

Practical Theological Implications Beyond the Concrete

The questions I have proposed for Plattenwald show that a materially and spatially sensitive practical theology can even occupy spaces where church is not a popular topic, because it has long transcended

the status of an applied priest's theology towards a Council-inspired theology of the church [...] and gone further towards a late-modern existential theology [...]. That is the charming aspect of this discipline: There is nothing truly human which in the framework of a "new theological existentialism" cannot become its subject* (Bauer 2015, p. 5).

We might add to Christian Bauer's statement, which appeared in the first article of an issue of a German magazine for pastoral theology (PThI) on the status of the discipline in 2015, that there is also nothing that is part of the human-material network that is out of reach of the discipline. I want to end this final chapter the way I have begun the book: by looking at the status of practical theology in 2020, though not by means of another handbook project¹ but by looking at the open questions one of the interlocutors to PThI's special issue has posed.

From the perspective of systematic theology,² Saskia Wendel remarks that while there are many voices and many research approaches in practical theology today, there were few who looked at the aspect of embodiment.

1 Although Birgit Weyel and her colleagues in 2022 have released a new *International Handbook of Practical Theology* from an ecumenical and interreligious, as well as transcultural, perspective.

2 The other interlocuter, whom I will just mention here briefly, writes from a Protestant perspective. Christian Grethlein considers the problem that the interlocutors from the social

Emotions, affects, bodily performances, and their phenomenological reflections, deliberations on the construction of “body” [...] along with power discourses seem to play only a minor role (at the moment), at least in the contributions published here* (Wendel 2015, p. 122).

While my book has done little to remedy the lack of a critical perspective on the body and the power discourses that surround it, it has nonetheless tried to make practical theology aware that even in its most reduced – and contorted – understanding as an applied science, it rests on the physical world.³ It depends on the houses, streets, concrete pillars, and glass panes which constitute human existence and which are not just passive elements, but whose design subtly shapes power relations in church and society. That attentiveness for the little details of our existence can help us also to become attentive of our own bodies and the way in which they are used, as well as misused. The aforementioned Jane Bennett and her “Political Ecology of Things” has made that link between things and bodies explicit – just as Bonnie Miller-McLemore has established the link between bodies and what they do in their everyday lives, eating, playing, loving.

There are also commonalities that Wendel finds in the contributions of practical theologians. Besides a reception of the Second Vatican Council it is the “anthropological turn” in 20th century theology (cf. *ibid.*, p. 125). There have been many turns since, and the “material turn” I propagate here is just one among the many, but as the ecological crisis demonstrates, there needs to be a sense for the environment that must complement the “anthropological turn”, no longer seeing nature as a passive object to be dominated but as part of a mesh, or rhizome, of relations. My approach is part of the many critical questions on the status of the human subject (cf. e.g. Bauer 2021) as well as on the question if the “optionality” of practical theology for the poor and oppressed must not be extended beyond the human scope.

and political sciences as well as philosophy are manifold and yet the theological references remain mostly within the Catholic spectrum (cf. Grethlein 2015, p. 129). He also argues that there is precious little to read about practical theologians from the United States. I hope that I have been able to bring in some of these perspectives and, vice versa, translate some of the German discussion for the English-speaking world.

- 3 Other practical theologians have since sought to remedy the lack of body-power discourses, for instance in dialogue with ethnography.

We might even further this thought by allowing for perspectives to enter our deliberations which are neither human nor material. Virtuality and the status of artificial intelligence are also considerations that practical theology has to take into account if it proposes to live in the mist of the present realities. While Christian social ethics (Filipovic et al. 2018) or moral theology (Brandt 2019) have debated the status of intelligent machines, I wonder what the specific perspective of practical theology is, which is a discipline that begins with

constitutive activities of daily life [...] where faith breaks down and people struggle (Miller-McLemore 2012a, p. 7).

Or, to put it briefly that is “a cultural science of the people of God”⁴ (Bucher 2002, p. 185). I would argue that we have yet to realise the full potential of our discipline when it comes to *digitalisation*, meaning that we need a sensitivity for the new spaces that are being created virtually and their material basis. As my starting point with the electric laboratories of large corporations shows, such an approach would be closely intertwined with the physical and the power-structures upon which the virtual world rests. With Bruno Latour we can thus say:

Nowadays, everyone knows that there is no GPS without three satellites; [...] drones in Pakistan without headquarters in Tampa, Florida; [...] When Harold Garfinkel described the skills necessary to “pass” as a member of a society, you could say it was a totally intangible social phenomenon that could be only qualitatively described, but not today when every detail of your avatars on the Web can be counted, dated, weighed, and measured. [...] Go tell Google engineers that their vast arrays of servers are just virtual! (Latour 2011, p. 802)

A materially sensitive practical theology would perhaps be more aware of the dangers of this brave new world that is being created and would remind itself constantly of its “optionality” in the face of the temptations of seemingly limitless – because non-material⁴ – possibilities.

4 I have written on the materiality of the virtual world in connection with the topic of “home” as a place (Henkel 2020).

