Siblings or 2nd Cousins-Once-Removed: A Relational Taxonomy for Practical Theology

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The definitions of practical theology are almost as numerous as the people who consider themselves practical theologians. When the Ecumenical D. Min. program between Catholic Theological Union, the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, and McCormick Theological seminary began in 1992, Herbert Anderson and I started collecting some of those definitions. The current count of definitions in that collection is now twenty-six. At the onset of that program, we also indicated that practical theology as practiced in the Ecumenical D. Min. program was marked by several distinctive characteristics. Now, twenty years later, it might be helpful to take up the definitional task again. Instead of simply delineating characteristics, however, it might be useful to offer some comparative reflections on practical theology and some of its theological siblings.

This loose relational taxonomy is offered as a way to clarify further an understanding of practical theology, at least as this author has come to understand it, as well as how to practice and teach it. Such work is, by its very nature, experimental; it is neither definitive nor complete but propositional. I would like to think, however, that—like every good experiment—this propositional approach is not without foundations. The litmus test of its value is, at least to a certain extent, found in the conversation it stimulates and its ability to generate further clarifications and definitional frameworks.

There are many siblings one could discuss in this kind of mapping. This includes some siblings that are actual theologies (e.g., empirical theology) and others that

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1 These were: 1) practical theology is not a single method but an approach marked by various characteristics. Practical theology is as much art as it is science; 2) Praxis is an essential dialogue partner in doing this kind of theology and even holds a certain priority [thought not necessarily a chronological priority]—thus, this is a more inductive than deductive approach; 3) There is a priority of the communal over the individual in both praxis and theory. This is a communal and collaborative way of doing theology; 4) All praxis is theory-laden, and this theory must be seriously engaged; 5) There is need for an adequate or thick description of the situation; 6) This theological enterprise, even in its descriptive aspect, is interpretive or hermeneutical. There is no such thing as the purely objective in the human framework; 7) Practical theology is both constructive and imaginative, not simply reflective and repetitive; 8) Practical theology is always provisional, tuned to cultural and historical particularities; 9) By nature practical theology is multidisciplinary, with special attention paid to the social sciences; 10) Practical theology attempts to be holistic. For example, it is concerned with orthopraxis, orthodoxy, and orthopathy; 11) This venture is for the sake of human transformation, i.e., the transformation of the faith community but also the transformation of the world; 12) The primary standard of validity is not the distinction between right and wrong, but between good and evil; 13) Thus the practical theological enterprise is prophetic, giving special attention to those on the margins without power; 14) Practical theology is always exercised with a sense of mutual regard and even humility, being careful not to judge, critique, or dismiss too quickly those people, experiences, contexts, and things that may be unknown or difficult to grasp.

2 See, for example, Hans van der Ven, "Practical Theology: From Applied to Empirical Theology," Journal of Empirical Theology 1, no. 1
are related theories that well wed themselves to practical theology (e.g., action theory, postcolonial theory, ritual theory, etc.). For this reflection, however, we will limit ourselves to three theologies and consider them in alphabetical order: applied theology, contextual theology, and pastoral theology. It is envisioned that this mapping might be expanded in the future. It is presumed that that each of these is as pluriform as practical theology, so referencing them in the singular is more grammatical convention than some implied dogmatic about their respective unicities. While pluriform, it seems that each of these is so characterized by concepts and methods that they can be understood as constituting more than simply a field of inquiry but actually a discipline. This position is empirically supported by the fact that multiple schools today offer advanced degrees or courses of study in applied theology (a Ph.D. at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary), contextual theology (University of Agder and the Norwegian School of Theology), and practical theology (Boston University).

**Applied Theology**

The roots of applied theology can be found in the scholastic debate between figures like Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) and Duns Scotus (d. 1308). Representing an emerging understanding of a university on the continent, Aquinas understood theology as a more speculative than practical discipline, more concerned with God than human activity: it was *scientia* in the Aristotelian sense of the word. This matched with the vision of emerging European universities concerned more with “the desire to know the truth rather than to provide training for a profession.” Duns Scotus disagreed and, in continuity with an older sapiential tradition linked to Augustine (d. 430) and already reflected in the work of Alexander of Hales, held that theology was *scientia practica*, not purely rational “but a discipline concerned with the seeking of salvation.” Since Scotus understood theology as having a different telos than Aquinas—not just knowing about God but knowing God as its object—it speculative exercises found their true purpose only insofar as they informed and enabled people to achieve salvation. This influence, however, only went in one direction, from speculation to practice. This theory applied to the practice with *scientia* was virtually hermetically sealed from *practica*.

While sometimes considered the father of practical theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher (d. 1834) might better be understood as the father of applied theology. His *Kurze Darstellung des Theologischen Studium* (*Brief Outline on the Study of Theology*) does speak of theology as a “positive science” (§ 1); is concerned with “the equilibrium … [of] both theory and practice” (§ 9) and “the mutual connection … between the different parts of theology” (§ 18); and considers practical theology the “crown” of his threefold division and sequence (§ 31) of philosophical, historical, and practical theology. Nonetheless, “his view of theology still had a theory-to-practice structure” and his approach never moves “beyond that of an applied science.” In the assessment of John Burkhart, “con-
course between theory and practice is a one-way street [in Schleiermacher] .... [and] action does not really influence thought.”

Schleiermacher’s Protestant conception of “practical as applied” theology finds its Roman Catholic antecedent in the 1774 proposal of Benedictine Abbot Stephen Rautenstrauch of Braunau (d. 1785) to Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, which was eventually published as The Instruction for all the Theological Faculties in the Empire (1776). This reorientation of theological education in the empire, which followed the suppression of the Jesuits in 1773, took a decidedly pastoral turn. A fifth year of intentionally practical studies was added to the existing four year curriculum and symbolized in the establishment of the first chair in pastoral theology, assumed by Rautenstrauch in 1776. While the language symbolized in this newly created chair clearly indicates that the activity of the church is the field for this pastoral engagement, the method remains that of an applied science and thus inadequate according to the common standards of practical theology as it is defined today.

As Johannes van der Ven effectively summarized over two decades ago:

> The inescapable conclusion is that there can be no standard model for how theological insights should be applied in practice, because the current societal, ecclesiastical and pastoral situation is not uniform. For this reason, too, the deductive approach that is contained in the concept of applied theology is inadequate. Theology is in need of inductive research into the current pluraliform, heterogeneous and chaotic societal, ecclesiastical and pastoral fields. A prerequisite is that the one-sided relationship between theological theory and the pastoral field, characterized by a line running from top to bottom, be replaced by a two-way relationship, one represented not by a line but by a circle or, better yet, by a spiral moving in inductive fashion from bottom to top.

Returning to our relational taxonomy, applied theology can be considered a distant forebear of practical theology. While some forms of applied theology actually shared the theological surname of practical theology, twenty-first century practical theology has largely distanced itself from that part of the family tree and would classify “applied theology” as a something akin to a second cousin, once removed.

**Contextual Theology**

As Stephen Bevans has noted, “there is no such thing as ‘theology’; there is only contextual theology.” At the same time, Bevans recognizes that all theologies are not necessarily aware that they are contextual, and so one can consider that “a contextual approach to theology is in many ways a radical departure from the notional of traditional theology.” Thus he concludes, “to understand theology as contextual is to assert something both new and traditional.”

If engaging contemporary human experience through serious reflection on the present context is the key distinguishing characteristic of contextual theology, it is certainly possible to argue that St. Paul, for example, in his

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16 Van der Ven, 92-3.
dialogues with the Corinthian community was contextual; the same could be said of the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (d. 107), hastily penned as he was in route to his own martyrdom, or Irenaeus of Lyons (d. ca. 202-3) in his attempted intervention in the quartodeciman controversy. Increasingly, however, Christian theologians were less concerned about engaging common human experience as a source for theology and more concerned with employing it as the trigger for posing questions that theology answered, often as a corrective to shared human experience. This is already clear in Tertullian, especially in his Montanist period (after 206), when he condemned the current bishop of Rome for allowing murderers and fornicators to return to the church despite the evidence and sincerity of their penance (De Pudicitia, chapter 4). Even in the fourth century, when contemporary writers quoted the great mystagogues as models of offering theological reflection on the meaning of the rites of initiation, it is clear that these reflections have little to do with the experience of the initiates and are more a scriptural explanation of what the rites are supposed to mean to them.18 While there are exceptions over the centuries, especially since many Christian theologians borrowed elements from their context for their theologizing (e.g., Aquinas turning to the recovery of Aristotelian metaphysics), shared human experience was seldom a positive and explicit source of revelation for Christian theology as it emerged in the universities in the West. Eventually theologians such as Paul Tillich (d. 1965) would recognize the importance of human existence in raising theological questions. However, his correlational method would only admit that “the Christian message provides the answers to the questions implied in human existence.”19

The turn to the subject in Western philosophy, symbolized by René Descartes’ (d. 1650) famous cogito ergo sum, took place outside of theological discourse. Even more than that, Immanuel Kant’s (d. 1804) critique of metaphysics effectively divorced philosophy from God, whom he argues lacks any objective reality and needs to be relegated (like the soul) to the category of a mere thought entity. Besides this philosophical turn to the subject, the so called age of enlightenment paved the way for the emergence of social sciences that not only focused on the individual (e.g., psychology) but also increasingly on individuals in the community (e.g., sociology, social anthropology, and social psychology). Nineteenth century social philosophy embraced this idea as well, culminating in the work of Martin Buber (d. 1965). As the arts and social sciences in the West extended their inquiry into the exotic (e.g., ethnography), it became increasingly clear that such socio-centric thinking not only existed in other cultures but was also actually a dominant model in many global contexts. Finally, philosophers such as Hans Georg Gadamer (2002) insisted on the historicity of being and human consciousness that is historically effected, providing a credible framework for considering the phenomenon of one’s dynamic situation (i.e., one’s horizon). This lent further theoretical credibility to considering subjects in a community as important and, further, to considering concrete historicity of such communities as essential to hermeneutics.

As Schreiter has noted, theological attention to the “role that circumstances play in shaping one’s response to the gospel [first] became evident in regions where Christianity was relatively new.”20 Early language for this type of theologizing was that of “indigenous theology.”21 This language appeared in a variety of studies in the ensuing decades,22 as did that of “ethnotheology”23—mirroring the adaptation by other disciplines of the “ethno” prefix (e.g.,

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ethnomusicology, ethnohistory, ethnoart, etc.). Around Vatican II there was much talk of the “local Church,” and in the early 1970s discussions turned to “local theologies.” The Local Theology Project at CTU dates from classroom teaching from 1975, and from 1976 in a series of lectures offered by Robert Schreiter. Schreiter holds that the language of local theology has the advantage of allowing “the overtone of the ‘local church’ to be sounded.” Also, since all local theories are not “equally sensitive to the context … this allows keeping the term ‘contextual’ for those theologies that show greater sensitivity to context.”

The language of contextual theology was also developing in this milieu. In 1963 Paul Lehmann was already writing about what others would deem “contextual ethics,” and in the early 1970s, he was writing explicitly about contextual theology. In 1971 the World Council of Churches held a consultation in Bossey, Switzerland on “Dogmatic or Contextual Theology,” and within a few years, the concept had such currency that some were already writing about the problems of contextual theology. Stephen Bevan’s breakthrough article in 1985, “Models of Contextual Theology,” paved the way for the 1992 book of the same title, now in a second expanded edition, an acknowledged landmark in the field.

Bevan thickens the definition of context by suggesting it encompasses four broad realities: 1) the experiences of an individual or group's personal life, i.e., the experiences of success, failure, births, deaths, and relationship that affect the way we experience God; 2) culture, whether that be a religious culture like that of India or Thailand, where culture and religion are rather indistinguishable, or a more secular culture like that of France or the United States, where religion and culture can be separate or highly distinguished realities; 3) the particularities of one's social location shaped by factors such as gender, education, wealth, and access; and 4) local and global powers of social change symbolized, for example, by contemporary communications and commerce. He originally proposed five but then expanded to six “models.” While he orders them in the book as the translation model, the anthropological model, the praxis model, the synthetic model, the transcendental model, and the countercultural model, I find his reordering—which he often presented in the first methodological course to CTU’s Ecumenical D.Min. students—more valuable for considering the relationship between practical theology and contextual theology.

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24 Schreiter, Constructing Local Theologies, 6. Schreiter notes that this is the most common English translation for ecclesia particularis, a phrase common in the documents of Vatican II, e.g., Lumen Gentium, no. 23. It sometimes references a single diocese but also sometimes references associations of dioceses, e.g., Christus Dominus, no. 6; De ecclesiis orientalibus, no. 10.  
27 Schreiter, Constructing Local Theologies, 6.  
33 Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology, 4-5.
After his presentation, the doctoral students would engage in small group work around the question of whether or not contextual theology and practical theology are the same thing? Over the years, especially with the introduction of the counter-cultural model—whose understanding of context Bevans characterizes as “radically ambiguous and resistant to the gospel”34—it became clear to me that while practical theology needs to be contextual, all contextual theologies are not practical theology. Especially as one moves to the extreme left and right of Bevan’s diagram, I believe contextual theologies fall outside the boundaries of practical theology. The translation and counter-cultural models do not seriously engage the context as a source of theology and thus step out of a correlation that seems essential to practical theology. On the other hand, certain forms of the anthropological model so value human experience and the present context that they can diminish the role of tradition or revelation in the dialogue. Thus, I would suggest that practical theology and contextual theology can be siblings but not twins and that certain forms of contextual theology seem to divorce them from the immediate family.

Pastoral Theology

As with contextual theology, one can see glimpses of pastoral theology from the birth of Christianity. Some would argue that there is actually a biblical pattern of pastoral theology that stretches back into the Hebrew Scriptures.35 More cautiously, one can see what Gerben Heitink calls “an elementary form of pastoral theology” in the New Testament.36 In large part this New Testament form is concerned with the internal care and ordering of the community, as reflected in Paul’s enumeration of certain leadership roles (cf. 1 Cor 12:28), and the instructions to said leaders in the Pastoral Letters. Several writing from the so-called patristic era offer pastoral reflections on the role of the bishop: noteworthy here is Chrysostom’s (d. 407) Peri hierōsynēs (“On the Priesthood”). One of the more notable works in pastoral theology from this era was Gregory the Great’s (d. 604) Liber Regulae Pastoralis (“The Book of the Pastoral Rule”), which was not only an instruction on the who and how of shepherding souls but also an embodiment of his understanding of the very mission of the church (to cure souls).37

34 Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology, 142.
36 Heitink, 91; much of what follows on the history of pastoral theology is indebted to Heitink’s chapter on “The History of Pastoral Theology” in Practical Theology, 90-99.
While pastoral activity—increasingly understood as care by clergy given to the members of one’s own parish or community—has been a mark of the church in every age, systematic and comprehensive reflection on that care was ordinarily replaced by specific aids for guiding the clergy in discreet acts of care, such as the emergence of penitentials or the *ars moriendi*. Canon 1139 of Lateran IV (1215) actually requires that cathedrals must have a master teacher to instruct the clergy and laity about the care for souls. Heitink sees this requirement as connected to the yearly requirement for auricular confession required by the same council. He writes, “for this reason canon moved toward preaching under Luther’s influence and away from sacraments under Zwingli and Calvin’s. This led to comprehensive rethinking of the whole of pastoral practice by some Protestant theologians, such as Andreas Hyperius (d. 1564) from Marburg. Roman Catholics did their own rethinking, partly in view of the “flaws and abuses of the religious-liturgical practice” that lead to the sixteenth century rupture in western Christianity. As noted above in the previous discussion of the work of Stephen Rautenstrauch, however, much of this pastoral theology was applied theology. While the great missionary movements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did witness notable rethinking of pastoral practice in new contexts, such thinking did not find much resonance in the European-dominated Roman Catholic Church.

A singular name in the transformation of pastoral theology in the twentieth century was that of Seward Hiltner (d. 1984), whom Michael Jinkins calls “a primary founder of the modern discipline of pastoral theology.” While Hiltner’s *Preface to Pastoral Theology* (1958) conceived of pastoral ministry from three interrelated perspectives (instead of from the traditional tasks of preaching, catechetics, etc.), shepherding, communicating, and organizing, he gives almost exclusive attention to shepherding in that volume and even in subsequent writings. According to Bonnie Miller-McLemore, at the center of the revival of pastoral theology for Hiltner was the turn from formal to dynamic knowledge—an idea that was borrowed from twentieth century psychology and “more specifically [focusing] on the ‘conflicts, tensions, and counterbalances among forces’ within doctrine as embodied in Christian life.” Hiltner was emblematic of those who discovered in the social sciences new models for relating theory and practice.

The Roman Catholic who in some ways paralleled Hiltner’s influence on pastoral theology was Karl Rahner (d. 1984). As Robert Kinast summarizes Rahner’s perspective:

> According to Rahner, pastoral theology (or practical theology, as he prefers) is not limited to the work of the clergy but extends to everything which the church as such has to do. This leads to the conclusion that practical theology is both a discipline in its own right and a constitutive dimension of all the other theological disciplines. As an individual discipline, pastoral theology takes up the task of comprehending the present situation

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38 Cf. *A Companion to Pastoral Care in the Late Middle Ages (1200-1500)*, ed. Ronald J. Stansbury (Leiden: Brill, 2010).
40 Heitink, 96.
41 Heitink, 97.
42 See, for example, Jaime Lara, *City, Temple, Stage: Eschatological Architecture and Liturgical Theatrics in New Spain* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2004).
in which the church finds itself (an ecclesial existentielle) and in relation to which the church must actualize itself.46

While pastoral theology and practical theology have sometimes been used as synonyms, there are increasing clear reasons for suggesting they are not. Bonnie Miller-McLemore is in the forefront here: someone who both self-identifies as a “pastoral theologian at heart,”47 but one who “understands her work as situated within the broader enterprise of practical theology,”48 the latter as evidenced by her recent stint as President of the International Academy of Practical Theology (2009-11), and also the editor of The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology (2011). While acknowledging that both pastoral and practical theology “share interest in dynamic theology,”49 “connote interest in church, ministry and faith practices … [and] share common historical roots,”50 she yet notes that “it is crucial to differentiate them and their distinctive gifts.”51

In her presidential address to the International Academy of Practical Theology,52 Miller-McLemore continues this theme. She notes:

Use of these terms to refer to a single enterprise obfuscates one of practical theology’s distinctive contributions as that discipline most concerned with mediating and integrating knowledge within theological education and between seminary, congregation, and society. We also lose sight of the distinctive resources of twentieth-century pastoral theology as developed in the United States in rigorous conversation with modern psychoanalytic theory and psychology.53

Roman Catholic theologian Kathleen Cahalan has written extensively on the importance of practical theology for Roman Catholics and why it is distinctive from pastoral theology.54 She clearly argues that practical theology and pastoral theology are not synonymous. While acknowledging that the language of pastoral and pastoral theology assumed critical importance when John XXIII (d. 1963) called a “pastoral council,” she seeks to demonstrate that “pastoral theology never became a serious, well-developed discipline,”55 citing Peter Phan, who noted that “it is common knowledge that the nature and task of pastoral theology is highly controverted.”56 In tracing the post-conciliar history of pastoral theology, she further notes that, while it became a category in seminary education, it happened at a point when seminary education was no longer the determining factor of Catholic theology, which was moving to Catholic universities.57 In the seminary context, citing Katarina Schuth, she notes that among semi-

47 Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Also a Pastoral Theologian,” 813.
48 Miller-McLemore, “Also a Pastoral Theologian,” 814.
49 Miller-McLemore, “Also a Pastoral Theologian,” 819.
50 Miller-McLemore, “Also a Pastoral Theologian,” 819.
51 Miller-McLemore, “Also a Pastoral Theologian,” 814.
52 Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Five Misunderstandings about Practical Theology,” Amsterdam, 25 July 2011; manuscript used with permission of the author.
53 Miller-McLemore, “Five Misunderstandings about Practical Theology.”
nary faculties, “it is the most controversial [area], the area about which there is strongest disagreement and the greatest concern about what and how to teach.” 58 Cahalan summarizes:

There is little evidence of pastoral theology as a theological discipline in Catholic discourse. There are no academic journals for pastoral theology, no professional organizations, and no graduate programs for a doctorate in pastoral theology, and few theologians would identify with pastoral theology. In terms of the practice of ministry, the pastoral as practice never became a respectable arena of scholarly inquiry.59

I would add that it is methodologically possible to do Roman Catholic pastoral theology as either applied theology (as evident from its historical roots) or as a theoretical enterprise that takes no particular practice or concrete context as a source for theory. It is not simply a field in which such hermetically sealed theories are to be applied. Thus, as a broad term without a cohesive or core method (except as understood, in Protestant circles in the United States, as closely allied to psychology in its various forms, e.g., cross-cultural psychology) and with little apparent contemporary effort towards attempting to forge such, pastoral theology appears at this stage to be largely a field rather than a discipline.60

Miller-McLemore’s broader based understanding of pastoral theology (what she calls a person- and pathos-centered discipline) is a subdiscipline of practical theology61 with a more integrative intent. She writes:

Practical theology has an important breadth. It encompasses pastoral theology. It provides an overarching method and aim within which I situate my thinking, teaching and writing on pastoral theology. The content of my courses, for example, are often concerns distinctive to pastoral theology, such as the care of families, children, and spirituality. But I approach them in a practical theological fashion, moving from thick description and interdisciplinary investigation to normative action and religious practice.62

Given Cahalan’s analysis from a Roman Catholic perspective, my own methodological concerns, and the perspective of Miller-McLemore, I would suggest that practical theology and pastoral theology are related only as cousins who can easily live outside of each other’s ambit but who might spend special holidays together.

Ongoing Work

There is no conclusion here, insofar as this is a first attempt on this author’s part at some kind of relational taxonomy between practical theology and some of its other relatives. This admittedly preliminary beginning will eventually have to take into account inculturated forms of theology, liberation theology, and other siblings. In his book The Whole Shebang, Timothy Ferris speaks about the sadness of maps insofar as they are imperfect in two ways: 1)

58 Cahalan, 7; the Katarina Schuth citation is from Reason for the Hope: The Future of Roman Catholic Theologates (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989), 171-84. Her thinking on this was reiterated in a 1997 publication as well.
60 Cahalan notably recalls that Karl Rahner and Heinz Schuster proposed in the 1960s that pastoral theology, as a way to attend to the church in the modern world, was conceived to “fill a gap in clerical training;” but was not intended to make a contribution to theology as a whole.” Cahalan, “Beyond Pastoral Theology,” 393; the Rahner-Schuster citation is from Heinz Schuster, “The Nature and Function of Pastoral Theology,” The Pastoral Mission of the Church, vol. 3 (New Jersey: Paulist, 1965), 6.
61 Part of that, she argues, is because people like Hiltner did not wish for the development of a “master perspective” such as practical theology, or “operational theology,” that would “swallow all the others.” (From Hiltner’s Preface to Pastoral Theology (24), as cited in Miller-McLemore, “Also a Pastoral Theologian,” 819.
62 Miller-McLemore, “Also a Pastoral Theologian,” 820.
they contain less information than the territory they are trying to represent and 2) they introduce distortion.\textsuperscript{63} This is an admittedly imperfect map and probably does introduce some distortion. It is not the last word, but hopefully it is still both speakable and useful.