



# International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT)

Practicing Ubuntu: Practical Theological Perspectives on **Injustice**, **Personhood** and **Human Dignity**

## **Roundtable Discussion: Approaches to Practical Theology**

### **ROUNDTABLE NUMBER 1**

JULY 17, 2015

11:15 – 12:30

### **A Postfoundational Practical Theology**

Prof. Julian Müller, Emeritus Professor, Senior Research Fellow, Co-Leader of Ubuntu Research Group, Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria, Pretoria

Practical Theology is an in-between discipline. It dwells in the gaps between the various theological disciplines, and between theology and other disciplines. As such it is confronted and exposed to multiple realities or to a variety of narratives and is therefore drawn into narrative inquiry, where stories of alternative realities can be imagined.

In this in-between land the emphasis shifts from "what"-questions to "who"-questions. Living people in real contexts becomes the main focus. Indeed a fruitful ground for imagining and story telling.

The most fitting theological paradigm for this narrative turn, seems to be the postfoundational approach, which forces us to firstly listen to the stories of people in real life situations. It doesn't have the aim of merely describing a general context, but of confronting us with a specific and situation.

This way of thinking is always concrete, local, and contextual, but at the same time reaches beyond local contexts. It is contextual, but at the same time acknowledges the way in which our epistemologies are shaped by tradition.

The postfoundational epistemology can be re-formulated into a postfoundational practical theological methodology with guidelines for the conducting of research. The case study of the Ubuntu research at the University of Pretoria will then be used to illustrate how postfoundational research can be conducted in practice.

## **Reflect deeply on the lived and concrete experiences of individuals and communities**

Prof. Andrew Root, The Olson Baalson Associate Professor of Youth and Family Ministry, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN

As Practical Theology has developed over the last fifty years it has sought to reflect deeply on the lived and concrete experiences of individuals and communities. This focus on the lived and concrete has led practical theology to provide significant perspectives and theories on human action—using empirical methods and other social sciences to describe religious phenomenon. Yet, too often this robust focus on human action has not always led practical theology into contemplation of divine action (particularly divine action as a transcendent reality encountered by human agents in and through their concrete/lived experience). Therefore, this presentation will explore how divine and human action might be held together in practical theology through a conception of ministry that allows the theological and practical to inform each other. Drawing from early Protestant perspectives, this presentation will seek to imagine how practical theology might perceive its work outside an Aristotelian conception of human action that seeks excellence, and instead dwell on how the impossibility of human action becomes the possibility for the experience of divine action itself.

### **Two current challenges**

Prof. Birgit Weyel, Department of Practical Theology, Faculty of Protestant Theology, University of Tübingen, Tübingen

I would like to discuss two current challenges, practical theology – in my opinion – has to accept:

1. *Intercultural and interreligious studies.* Practical Theology cannot develop a self-concept against the background of one religion and one cultural setting only because such a concept is futile as a paradigm for different religions and cultures. We have to realize more consequentially that there is not only a plurality of religions but also a plurality of concepts of religion, concepts of religious practices and so on. The International Academy provides a wonderful opportunity to work on intercultural and interreligious concepts.

2. *Theology and/or religious studies.* Practical Theology is a scientific theory of religious practices. For all intents and purposes, Practical Theology refers to religious studies, religious sociology, religious psychology, religious ethnology and so forth. In terms of operation methods and functions, there is no significant difference. The main difference is that Theology discloses the self-relation of the academic to the item he or she is working on. We suppose that theologians are practicing their religions, and theology makes their respective confession explicit. However, for reason of transparency, this would also be advisable for other academics that are concerned with religious topics.

## Roundtable Discussion: Approaches to Practical Theology

### ROUNDTABLE NUMBER 2

JULY 20, 2015

11:15 – 12:30

#### ***Theo-logy as response to the *logos tou theou****

Prof. Robert Mager, Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses Université Laval  
Québec

In working with doctoral students in practical theology, I have become keenly aware of the discourse-building nature of theological activity. I have reflected with my students upon different issues related to this discourse-building activity. A central one is its intent to say something meaningful and relevant about God, and specifically about how we come to say “God” as we experience different things in life. This means that the theological act is second, the first act being the naming of God in concrete situations. In this foundational speech about God, believers have come to discern God’s Word itself addressed to us. In that sense, theology is not only *about* our saying “God”, but it is a form of *response to* God’s Word, an act of conversation. *Practical* theology then comprises both an act of discernment (how is God speaking to us in our experiences today?) and an act of commitment (how are we to respond to this speech in a meaningful, relevant and responsible way?). Such a perspective questions the status of faith in the way we, as an Academy, understand the nature and the task of practical theology.