

A POSTFOUNDATIONALIST, HIV-POSITIVE PRACTICAL THEOLOGY¹

Prof Dr Julian C Müller
Department of Practical Theology
University of Pretoria

Abstract

The concept of postfoundationalist practical theology is in itself a re-discovery of the basic forms of practical theology. It is an effort to move beyond the modernistic boundaries of practical theology as a very formal, rationalistic venture. On the other hand it is also an effort to avoid the relativism of anti-foundationalist theories. It is hopefully a terra incognita, very necessary for practical theology to explore.

It will be argued that practical theology, as enlightened by the postfoundationalist ideas of Calvin Schrag and Wentzel van Huyssteen, should be developed out of a very specific and concrete moment of praxis, in this case the practice of concern and care for children living with HIV and AIDS.

A research project on children living with HIV and AIDS in South Africa will be the moment of praxis out of which practical theology will be developed in this workshop. I specifically do not use the concept of a case study, because that concept carries with it the idea of practical theology that lives somewhere in theories in literature, while the case study is only used as the empirical confirmation and verification of these theories. In this research, HIV and AIDS and children, is not a case study. It is much, much more. It is the moment of praxis which I will try to explore and cultivate in such a manner that a uniquely postfoundationalist practical theology develops out of it.

The research structure, which developed out of the concepts of postfoundationalism, will be used as a guideline for the development of the research project and at the same time for the exploration of the concept of a postfoundationalist practical theology.

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The only space in which any determinations can be made ... is in the moment of praxis (always local, embodied, and situated).²

The Practical Theology that I try to develop in this article is neither foundational, nor non-foundational. It is *post*-foundational. It can neither be described with the metaphor of a foundation, nor with the metaphor of non-foundation, or anti-foundation. It has moved beyond the restrictions and “insular comfort” of theological foundationalism, but at the same time it is not to be found within the sphere of relativism and the arbitrariness of antifoundationalism (Van Huyssteen 1997: 43).

Practical Theology happens whenever and wherever there is a reflection on practice, from the perspective of the experience of the presence of God. There are obviously various levels of Practical Theology. It can be very spontaneous, informal and local. It can also be very formal, systematic and organized. It can be part of ministerial activities on the congregational level, or it can be highly academic on university level. In any case, it is always guided by *the moment of praxis (always local, embodied, and situated)*.

During the last century Practical Theology struggled to obtain scientific status. Much effort was invested by practical theologians into the task of obtaining equal status for their subject next to the other theological disciplines. It also struggled to position itself as an academic discipline, differentiated from, and not to be confused with religious praxis (Heitink 1999: XV). In this process, unfortunately, Practical Theology became too much of an elitist academic affair, with too little contact with the informal forms of practical theological reflection. With all the emphasis, and justly so, on the scientific quality of Practical Theology, a disregard has developed for the many levels and various forms of the practice of Practical Theology on the local as well as informal level. Practical Theology is the one theological discipline that can never afford to be detached from basic forms of theological reflection. This is precisely the reason why I find the concept of postfoundationalist Practical Theology such a valuable contribution for the understanding of Practical Theology. It constitutes a re-discovery of the basic forms of Practical Theology. It is an effort to move beyond the modernistic boundaries of Practical Theology, which tends to be formal and rationalistic. On the other hand, it is also an effort to avoid the relativism of anti-foundationalist theories, which are a real threat to Practical Theology.

Practical Theology as local wisdom

² A phrase from a lecture by Anthony H Jones, with reference to Calvin Schrag.

It will be argued that Practical Theology, as enlightened by the postfoundationalist ideas of both Calvin Schrag and Wentzel van Huyssteen, should be developed out of a very specific and concrete moment of praxis. In order to explain this approach, I would like to refer to a very specific and relevant practice of concern, namely the care for children living with HIV and AIDS in South Africa.

A research project, focusing on children living with HIV and AIDS, will be the *moment of praxis* out of which Practical Theology will be developed. I specifically do not use the concept *case study*, because it carries the idea of a linear approach. This is an approach where Practical Theology lives somewhere in theories and in literature, with the case study as the empirical confirmation and verification of these theories. The reference to HIV and AIDS and children in this article does not function as a case study. It is much more. It is the moment of praxis which I will explore and cultivate in such a manner that a uniquely postfoundationalist Practical Theology develops out of it.

Postfoundationalist Practical Theology should be seen as a way of understanding within the paradigm of the hermeneutical approach. And yet, it moves beyond *hermeneutics* as a metaphor for Practical Theology. It even goes one step further and argues for a very specific view of understanding: namely an understanding, which not only includes the local context as one of the hermeneutical circles (cf. Bons Storm 1989:63), but an understanding that can only develop within and from a local context.

Although I generally agree with the basic philosophy of hermeneutics, and am at home within the school of thought as were *inter alia* formulated by Heitink (1999), Tracy (1984), Bons-Storm (1989), Ganzevoort (1993), Pieterse (1993), and Browning³ (1991). I am also concerned about the practice of Practical Theology based on the hermeneutical paradigm. My feelings of unrest about the hermeneutical approach for *Practical Theology*, grew out of three considerations:

- With Bleicher (1980:191) I am concerned about the inadequacy of the hermeneutical approach in situations where there is a continuous distortion of

³ Don Browning was present when I presented the workshop. I know him well and appreciated his presence very much. He reacted positively, but afterwards expressed doubts about two aspects: Firstly he felt that the hermeneutical approach is adequate enough and that we do not really need the concept of postfoundationalism to convey the ideas of this article. Secondly, he felt that my example of a hermeneutically based piece of research (The report of the REC), was not a good example. In reaction to his first objection, I would like to emphasise the importance of a positioning in between the fundamental and the postmodern approaches, which the hermeneutical approach as such does not provide. Hermeneutics can be abused towards both extremes. Postfoundationalism, on the other hand, positions itself firmly opposite both of these paradigms. In terms of his second objection, my reaction is twofold: 1. That there are so few examples of research on HIV and AIDS, done within practical theology that I do not really have a wide choice of research examples, and 2. Although my example does not represent a highly scientific research project, it nevertheless is representative of research done within the hermeneutical paradigm.

communication through the use of language (see also the discussion of these inadequacies of hermeneutics in the thesis of L.L. Bosman)

- The lack of emphasis on the socially constructed nature of knowledge and knowledge-systems. Because of this consideration, I have, in earlier work (1996:5), with reference to Gerkin (1986:54, 61) opted for a *narrative* Practical Theology.
- Thirdly, the seemingly inadequacy of the hermeneutical approach to provide Practical Theology with real contextual outcomes. In spite of good theory, it seems to leave Practical Theology only with theoretical abstractions. The “theories for *praxis*” which are created often remain distant from the real world.

By way of explanation, I would like to refer to a publication on HIV and AIDS in which the typical hermeneutical approach was followed. Later on in the article I will attempt to illustrate an alternative approach.

The Reformed Ecumenical Council on HIV and AIDS published a report: *REC FOCUS. Commission for Human Relations. HIV and AIDS* (March 2002, Vol 2, No 1). Although this was not, as such, presented as an article in a scientific journal, it was published as an official report. It represented practical theological research on a hermeneutical basis. The structure of such a study is to be anticipated: There is an overview of the HIV and AIDS situation in Africa, which is followed by a discussion on Biblical and theological principles involved. This is followed by a conclusion with a number of applications for “Counselling and Caring” and guidelines for “Christians in Action.”

Although the last few pages of the publication seem to provide good “theories for *praxis*”, the publication still leaves the reader with a feeling of frustration, and even hopelessness. According to me the problem is the lack of integration achieved between context and the biblical principles. The application part is detached from the descriptive part. It is as if all contexts are the same and are treated as if they are alike. Africa could have been Iceland for that matter. It is as if the expected possibilities for people to take Christian action are merely taken for granted. It seems as if the context was never really part of the hermeneutical process. The desperate situation of faith communities grappling with the principles of the gospel in the midst of cultural, social and economic difficulties in Sub-Saharan Africa is not weaved into a new understanding at all. It seems as if the understanding or hermeneutical part of the study had been done elsewhere and only afterwards it was sympathetically applied to the HIV and AIDS situation in Africa.

On the contrary, the postfoundationalist approach forces us to firstly listen to the stories of people struggling in real life situations. It does not merely aim to describe a general context, but we are confronted with a specific and concrete

situation. This approach to Practical Theology, although also hermeneutical in nature, is more reflexive in epistemology and methodology. According to Van Huyssteen (Lez Eyzies Symposium, May 2004), this kind of theological reflection revolves around three movements:

First, as theologians we should acknowledge the radical contextuality of all our intellectual work, the epistemically crucial role of interpreted experience, and the way that disciplinary traditions shape the values that inform our reflection about God and what we believe to be God's presence in the world. *Second*, a postfoundationalist notion of rationality should open our eyes to an epistemic obligation that points beyond the boundaries of our own discipline, our local communities, groups, or cultures, toward plausible forms of *interdisciplinary dialogue* (cf. Van Huyssteen 1999). Against this background I have argued for distinct and important differences between reasoning strategies used by theologians and scientists. I have also, argued, however, that some important shared rational resources may actually be identified for these very different cognitive domains of our mental lives (cf. Van Huyssteen 2006, forthcoming). *Thirdly*, it is precisely these shared rational resources that enable interdisciplinary dialogue, and are expressed most clearly by the notion of *transversal rationality*. In the dialogue between theology and other disciplines, transversal reasoning promotes different but equally legitimate ways of viewing specific topics, problems, traditions, or disciplines, and creates the kind of space where different voices need not always be in contradiction, or in danger of assimilating one another, but are in fact dynamically interactive with one another. This notion of transversality thus provides a philosophical window to our wider world of communication through thought and action (cf. Schrag 1992:148ff.; Welsch 1996:764ff.), and teaches us to respect the disciplinary integrity of reasoning strategies as different as theology and the sciences.

This way of thinking is always concrete, local, and contextual, but at the same time reaches beyond local contexts to transdisciplinary concerns. It is contextual, but at the same time in acknowledgement of the way in which our epistemologies are shaped by tradition. Van Huyssteen (Gifford-book, 9) refers to the postfoundationalist notion as "a form of compelling knowledge", which is a way of seeking a balance between "the way our beliefs are anchored in interpreted experience, and the broader networks of beliefs in which our rationally compelling experiences are already embedded."

On the basis of the argumentation thus far, I would then like to formulate the minimum requirements for a **Postfoundationalist Practical Theology**:
For Practical Theology, in order to reflect in a meaningful way on the experiences of the presence of God, it needs to be...

- **Locally contextual**
- **Socially constructed**
- **Directed by tradition**
- **Exploring interdisciplinary meaning**
- **Pointing beyond the local**

These minimum requirements are not only relevant for the epistemic questions of Practical Theology, but also for the methodology. In fact, it is in the doing, or in the practice of Practical Theology that its true epistemic nature will be shown. Therefore, in the subsequent part of this article I will concentrate on the methodological dynamics, which is created by a postfoundationalist understanding of Practical Theology.

The local and the specific as points of departure

Practical Theology is only possible as contextual Practical Theology. Practical Theology cannot function in a general context. It is always local, concrete and specific (cf. Willows, D. and Swinton, J. (eds.) 2000:42). The moment it moves away from the concrete specific context, it regresses into some sort of systematic theology. The very essence of Practical Theology demands of it to be very focused on concrete contexts. It can be argued that theology as a whole should be practical and that theology, which is unpractical, no longer is theology. But this is even more the case with regard to Practical Theology than with regard to any of the other sub disciplines of theology. Practical Theology should be differentiated from other theological subjects by its truthfulness, not only with regard to the context in general, but also with regard to a very specific context. Furthermore, it should not only be truthful to the context, but also truthful to a methodology with a definite and purposeful movement from the context, or praxis, to theory, and back again to the context. We can refer to this methodological process as the circle of practical wisdom (cf. Browning 1991: 34).

The following anecdote of a small conversation between Hiltner, the pastoral theologian and Tillich, the systematic theologian, perhaps illustrates this position of Practical Theology at its best

Tillich: Let us say that there was a certain man

Hiltner (interrupting): What was his name?

Tillich: Oh, ... err ... let us say John. So, there was this man named John and

Hiltner (interrupting): Was he married?

Tillich: Let us say he was. So. There was this married man, John, who

Hiltner (interrupting again): What was his wife's name? Did they both work?

Tillich (with exasperation): Professor Hiltner, won't you please let me finish? What is the meaning of all your questions?

Hiltner: To speak of just *any* man is to speak of no man at all.

(Childs 1998:193)

This is why I do not attempt to write a practical theology *with reference* to HIV and AIDS, but a practical theology, *developed out of* HIV and AIDS. It is the particularity of a practical theology that gives it life.

Social constructionism and narrative.

Van Huyssteen (Gifford-book 14) does not use the terminology of social-
constructionism, but clearly uses a similar line of thought when arguing for a
postfoundationalist rationality. He refers to Schrag who has moved ...

aggressively..._beyond the restrictions of Sartre's subject centered
consciousness to transversality as an achievement of communicative praxis
(cf. Schrag 1992:153ff). Talk about the human subject is now revisioned by
resituating the human subject in the space of communicative praxis. Thus the
notion of transversal rationality opens up the possibility to focus on patterns of
discourse and action as they happen in our communicative practices, rather
than focussing only on the structure of the self, ego, or subject.

The shift of emphasis from individual to social, from subjective to discourse, which
constitutes a new epistemology in the social sciences, is also part and parcel of the
postfoundationalist movement.

The idea of socially constructed interpretations and meaning is clearly part of the
postfoundationalist approach. Van Huyssteen (Gifford Lecture 1:12-13) writes: "...we
relate to our world epistemically only through the mediation of interpreted experience,
and in this sense it may be said that our diverse theologies, and also the sciences, offer
alternative interpretations of our experience (cf. Rolston 1987:1-8). Alternative,
however, not in the sense of competing or conflicting interpretations, but of

complementary interpretations of the manifold dimensions of our experience.” (Gifford Lecture 1: 12-3). The concept of “received interpretations”, as far as I understand it, puts emphasis on tradition, on culture and on cultural discourses, all of which contribute to interpretations. Therefore, although we sometimes may have the illusion of a unique understanding of reality, it is always *received*. Therefore not constructed in an individual and subjective sense, but co- or socially constructed.

In previous publications I have argued for the concept of a narrative Practical Theology, based on a social constructionist paradigm. The introduction of the concept of postfoundationalism to Practical Theology is no diversion from that position. It is the same line of thinking, but at the same time a very important enrichment.

Postfoundationalist Practical Theology includes the ideas of social constructionism and the narrative approach, but provides us with the apparatus to better position ourselves within a theological world. It also helps us to better position ourselves against the relativistic tendencies in some approaches within social constructionism and the narrative approach (cf. Wentzel van Huyssteen’s discussion of narrative theology, 1997: 180-192).

The step by step development of a Postfoundationalist Practical Theology

In the right hand column of the table below, I have “translated” Van Huyssteen’s (1997:4) description and summary of Postfoundationalist Theology (left hand column) into practical theological concepts. I have also elaborated on the concepts in order to develop a practical theological research process in seven movements.

POSTFOUNDATIONALIST THEOLOGY	POSTFOUNDATIONALIST PRACTICAL THEOLOGY
<p>...a <i>postfoundationalist theology</i> wants to make two moves. First, it fully acknowledges contextuality, the epistemically crucial role of interpreted experience, and the way that tradition shapes the epistemic and nonepistemic values that inform our reflection about God and what some of us believe to be God’s presence in this world. At the same time, however, a postfoundationalist notion of rationality in theological reflection claims to point creatively beyond the confines of the local community, group, or culture towards a plausible form of interdisciplinary conversation.</p>	<p>The context & interpreted experience</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A specific context is described. 2. In-context experiences are listened to and described. 3. Interpretations of experiences are made, described and developed in collaboration with “co-researchers” <p>Traditions of interpretation</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. A description of experiences as it is continually informed by traditions of interpretation.
<p>(Van Huyssteen 1997: 4)</p> <p>(Some phrases written in bold by JM)</p>	<p>God’s presence</p>

5. A reflection on, as it is understood and experienced in a specific situation, God's presence.

Thickened through interdisciplinary investigation

6. A description of experience, thickened through interdisciplinary investigation

Point beyond the local community.

7. The Development of alternative interpretations, that point beyond the local community.

AN EXAMPLE OF DOING PRACTICAL THEOLOGY:

In this section I try to explain how the research process is implemented in a real research project on HIV and AIDS.

Research theme: The contribution that faith-based organisations in South Africa can make in addressing the needs of children orphaned by HIV and AIDS.

The research develops into 7 movements, which reflect the assumptions and foundation of the Postfoundationalist Practical Theology that is implemented in the research. Methodological guidelines have been decided on for each of the movements for this specific project.

1. A SPECIFIC CONTEXT IS DESCRIBED .

The context/ action field/ *habitus*⁴ of this research is in the first instance the orphaned and vulnerable children living within the HIV and AIDS environment of South Africa. Secondly the level of involvement and the discourses which determine the faith-based organisations' involvement in these children's lives.

Methods to be used:

- Conduct interviews with at least ten persons working in the field of caring for children infected/affected by HIV and AIDS.
- Interpretation of interviews on a social-constructionist basis.

⁴ For the description of these concepts the reader can turn to the articles by Müller; Müller, van Deventer and Human on methodology.

- Doing research on existing and using research methods on listening to child narratives.

2 IN-CONTEXT EXPERIENCES ARE LISTENED TO AND DESCRIBED.

The team of researchers does empirical research, based on the narrative approach. They listen to the stories of children, grandparents, and caregivers in order to gain understanding of the in-context experiences.

Methods to be used:

- Two organisations as case studies are identified: Heartbeat and PEN. Their existing voluntary workers are trained to be sensitive to and understand the world and language of children. Experts in this field of specialization are used.
- Some of these helpers are selected, trained and empowered to enter into meaningful relationships with orphaned and vulnerable children.
- The same people are supervised to perform specific tasks (story telling; drawings; games; etc.) in order to hear the stories of children.

3 INTERPRETATIONS OF EXPERIENCES ARE MADE, DESCRIBED AND DEVELOPED IN COLLABORATION WITH “CO-RESEARCHERS”.

According to this research approach, the researchers are not only interested in descriptions of experiences, but also and foremost in their (co-researchers’) own *interpretations*. The researcher in this phase does not, in the first instance, look for data, but for meaning / interpretation given by the co-researchers.

Methods to be used:

- Interpretation is done in constant feedback loops and in collaboration with “co-researchers”, in this case the two teams of helpers.
- Multi-angular theoretical sampling is used where necessary (different sources, means, points of time, persons) in order to broaden the focus and to meet the richness of the data.

4 A DESCRIPTION OF EXPERIENCES AS IT IS CONTINUALLY INFORMED BY TRADITIONS OF INTERPRETATION.

There are specific discourses/traditions in certain communities and in faith-based organisations, which inform perceptions and behaviour. The researchers will have to identify these discourses and try and gain some understanding on how current behaviour is influenced by these discourses. By listening to the co-researchers, but also by listening to the literature, the art, and the culture of a certain context. The informative theological traditions should also be listened to.

Methods to be used:

- Interpretation of discourses.
- Revisiting research narratives, to be found in literature, art and other cultural phenomena.

5 A REFLECTION ON THE RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL ASPECTS, ESPECIALLY ON GOD'S PRESENCE, AS IT IS UNDERSTOOD AND EXPERIENCED IN A SPECIFIC SITUATION.

This is not a forced effort by the researchers to bring God into the present situation. It is rather an honest undertaking in order to really hear and understand the co-researchers' religious and spiritual understanding and experiences of God's presence. Again this should be integrated into the social-constructionist process. The researchers' own understanding of God's presence in a certain situation is also a valuable contribution they have to make.

Methods to be used:

- Listen for clues in children's narratives about experiences of God.
- Interact with those clues (explicit and implicit) through methods congruent to the world and language of children.

6 A DESCRIPTION OF EXPERIENCE, THICKENED THROUGH INTERDISCIPLINARY INVESTIGATION.

Interdisciplinary work is complicated and difficult. Language, reasoning strategies, contexts, and ways of accounting for human experience differ greatly between the various disciplines (Midali 2000: 262). Therefore no one -size -fits -all methodology can be applied. But this interdisciplinary movement is part and parcel of Practical Theology. It includes the conversation with other theological disciplines and with other relevant disciplines. The researcher has to listen carefully to the various stories of understanding and make an honest effort to integrate them all into one.

Methods to be used:

- Literature study
- Interviews with colleagues from different disciplines
- Focus groups; participatory observation and action in the interdisciplinary field.

7 THE DEVELOPMENT OF ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS, THAT POINT BEYOND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY.

Practical theological research is not only about description and interpretation of experiences. "Alternative interpretations" mean that this way of doing (practising) theology is also about deconstruction and emancipation. The bold move should be taken to allow all the different stories of the research, to develop into a new story of understanding that points beyond the local community. This should not be confused with generalization. It is rather a case of doing contextual research with such integrity that it will have possibilities for broader application. According to the narrative approach, this will not happen on the basis of structured and rigid methods, through which stories are analyzed and interpreted. It rather happens on the basis of a holistic understanding and as a social-constructionist process in which all the co-researchers are invited and engaged in the creation of new meaning.

Methods to be used:

These methods are on the level of dissemination, and can be done in various ways, for instance:

- Groups/workshops/seminars held with stakeholders.
Concentrical dissemination to various communities of faith on different levels.

CONCLUSION

The story of Practical Theology that emerges out of this article, has two focal points:

- It is Practical Theology that is “HIV positive”. In other words, it is a Practical Theology that is local and contextual, but in such a way that it also identifies with the people in the context. It is not a system of theories, which is formulated and then imposed on a certain situation, but a story of understanding, which grows from a real situation. It is a story developing out of an interaction between researcher(s) and a context.
- It is postfoundationalist theology. In other words it finds its identity in a balance and dialogue between theological tradition and the context.

This practical theological narrative is not only a paradigm-story, but also a method-story. It is an integrative narrative, which allows the practical theologian to participate in processes of both “story-telling” and “story-development”, with integrity. Therefore it is a Practical Theology that is sensitive, descriptive, but also bold in its deconstruction of negative discourses and in its development of new alternative stories.

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