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Metatheoretical decisions for the grounded theory research of sermons on poverty and to the poor as listeners[1]

ABSTRACT

The challenge of working with metatheoretical assumptions in a postmodern situation of a plurality of scientific-theoretical approaches is taken up in this article. The question whether the researcher must, in a practical-theological study, begin with theory analysis first or with praxis analysis first, is discussed. In sermon analysis with a grounded theory, abductive approach, the question is whether we have to begin with a blank mind. In order to answer this question the theory-praxis relationship is discussed. This leads to the argument of the article that wherever we begin the researcher cannot work without a theological perspective and in the case of homiletics, without a homiletical-theoretical framework.

1. INTRODUCTION

In his paper at the meeting of the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa on 21 January 2010 at the University of Pretoria, Richard R. Osmer of Princeton Theological Seminary, has drawn our attention to the importance of metatheoretical assumptions the practical theologian has to make in an approach to research and theory construction (Osmer 2010; see also Osmer 2008). Approaches to practical theology today are highly pluralistic. See for instance in South Africa Cilliers (2009); Müller (2005; 2009); De Wet (2009); Pieterse (2009). I am hesitating to speak of hardened paradigms in our contemporary situation. In one decade the secularization premise has changed into a post-secular situation (cf. Harrington 2007; Joas 2009). There are also signs that the endless plurality of postmodernity in the academic world is starting to change (cf. Van den Brink 2007). Osmer (2008:241) speaks of a "reflective equilibrium" where practical theologians can find common ground in the plurality of approaches on the four interrelated intellectual operations of practical theology, namely the descriptive task, the interpretative task, the normative task and the pragmatic task. Instead of talking of hard barriers of different paradigms, I would like to speak of a matrix of assumptions that a practical theologian has in her/his approach to research in the discipline. When we take this perspective as a vantage point the four metatheoretical issues that Osmer puts on the table for consideration when we decide on our assumptions in research are important (see Osmer 2010:8). These metatheoretical issues are:

The theory-praxis relationship, which is the kernel or *crux* of practical theological reasoning. From a certain philosophical and theological background a specific perspective is chosen on the reality of praxis and the relationship between theory and praxis through which we develop theories for praxis.

Sources of justification, which implies the traditional sources of theological truth – Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. The practical theologian has to decide on the theological sources that will form a basis of justification of interpretation of the reality that

will be researched. In the light of the theological tradition the current practical-theological theory for a specific pastoral action should be analysed for its concepts.

Models of cross-disciplinary work, which have to do with ways to perform the task of bringing two or more fields into conversation with one another, such as intra-theological disciplines, and for instance the relationship between theology and social sciences in inter-disciplinary discussions.

Theological rationale, which implies a theological theoretical framework, which means that we approach a research project from a specific theological perspective with assumptions that have an impact on the methodological process.

As a result of the wide variety of approaches to research in our field we have a *problem* in our discipline in this postmodern mindset, namely that practical theologians not always spell out their theological-theoretical framework that carries their assumptions when they are doing research. Therefore it becomes difficult to follow their research process because one is left in the dark about their metatheoretical assumptions. In sociology, the idea of abduction as understood by some writers, works with a blank mind without any theoretical assumptions that is of course a sign of extreme postmodern thinking (cf. Reichertz 2004; Bude 2004). F.Gerrit Immink is adamant that we as practical theologians need to put the theoretical framework we work with on the table in our research reports, that will not only help the reader, but also direct the research process and the evaluation of the findings (see for instance the theoretical framework in a research report, Immink & Verweij 2007:141-148).

In this article I will only discuss the theory-praxis relationship as it pertains to my research project of preaching on poverty and preaching to the poor as listeners. My theological perspective and homiletical-theoretical framework will be put on the table. In this research I have to make use of a grounded theory empirical approach in homiletical research. That implies that the researcher starts with a rather blank mind and does open coding leading to theoretical coding of the sermons – in this case on Matthew 25:31-46 – in order to be informed by the ideas in the sermons. The grounded theory approach intends to find concepts emerging from the data, concepts that fit the data in the sermons. From those concepts the researcher can construct a theory about preaching in a context of poverty – in my case sermons of Uniting Reformed and Dutch Reformed preachers. This grounded theory emerges from the data and can then be brought into interaction with current homiletical theories (cf. Charmaz 2006; Immink & Verweij 2007; Immink, Boonstra, Pleizier & Verweij 2009; Pieterse 2010). This way of empirical research works abductively, namely constructing theories for practice moving from an analysis of the praxis to theory. The *question* of this article is whether this approach can work with metatheoretical assumptions in the sense of Osmer's paper. In order to answer this question I will discuss the theory-praxis relationship with the question of what is a legitimate process in order to start the research of a project in the light of Osmer's metatheoretical advise: *from theory first or from praxis first*? In all my research projects so far I have always worked with an approach of theory to praxis (empirical research of the current praxis) to a theory for praxis. That means that I started with a theological perspective, a theoretical framework of the current practical-theological theory packed out in concepts, which guided the questionnaires (quantitative research) or half structured schedules (qualitative research) to come to a revised theory for practice.

2. THE THEORY-PRAXIS RELATIONSHIP IN PRACTICAL-THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

For many centuries and also in the history of reformed theology practical theology was regarded as the application of theological theory in practice developed in the biblical sciences and

dogmatics (cf. Heyns & Pieterse 1990:85-89; De Wet 2006:64). Since the turn in the approach to practical theology in the sixties of the twentieth century when he insight dawned that the praxis should be researched in an empirical manner, the focus changed from the old idea, namely that the movement in our discipline is from theory to practice as application of theory, to the question of the relationship between theory and praxis in practical theology (cf. De Wet 2006:61; Greinacher 1974).

Greinacher (1974:104-105) gives a description of 'theory' and 'praxis' that still forms the basic idea of these two concepts in our discipline. *Theory*, in practical theological sense, is a theory that represents the coherent structure of normative pronouncements rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ and its theological tradition, and is related to the current church praxis and the current situation of society. *Praxis*, in practical theological sense, is church praxis, namely the actions of individuals or groups in public church-oriented actions. Firet (1987:260) added to these actions the concept of communicative actions in the service of the gospel. Greinacher (1974:110) describes the relationship between theory and praxis as a bipolar tension and points out that they should be neither totally separate nor identical (cf. Heyns & Pieterse 1990:31). Heitink (1999:152) also sees the relationship between theory and praxis as a critical, bipolar tension. We must understand the concepts of theory and praxis in their philosophical tradition, beginning with the view of Aristotle's through to the current view of Habermas' conception of the relationship between theory and praxis (Heitink 1999:149-153). Heitink works with a hermeneutical-mediating approach that also has an empirical component. The insights from philosophy and our experience in practical theology over some decades have taught us that there is an indissoluble link in the relationship between theory and praxis. A bipolar approach in the relationship between theory and praxis seems to be the best way to go about in our discipline instead of the approach where theological theory is applied to practice. The bipolar relationship is a critical relationship where both theory and praxis can be critical on each other in the interaction between the two in constructing new theories for praxis in a research project on an aspect or field in practical theology. Working with this relationship between theory and praxis helps us to construct practical theological theories for praxis that are true to the biblical message and relevant to the contexts of congregations and society.

In current practical theological studies we find authors who start their research with a description of the current praxis, stating their theological and theoretical assumptions at the beginning, but there are others who sometimes do not state their theoretical assumptions. Some authors start with a theory and in some cases an analysis of the current theory for praxis, for instance preaching, and describe the theory in a conceptual framework before they embark on empirical research guided by an operationalisation of the concepts in common language for the respondents to understand. Then a critical interaction with the current theory and the experiences in praxis as a result of the findings in the empirical research can follow in order to construct a renewed theory for praxis.

2.1 Embarking on research by first describing the praxis before asking about general theological theories and of the specific field of praxis.

In the practical theological approach to social transformation Cocrane, de Gruchy and Petersen (1991) in their model of doing practical theology, view the moment of insertion in a practical theological research program as beginning in the context with a social-ecclesial analysis (Cocrane, de Gruchy & Petersen 1991:17-18). But they put their faith commitments on the table, namely the confessing of Christ (Cocrane, de Gruchy and Petersen 1991:15-16). Although they start with analysing the praxis, they provide a theological rationale for their model.

They describe the total process of a research project as follows:

- Prior commitment (faith)
- A direction: towards the 'kingdom' of God
- The moment of insertion
- Social analysis
- Ecclesial analysis
- Theological reflection
- Retrieval of the tradition
- Spiritual formation/empowerment
- Pastoral planning & praxis (Cocrane, de Gruchy & Petersen 1991:14).

Their model does not radically differ from the models that insert the process by first stating the theological assumptions and conceptualising of theories in order to get a scientific grip on the reality of the praxis of a specific field in the service of the gospel.

Ploeger (1989) has done a doctoral research project on the place of experience in the communicative action theory of Jürgen Habermas where Habermas' view of the theory-praxis relationship is prominent. He sees the theory-praxis relationship as on equal footing and in a critical relationship. Praxis can criticise theory for not being contextually relevant, and theory can criticise praxis for not being theory-laden and therefore following a blind praxis. Habermas' communicative theory on rational discussion works with the idea of a "herrschaftsfreie Diskussion" also in the theory-praxis relationship (Ploeger 1989:205). That opens the possibility for Ploeger to decide on beginning with experience (faith experiences) regarding communicative action in his practical theological design (Ploeger 1989:246-248). He maintains a certain distance from Habermas. Ploeger works with a solid theological framework. He shares the Reformed theological view that faith is something that is given by God through the work of the Holy Spirit. God is to be known only in his Word (cf. Ploeger 1989:43, 152-153).

Julian Müller (Demasure & Müller 2006) works with a narrative approach in seven movements where he firstly listen to the stories of the co-researchers, analyses them and then he also embarks in an interdisciplinary discussion with relevant social science participants. Müller has a solid theoretical base. He builds on the narrative perspectives of Ricoeur, social constructionism and the postfoundationalist approach to practical theological epistemology. Müller thinks in a narrative paradigm that functions with the dominant metaphor of postmodern times, namely a variety of mirrors in which ideas are constantly reflected to each other.

Don Browning has published a thorough, sophisticated and well informed study on the research process in practical theology (Browning 1991). He sees the organization of a fundamental practical theology as four moves, namely descriptive theology, historical theology, systematic theology and strategic practical theology. Working with the hermeneutical approach of H.G. Gadamer, Browning comes into the sphere of practical philosophy (Browning 1991:34-41). The idea is then that practical thinking moves from practice to theory to praxis, not from theory to practice – rather a practice-theory-practice structure (Browning 1991:41). This model is also observable in Rolf Zerfass' model of a movement from praxis to theory to praxis (cf. De Wet 2006:79). Browning understands the process of research in our discipline as beginning with a practical concern, therefore with descriptive theology of the praxis. We approach the praxis with a pre-understanding (Gadamer) in which our own theory-laden views or spectacles determine our observation. Browning (1991:47) gives a description of descriptive theology that will start the research process in practical theology:

Its task is more important than its name. It is to describe the contemporary theory-laden practices that give rise to the practical questions that generate all theological reflection. To some extent, this first movement is horizon analysis; it attempts to analyze the horizon

of cultural and religious meanings that surround our religious and secular practices. To describe these practices and their surrounding meanings is itself a multidimensional hermeneutic enterprise or dialogue. It would be a great mistake to believe that descriptive theology is simply a sociological task, especially if sociology is modelled after the narrow empirical natural sciences. Descriptive theology, however, would be close to sociology if sociology were conceived hermeneutically.

In descriptive theology the praxis that we describe is also theory-laden. With the results of the descriptive theology we engage with the classic Christian resources, historical theology and systematic theology, in order to come to strategic practical theology that can guide a renewed praxis (cf. Browning 1991:47-57).

Building on Browning's model Osmer (2008) works with four tasks in practical theological research, namely a descriptive-empirical task (what is going on?); an interpretative task (why is it going on?); a normative task (what ought to be going on?); and a pragmatic task (how might we respond?). He then describes the descriptive-empirical task as the beginning phase of interpreting church praxis, and on a continuum, also a research project (Osmer 2008:37). Although he works with a theological-theoretical framework – the threefold office of Jesus Christ as priest, king and prophet (Osmer 2008:28) – the question can be asked what theoretical framework guides the descriptive-empirical work of a specific field such as preaching that involves theoretical thinking beyond priestly listening? Although we should not separate the two poles from each other (theory and praxis) we need theoretical concepts in order to get a grip on praxis. "Scientific understanding is linked to theoretical constructs and systematic reflection: we look at phenomena from our conceptualizations and theoretical constructs, and in so doing we detect what is constant or variable, regular or irregular" (Immink 2005:2-3).

It seems as if contemporary practical-theological approaches prefer to begin a research project by analysing the current practice. Seeing the bipolar and critical relationship between theory and praxis the possibility to enter the process from analysing current practice is not far-fetched. The few designs that I discussed above work with one or other theoretical perspective or frame before they analyse the current practice. However, Browning and Osmer's approaches are not very clear about a theoretical frame for a specific field that should be empirically analysed.

2.2 Embarking on research by first describing the theological perspective, the theoretical framework and a conceptualised theory of a specific praxis for empirical research

In the extensive quantitative research project by Van der Ven, Dreyer and Pieterse (2004) each theological aspect that is tested for the views held by grade eleven high school respondents in the Pretoria-Johannesburg region, is first theoretically conceptualised and thereafter operasionalised in questions in the questionnaire. That was the only way we could get relevant results. This kind of quantitative research has its limitations. "The concepts and theories utilized in this type of research are not suitable if one wants to penetrate to deeper levels of consciousness. At this point assistance is needed from qualitative methods, employed from a hermeneutical angle" (Heitink 1999:232).

In Heitink's approach to practical theology he gives a pneumatological basis to his practical-theological theory of interpretation (Heitink 1999:192-194). He chooses as theological model the one of bipolarity with the view "that divine salvation and human reality, though in tension, can be so related that the one moment cannot fully come into its own without the other. This creates room for elements like encounter and experience. Greinacher (1974) applies this model to the theory-praxis relation in practical theology" (Heitink 1999:195). Heitink's approach has a clear theological-theoretical basis. In his description of empirical research in a practical-theological

study he indicates that the theoretical framework comes before the empirical research:

> The study may proceed as follows: After an introductory chapter with the definition of the problem, the statement of the goals, and the statement of the question to which an answer is sought, the first chapter will map out the theoretical framework of the study, in historical, sociological, and theological sections. The second chapter will deal with the empirical research, carried out on this basis, with a justification of the methodology, a description of what has been done, and a statement about the results. Keeping the theoretical framework in mind, the third chapter critically evaluates the results, with a view to pastoral action. A final chapter contains the conclusion of the study (Heitink 1999:238).

Heitink works with a hermeneutical approach and favours qualitative empirical research, although he keeps the methodological spectrum open, as long as the choice for qualitative or quantitative research has been justified.

In my research on the experiences with God by people who have lost their jobs or cannot find a job because of the application of affirmative action in South Africa, I have described the attributes ("hoedanighede') of God first, then a theory of alienation when people become jobless in a situation they experience as unjust, and then did the interviews with affected people in a qualitative approach guided by our theological understanding of God (Pieterse 2009)

The research done by Erina du Plooy on the witness of hope by terminal AIDS patients with Ben J. de Klerk as supervisor, works with a basic theory build on exegesis from relevant texts in Scripture, a metatheory of relevant medical, communication and psychological disciplines, a qualitative empirical research and praxis theoretical perspectives in order to finally come to guidelines for pastoral care (Du Plooy 2009). This approach is based on God's revelation in Scripture in relation to the praxis that is being empirically researched. In the hermeneutical interaction of normative theory and the results of the empirical research, the Word of God in Scripture is the point of departure as God's revelation. The light of God's will is thrown on a renewed praxis theory. These insights can bring enduring change in the praxis of the church (cf. De Wet 2006:54-55).

Grounded theory homiletical research that starts with descriptive interpretation in the sense of the analysis of sermons by means of the grounded theory approach of Barney Glaser, has also been build on a theological-theoretical framework (Immink & Verweij 2007). That framework with its assumptions is clearly described before the empirical part of building a theory from the praxis of preaching can follow (Immink & Verweij 2007:141-144).

The *conclusion* of the discussion of the theory-praxis relationship, in the light of Osmer's idea of metatheory, should therefore be that theological assumptions and a theoretical framework for the research must first be stated, even when the research begins with an analysis of the praxis as in my grounded theory research project. This is also the *argument* of this article. Therefore I state my theological perspective and homiletical-theoretical framework for my current research project in the following paragraph.

3. THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE AND HOMILETICAL-THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Theological perspective

The core of the praxis we study in practical theology is faith in the living relationship and communication between God and human beings, and human beings with each other. The praxis of faith is therefore formed by the interaction between God and humans as well as between humans beings (Immink 2005;1,11-12; Pieterse 1984:7). God takes the initiative in this relationship and the presence of the speaking God and the responding human can be experienced

in the practice of this relationship. The relationship and the communication thereof finds its observable practice as faith as it is lived which also includes, for instance, the presentation of the preacher and the active listening of the congregation in the liturgy (Immink 2005:43-69; Pieterse 2009:253-254). Faith as it is lived in our everyday practice, our pastoral praxis and in the worship service is the field of study for practical theology. Practical theology studies this communication and communion acts as communicative acts in the service of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The relationship between God and humans is being made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit (De Wet 2009; cf. Heitink 1999:193-194). Only by the work of the Holy Spirit can the reality of God and the reality of humankind be joined in connectedness. Therefore we work with a pneumatological point of departure in this theological-theoretical framework for the study of practical theology. Immink speaks of the uniqueness of the praxis of faith in the face of the existential character of the human act of faith and the praesentia Dei, the presence of God in this act (Immink 2005:3). All this is possible because God has created humans as spiritual beings with the ability to communicate: speak, listen and respond in relationships. God is a speaking God who communicates with us in personal relationships through his Word and Spirit. In this approach we have to work with theology, the understanding of God in his revelation in Scripture and his activity in our lives, as well as with anthropology, the understanding of humans and their actions in empirical research of the concrete praxis. The theological premise of pneumatology influences our point of departure in scientific research and is therefore unique in the spectrum of the social sciences (De Wet 2009:241).

This theological perspective has implications for the final phase of a practical-theological study – the construction of a relevant and renewed theory for praxis. The results of normative, theological-theoretical concepts based on Scripture and our theological tradition, and the results of empirical research in a practical-theological research project, must be confronted in interaction in a hermeneutical way in order to develop a renewed theory for the current praxis. When we work with a critical, bipolar tension between theological theory and praxis (described above), the normative theoretical part (theocentric) and the results of the empirical research of the current praxis (anthropological), should be confronted in a hermeneutical interaction with specific theological features. The lens through which we observe reality is a "perception by faith in combining vision of God with vision of what is seen and done in the concrete praxis" (De Wet 2005:505). This is possible if we work with a practical-theological pneumatology that operates in the space of the relationship with God made possible by the covenant in which Jesus Christ fulfils the role of Mediator. In the communicative acts in service of the gospel the ministry of reconciliation in Jesus Christ is a central activity. All these theological assumptions of our Reformed tradition that form our lens of observation and understanding play a role in the hermeneutical interaction process between theory and praxis (cf. De Wet 2005).

3.2 Homiletical-theoretical framework

In my research project of sermon analysis by means of the grounded theory approach homiletical assumptions are also important, because the theoretical perspective of the researcher influences the interpretation in the sermon analysis *even* if you do an empirical analysis in the first phase of the research project. A theological point of departure is important in homiletics (cf. Dingemans 1991:30-50). The sermon is a public address. But in this speech act the preacher's aim is to speak about God, to address the congregation with the Word of God from Scripture (cf. Cilliers 2004:57). Preacher and listener are closely related in the interaction in a dialogical way (cf. Immink 2005:273-277; Pieterse 2001). In the preaching event are observable linguistic and social actions that can be empirically analysed, but there is also a spiritual dimension, communication and communion with God, the Word of God as an event that touches the hearts and lives of

people in a transformational way. This dimension must be studied theologically.

Preaching as a hermeneutical communicative act finds its task to preach in the Bible. Immediately after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost Peter started preaching. Since then preachers preach in the Christian church until today in every age and every context. The apostles formulated the substance of preaching quite early on (cf. Acts 2:22-36; 3:13-26; 4:8-22). The purpose of preaching is to bring about an encounter between God and human beings. In such an encounter people can experience God that brings salvation, reconciliation, new life, spiritual growth, fresh hope and inspiration (cf. Pieterse 2004:16; Buttrick 1987:452). All this is possible through the work of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God that we can hear in Scripture (Pieterse 2004:16).

Preaching is an event that brings two contexts together – the context of the biblical text, which is the source of the sermon, and the context of this Sunday's congregation. These contexts fuse in a process of homiletical hermeneutics (cf. Dingemans 1991; Long & Tisdale eds. 2008:61-89; Buttrick 1987:263-280)). Thorough exegesis is a priority for the preacher in the preparation of a sermon (cf. Vos 1996 II; De Klerk & Van Rensburg 2005). The exegesis is directed at the context of the congregation. Topical preaching is preaching in the context of a specific congregation and the wider context of the socio-historical situation. The light of the Word of God shines in contextual preaching on the questions, discussions, pain, joy and future action of the congregation as disciples in the service of the gospel.

4. CONCLUSION

The discussion of the relationship between theory and praxis leads us to accept that it is not a problem to embark on a research project by either beginning with theory or beginning with praxis analysis, provided that the researcher works with solid theological and theoretical assumptions.

No one does theology from a position of theological neutrality. We all approach the task, whether at a crude or sophisticated level, whether poorly or well, from some perspective, from within some commitment or other, and with an agenda – however vague – in mind (Cocrane, de Gruchy & Petersen 1991:15).

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