

Curating practical theological space: What is it, and who is it for?

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In a recent meeting of the *Practical Theology* editorial board, some questions were raised about the boundaries of the discipline and the remit of the journal. In particular, we considered how peer reviewers might decide whether an article is suitable for inclusion in the journal, and more widely, what criteria we apply to practical theology. One member used a striking, art-based analogy: what do we consider worthy of hanging in the “gallery” of *Practical Theology*? It was agreed that two of us would take this conversation forward together, and write an opinion piece.

In reflexive terms, it is worth noting that both contributors have different experiences and responsibilities within the field, and that these shape their responses in important ways. Elizabeth Jordan is ordained in the Church of England and has worked in five provinces of the Anglican Communion, in both ministerial posts and in theological education. She has a professional Doctorate in practical theology and has published in the areas of ministerial experience and practitioner research. Katie Cross is a lecturer in practical theology. She has a PhD and is largely based in a university teaching context, though her research on trauma often takes her away from her desk and into conversation with practitioners, charities, churches and other organisations.

In this conversational reflection, we consider who and what fits within the space we name practical theology. In doing so, we each respond to several questions: namely, what is practical theology as a discipline, and who is the journal of *Practical Theology* for?

i. What is practical theology?

KATIE: Practical theology spans a wide breadth of perspectives, denominations, and religions, and a diverse set of approaches and methodologies. It is home to academics and practitioners from different cultures and perspectives, who are shaped by their encounters with people and

places, systems and circumstances. This applies to the construction of all theology, though in practical theology these considerations are often emphasised, or given methodological precedence. Because of this, it is challenging to neatly define what practical theology is. The complexities and varying dynamics of the discipline come (in part) from its emphasis on engagement with lived experience. No two people doing practical theology will respond to conversations between doctrine and practice in exactly the same manner (Stoddart, 2014). Those who count themselves as practical theologians might have loosely similar tasks and interests, but they will inevitably handle these in diverse ways according to history, tradition, geography, and lived experience. Self-defined practical theologians can be found both within and outwith the academy. Where it is taught in a university context, each department employs a different approach, which is in turn shaped by the interests of their academics and students. Those who call themselves practical theologians are interested in practice, but do not necessarily agree on exactly what “practice” entails, or how it should be engaged with. Nor is there one single methodological approach or set of methods. Though there are recognisable approaches and frameworks, these remain diverse. For all of these reasons, I think that practical theology is a highly ambiguous activity.

ELIZABETH: I understand practical theology as a branch of the theological enterprise, a particular way of theologising that attends to the practice of individuals and of communities, both those who affirm a basis of faith and those who do not. “In spite of everything, we go on saying ‘God,’” writes Rowan Williams (Williams, 2000). I understand theology as part of the human endeavour to understand what could be meant by God, making meaning of our lives while including space for trans-materialist and transcendent interpretation. This means I conclude that there are some secular disciplines such as sociology and psychology which are meaning seeking, but not theology.

Practical theology examines experience and practice both as the subject of investigation and as a source of insight into the nature of God. It is possible that some theologians, with a more restricted view of the sources of revelation about the human condition and the meaning of the universe, will find issue with this approach. I would argue though, that practical theology’s distinctive way of “doing theology,” that is, developing theological reflection such processes as

the learning cycle, the arts, journaling and so on should establish interaction with other, non-theological, disciplines, while treating these insights as a conversation partner, a third party, distinguishable from the theological base of the researcher/practitioner (Green, 2009).

KATIE: From my perspective, academic practical theologians have been highly concerned about defining the discipline, and about getting it right. Our definition anxiety fuels an existing disciplinary identity crisis, which stems from a common feeling of disinheritance within the wider field of theology. It is characterised by what Heather Walton calls “the ghostly presences of long centuries of intellectual humiliation and marginalisation within the Academy” (Walton, 2018). The question of whether practical theology is truly theological comes, in part, from its interdisciplinary nature. The use of social-scientific methodologies and frameworks has caused some to comment that practical theologians must not lose sight of their grounding in theology in favour of becoming more sociologically driven.

As such, we often default to discussions around our identity as a discipline. The problem of “disinheritance” from the theological project tends to be an issue for those of us working in academia, and fuels these conversations further. However, some recognise that this is perhaps a misguided enterprise. John Swinton draws attention to the way in which the “meaning and content of the term ‘practical theology’ is determined by the *practical*, as opposed to the conceptual use of the term” (Swinton, 2020). In other words, we can only come to know what practical theology is by engaging in it, and the meaning of the discipline is ultimately dependent on the interests and formation of the particular theologian.

ELIZABETH: I believe there is a particular character to practical theology: both the content and the process are distinctive and essential. Practical theology is concerned with practice. This need not necessarily be Christian or even faith-based practice though much good work on, say chaplaincy, preaching, prayer and initiation has illuminated the habits and behaviours of faith communities. Thick description of congregations for example, using the lens of anthropology as well as ecclesiology has high-lighted actual rather than simply idealised experience. Rigorous examination of chaplaincy within a multifaith context begins to identify some essential elements.

In this practical theology's willingness to engage with faith communities' own worldview has broadened the understanding of the theological discipline. If theology is the enterprise of trying to know and understand God, what does "God" mean? In this Williams encourages us to explore the "'informal' theology' of the faith communities' practices of prayer, art and holy action (Williams, 2000). He describes theology in three modes: celebratory, for the internal audience, communicative, dialoguing within and without and critical such as apophatic/plural/postmodern. The contribution of Cameron et al, that theology may be expressed and experienced in an operant and an espoused form (as well as normative and formal) has been encouraging and influential in both academic and practitioner circles (Cameron et al, 2010). These perspectives that widen the scope of the theological enterprise encourage practical theology to encourage practical theology to assert the value of researching practice, to be rooted in a faith tradition and to proceed with a desire to communicate in a reciprocal conversation with other traditions and communities.

KATIE: It seems to me that we have different perspectives on this, which are of course shaped by our current roles and experiences in the discipline. I think my anxiety about defining the field is related to my rejection of a single, universal definition, though I do recognise that there are some general characteristics which tend to unify practical theologians. As you have noted, the lived contemporary experience is a primary lens of understanding. Critical dialogue between this experience and theological and doctrinal ideas drives much of the academic interdisciplinary work, qualitative research, and reflective practice that takes place in the field. I would also suggest that practical theologians tend to favour liberal or radical models of theology, such as Liberation, Black, Feminist, Womanist, and disability theologies, as opposed to more conservative approaches which promote tradition and its straightforward application. Finally, the work of practical theology is done with a view to theoretical and tangible transformation in the contexts and communities where practitioners are located. What we share is a sense that practice is central, and our engagement with it is important; what practical theology *is* is determined by what we do.

ELIZABETH: The most appropriate verb for the practical enterprise seems to me to be "to do" rather than say, to study, to read or to learn. There is dynamic interaction between several elements and, though there are a variety of ways of combining them, the ingredients look similar.

I see a piece of practical theology containing an active element, most often some research into practice. This could take a variety of forms: the full gamut of social research methods: interviews, questionnaires, textual analysis,¹ participant observation, local history and narrative analysis, conversation analysis, auto-ethnography and so on. This may represent the operant or espoused theology of the individual or group that has been examined; there will often also be some reflection with theological tradition and norms. The research activity may have established an engagement with research practice: the relation with social theory should then also be made explicit. The encounter with a community of practice should include some reflexive consideration of the researcher's own experience and perspective.

KATIE: Yes, that seems helpful. Speaking of reflexive practice, I wonder if it would be useful for us to consider how we use practical theology in our own contexts?

ELIZABETH: I work as a parish priest in three small parishes in south Essex and as part of the training department of the diocese of Chelmsford, in the Church of England. Practical Theology informs both activities. I take time to notice the theology expressed in word and action by those who do not have academic training in theology. I respect the habits of prayer and faithful discipleship and observe with interest liturgical practices such as lighting a candle or making the sign of the cross. I note the barely conscious decisions made to offer comfort and practical assistance to others and sometimes bring these acts to wider attention, affirming people in their Christian discipleship. My own preaching, teaching and spiritual guidance is informed by what I have learned of the theology of those who might have little confidence in their own understanding of the Christian faith. The selfless generosity of those who do not profess any faith is also noteworthy. I would not want to deny some people's aversion to being part of faith-based community but, as Holland has highlighted, such behaviour may be a legacy of Christendom and part of the project to understand God's ways in the world (Holland, 2019).

The process and content of practical theology is more explicitly part of the training I facilitate for formal and recognised Christian ministry. The Common Awards of Durham University, through which much of the training for Anglican ministry which is episcopally licensed is validated, encourages research into areas of church life and the local context through several of the

modules offered.ⁱⁱ Teaching this I have seen the value of good research practice containing conversations between Biblical insight, devotional instinct, newly acquired reading in doctrine and the insights and perspectives of the social sciences. Encouraging reflexivity has facilitated understanding of the projection and transference that is the common experience of those who take public position, particularly such a socially constructed role as Vicar or preacher.

The pressures on church leaders are many, particularly in places where the lack of money and falling numbers of participants appears to demand rapid solutions. I am responsible for coordinating resources for leadership across the diocese. Leadership is another contested concept but one which has been seen as the cause and remedy of present difficulties. I find it helpful to continually remind myself and others of the need to be theologically reflective, to consider what our words and actions reveal and proclaim about what we believe. In the search for a healthy financial situation and for church growth it is possible to be functionally atheist! The decisions made about how money is spent, who is welcomed to church, what is posted on social media, who is supported in the face of local antagonism and many more are all theological decisions to be made in the light of faith. The distinctive approach of practical theology provides a framework for such examination.

KATIE: That is very interesting to hear. My context is quite different, as most of my work takes place within a university setting. However, I can relate to way in which practical theology shapes the questions we ask, and the answers we reach. One of my research interests is trauma; how we understand ongoing suffering in light of theology. This is something that has taken me away from my desk regularly in the last few years, and more recently I have been working on issues surrounding domestic abuse. This year, I collaborated with a Christian charity called Press Red, which aims educate people about domestic abuse in churches. As part of this, they commissioned a play called “Control” which they use as a live theatre awareness piece.

During this collaboration, I reflected on the particularities of practical theology which allowed me to engage with the work of Press Red. We have mentioned that practical theology takes a critical stance against tradition. In my work with Press Red, I explored the way in which some theological teachings and ideas (such as male headship and divine wrath) can appear to vindicate

domestic abuse. We have also discussed the way in which practical theology calls for lived experience to be centred. This is vital in my work with those who have lived through domestic abuse, and reminds me to prioritise their stories, no matter how challenging. Finally, since practical theology is both transformative and future-oriented, I have considered possibilities for both harm reduction and justice seeking. While I approach much of this in an academic way, the theology I create is intimately bound up with real lived experiences. Practical theology is deeply influential for my work; it shapes my understanding of trauma, and how I respond to it.

ii. Who is the journal of Practical Theology for?

KATIE: I understand that it's important to have criteria in place for an academic journal. My concern is that by placing an immovable boundary around the journal, either in terms of readership or authorship, we do a disservice to those whose work in the field is overlooked for not immediately fitting with (or at least paying lip service to) the white European "masters" and other makers of tradition. To return to the image that opened this reflection, the "gallery" of practical theology is one that has given the majority of its space to a set of fairly homogenous works. In particular, the discipline's reliance on Friedrich Schleiermacher's theological method has been described by Emmanuel Lartey as tantamount to "ancestor worship" (Swinton, 2020). His comment draws attention to the double standard of those who are critical of non-white, non-European methodologies, while also criticising practical theology's overreliance on particular characters and narratives.

As practical theologians critically examine white supremacy, patriarchy, ableism and other systems that have historically supported their thinking, we should expect some instability. The discipline has formed largely within North America and Western Europe, and has developed through the gaze of majority white, educated, able-bodied scholars. It has also been rooted in the context of university structures, which, from my own experience, are themselves plagued by issues of race, class, and disability representation. Some practitioners and methods of practical theology do create space for unheard stories, yet its underlying assumptions are deeply rooted in a culture of active exclusion (Beaudoin and Turpin, 2014). If we truly desire to listen to voices

that have been marginalised in the discipline, we must commit to making space for these voices to disrupt, challenge, and shape practical theology in new ways. It is no good to continue our discourse in the main hall of the gallery, while marginalised voices are siphoned off into smaller, less frequented rooms at the periphery.

Like all God talk, practical theology involves a degree of autobiography, and as such it is necessarily experience-driven. Practical theology is written by real people, living within particular contexts and systems that shape, privilege, and oppress them. It is a reflexive recognition of this that creates some of the debates around what counts as practical theology in the first place. Perhaps this same recognition should free us from defining inclusion criteria too carefully. There are (as yet) unheard voices which are vitally needed within the journal.

ELIZBETH: One would clearly like to say that the journal is for anyone who would like to read it. But in enabling that there are two considerations which may, at times, run counter to each other. On the one hand one wants as deep and broad a stream of articles, poetry and book reviews as possible, on the other one does not want to include such a variety of material that some find little in it with which to engage and cannot find a unifying thread.

The home page of the journal says that the audience for the journal includes: “practitioners in religious institutions and workplaces, students doing masters courses and professional doctoral work in practical theology as well as traditional readers of the journal who have found it a continuing source of enrichment for their day-to-day practice of faith and ministry.”ⁱⁱⁱ The earlier hope expressed, that the journal will “play a vital role...for those who teach practical theology within an academic context” might indicate a possible tension between the interests of an academic community and that of practitioners. The time, access to literature and capacity to write articles that the academic community possesses could create an imbalance in this delicate relation. It could be valuable to ask of a submitted article in what way it would assist the practitioner or student. This need not limit the scope of the articles to examination of faith-based communities. Such work as Pattison, on the apparent faith of business language (Pattison, 1997) or of Hoven’s article in the journal on the theological work of sports chaplains (Hoven, 2016) is of considerable assistance in navigating the churches’ location in a secular world.

The common thread that links articles in *Practical Theology* might be agreement that theological engagement with practice is essential, whether faith based or non-faith based. Agreement may not even be in evidence, only consensus that arguing about their relationship is a worthwhile activity. The non-declaratory nature of practical theology encourages a variety of opinions, and suits my approach believing, as I do, in the revelatory nature of dialogue (Jordan, 2018).

KATIE: I can see that we differ here again, though I'm glad that we agree on the importance of practical theology being at least somewhat "non declaratory." I'm also pleased that you mentioned that articles can either be "faith based" or "non-faith based." Theological discussions take place in a wide range of social settings, and are certainly not exclusive to religious communities. Theoretically, theology has a different, God-oriented "telos" and outlook, which separates it from wider society. In practice, I think the two are not so separate. They become enmeshed in our daily lives, meaning-making, and understanding. Those who are religious are influenced by both; their worldviews are not simply a reflection of their religious beliefs, but of their experiences within the social circles and societies that shape them. If it is true that the practices of the church and of the world are not ontologically separate (we might argue that both occur within God's creation), then it makes sense to include the lives, habits, and rituals of those who exist outwith religious communities in theological reflection.

By this, I don't simply mean non-ecclesial practice, since engagement with healthcare, educational, therapeutic, and political contexts has become a well-established part of practical theology. I mean to argue that the perspectives of those from non-religious backgrounds will be a crucial part of constructing theology in the future. Gordon Lynch has outlined a "post-religious" approach to practical theology, which is "open to being practised by those who do not have a commitment to any one particular faith tradition" and seeks practical moral wisdom for living constructively (Lynch, 2003). In doing so, he is careful to suggest that a post-religious approach is no better than a pastoral theological one; these are simply different frameworks that suit the commitment and needs of different people. There is no expectation that the inclusion of a post-religious practical theology would prevent, for example, Christian pastoral theologians from drawing on their religious beliefs. The answer to whether post-secular practical theology will

flourish lies in the future, but these are certainly issues worth consideration. In the meantime, it would be fascinating to see more writers with a non-religious viewpoint featured in the journal.

On a similar note, while practical theology historically stems from debates around Christian practice, there has recently been more discussion around its place in different religions.¹ For example, Tarek Badawia suggests that practical theology, while not derived from the context of Islamic theology, has always been very close to core ideas of charitable religiosity in Islam. He equates it to the Islamic concept of *waqf*, meaning “to stop, contain, or to preserve” (Badawia, 2022). Both practical theology and *waqf* emphasise social justice and the importance of ensuring the welfare of others. From a Buddhist perspective, Bhikshuni Lozang Trinlae considers the generalisation of traditionally Christian academic practical theology models. She suggests that a more academic, critical reflection on praxis could be beneficial in a wide range of Buddhist contexts, including Buddhist congregations, clergy, teachers, and scholars (Trinlae, 2014). Katja Stuerzenhofecker highlights a particular point of tension here: “if the field’s roots in Western practice and academia are Christian but current growth is international and multi-traditional, then how is this development best supported?” (Stuerzenhofecker This is not an issue with the inheritance of practical theology by non-Christians, but rather with ongoing Christian hegemony which is both historical and continues to exist within the institutional circumstances that I find myself in. This is an issue to be aware of, particularly as we consider the expansion of the field and seek to welcome and amplify different voices and contexts within the journal.

When we first spoke, you posed another question, which has a lot of relevance here: is there anything that should *not* be included in the journal?

ELIZABETH: There may well be limitations to the journal because of its form. Poetry is now included and arguably drawings could be. Theological cartoons would be a welcome addition! Music would be harder to include, though hyperlinks in the online edition could enable this. The diversity of genre in scripture, history, law, poetry, epistle and so on encourages exploration.

I expect that the editor has sent me articles for review that relate to ministerial practice and most have had a secure grounding in experience and practical research. I have certainly seen more which lack theological reflection, some connection with the declared or enacted faith of those described. An absence of future orientation, when there has been no thought of what could/should/might have taken place, is also note-worthy. It is rarer for me to encounter a review of someone else's work with little evidence of original research engagement though I have looked at articles that appear to have inadequate rootedness in a particular faith community and generalisations about "church" or "faith" replace recorded observation or convincing references.

KATIE: While I'm keen to keep the boundaries of the journal fluid, I think these are some helpful observations. It is also testament to the ground-breaking work that is already happening in the field that we rarely see submissions that don't include at least some original thought.

Conclusion

In our conversations together, we have identified different responses to the question of what practical theology is, and who the journal of *Practical Theology* is for. We have agreed that practical theology is centred on practices and lived experiences, and the interpretation of these. While we view the discipline differently, we both find that the "non declaratory" nature of practical theology is particularly helpful in the context of our work and practice.

To return to our opening analogy, an art gallery can be a daunting, unfamiliar, and impenetrable place. So, too, can the spaces and discussions that practical theologians inhabit. Crucially, if there are voices missing from these discussions, then our thoughts on what practical theology is and what fits within the journal will always be incomplete. Writing this piece in dialogue together has freed us to explore our own assumptions and opinions about practical theology, while knowing that the voice of the other will present an alternative perspective. Our thoughts, even together, will not be fully representative of the discipline. It is our hope that others may join in the continuing conversation that is helping us to shape the future of both the journal and the field.

Notes

ⁱ This might include examination of current papers, media reports etc, or of historical documents.

ⁱⁱ For example, *Developing Mission and Ministry in Context*.

<https://www.durham.ac.uk/media/durham-university/departments-/common-awards/documents/module-outlines/level-5/TMM2311.pdf> (accessed 07.10.22).

ⁱⁱ See

<https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?show=aimsScope&journalCode=yprt20> (accessed 07.10.2022).

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