

# PRACTICAL THEOLOGY in CHURCH and SOCIETY

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# PRACTICAL THEOLOGY in CHURCH and SOCIETY

Joseph E. Bush Jr.



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## PRACTICAL THEOLOGY IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY

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Dedicated to my father and mother:  
Joseph E. Bush Sr. and Virginia Curtis Bush



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## Practical Theology

THE PHRASE “PRACTICAL THEOLOGY” has a very long history in theological study. It constituted one of the three main divisions of theology in Friedrich Schleiermacher’s *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology* in 1811 and 1830, these three being: philosophical theology, historical theology, and practical theology.<sup>1</sup> Renewed attention to practical theology as a discipline, though, occurred in the 1980s. In America, the Association of Practical Theology was formed in 1984. Shortly after the end of the decade, in 1991, the International Academy of Practical Theology was formed.<sup>2</sup> Two short anthologies on practical theology were published during this decade and proved very influential. *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World*, edited by Don. S. Browning, appeared in 1983, and *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*, edited by Lewis S. Mudge and James N. Poling, appeared in 1987.<sup>3</sup> These were multidisciplinary volumes whose contributors were well-respected scholars in the fields of pastoral care, systematic theology, social ethics, biblical studies, and Christian education. Much of the energy for this renewed interest in practical theology was devoted to the effort of attending theologically beyond more narrow foci on the particular arts of Christian ministry.

Writing in practical theology, these scholars were interested in forging a greater methodological integration of theological reflection with

1. Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology*.
2. International Academy of Practical Theology, “History.” <http://www.ia-pt.org/history/>.
3. Browning, *Practical Theology*; Mudge and Poling, *Formation and Reflection*.



practices broadly conceived. The current statement of the Association of Practical Theology explains:

The purpose of the Association of Practical Theology (APT) is to promote critical discourse that integrates theological reflection and practice. Reconstituted from its predecessor organizations 1984, the APT was sparked by the investigation of practical theology as an integrative hermeneutical endeavor at the heart of theological education, characterizing not only the ministerial sub-disciplines but also a manner and method of engaged reflection.<sup>4</sup>

This interest in the method of practical theology inspired renewed efforts to articulate the relationships between theory and practice, between theology and other disciplines of thought, and between the church's praxis and the wider social context. Not surprisingly, these renewed methodological efforts often took cyclical forms that have distinct parallels with the methods we have already been discussing.

This chapter will attempt to chart some of these methodological iterations on our grid, much as was done with liberationist methods in the previous chapter. The point of this exercise is to elucidate some of the commonality between them. Deeper comparisons can be made only by attending to each thinker's own statements about their method and by relating them to the statements of others. Actually, a brief comparison delineating the commonality between two of the most influential of these practical theologians—Don Browning and Thomas Groome—has already been offered by Robert Schreiter in the handbook, *Studying Congregations*.<sup>5</sup> Before we look at Schreiter's comparison of Browning and Groome, though, we will begin by attending to Edward Farley's description of his method for practical theology. Edward Farley was a contributor to both of the anthologies mentioned above<sup>6</sup> and has been a very influential voice in theological education generally.

Farley emphasizes the importance for practical theology to enable us to interpret "situations." He defines situations broadly: "A situation is the way various items, powers, and events in the environment gather together so as to require responses from participants."<sup>7</sup> His definition is inclusive of

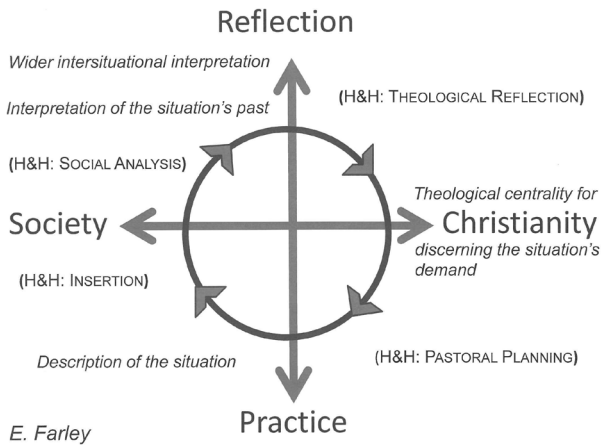
4. Association of Practical Theology, "About APT." <http://practicaltheology.org/about/>.

5. Schreiter, "Theology in the Congregation."

6. Farley, "Theology and Practice Outside the Clerical Paradigm"; Farley, "Interpreting Situations."

7. Farley, "Interpreting Situations," 12.

a broad range of situations. Situations, he clarifies, can be brief or enduring, and they can be local or global. They can be situations of individuals, groups, communities, collectives, or whole societies. Farley's first step is to describe the situation. In his second and third steps, he then moves to interpretation of that situation's past and of the wider situational context. Such interpretation will broaden our understanding of the situation both historically and contemporaneously with other situations. Fourth, explicitly theological interpretation becomes central, and this leads finally to "discerning the situation's demand."<sup>8</sup> Placed on our conceptual grid and cyclical schema along with Holland and Henriot's four movements in parentheses,<sup>9</sup> Farley's method would appear as follows:



It should be apparent that the breadth of Farley's understanding of "situations," is very similar to the breadth of our understanding of "practice" with which this book began and that we have been assuming throughout these pages. Moreover, Farley's historical deepening and "intersituational" broadening of interpretation is very similar to the way that Holland and Henriot advocate social analysis to expand our understanding of a particular social context. Moving now to the methodologies of Thomas Groome and Don Browning, both Groome and Browning can be seen to show similarities both with Farley's method and with the liberationist hermeneutic

8. Ibid., 14.

9. Holland and Henriot, *Social Analysis*, 7–8; "Pastoral Circle" and "Center of Concern" are trademarks of Center of Concern ([www.coc.org](http://www.coc.org)).

described in the previous chapter. Both Groome and Browning are integrative and profound thinkers who are able to encompass disparate schools of thought even as they distill from many scholarly influences a praxeological method that is accessible in its simplicity. Among these influences on their respective methods are some of the liberationists discussed above. Browning begins his *Fundamental Practical Theology* with such an acknowledgment, naming Juan Luis Segundo and José Míguez Bonino among others,<sup>10</sup> and he indicates, “Segundo’s conception of the hermeneutic circle, as stated in *The Liberation of Theology*, is very close to mine.”<sup>11</sup> Groome writes of Paulo Freire that he is “the most significant exponent of a praxis approach to education today,” and he acknowledges drawing significantly from Freire in developing his own method.<sup>12</sup>

In *Studying Congregations*, Robert Schreiter compares Thomas Groome’s “shared praxis” approach to Christian education and ministry<sup>13</sup> with Don Browning’s method in *A Fundamental Practical Theology*.<sup>14</sup> According to Schreiter, both Groome’s and Browning’s methods begin with experience itself and with description of the situation being experienced. “Groome calls this ‘naming the present praxis,’ and Browning calls it ‘descriptive theology.’”<sup>15</sup> Schreiter emphasizes the importance of this initial descriptive moment in practical theology. He summarizes the overall movement of practical theology as follows:

Practical theology is tied closely to the lives of congregations and individuals. Rather than moving from faith to life (theory to practice), it moves from life to faith and then back to life (practice to theory to practice). Practical theology begins, therefore, by describing the situation of the congregation and then correlates that situation with the faith and the beliefs of the congregation. From there, practical theology moves back to the life of the congregation to a refocused practice.<sup>16</sup>

10. Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*, ix.

11. Ibid., 66.

12. Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, 175–6.

13. Schreiter cites Groome’s *Sharing Faith*, which further develops a method built upon Groome’s earlier *Christian Religious Education*.

14. Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*.

15. Schreiter, “Theology in the Congregation,” 26.

16. Ibid., 25.

Further, Schreiter insists, “describing the situation is part of theological reflection itself, not just a prelude to it.”<sup>17</sup>

For Groome, though, this attentiveness to the “present praxis” seems to occur in two movements. There is an initial naming or expressing of one’s own or of society’s “present action.” This naming is the beginning of conscious engagement with that action, practice or situation. But this engagement deepens more critically with Groome’s second moment, called “critical reflection on present action,” which involves “any or all activities of critical and social reasoning, analytical and social remembering, creative and social imagining.” This second of Groome’s movements aims at the development of “critical consciousness of the present praxis,” which includes “its reasons, interests, assumptions, prejudices, and ideologies (reason); its sociohistorical and biographical sources (memory); its intended, likely and preferred consequences (imagination).”<sup>18</sup> The direction of thought in Groome’s first two movements is from experience itself to naming that experience to critically reflecting on that experience. This entails critical reflection on the whole social context shaping the current practice and not attending merely to so-called private experience.

In comparison, Browning’s more succinct phrase for his first move, “descriptive theology,” also already includes critical analysis and not merely description. This analysis, according to Browning, involves attentiveness to the social sciences in order to display the meanings embedded in practices. At the same time, he distinguishes this hermeneutical approach from the more “narrowly empirical natural sciences.”<sup>19</sup> Browning explains the difference: “Social-systemic, material, and psychological determinants are traced and explained as well as possible, but they are placed within the larger set of meanings that give them direction in the scheme of human action. These larger meanings that constitute the theory embedded in our practices invariably have a religious dimension.”<sup>20</sup> The focus for Browning in descriptive theology is the uncovering of meaning held contextually in situations. It has already moved beyond the plane of the practice itself to the level of critical reflection on it.

The next movements for both Groome and Browning give explicit attention to the theological resources of communities of faith. Browning

17. Ibid., 26.

18. Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 146–47.

19. Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*, 47.

20. Ibid., 48.

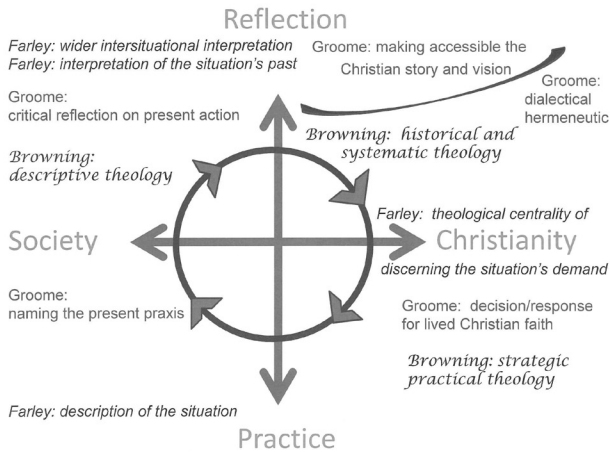
names the next movement “historical theology,” by which he means a critical attentiveness to the interpretation of normative texts and to the history of theological interpretation. Groome attends very similarly, but he names this movement “making accessible the Christian story and vision.” For both Groome and Browning, this movement involves hermeneutics of normative texts in order to display theological meanings emerging out of our religious tradition.

For both Groome and Browning, this then leads to a movement of dialogue between (a) the meanings available to us from our theological tradition and (b) the meanings appearing to us from analyzing our current practices. Schreiter explains: “Practical theology differs from much traditional theological work in the [next] move it makes. Rather than simply using historical sources as a measuring rod against which to critique the current situation, practical theology calls for a conversation between the two.”<sup>21</sup> Groome refers to this as a “Dialectical Hermeneutic to Appropriate Christian Story/Vision to Participants’ Stories and Visions.” Browning refers to this simply as “systematic theology,” but Browning clearly is intending such a dialogical process.

This then leads to the final movement for each. Groome refers to this last movement as “Decision/Response for Lived Christian Faith.” Browning refers to this simply as “strategic practical theology.” In each instance, the dialogical process of reflection between the theological tradition and the analysis of the lived situation now informs the decisions, actions, and practices of the Christian community. Reflection informs Christian practice. Groome’s and Browning’s movements can be placed on our methodological grid along with Farley’s as follows:

21. Schreiter, “Theology in the Congregation,” 26.

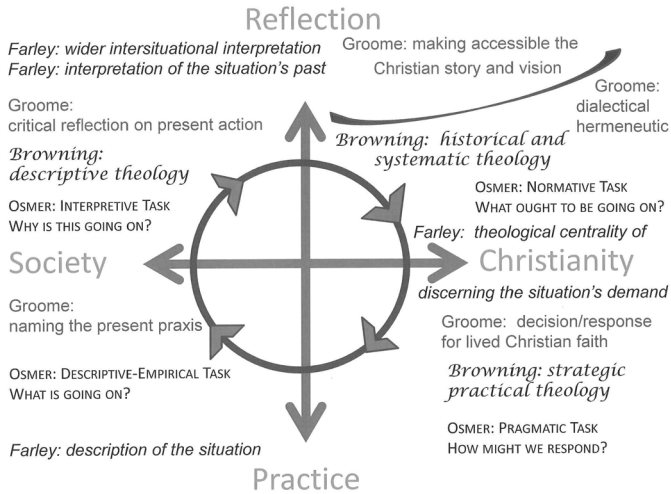
# PRACTICAL THEOLOGY



Practical theologians continue to refine this cyclical method of reflecting on practice. In 2008 Richard Osmer published his *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, which has become influential across the field. His language for navigating this method seems succinct and intuitive. He speaks of four tasks of practical theology, beginning with asking simply, “What is going on?” He refers to this initial step as the Descriptive-Empirical Task. An Interpretive Task then follows, asking “Why is this going on?” He refers to the third movement as Normative Task asking, “What ought to be going on?” Finally, we come full circle, responding in practice having been informed by our reflection. He refers to this last as the Pragmatic Task that asks “How might we respond?”<sup>22</sup> Placed on our grid, Osmer’s method might look as follows:

22. Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 4.

## PART 2: METHODOLOGICAL MOVEMENTS



Each of these methods begins with the concrete experience of situations in practice, further describes and interprets these situational realities, brings this broadened interpretation of the situation into dialogue with the deeper theological tradition, and then concludes by articulating the kind of informed and faithful response that might be lived out in practice.

A key moment in each of these methods is the movement between the upper-left and the upper-right quadrants of our grid. The conversation between interpretation of the situation and explicitly theological interpretation occurs as a kind of dialogue. We noticed that Groome refers to this conversation as a “dialectical hermeneutic” between the two. Browning advocates a similar hermeneutical process when he discusses systematic theology. Referring to the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Browning writes, “Systematic theology, when seen from the perspective of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, is the fusion of horizons between the vision implicit in contemporary practices and the vision implied in the practices of the normative Christian texts. This fusion between the present and the past is much different from a simple application of the past to the present.”<sup>23</sup> Browning sees this “fusion” or conversation between the tradition and the

23. Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*, 51, citing Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

contemporary situation to be a task of systematic theology as a “submovement within a larger practical framework.”<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, Browning, Groome,<sup>25</sup> and Osmer<sup>26</sup> all make reference to David Tracy’s critical correlational method in making such a move between the contemporary situation and the texts of the Christian tradition. Critical correlation theory seeks to articulate theology by critically correlating between the sources of Christian texts and common human experience and language. David Tracy expanded upon Paul Tillich’s earlier method of correlation in developing this method. Tracy advocates a critical correlation between hermeneutical analysis of texts (Christian faith in its many expressions) and phenomenological analysis of common human experience in its cultural expressions.<sup>27</sup> Don Browning, in particular, advocates this approach.

Another way of moving from reflection on the social situation to explicitly theological reflection is suggested by Bishop Laurie Green, whose iteration of the pastoral cycle or theological spiral was described in the previous chapter. The social context for Green and his work are the urban areas of the United Kingdom. Green notices that the experience of ministry in an urban context always seems to entail discoveries and surprises that provoke new insights and intuitions. A new insight or intuition can then help one make connections between exploration of the social context and theological reflection. He articulates a process of theological reflection that takes advantage of such intuition as a kind of ancillary circle within the overarching pastoral cycle. During the phase of reflecting, an intuition arises that leads to further exploration. Green says succinctly that we “check out” the intuition, and this leads to a “new witness.” The process allows the intuitive insight to guide our renewed attentiveness to theological resources as we check out the intuition on the way to articulating a “new witness.”<sup>28</sup> Placed on our interpretive grid, Green’s ancillary circle for reflection might look as follows:

24. Ibid.

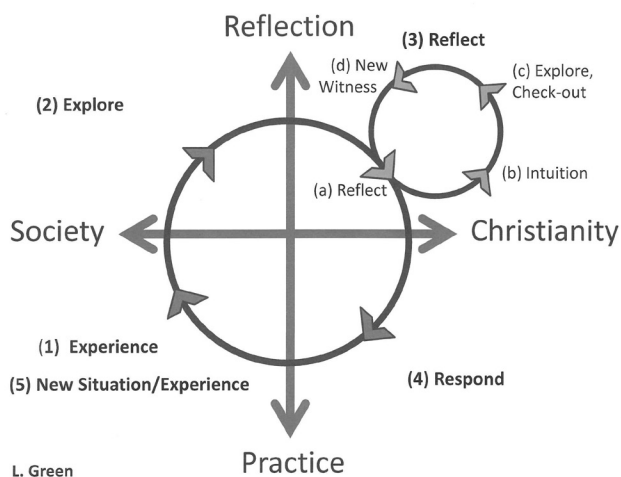
25. Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 191, citing Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 64.

26. Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 164–67.

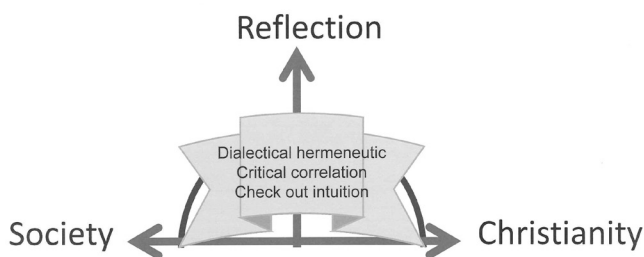
27. Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 43–45.

28. Green, *Let’s Do Theology: Resources*, 96–105; Green, *Let’s Do Theology: A Pastoral Cycle*, 90–98; Green, “Why Do Theological Reflection?” 11–18.





Each of the methodological processes described in this chapter provides a possible bridge between the upper-left and upper-right quadrants of our grid, that is, between our reflective exploration of contextual realities on the left and explicitly theological reflection on the right: critical correlation, Groome’s dialectical hermeneutic, or Green’s process of checking out intuitions.



## Exercise for Reflection

Chapter 7 concluded with a bridging exercise as follows:

Perhaps you used the four quadrants of the matrix reflexively at the end of the previous chapter in order to analyze your own theological statement or your own practice of ministry. If so, return to that grid now, and look for the bridge notions (or the bridge practices) between the quadrants in your earlier diagram. What connects

the ideas or the practices listed in each quadrant with the ideas or the practices in the adjacent quadrants? As you think about it now, what new ideas or practices occur to you that might have the potential for making this kind of bridge? Write them down in the areas bridging the relevant quadrants. If you have time, perhaps you could now even compose a constructive essay further developing these connections or making them more explicit.

Return now to that exercise and in particular to the bridge between the upper-left and the upper-right quadrants. Do any of the methods suggested here help you to further bridge between exploration/reflection of the social context on the left and explicitly theological reflection on the right? As you think about this situation and your analysis of it, have you been surprised by either your experience itself or by your reflective exploration of it? Does this surprise or discovery in your social context provoke any insight or intuition of a theological nature? Note: an insight or intuition might not be experienced as epiphany; it might rather be experienced as a quandary or a puzzle or a question. Pursuing that quandary, though, might lead to an epiphany. Try using Laurie Green's method of checking out intuition to further reflect theologically on this same exercise.

## Solidarity and Suspicion

### Practical Theology and Liberation Theology

THIS BOOK HAS INTRODUCED several related approaches to theological method employed by those writing in the area of practical theology. Several of these utilize a version of critical correlation theory. David Tracy actually defines practical theology in terms of this mutually critical correlation: “Practical Theology is the mutually critical correlation of the interpreted theory and praxis of the Christian fact and the interpreted theory and practice of the contemporary situation.”<sup>1</sup> In his *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, Don Browning cites Tracy’s definition with approval—which he considers to be an “excellent definition” of the “central theological enterprise” that is inclusive of the disciplines of descriptive, historical, systematic, and strategic practical theology.<sup>2</sup>

Critical correlation, however, has not gone without correlative criticism by some proponents of practical theology. An earlier iteration of Don Browning’s correlational approach as well as David Tracy’s approach to practical theology were criticized by James Fowler, who suggested that—while neither theologian intended to subordinate praxis to theory—they, Fowler nonetheless suspected, had inadvertently substituted an “idea of

1. Tracy, “Foundations of Practical Theology,” 76, quoted by Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 79.

2. Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*, 47, citing Tracy, “Foundations of Practical Theology,” 76.

praxis” for praxis itself. This was encouraged, according to Fowler, by their reliance on hermeneutics, which stresses the problem of meaning and interpretation<sup>3</sup> rather than practical engagement with others in society or in social struggle.

Drawing from liberationist, feminist, and German political theologies, Rebecca Chopp offers a similar criticism of practical theology’s limitations. Like Fowler, she argues that the critical correlation method of “liberal-revisionist” theology tends to assume the basic problem to be one of meaning making rather than that of historical engagement within society in need of transformation. Citing liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, she states: “While liberal-revisionist theologians respond to the theoretical challenge of the nonbelievers among the small minority of the world’s population who control the wealth and resources in history, liberation theologians respond to the practical challenge of the large majority of global residents who control neither their victimization nor their survival.”<sup>4</sup> The very “point of religion” for liberation theology, according to Chopp, “has to do with emancipation and enlightenment of persons in history,”<sup>5</sup> as opposed to determining the veracity of cognitive faith claims of the more privileged people within the increasingly secularized part of the world. Since liberation theology is not primarily concerned with the “crisis of cognitive claims,” according to Chopp, it does not really need a “theoretical method of correlation.” She cites Matthew Lamb in this regard:

As Matthew Lamb has demonstrated, the nature of the correlation in the liberal-revisionist approach is always a theoretical correlation. The limits of this theoretical correlation lie in the dominance, and even the hegemony, of theory over praxis.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, liberation theology “needs a method that can critique and transform situations.”<sup>7</sup> The two methods, she suggests, are in tension to the point of being incommensurable.

Praxis is understood differently in each of these methods, Chopp argues. While praxis is typically understood by liberal theologians as intentional activity, Chopp contrasts, liberation theologians tend to understand

3. Fowler, “Practical Theology and Theological Education,” 55.

4. Chopp, “Practical Theology and Liberation,” 128, citing Gutierrez, *Power of the Poor in History*, 212–13.

5. Chopp, “Practical Theology and Liberation,” 129.

6. Ibid., 131, citing Lamb, *Solidarity with Victims*, 75–76.

7. Ibid.

praxis “in a broader sense of the web of social interactions.”<sup>8</sup> The purpose of praxis in liberation theology, according to Chopp, is to “transform and ‘re-make’ history”<sup>9</sup> and not simply to correlate normative views with existing practices, thus privileging “balancing or reconciling meanings.”<sup>10</sup> The political intent of praxis is unavoidable for liberation theologians, who believe that “all theology is political,” as opposed to viewing politics as just “one distinct arena of praxis,” as Chopp contends is typical of liberal-revisionist theology.<sup>11</sup>

Since Fowler’s criticism in 1985, both Tracy and Browning have deepened and nuanced their writing about theological method to take into account this criticism and to give greater emphasis to the importance of social praxis. Browning has taken account of liberationist criticisms of correlational method, in particular of Matthew Lamb and of Rebecca Chopp.<sup>12</sup> Tracy’s *Analogical Imagination*, which was not cited in Fowler’s article, had actually already been published; it provides a stronger emphasis on praxis and identifies particular realms or publics to which theology might be oriented, e.g. practical theology as being oriented toward the social public.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Fowler’s and Chopp’s insightful criticisms stand as reminders that practical theology should not be too vastly abstracted from the world of practice and action—of society and culture as well as church.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, this issue concerning the nature of praxis and of “practices” continues to be ingredient in current developments in practical theology. Written more recently, Richard Osmer’s *Practical Theology*, published in 2008, makes due note of Rebecca Chopp’s and Matthew Lamb’s liberationist critique. In particular, Osmer acknowledges the critique that “the real crisis confronting theology is not one of meaning but one of human suffering,” and he indicates the goal of theology’s dialogue with other fields should be to “contribute to social transformation that alleviates this suffering.”<sup>15</sup> He

8. Ibid., 133.

9. Ibid., 132.

10. Ibid., 135.

11. Ibid.

12. Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*, 47, citing Chopp, “Practical Theology and Liberation,” 120–38, also citing Lamb, *Solidarity with Victims*.

13. Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, discussed by Lamb, *Solidarity with Victims*, 80.

14. For further discussion of this debate, see Hastings, *Practical Theology and the One Body of Christ*, 4–12.

15. Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 167, citing Lamb, *Solidarity with Victims*, ch. 3, also citing Chopp, “Practical Theology and Liberation,” 120–38.

defines a “revised praxis method of correlation” as follows: “the first and most important dialogue is between movements and communities sharing common emancipatory goals. The dialogue between theology and other fields is a second step, arising out of transforming praxis and helping to guide this praxis.”<sup>16</sup> Tellingly though, even with this emphasis on the primacy of transformative social praxis, Osmer discusses this matter in his chapter pertaining to the “normative task” of practical theology rather than in the descriptive-empirical task. This would still seem to place the concern at the level of making meaning rather than at the level of concrete social engagement as the necessary beginning for emancipatory theology.

Also published in 2008, *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* was funded by the Lilly Endowment and has contributions from many highly respected voices in practical theology, including the volume’s editors, Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra. Dorothy Bass defines “practice” for that volume as follows:

This summary of a theological and normative understanding of practices interprets practices as the traditioned yet always-emerging patterns through which communities live as Jesus’ disciples, responding to God’s grace and to the needs of human beings and all creation. It interprets practices, in short, as forms within and through which a Christian way of life takes shape.<sup>17</sup>

In a footnote, Bass responds to Laurie F. Maffley-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri, whose book, *Practicing Protestants* (also sponsored by the Lilly Endowment), contrasts her understanding of practices as benevolent with a social-scientific perspective that “adopts a critical stance toward the power arrangements embodied in practices.”<sup>18</sup> Bass acknowledges that her understanding of practices does tend to assume “each Christian practice as a whole as good” even while, she contends, incorporating “critical and self-critical perspectives.”<sup>19</sup>

16. Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 167.

17. Bass and Dykstra, *For Life Abundant*, 32.

18. Maffley-Kipp et al., *Practicing Protestants*, 1–6; on pp. 3–4 the authors are quoting Bass’s earlier definition of “practices” as “those shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life. Reflecting on practices as they have been shaped in the context of Christian faith leads us to encounter the possibility of a faithful way of life, one that is both attuned to present-day needs and taught by ancient wisdom” (Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, xi).

19. Bass and Dykstra, *For Life Abundant*, 30n10.

It does seem that two different ideas of practice are at play in this conversation—or at least two very differently nuanced understandings of practice. One is looking at “Christian” practice in particular—though this might be a wide range of different kinds of Christian practices engaged in by both individuals and organizations. The other is looking at “practice” as that broader “web of social interactions,” to use Rebecca Chopp’s phrase, and the power entailed in those relations. Moreover, there seem to be two different interpretive stances from which to view these two different ideas about practices. There is a relatively trusting view that practices—explicitly Christian practices—are benevolent and formative for Christian community. This is contrasted with the more suspicious view that practices—even church practices—are complicit with inimical forces at work within the wider web of social relations.

For Christian practical theology, this book has argued, we need to consider both our distinctively Christian practices and the broader social realities encompassing Christian organization and activity. The logic of our method helps us to focus attention on both kinds of practices and their relationship to each other. We have tended to demark our participation in specifically Christian practice within the lower-right quadrant of our interpretive grid, and we have attended to the relationship between these Christian practices and the wider society on the left side of that interpretive grid. The cyclical method moves our attention between the quadrants, so that we continually ask about the influential relationship between the two—between our practices as Christians and our practice within a wider society. How does one give shape to the other? How does one constrain the other? This method allows us to distinguish between them in order to better evaluate their continuing connection with each other in real life, that is, in practice. We are enabled to see and to critique Christian practice within its wider social context.

The liberationist critique, however, reminds us that the social forces at work in society are not simply the context environing Christian practice; they are the forces shaping Christian practice. Correlatively at the level of reflection on practice, social ideologies give shape to Christian theologies. From this perspective, we have seen argued, priority must be given to immersion and solidarity with those in society who are striving for justice. Otherwise, the church can find its theology and practice simply reflecting if not justifying prevailing social conditions. From this perspective, right thinking and just acting begin in social solidarity, which provides a

condition for the continuing reform and correction of Christian theology and practice.

It can be seen that all of the cyclical methods described in this book allow us to navigate between Christian practice, social realities, social analysis, and theological reflection. The liberationist models, however, emphasize the importance of engagement with and attention to “practice” pertaining to the very social realities shaping (or distorting) human existence. (This was represented on the lower-left quadrant on the methodological grid.) The other practical theological methods that we have compared allow—and even encourage—this movement as well, but the necessity of engaging the wider social dimension as a matter of both praxeological and epistemological priority is not always as salient as it is in the avowedly liberationist methods. It is certainly the case that all of these methods for practical theology have been informed by liberation theology and its methods. Liberation theology’s priorities, however, such as the epistemological privilege of the poor, are not always as pressingly apparent in their methodological unfolding.

There may still be some merit in the contention of Fowler and Chopp that it is the very reliance of practical theology on hermeneutics that tends to focus attention primarily on issues of meaning and interpretation rather than as urgently on the practice of engagement with others in their struggle for justice.<sup>20</sup> It is the case that liberation theologians emphasize the necessity of concrete engagement in social praxis. However, hermeneutics is also at the core of liberation theology, as we have seen from our own methodological journey in chapter 8 of this book with the hermeneutical circle drawn by Juan Luis Segundo. For liberationists, hermeneutics is grounded in social struggle and is employed in the service of projects for social transformation. Segundo’s hermeneutical circle begins with the experience of social reality and moves to ideological suspicion and to hermeneutical suspicion. It would seem that the particular role of suspicion in hermeneutics that characterizes the liberationist approach may be key in this debate.

## Paul Ricoeur

Paul Ricoeur’s distinction between a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of restoration might guide us at this point. Ricoeur distinguishes between a hermeneutics of suspicion that aims at uncovering

20. Fowler, “Practical Theology and Theological Education,” 55.



hidden, disguised, or encrypted meanings in a text and a hermeneutics of restoration that aims at recollecting, or displaying the meaning of a text as intended and understood by the author(s) of that text. Both types of hermeneutics assume that one is challenged to understand or interpret the meanings inherent in another's text or another's communication. The main difference between them pertains to whether one is primarily attentive to the author's/speaker's understanding of that meaning or if one is critically suspicious of the author's/speaker's perspective and finds meaning through a critical process of reinterpretation. The meaning ascertained through a hermeneutics of suspicion might be hidden to the original author or speaker, and the interpreter's explication of that meaning might seem quite foreign to him or her. For examples of a hermeneutics of suspicion, Ricoeur points to the writings of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche.<sup>21</sup>

Ricoeur maintains this distinction between approaches to hermeneutics not only with reference to texts as documents but to other fields of inquiry marking his work, including "the theory of texts, the theory of action, the theory of history, and psychoanalysis."<sup>22</sup> At its most basic, Ricoeur refers to this hermeneutical distinction as attending differentially to both comprehension and explanation. While comprehension requires a sympathetic reading in order to better understand, deeper explanation follows from critical lines of inquiry that approach the subject with greater suspicion. While this distinction in hermeneutics has been described as a "conflict of interpretations," Ricoeur explains that this is not a conflict "*between* interpretations" but "*within* interpretation." Both approaches are needed. Ricoeur insists, "My contention is that understanding without explanation is blind as much as explanation without understanding is empty."<sup>23</sup>

Throughout this book on practical theology in church and society, both a hermeneutics of restoration and a hermeneutics of suspicion have been employed at various points in our discussion. In chapters 3 and 4, a hermeneutics of restoration can be seen to be operative in use of the ladder of inference in Farber-Robertson's method of case study and in use of the "practical hermeneutics grid." Each of these exercises is designed to help the interpreter attend more carefully to the meaning that the other individual might be intending to convey or be bringing to the situation. These exercises do so, however, by means of different strategies. The use of

21. Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 28, 32

22. Ricoeur, "Conflict of Interpretations," 223.

23. *Ibid.*, 225–26 (italics original).

the ladder of inference in case study helps the interpreter step aside from his or her own inferential interpretation in order to attend more deliberately to the actual data in the discourse. Such inferential interpretation, we saw, could be laden with suspicion about the other's motives that might actually hinder communication because of projection and blame. The "practical hermeneutics grid" employs a different strategy but toward the same end. Instead of moving down the ladder of inference to attend more deliberately to actually spoken words, it asks us to brainstorm about the many possible interpretations of a phrase that we might infer in a pastoral encounter. But this process then asks us to choose the "most generous response" from among these many possible interpretations. In each case, the exercise is designed to help us attend more closely to the meanings that might be intended by the other by holding our own suspicions or inference in abeyance.

Both a hermeneutics of restoration and a hermeneutics of suspicion are present in chapter 1 with regard to social location, in chapter 2 with regard to "stereo vision" when encountering congregational culture, and in chapter 3 with regard to liminal leadership. In each of these chapters, the dynamic between insider and outsider is highlighted. The pastor is seen as both insider and outsider at once within a congregation's culture and its surrounding community. This presents a challenge to the pastor to be able to attend more deliberately to intended meanings of parishioners in their communications together. At the same time, the role of suspicion comes into play in recognizing the influence of social location in shaping a person's priorities, commitments, and interpretations. Because of the liminal status of the pastor as both insider and outsider, the pastor is able to bring both an emic (insider's) and an etic (outsider's) interpretation to situations within the parish.

A hermeneutics of suspicion has been employed in the chapters pertaining to liberation theology and in the comparisons of various cyclical reflective methods with the hermeneutic circle of Juan Luis Segundo. As we have seen, Segundo's method gives prominent emphasis to the role of suspicion in critiquing both ideology and biblical/theological hermeneutics. Segundo was influenced by the thought of Karl Marx pertaining to class struggle and class consciousness. The key idea here is that prevailing social ideology reflects and reinforces economic privilege, and further that a critical consciousness is conditioned upon engagement in class struggle alongside the underclass in efforts to reorder society. Marx's critical perspective

about the determining influence of economic class on ideology influences liberation theology in giving import to solidarity in class struggle as the necessary context for engaging in theological reflection.

However, drawing on Ricoeur's hermeneutical distinction, we might find that solidarity with those struggling for justice actually demands a sympathetic listening toward respectful comprehension as much as it does a suspicious attention leading toward deeper explanation. Ruthellen Josselson, a psychologist interested in the narrative interpretation of people's lives, draws on Ricoeur's distinction between these two interpretive stances in reaching such a conclusion. She writes:

Ricoeur demonstrates that the hermeneutic interpretive stance, in its derivation from philosophy and interpretation of sacred texts, can be positioned in two different ways. The first positioning aims at the *restoration* of a meaning addressed to the interpreter in the form of a message. It is characterized by a willingness to listen, to absorb as much as possible the message in its given form and it respects the symbol, understood as a cultural mechanism for our apprehension of reality, as a place of revelation. This type of hermeneutics is animated by faith. By contrast, hermeneutics may be approached as the demystification of meaning presented to the interpreter in the form of a disguise. This type of hermeneutics is characterized by a distrust of the symbol as a dissimulation of the real and is animated by suspicion, by a skepticism towards the given. Ricoeur suggests that it is the latter type of hermeneutics which is practiced by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. All three of these 'masters of suspicion' look upon the contents of consciousness as in some sense 'false'; all three aim to transcend this falsity through a reductive interpretation and critique.<sup>24</sup>

Even though Marx, mentioned here as a "master of suspicion," is widely understood to champion the cause of the oppressed in social conflict between economic classes, Josselson prefers a hermeneutics of faith or restoration over a hermeneutics of suspicion when seeking to hear and to understand the voice of the marginalized and oppressed in society. She continues:

As researchers, our effort is to unearth the meanings inherent in the narratives we obtain, remaining faithful to the (multiple and layered) intentions of the narrator, rather than trying to construct them differently. This approach is of paramount value when our

24. Josselson, "Hermeneutics of Faith and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion," 3.

aim is giving ‘voice’ to marginalized or oppressed groups and thus representing their experience.<sup>25</sup>

The aim, according to Josselson, is to give credence to the understanding of the marginalized themselves as they are able to find expression. One wants to avoid their further disenfranchisement by overlaying on top of theirs another layer of meaning inferred by the interpreter according to the interpreter’s preconceived theory. Although interpretation always is the construct of the interpreter, the aim here is for the interpreter to understand as closely as possible the meaning that might be held by the speaker.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have noticed the continuing relevance of a critique of practical theology that has been voiced from a liberationist perspective. While this critique was levied primarily at the use of critical correlation theory within practical theology, it challenged more broadly the assumptions about “practices” and indicted the very priority given to meaning making in hermeneutics. In response, we have noticed with appreciation ways practical theologians such as Don Browning and Richard Osmer have addressed these concerns, and we have attended to the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur for help in addressing this critique ourselves. We found Ricoeur’s distinction between a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of restoration helpful for articulating ways in which both hermeneutical stances might be present in practical theology. Indeed, we have suggested along with Ricoeur that both might be necessary.

This chapter has also tacitly touched on some other questions related to the role of hermeneutics in practical theology. These questions pertain to the relationship of ourselves as interpreters with other actors and agents in any given situation. Is our activity as practical theologians outwardly focused on the world of practices and practical reality, or is it inwardly focused on ourselves either as actors or as interpreters? Is practical theology a corporate activity that is conducted cooperatively and publicly with others, or is it more privately accomplished by individual interpreters? What is the role of reflexivity in our practical theology? How is our practical theology about us, and how is it about others? This book actually began with these questions as we distinguished between individual actions and wider areas

25. Ibid., 6, citing Tappan, “Analyzing Stories of Moral Experience.”

of practice. We began by affirming the importance of reflecting on ourselves and on our own actions as individuals within a given social location. To these questions of reflexivity this book now returns in the concluding chapter.

### Exercise for Reflection

Throughout this book there have been “exercises for reflection,” in which a tool for reflection on practice has been introduced, or in which readers have been asked to reflect on practice utilizing the interpretive grid or the cyclical method. Look back over your reflections in these exercises. This chapter has highlighted two interpretive stances—a hermeneutics of restoration in which we attempt to listen as closely as possible to others’ intended meanings, and a hermeneutics of suspicion in which we bring a critical eye to bear in attempting to enrich our explanation of events and practices. While a hermeneutics of suspicion may be especially prominent in a liberationist approach, this chapter has affirmed the presence and necessity of both hermeneutic approaches in our reflection on the practice of ministry in church and society. As you look over your own reflections in the exercises of previous chapters, where do you see yourself employing a hermeneutics of restoration? Where do you see yourself employing a hermeneutics of suspicion?

## Reflexivity

### *Looking Back, Looking Ahead*

THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER EXAMINED some concerns about practical theology, especially as voiced from a liberationist perspective. These concerns raised questions about the idea of practice. In particular, whose practice is of concern in practical theology? By “practice,” do we mean the actions of individuals, the practices of the Christian community, or the larger web of social relations and historical forces? We affirmed that we need to attend to practice at each of these levels, and we recognized that the cyclical method explicated in this book allows us to do so. In fact, this method at its best posits the question of the relationship of Christian practices to social praxis from the outset. As we have seen, the very name “practical theology” describes a dialogue between theological reflection and the so-called practical. That is, it is a praxeological method, which is reflection on practice. Such practice is broadly conceived to include not only individual actions of ministry in church and society but also those larger social and cultural forces which act on us—that shape our ideas and that both constrain and potentiate our individual actions and our churches’ ministries.

A further, related question pertaining to practice was also raised in the previous chapter. This is the question of whether or not practices are considered benign and even beneficial—helping to develop a people of virtue, helping us to deepen in Christian discipleship and faithful living. Or, conversely, when understood as that web of social relations and social forces, is social practice inimical to the greater good, distorting of Christian witness,

requiring from us a practical commitment to engage in struggles for social justice? This question drew us to a consideration of the role of suspicion in hermeneutics and, in particular, to Ricoeur's distinction between a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of restoration. Again, we affirmed the need for both approaches in our interpretation of practice.

Now, in this final chapter, we attend again to the importance of individual agency in self-reflection, recognizing that as individuals we are thoroughly enculturated and shaped by social and cultural influences. Throughout this book, we have described practical theology as reflection on practice, and we have recognized that *practice* can refer to multiple levels of individual action, organizational processes, and larger social realities. For people of faith, theology is important at each of these levels, whether individual beliefs and commitments, ecclesial affirmations and confessions, or efforts to discern God's ongoing activity in the whole inhabited world. We have engaged in reflection focused both outwardly on our social community and inwardly on our own participation as individuals in church and society. When our reflection is self-reflection focused reflexively back on ourselves, we refer to this as reflexivity. This book began with such reflexive attention to ourselves acting as individuals with social location. This final chapter now returns to the matter of self-reflection with an appreciation for the complexity of social and cultural forces that shape us.

As we have seen, some social and cultural influences work to our benefit and virtue, others to our detriment and to the distortion of both our self-understanding and our life together. Much has already been said in this book about the influence of the larger social world—economic and political forces as well as cultural influences—on both our practice and our reflection, whether as individuals or as church. We are right to attend with suspicion to these social forces even while we trust both in God's grace and in the redemptive possibilities for life in society. The significance of the wider culture for practical theology, I believe, is dual—influencing both reflection and practice. Culture is constitutive of that world of ideas that shapes our thinking and, correlatively, it is constitutive of that social “practice” that informs our Christian practice.

When we think about culture and about ourselves as enculturated, we notice a mutuality of influence. Each is formed by the other. We can speak of the cultural construction of the self, realizing that at a most fundamental level we as persons are the products of our culture. But culture is itself the product of our human construction, the product of our life together as

multiple individuals over time. The first half of this final chapter attends to this matter of mutual relationship between ourselves as individual persons and ourselves together as constituting culture. In particular, we will focus on the idea of reflexivity or self-reflection in understanding this relationship. The chapter will then conclude with some thoughts about pedagogy and formation in light of the kind of reflexivity being advocated here.

## Cultural Theory and Self-Reflection

It may initially seem as if we are presented here with two different foci for our attention—either inwardly in self-reflection or outwardly toward the social and cultural world. While this tension does denote different directions demanding our attention, it does not represent a mutually exclusive choice. As we have already recognized, reflective individuals and their cultures are mutually formed.

Cultural theorist Clifford Geertz makes the case for the constancy of culture in shaping humanity by pointing out that humanity's culture and biology have coevolved. According to fossil evidence, Geertz argues, our primate ancestors at their earliest were already social animals creating meaning in interaction with one another and establishing patterns in those interactions. Geertz defines culture in terms of semiotics, emphasizing the importance of symbolism as constituting a shared system of meaning. A shared symbolic system allows us to interact meaningfully with one another. He writes:

Undirected by cultural patterns—organized systems of significant symbols—man's [*sic*] behavior would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experience virtually shapeless. Culture, the accumulated totality of such patterns, is not just an ornament of human existence but . . . an essential condition for it.<sup>1</sup>

He further explains:

When seen as a set of symbolic devices for controlling behavior, extrasomatic sources of information, culture provides the link between what men [*sic*] are intrinsically capable of becoming and what they actually, one by one, in fact become.<sup>2</sup>

1. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 46.
2. *Ibid.*, 52.