

Matthias Scharer, Innsbruck

From Pastoral Theology to Practical Theology: The impact of Karl Rahner's understanding of Practical Theology in a Digital World

Introduction

The title of this Conference covers a relationship between Digital Shepherding and Pastoral Theology: “Digital Shepherding: Pastoral Theology and Ministry in a Digital Age.” The core question of my paper is: How do Shepherding—in our case Digital Shepherding—and Pastoral Theology interact (slide 1)? Is the relationship demonstrating we can apply Pastoral Theology to help digitally shepherd their congregation of sheep? Or are we using a Practical Theology understanding of Pastoral Theology, as Rahner suggested, which reflects theologically on digital shepherding and other kinds of pastoral care? (slide 2) My suspicion behind the question on the interaction between Digital Shepherding and Pastoral Theology is that a dated understanding of Pastoral Theology is being used like we have it in the application type. In the context of neoliberalism which supports effectiveness Digital Shepherding *and* the application type of Pastoral Theology could match excellently. In this case, a theological regression would happen. We have to examine the relationship between Digital Shepherding and Pastoral Theology more intensely.

First I will deconstruct the dated understanding of Pastoral Theology which comes from Neoscholasticism. Second, I will introduce the perspective of Rahner as it relates to how to understand and to do Pastoral Theology as a Practical Theology. In my third paragraph, I'll make you aware of what we should have in mind when we discuss the correlation between Practical Theology and Digital Shepherding?

1. Deconstruction of a dated meaning of Pastoral Theology: The Application Type

What is the understanding of Pastoral Theology in the Application Type (slide 3)? In this paradigm, Pastoral Theology is a set of principles and skills a pastor needs to fulfill the duties of ministry: preaching, catechizing/evangelizing, liturgizing, caring for the wounded and sick, the penitent and the bereaved. The term “pastoral” in combination with Theology is also used indiscriminately to mean pastoral counseling or pastoral care. To return to our conference

title, this would mean that digital shepherding should be done with the advice we glean from Pastoral Theology. Pastoral Theology works on a set of principles and skills how we can make Shepherding more effective and successful by doing it via Digital Networking etc. With such understanding of Pastoral Theology, we would fall back into the Neoscholastic application type.

Within the Neoscholastic Approach (slide 4), Pastoral Theology was called “Theology Minor” in opposition to “Theology Major” as in Dogmatic Theology. “Theology Major” would mean, that some theological disciplines are responsible for the reflection of the dogma and others to encourage the practice of the Church. Pastoral Theology in this meaning is no theological reflection of his own. The discussion on this concept is current and ongoing.

Closely linked with the meaning of Pastoral Theology as a theological reflection of his own is the question on the theological importance of process, methods and media which we are highlighting in Communicative Theology. I explained it in my paper in 2013 at this Conference. I did it on the discussion about the ambivalence of digitalization in Society and Church. Digital media is an ambivalent medium which leads communication processes with a mix of positive and negative results.

To highlight this ambivalence and it’s theological meaning, allow me to remember two conflicting perspectives of the most recent popes regarding the theological relevance of processes such they belong to methods and media. If you remember the speech of Cardinal Ratzinger the later Pope Benedict which is published, you will find exactly the paradigm of Application. If we are doing theology we should not include, like Practical Theologians are doing today, humanistic research methods like psychology, sociology to understand the meaning of the processes. Exegesis and Catechetics had led to a “hypertrophy” of methods over the content of the faith. Also, the meaning of the processes has now relevance for theological insights. They are questions of practice. On this way, Pope Benedict came to a relatively uncritical position in respect to New Media.

For Pope Francis, it seems to be contrary: In EG he highlights the theological meaning of the process when he proclaims that “time is greater than space (EG 222 -225).”

2. Practical Theology in the perspective of Rahner's transcendental-anthropological approach

It would be impossible to summarize the philosophical, anthropological and theological writing of Karl Rahner S. J. in twenty or fewer minutes. What I can do is mention a few ideas of Rahner, especially belonging to his transcendental-anthropological approach. The aim is to reconstruct Pastoral Theology under the framework of Practical Theology. According to Rahner, Pastoral Theology is not limited to the practical work of the clergy or of lay ministry. It is not a set of principles and skills applying Theology Major, the Dogmatic. Rahner grants a new meaning for theology. He reconceptualized theology as an anthropological concept. Rather than being a study of God, he used theology to studying man's experience a transcendental subject. Further Rahner renames the application – based “pastoral theology” to “practical theology” as an attempt to reinvent the theological meaning of the discipline (slide 5). This means that philosophical and theological reflection never start with cerebral contemplation on God or Jesus Christ or the Church as it did in Neoscholasticism. It starts with questioning the human as the subject of every theology and even of shepherding.

Rahner concentrates on universal anthropological questions. For him, the center of Theology is to understand the human as a transcendental subject. So, he changes from the classical understanding to an anthropological understanding of Theology.

To do this, he concentrates firstly on questions related to all people—, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhist— even if they are humanists or atheists. All humans are born with an inherent knowledge of their own existence “from inside”. As adults, we reflect and communicate our experience of existence in concepts of hope, joy, sorrow, etc. For Rahner, this reflection and communication are knowledge at a second, more conceptual level. In this regard, humans experience both original knowledge from within themselves and reflective knowledge at a second level.

Based on this general anthropological hypothesis, Rahner sees an “unthematic transcendental experience” [i.e. uncategorizable] of self-presence in daily life. This is not a sectoral experience; it is experience among other experiences. It makes human existence itself “spiritual.” Although by nature humans are controlled by context and biology, they experience moments of freedom, love, responsibility and other non-predeterminations. “The

experience of subjectivity or personhood is the characteristically human mode of (spiritual) existence in the world,” William V. Dych describes in his article “Theology in a New Key” how for Rahner the human as a subject is the keystone of transcendence experience.

For Rahner, there exist three anthropological existentials: self-presence, freedom, and transcendence. These anthropological structures act “upon our experience of human existence in its totality”, and they are “accessible to anyone, believer or unbeliever”, Dych says (Dych, Pos. 199). Upon this anthropological existentials theology can build up: “We shall be seeing a fourth [existential] when Rahner calls grace a ‘supernatural existential’” (Dych, Pos. 197), Dych suggests. The world from a theological point of view is – like the title of the book of O’Donovan says: “A World of Grace” (see: Donovan (Ed.)

The transcendental experience is a constant way of being. It is present in all our categorial experiences. Ultimately, it is based on mystical experience. I can understand this better on the example of freedom: Real freedom is not the summary of all free acts. “We find our own freedom in the previous experience of being persons who are, as a whole, already given over to ourselves and ultimately responsible for ourselves. This experience of freedom is transcendental”, Carr says (Carr, Pos. 430). The human experience of freedom as different categorial experiences is ambiguous till we encounter the freedom per se in eternity. “For salvation means precisely the ultimate validity of our real self-understanding and free self-realization before God. It is the confirmation of our way of understanding ourselves and what we have chosen to be, not simply in our words or ideas or actions, but in ourselves. Only in eternity can our freedom exist as a final, complete, and fully actualized...” (Carr, Pos. 476 f.)

For Rahner, there is an ongoing tendency in us towards new discoveries. Rahner sees in it a drive of the mind toward the infinite. It belongs to the context or the horizon in which we are living and thinking. Can they explain? Each question provokes a series of new questions. They can take us “to this horizon of all reality and to an infinitude which is utterly different from the finite things we directly and immediately experience. Ultimately the coherence or explanation of the finite is not finite. It depends on the open horizon towards the infinite if we experience our life and the world as meaningful or absurd.” Carr, Pos.

Rahner’s transcendental anthropological and theological approach met significant critique. One of the most controversial aspects is Rahner's argument that the human transcendence is

founded in the “pre-apprehension of infinite reality” (Dych, Pos. 39). Rahner asks with the previous knowledge from Kant - not only about the conditions of the knowledge in a gnoseological meaning but consequently in an existential meaning. He asks about the ontological conditions of the Human as God’s mystery. Rahner asks on what always is pre-existing.

The question on the always pre-existing has a problematic underline message, as Catholic theologian J.B. Metz detects. To explain this problem Metz remembers on the tale of the rabbit and the hedgehog. The rabbit and the hedgehog organize a foot race. The hedgehog places his wife, who looks similar to himself, on the finish line of the foot race. So, the hedgehog makes only a few steps, and it seems that he is on the finish. When the rabbit arrives on the finish line, it seems that the original hedgehog is already at the finish line, which confuses the rabbit. After the 74th foot race, he dies because after each trial it comes to the same result. Like the tale, the insight of Rahner could end in a circle if the starting point is always the same and no new aspects are considered. The hedgehog is "always already there" because he knows on the starting point what happens on the finish. Rahner’s idea of apprehension assumes foreknowledge. Like the race with the hedgehog, the race is rigged unwinnable.

Rahnerian anthropology significantly influenced the upcoming of Practical Theology, as it is known nowadays in theological circles. In this line, Practical Theology is still working on his specific paradigms within the field of Theology.

3. What we should have in mind when we discuss the correlation between Practical Theology and Digital Shepherding

It is evident that in the meaning of Rahner, Pastoral Theology, as a Practical Theology, is not a set of principles and skills a pastor needs to fulfill the duties of ministry. It is not pastoral counseling, pastoral care or digital shepherding. Pastoral Theology as a Practical Theology belongs to all these in a critical manner; but it’s more. It hybridizes theological reflection with the transcendental anthropological view of the human related to the daily life of the people. The common basis of the approaches of Practical Theology is the critical correlation of reality and theology. Reality means the whole human social environment, with special attention to intercultural, trans-religious, inter-confessional, interinstitutional and inter-medial differences

and interactions. The implied theology of the reality is explicated theologically and discussed critically.

In this connection, Practical Theology stands in the conversation with different partners:

- With the practitioners of educational, pastoral and juridical practice fields. They are not adopter from what Practical Theologians are working on. They are Co-Researchers in the practice fields.
- With other scientific disciplines (educational theory, sociology, psychology, ethnology, etc.);
- With other theological disciplines (Biblical, Historical, Systematic Theology).

At the University of Innsbruck, Pastoral Theology is located in the department of Practical Theology. In the mission-statement of the Pastoral Theology sub-department someone can read: “Pastoral theology is an adventure. It leads into a fascinating vortex of differences: church and the world, nature, and grace, people, and powers. ... As an 'ethnology of the people of God', it combines the perception of pastoral field research ('seeing') with the ability to judge theological archives ('judgments') - to bring the results of their 'participating observing' into the equalized discussion with practitioners: pastoral theology is not a one-way street from the insights of researchers to practitioners. It's always reciprocal. Inevitably, we are caught in contrasts, the differences which have long since permeated our late modern life: religions, confessions, and secularities of the 21st century. There are new pastoral places to follow Jesus, but also fascinating people, interesting stories, sincere devotion - and most of all, their own God as the mystery of the world”.

Within the ongoing process of developing Pastoral Theology as a Practical Theology we have also to respect the critique of H.J. Sanders on Rahner's neglect on doing a full theological analysis “of the world”. Contemporary Practical Theology does not only belong to Rahner's transcendental anthropology but also to a theological reflection on insights from ethnology or sociology.

When it comes to the correlation between Digital Shepherding and Pastoral Theology, we have to be aware that 'shepherding' is a loaded word—some may say *overloaded*. Shepherding is a metaphor that evokes images of protected tranquility for some and belittling hegemony for others. A psychologically- and sociologically-informed Pastoral Theology

unpacks the desire for a guiding shepherd along with abused authority; areas that have been rejected by authority figure, projections of areas of myself that I have rejected, transfers from situations I have experienced earlier, etc. play a big role. For some people in the context of churches and religions, shepherding is a metaphor of abuse. Many people have a warm feeling on being shepherded at the last end from the One who is love and freedom per se; someone who doesn't give advises how to live but to keep free and self-responsible.

This warm feeling with shepherding for Christians deals with the Good Shepherd in the Gospel who takes care of me and all people in the world, especially the lost and outsourced. We should keep in mind that the desire on good shepherding like the Gospel mentions can never be fulfilled from a human, much less a human form of communication such as digital media. We have to respect that shepherding inherits the burden of all Church's and Religion's history with all the abuses of past shepherding. We need to take extra caution when dealing with the autonomous, illuminated subject which Rahner assumes; it necessarily has trouble accepting shepherding, especially shepherding by Church or Religion authorities.

We cannot sacrifice face-to-face community with the introduction of digital shepherding. It is not a sufficient substitute for face-to-face community. If it comes to digital shepherding or shepherding via Digital Media – what it exactly means remains open – we have to respect the highly ambivalent character. By this, I mean that digital media cannot be reduced to 'evil' or 'profitable'; rather it is a means of communication which can be wielded as a weapon of deconstruction or a rejuvenating lifeline. In my first statement at one of these conferences, I quoted the metaphor of my Dogmatic colleague in Innsbruck, Niewiadomski: "*extra media nulla salus*," "out of the media is no salvation" playing upon the old metaphor: "out of the Church is no salvation." We have to deal with the problematic promise of salvation which inherits New Media if we speak about Digital Shepherding.

Conclusion

The core question of my paper was: How do Shepherding – in our case: Digital Shepherding – and Pastoral Theology relate? I suspected that a dated understanding of Pastoral Theology was being used and I deconstructed the term accordingly. We could see how the digital media could be used in the discipline of Pastoral Theology as 'theology minor', in response, I suggested that we redefine Pastoral Theology in terms of Rahner's 'Practical Theology'. Only

after we redefined Pastoral Theology could we discuss the implication on the interaction between Practical Theology and Digital Shepherding.

Thank you for your attention.

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