

Research Article

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Beyond Theory and Practice: Lived Theology and Its Intersection with Empirical Theology

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Abstract: This article approaches the relationship between theory and practice based on Lived Theology. The concept is introduced through empirical insights and an overview of various definitions. Additionally, the article highlights the implications of Lived Theology on the field of academic theology and the concept of theology itself. Subsequently, Lived Theology is juxtaposed with the research field of Empirical Theology. The article explores how Lived Theology can be researched adequately, revealing that Empirical and Lived Theology are interdependent from one another.

Keywords: practical theology, empirical theology, lived theology, qualitative research, grounded theory, religious experience

1 Introduction

The relationship between theory and practice has been a central concern in theological research throughout history, particularly how practical experiences influence the authority and contribution to the formation of theological concepts and theories. The present article addresses this issue and sheds light on the connection between Empirical and Lived Theology.¹

The starting point of this article is, therefore, the multifaceted concept of Lived Theology. The concept advocates for a strong connection between theology and experience and thus transforms the dichotomous relationship between theory and practice. This is explored in the first part of this article based on my own empirical research.

The second part then deals with the question of how Lived Theology can be explored appropriately and thus contextualizes the concept within Empirical Theology.

1.1 Lived Theology – Beyond Theory and Practice

While the concept of Lived Theology is often considered the starting point of theological thinking in the English-speaking world,² it is still relatively unknown in German-speaking regions. The following section

¹ It is important to note that many of the thoughts presented here originate from my following two monographs, where they are discussed in more detail. Müller, *Religious Experience*; Müller, *Lived Theology*. Furthermore, some of the ideas stem from my not-yet-published book: Müller and Pleizier, *Grounded Theology*. When referring to the term “Empirical Theology,” I am harking back to the discourse initiated by Hans van der Ven and sustained for more than 30 years by the International Society of Empirical Research in Theology (ISERT).

² One example: Carrie Doehring anchors her exploration of pastoral care within the framework of Lived Theology. Doehring, *The Practice*, 4–6.

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will illustrate what is meant by Lived Theology. The concept will first be elucidated through a research example before common definitions and various currents are introduced.

2 Starting Point: Examples From My Research on Religious Experiences

I've conducted extensive research on the religious experiences of young people over several years using the Grounded Theory methodology, which facilitates the integration of various approaches and dynamics to generate a comprehensive theory. My focus was not solely on researching individuals, but predominantly on conducting collaborative research³ with the affected individuals themselves. Data collection involved triangulation of interview-based, arts-based, narrative, and interactive methods.

Two Examples of Religious Experiences:

Carmen is a 50-year-old who recently moved from Chicago to Los Angeles. Despite not belonging to any church or denomination, Carmen is interested in religion and spirituality. Her religious experience stems from a difficult divorce, during which she felt emotionally overwhelmed amidst the anger and hurt surrounding the process. However, a pivotal moment occurred in a fitness center when the gym owner insisted she watch TV, leading her to digitally encounter a minister whose words seemed to directly address her emotional turmoil. Carmen interpreted this as a sign from God, bringing peace and understanding to her situation. This experience transformed her approach to dealing with difficult people, allowing her to emphasize kindness and understanding. The color transitions in Carmen's drawing vividly reflect her changed perception of the situation (Figure 1).⁴



Figure 1: Drawing by Carmen.

³ For the whole spectrum of collaborative and participatory research in theology: de Roest, *Collaborative Practical Theology*.

⁴ Müller, *Religious Experience*, 91–2.

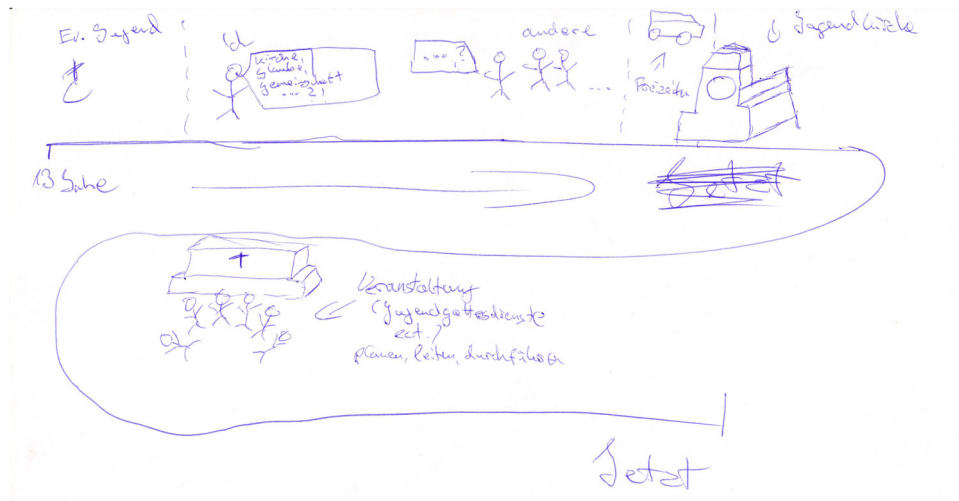


Figure 2: Drawing by Janik.

Janik, a 19-year-old currently engaged in a voluntary social year at the Protestant City Youth Service, shared narratives of what he identifies as religious experiences, wherein other individuals play a significant role. Growing up as a foster child, Janik was initially exposed to the church through his foster mother. He attended children's services, completed his confirmation, and even served as a substitute for the organist. His interactions with individuals from the Protestant Youth left a profound impression on him, particularly conversations with a deacon that allowed him to explore his faith more deeply. Janik emphasized the importance of personal connection and meaningful dialogue with people in shaping his faith, while highlighting the necessity for faith to resonate with his personal experiences and understanding. For Janik, religious experiences are intertwined with relationships, reflection, and ongoing development, significantly impacting his spiritual journey amidst changing family circumstances (he lived as a foster child in different families; Figure 2).⁵

In summary, based on these two (and many more) stories, the theory-generating method reveals that people perceive and interpret their religious experiences in a very nuanced manner. The intricate nature of the subject is reflected in fluid experiences and reflections that surpass a binary categorization into functional or substantive understandings of religion. Furthermore, it was evident that religious experiences are closely connected to a hopeful perspective. This perspective is rhythmized in life itself, nurtured through new experiences, and ultimately transforms people's perspectives on the world, other people, and the self.

Instead of ecclesial tie-backs, this practical relevance in everyday life is expressed in a form of Lived Theology that is experienced on a daily basis.⁶ Based on these experiences, Lived Theologies are constructed by people. These theologies shape their way of life and are often more perceptible through their actions than through outright words and expressions of faith.

2.1 What is Lived Theology?⁷

The study on religious experiences emphasizes the intimate relationship between theology and personal experience, echoing Tillich's assertion that theology's foundation lies in lived experience.⁸ Religious

⁵ Ibid., 101.

⁶ Ibid., 206.

⁷ Müller, *Lived Theology*.

⁸ Tillich, "Theology and Symbolism," 108.



Figure 3: Drawing by Carmen.

experience and practical theology are intertwined across various theological traditions. Without religious experience, theology lacks its foundational source, while without theological frameworks, religious experiences remain ordinary.⁹ This perspective suggests that everyday life serves as a fertile ground for Lived Theology that transcends denominational boundaries. It is crucial to recognize that Lived Theology is inherently contextual and diverse, yet its essence lies in its emergence from existential human experiences, thus fostering a sense of hope and counterfactual trust.

How everyday theology emerges from experience is particularly evident in Carmen's depiction of herself and the world around her (Figure 3). Initially, she is depicted as desperate (1). Then, in the moment of her religious experience (2), she is depicted in a new way. Interestingly, in the third segment of the drawing, which depicts the day after Carmen's religious experience, the color yellow, symbolizing the divine/a picture of God, surrounds her (3). At the time of data collection, more than a year has passed since the event, visually illustrating (4) how the experience continues to affect her and how it impacts others through her altered perception of herself, other people, and the world.

Martin Luther famously expressed the relationship between theology and experience with the phrase "*Sola autem experientia facit theologum*"¹⁰ (only experience makes the theologian). Luther highlighted the crucial connection between theological reflection and personal life experiences, particularly experiences of grace. However, this form of theologizing faded into the background or received minimal attention in most academic and church discourses, especially in the German-speaking context. However, with phenomena like digitization, which reveal new forms of theological productivity, experience-based Lived Theology by non-academically trained theologians is gaining renewed attention.

Terms like "lay theology," "everyday theology," "lived faith," "theologizing," and "ordinary theology" are all used to describe this experiential and Lived Theology, which lacks a fixed designation and definition in the

⁹ Müller, *Religious Experience*, 208.

¹⁰ Luther, *WA TR*, 1; 16,13.

German-speaking context. In contrast, in Anglo-Saxon contexts, ordinary theology has received more attention, with Jeff Astley being a leading figure in the discourse.¹¹

Lived Theology reveals the individual's actual construction of faith, involving an experienced and reflected faith practice that includes a critical element of doubt and questioning. It originates in people's experiential and lived realities and becomes theology when it finds reflective expression and resonates publicly. Lived Theology emerges in various locations, manifests digitally and analogously, and transcends denominations. It is a practical phenomenon, representing the personally constructed, integrated, ordinary Christian theologies of individualized people expressing meaning within their own lives. It is evident in individuals' concrete life worlds (as seen in the cases of Carmen and Janik) and extends beyond specific church contexts, manifesting in everyday actions, discussions, and reflections, both analog and digital.

As seen in the cases of Carmen and Janik, Lived Theology is an experienced and experienceable theology that must prove itself in life, especially in contingent situations and often exhibiting pragmatic elements. This form of theology is characterized by existential questioning rather than certainty, representing a processual expression of theology rooted in personal and communal experiences that are subject to change based on life circumstances and context. Theology, in this context, is not primarily a normative science assuring specific results, but rather a discursive, practice-oriented, and hermeneutical activity committed to the possibility of achieving a transcendent existence.

2.2 Different Strands of Lived Theology

What we won't be able to avoid in any case, and what may be necessary, are the various understandings of Lived Theology. It is not surprising that different theologians also define Lived Theology in various ways. The first definition accentuates the distinction between Lived Religion and Lived Theology, elucidating the latter's endeavor to comprehend the presence of God within the human experience: "Lived religion examines practices, beliefs, and objects to understand more clearly the human phenomenon of religion, while Lived Theology examines practices, objects, and beliefs in order to understand God's presence in human experience."¹² The second viewpoint highlights the extension of interest in rituals and practices to delve into the ways in which theology as well as the expression of divine knowledge and love manifest in everyday life, thereby emphasizing the reciprocal influence between everyday life and theology: "Where historians and sociologists of religion have begun to examine lived religion, those who engage in practical theology investigate Lived Theology and lived faith, extending interest in rituals and practices to questions about how theology or knowing and loving the divine takes shape in everyday life and how everyday life influences theology."¹³ The third perspective underscores the scholarly endeavor to examine theology and theologizing that is influenced by ordinary people's everyday experiences, signifying the evolving nature of Lived Theology as a burgeoning research field: "Lived Theology is the scholarly attempt to bracket and study theology and theologizing shaped by ordinary people's experiences in everyday life. As a research field, it is very much in the making."¹⁴ In the fourth perspective, the emphasis is placed on the individually constructed and experiential nature of Lived Theology, integrated into everyday life and derived from its practical relevance, underlining the contextual and experiential underpinnings of this theological construct: "Lived Theology refers to the individually constructed, personally verified, and rhythmized theology of the individualized person that is integrated into everyday life. This contextual theology is experiential and experienced, and feeds its context of justification from its practical relevance to everyday life."¹⁵

¹¹ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*.

¹² Marsh et al., *Lived Theology*, 7.

¹³ Miller-McLemore, "Understanding Lived Theology," 465.

¹⁴ Tveitereid, "Lived Theology," 67.

¹⁵ Müller, *Religious Experience*, 211–2.

The four approaches to Lived Theology, while sharing a common focus on the interaction between theology and everyday life, emphasize different aspects. The first approach distinguishes Lived Theology from Lived Religion by focusing on understanding God's presence in human experiences. The second extends interest in rituals and practices, exploring how theology and divine knowledge shape and are shaped by daily life. The third highlights the scholarly study of theology as influenced by ordinary people's experiences, presenting Lived Theology as an emerging research field. The fourth emphasizes the individually constructed, experiential nature of Lived Theology, rooted in practical relevance to daily life. Despite their differences, all approaches underscore the dynamic and context-dependent nature of Lived Theology.

In recognizing how different ways of conducting theology are important facets of theological discourse, a nuanced understanding of the intersection between theory and practice emerges. The diverse conceptions of Lived Theology pave the way for a practice-informed theory as well as a theory-informed practice, fostering a comprehensive approach to theology that resonates with the wide range of human experiences. Therefore, the exploration of Lived Theology not only enriches our understanding of theological constructs, but also underscores the dynamic interplay between lived experiences and scholarly inquiry, ultimately contributing to a more holistic and inclusive theological discourse in which theology is simultaneously a science, an ecclesial discourse, an existential practice, and much more. This leads back to Tillich and the basis of theological existence: "The object of theology is found in the symbols of religious experience."¹⁶

3 Empirical Theology and Lived Theology

To explore Lived Theology, empirical methods are needed to guide us in a manner that is as inductive and unbiased as possible so as to allow us to listen carefully and provide guidance throughout the process of theological theory generation. This research attitude of careful perception is strongly emphasized in conceptions of contextual theology,¹⁷ for example. So, Lived Theology cannot be separated from Empirical Theology.

Empirical Theology is a form of (practical) theology research that focuses on the investigation of religious phenomena through the collection and analysis of data.¹⁸ In contrast to purely hermeneutical approaches, Empirical Theology aims to apply social scientific empirical methods to the (religious) experiences and practices of people, churches, rituals, etc.¹⁹ The goal of this approach is to systematically capture religious phenomena and interpret them methodically (e.g., through coding).

To adequately research Lived Theology, in my view, two aspects are particularly central: (1) the reflection of the researcher regarding their own standpoint and preconceptions, and (2) a qualitative, inductive research paradigm. Both aspects will now be unfolded in the second part of the article.

3.1 Reflexivity as a Crucial Element in Investigating Lived Theology

A fundamental aspect of any research endeavor, whether hermeneutical or empirical, qualitative or quantitative, is the recognition of the researcher's personal imprint and social location. This includes attributes such as gender, race, skin color, individual character, socioeconomic status, and prior expertise, which may be interpreted differently depending on specific contexts and cultural environments. After all, each researcher brings their own experiences, beliefs, and values into the research process, which influences the approach, interpretation of data, and ultimately, the outcomes. The notion of conducting neutral and objective research is an illusion. When it comes to the topic of Lived Theology, which academic theologians are not exempt from,

¹⁶ Tillich, "Theology and Symbolism," 108.

¹⁷ Cf. a.o. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*; Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*; Armstrong, "Some Ordinary Theology of Assisted Dying," 39–53.

¹⁸ Heimbrock and Dinter, "Impulse der Empirischen Theologie," 310.

¹⁹ Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, xi.

reflexivity becomes even more important, as many personal theological convictions and biases may be overlooked or dismissed through a form of scholarly argumentation. Consequently, it is crucial to be aware of one's own positionality and remain transparent about how it shapes one's research. Our reflexive efforts are biased, underscoring the importance of acknowledging that, despite our attempts at reflexivity, our research endeavors can be influenced by personal preferences, cultural norms, and societal structures.²⁰ Recognizing this bias is essential for critically reflecting on our research practices and interpreting our findings.²¹ Instead of striving for objectivity, it is more meaningful to accept and disclose our positionalities and perspectives, focusing on transparency regarding our viewpoints and assumptions when engaged in research endeavors. Tone Stangeland Kaufmann suggests using “reflexivity as the interpretation of our own interpretation”²² to resolve this dilemma. This approach emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and critically examining the subjective perspectives through which we perceive and interpret our research findings. Through reflective engagement with our own interpretations, it is possible to approach the complexities of empirical research with greater composure and precision. With that said, it is essential that reflexivity does not become a self-indulgent endeavor, but rather serves as an additional process of knowledge production for which the researcher must take responsibility to engage in critical self-reflection.²³ My research style, for example, is influenced by my love for fluid phenomena, my background in pastoring a church for many years, and my affinity for being in close contact with people.

3.2 Qualitative Research and Grounded Theory as a Potential for Lived Theology

In qualitative Empirical Theology, several methodologies are employed, with the four most common ones being found in works by students, doctoral candidates, and professors. These are explained in the following graph (Figure 4).

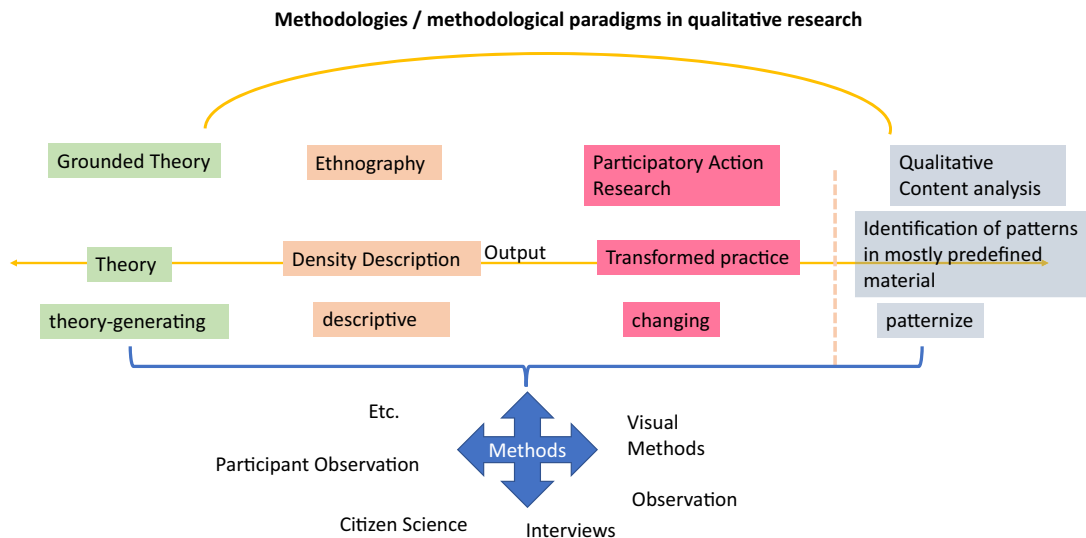


Figure 4: Methodologies.

The graphic above illustrates the array of methodologies utilized in qualitative research in the field of theology, while juxtaposing various approaches, such as Grounded Theory, ethnography, participatory action

²⁰ Dreyer, “Knowledge.”

²¹ Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr, *Qualitative Sozialforschung*, 44.

²² Stangeland Kaufman, “Practicing Reflexivity,” 112.

²³ King et al., *Interviews in Qualitative Research*, 182.

research, and qualitative content analysis. This portrayal also aims to demonstrate that the choice of method does not inherently convey insight into the underlying methodology, research objectives, and outcomes. For example, in master's theses and dissertations, I often observe that there is a conflation between methodology and methods, in addition to insufficient reflection on the conceptual framework guiding the respective methodology and its objectives.

Whichever methodology is selected delineates the aims of the study. For instance, Grounded Theory adopts a theory-generating approach to discover new theories.²⁴ Ethnography, on the other hand, aims for a dense description to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the research field.²⁵ Participatory action research focuses on change and a transformed practice.²⁶ Meanwhile, qualitative content analysis, which not all experts count as a form of qualitative methodology in itself,²⁷ focuses on checking theories and the identification of patterns in mostly predefined materials.²⁸

The methodology I choose depends on my research question and my research goal. For instance, I will ask myself whether I want to use a theory-generating, theory-testing, or descriptive approach or whether I would prefer to use a practice-changing approach? Once both the research question and research goal are clear, a specific methodology can be selected. From there, I will go about choosing my methods for data generation, and often not conclusively, as is typical with Grounded Theory, for example.

To reintroduce self-reflection here: I enjoy discovering phenomena in context and prefer working with fragments and fragmented theories, but I am less keen to work with grand theories that I apply to the data. Therefore, I often opt to use Grounded Theory. The choice of methodology is, thus, equally based on my personal preferences and the research subject. As a result, I have already applied all the methodologies presented here, as well as participatory citizen science.

Especially when it comes to exploring Lived Theologies and theory-generating theological work, I consider Grounded Theory to be the more advanced methodology. "Grounded Theory is ideational; it is a sophisticated and careful method of idea manufacturing. The conceptual idea is its essence ... The best way to produce is to think about one's data to generate ideas."²⁹ The aim of Grounded Theory is to test ideas and develop a theory based on empirical data.³⁰ The term "grounded" clarifies that the goal is to conduct research "from the bottom up" or based on the subject matter.³¹ In Grounded Theory, no specific hypotheses are predefined, as the approach is fundamentally inductive-theory-generating and less about theory-testing.³² As a result, this methodology is particularly well suited for generating data and deriving theories from this data.³³ The transition from data to theory typically occurs through an inductive process, and then through an inductive-deductive approach (open, axial, and selective coding process), which is sometimes called abductive. A key characteristic of Grounded Theory is its process-oriented nature. Research progresses in an ongoing process, in which sometimes very diverse data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted to generate new insights. This iterative process allows researchers to continuously engage with the data, as well as to review and expand their theories.³⁴

²⁴ Glaser and Strauss, *Grounded Theory*.

²⁵ Geertz, "Thick Description."

²⁶ For example, Kemmis et al., *The Action Research Planner*.

²⁷ "Some of the currently prominent methods, such as that of 'qualitative content analysis', do not correspond to the criteria which we consider to be authoritative within the reconstructive methods framework outlined in this textbook. In our view, qualitative content analysis classifies rather than reconstructs sense structures. It is not capable, nor is it designed, to capture implicit meanings as they may be expressed in the manner of phrasing or an interaction sequence." Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr, *Qualitative Sozialforschung*, 189; An exception to this is provided by Kuckartz and Rädiker, who also orient content analysis more strongly towards reconstruction. Kuckartz and Rädiker, *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse*.

²⁸ Mayring, *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse*.

²⁹ Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity*, 9.

³⁰ Pleizier, *Religious Involvement*, 85.

³¹ Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr, *Qualitative Sozialforschung*, 192–5.

³² Ibid., 196–8.

³³ Breuer, *Reflexive Grounded Theory*, 39.

³⁴ Ibid., 69–109; Flick, *Qualitative Sozialforschung*, 386–402; Glaser and Strauss, *Grounded Theory*, 115–29.

Now, specifically in the context of researching Lived Theology, the active involvement of co-researchers seems to be an essential element. Through this process, these individuals transition from being researched to becoming co-researchers who make significant contributions to theory development.³⁵ Because of the experiences and perspectives they bring, theory generation and theoretical saturation become possible. This collaborative partnership contributes to increasing the quality and relevance of the research while enabling co-researchers to actively participate in theological reflection.³⁶

4 Conclusion

The concept of Lived Theology advocates for an integrated approach where theological reflections are inseparable from everyday religious experiences. It emphasizes that theological interpretations are intrinsic to every religious practice, blurring the traditional distinction between theory and practice. To maintain its relevance and connection to lived experiences, academic theology must take these interpretations seriously and examine them intensively. Therefore, this article argues first that Lived Theology should form the foundation of academic theology. Additionally, it asserts that integrating Empirical Theology is essential. Secondly, the article advocates for the use of inductive qualitative approaches, such as Grounded Theory, which hold significant potential for researching Lived Theology within academic theology.

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³⁵ For further information about citizen science and the paradigm shift: Müller and Todjeras, "Theological Empowerment," 185–98.

³⁶ Müller, *Religious Experience*, 66–7; Müller and Todjeras, "Theological Empowerment."

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