

## ***Leveraging Inter-religious Dialogue into Transformative Action Using Practical Theology's Reflexive Frameworks,*** **by Bhikshuni Lozang Trinlae**

*Sponsored by the Memnosyne Foundation, the Memnosyne Interfaith Scholarship is designed to support a graduate student completing advanced research related to interfaith studies, relations and action. The research will support not merely religious tolerance and dialogue, but real cooperation. The assertion being that in order to live harmoniously in a multi-religious civil society with democratic structures and a secular government, real cooperation is needed. An approach based upon collaborative pragmatism rather than conflicting idealistic principles is needed in order to achieve a peaceful way of life. All religions carry their distinct revelations. Collaborative pragmatism implies not dominating and destroying these diverse revelations, but cooperating in order to compliment and fulfill them in our ever new and changing world.*

*The scholar was chosen by the Memnosyne Foundation, and through our agreement with the Global Theological Education Program of Perkins School of Theology and the Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue. In this four week research-centered program over the summer, the scholar was offered the opportunity to use the facilities of Bridwell Library at the Perkins School of Theology, one of the finest collections of theological and multiple faith resources in the United States.*

*In addition to the research, Memnosyne will arrange for (two) public lectures or possible panel discussions during the fall for the benefit of the greater SMU community, Dallas-Fort Worth, and the promotion of the Memnosyne Foundation's Center for Interfaith Inquiry. The lectures or panels will be designed to promote religious cooperation, interfaith relations and action, and how this impacts a community. The Memnosyne scholar provides both a researched paper and, as part of the presentation, provide examples of the validity and power of a society that embraces the power of interfaith relations and action, not just in theory, but in practice.*

*This year, the scholar was Bhikshuni Lozang, a Buddhist Nun and Contributing Scholar to State of Formation. It is with great pleasure that we feature the work that she composed as a Memnosyne Interfaith Scholar in the article that follows.*

### **Abstract**

In my mission to develop protocols for assessing Vajrayana Buddhist contemplative practices, I have investigated models of academic practical theology as prospective frameworks for systematic reflection incorporating both theological and empirical dimensions. Beyond this Buddhism-specific application, I have explored how practical theology can be used to enhance inter-religious engagement. In this paper, I demonstrate how traditionally Christian academic practical theology hermeneutic formalisms can be generalized to serve as reflexive frameworks

for conducting collaborative inter-religious activities. Such frameworks have the potential to enable actual communities of lived religions to leverage sustainable collaboration in areas of mutual interest for the long-term benefit of congregations and our wider society.

## Introduction and Rationale

Multiple problems, like poverty and violence and their causes, afflict our communities, while our religious communities appear utterly impotent as resourceful antidotes. Perhaps if our religious congregations were able to combine resources and work as coalition partners on problems of mutual interest, this cohesive network would become a significant force for transformative problem-solving.

As an ordained Buddhist clergy, scientist, educator, practitioner, and researcher of traditional formal Vajrayāna Buddhist meditation techniques, I here present a rationale for employing research paradigms from traditional Christian practical theology in the service of inter-religious collaborative activities. Such paradigms are of potential interest to scholars from academic practical theology, contemplative studies, religious and inter-religious studies, Buddhist and other religious clergy and congregations.

## Terminology

As a scientist and Buddhist theologian from the Vajrayāna tradition, my use of the phrase “practical theology praxis” is precisely selected: I favor Heitink’s general rendering of “praxis” as “action, activity”<sup>1</sup> because of the theological prominence of its Sanskrit rendering, *karma*, in Buddhism and its philosophical significance indicating the locus of practical dynamic processes by which intentions are transformed into executed results. It is taken more specifically in the practical theological sense given by David Tracy<sup>2</sup>: “Praxis is correctly understood as the critical relationship between theory and practice whereby each is dialectically influenced and transformed by the other.” For the phrase “practical theology,” I refer precisely to the usage jointly offered by Browning, Fowler, Schweitzer, and van der Ven<sup>3</sup>: “Practical theology should be understood as an empirically descriptive and critically constructive theory of religious practice,” contributing to “empirical theory building” and “a theology of transformation.”<sup>4</sup>

## Review of Practical Theology Scholarship

The work described herein applies categorical analysis to practical theology. The interpretive approach is pragmatic, selecting those points of the respective literature considered most relevant to my quest to develop a community-based service project for inter-religious engagement, beyond my immediate research assessing the prospects for developing a theoretical praxis framework for investigating Vajrayāna Buddhist meditation intended to inform teachers and students of such meditation. This need is determined pragmatically, from

the point of view of this author who is not only a Vajrayāna Buddhist with extensive expertise in Vajrayāna spiritual formation, but also a scientist and initiate practical theologian.

### **Prospective Buddhist Practical Theology Praxis**

There are authors who believe that practical theology must appropriate for itself an even broader frame of reference. It should restrict itself neither to Christianity nor to the world religions, but should take as its object the desire for transcendent meaning which lives in mankind [sic].<sup>5</sup>

Of the scholarly literature on fundamental practical theology selected here for review, those by Heitink and van der Ven respectively are among the top most-frequently nominated “essential readings” of practical theology by members of the International Academy of Practical Theology and hence have very high scholarly significance.<sup>6</sup> The selections here follow in order of increasing theoretical complexity and specificity.

Richard Osmer writes about “practical theological interpretation by the leaders of [Christian] congregations” in his text *Practical Theology*, detailing a 4-task method of practical theology generalized such that it “may be brought to bear on *any* issue worthy of consideration.”<sup>7</sup> These tasks, “descriptive-empirical,” “interpretive,” “normative,” and “pragmatic,” respectively function for descriptive information gathering, theoretical understanding and explanation, theological and ethical normative construction (or reconstruction, as the case may be), and the establishment of strategies of action and “reflective conversation with the ‘talk back’ emerging when they are enacted.”<sup>8</sup> While Osmer restricts his theological formulation of the normative task to the Christian sense of “prophetic discernment,”<sup>9</sup> there is no obvious reason why a Buddhist normative task informed by Buddhist theology and Buddhist ethics cannot function in this task role and thereby yield a functionally Buddhist practical theology. Osmer himself cites Christian theologian Elaine Graham’s deployment of this normative task through transformative praxis in feminist theology,<sup>10</sup> thereby evidencing the pragmatism of the normative function. The prospects are therefore favorable for deploying Osmer’s practical theology praxis framework, with respective theological modifications, within a uniquely Buddhist or otherwise non-Christian-specific theological context.

Gerben Heitink’s presentation of “practical theology as a theory of action” in his text *Practical Theology*<sup>11</sup> rigorously portrays the historical-interpretive development of Christian practical theology from the European Enlightenment era, through modernity, to post-modernity. He details a historical relationship of nuanced engagement of Christian practical theology with developments in philosophy, modern epistemology, the social sciences, political theory, hermeneutics, and pluralism.

Informed by the work of Schelsky, Furet, and others, Heitink’s practical theology as a theory of action is built upon the communicative theory of action of Habermas and hermeneutical theories of Paul Ricoeur respectively, with the insights of the latter informing a

transformative methodology in a hermeneutical cycle of understanding, explanation, and change. A philosophical relational theory between theory and praxis is established which undergirds communicative, interpretative, and methodological capacities in the service of practical theology. This is elaborated in great detail in terms of hermeneutical, strategic, empirical perspectives, and the interchange between [Christian] religious life and its social context. Heitink furthermore considers specific domains of praxis application: a “normative-deductive current;” a “hermeneutical-mediative current;” an “empirical-analytical current;” a “political-critical current;” and a “pastoral-theological current.” These categories are not mutually exclusive, and all of these “currents,” given theologically-relevant alterations, can be pursued within Buddhism’s or any other religion’s practical theological praxis relative to particular goals.

### **Inter-religious Applications of Practical Theology**

I propose and personally intend to deploy the concept of practical theology as a framework for collaborative community service in general and inter- and intra-religious activities in particular. This is easiest to consider in contexts of increasing complexity. I will illustrate the concept thereafter using specific examples.

#### ***Simplest practical theology context***

Here one merely engages in the project or activity within the reflexive hermeneutic framework. This scenario is not unlike project management approaches for non-profit organizations. The differences, however, are that the theological perspective informs all phases of the reflexive cycle--the normative phase in particular--and that the individual phases are mutually interactive with each other.

This reflexive, simple, yet systematic process can employ the Osmer model:

Descriptive-empirical phase: once an activity or project is planned and undertaken, the process is described from observations without analysis

Interpretive: in this phase, the material acquired through the descriptive phase is analyzed and interpreted

Normative: in this phase, theological, ethical, and "good-practice" values inform, guide, and transform plans and designs for subsequent projects or activities<sup>12</sup>

Pragmatic: strategies of action for producing outcomes incorporating the directives from the normative stage are developed and executed.

From this point, the cycle begins anew, and therefore the process is more of a spiral than a circle, over time. That is, since time is always moving forward, our reflections are actualized as normative influences on our future activities. It is precisely the "going-around-in-circles"

dynamic that we are attempting avoid and replace with this pregnant, transformative approach. Implementation of this framework can serve to train partners in collaborative activities to deliberately consider their activities from within the practical theology process framework.

### ***Moderate empirical practical theology context***

In this context, the interpretive framework of the simple context is preserved but extended to include semi-formal empirical work. Questions are formulated and data collected via questionnaires or online surveys such as Survey Monkey®. Data can be compared over time, from pre-project reference, mid-project, and post-project to assess performance and outcomes. Additionally, diverse population groups can be compared according to age, ethnicity, location, etc. The questions of such surveys are designed within and informed by the practical theology hermeneutic reflexive process described above.

For example, perhaps some members of a spiritual community want their congregation to engage in more action to address income inequality locally, nationally, and globally. They could use a survey to ask members if they feel strongly about the ethical outcomes of income inequality, if they would like to see their congregation engage the issue more, and if they would like to participate in a leadership group on the issue. The survey would then be reviewed under two separate hermeneutic phase processes: first to merely describe the survey responses, and secondly to interpret them with respect to their initial vision of enhanced community engagement. From that point, the members would plan their next step as the normative stage, for example, creating a group exploring scriptural resources addressing income inequality and sharing these results with the congregation. Finally, this plan would be implemented, and then the cycle would move to a descriptive phase again. That is, the cycle would begin anew to describe the process of creating this group, interpreting that process, refining and/or expanding it, and then implementing those refinements. Thereby each phase of the process is systematically brought under the scope of reflection, and no stage is overlooked. It is this last feature that has much potential to help inter-religious collaboration and coalition-building, because it is often imagined, rather than intended, sleights, that hurt feelings and obstruct collaborative relationships. By systematically deploying a safety-net of awareness for these and other problems into the fabric of the collaborative process, such problems can be addressed directly. Furthermore, by separating the descriptive and interpretive phases, errors in either description or interpretation of events and issues by parties will not be confounded.

### ***Formal empirical practical theology context***

Here, while continuing within the simple interpretive framework mentioned above, project planners and collaborators draw on expertise from academic faculty in psychology and/or others trained in statistical empirical research for guidance and supervision with research design, operationalization, and analytical processes. While in most practical theological contexts, experimental controls cannot typically yield differentially conclusive results, exploratory work

can lead to more refined interpretive processes. For example, given data from adequately sized populations and carefully designed research, regression analysis can be used to indicate the nature of any causal relationships among various factors relevant to a project.

## Examples

Here, I identify two distinct types of problems to approach with the practical theology process, both within contexts of pragmatic inter-religious collaboration. In the first type, the practical theology process framework is used to inform and transform collaborative projects. For example, leaders and members of congregations from multiple faith traditions can work together on areas of common interest, be they items of spiritual formation, such as a program for increasing the practice of patience among populations, or social issues, like reducing public profanity culture, or working on critical problems such as economic injustice and sustainable environmental practices at household, community, and/or regional levels. (Numerous personal and social issues can be conceived; those mentioned above are mere samples.) Like any project, parties would meet and devise vision, mission, strategies, etc. as their planning process, and from the beginning of action, the practical theology reflexive framework would be executed according to the desired and suitable context as described above.

In the second type of problem to approach with the practical theology framework, the collaborative aspect itself would be under examination. This can be conducted passively or explicitly. In the first case, collaborative parties from different faith traditions working jointly on a project would have to describe, interpret, guide, and act on information related to the interrelational components of their joint activities. Ideally this descriptive net would be honest enough to include both strengths and weaknesses or failures in communication and/or cooperation, misunderstandings, etc. In this case, the practical theology framework also serves as a safety net dedicated to managing these components perhaps more often considered to be incidental to project management.

In the second case, activities designed especially for inter-religious relationship building and literacy would themselves be the focus of the collaborative project. For example, a series of workshops and short-retreats can be devised in any community with the specific mission of developing community inter-religious networks and relationships for collaborative network building. Activities could be devised to engender inter-religious literacy with respect to: various theologies; political, cultural, and geographical histories; ethics; and common problem sharing regarding both internal and wider social contexts. By taking time to develop relationships of literacy across various different religious domains, even when we prefer our own ways of doing things to that of our religiously "other" brother and sister, this preference will not interfere in our working together toward common goals (i.e., reducing suffering and its myriad causes), but rather will have a more mundane status akin to different dietary preferences. Our common work can proceed unhindered by our differences, and yield more efficient and effective results. Again, the reflexive practical theology framework would inform and transform such activities by

enabling participants to refine the processes by using the suitable context of empirical tools and methods.

## **Conclusion**

We know that intellectual power and analytical knowledge alone are insufficient to our contemporary problems. For example, there are many perspective solutions offered by nonpartisan experts advising on environmental and economic issues. Nonetheless, their prescriptions are often not leveraged adequately to yield transformative action resulting in positive conditions for local communities, the nation, and humankind. Their voices do not sufficiently reach into the social space inhabited by various power brokers with influence.

Our communities are full of numerous religious congregations and spiritual communities, yet these potent resources are underutilized for social problem-solving in fragmented form. Conversely, collaborative pragmatism in the form of long-term coalitions among all sectors of society represented by such spiritual communities can work endlessly generation by generation on various problems and therefore can serve as an agency for regular, transformative change. In order for such a resource to bear significant fruit, it must first coordinate itself into a vibrant network and gain mastery in collaborative action.

In order for interfaith collaborations to become and remain effective, an interpretive framework must be in place to inform and transform the collaborative process. Practical theology is suited to this task while also being able to accommodate the diverse theological factors present in any inter-religious context. Furthermore, practical theology can be used empirically for formal project assessment, leading to greater accountability to congregations, organizations, and donors. In our era of diminishing public services, investment in religion is negligible compared to medicine or engineering, where material outcomes and potential commercial benefits are self-evident. At the same time, more numbers of our most vulnerable populations turn to our religious communities for assistance and support. Without a sound accountability process in place, how can willing institutional and private donors have confidence to support the faith traditions' social welfare activities?

The practical theology reflexive framework is therefore a broad-spectrum mechanism for process reflection and normative pragmatism that can enable spiritual traditions to move from the level of inter-religious dialogue to collaborative network building and action coalitions and thereby harness and leverage joint resources for social problem-solving and positive transformation.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the support of the Memnosyne Foundation, the *Journal of Inter-religious Dialogue*, and Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University for supporting this research.

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Notes

1 Heitink, *Practical Theology*. Translated by Reindeer Bruinsma. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 7.

2 David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

3 Supplied in the forward; Heitink, *Practical Theology*, xvi.

4 *Ibid.*, xvi.

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

6 “International Academy of Practical Theology”, accessed 2011, <http://www.ia-pt.org>.

7 Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans, 2008), X; italics in original.

8 Osmer, *Practical Theology.*, 4-12.

9 *Ibid.*, 129.

10 *Ibid.*, 157-159.

11 Heitink, *Practical Theology*.

12 Osmer, p. 178.