became predominant in worship services and congregational meetings.

At the School of Theology, the number of students increased due to the increased demand for ministry, and there was now a full-time faculty with a unique academic background: few colleges had a collegiate body with doctorates at the time. The increase in the number of professors and the inclusion of Brazilian teachers who had studied abroad began to change the profile of the studies, which were gradually taught in Portuguese. Likewise, new dis-



ciplines were added to complement practical theology. It is interesting to observe that the full-time teachers were still all men, and until 1985 women could only teach on a part-time basis, especially in disciplines such as psychology, sociology, foreign languages or music (Fischer 1986, 30).

Latin American and Brazilian theology, starting with Vatican II, received new impulses, becoming a theology with a focus on the poor. Theology studies as well as a philosophy of liberation triggered changes in the way in which theology was handled not only within the Catholic Church, but also in Protestant institutions (Bonino 2003, 9–96). The student movement and the ecumenical movement in the 1950s and 1960s promoted a new Latin American theology from the perspective of an *ecumenical social ethics* that was also present at the international level. One of those responsible for this movement was theologian Millard Richard Shaull, who, in addition to reinterpreting “the task of Protestant churches on the continent, showed a new way of doing theology, until then despised by continental churches and theologians” (Abreu 2010, 60). It is important to note that Richard Wangen, a professor of practical theology at the School of Theology, worked closely with Shaull and influenced a whole generation of pastors and theologians focusing on social exclusion, justice and peace.

While liberation theology gained space in the institution in the different theological areas of study, evangelical theology also had its space and the debates were often marked by discussions and ruptures. For Walter Altmann, rector of the Higher School of Theology at the time, one “theme deserves special mention: the interrelationship between practice and theoretical activity. The EST courses have some mechanisms that characterize this interrelationship, the practical internships, the clinical pastoral education, the spontaneous groups of interest, the limited and occasional participation of teachers and students in congregational activities” (Altmann 1986, 172).

Practical theology in the context of Latin America: a manual

The book *Practical Theology in the context of Latin America* is divided into two major parts: the first part discusses the fundamental and epistemological aspects of the discipline and the second part briefly introduces the specific disciplines of practical theol-

ogy. The second edition was published in 2005 and maintained the same content (Schneider-Harpprecht 2005). The third edition of the book, published in 2011, had Roberto Zwetsch as co-editor. This is a revised and expanded version. The texts, although essentially the same, were revised (Schneider-Harpprecht and Zwetsch 2011). The manual has been translated into German (Schneider-Harpprecht 2003) and into Spanish (Schneider-Harpprecht and Zwetsch 2011). The latter edition was published by the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI). All of this confirms the positive acceptance of the book in seminaries and schools of theology run by the different denominations.

Basic aspects of practical theology according to the manual

The first part of the manual, called “Fundamental Aspects of Practical Theology,” clearly establishes “the epistemological status of Practical Theology” (Libânio 1998, 8). There are five chapters dealing with the place of practical theology as a discipline, the historical aspects of the discipline, reflections on the method of practical theology and its relationship to the ministry of the church and pastoral practices in Latin America. We briefly provide an overview of the reflections on practical theology in the book by focusing on chapters 1 and 2.

A) “The Place of Practical Theology as a Theological Discipline.” Lothar C. Hoch begins his chapter by talking about the richness and diversity found in pastoral practices on the continent, which, while a lively read, also reveals a confusing reality wherein practical and pastoral theology are often mixed together. In the context of these overlapping theologies, Hoch notices a distance between the pastoral work done in the churches and the education offered in theological centers. In the latter context, in turn, the role of practical theology and its relationship to the various sub-disciplines are not clear. The lack of clarity regarding the nomenclature (practical theology, pastoral theology, applied theology) reflects the labyrinth of confusion and the loss of the link between pastoral and practical theology.

Reacting to this reality, Hoch proposes that “Practical Theology needs to shorten the distance that separates it from the pastoral perspective. Practical Theology is the special interlocutor of pastoral practices developed within the people of God” (Hoch 1998, 22). In addition, practical theologians need to position and articulate themselves against

the background of the knowledge coming from other theological disciplines—history, systematics and biblical scholarship—as well as the knowledge of related fields of study, such as sociology, psychology, communication, pedagogy and religious studies.

Making a historical incursion, the author shows that the controversy surrounding practical theology is not new. Since its beginnings in the 19th century, the locus of practical theology in academia was controversial. Schleiermacher himself, the father of practical theology, was not sure whether there should be a specific chair of practical theology, since all theology is practical by its very nature (Hoch 1998, 24). If it has become necessary today, this only confirms once again that there is a distance between theology and the hierarchical church and practical theology or pastoral practices. Therefore, the first task of practical theology is to find its specific place in order to contribute both to theology and to the Church and society.

Hoch reinforces the need for practical theology to seek dialogue with the other theological disciplines, contributing to the indivisibility of theology. Theology is not self-sufficient and should not be underestimated. It finds its place insofar as it opens itself up to other disciplines (Hoch 1998, 26). On the basis of European Protestantism, he describes three models of doing practical theology, positioning them within other theological disciplines: 1) practical theology as a practice of theology—it provides the technical tools so that knowledge of the other disciplines can be applied effectively in the life of the Church (Tillich 1984); practical theology as a theology of practice—it is the theology of the Church's service and it is a theology of ecclesial practice only (W. Jetter); 3) practical theology as a science of practice—a model in which practical theology, in dialogue with other social sciences, develops theories that are relevant to the praxis of the Church in the present world (Daiber 1977; Hoch 1998, 27ff).

Next, Hoch discusses the contribution of liberation theology (TdL), asking whether it represents a breakthrough for practical theology in its search for identity. In conclusion, he reinforces Schleiermacher's idea that practical theology only finds its specific place as a theological discipline in a dynamic relationship with the other theological disciplines. The specific task of practical theology is to remind the other disciplines of their practical vocation.

According to Hoch, practical theology has a double task: 1) practical theology is a premise for theological reflection, with the task of listening to

the concerns and anxieties of people and society; and 2) practical theology must show critical awareness, asking and checking whether the practice of faith and the Church is consistent and corresponds to the postulates of theology and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Practical Theology is therefore interrelated with the yearnings of people and society, on the one hand, and the practice of the Church, theology and the practice of the gospel on the other.

B) "Historical Aspects and Contemporary Conceptions of Practical Theology." Based on the European models brought by Catholic and Protestant immigrants to Latin America, Schneider-Harpprecht seeks to reflect on a possible conception of practical theology in this context. He points out that the models brought from Europe are diverse, such as that which justifies the slavery of Indians and Blacks, of Anchieta, or the pastoral mission of the Jesuits, the liberal Protestant model, the internal and external mission to save the souls of communism or the need to promote struggles for social and political transformation. These conceptions and models have left their mark on what practical theology means today (Schneider-Harpprecht 1998, 36).

The author begins his study by presenting the historical variants of practical theology. According to Schneider-Harpprecht, "the emergence of Practical Theology in Europe was related to the rise of the bourgeoisie, the beginning of industrialization, the movements of Enlightenment and Romanticism", all of which demanded a more deliberate reflection on the practical dimension of theology. Schleiermacher, starting from the Enlightenment idea of a universal science, intended to construct a system of theology as an organism: "Theology refers to the religious consciousness as a fundamental dimension of human beings that takes historical forms and is concretized in the religious beliefs and practices of certain Churches" (Schneider-Harpprecht 1998, 36). Theology, therefore, is a science whose practical goal is to lead the Church, as we see in his definition of theology: "Christian theology is thus the highest representation (essence) of the scientific knowledge and rules of art which are necessary for a harmonious Church leadership" (Schleiermacher *apud* Schneider-Harpprecht 1998, 38). The basic task of theology is therefore practical, and practical theology is placed at the end of the study of theology as its crown.

Rather than just being technical, practical theology is, for Schleiermacher, an "applied science", a theory of technique. Despite the importance of this



conceptualization of practical theology, Schneider-Harpprecht notes that the great problem here is that practical theology, as a theory of practice, cannot reflect theologically on its own theological foundations, remaining an appendix to the theoretical study of theology (Schneider-Harpprecht 1998, 40).

Schneider-Harpprecht presents the conceptions of practical theology that influenced it after Schleiermacher, reflecting on the thinking of Carl Emanuel Nitzsch, Otto Baumgarten, Friedrich Niebergall, Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. Nitzsch, understanding the Church as an “acting subject”, sought to overcome Schleiermacher’s thinking by suggesting that practical theology has to move beyond its own theological bases.

Schneider-Harpprecht presents four contemporary models of practical theology:

1) The “liberation of theology” posited by Juan Luis Segundo; 2) the plan for practical theology suggested by Gerd Otto; 3) the fundamentals of practical theology proposed by Don Browning; and 4) the practical theology of Casiano Floristan, which Schneider-Harpprecht considers the most appropriate model for the Latin American context.

Based on this broad historical and epistemological study of practical theology, Schneider-Harpprecht concludes his chapter by presenting fundamental ideas for the construction of practical theology in the context of Latin America as a way of overcoming of dichotomies between theory and practice, responding to the agency of members of religious communities and the people, advocating the fundamental role of hermeneutics and dialectics as a method for the discipline, mainly as a way of reading, analyzing, interpreting and critically planning the acting and the action (Habermas’ communicative action), and making space for the paradigm of social liberation that permeates all theology as practice. Practical theology should be viewed within the Christian tradition as a living tradition of the people who are living out the gospel in their daily lives and as part of the need for inculturation; it should reflect the importance of dialogue with other disciplines of theology and human sciences as well as facilitate mutual criticism, among other things.

The situation of practical theology today: the challenge of being updated in the face of new demands

Walter Altmann, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of Faculdades EST, recalls the times when theological reflection helped the Church to have a confessional identity. The IECLB was and continues to be the main “client” of the School of Theology at Faculdades EST, whose primary task has been, since its inception, to train pastors to build congregations for the church, a mission that we understand has been fulfilled in an exemplary way. The theology that has developed in the institution, and that is still being developed, remains linked to the Church. With this, we can say that practical theology has essentially had an ecclesial bias. With the coming of liberation theology onto the Latin American scene, and with an engagement in a theological practice with a socio-political concern, we can clearly notice a change in the way of doing practical theology. In the same period, the IECLB began to recognize itself as Brazilian and expand within the Brazilian context. Practical theology has changed its profile, with the clear task being to train church workers who have their own critical stance in the way they do theology.

With the required ecumenical openness, with the implementation of a graduate study program, and later, with its recognition by the Ministry of Education, the theological school has shifted its focus to a more ecumenical theology. On the one hand, there is an important opportunity for dialogue with other churches and other theologies. On the other hand, there is a risk of losing the church’s confessional identity, which would result in no longer fulfilling the task of providing a theology that guides and orients the church. A “fuzzy identity” within multiple initiatives can also raise the question of where practical theology is with respect to the institution and who is its audience. As a way of surviving in a competitive world, it seems that theological institutions also need to adapt and recreate themselves internationally. Ganzevoort (2009, 337), looking at the changes of clientele in theological institutions, refers to three audiences of practical theology: 1) an ecclesial audience made up of the Church, which needs the training of ministers and requires of practical theology and its sub-disciplines the clear task of placing an emphasis on ecclesial practical theology as was done in the beginning phase of theological education at the institution; 2) an academic audience

whose demand comes from the academic world, which requires empirical research with a scientific methodology, publications and a discussion with other disciplines; 3) a third audience consisting of society, which demands a theological reflection on themes such as violence, HIV/AIDS, social class and ecology. The discussion of practical theology here takes place through public theology and political diaconia as sub-areas. These three audiences comprise intertwined spaces for doing practical theology.

The book *Practical Theology in the Latin American Context*, published in the late 1990s, staked out a clear position for practical theology as a discipline. In addition, it defined practical theology as a theological discipline, making clearer its relationship with other areas of theology as well as with related areas of knowledge. It is important to observe that the book reflected on the possibilities of a method for doing practical theology and established links with the ministry of the church and with pastoral practices in Latin America. Additionally, it defined practical theology starting from common international historical bases, recovering fundamental references to such luminaries as Friedrich D. Schleiermacher, Carl Emanuel Nitzsch, Otto Baumgarten, Friedrich Niebergall, Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann; it reflected on practical theology in Latin America based on various models, such as Juan Luis Segundo's theology of liberation, Gerd Otto's plan for practical theology, Don Browning's proposed fundamentals of practical theology and the practical theology of Casiano Floristan.

After the publication of the book, we can say there was a certain stagnation—perhaps a setback—in the process of developing and deepening practical theology in a Latin American context. There is no record of the emergence of something new. Of all the authors—the book did not include any female authors—of the three editions of the books, only one of them, Roberto E. Zwetsch, remains at Faculdades EST. The book has been translated into German and Spanish and has been reprinted without changes in the design of the material. Only one of the chapters, the chapter on homiletics, has been replaced. What is the reason for this stagnation of practical theology in the context of Latin America?

Certainly, there are several reasons.

- Major changes that have taken place with respect to liberation theology, its diversification and fragmentation, its identity crises and its relevance in a context where Pentecostalism and, recently, prosperity theology have required new

ways of positioning themselves. The concept of practical theology addressed by the book is heavily influenced by liberation theology. In the conclusion, references are made to the profound changes already under way in the late 1990s, such as the Latin American versions of Charismatic, Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal fundamentalism (Schneider-Harpprecht 1998, 321).

- It could also be said that there was an emphasis on theology becoming more and more academic, especially the theology presented in graduate studies program, leading to a distancing of practical theology from the ministerial practice of the Church, which is precisely what practical theology should be seeking to overcome. This tendency to become too academic may also have to do with the recognition of theology as a field of knowledge by the Brazilian state. Related to this fact, there is also currently an expansion in Brazil of graduate programs in religious studies beyond just theology programs, which may also indicate a greater interest in broader religious themes.
- Changes in the focus of theological research, opening space for research into more generic studies related to other areas of knowledge and society. Whereas the book emphasized the practice of the Church, what happened later was just the opposite: an abandonment of the Church and a greater interest in society, religion and culture and themes of public theology, for example.

Thus, we have great challenges ahead of us. One of them is to recover practical theology as a fundamental sub-discipline of theology and to regain its leading role within theological schools (at the undergraduate and graduate level), in church and in society. Practical theology has continued to advance in the international context, a task we need to re-establish in Brazil as well. Practical theology must deal with three main fronts of action and reflection: 1) it must deal with themes related to ministry and the Church, overcoming mere academicism; 2) it must resume dialogue with existing liberation theologies, among them we can mention specifically decolonial theologies, thus strengthening their commitment to the social and political context; and 3) it must rediscover its role as dialogue partner with the empirical practice of religion, society and culture and other areas of knowledge in studies of the body, genre, lived religion, pop culture, popular religiosity, and so forth.



Conclusions

When considering the narrative about the development of practical theology in the concrete space of Faculdades EST, we notice significant advances and stagnations. Among the plurality of theological approaches is that of decolonial theology, which offers us an opportunity to unveil and investigate the different mechanisms that control the economy, authority, natural resources, gender and sexuality as well as subjectivity and knowledge. Perhaps it is time to go a step beyond with practical theology in our context and look for a practical theology with a Latin American face, reflecting on current theological and religious practices, cultural pluralism, a means to redeem our ways of living out faith and religion, a means to rediscover the so-called frontier thinking and local knowledge, such as *Buen Vivir*, and for example, subjugated knowledge (Walsh 2010), and finally a means to emancipate itself from the European theological roots (Schneider-Harpprecht 1998, 321).

In 2019, IAPT Conference, with its theme (*De coloniality and Religious Practices: Liberating Hope*), will be hosted by Faculdades EST. Surely this is an opportunity and a special challenge to reflect on the developments made at the school regarding research and reflections on Latin America and the international sphere.

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