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# • Practical Theology and Empirical Identity
# • *Théologie Pratique et identité empirique*
# • *Praktische Theologie und empirische Identität*

**Mark J. Cartledge,** Liverpool

**RÉSUMÉ**

*Cette étude a pour sujet la méthodologie de la théologie pratique à partir des travaux de Paul Ballard et John Pritchard d'une part, et de Johannes van der Ven de l'autre. Les deux méthodologies utilisent, mais de manières différentes, l'approche de l'action-réflexion, qui domine actuellement la théologie pratique.*

*La méthodologie de Ballard et Pritchard est basée sur une version du cycle pastoral et met l'accent sur l'action ou la praxis de la foi. Ceci en quatre phases : l'expérience, l'exploration, la réflexion et l'action. Ainsi une reconsidération de la praxis conduit à un changement de praxis.*

*La méthodologie de Van der Ven est influencée par les travaux de Jürgen Habermas et de Karl Popper. Le cycle empirique et théologique adopté comprend : le développement du problème et de l'objectif, l'introduction théologique, la déduction théologique, la vérification empirique et théologique et l'évaluation théologique.*

*Ces deux approches sont commentées chacune en fonction de l'autre. L'auteur tente de montrer que les deux modèles sont empiriques et que la théologie pratique a besoin d'adopter de manière explicite une telle méthode. Les points forts de l'une des approches sont utilisés pour critiquer les faiblesses de l'autre et vice versa.*

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG**

*Dieses Essay betrachtet die Methodologie der praktischen Theologie aus dem Blickwinkel zweier verschiedener europäischer Kontexte. Beim ersten handelt es sich um das Werk Paul Ballards und John Pritchards, während es beim zweiten um das Werk Johannes van der Vens geht. Beide Methodologien verwenden, allerdings auf verschiedenartige Weise, den 'action-reflection' Ansatz, der zur Zeit die praktische Theologie dominiert.*

*'Die Methodologie Ballards und Pritchards basiert auf einer Version des pastoralen Zyklus und konzentriert sich auf die Aktion bzw. Praxis des Glaubens, die sich in vier Phasen vollzieht: Erfahrung, Analyse, Reflektion und Handlung. Ein Überdenken der Praxis führt demnach zu einer veränderten Praxis.*

*Die Methodologie van der Vens ist von Jürgen Habermas und Karl Popper beeinflußt. Der angewandte empirisch-theologische Zyklus umfaßt die Problem- und Zielentfaltung, theologische Induktion und Deduktion, empirisch-theologisches Testen sowie eine theologische Beurteilung.*

*Die beiden Ansätze werden jeweils im Licht des anderen kommentiert, wobei darauf hingewiesen wird, daß es sich in beiden Fällen um empirische Modelle handelt und daß die praktische Theologie gut daran täte, die Aufnahme einer solchen Methodologie explizit anzuzeigen. Die Stärken des einen Ansatzes werden jeweils dazu herangezogen, die Schwächen des anderen einer kritischen Beurteilung zu unterziehen.*

The aim of this essay is to compare two approaches to Practical Theology, one Continental and the other British, in order to elucidate the similarities and differences which characterise them in relation to each other. The Continental study comes from Johannes van der Ven, Professor of Practical Theology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands[1]. The British approach is the recent study by Paul Ballard, Senior Lecturer in Practical Theology at the University of Wales, Cardiff, and John Pritchard, the Archdeacon of Canterbury.[2] It is the contention of this study that both approaches may be described as empirical. That is they both seek to explore and describe empirical reality as it is mediated through Christian experience; and they seek to gather within the discourse of theology other perspectives from the social sciences to facilitate the comprehension of empirical reality. Van der Ven is more consciously empirical, while Ballard and Pritchard are less obviously so. Nevertheless the comparison remains, as will be demonstrated below.

To enable the comparison to be made I shall focus on the two methodologies which characterise these approaches to Practical Theology. I begin with the British approach of Ballard and Pritchard.

## The Pastoral Cycle

For Ballard and Pritchard theology is described in Anselm's terms as 'faith seeking understanding' and it serves the church and draws no sharp distinction between the academic and the practical. Practical Theology as a theological discipline is defined as 'the enterprise which reflects theologically on the action of the church both in its own life and the life of the society. Its raw materials are the actions of faith rather than the language of faith'.[3]

The practice of the Christian community becomes its recognised subject area while the recognised methodology contains the functions of theology, namely that it is: descriptive, normative, critical and apologetic. Yet within Practical Theology there is a distinctive methodology commonly called the 'pastoral cycle'. It is this which forms the focus of the discussion presented here.

The pastoral cycle emerged out of the Christian base communities of Latin America and the liberation theology movement. Ballard and Pritchard embrace a form of liberation theology but adapted for the British context. The pastoral cycle, as described here, contains four phases.

First, experience is the starting point, where the present situation or current praxis, usually interrupted by an event or crisis, raises a pastoral problem which demands attention. Praxis is described as 'more than practice, for it recognizes that no human activity is value-free. What is happening today is an expression of human assumptions about how things must or ought to happen'.[4] With this in mind, information is gathered, recorded and shaped for presentation. Attention to the situation is emphasised with the pastoral counselling values of genuineness, respect, accurate empathy, listening to the base-line or sub-text and listening to oneself. The approach is one of 'critical openness'. Examples of such experiences are the theological student placement and the church audit.

Second, exploration is the stage of further information gathering, analysis and discussion. At this point an inter-disciplinary approach is advanced which is dialogic and creative. However differences of discourse between theology and the social sciences need to be observed as different explanations are offered. The difficulty of such dialogue is that it is in danger of becoming unbalanced, as one partner threatens to usurp the other. For example, when critical tools are imposed and control theological reality, or when social science perspectives are denied validity and theological imperialism ensues.

Third, reflection follows and considers factors such as: personal and communal beliefs, the meaning and purpose of life, together with moral values. In this phase it is expected that discovery and change will occur and an acknowledgement of the

reality of the situation made. The pastoral cycle is characteristic of the praxis model of theology and functions to unify other methods of theology within it such as linear approaches, i.e. applied theology, correlation methods, narrative approaches, artistic methods and the *habitus* approach.

Fourth, action completes the cycle as it arises out of whole process. It is the place where informed decisions are taken and appropriate initiatives made. Action is important since truth is understood not in terms of abstract concepts but as expressed in concrete situations. Six types of change are mentioned by Ballard and Pritchard, namely: cognitive, affective, behavioural, interpersonal, social and political, and spiritual, which functions as a unifying concept.

Once the cycle is complete it simply continues as the process starts all over again, in that sense the cycle is really a spiral. Ballard and Pritchard present the pastoral cycle as a guide rather than as a process to be chained to; nevertheless it is now almost universally accepted as the methodology from which Practical Theology arises within a British context. They are committed to a praxis orientation informed by a liberationist commitment and link Practical Theology to a spirituality. They argue that Practical Theology should lead to a form of Christian '*habitus*', that is a growth in holiness of heart and life. Thus the academic and the practical processes of research and reflection are accompanied by a spirituality concerned with the kingdom of God and the mission of the church.

## The empirical-theological cycle

Van der Ven argues that theology should be conceived as an empirical discipline in the sense that it would aim to explore, describe and test theological ideas contained within a specific context. The direct object of empirical theology therefore is the faith and practice of people concerned. The social sciences are used to further this enterprise and theology is dependent upon these disciplines within Practical Theology. He argues that theology gathers into itself the appropriate techniques and methods to facilitate this development. That is the overall framework of thought is theology and the hypotheses to be tested are theological. In this sense theology's relationship to the social sciences is described as 'intra-disciplinary'.[5] This is an innovation in the discussion of the relationship between theology and the social sciences and will be discussed below.

Van der Ven also draws from the wells of liberation theology but his equally dominant theoretical position is borrowed from Jürgen Habermas, namely his theory of communicative praxis.[6] Everything in the realm of Practical Theology is viewed through the merging lens of communicative praxis and liberation theology which becomes a hermeneutical framework.[7] The praxis concept is taken from the more recent interest of Catholic theology in *Heilsgeschichte*, 'which holds that God's saving grace is realised in and through the historical actions of [hu]mankind'.[8] Therefore theology can be understood as a critical theory of religious praxis. The basic structure of such praxis is 'the communication between people within the societal conditions formed of economic, political, social and cultural institutions, of which the church is one. Practical theology...focuses, as a practical science, on the question whether and how this communicative activity within the conditions of the church and other societal institutions occur, whether and how it should and can be improved. The question of improvement is not purely technical or methodical...[it] is founded in the normative, or religious-normative basis of communicative activity, which has its origin and its goal in universal solidarity'.[9] This is connected to a concern for a liberation from suffering and the hermeneutical task of interpreting modern and ancient texts within the Christian tradition. This process is regarded as a dialogue through which meaning emerges. Indeed, such an approach results in many interpretations and theological diversity. However, despite these conflicts of interpretation,

'priority must be given to those who suffer from economic, political and cultural discrimination, lack of freedom and alienation'.[10] This in turn is coupled with an ideological-critical approach which seeks to disclose connections between ideas and power.

While communicative praxis will inevitably contain pluralism and conflict, van der Ven understands the goals of communication as operating at three levels: (1) the exchange of views, (2) an understanding of these views, and (3) a striving for consensus. One ultimately attempts to achieve consensus. In this communication there remains the free exchange and understanding of opinions, measured against the standards of truth, rightness and authenticity.[11] In addition, van der Ven posits four criteria for what he calls normative praxis. The first criterion is equality, that is the acceptance in communication that the other person has the same right to speak and to disagree with me. Second, the principle of freedom encourages an attitude of openness, tolerance and respect. Third, that freedom of communication is rooted in the subjectivity of those engaged and it is directed against deception and self-deception. Therefore no person may be excluded from communication, that is the principle of horizontal universality. To this he adds the dimension of history and the idea of vertical universality, which includes the martyrs, the victims and the dead, who still have something to contribute to the discussion. These two principles point to a fourth criterion, namely universal solidarity.[12] The liberation concern is once again to the fore when he says: '...commitment to freedom, universality and solidarity that is intrinsic to all real communication necessarily demands absolute universal liberation and reconciliation in the religious sense'.[13]

To develop a methodology for investigating such praxis, van der Ven begins by asking: what is the relationship between experience and empiricism? To which he answers by reference to the experience cycle, an analytical tool which aids the comprehension of experience by dividing it into four phases or components. This cycle contains: (1) perception, that is the influence of the environment upon a person which is experienced and perceived; (2) experimentation, which describes the action of the person upon the environment and the possible courses of action; (3) examination refers to the investigation by the person of the alternatives and their contribution to various effects; (4) assessment 'circumscribes the efforts to determine the value and meaning of the experiments'.[14] The experience cycle is in reality indivisible, the phases exist for analytical convenience. This approach places experience in an interactionist and action theory framework. Action is divided into active and passive actions, one interventionist the other receptive. Experience and empiricism likewise can be divided into two aspects: perception and examination are deemed to be relatively passive, while experimentation and the assessment phase of experience are more active.

This understanding of experience is foundational to the empirical-theological cycle. Perception corresponds methodologically to induction, experimentation to deduction, examination to testing, and assessment to evaluation. To these phases van der Ven adds the original one of the development of the problem and the goal. Empiricism refers to these five phases, which flow one from the other in a cycle, with the evaluation leading to the development of a new problem. This approach is not objectivist since during the inductive phase the researcher uses all the five senses and intuitive perceptions to let the data speak. It is not positivist since testing is preceded by the deductive phase where the interpretive framework is developed. It is also not open to the charge of empiricism, that is the ascription of power to empirical data. The evaluation phase safeguards against this by placing the data into a broader theoretical framework, which assesses its significance.

Induction refers to the observation of phenomena in the empirical reality. 'This involves the discovery and naming of

classes of phenomena, and the uncovering of comparative, correlative and causal relationships between the phenomena.'[15] This is followed by deduction where 'regularities' discovered in the empirical data are pursued by formulating and testing conjectures and expectations. The testing is completed on a completely different set of data. Since it is impossible to derive universal knowledge from specific cases, van der Ven adopts the philosophy of Karl Popper. To the question of how one acquires empirically tested general knowledge, he answers 'by deduction'. 'What, then, is place of empirical investigation in this deduction? Popper's answer is that one must develop general conjectures out of specific (observed) regularities, declare these conjectures hypothetically applicable to other concrete cases, and test the validity of this application to those cases.'[16] These conjectures and hypotheses are shaped in relation to existing theories, which in this type of research are, of course, primarily theological. Such hypotheses are tested by the route of falsification, which requires that the falsification of a null hypothesis should occur for a main hypothesis to be corroborated. The objective of such an approach is not to favour the original hypothesis, but to critically test it.

The phases of the empirical-theological cycle are as follows: First, the development of the theological problem and goal focuses on faith in God as the direct object and goal of research. The aim of such research is to improve the hermeneutic-communicative praxis.

Second, theological induction follows and includes an examination of theological perceptions from random to systematic perceptions. A random perception is without previously established systems of categories while systematic perception is characterised by the use of standardised instruments of observation. This includes both the options of participatory and non-participatory perception, overt and covert observation, and indirect and direct perception. Finally, the difference between one's perception of others and one's perception of self must be considered. This is followed by theological reflection in which a dialectic with perception is initiated, as preliminary conclusions lead to changes in perception. This is achieved by the acquisition of literary knowledge of the field, including both theological and empirical literature. It ensures that reflection is guided by theory. As a result the theological question is formulated, which is specific and limited in character. It will depend upon previous knowledge in the field as to what type of question is formulated. Questions may be descriptive, explorative or hypothesis-testing. Consequently a research design will be adopted that explicates the question previously formulated. The research design may adopt quantitative or qualitative methods, or a combination of the two depending on the topic under investigation.

Third, theological deduction contains a theological conceptualisation which fulfils the criteria for scientific theory as stipulated by Karl Popper. These are: (1) logical consistency, with the use of clear conceptual terms, (2) mutual independency of statements, i.e. they are not derived from one another and situated on the same logical level; (3) sufficiency, in the sense that theories 'must contain a sufficient amount of information so that empirically testable consequences can be derived form them';[17] (4) necessity, by which is meant that theories must not contain superfluous information. The theological-conceptual model determines the operational method as well as the analytical technique. On the basis of the literature the model will contain: concepts or variables, relationships between the variables, and the research units. A theological-conceptual model contains at least two variables, one functions as the principle variable and is theological. From this model hypotheses can be derived. This is followed by theological operationalisation which bridges the gap between the theoretical concepts and the empirical reality. It is the defining of concepts in terms of operations. Instruments used to measure hypotheses must be valid and reliable.

Fourth, empirical-theological testing

contains data collection by means of questionnaire survey. The data is then prepared by entering data into the computer, then checked and cleaned. The empirical-theological data analysis includes the phases of: (1) description of research population, (2) construction of theological and other attitudinal scales, (3) determination of the holders of theological attitudes, (4) determination of the context of theological attitudes, and (5) explanation of the theological attitudes.

Fifth, theological evaluation contains the theological interpretation which focuses upon a summary of the analytical results aimed at answering the theological question, in light of the theological problem and goal, and with particular emphasis upon theological conception. Theological reflection follows which is based upon the results of theological interpretation. It is concerned with the discussion of the meaning and relevance of the results of the theological interpretation and the adequacy of the study. Finally, a theological-methodological reflection occurs which concerns the methodological prerequisites of and the implications for empirical-theological research as a whole, as well as the individual phases of the cycle.

## Comments and critique

Three comments are offered here which use critical features from both models and aim to raise questions for further debate.

First, it could be suggested that the approach of van der Ven highlights the inadequacy of the Ballard and Pritchard model regarding empirical methods. It is the contention of this study that both approaches are empirical, not just van der Ven's. However, the British approach neglects a description of the possible methods which the social sciences use to investigate the phenomenon. The use of the social sciences is apparently limited to theoretical perspectives, although a participant observationist approach is assumed to be the norm for the practical theologian in the experience phase of the cycle. This approach could be strengthened considerably by first of all admitting the clear empirical approach which it takes; and second, having made that admission, reviewing the possible options for empirical work from the range of qualitative and quantitative methods available. As a corollary to this point, van der Ven includes clear and systematic analysis of the data. This is omitted by Ballard and Pritchard possibly because they do not regard their approach as being empirical. But even if the concept of empiricism is not admitted, such an omission of data analysis is a crucial analytical error. The quantitative preference of van der Ven does not need to be accepted, since qualitative data analysis is becoming increasingly rigorous with the use of computer software.[18]

Second, Ballard and Pritchard contend that an inter-disciplinary approach to the exploration of the situation be proposed.[19] They cite as one of the dangers to the balance of the dialogue of theology with the social sciences the possibility that one partner in the discussion might become dominant. Either the critical tools of social science control theology or they are denied validity and theological imperialism results.[20] Is Practical Theology, therefore, to be inter-disciplinary or intra- disciplinary in relation to the social sciences? The relationship as one of interdependence is not established. On the contrary, van der Ven argues that the social sciences do not need theology, but Practical Theology needs the social sciences. Therefore there is an inevitable imbalance.[21] If the overall discourse is to be theology, he sees no reason why it cannot follow other academic disciplines in the borrowing of methods to expand its range of techniques. It is suspected that Ballard and Pritchard are conscious of the previous debate about the possibility or impossibility of 'empirical theology'. In that debate, the views of major participants, such as Peter Berger, proceeded from methodological atheism.[22] The proposal of van der Ven to consider theology in its immanent form, that is defined in terms of the faith and practice of people in a particular concrete situation, appears to be one way of circumventing such objec-

tions.[23] That is, the direct object of Practical Theology is hermeneutic communicative praxis, while God is the indirect and ultimate object of Practical Theology. However, van der Ven's model is also subject to the critique of Ballard and Pritchard. He has chained his approach to the communicative action theory of Habermas.[24] Such a manoeuvre is reductionist and corresponds to what Andrew Kim describes (when commenting on Habermas' view of the possible future of religion) as the 'religious utopia of a liberated community [which] thus becomes the secular ideal of unconstrained communicative action among participants in a community free from domination'.[25] Such an approach consequently limits both the choice of research topic and the perspective through which it is defined. The communication of the church in society is a vital area for Practical Theology, but whether it should be inextricably connected to Habermasian theory is a seriously moot point.

Third, both approaches arise from within the liberation theology movement, and one would not wish to deny the possibility of such an approach.[26] However, whether a liberationist approach should govern Practical Theology is to be doubted. In van der Ven's case it appears to limit his research to the communicative praxis surrounding the problem of theodicy, while Ballard and Pritchard inevitably see Practical Theology as either crisis or event centred (e.g. student placement or church audit). As they state, 'The starting point is the present situation; the more-or-less routine existence of a given context. But there is a further element. This present is interrupted, whether from within or... from outside by events that demand a response, or uncover a tension.'[27] Surely this need not be the case. If an empirical Practical Theology concerns the praxis of the local church in a particular setting, a whole range of routine concerns may be addressed from a variety of theological perspectives. For example, I have researched the subject of charismatic prophecy within the Church of England Diocese of London.[28] The purpose of the investigation was to understand how participants within the charismatic movement defined such activity. A crisis centred liberationist approach would have been inappropriate to such a study.

## Concluding remarks

The concern of this brief essay is to compare the methodologies found within British and Continental Practical Theology. In the writings discussed here the approaches owe much to the liberation theologies which have emerged from Latin America. There is a great deal of similarity between the two methodologies of Ballard/Pritchard and van der Ven. However, there are real differences of theory and approach to empirical identity. While I would not wish to agree with van der Ven's theological presuppositions and hermeneutic,[29] he offers a more rigorous model in terms of empirical identity. For that reason his work demands to be taken seriously in its own terms, while the greatest strength of the Ballard and Pritchard model is the promotion of the pastoral cycle as a spiritual endeavour. The vision of a discipline which is academic and practical, and one which is combined with a spiritual dynamic is worthy of great respect and gratitude. It is hoped that the strengths of both approaches may be combined in the variety of models which are undoubtedly still to emerge from this ever expanding field.

## Notes

1 J. van der Ven, *Practical Theology: an Empirical Approach* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993).
2 P. Ballard and J. Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of the Church and Society* (London: SPCK, 1996).
3 Ballard and Pritchard, p. 118.
4 Ballard and Pritchard, p. 66.
5 Van der Ven, pp. 101–112.
6 J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* I and II (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987, 1991).
7 For an exposition of the way in which critical theory has been integrated into theology see R. J. Siebert, *The Critical*

*Theory of Religion: the Frankfurt School* (Berlin: Moutin, 1985).
8 Van der Ven, p. 34.
9 Van der Ven, p. 40.
10 Van der Ven, p. 48.
11 Van der Ven connects these standards to the respective modes of the 'objective', 'social' and 'subjective' as described by Habermas, p. 44.
12 Van der Ven, pp. 60–61.
13 Van der Ven, p. 62.
14 Van der Ven, p. 113.
15 Van der Ven, p. 115.
16 Van der Ven, p. 115.
17 Van der Ven, p. 129.
18 See I. Dey, *Qualitative Data Analysis: a User Friendly Guide for Social Scientists* (London: Routledge, 1993).
19 See discussions by religious educationalists: William Kay and Leslie Francis, 'The seamless Robe: Interdisciplinary Enquiry into Religious Education' *British Journal of Religious Education* 7.2 (1985) pp. 64–87; also *Drift from the Churches: Attitudes Toward Christianity During Childhood and Adolescence* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), Appendix 1: 'Scientific Study of Religion', pp. 159–182.
20 Ballard and Pritchard, pp. 109–110.
21 Van der Ven, p. 100.
22 See P. Berger, *The Social Reaality of Religion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), Appendix 2: 'Sociological and Theological Perspectives', p. 182.
23 Also see van der Ven's response to Paul Tillich, pp. 102–112.
24 Indeed, Habermas is not without his critics, see A. Brand, *The Force of Reason: An Introduction to Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1990), pp. 118–126; cf. D. M. Rasmussen, *Reading Habermas* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); S. K. White ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). However, in a recent unpublished conference paper, van der Ven omits Habermas' communicative action theory altogether, thus suggesting the possibility of a change of position on this matter. See Johannes A. van der Ven, 'Practical Theology in the Making' (British and Irish Association for Practical Theology Conference, University of Wales, Cardiff, 1997).
25 A. E. Kim, 'Critical Theory and the Sociology of Religion: a Reassessment', *Social Compass* 43.2 (1996), p. 275.
26 See for example, S. Pattison, *Pastoral Care and Liberation Theology* (London: SPCK, 1997).
27 Ballard and Pritchard, p. 77.
28 M. J. Cartledge, 'Charismatic Prophecy', *Journal of Empirical Theology* 8.1 (1995), pp. 71–88.
29 See M. J. Cartledge, 'Empirical Teology: Towards an Evangelical Charismatic Hermeneutic', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 9 (1996), pp. 115-126.