

CHAPTER 10

Hermeneutical Theory

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Practical theology has enjoyed a rich and varied relationship with hermeneutical theory, which is theory of interpretation. For some practical theologians, hermeneutical theory provides a perspectival or epistemological orientation to their work; for others, it provides a methodological framework. For most, hermeneutical theory contributes to the work they do in both these ways.

Some hermeneutical theorists – particularly those who have emphasized philosophical, rather than textual, hermeneutics – would insist that hermeneutics is most definitely *not* a “method”; it is theory about the human phenomenon of understanding. At the same time, a deliberate and self-aware process is a help in coming to understand something. There are better and worse ways to go about trying to understand things like religious texts, spiritual practices, contexts, and actions. So for practical theology, hermeneutical theory functions as both an informing perspective and a rich methodological resource.

Why Interpretation Matters to Practical Theologians

Practical theology can be practiced by a group of believers, some of whom are homeless, worshipping in an urban arts center, by a pastor teaching lay preachers in a rural Asian village, or by a university professor constructing a fresh theory of Christian education. In each case, practical theology is that field of theological inquiry and practice that seeks critically to discern and respond to the transforming activity of God within the living text of human action. Other fields of Christian theology focus on the history of Christianity and of other religions, inquire into what Christians believe, or seek the best ways to make sense of ancient texts such as Christian scripture. While practical theologians sustain lively conversations with these fields, their distinctive interest is in theological discernment about human action, particularly (but not exclu-

sively) those practices in which Christians wrestle with and express their faith through worship and witness, and in ordinary life.

Some of the actions to which practical theologians attend have to do with the interpretation of texts; preaching and catechesis are examples. It is not surprising, then, that even from its beginnings as an academic discipline at the cusp of the nineteenth century, practical theology has attended to methods of text interpretation. But through the course of the twentieth century, hermeneutics has expanded its scope beyond matters of text interpretation. A parallel development has taken place in practical theology. It has widened its angle of vision, attending to many different types of action both within and beyond faith communities. These developments have led to a more varied conversation between the two fields.

Because practical theology is thoroughly contextual inquiry, practical theologians must take into account an array of historical, social, economic, and political factors that shape human action and actors. Practical theology today uses many tools in its work of interpretation, including educational theory, psychology, sociology, gender studies, ritual studies, rhetoric, and performance studies, along with critical and comparative theories of culture and ethnographic research techniques, to name but a few. Amid all of these rich interdisciplinary inquiries, self-awareness about what interpretation is, how it happens in our ordinary lives, and how it can best be conducted in any given setting are essential. Thus hermeneutical theory continues to be a crucial conversation partner for practical theologians. Today, a hermeneutical conversation that began several decades ago with a handful of pastors and exegetical scholars consulting in a corner has become a humming, multidisciplinary gathering of literary theorists and pastoral theologians, ethnographers and homileticsians, sociologists and Christian educators, engaged in avid discussion in a vast arena.

Tracing the Development of Contemporary Hermeneutics

Early use of the term *hermeneutics* in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries referred strictly to rules for the interpretation of texts, particularly ancient texts. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1977) broadened the scope of text interpretation beyond what he called "grammatical" concerns (matters of word meaning, syntax, and so forth) and argued that in order rightly to understand a text, the interpreter must attend as well to the "psychological" dimension, seeking to understand the mind of the author (III.7, 10; IV.2.; IX.18). He also articulated the concept of the "hermeneutical circle," arguing that one's understanding of the whole of a text develops in a back-and-forth interplay between a sense of the whole and one's understanding of each part (IX.20; XI.23). For Schleiermacher, this circle also referred to the manner in which grammatical and "psychological" understanding emerge together and influence one another (IX.20.2).

During the same period, Wilhelm Dilthey brought a deeply historical interest to text interpretation. Texts, he said, are objectifications of historical life. Interpreters must attend to the concrete historical setting of texts and their authors, as well as their own. Although Dilthey fell short of his ultimate goal (to define an objective method for the

human sciences), the emphasis in his work on the concrete historicity of both interpreter and interpreted became a lasting legacy in hermeneutics.

It was the work of Martin Heidegger in the twentieth century that decisively shifted the question of hermeneutics to new ground. In his masterwork *Being and Time* (1953), Heidegger employed the phenomenological method of Edmund Husserl to describe the nature of human being as *Dasein*, "there-being" or Being-already-engaged-in-world. Against Descartes, Heidegger argued that human beings cannot decide to bracket the world of their experience; to be is to be engaged in the world of experience, and human beings know themselves only through experience and as embedded in a world. Thus for Heidegger, the particular being of *Dasein* is fundamentally and inescapably hermeneutical; it is understanding-Being, or Being-that-comes-to-understand (1996 [1953]: 134–144). *Dasein* engages its world through fore-conceptions, feeling its way on the basis of hunches or stances toward the "givenness" of things, opening itself to the given that it may speak (140–141). Heidegger decisively set the question of interpretation on new ground, not as a set of techniques for interpretation, but as the fundamental nature of human being-in-the-world.

In the years that followed, Hans-Georg Gadamer played out the hermeneutical intimations in Heidegger more explicitly. In his masterwork *Truth and Method* (1993 [1975]), Gadamer sought to challenge the hegemony of the scientific method as the quintessential standard of truth by reflecting on what we mean when we say we have come to understand something, whether that is a text, an artwork, or another person with whom we converse. Ultimately Gadamer concluded that the mode of understanding proper to the human sciences is one and the same with the mode of understanding by which *all* human beings come to terms with their world. Understanding is intrinsic to human life and is the precondition of all method (including scientific method!).

Along the way, Gadamer introduced several concepts that have proven richly informative for practical theology. First is the concept of "horizon." We as interpreters are situated; we occupy a horizon of historical understanding, and so does the text or other phenomenon we seek to understand. A text mediates to us a horizon of meaning distinct from our own. Second, our horizon includes our pre-understandings and prejudices. Significantly for Gadamer and for those who have followed him, our prejudices are not impediments to understanding but are precisely what gives us a stance toward, and a purchase on, whatever it is we are seeking to understand. The important thing is to test our prejudices to discern which are helpful and which are not (1993: 268–269). Third, understanding emerges from a conversation-like, dialectical openness to the horizon mediated to us by a text or artwork or other phenomenon. Fourth, what emerges is a "fusion of horizons," a new entity which includes the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter. This fusion of horizons is the event of understanding (306–307).

It is important to note that, for Gadamer, it is more appropriate to speak of interpretative *experience* than interpretative *method* – a point missed by many of those who have appropriated his work (including practical theologians). Gadamer explicitly did not intend to present a "method" (1993: 13). The fusion of horizons that is understanding is not an achievement consequent on proper method, but an event that depends on a conversation-like, dialectical openness toward that which we hope to understand.

Gadamer's work is not without its critics. Most notably, philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas engaged Gadamer in sustained debate regarding what struck Habermas as dangerously uncritical tendencies. Guided by critical theory in the Frankfurt School, he attacked what he took to be uncritical and overly sanguine views of tradition and authority in Gadamer's ontological hermeneutics. In the effort to rethink the romanticist hermeneutical notion that prejudices can be bracketed, Gadamer argues on the principle of historical effective consciousness for the positive role of prejudice as enabling, rather than inhibiting, understanding. But for Habermas, Gadamer's ontology of understanding obscures the way that power, political and otherwise, shapes dominant traditions and their authoritative interpretation. Although Gadamer defends his hermeneutics, arguing that critical reason functions in the space opened up by the distancing that occurs between texts and their authors, as well as the strangeness that is the presupposition of the dialectic of understanding, Habermas continued to insist on a more theoretically substantive role for emancipatory reason that can exert critical leverage against tradition and authority. Habermas proposed that hermeneutics must be rethought within the framework of a theory of communicative action which takes into account the function of human interest and power in all discourse.

Feminist critics have expressed similar concerns. They point out that Gadamer's model of interpretation is highly individualistic, whereas the interpretation of a text or other material is frequently undertaken amid a community of interpreters with various stakes in the outcome of the interpretative encounter, and varying degrees of power to sustain a particular interpretation. (An example would be a Christian congregation coming to terms with a biblical text urging women to behave in ways subordinate to males.) Second, some find him indeed too optimistic about traditions, some of which have been damaging to women and other marginalized groups. Third, Gadamer's deliberate bracketing of interpretative method seems to eclipse precisely the strategies that have been crucial for emancipatory feminist interpretation of texts, especially biblical texts.

Philosophical hermeneutics in the tradition of Heidegger and Gadamer sees method in text interpretation as a legitimate concern, but insists that it be understood against the backdrop of the inescapably historical, concretely situated, interpretative nature of human existence itself. Practical theologians today take these insights very seriously. At times, they have missed the fact that Gadamer's project is descriptive, not prescriptive, and have tended to see the fusion of horizons as something to be engineered through proper method. Nonetheless, a hermeneutical sensibility pervades contemporary practical theology and has shaped its work profoundly.

The Impact of New Methods of Text Interpretation

Advances in biblical and literary hermeneutics in the twentieth century have also had ramifications for practical theology. Since the mid-1900s, a variety of forms of literary criticism, including narrative theories, structuralist interpretation, speech act theory, deconstructive literary criticism, rhetorical criticism, and reader-response approaches

to text interpretation have impacted the way the Bible is interpreted. Space does not permit a detailed examination of these approaches and their methods. In nearly all cases, however, there is more stress on what a text is *doing* (the way it projects a proposed world, the kind of reader it envisions, what it expects of readers, etc.) alongside matters of vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and genre. In addition, these methods underscore the semantic independence of the text from authorial intent or control. The influence of Heidegger can be felt when literary theorists speak of meaning erupting in the interplay between text and readers, or between the world the text projects and the world of the interpreter(s).

A rich interweaving of the concerns of both textual and philosophical hermeneutics characterizes the wide-ranging corpus of philosopher of language Paul Ricoeur. Like Gadamer, Ricoeur believed that human experience is inherently hermeneutical; yet, unlike Gadamer, he preserved within his hermeneutical philosophy a place for methodological concerns (1976: 11). Interpretation, whether of an artwork, a text, or even an action, emerges through a dialectical movement between the poles of "explanation" (critical testing of one's emerging grasp of a text with reference to the systematic examination of prejudices, of features of the text, and so forth) and "understanding" (the new understanding and self-understanding that come through entertaining the "world" proposed by a text or artwork). Instead of the hermeneutical circle, Ricoeur proposes the hermeneutical "arc," a movement from "first naïveté" (initial hunch about meaning) through the methodological moment of "explanation" (testing the hunches of the first naïveté through a variety of critical methods) to "second naïveté" (1967: 351; 1976: 71–88). This movement is repeated many times on the way to a fuller understanding of the world the text projects and the self-understanding it provokes.

Several features of Ricoeur's hermeneutical project have captured the attention of practical theologians. First, his particular attention to narrative hermeneutics has made him especially intriguing to practical theologians alert to the world-shaping implications of narrative for Christian preaching, Christian formation, and pastoral care. Second, in contrast to Gadamer, Ricoeur urges a hermeneutics of suspicion (1970: 32–35). One is obligated through a variety of methods to assess critically the meaning a text projects, and this provides a corrective to Gadamer's less critical stance toward texts and the traditions they mediate. Finally, and significantly for practical theology, Ricoeur expands the range of possible objects of interpretation to include not only texts, but actions as well (1981: 197–221).

Hermeneutics and Postmodern Thought

A cluster of philosophical developments in the late twentieth century sometimes known as the *postmodern turn* have been important for contemporary practical theology. A few significant terms are worthy of mention, as they are part of contemporary practical theology's interpretative vocabulary.

The term *postmodern* was introduced by Jean-François Lyotard in his brief but influential work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984 [1979]). Lyotard challenged the notion of "totalizing" metanarratives (*grands récits*), accounts of the

human condition that claimed to propound universal truths. Instead we must privilege the small and local stories that describe an array of particular human locations and experiences. Michel Foucault (1972) undertook a critical history of modern institutions, focusing on the relationship between institutional power and what is presented officially as "knowledge." He developed discourse theory which sees discourse (writing, speech, action) as a strategic deployment of power for the sake of particular interests and envisions human agents as "subject positions" established by interconnected vectors of power-bearing discourses and practices.

Postmodern criticism as a whole emphasizes the semantic polyvalence of texts, and attends to the effects of history, differentiated power, and contrasting social and political interests in the production as well as the interpretation of discourse. Interpreters seek to unmask hidden interests and suppressed histories inscribed in texts or practices. Practical theologians are vitally interested in the way power affects the interpretation of texts, discourse, and action, and many utilize the tools of gender, race, and class studies to surface the complex forces that shape human action and its contexts.

Philosophical Hermeneutics and Practical Theology: Charles Gerkin and Thomas Groome

Hermeneutical theory provides both guiding perspectives and methodological frameworks for constructive practical theology. Until the twentieth century, concerns with biblical interpretation largely accounted for the intellectual traffic between the domains of hermeneutics and practical theology. Today, however, practical theologians are informed by the hermeneutical ontology of Heidegger and Gadamer, as well as by the combination of philosophical and methodological interests in Ricoeur and in postmodern interpretative strategies. As they conduct research and construct theory, practical theologians seek to integrate these hermeneutical perspectives with their specific theological commitments concerning what God has done, is doing, and will do to redeem all things. Two practical theologians in particular, pastoral theologian Charles V. Gerkin (1922–2004) and religious educator Thomas H. Groome, represent late twentieth-century influence on practical theology.

In *The Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (1984), Gerkin begins by suggesting that we regard the life of the human self "as fundamentally a process of interpretation" and the practice of pastoral counseling "as a process of interpretation and reinterpretation of human experience within the framework of a primary orientation toward a Christian mode of interpretation" (20). Following Gadamer closely, Gerkin describes the encounter of counselor and client, as well as their encounter with the horizon of Christian tradition, as "a continuous process of question and correction, refinement and integration" (61). Gerkin draws on Gadamer's concepts of horizon and fusion of horizons to shed light on both the counseling dyad and their mutual encounter with new possibilities for understanding proposed by Christian tradition (44–49). The Christian tradition offers not prescriptions, but "a broad range of images, symbols, and narrative themes that provide for us a language with which to reflect" (62). Proposing that the reinterpretation of the self is

a narrative project, Gerkin appropriates the literary theory of Wesley Kort to detail the structure of a coherent life narrative (113–115). The work of John Dominic Crossan and Sallie McFague on parable and metaphor illuminates the interpretative resources of the Christian tradition.

Gerkin turns to a specific case study to demonstrate his hermeneutical approach to pastoral counseling. Here, the informing structure of Gadamerian concepts is evident throughout: The counselor's pre-understandings or "prejudices" are not an impediment to understanding, but provide a means of purchase on the storyline of a counselee's life. An unforced "play" of possible interpretations is entertained, allowing the person whose sense of self is under reconstruction to take the lead as past situations, present dilemmas, and future possibilities are reframed. The fusion of horizons occurs as new self-understanding emerges.

Gerkin's hermeneutical metaphor, "the living human document," fitted the dominant therapeutic paradigm for pastoral counseling that prevailed in the 1970s and 1980s, and, at the time, his project represented a creative appropriation of the insights of hermeneutics for practical theology. However, just 10 years later, pastoral theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore would observe that, with the dominance of the therapeutic paradigm waning and with fresh insights from feminist theory, discourse theory, and other sources providing more complex, socially constructed understandings of human beings, the "living human document" image could no longer support all that is at stake in pastoral theology and pastoral care. A new image, "the living human web," would better serve practical theology's new perspectives on human flourishing (Miller-McLemore 1993: 367, 369). Before returning to this insight, however, it will be useful to consider Thomas Groome's work, which utilizes the philosophical hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer, yet attends to critical postmodern insights as well.

Thomas H. Groome's *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* (1991) reflects a rich interplay of hermeneutical theories. He recasts Christian education in a fundamentally hermeneutical key as "shared praxis." *Praxis* is the starting point of critically reflective conversation in his multistage approach, with revised (and revisable) praxis as its goal. The shared praxis process is designed to evoke in learners a thoroughly intentional and practical, faith-imbued engagement with their world at every level. Groome chooses the term *conation* (based on the Latin *conatus*) as a more encompassing term than *cognition* to characterize life commitments oriented toward praxis. He emphasizes that "our personal conati," his term borrowed from Spinoza for our capacities for expression and agency, "bring us into a two-way relationship with a public sociocultural world of meaning and value that is already established in its ideologies and structures" (1991: 98). For this reason, critical assessment of context is a crucial part of shared praxis reflection, along with critical appropriation of "Christian Vision/Story." Participants reflect on praxis in light of Christian Story/Vision and, at the same time, reflect critically on Christian Story/Vision in light of praxis, since both praxis and Christian Story/Vision may suffer from "distortions" (145).

Groome's appropriation of hermeneutical insights is more diverse than Gerkin's and reflects more distinctly postmodern concerns and sensibilities. The influence of Heidegger's existential ontology is palpable throughout Groome's description of con-

tively directed shared praxis education. Concepts are drawn from both Gadamer and Ricoeur to describe the dialectical, relational nature of shared critical reflection on praxis. But elements of Jürgen Habermas's communicative action theory, narrative hermeneutics, and place theory also contribute substantially to Groome's thick description of the existentially engaged, ideology-alert praxis that is the goal of Christian education.

Postmodern Hermeneutical Practical Theology

As noted above, Miller-McLemore alerts us that when we understand persons not as isolated self-reflective subjects, but in terms of subject positions to be negotiated amid webs of interest, power, and influence, we need to adjust our interpretative tools to take into account something that is less like a text and more like a web of influences, or a dynamic site of intersecting vectors. Effective pastoral care will take into account the way that the interplay of many vectors of action, history, cultural traditions, and differentiated power impact the self-understanding of any individual or group.

This requires attention to new methods of interpretation that can help us understand complex communities and specific sociocultural contexts. Practical theologians are incorporating methods of inquiry and interpretation drawn from gender studies, ethnography, sociology, and poststructuralist discourse theory to surface the influence of gender, race, and class on the construction of human communities and lives and to reveal hidden histories, hidden wounds, and hidden possibilities.

Although Mary McClintock Fulkerson was trained as a systematic theologian, she finds recent developments in practical theology more promising for understanding theology and faith. Her *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (2007) is a thickly descriptive congregational study that attends closely to social practices and discourses in order to discern within them the transforming work of God – or, as Fulkerson puts it, to discover how these practices go about “honoring the worldliness of an incarnate God” (2007: 231). In addition to practical theology, practice theory and place theory are primary conversation partners for Fulkerson. She posits that place is a social construction comprised of power-laden practices. An array of oft-repeated practices, with their deployment of bodies, space, action, and power, construct the place which is Good Samaritan United Methodist Church, a small, urban, multi-ethnic and multiply abled congregation in a southern US city. Using ethnographic research techniques, Fulkerson examines practices of formation, worship, hospitality, and scripture reading in gatherings at Good Samaritan. Her goal is to “read” Good Samaritan theologically, with particular interest in what kinds of human subjectivity and agency “appear” (and are permitted to appear) within the practical ecology of the community.

Instead of focusing on abstract doctrine, Fulkerson is interested in how Good Samaritan's practices, imperfect as they are, allow persons, as well as grace, to appear. Although this community, which claims to be “color-blind,” proves to be blind to certain practices that exclude the other, the bodily practices of this community nonetheless reveal divine presence even as they sometimes produce exclusion (Fulkerson 2007: 246).

Hermeneutical theory in a more traditional sense combines with the fruits of sociological and ethnographic research in South African homiletician H. J. C. Pieterse's work on addressing poverty from the pulpit. In his book *Preaching in a Context of Poverty* (2001), he takes seriously the concrete locatedness of all interpretation by examining in detail the specific conditions that produce and perpetuate poverty in the South African context. He demonstrates how the country's own internal financial crisis as it emerged from the grip of apartheid interfaced with globalization economics on the international scale in a manner that seriously exacerbated poverty in South Africa.

Pieterse accesses the hermeneutical theories of both Gadamer and Ricoeur to demonstrate how preachers can connect biblical texts with the problems of poverty in South African pulpits by starting "in the existential situation of preacher and congregation" (2001: 79). Wisely, he concedes that Gadamer's hermeneutical theory, taken as a whole, is "a grand design that cannot be described in the short space of one chapter" (74). With that said, Pieterse moves on to appropriate that section of *Truth and Method* that describes how interpreters engage texts. A consequence of this move is that Pieterse tends to bracket the philosophical-ontological thrust of Gadamer's hermeneutics – a move not uncommon in appropriations of Gadamer – and tends to present Gadamer's work as an interpretative *method*. Nonetheless, Pieterse makes deft use of Gadamerian concepts to explore the interpretative landscape that the preacher must negotiate to address poverty through preaching: the historical horizon of text and interpreter, the effective history of the biblical text as it impinges on preacher and congregation, and attention to ethical consequence as a critical norm of interpretation based on Gadamer's recovery of *phronesis* from Aristotle (2001: 74–76). Pieterse focuses particularly on the role of application in Gadamer's account of text interpretation, enriching this discussion with insights on application from Ricoeur as well (76–79).

With this map of hermeneutical experience in place, Pieterse guides preachers through a "theological hermeneutics" of the situation of poverty in South Africa, calling on preachers to: (1) approach the text from the perspective of the poor; (2) immerse themselves as deeply as possible in the existential situation of the poor by bodily identifying with their situation and place; (3) creatively connecting the biblical text with the context of poverty in a manner that is ideologically critical; and (4) preaching as a response on behalf of the poor to the meaning a biblical text proposes (2001: 81–91). Ultimately, preaching that addresses poverty must take place within the context of an array of practices that respond to the complexities of poverty. Alongside preaching, practices of social witness and concrete engagement with policy-makers are essential.

Pieterse's work reveals much of the best of contemporary hermeneutical practical theology. The focus of interest is on human actions, both ecclesial and extra-ecclesial, intracommunal and public. The tools of interpretation are varied, brought together within a hermeneutically and theologically informed theoretical framework. The result is a proposal that has potential to engage and impact the liturgical life of congregations, their practices of biblical interpretation, attitudes toward public policy, and patterns of social and economic behavior.

Practical theologians see their work as thoroughly interpretative in nature. The scope of the "interpreted" in practical theology today is broad indeed, and the tools

required to facilitate understanding are many. Theories of text interpretation remain pertinent, but the hermeneutical requirements of contemporary practical theology far exceed the limits of traditional text-interpretative hermeneutical theories. Practical theologians will continue to draw upon an array of disciplines and strategies of inquiry in their quest to discern and respond to the world-transforming work of God in the living texts of human action, both within the church and beyond.

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