

Research Articles

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Prospects for a Buddhist Practical Theology

Abstract: I argue here for a contemporary academic discipline of Buddhist practical theology. After briefly reviewing philosophical issues with respect to a specifically Buddhist practical theology, I demonstrate how certain traditionally-Christian academic practical theology models can be generalized to enable systematic, critical, and pragmatic reflection on praxis in a wide range of Buddhist contexts. Buddhist congregations, clergy, teachers, leaders and scholars could all benefit from increased scholarly discourse focused on issues of praxis. Moreover, this generalization process itself can be applied beyond the contexts of Buddhism to any non-Christian religion or spiritual tradition. The scope for scholarship within non-Christian religions, as well as interreligious research, can thereby be expanded within academic practical theology.

Zusammenfassung: Der Artikel plädiert für eine zeitgenössische, akademische Disziplin der buddhistischen Praktischen Theologie. Nach einem kurzen Einblick in philosophische Fragestellungen bezüglich einer spezifisch buddhistischen Praktischen Theologie, demonstriert die Autorin, wie bestimmte traditionell christliche Modelle der akademischen Praktischen Theologie verallgemeinert werden können, um systematische, kritische und pragmatische Reflektion auf Praxis in einer Vielzahl von buddhistischen Kontexten zu ermöglichen. Buddhistische Gemeinschaften, Geistliche, Lehrer, Leiter und Gelehrte könnten alle von mehr praxisbezogener Forschung profitieren. Diese Verallgemeinerung kann auch auf andere nicht-christliche Religionen und geistliche Traditionen angewandt werden.

Keywords: Practical Theology, Pastoral Theology, Buddhist Practical Theology, Buddhist Theology, Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism, Contemplative Studies

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Introduction and Rationale

Presently too few places in the Western academy enable Buddhist clergy and teachers to gain accredited education studying Buddhist religion in a manner which uses contemporary research methods and yet critically upholds the theological integrity of both the forms and the contexts of religious practice. While opportunities to pursue graduate education in Buddhist religious studies are ubiquitous, the approach typically consists of third-person critical textual analysis of scriptural and philosophical texts. Confessional perspectives of the lived experience of Buddhism and respective spiritual formation processes are forbidden, taboo, or shunned.¹ As Paul Griffiths explains, “the most important point to bear in mind here is that the Buddhologist *qua* Buddhologist cannot be a religious enthusiast, proselytiser, or even, one might go so far as to say, Buddhist. The set of attitudes that a Buddhist usually has towards the texts of his [sic] tradition are quite different from, and to a large extent incompatible with, those that a Buddhologist should have toward the text he is studying.”²

Could it be that no Western doctoral programs exist specifically to facilitate practical theology research in Buddhism for the simple reason that a contemporary academic discipline for such research has yet to be fully formed by Buddhist scholars and theologians? While others have previously argued for academic Buddhist theology in general³, I here argue for and demonstrate the nascent advent of Buddhist practical theology in particular.

As an ordained Buddhist clergy, scientist, educator, practitioner and researcher of traditional formal *Vajrayāna*⁴ Buddhist liturgies and meditation techniques, I here offer a rationale for using certain Christian practical theology models in the service of emic Buddhist research, and by inference, to any non-Christian religious research. Such practical theology frameworks are of potential interest to scholars from academic practical theology, contemplative studies, religious and inter-religious studies, Buddhist clergy, and leaders of Buddhist congregations. Because Buddhist and other non-Christian congregations and scholars exist in most countries,⁵ this topic is of prospective interest internation-

1 Paul J. Griffiths, Buddhist Hybrid English. Some Notes on Philology and Hermeneutics for Buddhologists, in: *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 4/2, 1981, 17–32.

2 *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

3 John Makransky, Contemporary Academic Buddhist Theology. Its Emergence and Rationale, in: John Makransky / Roger Jackson (eds.), *Buddhist Theology. Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, London (Routledge-Curzon) 2000, 14–23.

4 Sanskrit *vajrayāna*.

5 Cf. <http://www.buddhanet.net>, last viewed April 1, 2014.

ally. Moreover, this presentation of Buddhist practical theology may be of interest to Christian practical theologians seeking innovative methods and contexts for engaging non-Christians⁶.

Buddhist scholars examining the concept of Buddhist theology are first presented, followed by examples of Christian models of practical theology generalized for Buddhist applications. Generalizing still further, I suggest that such a pragmatic customization of practical theology might serve the purposes and contexts of any religion or spiritual tradition. Not considered here are issues of Buddhist theology related to secular clinical or otherwise non-Buddhist uses of meditation, popular interests in Buddhist meditation, or the dynamics of Buddhist-Christian interreligious collaboration.

A paucity of scholarly work relevant to this topic limits the range of voices presented. That is, while much virtue of the practical theology works considered here derives from their expressly general nature, there is little evidence suggesting these practical theologians have anticipated that their work might be fundamentally used to inform a Buddhist or otherwise non-Christian practical theology praxis in particular. Moreover, works selected by Buddhism scholars consider Buddhist theology in general, but only obliquely allude to a specifically practical theological approach. The synthesis presented here is therefore unique.

Why a Buddhist Practical Theology is Needed

An academic discipline of Buddhist practical theology is needed, because Buddhist congregations, clergy, religion teachers, etc. have the right to benefit from critical, normative, and pragmatic reflection on praxis. Furthermore, Buddhist leaders and clergy are committed to providing optimal conditions for the full spiritual formation of their congregants. As mentioned earlier, it is presently not feasible to do Buddhist practical theology research in academic religious studies departments.

At a personal level, Buddhism is itself a religion of systematic methods of critical and pragmatic reflexive praxis. For example, generally, when Buddhists train in meditation, theologically one learns the role of meditation in spiritual formation by studying scriptures and commentaries, and then through actual meditation practice, one begins to experience that role directly. Similarly, a

⁶ To review prospective contexts for specifically interreligious applications of practical theology, see Bhikshuni Lozang Trinlae, *Leveraging Inter-religious Dialogue into Transformative Action Using Practical Theology's Reflexive Frameworks*, in: *Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue* 11, 2013, 50–59.

Buddhist studies compassion theologically and historically as a foundation for becoming more compassionate, practices actually generating compassion during meditation using specific techniques for that purpose, and then attempts to integrate this capacity for compassion during day-to-day life. Through regular reflection, students can examine if in fact they are behaving more compassionately, and can adjust their balance of study and practice efforts accordingly. The process is therefore normative and pragmatic.

At the level of interpersonal praxis, historically most Buddhist teachers and clergy lived segregated from secular society according to an ethical system known as *vinaya*, which specifies procedures for regular review of and consensus-based influence over the social dimension of community life. Most of Buddhist history was lived in Asia during pre-modern eras under autocratic or feudal rule. Therefore, what we might think of as an indigenous Buddhist practical theology has historically consisted of exegesis of scriptural texts and commentaries setting forth how to practice Buddhist instructions, and preservation of the community-based ethical vocations enabling activities of teaching, study, and practice among both ordained and lay sectors.⁷ Direct instructions on meditation practice passed from teachers to students in the oral traditions. As Roger Jackson explains, “Buddhists seldom have been willing to rest content merely with intellectual reflection on their tradition. Nevertheless, they have left the world a vast legacy of such reflection, which has – rhetoric of non-conceptual reality aside – been a significant part of Buddhist life wherever the Dharma has spread. Furthermore, Buddhism is not alone among religious traditions in recognizing the limits of rationality; indeed, it may be a hallmark of ‘religions,’ and at least one way of distinguishing them from ‘philosophies,’ that their adherents cannot rest content only with pondering the ultimate; somehow, they must gain access to it, either directly or indirectly.”⁸

In the modern era, Buddhist countries in Asia continue to develop secular education systems while Buddhist colleges and seminaries attempt to adapt and integrate their curricula within modern sociopolitical contexts. Under democratic governments, Buddhist clergy and leaders have begun to reflect on Buddhist

7 For more on the historical context of Buddhism, see, e.g., T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*, New Delhi (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd) 1999; Sallie Tisdale, *Women of the Way. Discovering 2500 Years of Buddhist Wisdom*, San Francisco (HarperCollins Publishers) 2006; Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *Sisters in Solitude. Two Traditions of Buddhist Monastic Ethics for Women*, Albany (SUNY Press) 1996.

8 Roger Jackson, *Buddhist Theology. Its Historical Context*, in: Roger Jackson / John Makransky (eds.), *Buddhist Theology. Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, London (Routledge-Curzon) 2000, 1–13.

praxis and ethics in their wider social contexts.⁹ Meanwhile, internationally Buddhism has spread through Buddhist immigrant populations, and an ever-increasing number of converts to Buddhism, who have found no safe haven for prescriptive theology in academia.¹⁰ Jackson notes, “Christian or Jewish scholars could profess (as well as study and criticize) their traditions in theological seminaries, but the new Buddhist Buddhologists had no such settings into which to graduate. [...] Thus, whatever their degree of personal commitment to Buddhism, the baby-boom Buddhologists had to (and many, in any case, wished to) keep their personal and academic lives quite separate – for only that way were employment, then tenure, possible.[...] They did not, by and large, produce works of Buddhist theology.”¹¹

Individual Buddhist scholars have nevertheless focused work on feminism¹², culture¹³, ethics¹⁴, and philosophy,¹⁵ etc., despite the constraints of an academy “with its elevation of the descriptive over the normative.”¹⁶ Paradoxically, we find that introspective, mindfulness-based insight, a skill transmitted over millennia within Buddhism, presently nourishes the academic discipline of Christian practical theology, while would-be Western Buddhist practical theologians seek safe havens in historically Christian seminaries and colleges in order to pursue research vocations discoursing on Buddhist praxis.

9 Elise Anne DeVido, *Taiwan's Buddhist Nuns*, Albany (SUNY Press) 2010.

10 For a comprehensive listing of international Buddhist congregations, see www.buddhanet.net (n. 6).

11 Jackson, *Buddhist Theology* (n. 9), 11.

12 See, e.g., Anne Klein, *Primordial Purity and Everyday Life. Exalted Female Symbols and the Women of Tibet*, in: Clarissa Watkinson / Constance Buchanan / Margaret Miles (eds.), *Immaculate and Powerful. The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, Boston (Beacon Press) 1985, 111–138; Rita Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy. A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*, Albany (SUNY Press) 1993.

13 See, e.g., Donald Lopez Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-LA. Tibetan Buddhism and the West*, Chicago (University of Chicago Press) 1998.

14 See, e.g., Mario I. Aguilar, *Religion, Politics and Liberation. A Dialogue Between Gustavo Gutiérrez, the 14th Dalai Lama and Gianni Vattimo*, in: *Political Theology* 12/1, 2011, 144–166; José Ignacio Cabezón, *The Discipline and Its Other. The Dialectic of Alterity in the Study of Religion*, in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74/1, 2006, 21–38.

15 See, for example, Robert A. F. Thurman, *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46/1, 1978, 19–39.

16 Jackson, *Buddhist Theology. Its Historical Context*. (n. 9), 13.

Review of Relevant Terminology

As a Buddhist practical theologian from the *Vajrayāna* (Tibetan Buddhist) tradition, my use of the phrase “practical theology praxis” is precise. I use the term in the sense given by David Tracy: “Praxis is correctly understood as the critical relationship between theory and practice whereby each is dialectically influenced and transformed by the other.”¹⁷ For the phrase “practical theology”, I concur with the usage jointly offered by Browning, Fowler, Schweitzer, and van der Ven: “Practical theology should be understood as an empirically descriptive and critically constructive theory of religious practice.”¹⁸ Reminiscent of Buddhist ontology, this is a “middle-way” practical theology of sorts, functioning between the extremes of “speculative thinking”, and a radical, positivistic “empiricism” while contributing to “empirical theory building” and “a theology of transformation”.

Buddhist Scholars Accept the Notion of a Buddhist Theology

Scholars of Buddhist religion formed by the Buddhist religion, herein referred to as “Buddhist scholars”, have presented their respective conceptual etiologies of the phrase “Buddhist theology”. For John Makransky, writing in his paper, *Contemporary Academic Buddhist Theology: Its Emergence and Rationale*, necessity is the mother of invention, and “Buddhist theology” therefore represents the mission of Buddhist scholars to “respond to their own culture’s normative interest in Buddhism and find new ways to express itself”, and by such means “contribute to authentic new understanding.”¹⁹ He establishes the scope of this theology in terms of a reflexive interchange between “critical reflection upon Buddhist experience” and “contemporary understanding.” José Ignacio Cabezón furthermore considers the term “Buddhist theology” to operate functionally “in a way similar to its counterparts in other religious contexts”, such as “Christian or Jewish or Islamic theology.”²⁰

¹⁷ David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order. The New Pluralism in Theology*, New York (Seabury) 1975.

¹⁸ Supplied in the forward; Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology. History, Theory, Action Domains*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 1999, 16.

¹⁹ Makransky, *Contemporary Academic Buddhist Theology* (n. 4), 18.

²⁰ José Ignacio Cabezón, *Buddhist Theology in the Academy*, in: John Makransky / Roger Jackson (eds.), *Buddhist Theology. Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, London (Routledge-Curzon) 2000, 25–52.

In *Buddhist Theology: Its Historical Context*, Roger Jackson reviews early Greek and historical Christian conceptions of *theologia*, and cites David Tracy, who says, “to speak of theology is a [...] useful way to indicate the more strictly intellectual interpretations of any religious tradition, whether that tradition is theistic or not [and] to use *theo logia* in the literal sense of ‘talk or reflection on God or the gods’ suggests that even nontheistic traditions (such as some Hindu, Confucian, Taoist, or archaic traditions) may be described as having theologies.”²¹ Jackson argues that Buddhists “theorizing about the sacred” can adopt Tracy’s broader usage of “theology” as “intellectual reflection within a religious tradition”, which implies the corollary that “right from its inception, Buddhism has been deeply involved in ‘theological’ activity.”²² Jackson, anticipating Buddhist objections to the insufficiently narrow scope of “intellectual reflection”, offers “the term ‘theology’ to describe conceptual activity within and about a particular religious tradition, without thereby implying that such activity is itself an avenue to the ultimate; it is just as true, after all, that the God of Christian theology is ineffable as it is that *nirvana* or buddhahood transcends the range of thought.”²³

We get a sense of what Rita Gross considers to be the role of Buddhist theology from her question in her paper *Buddhist Theology*: “What should contemporary Buddhists who use Buddhism as something *with which* to think, rather than only as something to think *about*, call their enterprise?”²⁴ Conceding that the phrase ‘Buddhist theology’ is “something of an oxymoron”, Gross takes up the issue of accountability inherent in an advantage she sees in using the term ‘theology’: its clear indication that the theologian is “thinking *within* the confines of a specific tradition.”²⁵ She argues that the very location for work placed ‘under the authority’ of the tradition, even when reconstructing it with ‘contemporary interpretations’, is what distinguishes the work of the theologian from the historian, philologist, or philosopher. Considering in detail alternatives for naming “constructive normative Buddhist thought”, and “doing contemplative, speculative Buddhist thought”, Gross concludes “Buddhist theology” to be “culturally appropriate”²⁶.

²¹ Jackson, *Buddhist Theology* (n. 9), 1.

²² *Ibid.*, 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁴ Rita Gross, *Buddhist Theology?*, in: Roger Jackson / John Makransky (eds.), *Buddhist Theology. Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist*, London (Routledge-Curzon) 2000, 53–60, 56, emphasis in original.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 57, emphasis in original.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

Vesna Wallace, in *The Methodological Relevance of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship to the Study of Buddhism*²⁷ argues for an exegetical Buddhist theology incorporating Christian theology's reflexive methods informed by modern hermeneutics and contemporary experience. Arguing, "We must make sure that the hermeneutics of suspicion and critique does not remain the sole dimension of our interpretive process", she seeks a dialogical, self-reflective interpretation which discloses a scholar's "historical situatedness and the preconceptions and anticipations that she brings into the dialogue."²⁸ Wallace laments that scholars "have taken Buddhist texts out of the hands of Buddhist communities", and thereby have "disempowered" them with respect to "interpretative context."²⁹

Wallace thus argues for a Buddhist theology that employs hermeneutics and considers the "contemporary Buddhist identities" and "assumptions of truth" of Buddhist communities. She concludes, "Buddhist scholars should engage in conversation with confessional Buddhologists pursuing the study of Buddhism outside the university and with scholars of other religious traditions to compare their respective methods of studying religion and jointly to seek solutions to their problems."³⁰ In essence, what Vesna Wallace is calling for is a contemporary academic Buddhist practical theology akin to Christian practical theology.

These Buddhist scholars, speaking expressly as academic Buddhist theologians, thus empower the notion and functions of Buddhist theology through their franchise. José Ignacio Cabezón proclaims his aspirations accordingly, "Critical discourse that unapologetically locates itself within the Buddhist tradition (i.e., Buddhist theology) should be considered on par with Christian theology as far as the academy is concerned; Christian theology should not be privileged over Buddhist theology; and indeed all such forms of discourse, regardless of their religious affiliation, should be given a proportionately equal voice in the academy so long as they can subscribe to the norms of open rational inquiry."³¹ He is nevertheless not naïve about this prospect, remarking, "A theory (from Greek *theōros*, spectator) of academic Buddhist theology, strictly speaking, requires an object, and so this essay is in a sense premature: more like looking into an empty theater and dreaming the possibilities of a work of drama than actually seeing one."³²

27 Vesna A. Wallace, *The Methodological Relevance of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship to the Study of Buddhism*, in: Roger Jackson / John Makransky (eds.), *Buddhist Theology. Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*, London (Routledge-Curzon) 2000, 78–94.

28 *Ibid.*, 83.

29 *Ibid.*, 87.

30 *Ibid.*, 91.

31 Cabezón, *Buddhist Theology* (n. 21), 26.

32 *Ibid.*, 43.

Demonstrations of Prospective Buddhist Practical Theology

“Finally, there are authors who believe that practical theology must appropriate for itself an even broader frame of reference. It should restrict itself neither to Christianity nor to the world religions, but should take as its object the desire for transcendent meaning which lives in mankind [sic].”³³

Richard Osmer writes about “practical theological interpretation by the leaders of [Christian] congregations” in his text *Practical Theology*, detailing a 4-task method of practical theology. It is generalized such that it “may be brought to bear on *any* issue worthy of consideration.”³⁴ These tasks: “descriptive-empirical”; “interpretive”; “normative”; and “pragmatic” respectively function for descriptive information gathering; theoretical understanding and explanation; theological and ethical normative construction (or reconstruction, as the case may be); and establishing strategies of action and “reflective conversation with the ‘talk back’ emerging when they are enacted.”³⁵ Although Osmer restricts his theological formulation of the normative task to the Christian sense of “prophetic discernment”³⁶, there is no obvious reason why a Buddhist normative task informed by Buddhist theology and Buddhist ethics can not function in this task role, and thereby yield a functionally Buddhist practical theology. Osmer himself cites theologian Elaine Graham’s use of this normative task through transformative praxis in feminist theology,³⁷ thereby illustrating the pragmatism of the normative function.

Consider now an example of Osmer’s practical theology praxis framework, with respective theological modifications, applied within a uniquely Buddhist theological context. A Buddhist meditation teacher is teaching her students how to generate a meditative state of altruistic compassion.³⁸ She conducts a guided meditation session on the topic according to typical traditional theological guidelines. After the session, she reviews the session using Osmer’s framework:

33 Johannes van der Ven, *Practical Theology. An Empirical Approach*, Leuven (Peeters) 1998, 38.

34 Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology. An Introduction*, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 2008, X; emphasis in original.

35 *Ibid.*, 4–12.

36 *Ibid.*, 129.

37 *Ibid.*, 157–159.

38 See, for example, Fourth Panchen Lama Denbay Nyima’s instruction translated in Geshe Lhundup Sopa / Jeffrey Hopkins, *Cutting Through Appearances. Practice and Theory of Tibetan Buddhism*, Ithaca (Snow Lion Publications) 1989.

Descriptive: from student feedback, she learns that many students found the meditation difficult to follow;

Interpretative: the meditation guidance was perhaps too long for the students to digest fully in one sitting;

Normative: more time should be given for students to learn and understand the meditation procedure;

Pragmatic: next class, she will read through an explanation of the meditation with students before conducting the guided meditation.

Osmer's model of practical theology can be applied thus in Buddhist religious education contexts of teaching meditation. Buddhist meditation teachers could use this framework for systematically reflecting on teaching and learning processes. It could furthermore be used in the Buddhist religious education of meditation teachers.

Don Browning's *A Fundamental Practical Theology* similarly provides a possible framework for a specifically Buddhist practical theology. Browning understands a fundamental practical theology to be a "critical reflection on the church's dialogue with Christian sources and other communities of experience and interpretation with the aim of guiding its action toward social and individual transformation."³⁹

Drawing on the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr, Louis Janssens, Heidegger, Gadamer, and American pragmatism, and expanding on Habermas's validity claims in particular, Browning offers a general, fundamental practical theology consisting of descriptive, historical, systematic, and strategic theologies respectively. Strategic theology here is a strategic *practical* theology category comprised of "disciplines of religious education, pastoral care, preaching, liturgy, social ministries, and so forth."⁴⁰ The framework of descriptive theology itself consists of five dimensions of validity claims: a "visional descriptive level", an "obligational normative level", an "anthropological tendency-need level", an "environmental-social level", and a "rule-role pragmatic level."⁴¹ Browning further suggests a reflexive function, stating, "A fundamental practical theology must be tested critically at a variety of points in the hermeneutic circle."⁴² Browning goes on throughout his text to demonstrate actual praxis trials of his practical theology by reporting experiences of various field applications.

³⁹ Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology. Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*, Minneapolis (Fortress Press) 1995, 36.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Adoption of Browning's descriptive theology model for a uniquely Buddhist practical theology would require theologically specific modifications. For example, Buddhist ontology and epistemology would inform the visional level, and Buddhist theology and normative ethics would inform the obligational normative level. Buddhist lay and monastic precepts would supply concrete rules and roles, while the anthropological tendency-need and environmental-social levels respectively would remain ecologically context-dependent.

An example of Browning's practical theology applied to Buddhism would be reflective formulation of an ethical position paper toward capital punishment from a Buddhist perspective. The visional level would be informed by Buddhist ontology of interdependence, whereby the strict notions of enemy and friend, criminal and victim would be taken into consideration within the larger context of all sentient beings. Normatively speaking, Buddhist theology of universal non-violence and cyclic existence would inform a proscriptive position of avoiding violence and suffering wherever possible. Buddhist lay and monastic precepts to avoid killing any living being would inform the concrete rule and role of Buddhists to refrain from killing and its proximate causes whenever possible. The local context would inform a Buddhist anthropological tendency-need and environmental-social level. This could be conceptualized as, for example, finding solidarity with local interreligious coalitions organizing to end capital punishment and to promote restorative justice systems. Thus, Browning's practical theology functions well in a hypothetical Buddhist context.

Gerben Heitink's presentation of "practical theology as a theory of action" in his text *Practical Theology*⁴³ rigorously portrays the historical-interpretive development of Christian practical theology from the European Enlightenment era, through modernity to post-modernity. He details an historical relationship of nuanced engagement of Christian practical theology with developments in philosophy, modern epistemology, the social sciences, political theory, hermeneutics, and pluralism. Heitink's focus on action is exceptionally conducive to Buddhist theology, where the role of action (Sanskrit *karma*) is central.

Heitink's practical theology, as a theory of action, is informed by the work of Schelsky and Fiet. It is built upon the communicative theory of action of Habermas and hermeneutical theories of Paul Ricoeur, respectively. Ricoeur's insights inform Heitink's transformative methodology in his hermeneutical cycle of understanding, explanation, and change. Heitink outlines specific domains of praxis application: a "normative-deductive current"; a "hermeneutical-mediative current"; an "empirical-analytical current"; a "political-critical current"; and a "pas-

⁴³ Heitink, *Practical Theology* (n. 18).

toral-theological current” respectively. These categories are not mutually exclusive. All of the “currents”, given theologically relevant alterations, can be pursued within a Buddhist practical theology.

Using Heitink’s pastoral-theological current, Buddhist clergy and chaplains working with clients struggling with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) could systematically reflect on their praxis from theologically normative perspectives, and therefore more effectively discourse about it with others. For example, Tibetan refugee monks of the Lam Rim Buddhist Center in Boston have found themselves in a unique predicament, whereby symptoms of PTSD have disturbed their usual source of spiritual nourishment and self-soothing, which is meditation.⁴⁴ By reflecting on the “theological dynamics”⁴⁵ of the impact of trauma, they could try to substitute alternative, action-based meditations for the more common sitting meditation in such trauma patients. Such a model for re-training in meditation among traumatized Buddhists could be systematically assessed. With Heitink’s hermeneutical cycle of understanding, explanation, and change, outcomes of revised meditation techniques would be monitored, assessed, and prescriptions for future PTSD management strategies informed.

The American Buddhist chaplain Thomas Kilts has developed a *Vajrayāna* Buddhist-based theological model of chaplaincy ministry.⁴⁶ Although he does not explicitly inform his model with academic practical theology, it is highly suited for implementation within a reflexive hermeneutic cycle such as Heitink’s pastoral-theological current, including in such above-mentioned PTSD cases.

The empirical-analytical current developed over the past forty years by Bastian, de Groot, and van der Ven is, I here propose, best suited to Buddhist practical theological praxis focused on meditation practice in general and its neurophysiological and behavioral psychological properties in particular. This is due to its substantial history of successful exercise, its capacity for both qualitative and quantitative applications, and its fundamentally intradisciplinary character, which, as van der Ven explains by referencing Reugg, “refers to the borrowing of concepts, methods, and techniques of one science by another and the integration of these elements into the other science.”⁴⁷

44 Adriana Lee Benedict / Linda Mancini / Michael A. Grodin, *Struggling to Meditate: Contextualising Integrated Treatment of Traumatized Tibetan Refugee Monks*, in: *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 12/5, 2009, 485–499.

45 Heitink, *Practical Theology* (n. 18), 176.

46 Thomas Kilts, *A Vajrayana Buddhist Perspective on Ministry Training*, in: *Journal of Pastoral Care* 62, no. 3, 2008, 273–282.

47 Van der Ven, *Practical Theology* (n. 19), 101.

This empirical theology current itself has been significantly developed and practiced as a complete practical theology praxis by Johannes van der Ven, which he details in his text, *Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach*.⁴⁸ His theoretical formalism and template would quite adequately guide development of a Buddhist empirical practical theology suitable for research and practice focused on meditation. Phases of the empirical-theological cycle cover “research problem and goal development”; “theological induction”; “theological deduction”; “empirical-theological testing”; and “theological evaluation.”⁴⁹ This presentation is followed by a case example illustrating the empirical-theological cycle in full application.

Van der Ven’s normative method theoretically informs the empirical-theological cycle in a manner concordant with an expressly Christian theology. However, van der Ven generously admits that “[...] in choosing to focus on religious eschatology [...] we are guided by the premise that the non-believer is free to decide for a non-religious eschatology or any other option.”⁵⁰ Van der Ven thus offers an expressly generalizable praxis framework while inviting diverse but similarly rigorous theological formalisms. This virtue dignifies the empirical practical theology enterprise with a standard of rationale proportional to the capacity of theologians to correlate and integrate theological meaning, and, perhaps, profundity with actual praxis.

A most promising Buddhist application of van der Ven’s empirical practical theology is in contemplative research. Since Herbert Benson went to Sikkim in 1988 to investigate the neurophysiological properties of Tibetan Buddhist monks during advanced meditation⁵¹, there has been much interest in Buddhist meditation from science and medicine.⁵² Similarly, researchers use Buddhist meditators to assist them in their ever-developing understanding of cognitive and anatomical neuroscience.⁵³

Empirical research on Buddhist meditation can not only be used to inform medicine and science, but to directly benefit Buddhists in their spiritual formation. Using empirical practical theology, it can be conducted within religious

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., 119–152.

50 Ibid., 69.

51 Herbert Benson et al., Three Case Reports of the Metabolic and Electroencephalographic Changes During Advanced Buddhist Meditation Techniques, in: *Behavioral Medicine* 16/ 2, 1990, 90–94.

52 Brian Luke Seaward, Alternative Medicine Complements Standard, in: *Health Progress*, September 1994, 52–57.

53 Heleen A. Slagter et al., Mental Training Affects Distribution of Limited Brain Resources, in: *PLOS biology* 5/6, 2007, 138; Britta K. Hölzel et al., Mindfulness Practice Leads to Increases In Regional Brain Gray Matter Density, in: *Psychiatry Research* 191/1, 2011, 36–43.

practice contexts that benefit students and teachers of Buddhism in a manner consistent with Buddhist theology.

Applying van der Ven's empirical practical theology within such a context, the first step is development of the theological problem and goal. We could seek to elucidate the spiritual formation role of various meditation techniques. For example, mindful breathing is prescriptive in Buddhism for stabilizing the mind, often for enhancing subsequent meditation on theological topics like compassion and wisdom (which action is itself performed for the theological purpose of benefiting oneself and others). For the theological induction phase, we can hypothesize that skillful breathing has, as claimed by Buddhist texts⁵⁴, significant influence on the meditator's stress reduction and attendant thought processes.

For theological deduction, our hypothesis is operationalized, such that monitoring of breath rate, EEG, and galvanic skin response serve as measurement indicators of breathing stability, neurological activity, and stress response. Self-report Likert scale surveys can be used to indicate subjective experiences of meditation. The empirical-theological testing phase would consist of data collection, processing of the data, and analysis. The theological evaluation phase would consist of interpretation and reflection on the results, including theological aspects of the methodology.

For example, some students might be observed to respond to meditation techniques better than others with respect to neurophysiological stabilization. A program of biofeedback might be devised for such students to use during meditation practice during class. Monitoring of breath rates of both instructors and students in real time during meditation class could serve as a significant learning enhancement, while the process itself would always remain within a system of critical, normative, and pragmatic reflection using van der Ven's empirical practical theology model. Such a framework is radically different from that of contemporary cognitive neuroscience, and infinitely more relevant and responsive to the needs of Buddhists.

Conclusion

These examples of traditionally Christian practical theology models applied to Buddhist praxis contexts provide proof of principle for Buddhist practical theol-

⁵⁴ See, e.g., Glen H. Mullin, *Tsongkhapa's Six Yogas of Naropa*, Ithaca (Snow Lion Publications) 1996.

ogy. They furthermore call the Buddhist theologian to move from speculation to performance. They inspire us toward possible intradisciplinary work as well as numerous challenges for theological construction. Within Indo-Tibetan *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, theologians could engage theory building around Habermas's communicative-rationality and *Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamaka* dependent-origination ontology, researching the validity of the laws of cause and effect (*karma*); discourse ethics with respect to the dialectic nature of validity claims of Buddhist norms; deontological ethics and *pratimokṣa vinaya* ethics. The extent of concordance between Habermas's hermeneutics and the valid cognition and traditional hermeneutical traditions of Dharmakīrti and Tsongkhapa, for example, could be comprehensively analyzed.

The theoretical relationship between *Vajrayāna* Buddhist ethics and consequentialism, pragmatic ethics, and reflexive functional praxis remain to be expounded in detail. Likewise, Ricoeur's hermeneutics of symbol and text with respect to interpretation and practice vis-a-vis the lived experience of *Vajrayāna* texts offers an enormously rich ground for theoretical investigation both immediately and directly relevant to a *Vajrayāna* Buddhist practical theology.

Van der Ven's comprehensive empirical practical theology promises great functional rewards for teachers and students of Buddhism to the extent Buddhist theologians take on the challenges of formulating a specifically Buddhist empirical theological cycle. Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Middle Way and Valid Cognition ontologies and epistemologies respectively, along with *Vajrayāna* liturgical and contemplative praxis traditions can inform Buddhist understandings of contemporary action theories, processes of religious experience, and eschatologies within a normative framework informed by Buddhist ethics and the Grounds and Paths⁵⁵ developmental theologies of Buddhism.

This process of applying suitably modified, context-relevant practical theology models could similarly be undertaken for the benefit of any religious purpose, whether it belonged to one of the major world religions or to an indigenous spiritual tradition. Therefore, in principle we can infer that not only is contemporary academic Buddhist practical theology a viable discipline, but also likewise so is an Islamic practical theology, a Jewish practical theology, Hindu practical theology, and so on. While our respective theologies are significantly different, the challenges of making religious and spiritual traditions positively transformative for individuals, congregations, and our societies all require critical and pragmatic reflection on praxis, and may ultimately inspire entirely new models of practical theology. As research is designed and con-

⁵⁵ Tibetan sa lam.

ducted to directly inform diverse religious traditions so that they may increase and enhance beneficial outcomes while also preventing and minimizing harm, another generation of practical theologians may be revitalized and inspired by pragmatism.

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