

The Theory-Practice Binary and the Politics of Practical Knowledge¹

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

A few years ago I co-taught a course for first- and second-year doctoral students from different academic areas in our graduate department of religion. As they rotated responsibility for presenting, I noticed a subtle but clear posturing, running just below the surface, written into body postures, gestures, and speaking habits. More credibility and status surrounded those in certain disciplines. For those familiar with theological education, I hardly need say: the more theoretically-focused areas garnered more esteem.

Why did those closer to practice (e.g., homiletics, pastoral theology) question their knowledge, while those who foreground theory (e.g., historical studies, systematic theology) assume an air of greater confidence? Since I served on the committee that oversaw their matriculation, I knew that on paper there was little discrepancy in their credentials. Their behavior was even more peculiar because these students had entered a funded program designed precisely around teaching for the practice of ministry. By the program's standards at least, those closer to pastoral and religious practice should even have had an advantage. What most surprised me was how early in the students' careers such patterns set in and became established. How did people fresh to the academy so readily absorb its unspoken values about theory's dominance?

This moment in time encapsulates a conundrum in relating theory and practice that persists within the theological academy and its constituencies despite ourselves. Despite all that practical theologians have accomplished in advancing the cause of practice—and one of my central points in a 2011 presidential address to the International Academy of Practical Theology stressed the need to quit lamenting our sorry state—the very categories we seek to unsettle, those of theory and practice, continue to entrap us.² The terms

1 In addition to my appreciation for suggestions from other authors in the volume and my co-editor, I am grateful to Don Ottenhoff, Dorothy Bass, and Kathleen Cahalan for their constructive feedback on drafts of this chapter.

2 Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Five Misunderstandings About Practical Theology," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 16, no. 1 (2012): 5–26.

theory, *practice*, and *praxis* appear repeatedly in our literature, more frequently than other terms, precisely because a primary disciplinary aim has been to address the modern divorce between academic theology and everyday life.³ Yet those closer to the ground—those with practical knowledge and those who study it—still struggle to validate our particular kind of knowledge. We claim knowledge in practice but struggle to put that knowledge and its value into words and institutional practice. What exactly is going on here?

Several dynamics intensify the persistent academic devaluation of practical knowledge and practice and make the conundrum difficult to tackle. How theory relates to practice is actually a problem that has evaded satisfactory resolution for centuries, all the way back to Aristotle.⁴ As this suggests, epistemology or how we know what we know is in many ways a highly speculative subject, especially for those invested in theology as practical. The categories themselves reflect the hegemony of Western constructs. Why has practical theology's story been told through this terminology anyway? Have we reinforced the very dualism we are critiquing through our obsession with it? And does pursuit of this conjectural matter simply enact the opposite of what practical theologians recommend—attention to the concrete, immediate, and grounded? Theory/practice is simply not a key concern for those in underrepresented communities, as one colleague pointed out.⁵ Or, as another colleague objected, “haven’t we gotten beyond this?” Finally and possibly most troubling, how do we talk about our own devaluation without sounding like complainers, simply furthering alienation and stymieing progress? Do we further reify the hegemony by talking about it? “It is wise,” I remark in my presidential address, “to know the politics out of which our discipline emerged.... But it is no longer necessary to start here or bemoan our status.”⁶

3 Duncan Forrester, a leading Scottish scholar in the 1990s, claimed that the question of the “proper relationship” between practice and theory “must bulk large in any discussion of the nature of practical theology” in “Can Theology be Practical?” in *Practical Theology: International Perspectives*, ed. Friedrich Schweitzer and Johannes A. van der Ven (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), p. 22.

4 Systematic theologian Matthew L. Lamb says dissecting the relationship between theory and practice “goes right to the core of the entire philosophical enterprise,” and he makes exactly the same claim about systematic theology at the end of his own survey in “The Theory-Praxis Relationship in Contemporary Christian Theologies,” *CTSA Proceedings* 31 (1976): 149, 178.

5 See Courtney Goto's chapter 5 in this book where she discusses the demand that she conform to a “template” of key issues that are “taken for granted as neutral” (p. 117).

6 Miller-McLemore, “Five Misunderstandings,” 10.

Despite or perhaps because of these intellectual and practical entanglements, the troubled relationship between theory and practice is a problem to which I think we need to return. While repeated negative disciplinary self-portraiture is problematic, gaining greater understanding of the dynamics behind demotion of practical knowledge is needed, even if the historical, conceptual, and political complexities cannot be fully addressed or resolved in one chapter. Questions about how we know what we know in theology and the connections between theoretical and practical knowledge have not gone away and even comprise, I would argue, the heart of practical theology's most valuable contribution. In this chapter, I want to explore why the relationship between theory and practice remains such a stumbling block—that quintessential idiomatic Biblical term for an impediment that leads to human transgression. Why does the dominance of theory remain, despite all the efforts to disrupt it in Marxism, pragmatism, hermeneutics, liberationism, post-structuralism, and practical theology? By examining the enduring influence of the modern theory-practice hierarchy and mixed efforts to undo it, I hope to show that unique perspectives arise precisely when we approach this question from a practical angle. For, as my opening story and many others like it reveal, the question of the proper relationship between theory and practice is more than a theoretical puzzle. It involves us almost immediately in troubled, contested political and institutional tensions and patterns—curricula, habits of learning and speaking, practices of entitlement and non-recognition, naming of disciplines and doctoral areas—that sustain systemic hierarchies and make it difficult to prize practical knowledge. One way to respond to the problem, I argue, is to gain greater consciousness of the power dynamics that surround it. Ultimately, resolution lies not in better theories alone but in changed practices.

The Relentlessness of the Modern Split

It is difficult to think outside the modern epistemological box in which theology is so separate from everyday life, although sometimes we catch a glimpse of times when the disjuncture was less stark. In an eloquent public address, Anglican Bishop Rowan Williams describes a period in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when the university was considered a “cell of the Body of Christ” and Christianity was not seen as a series of truth claims for professing or debate but as an “action that created a form of human life” or “instruction for shaping and ordering holy lives” in divine image. So, education was not

about “abstract argument... for abstract persons” but about equipping honest and astute guides and interpreters for the Christian life.⁷

This seemingly cohesive medieval worldview seems so utterly foreign today that it is nearly impossible to fathom. Fortunately, Williams does not pine nostalgically for a return to an idyllic pre-divided time but instead deftly makes a case for Christianity’s contribution to forming wise citizens capable of making reasonable and just decisions previously given over to the monarchy. I wonder, however, if he is idealistic about our ability to reform education so it fosters a kind of “mediaeval practicality” that avoids the “false polarity between disinterested research and the world of target setting,” especially for those in theological education.⁸ It seems that the divide that severs theory and practice runs right through those of us in the modern theological academy.

A Swedish colleague states the problem bluntly when he explains the situation in Lund. He says his own context “can only fully be understood against the background of the Lundensian School of Theology,” which shaped Swedish theology between 1925 and 1960. For the school’s most important representatives and internationally famous theologians, such as Anders Nygren, a “strong division between theory and practice was necessary in order for theology to remain a subject among the sciences.” Nygren and his colleagues “believed that the strong connection Schleiermacher made between academic theology and church practices was a mistake.”⁹ By contrast to Schleiermacher, they wanted to “make theology scientific, and therefore to keep theory and praxis and facts and values apart.” In the words of another commentator, the “Lundensian theologians strongly maintained that they did not do normative or constructive theology. They only provided a rigorously objective description of the distinctively and authentically Christian.”¹⁰ They sought to make clear to the university that theology was not connected in any way with the confessional church and its (emotional irrational) biases. Theology analyzes but refrains from influencing—or worse, converting—the world.

7 Rowan Williams, “Oxford University Commemoration Day Sermon,” *TAO* XLV, no. 1 (Winter 2007), 26, 28–29.

8 Williams, “Commemoration Day Sermon,” 27, 30.

9 Thomas Girmalm, “Perspectives on Practical Theology: Searching Tools and Arenas in Modern Swedish Theology Up to the Present Day,” p. 1, paper presented at the International Academy of Practical Theology, Amsterdam, July 25, 2011.

10 Arne Rasmusson, “A Century of Swedish Theology,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (2007): 135, cited by Girmalm, “Perspectives on Practical Theology,” 2. See Tone Kaufman’s chapter 6 in this volume on persistent questions about normativity in empirical research (pp. 134–162).

Prejudice against practice lingers not just in Sweden, however, but also in others places partly because the bias is built right into institutional infrastructures. In leading Catholic universities, for example, the university theology department does theory (e.g., systematics and history) and farms out practice to separate graduate programs in ministry (e.g., religious education, counseling).¹¹ In U.S. Protestant seminaries, the term “fourth area” has served for decades to demarcate and segregate “arts” of ministry from so-called classical areas of bible, history, and doctrine. A similar hierarchy characterizes many European contexts where ministerial education occurs in two sites—study of theory in the university followed by time in a seminary focused on practice.

During a 2013 American Academy of Religion (AAR) panel on human senses and religious experience, a religion and psychology colleague observed: “Nowhere has the separation of theory and practice done more damage than in the study of religion and theology.”¹² A hyperbole perhaps, and his rationale for the assertion was buried within a paper on embodied cognition that only implicitly challenged the division. But others, such as revisionist theologian David Tracy, have elaborated the point. In several places in the last decade, he distinguishes the “three great separations of modern Western culture”—feeling and thought, form and content, and theory and practice—as devastating for theology and theological education. In an interview, he credits French philosopher Pierre Hadot’s *Spiritual Exercises in Ancient Philosophy* for his own change of heart. His description of Hadot’s thesis captures the problem well:

[Hadot] claims that the reason we moderns have such a difficult time reading ancient and non-Western texts stems from the fact that in modernity we’ve lost a link that was once present in our own culture—and still endures in other contemporary cultures. We generally phrase it as a link “between theory and practice,” but I think a more exact way to say what’s weak for us is the link “between theological and philosophical theories and spiritual exercises.” If you were an ancient Stoic, every day you would practice certain exercises that would heighten awareness of “my” logos and “the” Logos.... There is a need, of course, for a genuine *dis-*

11 See Claire Wolfteich’s chapter 11 in this volume on Catholic practical theology (pp. 276–304)

12 James W. Jones, informal panel comment during a session on “Religious Experience Through the Senses,” paper presented at the American Academy of Religion, Baltimore, November 24, 2013.

tion between theory and practice, as the scholastics used to say, but not for separation.¹³

According to Tracy, practical theologians are among those who best understand this disjunction, and they have the means, he says, to recover the “classic link” between theoretical reflection and spiritual exercise. But he himself pictures the recovery as a personal, spiritual, and intellectual enterprise more than an institutional and political matter, and this misperception is partly due to his failure to recognize that the separation is not simply a disconnection but also a hegemony.

Even though many “hope for reform”—as Tracy’s interview is titled—there is an institutional and political intractability to the problem. The Association of Practical Theology hosted a panel at another AAR in which institutional leaders were invited to reflect on the accomplishments, challenges, and implications of new initiatives in practical theology. Social ethicist Elizabeth Bounds, then coordinator of a Lilly-funded doctoral program on religious practices and practical theology at Emory (comparable to Vanderbilt’s program with which I opened this chapter), identified “theory vs. practice” as one of four dichotomies that have impeded a cohesive institutional identity for their program. Her conversations with faculty members led her to conclude:

The most pervasive and distorting dichotomy comes from the difficulty Western academic or intellectual culture has had in grappling with the connections between theory and practice. Understanding practice as an application of theory is virtually hardwired into the Western academic mind. While there have been challenges to this assumption: Marx’s notion of praxis, the tradition of American pragmatism, and more recently MacIntyre’s revival of an Aristotelian account of practical reason, I often find that even when we claim to be working with one or more of these heritages, we academics still have theory lead and practice follow.¹⁴

13 William R. Burrows, “Reasons to Hope for Reform: An Interview with David Tracy,” *America* 173 (October 14, 1995), 15–16, emphasis in the original. See also David Tracy, “Traditions of Spiritual Practice and the Practice of Theology,” *Theology Today* 55, no. 2 (1998): 235–241 and “A Correlational Model of Practical Theology Revisited,” in *Religion, Diversity, and Conflict*, ed. Edward Foley (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2011), 49–61.

14 Elizabeth Bounds, “Border Crossings: Some Thoughts on the Initiative in Religious Practices and Practical Theology at Emory University,” paper presented at the American Academy of Religion, Atlanta, Georgia, November 22, 2003, 3. The other dichotomies include objective vs. engaged study, religious vs. theological, and specialization vs. interdisciplinary approaches.

Like Tracy, Bounds sees practical theology as a resource for correction, and she hopes the Emory initiative will explore approaches that overcome the dualism. But how will the hardwiring be changed, especially if programs like Emory's and Vanderbilt's stand at loggerheads with unexamined powers that be?

An Evasion of Theory-Practice as Political

An evasion of the politics surrounding theory-practice characterizes the longer philosophical discussion. This obfuscation is especially evident in surveys of the theory-practice relationship. Two philosophically trained theologians, Matthew Lamb and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, wrote articles in 1976 and 1987 respectively offering useful theory-practice typologies that, nonetheless, completely ignore practical biases and inequities. Since people look to such overviews as useful resources in understanding the problem, noting this shortcoming is important. Lamb names five theory-practice positions: primacy of theory (e.g., Catholic scholasticism, orthodoxy), primacy of practice (e.g., liberal Protestantism), primacy of faith-love (e.g., neo-orthodoxy, which eschews the theory-practice question); critical theoretic correlations (e.g., revisionist theology); and critical-praxis correlations (e.g., political and liberation theology). However, because Lamb's analysis equates *practice* with *experience* and *theory* with the Christian *tradition*, he essentially reduces the discussion to a debate in systematic theology over where religious truth or revelation resides (experience or tradition). Consequently, rather than explore how theory-practice relate to one another, his essay turns into a review of twentieth-century schools of systematic thought as a whole, similar to Tracy's "five basic models" (to which he makes frequent reference) and modernist taxonomies such as those of H. Richard Niebuhr and Avery Dulles (which he footnotes).¹⁵ Although Lamb provides a helpful comparative analysis of doctrinal positions from orthodox to progressive, he skirts questions about the complexity of practical knowledge and its academic marginalization regardless of where scholars and schools of thought fall on his continuum.

A decade later, Fiorenza's aims are more practical because he writes for a theological education journal and audience. However, his account of four models for relating theory and practice—hermeneutical, linguistic, liberation, and pragmatic—is quite brief; it is organized around theoretical differences

15 David Tracy's *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 22–42; H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951); and Avery Dulles's *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), cited by Lamb, "The Theory-Praxis Relationships," 149.

This evasion does not mean that these treatments are without value. Beyond offering categorical distinctions, they provoke critical consciousness about the categories themselves. German political theologian Johann Baptist Metz, Lamb's and Fiorenza's teacher and a pivotal figure in the revitalization of lived theologies of all kinds, credits Lamb's "penetrating" article as significant in his own emerging awareness of the "practical limitations of a purely theoretical critical theology."¹⁷ Key to the development of his own "practical fundamental theology," whose oddity he admits is apparent in its very title, is the need to recognize the limitations of the "standardized subjects... (professors, teachers and specialists in theological studies), places (universities, seminaries colleges), the normal forms of communication (books, lectures, discussions) and interests (the Church's teaching mission)."¹⁸ The professional theologian is not theology's sole executer, a theme that arises again and again in liberation, practical, and contextual theologies influenced by his work. Nevertheless, however admirable Metz's effort to moderate the distinction between laity and professional and to forge a genuine dialectic between theory and practice, his effort is for naught without further institutional analysis of the very sort his own political theology invites.

The desire to repair the rift between theory and practice is apparent in almost every book on practical theology and theological education from the

16 Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Theory and Practice: Theological Education as a Reconstruc-
17 tive, Hermeneutical, and Practical Task," *Theological Education* 23, no. 3 (1987): 113–141.
18 Johan Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theol-
ogy*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1980), 50–51, and 79, note 3.
Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 59.

1980s and 1990s. It is helpful to return to this literature because it gives such a pristine picture of an early and not wholly successful attempt to right distorted theory-practice relationships at the beginning of practical theology's twentieth-century revitalization. A constantly repeated refrain throughout the scholarship is criticism of education designed around the application of theory to practice. "Theological schooling is not a movement from theory to the application of theory in practical techniques," contends Yale theologian David Kelsey in a 1997 summary in *Christian Century*. When education is understood purely as the acquisition of ideas, bodies of theory become the "ultimate subject matter," the "curriculum becomes a clutch of unrelated courses," and students focus on becoming "skilled in certain professional techniques" rather than attending to what scholars at this time identified as the real subject matter—"deeper understanding of God."¹⁹

It is clear from these remarks that Kelsey spent time talking extensively with theological educators such as Edward Farley, Barbara Wheeler, and Joseph Hough about the one-way movement of theory to practice as part of an Association of Theological Schools "Basic Issues Research" in theological education.²⁰ Introductions to two edited volumes supported by this program tell the same story. As Hough and Wheeler argue in introducing *Beyond Clericalism*, faculty members can do the research they enjoy while absolving their responsibility for its practical implications by seeing their endeavors as providing a "theory" for the profession" or the "theory" necessary to undergird the 'practice' of ministry."²¹ So, scholars have little motivation to mend their ways.

The next logical step in Hough and Wheeler's description of the problem comes straight from Farley's classic treatise on theological education, *Theologia*, which they identify as a central influence: "Complaints about the irrelevance of academic theory... encourage a focus on practical skills," and ministry becomes captive to the "modern professional model" or what Farley christened the *clerical paradigm*, "with its focus on managing and counseling at the expense of genuine theological reflection."²² When Wheeler teams up again two

19 David Kelsey, "What's Theological about a Theological School?" *Christian Century*, February 5–12, 1997, 132. See also his book, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological about a Theological School* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992).

20 Hereafter, referred to simply as "Issues" literature or discussion. For a bibliography, see W. Clark Gilpin, "Basic Issues in Theological Education: A Selected Bibliography, 1980–1988," *Theological Education* 25 (Spring 1989): 115–121.

21 Joseph C. Hough, Jr. and Barbara G. Wheeler, "Foreword" to Hough and Wheeler, eds., *Beyond Clericalism: The Congregation as a Focus for Theological Education* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), xxi.

22 Hough and Wheeler, "Foreword," xxi. See also Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 127–135.

years later with Farley, his voice also comes through in her introduction to their edited book, *Shifting Boundaries*. She applauds the theological turn, a move Farley calls for in *Theologia*. We must disrupt an assumption, “so widely held that it is often taken to be self-evident,” she writes, “that theological education is best conceived as the preparation of clergy for their tasks.”²³

Here, I find myself saying somewhat irreverently, “Imagine that—preparing clergy for ministry.” In the margin next to Wheeler’s dismissal of clergy tasks, I have written: “something really right *and* wrong about this.” I recognize that by “tasks” she actually means a truncated focus on techniques, and I understand and even agree with the need for a renewed “theological focus.” *Theologia*, Farley’s term for sapiential understanding of God, is meant to get beyond theology as mere theory. But if theology is not theory, what is it and how does it function? The answer to this question is less clear, and this problem has not received the attention it deserves. In a sense, the entire case for change in theological education is placed on the return to *theology*, an unstable, unwieldy term for something everyone can favor but few can pin down.

Instead, these accounts share a fixation on the demise of education into “technique.” As I argue elsewhere, the “clerical paradigm” becomes the final whipping boy in a long string of historical events troubling theological education—an emphasis that I see as misplaced when it is not accompanied by concern about academic theology that barely touches the ground of everyday life (the “academic paradigm”).²⁴ But only now do I see more clearly that despite a deep desire at the heart of this work to subvert the theory/practice polarity, the standard storyline that runs through this literature still perpetuates a dualism, now reinstated as *thinking theologically* versus *developing practical skills*. That is, despite all good intentions, a theory-practice division and hierarchy rise up once again in the tension between *theologia* and the clerical paradigm.

The persistence of this hierarchical dichotomy actually runs counter to the original intention of the 1980s and 1990s “Issues” literature. The point is not a “matter of the ‘academic’ side... dumping on the ‘practical side,’” Kelsey underscores.²⁵ In identical fashion, Wheeler clarifies, the proposal that theological education become more theological is not meant “to privilege any current

23 Barbara G. Wheeler, “Introduction” to Wheeler and Edward Farley, eds., *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 9.

24 Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), Ch. 7, “The Clerical and the Academic Paradigm”; and “Five Misunderstandings,” 13–15.

25 Kelsey, “What’s Theological,” 132.

field or area of study” but to question curricular divisions themselves.²⁶ A few years later, when Wheeler co-writes again, this time with Kelsey for a Farley festschrift, we hear the same refrain. They laud Farley and then explore why his work and the “Issues” literature as a whole had so little effect, and we hear once again: People have misinterpreted the call for a more theological orientation as a “plot to privilege academic theology” and take over the less “theoretical” fields. According to Kelsey and Wheeler, people also fear that the turn to practice will not be intellectually credible, that the “kinds of intellectual rigor traditionally linked with studies in the ‘theoretical’ fields of the curriculum will be slighted.”²⁷ Uttered twenty years ago, these words could have been said yesterday. These recurrent worries about privilege and rigor actually reveal the persistence of deep institutional fissures by which the theory-practice hierarchy gets reinstantiated in unexamined educational practices.

This divisive way of organizing knowledge, in other words, will not give up the ghost so easily. Why not? Why does Tracy’s “great separation” continue to resurface even in places where people genuinely wish to subvert it? Why is it so entrenched? This question plagues the discussion and goes to the heart of my argument. My hunch is that answering this question will require further study of two important dynamics: first, political power within the theological academy; and second, the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge. Although this chapter focuses primarily on the first dynamic, the overarching question remains: Can the difference between theory and practice be understood in a way that yields respect for each rather than hierarchy and disregard?

A Sociology of Theological Knowledge

In his 1985 book *Constructing Local Theologies*, now in its tenth printing, Robert Schreiter sketches a sociology of theological knowledge that begs for further elaboration. He is among the few then and now who extend the political analysis suggested by Latin American liberation theology to the theological school itself. He is also singular in questioning the modern sovereignty within academy and church alike of one kind of theology—theology as sure

²⁶ Wheeler, “Introduction,” 10.

²⁷ David H. Kelsey and Barbara G. Wheeler, “New Ground: The Foundations and Future of the Theological Education Debate,” in *Theology and the Interhuman: Essays in the Honor of Edward Farley*, ed. Robert R. Williams (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1995), 189–190.

knowledge. Almost all other attempts to classify types of theology ignore such politics.

A sociology of knowledge traces cultural dynamics and political pressures behind the construction of human concepts. In Schreiter's words, it asks how "certain ideas or ways of thinking become prevalent at a particular point in time."²⁸ Its roots go back to Marx and later German sociologists, such as Karl Mannheim and Max Scheler, who shared the conviction that knowledge is driven or at least powerfully shaped by class interests and ideology. A sociology of theological knowledge therefore investigates theological reflection as a practice shaped by cultural conditions.

There is nothing new today, of course, about the idea that Christian theology is shaped by politics and social context. Over the last several decades, people have argued convincingly from a number of angles that class, race, ethnicity, gender, orientation, ability, age, and other factors shape how one imagines God, faith, Christian community, human sin, and salvation. In the three decades since Schreiter's work, scholars have found other resources in post-colonial theory, for example, and in Michel Foucault's corpus to extend even further the analysis of power and knowledge. In fact, Schreiter recognizes his own debt to liberation theologians who were among the first to raise questions in 1960s about theology as the property of a bourgeois class. Along Marxist lines, they sought to return theological authority to the poor. Theology comprises far more than words, they insisted, and is most fundamentally embodied in actions that liberate the captive and free the oppressed.

What was new in Schreiter was his intimation that the theological school is itself a culture worth investigating. To be clear, this is my reading of what he accomplishes; he himself puts this forward more by implication than by direct assertion. But his argument leads inescapably to this conclusion. The entire Christian scholarly corpus is merely a "series of local theologies" to use his words.²⁹ More important, academic theology is just one cultural instantiation among others, not the superlative or only such happening. "What has counted for theology since the thirteenth century in Western Christianity," he observes, is no longer the whole of theology, if it ever was. This form extols a university model of knowledge, "with its emphasis on clarity, precision, and relation to

28 Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985, 2002, Tenth printing), 78. He cites Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955 [1936]) and *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).

29 Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 32.

other bodies of knowledge.”³⁰ Its proponents assume that this universally-valid theology should be applied to local communities and that the professionally trained theologian plays *the* key role in doing so.

Most Christians have bought wholeheartedly into this construction. Indeed, most people in congregations feel “they do not have ‘real’ theology until they have theology as sure knowledge.”³¹ They seldom see their own words and actions in the church and their lives as theological. The word *theology* is associated with an endeavor removed from daily encounter and located in theological schools and ecclesial doctrines. This model of theology as sure knowledge or *scientia* has loomed “so large in the West, and is so often held up as the theological ideal elsewhere,” Schreiter says, “that it is hard to think of it as one form of theology alongside others” even though it is itself embedded within its own particular culture.³² A kind of false consciousness covers over its material location and elevates this form over other forms.

Schreiter makes two moves here that challenge the politics of theological knowing. First, he explores local theologies that relativize the authority of the professional theologian, recognizing complimentary roles of lay leaders in the Christian community as well as what he calls prophets, poets, insiders, and outsiders, all of whom contribute to the development of theology. Second, in identifying “theology as sure knowledge” as only one of many kinds, he exposes ways in which its dominance has slighted three other forms, which he names as theology as *variations on sacred texts*, theology as *wisdom*, and theology as *praxis*. In a word, he questions the “very paradigms of [theological] thought themselves.”³³ Mapping local theologies offers fresh categories, language, and grids by which people might better discern theologies in context. Moreover, naming the multiple forms of theology underscores the plurality and power dynamics.

It is important to note that in a sociology of knowledge a typology is valuable not just for its specific content (e.g., these four forms of theology) but also for the ideological work that it accomplishes. That is, a typology is more than a classificatory tool that sorts out kinds of theology; it is a political tool that reveals systems of power. Broadening our awareness of the “range of possible forms of theological expression” is “especially important,” Schreiter insists, because of the temptation for one group to “judge another group’s theology as

30 Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 4.

31 Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 91.

32 Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 89.

33 Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 77.

not being ‘real’ theology, or as being more or less sophisticated.” Such dynamics are “odious,” he says, and based on an unjust “comparison of qualitatively different entities.”³⁴ Although he does not say so explicitly at this point, those inclined toward theology as a science—that is, most or all of us in academe—bear the heaviest burden of guilt for the competition deeply woven into university infrastructures and the patterns of dominance that spill over into religious communities. Typically, we judge other forms of knowledge “by sure-knowledge standards” and find them wanting, leading “to the situation today where it is now a struggle to relearn how a community engages in theological reflection.”³⁵ In other words, a typology not only describes modes of theology; it uncovers and challenges hierarchies of knowledge, affirms suppressed knowledge, and calls for a repositioning of alternative forms.

Of course, Schreiter has his blinders, more easily seen in hindsight. He understood culture as a cohesive holistic way of life, a view that postmodern anthropologists now question.³⁶ But, if anything, today’s redefinition of culture as plural, fluid, fragmentary, and eclectic only furthers his challenge to theology as conventionally understood in distilled holistic doctrinal and academic forms. He also seems oblivious of a parallel interest in “local theologizing” in the pastoral and practical theologies that were developing largely in Protestant institutions from mid-century into the 1980s, none of which appear in his text.³⁷ Nor does he imagine further implications of the liberationist theory on which he draws. As a Catholic theologian, practical and liberation theologies likely had ambiguous, perhaps even unwelcome, connotations when he wrote the book, which predated much of the 1980s practical theology discussion and the growing acceptance of liberation theology. More important for my purposes than these deficiencies, however, his book significantly advances insight into how theological institutions deform theology. Merely recognizing theologies as plural raises significant question about justice among the diverse forms. In turning from philosophy to the social sciences, naming the disdain for the “religion of the people” in colonial theology, and questioning the property ownership of theological construction by an elite, *Constructing*

34 Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 80.

35 Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 90.

36 See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997). However, she tends to reduce theology’s complexity to a two-fold binary—academic and everyday theology—even though she recognizes theology as itself a “material social practice” (p. 72).

37 Schreiter lists five new forms of theologizing, including local and contextual, but does not include pastoral and practical theologies (pp. 5–6).

They name the “vested interests” of faculties in sustaining the status quo and identify the organization of theological studies into discrete disciplines as the “most critical *political fact* of life” in seminaries.⁴⁰ A few years later, Wheeler contends that a theory-to-practice movement is “codified and continuously re-presented” by the “structure of studies,” a phrase she repeats throughout her essay. The “presuppositional package” that orders the disciplines is “more than a pedagogical arrangement; it is also a *socioeconomic reality*.” It is “rarely scrutinized”; it is “simply taken for granted, and its power to shape perceptions and behavior goes unnoticed.”⁴¹ Finally, in a culminating assessment of the 1980s and 1990s “Issues” literature, Kelsey and Wheeler imply that the failure to understand how educational institutions operate on the ground is one reason for the literature’s limited impact. They gleaned this insight from feminist and Latin American theologies, translated through Rebecca Chopp who criticizes the discussion as highly ideational, removed from the concrete “historical, cultural and symbolic factors at work.” The analysis is “unrealistic and distant from the way things actually are.”⁴² In response, Kelsey and Wheeler call for ethnographic studies of institutional cultures—“studies that describe the practices of schools in thick detail.” A few years later, Wheeler spearheads a project contrasting a mainline and an evangelical seminary.⁴³ However, although the study captures well student experience and school environment, it remains entirely on the surface in terms of academic politics.

Wheeler and company are on the right track; they just do not go far enough in spelling out the stratification that haunts hallowed halls and sanctuaries. In some ways, they are not that far removed from two leaders of the discussion—Kelsey and Farley—who confess that they refrain in their major works from comment on the actual “institutionality” of theological education and focus instead on the conceptual or the “ironically utopian,” as Kelsey says.⁴⁴ In *Theologia*, Farley quotes Foucault and promises an “archaeology of the theological

40 Hough and Wheeler, “Foreword,” x, xxi–xxii, emphasis added.

41 Wheeler, “Introduction,” 11–14, emphasis added.

42 Kelsey and Wheeler, “New Ground,” 192. They cite Rebecca Chopp’s book, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 9–11. See also Chopp, “Practical Theology and Liberation,” in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge and James N. Poling (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 120–138.

43 Kelsey and Wheeler, “New Ground,” 193. See Jackson W. Carrollet et al., *Being There: Culture and Formation in Two Theological Schools* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

44 Farley, *Theologia*, xi–xii; 22–23; Kelsey, *To Understand God*, 15–16, 111.

school” rather than a “straightforward” history.⁴⁵ But his analysis falls short despite its historical erudition because it ultimately does not take seriously disciplinary regimes and practices internal to the academy of religion.

Some people, such as Dale Andrews, decry the chasm between academic theology and folk religion in religious communities, and others, such as Michel Andraos, study how classroom pedagogy replicates colonialist imposition of Western epistemology.⁴⁶ But among the few scholars who have looked more closely at the production of theological knowledge, Schreiter and Mary McClintock Fulkerson are unique in urging closer inspection of the “social location of theologians” as “members of the professional managerial class” in Fulkerson’s words. They come at this problem from different angles and for different purposes—Fulkerson as a Protestant feminist postmodern theologian interested in deconstructing narrow views of theology in feminist and doctrinal circles and Schreiter as a Catholic theologian and missiologist invested in reclaiming local theologies. But they reach similar conclusions about the politics. Fulkerson, however, identifies only one instance of the misuse of managerial power. Those who rely on a “MacIntyrean definition of practice,” such as her own Duke colleague Stanley Hauerwas, ignore the “work of the so-called ‘practical’ field,” thereby reinstating the power of certain preferred academic guilds.⁴⁷ Schreiter looks beyond postliberal theologians to a longer history of discrimination. For centuries and well before the advent of modernity and science, a university model of theology discounted common theologies as lacking theoretical clarity and precision.

Feminist and critical theorists provide resources to extend the interrogation. Black feminists in particular have distinctive insights precisely because they find themselves confronting diverse but interlocking systems of oppression (race, gender, class, etc.) and have found it useful to focus on commonalities among the injustices. In particular, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins characterizes the “either/or dualistic thinking” or what she calls the “construct of dichotomous oppositional difference” as a basic tenet of domination that cuts across multiple sites. She quotes author and activist bell hooks who depicts dichotomies as the “central ideological component of all systems of domina-

45 Farley, *Theologia*, 30.

46 Dale Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); Michel Elias Andraos, “Engaging Diversity in Teaching Religion and Theology: An Intercultural, De-colonial Epistemic Perspective,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 15, no. 1 (2012): 3–15.

47 Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “Theology and the Lure of the Practical: An Overview,” *Religion Compass* 1, no. 2 (2007): 300.

tion in Western society.”⁴⁸ In Collins’s analysis, binaries such as black/white and male/female share three basic characteristics: stark difference from one another, inherent opposition, and, most important for understanding the conundrum of theory’s recurrent dominance, intrinsic instability. This instability is often resolved, she observes, “by subordinating one half of each pair to the other.” So terms are understood “only in *relation* to their difference from their oppositional counterparts.”⁴⁹ Each pole is inherently opposed to the other, they do not enhance each other, and, most significant, they devolve into patterns of disempowerment. She summarizes: “Thus, whites rule Blacks, males dominate females, reason is touted as superior to emotion in ascertaining truth, facts supercede opinion in evaluating knowledge, and subjects rule objects. Dichotomous oppositional differences invariably imply relationships of superiority and inferiority, hierarchical relationships that mesh with political economies of domination and subordination.”⁵⁰ Similar ideas have arisen among poststructuralists. As captured well by political theorist and philosopher Seyla Benhabib, the “logic of binary oppositions is also a logic of subordination and domination.”⁵¹ Or, in the words of a peer in the philosophy of religion Grace Jantzen who studies gender and the theism/atheism binary, “wherever there is a binary distinction, we need to ask whose interest does such logic serve.”⁵²

Of course, the scale of the binaries foregrounded by Benhabib, Jantzen, Collins, and hooks is formidable compared to that of theory-practice. As Benhabib puts it, “The Orient is there to enable the Occident, Africa is there to enable western civilization to fulfill its mission, the woman is there to help man actualize himself.”⁵³ So I hesitate to draw analogies. But it is still important to

48 bell hooks, *From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 29, cited by Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” in *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*, ed. Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 42.

49 Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” 42, emphasis in the original.

50 Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” 42.

51 Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 15.

52 Jacob A. Belzen, “Back to Cultural Psychology of Religion” in *Religion and Psychology: Mapping the Terrain: Contemporary Dialogues, Future Prospects*, ed. Diane Jonte-Pace and William B. Parsons (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 118, referring to Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Toward a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 66.

53 Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, 15.

note the hegemonic dynamic within the theory-practice binary, especially because it is so seldom noted. The theory-practice dichotomy functions in ways similar to more commonly recognized dualisms, operating to suppress and control knowledge, turning those who stand closer to material practice into the “other” to stabilize dominant structures of knowledge, and assigning positions of inferiority and superiority that harm theology’s potential to flourish in diverse places within and beyond the academy. This dynamic breeds competition over who does “real” theology that cannot be resolved within the limitations of the schema itself because the underside is often rendered invisible or unseen, and inferior placement becomes a means for further domination. So, for example, academics do not “know” about scholarship in pastoral and practical theology despite a sixty-year history. Moreover, people are assigned a “group inferior status,” in Collins’s words, and then that status is used as “proof of the group’s inferiority.” Black women are denied literacy and then accused of lacking necessary information for sound judgment.⁵⁴ Practical theologians are expected to teach arts of ministry and then said to lack rigor and precision.

When Jeremy Carrette, a critical theorist in religion and psychology, draws on Foucault to examine the knowledge economy behind the construction of modern psychology, he also analyzes how binary knowledge functions and a second concept with implications for our analysis, *disciplinary amnesia* or the “art of suppressing those features of a discipline that undermine” its logic and practice.⁵⁵ Maintaining divisions “as fixed rather than temporary” is a way of wielding power in the construction of knowledge, he argues.⁵⁶ The creation of modern psychology rests on just such an unexamined, fixed bifurcation of the individual and the social that assigns psychology to the individual and artificially brackets the social. But because disciplinary amnesia suppresses recognition of how this division has ordered and controlled knowledge, few people notice how much economics shape psychology and how individually-oriented psychology sustains a market economy, selling products for the self. Subtly, quietly, binaries become epistemological linchpins, controlling what is recognized as knowledge and insulating the recognized knowledge from political scrutiny. That binaries seem so irresolvable actually reveals that they are hiding certain values and material realities behind their surface patina.

Has the theory-practice binary functioned in similar ways in theology? Although I cannot answer this question to the extent that Carrette does in his

54 Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” 42.

55 Jeremy Carrette, *Religion and Critical Psychology: Religious Experience in the Knowledge Economy* (London/New York: Routledge, 2007), 23.

56 Carrette, *Religion and Critical Psychology*, 22.

book-length treatment of economics and the production of specialist psychological knowledge, his pursuit of a *critical psychology*, exposing the “fault lines” in the formation of a discipline, remains suggestive for a comparable *critical theology*.⁵⁷ How has theological knowledge, constructed around a stark and unbalanced theory-practice division that privileges only one kind of intelligence, been wed, for example, to the exploitations of certain peoples or to the cost-benefit values of an efficient profitable market economy, values that go against the grain of many religious communities and traditions? Or, as another example, how has the hegemony of theory over practice insulated theology from political critique and obscured its wider ethical responsibilities? The take-away here, as he suggests, is the reminder that binaries are always “value-motivated and, consequently, politically fuelled.” Hence, they cannot be resolved without reassessing the values we hold “about being human.”⁵⁸ In the end, he argues for an ethic of not-knowing that challenges totalitarian forms of knowledge and redefines knowing as a more open-ended and evolving relationship, which allows more room than an owned and controlled canon for what William James called the “More.”

When narrative therapists Michael White and David Epston turn to Foucault to reconstruct counseling as a political process, they also describe a kind of epistemological amnesia that arises around two kinds of subjugated knowledges: “One class is constituted by those previously established or ‘erudite’ knowledges that have been written out of the record by the revision of history achieved through the ascendance of a more global and unitary knowledge.”⁵⁹ In theology, one can think of the tensions between speculative and practical theology in Bonaventure and Aquinas in the thirteenth century, Luther’s not entirely successful protest against speculative theology in the Reformation, and even Farley’s own attempt to “restore unity” across specialized disciplines by recovering *theologia*, “‘theology’ [as] a single thing.... the one ground of the one thing.” In each case, the eruption of new theological knowledges is submerged or controlled through formal systematization designed to “mask the ruptural effects” in Foucault’s words.⁶⁰

57 Carrette, *Religion and Critical Psychology*, 26.

58 Carrette, *Religion and Critical Psychology*, 98.

59 Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 25.

60 Farley, *Theologia*, 142, 151. For an overview of this submerged history, see Farley himself, *Theologia*, 34–39, and Randy L. Maddox, “The Recovery of Theology as a Practical Discipline,” *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 650–72, especially 652–653, 654–655.

Practical theological knowledge also resembles a second kind of subjugated knowledge that Schreiter's work touches on—"local popular" or "indigenous" knowledges that are operative but "denied or deprived of the space in which they could be adequately performed." These knowledges "survive only at the margins of society and are lowly ranked—considered insufficient and exiled from the legitimate domain of the formal knowledges and the accepted sciences" or, in Foucault's words, "beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity."⁶¹ In general, lost knowledges can be resurrected "only by careful and meticulous scholarship" that challenges the claims for a unitary and uniquely scientific truth, as White and Epston suggest.⁶²

Of course, as any reading of Foucault would suggest, power is continuously under negotiation, and there are few innocent parties. People occupy varying positions of relative power and disempowerment, perpetuating discriminations to which they are subject. Given the "ambiguity of all power-knowledge practices within even the most seemingly liberative" efforts in practical theologian Tom Beaudoin's words, we should recognize the new knowledge production in practical theology as both disorienting earlier power relations *and* establishing new regimes.⁶³ So, for example, people rank some practical disciplines over others or disregard the knowledge of students, ministers, or certain types of Christianity or other religions. However, the constant renegotiation of power does not dispel the persistence of imbalances and inequities. Even Foucault evidences what Beaudoin describes as a "preferential option" for the repeatedly marginalized.

Raising Consciousness: Practical Theologians as Outsiders Within

Around the edges of their writing, scholars have put into print their concern about academic prejudice against those proximate to practice. Several decades ago, Juan Luis Segundo said the effort to liberate theology is threatened by what he described as an "academic disdain" for a "theology rising out of the urgent problems of real life" as "naïve and uncritical."⁶⁴ Twenty years later, in one of the first international volumes in practical theology in the 1990s, a

61 White and Epston, *Narrative Means*, p. 26, citing Michel Foucault, *Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 82.

62 White and Epston, *Narrative Means*, 25–26.

63 Tom Beaudoin, *Witness to Dispossession: The Vocation of a Post-Modern Theologian* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 68.

64 Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976), 5.

United Methodist scholar best known for research on faith stages, James W. Fowler, describes the “revolution” in the discipline as a move from the “basement” of departments housed “as though they were afterthoughts.” The “more academically prestigious the school of theology,” he continues, “the greater the status difference.”⁶⁵ Bernard Lee, whose investment in practical theology grew when he assumed directorship of the Institute of Ministry at Loyola University in New Orleans in 1989, declares his eagerness “to reject the epithet of ‘soft theology’ made by many who remember an older form of pastoral theology as what you did after you learned theology and *then* need to apply it.”⁶⁶ Long before these folks, Seward Hiltner himself, heralded as a founder of the turn to the study of living human documents in theological schools, hid his frustration in a string of testy footnotes about the deep “antipractical bias” in academe that views pastoral theology as “merely practical without the ability to make genuinely theological contributions.”⁶⁷ More recently and not surprisingly, Carmen Nanko-Fernandez names “academic second-class citizenship” as one reason why so few Latino/a scholars identify themselves with practical and pastoral theologies. Those who “already experience marginalization” find little advantage in affiliating with practical theology, she remarks, “especially when others seek to classify our theologies as practical as a means of dismissing” their value.⁶⁸

In many ways, practical theologians find themselves as “outsiders within,” to borrow Collins’s phrase, only partially belonging but also understanding a great deal from the margins about the complexities of theological knowledge. She coins the phrase to capture the more pernicious discrimination she experiences as a black woman sociologist “caught between groups of unequal power,” privy to deep internal secrets, as with domestic workers or support staff, but never fully belonging. Whereas early figures in the sociology of knowledge, such as Georg Simmel and Alfred Schütz, identified the *stranger* or the *insider* and *outsider* as valid positions for obtaining knowledge, she draws on Mannheim who saw “marginal intellectuals” in academia as capable of bringing a “critical posture” to the “creative development of academic disciplines

65 James W. Fowler, “The Merging New Shape of Practical Theology,” in *Practical Theology: International Perspectives*, ed. Friedrich Schweitzer and Johannes A. van der Ven (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 75.

66 Bernard J. Lee, “Practical Theology: Its Character and Possible Implications for Higher Education,” *Current Issues in Higher Education* 14, no. 2 (1994): 25, emphasis in the original.

67 Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), 217–218, note 11; 218–219, note 14; and 220–221, note 16.

68 Carmen Nanko-Fernandez, *Theologizing en Español: Context, Community, and Ministry* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 22.

themselves.”⁶⁹ Life on the edge fosters “a particular way of seeing reality,” as bell hooks says, from both the “outside in” and the “inside out.”⁷⁰ Although Collins later protests the personalized and depoliticized overuse of her phrase, black women’s experience of marginalization exposes dynamics faced by “any group of less powerful outsiders encountering the paradigmatic thought of a more powerful insider community.”⁷¹ In a sense, practical theologians who strive to understand theological knowledge within practice join feminists and postmodernists who criticize Western rationality, in Benhabib’s words, “from the standpoint of what and whom it excludes, suppresses, delegitimizes, renders mad, imbecilic or childish.”⁷²

Professors who teach in the so-called practical areas are accustomed to careless aspersions or even well intended but distorted characterizations of our “madness.”⁷³ Some of my Vanderbilt peers have harbored an assumption similar to that of the students with whom I began this essay—that those admitted in the practical areas have lower entrance exam scores, a misperception I accepted uncritically myself until I noticed that the facts proved otherwise. One colleague in systematic theology also evidenced surprise that I could actually find fifty-some established or credible authors to contribute to *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*. On a fairly regular basis, I have heard graduates and faculty members from another top U.S. divinity school announce proudly that their institution discourages students from taking practical courses as simply less valuable. A graduate from a prestigious religion department told me recently she had “gotten away” with including “practice” and “theology” in her dissertation in a department that frowns on both terms because they are regarded negatively within the wider university. When I was a doctoral student at a university divinity school surrounded by a plethora of religiously-affiliated seminaries whose primary aim was education in the practice of ministry, I absorbed from the air we breathed a quiet condescension toward these “lesser” institutions, one of which later hired me. When I left this school for my current appointment, my stronger publication record earned me a lower rank than a colleague coming from an Ivy League college in a more “classical” discipline. Another colleague accepted a demotion in rank in

69 Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, in Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” 36.

70 bell hooks, *From Margin to Center*, vii.

71 Patricia Hill Collins, “Reflections on the Outsider Within,” *Journal of Career Development* 26, no. 1 (Fall 1999): 85; Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” 53.

72 Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, 14.

73 See Ryan LaMothe, “Method and Madness: A Pastoral Theological Reflection,” *Pastoral Psychology*, June 2016, doi: 10.1007/s11089-016-0709-1.

moving from seminary to university divinity school because book publications for church audiences were perceived as less demanding. Late in his career, my own mentor, ethicist and practical theologian Don Browning, spent half of each year at another institution on research leave at least in part because of the lesser regard for his work in his otherwise leading home institution. In another school, as faculty members of a professional ministry program discussed whether to allow students who would likely serve Catholic parishes to take more than one ministerial arts course, one classically-trained faculty turned to his practical theology colleague and asked quite sincerely, “But aren’t these classes *just* hands-on?”

How does one reply in such situations? How would one explain in a sound-bite the actual value and intricacy of hands-on knowledge? If I had written down every prejudice since I began thinking about the latent politics, I would have amassed a large database. Those in practical theology tell these stories to each other but seldom put them out there for analysis. Perhaps to do so is impolite, ungracious, and counterproductive; perhaps it inflates the magnitude of the harm done. Over the years, however, I have begun to see a resemblance between these comments and “microaggressions” now recognized as sexist, racist, heterosexist, and so forth. It has taken time to see this. Psychologist and Chicano/a Studies professor Aída Hurtado describes the different experiences with sexism of women of color and white women. Women of color have a clearer view of oppression because they do “battle every day,” encountering overt racial discrimination as early as they can remember. Hence, they learn survival skills at the beginning of their lives. By contrast, many white women are oblivious, “seduced” into subordination because they occupy “more contradictory positions vis-à-vis white male power,” often unknowingly coopted into their own oppression. Consequently, they fail to acquire “political consciousness of gender oppression until they become adults.”⁷⁴ So also are many academics like white women—lulled into our prejudices and lacking in political consciousness by the conflicting positions we occupy with regard to power.

The disciplinary amnesia that prevents discussion of power politics also characterizes conversations about the very terms *practical theology* and *theology*. The quizzical expressions of those who persist in asking, “What is practical theology *anyway*?” remind me of questions asked in 1980s about feminism that constantly put the burden of explanation back on women, just as similar requests to explain racism continue to be foisted on people of color. Sometimes it is hard not to hear the question as willed ignorance on the part of a

74 Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” 41.

dominant group that is as interested in subjecting practical theology to suspicion as understanding it.⁷⁵ A parallel query, sometimes said with a smile of self-satisfaction, as if the inquirer has just scored a match point, runs like this: “Is there such a thing as *impractical* theology?” The last time someone asked me this I unloaded years of pent up frustration not deserved by the questioner. Would anyone ask a systematic or biblical theologian if there is such a thing as *unsystematic* or *unbiblical* theology, as if the pursuit is inevitably illogical or always in tension with its opposite? Not often, because the validity of these subjects is automatically assumed. The question also presumes that theology *is* practical, all the while obscuring the reality of a modern *impractical theology* removed from life. So those interested in how theology gets embodied in practice find themselves once again explaining themselves on the downside of an unexamined hegemony of theory-practice. The power of naming; the confusion around the very term *theology* and its conflicted institutional meanings for a denomination’s beliefs, an entire faculty or school, *and* a solitary discipline reserved for only a select few; the admitted ambiguities of *practical* as a qualifier for *theology*; and questions about when and why doctrinal theologians switched identifiers to terms like *systematic* and *constructive* (as opposed to unsystematic or unconstructive?) or why they introduce themselves simply as *theologians* while others in theological education must use qualifiers, such as *biblical* or *pastoral*—all these matters go largely unexamined. And thus, we academics agree to ignore the political and ideological dimensions of our definitional and institutional maneuvering.

To be clear, my aim in recounting these experiences and making these claims is not to gain more respect for an academic discipline that still has work to do in establishing its distinct knowledge and methods. Rather, without awareness of how the hegemony of theory-practice is embedded in educational habits, definitions, nomenclature, and who has access to producing and maintaining knowledge, progress in understanding practical theological knowledge will be slow. We can talk all we want about the dialectic between theory-practice and the value of practical knowledge, but if these ideas are not embodied in actual institutional structures and actions, the dialectic is largely cosmetic and conceptual. In short, there is a reality that few name in their theoretical analyses of the theory-practice relationship: When one has a binary, it is hard to keep it from becoming institutionalized as a hierarchy.

75 See Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “The Hubris and Folly of Defining a Discipline: Reflections on the Evolution of *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 29, no. 1 (2013): 152–153.

Years ago, when our family brought a chocolate Lab home from its litter, a friend loaned me a book on raising puppies by the monks of New Skete. One insight lingers because it proved useful in helping our five-year-old son establish authority with a dog about his size. Dogs are pack animals, and from birth they fall into rank from dominant to weakest. Owners of the mother dog had in fact handpicked our puppy because she stood in the middle of the pack and would blend well into our family clan. Our son simply had to stand his ground and make the dog believe she was smaller, weaker. Academic politics, I thought at the time, are not all that far removed. Establishing rank and supremacy comes with the territory of our mammalian nature. So, the relationship between theory and practice is a stumbling block—that scriptural phrase for a circumstance that leads to sin—precisely because it incites a striving for status and domination. Practical theologians exemplify this tension: The revival of practical theology as one more disciplinary science within the academic study of theology in the 20th century emerged directly out of the establishment of theology as sure knowledge, a development that was certainly about power and status; yet the discipline has made representation of underrepresented and undervalued modes of practical theological knowing its mission.

When it comes to Christian theology scriptural mandates turn power structures upside down, and we find an appeal to a different relationship among those who seek the truths and best practices of the tradition. To acknowledge power dynamics, therefore, is not about turning the tables and installing practical theology as kingpin “within this lack, this negative, even by denouncing it,” to use the words of French psychoanalyst and philosopher Luce Irigaray on the male-female polarity. Rather, naming the politics is meant to destabilize the terms and make way for a “different, multi-faceted strategy” that hears other voices in the wake of such binaries.⁷⁶ The important question then becomes how to reconceive the relationship of theory and practice in less stratified, hierarchical, and institutionally repressive ways.

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