Current Projects on Embodied, Localised Thing-Theology

Bonnie Miller-McLemore's handbook is a strong advocate for a practical theology that starts with the tangible, localised, and embodied. I want to finish my overview of the two handbooks not with the demand for a third or fourth handbook, but rather I want to show how new approaches in practical theology emerge from – or are sometimes set against – these handbooks. I pay particular attention to those projects that tie in with my own work.

Miller-McLemore's attention to the daily lives of Christians links her work back to efforts that seek to establish praxis theory as a comprehensive methodological basis for practical theology. Julia Koll, for instance, follows Theodore Schatzki when she argues that a new understanding of praxis is needed that

(a) follows the bodily and material turn by "emphasising the bodily nature of the social,"* namely that a praxis, first of all, consists of routinised bodily movements which also incorporate artefacts that are used according to specific rules (cf. Koll 2019, p. 70);
(b) relativises the precedence of rational processes, of texts, and of other forms of written or spoken communication and looks at forms of knowledge that are based on an incorporate knowledge of how to "deal with" artefacts and persons (cf. ibid., p. 70);
(c) includes a time index in its analysis since practices can also subside and vanish (cf. ibid., p. 70).

Koll encourages practical theology as a discipline to take on another perspective that sees religion not as a disposition but as something that is learned, repeatedly practiced, and shared with others (cf. ibid., p. 78). This style of thinking

helps us, the author argues, to see the little things, "making coffee or delivering the parish newsletter […] as practices with their own individual [theological] quality"* (cf. Koll 2019, pp. 81–82).

Complementary approaches that focus more on the artefacts than on the persons that routinely handle them can be found in the material approaches in ethnography, e.g. the work of Peter Bräunlein in museum studies, which traces the history of archaeology and cultural anthropology through the artefacts displayed in museums and university collections (Bräunlein 2012).[1] The study of religion has likewise contributed to an increased attention to artefacts, with Sonia Hazard criticising that current approaches are mainly anthropocentric, focusing on humans handling things rather than the things themselves. She introduces the position of new materialism[2] as distinct from that of the mainstream of religious studies in that

(a) "[u]nlike the symbolic approach, new materialists insist that matter cannot be reduced to or seen as exchangeable with text", i.e. the "power and value" (Hazard 2013, p. 67) of artefacts is not determined by the human subject that handles and describes them;
(b) new materialists thus "decentre" the human subject, no longer limiting the discipline to the sensing and thinking body of humans alone, and argue that we as humans with our bodies, the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the microbes that live with us are also "assemblages of things, human and nonhuman" (ibid., p. 67);
(c) new materialism argues that those human-non-human assemblages as they exist over time in history cannot be broken apart to only look at e.g. the human body or the built environment detached from one another (cf. ibid., p. 68).

All this makes the study of religion more complicated, as such an approach is anti-reductionist in nature. But it also furthers Bonnie Miller-McLemore's project to look into the details of daily existence, the "sites where faith breaks

1 Bräunlein has also contributed to a material turn in the sociology of religion (Bräunlein 2017).

2 A later chapter in this book will focus on the basic positions in new materialism and its relation to theology, cf. page 83.

down and people struggle" (Miller-McLemore 2012a, p. 7). Inken Mädler is one of the practical theologians who has undertaken this deep dive into the world of things. She does this ethnographically from the perspective of the material culture of everyday life, providing thick descriptions of things that her informants hold dear – a bible, a secretary, a ring, a computer, or a TV set – theologically overcoming the focus on a critique of consumer culture towards a phenomenological appreciation of things as part of a living network within which humans exist.

> Recognising the material environment, which shapes everyday life-situations, as well as serving as a visible and tangible model of them, contributes both methodologically and content-wise to a widening of the theological scope and enables us to extend practical theology phenomenologically.* (Mädler 2006, p. 357)

Mädler concludes her exploration with the argument that artefacts are relevant for sacramental theology, as well as for the theory of education and the liturgy of special occasions (e.g. funerals). She chooses the term "transfigurations"* to characterise the relation between humans and things.

> The glorification of the self in light of transfigurated objects and the glorification of objects in light of the transfigurated self is in its mutuality neither idolisation nor fetish. The theological ban over transfiguration would be only justified if it would promote a contortion into one's self and cultivate what Luther called "homo incurvatus in se ipsum". That this is not the case and that especially the things we hold dear function as signs for relationality par excellence was proven in this work. […] Found treasures, presents, heirlooms, and collections stand as transfigurations not for themselves but for the being in relation of those whose extended self is configured by them. With these things humans embed themselves in the relational structures of their existence and hold themselves symbolically present, but they do not worship them (ibid., pp. 374–375).*

Thus we could see Mädler's work as populating the sites where humans exist – which Miller-McLemore visits throughout the *Companion* – with the objects that give a more detailed account of human existence in relation.

The aspect of "site" then finally brings me from the human and the artefact to the spatial dimension of practical theology, which I have already mentioned in my assessment of the handbooks and in my choice of specific sites to locate the handbooks' authors. In his book *Sakrotope*, which is a study of the material dimension of religious practices, Torsten Cress brings together both the place and its specific materiality in the study of religion. Looking at, among others, pilgrim churches in Jerusalem, the author argues that we need to widen our spectrum to include both "spatial arrangements […] as well as figures, images, smells, colours, or light. Talking about a Sakrotop means emphasising both the performative as well as the material dimension of a religious context" (Cress 2019, p. 10).* An exemplary question would be "How do the elements of the interior of a church help a worshipper to collect herself and focus on the prayer?" (ibid., p. 11)* While Cress situates himself in the material turn within the sociology of religion, like the authors mentioned previously, he focusses mainly on practices and spaces that can be identified prima-facie as Christian.[3] As we will see, my own approach is in line with the material and spatial turns that the previously mentioned authors took. However, I will start from places that prima facie have nothing to do with religion.

Attention to Details

At the end of this introduction I want to go back to Rolf Zerfaß' question of "where do we stand?"[4] as practical theologians. After walking through the portrait gallery of important contributions to the discipline and ending with a mul-

3 And with that his work relates to and opens up new perspectives in the practical theological discourse on sites, e.g. Sonja Keller's dissertation on the reuse of church buildings in urban areas, which also relies on qualitative methods to understand these Christian sites, while at the same time developing an interdisciplinary understanding of "sacred" space (cf. Keller 2016).

4 The question has also been the subtitle of the German edition of Francis Fukuyama's book *The End of History and the Last Man* (Fukuyama 1992). Fukuyama's thesis of a dominance of the Western, i.e. American, democratic model after the fall of the Soviet empire has been widely contested and later adapted by the author himself (Jordan 2009). The debate serves as a reminder that progress narratives are also influential in the history of science and that retelling the story of a discipline, such as practical theology, benefits from a narratological as well as a power analysis.

titude of approaches, I perceive an ever-increasing need for practical theology to take on other, outside perspectives.

This leads us from a church and practice centred approach back to a philosophical perspective from the outside, especially philosophy as a "cultural science"* that helps to discover the unchartered cultural territories of the present time (cf. Bucher 2002, p. 181).[5] In another essay on the perspectives of the discipline today, Bucher reminds pastoral theology that it must make its discoveries "in the ruins of the broken power systems"* (Bucher 2001, p. 195) and that in order to do so, it must not harbour master plans for the church in the world but "love for the small places"* (ibid., p. 195).

Thus I want to end this introductory chapter with a perspective that deviates from the pastoral planning fantasies that many church officials still harbour and which echoes in the handbooks as well, be that under the label the self-fulfilment of the church (Rahner) or the focus on an improvement of pastoral work (Miller-McLemore). As I worked on my dissertation on Catholic migration advocacy, the question arose as how to deal with voices from my interviews that deviated from the social ethics literature and church documents on migration. I found the approach of Ottmar Fuchs particularly helpful for this conundrum as he is aware that as theologians we are both concerned with the long history of a faith community and our findings from empirical research. In this situation we must not pit tradition and praxis against each other. Fuchs rather argues that praxis could help us to rediscover tradition in the sense that it helps us "to see new approaches within which forgotten or ostracised positions become alive again"* (Fuchs 2000, p. 209). I owe as much of that sensibility for such positions to Ottmar Fuchs as to Christian Bauer and his "theology of the people,"* which argues along similar lines that we must cultivate a "mixed discourse"* (Bauer 2013, p. 83). Bauer's "theology of the people"* derives inspiration not only from his work on Marie-Dominique Chenu but also from a pivotal moment in the history of theology in 1970: At a congress of the magazine *Concilium*, lay members of the audience protested against the dominance of clerical theologians: "Subdued forms of knowledge revolted and demanded a voice. 1970 was something like the 1968 for academic theology"* (Bauer 2010, p. 59).

5 In this book, my point of departure lies more within the realm of cultural studies – informed by philosophy.

In my dissertation I have taken the quotation by Fuchs as an invitation to re-read theological positions on migration informed by the perspectives of those concerned with the topic on a daily basis. Here, however, I am concerned with the way we can discover such positions in the first place. "God is drawn towards the details,"* Fuchs writes in another article,

> he does not become human in some large collective but in one individual human being at one specific point in the history of the world. But there his inculturation happens to the deepest and to the greatest extent […]. Inculturation of the gospel has more to do with a deep-reaching exemplarity than with a far-reaching superficiality. Especially in societies where supra-regional superstructures in media, economy, and information technology are given priority […], we need to pay attention to what we call interpersonal primary cultures* (Fuchs 1995, p. 74).

Fuchs argues that theology must search for resources *in* these cultures, acknowledging that God is already there. Turning to the role of pastoral theology, Fuchs writes:

> Such an attitude of pastoral could be called a *culture-ecological* pastoral: an activity that starts with […] individual *and* social creative […] processes of human beings and does not ignore one single salvific iota of them: neither in a society nor between [societies]* (ibid., p. 76).

What the author applies to the processes of the inculturation of the gospel in the European context, and the demands of an intra- and intercultural exchange, can also be applied to practical theological work in general. It must be attentive not just to the silenced voices but also to the hidden details. One could argue that pastoral theology must develop what Rolf Zerfaß demands for the teaching of the discipline: a "curiosity, willingness to be surprised, interest in the individual case, attention for the irregular, for a deviation from the rule,"* as well as "a fundamental option for the diversity of causes, motivations, values behind human acting, a distrust against the onedimensionality of vulgar theological worldviews"* (Zerfaß 1974, p. 175). This is done not just by discovering new voices "from the field" but also by taking a new look at the "field" from as many perspectives as possible, in particular the often overlooked material side of human life.

I want to illustrate this with an example from urban planning: To find out who is welcomed on a city plaza and who is excluded we could (and should) conduct interviews with residents and people passing through that area on a daily basis. But we could also look for traces of people und uncommon signs of use. This might lead us to discovering the score marks of skateboards on the stairs and railings of the plaza and to the discovery that the culture of skateboarding, and its physical interaction with the built environment, can give us a completely new perspective on urban planning (cf. Skateboarding and Architecture in Snyder 2017). Ultimately, both the skaters and the researcher working with them ask the same question: Where does inspiration come from and how can we learn to see our surroundings differently?

This Habilitation as One Particular Lens

The following proposal is my own contribution to this change of perspective, which I understand neither as a paradigm shift nor as a gradual evolution from the path the discipline took over the last 60 years. I rather perceive my work as a different perspective, or, as the architectural filmmaker Heinz Emigholz puts it, a slightly "canted vision" (Sicinski 2018) on the things that seem familiar to us.

Methodologically the following parts II and III can be read then as an interpretive lens, following Jan Kruse and his suggestion for qualitative researchers to read their material though different "analytical lenses"* (Kruse 2014, p. 493).[6] As such, it helps us to see the classical topoi of pastoral theology in a new light, as I will demonstrate in part IV when I look at the parish community and ask what its buildings and their materiality can tell us about the evolution of ecclesiastic communities in the 20th and 21st century.

But the following text can also be seen as an extension of what I started here with the types of practical theologians, their discipline-defining book projects, and the locations where these handbooks were conceived. It is a reminder that

6 In my dissertation I have discussed Jan Kurse's approach in greater detail (cf. Henkel 2017, pp. 117–123). It is noteworthy that the idea of analytical lenses also links back to Herbert Blumer's "sensitizing concepts" and ultimately to the "levels of attention" that grounded theory approaches and other close-reading methodologies employ in their analysis of qualitative data.

practical theology starts with a "rift"* (Bucher 2001), in that praxis is no longer taken for granted, that we must reflect on praxis, and that ultimately our reflection must become self-reflexive as well. My book contributes another reflection to the ones found in and around the handbooks. It thus partakes in all of the above. It is a bit of the bent steel bar at *Herder* as well as the *Tumbleweed* sculpture and the turn to the experience of the preacher riding the circuit. It participates likewise in Karl Rahner's futurology and Bonnie Miller-McLemore's idea of living out the brokenness of the gospel and the world. It is an attempt to change our perspective.

On that basis then we can now proceed towards a realm that at first glance has few points of contact with the field of pastoral theology. The reader might expect a look at churches, religious community centres or parish schools at this point. But to train material sensibility in the 21st century, there are other "cathedrals" which are much more important for current societies. A digital society has become increasingly dependent on technology and communication companies and the products that emerge from their laboratories. At these sites I want to develop a material sensitivity in the following part. And not only that, I also want to argue that materiality has a political and potentially liberating perspective which can change our perspectives as historians of progress and as theologians. So while a journey to the United States in the 1960s might seem odd for a practical theologian, there is a lot to learn from the *electric laboratory*.