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# A Comparative Research Conversation: American Catholic and German Protestant Spirituality Studies

**Abstract:** This article looks onto the latest developments of the field of spirituality from an American-Catholic and an European-Protestant perspective. Both perspectives are commented upon to broaden the view. The conditions of the developments and the present level of research are described for both regions. Further themes are denoted. In this way the research is linked up and deepened.

**Zusammenfassung:** Dieser Artikel betrachtet aus einer amerikanisch-katholischen und einer europäisch-protestantischen Perspektive die neuesten Entwicklungen im Bereich der Spiritualität. Beide Perspektiven werden nochmals auf ihren Ertrag hin kommentiert, um den Horizont zu erweitern. Für beide Regionen werden die Bedingungen der Entwicklungen und der gegenwärtige Stand der Forschung beschrieben. Weitere Themen für die Forschung werden benannt. Damit wird sie vernetzt und zugleich vertieft.

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## 1 Introduction

Spirituality is a growing area of research within the academy as well as an expanding, increasingly diffuse phenomenon in contemporary culture. Of course, there is no generic spirituality but only particular spiritualities embodied in and shaped by particular contexts and traditions. This jointly written article seeks to explore some of the parameters of spirituality research in, respectively, American Catholic contexts (Wolfteich) and German Protestant contexts (Schneider). In sections 2 and 3, each author will present several key features of spirituality as a lived phenomenon in the American and German contexts, describe the state of spirituality studies in those areas, and identify research issues going forward. Each author will give particular attention to her/his own religious tradition as

part of that contextual attention to spirituality. Then in the following sections, each author will comment briefly on the other author's piece so there is an exchange of perspectives. Of course, our respective positions should not be understood to represent all American or all European, nor all Catholic or Protestant positions. This is an exploratory conversation that aims to present a comparative research report, familiarizing readers with the shape of spirituality studies in two different contexts and perspectives. We seek to spark further reflection. This discussion between two particular scholars reveals certain presuppositions, training, and contextual factors that influence us. Bringing these to light will foster, we hope, other similar conversations that may clarify commonalities and differences in research approaches and findings across regional and denominational lines.

## 2 Perspectives on Spirituality: American and Roman Catholic (Claire Wolfteich)

A. Spirituality: what does this word mean in the American context? It is a vast and all-encompassing umbrella term that captures a variety of paths of seeking after wholeness, meaning, self-transcendence, authenticity, and experience. Where "religion" may evoke images of divisiveness and unwelcomed authority, "spirituality" remains for many a safe and free space, an amazingly plastic term that has staying power in popular culture and across religious boundaries. Spirituality fits well with the stereotypical American individualism and love of freedom. At the same time, spirituality is a significant feature of the discourse and practice of American faith communities. American society remains a highly religious society, certainly compared to Europe, and spirituality is comfortably integrated in religion even while affording some a distance from it. In short, spirituality is an important phenomenon in contemporary religious and cultural life in the United States and, as I have asserted in previous work, it should be a serious focus of study for practical theology.<sup>1</sup> Practical theologians bring important tools to this work, including finely tuned skills in analysis of practices, contexts and cultures; facility with interdisciplinary work; and interest in the dynamics of formation and transformation. Given the widespread use of the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Claire E. Wolfteich, Spirituality, in: Bonnie Miller (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, Oxford (Blackwell Publishers) 2011, 328–336; Claire E. Wolfteich, *Animating Questions. Spirituality and Practical Theology*, in: *IJPT* 13 (2009), 121–143.

term, spirituality calls for careful practical theological analysis to make some theological sense of it and to shape the constellation of practices that fall within its orbit.

In the United States, spirituality studies is a growing academic discipline in its own right, with a professional organization, a serious peer-reviewed journal, and several graduate level programs of study located in both Catholic and ecumenical contexts. Many leading spirituality scholars are historians and theologians; practical theologians intersect with the discipline, but by no means dominate it. While from the standpoint of practical theology, spirituality sometimes is considered a “subdiscipline”, I have argued that it is better understood as a disciplinary partner. Thus, we need to consider not only how practical theologians research spirituality, but also to examine the broader field of spirituality study and research. For while practical theology has much to bring to critical research of spirituality, so too can practical theology learn much from spirituality studies, particularly in the discipline’s keen attention to religious experience, language, and spiritual classics, including mystical texts.

This section first will identify some key features of spirituality as a phenomenon in the United States, including attention to Catholic spirituality; then note the rise of spirituality studies as an academic discipline; and finally argue for practical theological study of spirituality that draws upon Catholic sensibilities. In particular, I will call attention to the significance of everyday practice as well as the neglected value of the spiritual classics, including mystical texts, within practical theology. I will argue for an ecclesial, sacramental spirituality that attends to the complexities of context and culture in a pluralistic society – and, following David Tracy, for a mystical-ethical practical theology. For while mysticism should not be divorced from apostolic, prophetic action in the world, the historically Protestant discipline of practical theology could well be creatively unsettled by dialogue with the mystical texts that have so captured the focus of many Catholic spirituality scholars.

B. Spirituality in the United States is a diverse phenomenon, crossing religious lines and holding a space for those who do not identify or affiliate with religious institutions yet seek to cultivate and affirm a spiritual dimension of life. Once a term largely associated with Catholics and Orthodox, “spirituality” is now claimed comfortably by mainline Protestants and increasingly by evangelicals. It also has remarkable play across religious lines. As an indicator of the widespread acceptance of the term, one can point to the “World Spirituality: An Encyclopaedic History of the Religious Quest” book series (Crossroad Publishing Company), which includes volumes on Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Islamic, Taoist, Hindu, Confucian, and secular spiritualities. Spirituality is, moreover, a feature of popu-

lar culture, certainly not confined to religious communities but rather expressed in diverse forms.

Spirituality is a significant discourse/movement in medicine and in business. For example, the George Washington Institute for Spirituality & Health advocates for policy changes and research to support the integration of spirituality into health care practice. It also runs an annual summer institute focused on integrating spirituality and health care and offers a renewal retreat for healthcare practitioners. The institute adopts the broad, universal definition of spirituality proposed by the Association of American Medical Colleges in 1999: that which is “found in all cultures and societies” and “expressed in an individual’s search for ultimate meaning through participation in religion and/or belief in God, family, naturalism, rationalism, humanism, and the arts.”<sup>2</sup> Spirituality and business too is a growing movement noticeable in conferences, consultants, workplace chaplains and publications dedicated to the infusion of spirituality in the marketplace. The American Academy of Management has a “Management, Spirituality & Religion” interest group that explores the influence of spirituality and religious traditions in organizations. Popular literature on spirituality and work abounds (including, for example, titles such as *Jesus, CEO*). Some of this movement is rather instrumentalist – a way for companies to improve worker morale, reduce employee turnover and increase efficiency for the bottom line. Yet it would be a mistake to reduce the spirituality and business movement to this one feature. It also represents interest in a this-worldly spirituality that can be embodied in all spheres and structures of everyday life. While a broad-based humanistic understanding of spirituality is common in the spirituality and business movement, one also can point to more Christian-specific initiatives, such as evangelical Bible studies or prayer breakfasts in the workplace. The interdenominational Christian group The Navigators, for example, trains business and professional women to mentor and evangelize other women in the workplace through small group Bible studies.<sup>3</sup> In my view, work and spirituality is an important area for serious practical theological analysis and research given the significance of work in human life and increasingly in identity, the rising numbers of women in the workplace, and the potential for human oppression in demeaning jobs and unemployment.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The full definition is cited on webpage: [www.gwish.org](http://www.gwish.org).

<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.navigators.org/us/staff/karen\\_warin/Resources/items/Workplace%20Bible%20Studies](http://www.navigators.org/us/staff/karen_warin/Resources/items/Workplace%20Bible%20Studies).

<sup>4</sup> Examples of theological explorations in this area include: Margaret Benefiel, *Soul at Work. Spiritual Leadership in Organizations*, New York (Seabury) 2005; Joan M. Martin, *More Than Chains and Toil. A Christian Work Ethic of Enslaved Women*, Louisville (Westminster John Knox

Spiritual practice ranges quite extensively – from traditional Christian devotions to yoga to highly eclectic forms of spiritual practice gleaned from multiple sources. Music, sports, food, health, therapy all are encompassed in the contemporary discourse of spirituality. It is common to see spiritual practices de-contextualized from their original traditions and planted in new contexts: yoga in the synagogue as part of Shabbat afternoon, offered in Christian retreat centers, and described as an “embodied Christian spiritual practice” on a video set to contemporary Jesuit tunes and integrated with reflections on the Beatitudes.<sup>5</sup> Such movements raise important theological questions. On the one hand, spiritual practice is always contextual, situated in traditions, and care must be taken in the process of adapting a practice to a new context. On the other hand, Catholic sensibilities can support an open approach to culture and a critical retrieval of that which can find analogous meaning within the Catholic tradition.

The category of “practice” is highly salient to American spirituality. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow describes a shift in the United States from what he calls the “dwelling-oriented spirituality” characteristic of the 1950s to “seeker spirituality” as people in the 1960s and subsequent decades explored outside the boundaries of religious institutions. Wuthnow points to the potential of a “practice oriented spirituality” for future American spirituality.<sup>6</sup> If Wuthnow’s assessment is correct, surely practical theological study, assessment, and guidance of this developing spirituality would be quite natural – and needed. Practices cannot be divorced from beliefs; practical theologians rightly assert that integral relationship between practice and theory. The practice-oriented nature of American spiritual exploration can be examined with an eye on the relationship between practices and traditions, the ways that different practices shape what we come to know, and the construction of contemporary spiritual lives.

Looking more specifically at Catholic spirituality, I would note that Catholic spiritual traditions include a wide diversity of paths and experiences, even within a single saintly life or community. Studies of the Desert Fathers include stories of extreme ascetic practice as well as gentle compassion for ordinary human foibles. Simon sits on a pillar for years, while another monk counsels not judgment but compassion for a sleepy brother at communal prayer. Teresa of Avila writes of her

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Press) 2000; Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit. Toward a Theology of Work*, New York (Oxford University Press) 1991; and Claire E. Wolfteich, *Navigating New Terrain. Work and Women’s Spiritual Lives*, New York (Paulist Press) 2002.

<sup>5</sup> See Paulist priest Fr. Thomas Ryan’s video: *Yoga Prayer. An Embodied Christian Spiritual Classic*.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven. Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*, Berkeley (University of California Press) 1998.

extraordinary mystical experience, including visions and levitations. She also practices a very this-worldly spirituality as she travels miles across Spain to found reformed Carmelite monasteries. Burton-Christie argues that the spiritual life of the desert elders (often seen as exemplars of withdrawal from the world) is better characterized as a rhythm of withdrawal-encounter-return.<sup>7</sup> So too scholars have studied the relationship between mysticism and social transformation in, for example, the Franciscans, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, and the Quakers.<sup>8</sup> I have argued that the dominance of contemplative and monastic models of spirituality may present unattainable models of holiness to laity, including mothers of young children who have little silence, solitude, or leisure.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, these spiritual ideals coexist with apostolic, action-oriented spiritual traditions and Catholic teachings (particularly since the Second Vatican) about the holiness of the lay vocation expressed in the ordinary spheres of family, work, and politics. Indeed, we can look to twentieth-century American-Catholic lay movements such as the Catholic Worker for models of an integrated contemplative-apostolic spirituality. We can explore the relationship between this spirituality and the laity's exercise of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom.<sup>10</sup> Retrieving, articulating, and developing the theology and practice of an organic lay spirituality is, in my view, a critical need for contemporary spirituality and practical theology. I assert this on theological grounds; as the Second Vatican Council document *Lumen Gentium* declared, laity from their ordinary contexts of family and social life are to sanctify the world "from within as a leaven" (*LG*, 31). This view of spirituality as infused in ordinary spheres of life also is quite consonant with broader contemporary American trends to find spirituality in the so-called secular and in everyday aspects of life, such as health, work, politics, family life, and even cyberspace. As sociologist Nancy Ammerman shows, we must look for spirituality not only in explicitly religious spaces but also imbedded in multiple "everyday" spheres, shaped by pluralism, hybridity, and often "permeable" boundaries between the religious and the secular.<sup>11</sup>

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7 Douglas Burton-Christie, *Solitude, the Ground of Compassion*, in: *Journal of Supervision and Training in Ministry* 18 (1997), 129–142.

8 See Janet K. Ruffing (ed.), *Mysticism and Social Transformation*, Syracuse (Syracuse University Press) 2001.

9 See Claire E. Wolfeich, *Standing at the Gap. Reading Classics and the Practices of Everyday Life*, in: *Spiritus* 10/2 (2010), 250–255.

10 For further examples, see Claire E. Wolfeich, *American Catholics Through the Twentieth Century. Spirituality, Lay Experience, and Public Life*, New York (Crossroad) 2001.

11 Nancy T. Ammerman (ed.), *Everyday Religion. Observing Modern Religious Lives*, Oxford (Oxford University Press) 2007.

Historians have richly documented changing patterns of American-Catholic spirituality, including the devotional lives of immigrant communities and the dramatic shifts in piety that followed the Second Vatican Council.<sup>12</sup> Traditional devotions such as Eucharistic adoration, novenas, and the rosary have declined, though they retain a hold among some Catholics. As Lawrence Cunningham notes, today there are many diverse spiritual paths in the American-Catholic world today – including small faith sharing groups (e.g., RENEW), retreats, Cursillo, spiritual direction, Twelve step programs, and charitable groups such as the St. Vincent de Paul Society.<sup>13</sup> Catholic spirituality is expressed in a wide-ranging melange of liturgically based devotion, traditional piety, cultural celebrations, eclectic mixing of spiritual/secular practice, small groups, and retreat programs that may be quite ecumenically and interfaith oriented. Adult faith formation remains an important need in the Catholic community.

The issue of declining Mass attendance is an important concern. According to the Second Vatican Council document *Lumen Gentium* (“The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church”), the Eucharist is the “source and summit of ecclesial life” (LG, 11). Theologically, Catholic Christian spirituality is understood to be ecclesial and integrally connected to the communal practice of the celebration of the Mass. The communal celebration of the liturgy is a primary means of spiritual formation. And yet, the percentage of American-Catholics who say that they attend Mass at least once a week now falls below 25%, with even lower percentages among the “Generation X” and “Millennial” cohorts born after the Second Vatican Council.<sup>14</sup>

Hispanic popular religion should be seen as increasingly important to an understanding of American-Catholic spirituality, as Latinos are a rapidly growing segment of the American-Catholic Church, by some estimates now comprising forty percent. Latina/o spirituality is rooted in *lo cotidiano* (the everyday), the

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**12** For examples of historical research on American-Catholic spirituality, see Joseph P. Chinnici, OFM, *Living Stones. The History and Structure of Catholic Spiritual Life in the United States*, Maryknoll (Orbis Books) 1996; James O’Toole (ed.), *Habits of Devotion. Catholic Religious Practice in Twentieth Century America*, Ithaca (Cornell University Press) 2004; Joseph P. Chinnici, OFM / Angela Dries (ed.), *Prayer and Practice in the American Catholic Community*, Maryknoll (Orbis) 2000; James P. McCartin, *Prayers of the Faithful. The Shifting Spiritual Life of American Catholics*, Cambridge (Harvard University Press) 2010; and Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street. Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950*, New Haven (Yale University Press) 1985.

**13** See Lawrence Cunningham, *Catholic Spirituality Today: What Does it Mean?*, in: *Commonweal* 2006; [http://www.catholic.org/national/national\\_story.php?id=18790&page=1](http://www.catholic.org/national/national_story.php?id=18790&page=1).

**14** See statistics compiled by the Georgetown University-based Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA): <http://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAServices/requestedchurchstats.html>.

locus of spirituality and theology, woven through home, family, and community.<sup>15</sup> Spirituality is both domestic and public. Describing the importance of public devotions such as the Good Friday Way of the Cross procession, American Latino historian Timothy Matovina notes: “Hispanic leaders contend that their practices provide a viable model for public worship in a society that often accents individual spiritual quests and the ‘privatization’ of religion...”<sup>16</sup> As several scholars have shown, issues of immigration, economics, and life at the U.S.-Mexican border also carry important spiritual and theological dimensions.<sup>17</sup> Latino Catholic spirituality can well inform practical theology, deeply connecting aesthetics, spirituality, culture, and liberation. Roberto Goizueta argues, for example, that Latin American and U.S. Hispanic intellectual traditions emphasize “aesthetics, or aesthetic experience, as a key category for interpreting human action” – over and against instrumentalist understandings of praxis.<sup>18</sup> Careful attention to U.S. Latino spirituality could stimulate needed further practical theological research on the interconnections between spiritual, aesthetic, domestic, and political praxis.

C. The study of spirituality has grown as an academic discipline in the United States over the past twenty years. The Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality was founded in 1991 to advance scholarship in spirituality and to support the development of spirituality studies as a discipline within the academy. While leading Catholic scholars such as Sandra Schneiders, Bernard McGinn, and Janet Ruffing have been instrumental in shaping spirituality studies, SSCS is quite ecumenical and inclusive, with active members from various Protestant churches. While focusing primarily on Christian spirituality, its members also are interested in cultural analysis and dialogue with other religious traditions. SSCS also includes members from outside the United States, particularly from Ireland and the

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15 On this point, see, for example, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, Maryknoll (Orbis) 1996 and Michelle Gonzalez, *Embracing Latina Spirituality. A Woman’s Perspective*, Cincinnati (St. Anthony Messenger Press) 2009.

16 Timothy Matovina, *Latino Catholicism. Transformation in America’s Largest Church*, Princeton (Princeton University Press) 2012, 188.

17 For example, Daniel G. Groody’s ethnographic study of the spirituality of contemporary Mexican immigrants at the U.S.-Mexican border shows the powerful role of spirituality in the perilous experience of border-crossing: Daniel G. Groody, *Border of Death, Valley of Lives. An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit*, Lanham (Rowman and Littlefield Press) 2007. See also Nancy Pineda-Madrid’s theological analysis of violence against women – and communal resistance – in Juarez, Mexico, on the border with El Paso, Texas: Nancy Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juarez*, Minneapolis (Fortress Press) 2011.

18 Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesús*, Maryknoll (Orbis) 1995, see 89, for example.

United Kingdom. In its early years, SSCS published the *Christian Spirituality Bulletin*; this led in 2001 to the founding of a serious, refereed academic journal, *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, published by Johns Hopkins University Press. Edited by Douglas Burton-Christie, the journal has featured spirituality research utilizing historical, theological, literary, sociological, and practical theological methods. The journal also attends to aesthetics, poetics, visual art – incorporating photography, art, and poetry in most issues. The academic credentials of spirituality studies are reflected in the fact that there is now a Christian Spirituality group at the American Academy of Religion. Spirituality studies include a range of methodological approaches – with strong representation in historical and theological approaches and growing dialogue with social scientific perspectives in spirituality studies. I have previously in this journal outlined as well the importance of practical theological approaches to the study of spirituality.<sup>19</sup>

#### D. Spirituality as important object of study and disciplinary partner with practical theology: Catholic contributions

Considering these aspects of contemporary American spirituality and the discipline of spirituality studies, I would make several points regarding practical theological research of spirituality in dialogue with Catholic perspectives and scholars. First, the current language around “I’m spiritual but not religious” must be examined from the vantage point of ecclesiology. A Catholic perspective on spirituality must assert the ecclesial nature of spirituality – and hence, I would say, the Eucharistic nature of spirituality. Authentic life in the Spirit is life within the body of Christ. At the same time, Catholics can take very seriously (and with openness) the movement to situate spirituality within the secular. Rather than being opposed to the ecclesial nature of the church, a critical relationship between spirituality and secularity (not secularism) has grounding in a Catholic understanding of lay mission and vocation. Practical theology needs to take up the task of carefully assessing the particular shape and fidelity of the spiritual in all the different spheres in which it surfaces in contemporary cultures. This can entail both curious inquiry and sharp critique – for example, in resisting the consumerist dimension of contemporary spirituality. As American-Catholic theologian Terrence Tilley writes: “Our desires are shaped to be satisfied by goods we can buy in the spiritual marketplace, use, and discard, not by the Good that can be ‘bought’ only by a life of commitment... How can modern folk live in fidelity to

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<sup>19</sup> Claire E. Wolfteich, *Animating Questions. Spirituality and Practical Theology*, in: *IJPT* 13 (2009), 121–143.

their religious traditions?”<sup>20</sup> This question could well frame practical theological research and action.

For American-Catholics, alienation from church spirituality can be traced at least in part to the moral failure of ecclesial institutions – for example, in preventing child sexual abuse and in acknowledging women’s gifts. Living in fidelity to our religious traditions entails a process of accountability and restoration. Repentance, humility, reconciliation, hospitality, and dialogue should be the postures of the church in seeking to offer once again the spiritual wisdom and practice of the tradition.

How understand the nature of spirituality? I would assert that spirituality should be understood to encompass both extraordinary and quotidian religious experience. The extraordinary expressions of spirituality that punctuate spiritual classics are indeed part of Christian spirituality – to be critically studied but also approached with some degree of “unknowing.” Catholic sensibilities affirm the mysterious nature of God’s grace, moving into and within human life. I would not deny the possibility of quite extraordinary encounters with the divine, though extraordinary experience should not be the sole paradigm of holiness. As part of a deeply incarnational faith, enlivened by a “sacramental imagination”, Catholics should understand “life in the Spirit” to be interwoven with and embodied in the everyday.

Protestant practical theologians, it seems to me, are quite comfortable with the everyday context of faith. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, for example, have emphasized the importance of Christian practices in the cultivation of a way of life. In the “Practicing Our Faith” book series, for example, Bass highlights Christian practices such as hospitality, household economics, and care of the body.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the recently published *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, edited by Bonnie Miller-McLemore, leads off with a section on mundane practices such as eating, consuming, and playing. While examples of similar attention to everyday practice may be found among spirituality scholars, one can point to what Arthur Holder calls the “hegemony of spiritual classics in the discipline of Christian spirituality”: “By ‘hegemony’ I mean the dominating influence and restricting control of ‘the classic’ as a category.... I want to think about what is missing because it has been left out entirely or relegated to the margins of our disciplinary landscape.”<sup>22</sup> In my view, research on everyday spiritual practice

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<sup>20</sup> Terrence W. Tilley, *History, Theology & Faith. Dissolving the Modern Problematic*, Maryknoll (Orbis Books) 2004, 167.

<sup>21</sup> See Dorothy Bass, *Practicing Our Faith. A Way of Life for a Searching People*, San Francisco (Jossey Bass) <sup>2</sup>2010 and the project website: [www.practicingourfaith.org](http://www.practicingourfaith.org).

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Holder, *The Problem with ‘Spiritual Classics’*, in: *Spiritus* 10 (2010), 24.

has been underemphasized in the study of Christian spirituality. Social scientific and practical theological approaches offer important correctives here.

At the same time, the study of spiritual classics, including mystical texts, within spirituality research points to a gap in practical theology. Long a predominantly Protestant discipline, practical theology rarely looks to spiritual classics as objects of study, hermeneutical dialogue partners, or normative sources. Rather, practical theology has been deeply shaped by hermeneutic philosophy, social science, and ethical philosophy. The gap is most pronounced when one considers the near absence of mystical texts in practical theology scholarship. Mystical authors and texts, on the other hand, feature prominently in Christian spirituality scholarship. This could be a Catholic contribution to practical theology: rigorous study of the rich traditions and texts of Christian spirituality in dialogue with contemporary contexts in order to learn more about the epistemological value of practice; the dynamics of Christian life; the surprising movements of divine grace; the hermeneutical project of constructing contemporary spirituality; and the critical interplay of culture and spiritual practice.

As another way into this issue, one can look at how the French Jesuit spirituality scholar Michel de Certeau (1925–1986) might inform practical theology. In studying sixteenth and seventeenth century mystical texts, Certeau describes mysticism as a kind of social practice among the marginalized that involves the creation of a new discourse, a new domain, with new mechanisms.<sup>23</sup> Doctrine arises later, arising from the practices and subsequent interpretation. Mystical language entails practices of “unsaying”, and it is a modern “quest to discern in our earthly, fallen language the now inaudible Word of God.”<sup>24</sup> Such statements may sound foreign to the language of practical theology, which tends to proceed as a rational form of research and discourse in the academy. Yet spirituality scholars grasp something essential here: the importance, power, and fragility of language when it comes to speech about the divine. This is by no means an exclusively Catholic insight; one would not want to make such blanket generalizations. Yet this sensitivity to language and to silence does seem to arise in the study of the mystics. As mysticism scholar Bernard McGinn writes: “... to speak of inner experience of God is just another example of the impossible but necessary task of all speaking about the unknowable God – an inherently contradictory activity, as mystics of many traditions have insisted.”<sup>25</sup> Engagement with

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<sup>23</sup> Certeau, *Mystic Speech*, 188–189.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>25</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Language of Inner Experience in Christian Mysticism*, in: Elizabeth A. Dreyer / Mark S. Burrows (ed.), *Minding the Spirit. The Study of Christian Spirituality*, Baltimore (Johns Hopkins University Press) 2004, 147.

mystical texts raises for practical theology the question of how to research mysticism (considered both as a kind of experience and as a kind of practice) and perhaps even how to incorporate “unsaying” in practical theological writing. Here one can look to recent work in poetics and practical theology as an important beginning point.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Certeau closely linked mysticism and poetics; by “saying nothing”, the poem “permits saying.”<sup>27</sup>

In bringing Catholic spirituality more into dialogue with practical theology, we would need to hold in creative tension contemplative and apostolic spiritualities, as well as movements of withdrawal from the world and immersion within the world. As mentioned, often these spiritualities coexist and interplay within a single tradition, community, or person. One can envision practical theology that not only conducts research on spirituality but that is shaped by spirituality in its methods, aims, and normative sources. One of the most significant American-Catholic theologians of our day, David Tracy, called for such an integration of spirituality and practical theology, one that could unite the ethical turn in practical theology with a mystical and aesthetic dimension: “The emphasis on the ethical-political in contemporary practical theology continues the prophetic center of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. At the same time, however, I now wish I had also emphasized ... a theological correlation with the aesthetic, the contemplative-metaphysical and the several spiritual traditions of Christianity.”<sup>28</sup> Tracy’s vision of a “mystical-prophetic” practical theology resonates deeply with Catholic sensibilities. Will it perhaps emerge as a fruit of continued dialogue between Protestant and Catholic scholars, practical theologians and spirituality scholars?

### **3 Protestant and German views on the research of spirituality (Jörg Schneider)**

#### **A The rise and the meaning of the word “Spiritualität” (spirituality) in Protestant religious life and theology**

The word “spirituality” is rather new in Protestantism, and it is an imported word. Deriving from specific spiritualities of Catholic monastic orders it has spread into

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<sup>26</sup> See Heather Walton, *Practical Theology and Poetics*, in: Bonnie Miller-McLemore (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, Oxford (Blackwell Publishing Limited) 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Certeau (n. 23), 203–204.

<sup>28</sup> David Tracy, *A Correlational Model of Practical Theology Revisited*, in: Edward Foley (ed.), *Religion, Diversity and Conflict*, Münster (LIT Verlag) 2011, 49 f.

Protestantism and beyond to describe something general and something very subjective at the same time. In the general sense the word describes a mainstream-development of the practice of religion; in the subjective sense it describes these developments on a personal emotional level.

Originally it only described the style and way of life under a rule for a group and its individuals. The styles vary from group to group and in the ways of realizing the purpose of living together. We can distinguish for example the spirituality of the Carthusians from that of the Jesuits with their Ignatian way, or a Franciscan spirituality, which is different to a Dominican or Carmelite one, etc. Spirituality is in that sense the abstract description of how the rule is filled with life, and it is something distinct from other practices.

Protestant groups have developed religious lifestyles, too. But this always was seen with suspicion and often led to the division of religious groups. Defining Protestant groups is sometimes more difficult as that they often do not have an order with clear constitutions, rules or clear spiritual practice from a founding figure. Most denominational offshoots of the Reformation and especially some groups in pietism have nevertheless developed some constitutions and lifestyles. For example the Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine (Moravian Church) with the inspiring faith of Count Zinzendorf, developed a world of religious language, a religious lifestyle and even an architectural style.<sup>29</sup> All are recognisable up to today. Some of its traits, such as the daily watchwords (*Losungen*), have become a widespread source of edification since 1728 as they became an important part of general Protestant spirituality.<sup>30</sup> This demonstrates the permeability of borders that are drawn by the self-definitions of groups.

In German pietism, one of the very influential groups began with Philipp Jacob Spener who founded “a little church within the church” (*ecclesiola in ecclesia*), and private gatherings on spiritual matters (*collegia pietatis*, using this term since 1677). No break from the common Lutheran Church was intended but a more intense life Christian devotion than was possible in mainstream orthodox Lutheranism. Pietists attended (and quite a few still do so) the congregation’s Sunday service and gathered afterwards for a time of Bible study and singing. This is an example of how the longing for reform and renewal may work for a while within an institution. Some groups, however, saw it is necessary to break from the larger covering body – even sometimes before the larger covering body

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<sup>29</sup> See Ulrike Carstensen, *Stadtplanung im Pietismus. Herrnhag in der Wetterau und die frühe Architektur der Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine*, Herrnhut (Herrnhuter Verlag) 2009. For the typical church interiors see e.g. p. 47 ill. 9 or p. 167 ill. 37.

<sup>30</sup> For numbers and procedures see [www.losungen.de](http://www.losungen.de), 1st April 2012.

ostracized them. In this regard, developing forms of spirituality may be a *shibboleth* that can lead to inclusion or exclusion.

The Protestant difficulty with the term “spirituality” is mainly a theological one. The difficulty became more intense with the clear positions from the camps of the dialectical theologians and their neo-orthodoxy. The theological program of the “Word of God” approach radically rejected Schleiermacher and any interpretation of religion as human experience. The word “religion” itself was not considered adequate for describing the true relation of God and his creation. In this conception, religion designated what man desires, not what God desires. The term “religion” was abandoned in favour of the more immediate “faith” as something given by God. The danger in “religion” and hence in “spirituality” was that man might think that he could justify himself before God. Religion and spirituality were terms of the sphere of human works to please God or even of becoming God. In a perhaps inappropriate but clarifying reduction: Religion and spirituality were delegitimized as the erroneous way that humans made their way to God. The dialectical position held, however, that there is no way to God and there is therefore no real spiritual development or spiritual guidance, etc – and if that they are futile as mere human effort. This resulted in a concept of spirituality as self-deception and even arrogance.<sup>31</sup>

While academic theology was and still partly is reluctant in the reception of the term, some churches and congregations widely use it without hesitation, while others still prefer descriptions of Christian life with alternative concepts, such as the verb to “believe” or the noun “faith”<sup>32</sup>. Hans-Martin Barth voted as late as 1990/1<sup>33</sup> against the usage of the term “spirituality” in a move against the free and indeed unspecific use by the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). The Church introduced it at large in 1979.<sup>34</sup> The use of the term “spirituality” in the churches seems to fill a desperately felt gap. In an interpretation of current

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**31** Well written and clear with the Lutheran viewpoint on spiritual guidance, which is parallel to the treatment of the whole theme of spirituality: Dietrich Stollberg, Was ist die theologische Basis geistlicher Begleitung? Ein kritischer Zwischenruf, in: Pastoraltheologie 99/1 (2010), 39–57.

**32** [www.elk-wue.de/glauben/](http://www.elk-wue.de/glauben/) for „believe“. The Bavarian Lutherans ([www.bayern-evangelisch.de/www/glauben/spiritualitaet.php](http://www.bayern-evangelisch.de/www/glauben/spiritualitaet.php)) list spirituality under „believe“, which deals with the main fields of spirituality anyway. [www.zh.ref.ch/handlungsfelder/bs/spiritualitaet](http://www.zh.ref.ch/handlungsfelder/bs/spiritualitaet) [sic] puts spirituality near religious education. All links controlled Mai 2012.

**33** Hans-Martin Barth, Gemeinsam im Glauben und in der Liebe wachsen. Kriterien evangelischer Frömmigkeit, in: Evangelische Frömmigkeit. Jahrbuch des Evangelischen Bundes 34, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 1991, 5–24, 7.

**34** Die Kirchenkanzlei im Auftrage des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (Hg.), Evangelische Spiritualität. Überlegungen und Anstöße zur Neuorientierung, Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn) / Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 1979.

processes in religion, the decline of churchd religion is associated with the need to boost a churchd spirituality. The call for more spirituality may be at some places a surrogate for the loss of theological precision or even the impossibility of being precise anymore, but it is also an answer to the question how to keep people churchd. It may be the case that the current development of spirituality and that the church efforts will not help the churches, but rather promote the evolution of individual conceptions of religion. This is certainly also a mission of the church and part of religious education. On the other hand, what institution would work for its loss of members by making them religiously independent, even if it is an unwanted side effect of a basic task of church duties? With all worries about the decline of membership, nevertheless almost two thirds of Germans still have more or less close ties to the Christian religion in its organized form because of different reasons.<sup>35</sup> The reasons are sometimes not outspoken but lie in the cultural, familiar or even local identities. “Tie” does not necessarily mean “member” – we can see that if the village church needs repair many people will help financially or with work, even if they are not members because of the identity created by the building and the family connection that may be quite old.

And besides this, the church understands itself as founded by Jesus Christ as a communion of believers. Religious independence is to a certain degree a protestant goal but within the communion. The religious communication (Schleiermacher) is only possible if there are enough things in common and if there is space and time to gather. This model assumes however a stability and an identity of belonging. Belonging and therefore being dependent to some degree is contrary to the spiritual goal of being self-sufficient and independent from authority.

In one regard, the concepts around the term “spirituality” stand for the emotional sides of religion. Academic theology, in contrast, cannot reach totally into that private sphere of religious peoples’ lives. People evade the control (and guidance) of pastors, professors and other professionals of religion and so they sample on their own in a non-dogmatic way. This process is reflected in the difficulty of traditional academic, churchd theology to find a language that is not so much concerned about ideas and terms but about relations and actions. The intricate and closed theological systems have lost their persuasive power in a fast moving and changing world whose main concern is communication. Tradition and fixed truths as such have a limited degree of oversight on these matters. This is in part supported by the Protestant theology that questioned traditions and fixed dogma. This is the case even though traditions are necessary for the continuity of systems of beliefs, churches and congregations. In the mediation theology (“Ver-

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35 For Protestant statistics see: [www.ekd.de/download/broschuere\\_2011\\_mit\\_Links.pdf](http://www.ekd.de/download/broschuere_2011_mit_Links.pdf), 4.

mittlungstheologie”), following Friedrich Schleiermacher, we may catch sight of a final attempt to find a relation between the transcendental origins of the Word of God and the human conditions of belief in emotion (“Gefühl”) – in an area not accessible for total intelligible reconstruction.

The model behind filling the spiritual gap by churches is the assumption and the feeling that on one hand something went missing (since when? Why? Is it true that something went missing?), and that on the other it can be found in the content of the new word spirituality. As it is impossible to find a clear definition, the programmes have to stay vague and very disparate. This is probably one reason for a mainly functional interpretation of the contents of spirituality. For example spirituality is used for recreation purposes. It is the content in time-outs for managers to prevent a burnout. It serves as balance of body and soul. Such offers belong to a part-time spirituality. The problem with that is that belief and the resulting *praxis pietatis* should affect the whole life.

## **B Differences between “Frömmigkeit” (piousness) and “Spiritualität” (spirituality)?**

In the German language the word “Frömmigkeit” is the traditional word for describing how religion becomes relevant in one’s life and how religion leads to ethic deeds and ideals on morals. “Frömmigkeit” as term had its peak by the influential definition that Friedrich Schleiermacher gave. His definition is still valuable and the content is now mainly described with the word “Spiritualität”. In most cases, “Frömmigkeit” and “Spiritualität” are used simultaneously but “Frömmigkeit” seems to be outdated. It is associated with old-fashioned opinions on morals and with traditional adherence to church-life such as attending services or knowing classic – that is “old” – songs by heart. It therefore is today associated with the side of the “law” instead of the “gospel”, with a view on a static, moralistic lifestyle.

Schleiermacher gave two directions of the term “piety” i.e. “Frömmigkeit”. In the “Glaubenslehre” he defined in a rather static way: “Die Frömmigkeit, welche die Basis aller kirchlichen Gemeinschaften ausmacht, ist rein für sich betrachtet weder ein Wissen noch ein Thun, sondern eine Bestimmtheit des Gefühls oder des unmittelbaren Selbstbewusstseins.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt*, Berlin (Reimer) <sup>2</sup>1830–31, § 3.

See also Christian Albrecht, *Schleiermachers Theorie der Frömmigkeit. Ihr wissenschaftlicher Ort*

Spirituality on the other side is, already by its etymology, on an active side, because it refers to the actions of the Spirit. The term sounds modern in its ability to describe the very individualistic, always changing self-made access and relation to transcendent matters. Friedrich Schleiermacher already pointed to this relation in defining ethics like this: ethics as science is a “description of the Christian consciousness as far as it is an impulse.”<sup>37</sup> The word “impulse” gives the necessary other direction. Spirituality is about designing (active) the relationship to what or upon whom one depends. So spirituality can be described from people’s opinions, from their behaviour,<sup>38</sup> from their explicit or implicit roots in certain traditions. “Certain”, because there exist meanwhile non-theistic spiritualities.<sup>39</sup> Maybe non-theistic spiritualities are a short-living offshoot of the discovery of the manifold fields where spirituality plays a role in one’s life. Yet the difficulty in finding an overarching term of spirituality increases by the fact that it does not necessarily define metaphysical ways of making sense of human existence.

So the research would be about finding and defining the groups with a common spirituality and about analyzing individual religious activities. From that it should be possible to see the traits of the religious signature of our period. Altogether the discussion will move from finding subtle differences between “Frömmigkeit” und “Spiritualität” to a more content-orientated, relation-orientated and process-orientated definition. If it were possible to get closer to the definition what lived religion is and what its basis are, we would fare better. But

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und ihr systematischer Gehalt in den Reden, in der Glaubenslehre und in der Dialektik, Berlin / New York (De Gruyter) 1994.

**37** Friedrich Schleiermacher, Die christliche Sitte nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt, in: Otto Braun / Johannes Braun (ed.), Schleiermachers Werke 3, Leipzig (Fritz Eckardt) 1910, referring to „impuls“ 130–142, here 131: „Ist nun also die christliche Sittenlehre die Beschreibung des christlichen Bewusstseins, sofern es Impuls ist: so fragt sich, wie wird es denn Impuls, und wie geht es in Handlungen über?“ It is noteworthy to see this in the context of “The Christian Faith in Outline” § 3 “Frömmigkeit” is neither a knowledge or a deed, meaning not made by man or leading to action. To this context see: Christof Ellsiepen, Frömmigkeit als Handlungsimpuls. Zum Verhältnis von Religion und Ethik nach Schleiermachers ‚Christlicher Sittenlehre‘, in: Andreas Kubik (ed.), Protestantismus – Aufklärung – Frömmigkeit. Historische, systematische und praktisch-theologische Zugänge, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 2011, 38–52.

**38** Peter Zimmerling calls it „die Vollzugsseite des christlichen Glaubens.“ See: Peter Zimmerling, Evangelische Spiritualität. Wurzeln und Zugänge, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 2003, 18.

**39** Cf. André Comte-Sponville, L’esprit de l’athéisme. Introduction à une spiritualité sans Dieu, Paris (Michel) 2006.

maybe it will not be possible to define at all something which is – by definition! – fluid and not general but rather individual.

### **C Protestant spirituality under the weakening structure and condition of denominational churches in Germany (“Landeskirchen”).**

In Germany (and Switzerland) we have the peculiar historical situation that there exist territorial entities, forming federal states and “Landeskirchen”, in Switzerland also called “Kantone” and “Kantonalkirchen”. In many cases the borders of the German “Landeskirchen” are identical with existing or former federal states. Altogether 16 federal states but 22 *Landeskirchen* exist as of May 2012, some of which bear in their name their complicated history of merging former *Landeskirchen* and territories (e.g. *Evangelische Landeskirche Berlin-Brandenburg-schlesische Oberlausitz*).<sup>40</sup> Here we see the persistence of religious institutions and identities. But also we witness the ongoing merging into greater churches in middle and northern Germany. The reasons for that often lie in the hope of economic savings. The principle of the need of different *Landeskirchen* is not really questioned, even though it cannot be derived from theological reasons. The strength of tradition can be seen in the fact that the then ancient hierarchies will still be maintained under new names and in a slightly lower level in the new church-administration. Indeed there are different traditions, e.g. the Pomeranian Evangelical Church is a “united church”, which means that it has Lutheran and Reformed elements, deriving from the Prussian Union since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Mecklenburg is, already by its name, pure Lutheran.

Because of the beginning of these “Landeskirchen” by decree of princes of the Holy Roman Empire or Free Imperial Cities and their acknowledgment by the constitution of 1919 after the end of the monarchies they have up to now an exclusive legal position that makes them a statutory corporation with certain rights and privileges in the State of Germany.<sup>41</sup> These bodies have developed their

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<sup>40</sup> [www.ekd.de/download/broschuere\\_2011\\_mit\\_Links.pdf](http://www.ekd.de/download/broschuere_2011_mit_Links.pdf), 7.

<sup>41</sup> The Roman Catholic Church has the same status, also the Jewish community. The “free churches” do not want to be involved so much into the state by ecclesiological reasons and therefore renounce that legal status. On the other hand the Jehova’s Witnesses want to take the benefits of it and be recognized under that law. In recent years the specific German discussion about the recognition of Islam as legal body has not yet led to results because of the different form of organisation of Islam that does not fit into German legal patterns. Islam does not have a

own traditions and spiritualities. Now, as the institutions decline in membership and influence along with their traditions the contents are at free disposal.

The break in tradition and theology-centred Protestant identities may be seen e.g. in the new names of the most recently merging churches. They do not refer anymore to old territories and uniting denominations, but to geographical directions. The Church of Nordelbien (merging churches of Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein) already had earlier merged into a geographically named entity, and now a “North-Church” has emerged. A Church in Middle-Germany has been founded by two very traditional Church-territories that reflected their position as in a province in former Prussia and as in former principalities in Saxony-Anhalt. The churches have changed before, too, of course. Nevertheless, a regional consciousness of a belonging to a certain regional church had developed. Such consciousness can barely be nourished anymore because of the change in the political borders – therefore it is difficult to maintain a distinct consciousness of belonging e.g. to the Church in Württemberg and the one in Baden. Both churches exist within one political federal state, have however different theological and liturgical traditions. Due to social mobility, many of these regional differences are fading from view and becoming more irrelevant but they are perpetuated by the quite stable hierarchies and recruitment of pastors among more traditional and local families. It will be interesting to see if the new churches will develop identities and a sense of belonging as these are crucial for a long-term existence of an organisation or institution. But we have to see that the identity and sense of belonging first apply to the local congregation and only then to bigger and more distant bodies.<sup>42</sup>

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permanent administration, and it consists of more or less independent congregations or societies, and therefore the state does not have representative points of single contacts.

Before the 19th century almost all Christian citizens in middle Europe were organised in church bodies that they did not and could not choose or leave (except emigration, exile in lonely regions or tolerance by the prince). The emancipation of the Jews gave impetus to the general freedom of leaving or belonging to a church. See: Lucian Hölscher, *Geschichte der protestantischen Frömmigkeit in Deutschland*, München (C.H. Beck) 2005, 164 on the individual freedom of belonging to a church.

**42** [www.kirche-im-aufbruch.ekd.de/images/12-08\\_regional\\_erste\\_wahl.pdf](http://www.kirche-im-aufbruch.ekd.de/images/12-08_regional_erste_wahl.pdf) – this collection of papers focuses on the region, but not on the local congregation. In that paper Jan Hermelink gives the reasons for the organisational restructuring into bigger entities; and they are obviously reasons of control and uniformity (‘Region’ als Konfliktfeld und Konfliktlösung. *Praktisch-theologische und kirchengeschichtliche Beobachtungen*, 14–27.19). Maybe we see here the beginning of the amalgamation of congregations into regional bodies, following in this the catholic model of “Seelsorgeeinheiten” with very few pastors and still independent congregations. The congregations have to be kept recognizable as protestant by the implementation of a certain degree of

Adding to this we have the special situation in the new federal states in Germany after the reunification in 1990. The old area of Eastern Germany was previously the core of Protestantism. After living under atheistic regimes from 1933 to 1989, however much has changed. Some eastern parts resisted the anti-ecclesial political program more than others. Generally speaking, the southern parts of eastern Germany stayed more churched than the northern parts, a phenomenon that also applies to western Germany in its north-south divide.

When defining spirituality as the *praxis pietatis* and the way Protestantism sees itself we can discern some classical pillars of Protestant spirituality. There is the main pillar of Jesus Christ and of bible study. The statistics on how many really study the bible show that this is actually more on the side of self-description and not *praxis pietatis*.<sup>43</sup> The reading of the daily watchwords is part of private prayer and of public prayer. The use of calendars with spiritual readings, e.g. the *Neunkirchener Kalender*, is still common in a certain older age group. The importance of the traditional songbook can be seen in that it is a popular gift for confirmations, however that popularity does not say much about its use. At least there are some songs and their poetry that are considered as genuine Protestant such as Paul Gerhardt's verses. The tradition of the songbook as a gift is a document of spirituality, because the book, not the use, represents the Protestant denomination.

Of newer date is the mass attendance of "Kirchentage" (German Evangelical Church Congresses) that are held every two years since 1949. On the other hand the attendance of normal Sunday services is very low, as the institution is regarded unimportant for one's own Protestant *praxis*.<sup>44</sup> The adherence to the church is preserved because of reasons that do not imply personal activity. Because pastors see church-attendance as measure of their standing in the congregation and of their quality of work and because the sermon is ranked theologically extremely high, there is a wide gap between the self-description and self-esteem of pastors and the evaluation by the church members. If however churchgoers attend a service its quality is measured mainly by the sermon. Pastors are elected after the committee has heard a sermon, and the other qualities are only second class. The average Sunday service is not the main source of religious edification and not the

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uniformity, that cannot be guaranteed anymore by the local representative (priest, pastor) of the church.

<sup>43</sup> Silke Harms, *Glauben üben. Grundlinien einer evangelischen Theologie der geistlichen Übung und ihre praktische Entfaltung am Beispiel der ‚Exerzitien im Alltag‘*, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 2011, 24 and [www.ekd.de/download/kmu\\_4\\_internet.pdf](http://www.ekd.de/download/kmu_4_internet.pdf), 18.

<sup>44</sup> About 4% of the Church members attend service on an average Sunday; [www.ekd.de/download/kmu\\_4\\_internet.pdf](http://www.ekd.de/download/kmu_4_internet.pdf), 8, 18 and 23.

cornerstone of the social cohesion of a congregation. The function of the average Sunday is no longer the pivotal point of communication on religious and profane matters for the secular community and religious congregation, so it is celebrated on behalf of the absent members. These forms of communication have spread from a centre (church, service, talk and coffee after the service) to a netlike way in many layers and mobile structures. Not everybody knows everybody in the congregation anymore but some people only from certain events. Religious communication takes places in maybe less obvious ways at the workplace, in leisure time, in internet blogs and chats. The partners for religious communication vary from place to place, there is no personal religious leader like the pastor or priest.

This means that the documents of spirituality change. Had they been centred in theological media (songbooks, tractates, bible-reading, attending services), find we now a more emotional way to religious experience. A sign for the de-theologisation is that in confirmation-lessons only a few basic Protestant texts are learned by heart anymore (catechism, songs, bible-verses). This means that the individual will not give an answer to what Christianity in Protestant interpretation is from given patterns but from personal opinion. Protestantism is what a young person has experienced in the group and in the services he or she had to attend during the year of preparation to the confirmation. That brings up a great variety of ideas. A difficult question is why the churches and within them the pastors (and the teachers in schools) do not insist anymore on the traditional kind of learned spirituality. Learning by heart is considered as old fashioned educational theory and praxis in the manner of authoritarian teaching, not of understanding but only of reproduction of texts. As a disadvantage of this, almost all “sacred” texts are literally lost and cannot therefore help in interpreting one’s situation. The faint memory that there were certain texts in discussions during the lessons and services are not sufficient for a religious analysis and interpretation of one’s life and for a still satisfactory *praxis pietatis* at the existential turning points of life.

We see a shift from dogmatic and authoritarian tradition-bound truths and their communication to emotional and personally substantiated convictions that may change during the biographical evolution. To share these convictions groups like traditional congregations do not suit, but small groups like youth-groups that change frequently or not obliging gatherings on special occasions. There is no obvious need for a traditional institutionalized church in personal religious life, only at few occasions and if it is not demanded there by other members of the family; here the social system of the family stimulates clearly religious performances. If however there is no greater family there is no demand for churched religious performances, or only if there are people who are rooted in tradition. This changes the institutions because they cannot rely on their history, tradition

and self-evidence anymore but have to justify themselves and their existence in never ending inventions.

Protestantism in Europe and the Germanic countries is undergoing many changes – from being a substantial influential majority in organisational, institutional and spiritual matters to a minority within a majority of nondenominational and non churched people.<sup>45</sup> This does not mean a decline in religion and Protestantism altogether but in the institutional power. In the research of spirituality we have to look into implicit religion and the Protestant elements of individual religion.

Theologians and traditional people have a deep historical sensibility of Protestantism stemming from the Reformation, that forming period had been the reference for new emerging spiritualities. That founding phase of certain spiritualities however fades in the consciousness of many churched people. Besides it has become obvious that many forms of a genuine Protestant spirituality have derived from then Catholic practices such as the prayer of the hours or the reception of the desert fathers and mothers. So we experience today a revival of older forms, an input from other religions around the world and a merging of spiritual practises, but without giving account of historical conditions. The old forms are used in a refreshing way, unhampered by historical qualification. It seems to be not important anymore to live one's spirituality of a confession *against* another. They are considered equal, because the theological justification of forms of beliefs has weakened. The authority of doctrine has lost its grip as there is no authority or social automatism that can impose a confessional lifestyle.<sup>46</sup> This leads to less social tension and to the freedom of personal decisions but also to new questions of pastoral care regarding couples in denominationally mixed marriages. On another level it makes it difficult to explain denominational positions in political debates.

## D Protestant approaches to actual lived religion (“gelebte Religion”)

One key problem of defining lived religion is that the term is very ambiguous and applying to individuals, and that makes it difficult to collect empirical data and to

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<sup>45</sup> Wilhelm Gräb, Die Zukunft des Christentums, in: Pastoraltheologie 100 (2011), 332–346, 336.

<sup>46</sup> I often hear comments like these: “As long as we believe in the same God it does not matter if we are Protestants or Catholics, doesn't it?” Or: “I'm happy that denomination doesn't separate people anymore like in old days when people couldn't marry because of the wrong denomination.” Or in the greater context of religious dialogue: „Regarding Islam – we believe in the same God, don't we?”

find common patterns. We have surveys and statistics, but the interpretation is difficult and the questions about the personal *praxis pietatis* are quite general, if posed at all (the sociological point of view asks for the positions and relations of individuals within an organisation or an institution, but not necessarily for their *praxis*, however questions may relate to reading the bible or to private prayer).<sup>47</sup> Also the way of posing the questions in the surveys may result in answers that give general trends but not the personal processes of spiritual development.

To get reliable empirical data we have to look for the “hardware” of spirituality. E.g. we see in bookstores a variety of books on spirituality that respond to the needs of the market. Researchers point to the mass of books on monasteries, cloisters and on monastic lifestyle as help for everyday problems. Just one prominent example of many is the Benedictine author Anselm Grün, whose books about a free personal spirituality and about making oneself sure flood the market. Although this phenomenon is very visible in the media and economically interesting for publishing houses it applies only to a specialised group of highly religious people, to seekers and wanderers, to seekers of personal fulfilment and soul-wellness. The diversity only hints at a literarily met demand. It seems to me that the quest for other documents of spirituality is one of the major tasks of the research of spirituality.

Having found what exactly to look at it is necessary to think about the way of looking. Protestant eyes are focussed by lenses such as the unconditional justification of the sinner, by the distinction between law and gospel and by a *theologia crucis* that implies a strong sensitivity towards the sinfulness of humans. Wolfhart Pannenberg therefore insists that Protestant spirituality is mainly a spirituality of repentance (“Bußfrömmigkeit”)<sup>48</sup>, and he is in the tradition of the great Lutheran Orthodox such as Johann Gerhard.

These theological lenses have practical consequences. Most important the *praxis pietatis* is considered necessary but not as the way to salvation.<sup>49</sup> It is necessary because humans organize and arrange things to cope with them, and the relation to God is part of that. Seen from the perspective of God – if that is

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<sup>47</sup> Already from 2003 but still the most recent survey: [www.ekd.de/download/kmu\\_4\\_internet.pdf](http://www.ekd.de/download/kmu_4_internet.pdf), e.g. “Grafik 1” page 16 and “Grafik 2” page 18. For British conditions there is the comprehensive study of the town of Kendal: [www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/projects/ieppp/kendal/](http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/projects/ieppp/kendal/).

<sup>48</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christliche Spiritualität. Theologische Aspekte*, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 1986.

<sup>49</sup> Dietrich Stollberg (n. 31) goes a bit over the top when denouncing the whole phenomenon on Lutheran theological grounds because it is undeniably existent. His argument against the self-justification before God by fulfilling peculiar spiritual practises may be turned positively into a description of the human struggle to find and to build the relation to God even though it is already there.

possible to take at all – this is good but already fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Being therefore relaxed in the first place about the theological problems of spirituality is really Protestant spirituality. This however does not relieve church and theology from a critical support of church members and pastors in the field of spiritual development of themselves and their congregations.

## E Possible developments in the research into spirituality

The term spirituality applies to more and more fields. The naming of these fields with English terms indicates the import of progress into Europe. E.g. in the field of health care spirituality has become an integral part of treatment and even in German we speak of “spiritual care”. The spreading of the term may have to do with the discovery of humans as extremely differentiated but nevertheless personal beings in a unity of body and soul/spirit/consciousness, and that that unity cannot be easily parted in a clinical or material body-part and “the other part”. The former dichotomy of body and soul has given way to a more holistic view and a functional view. The question is how a spiritual equilibrium may be established to make a therapy altogether successful.

So on the one hand we see that more and more parts of reality are recognized as being soaked with phenomena of spirituality and that on the other hand spiritualities of their own right come to the light, such as an ecumenical spirituality or a female church spirituality.

On a more global level we see the free flow of elements from different religious lifestyles and a free adaptation in the western world. In the Protestant sphere there was an export of patterns of a pietistic *praxis* to other parts of the world, and now they come back in a charismatic version. Adding to this patterns and elements of other religions are integrated. For the research in spirituality the consequences are a widening of the horizons of where to look for documents of spirituality and of defining them. Therefore the research will happen on many levels, from individuals to societies, from groups to big companies, from local congregations to greater regions. If by definition spirituality is the religious lifestyle and *praxis* of faith it is always connected with people. But as individuals are acting as social beings the conditions of the acting out one’s spirituality will come into the focus of research. The churches as very big groups will be part in the research, as will be congregations – how differentiated these groups are within themselves. However the churches will have to accept that there is less “theology first” but a longing for the experience of the Divine – what cannot be produced and guaranteed at all by the church, its personnel and the planned spiritual events. In the slow process of diminishing and dissolution of the denomination-

ally constitutional big “Landeskirchen” just by the demographic decline of the protestant group in Germany, only remnants and fragments of a clearly Protestant spirituality will eventually survive. Long running undercurrents of Protestant spirituality will probably be recognizable much longer. The mainland of the reformation will cherish the “holy” historic places in a touristic way, and also as places for strengthening the cultural identity of nations with roots in the reformation and of non-churched or free Protestantism.<sup>50</sup> That means that the research in spirituality will never cease, but it will find always changing contours. The research as science within the practical theology will deal with a constant in a changing world – the very personal manifestation of religion.

## 4 Commentaries

### I Jörg Schneider on Claire Wolfteich

Claire Wolfteich’s text animates to comment on various paragraphs. I have to restrict the comments on a few.

First I will ask if academic research can have normative aspects. In my first Research Report on spirituality in this journal I made suggestions on the academic accompaniment of Protestant spirituality,<sup>51</sup> and Claire Wolfteich also has suggestions for a support of a spirituality that is in harmony with the basic insights of Christianity and our respective denominations. This wants to keep the denominations in touch with the sources in a historically clarified way speaks for

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**50** How the Evangelical Church tries to improve the baptismal spirituality can be demonstrated at the recent renovation and re-inauguration of the baptism church of Martin Luther in Eisleben that was turned into a „Zentrum Taufe“. It functions not only for the local congregation but also as spiritual place for visiting tourists and seekers. See [www.kirchenkreis-eisleben-soemmerda.de/lilac/cms/de/2808,,/Lutherstadt-Eisleben-Zentrum-Taufe.html](http://www.kirchenkreis-eisleben-soemmerda.de/lilac/cms/de/2808,,/Lutherstadt-Eisleben-Zentrum-Taufe.html) and [www.zentrum-taufe-eisleben.de/zentrum-taufe/konzeption/](http://www.zentrum-taufe-eisleben.de/zentrum-taufe/konzeption/). For the discussions, if there is going to be a baptism tourism and if that is theologically supportable see e.g. [www.dradio.de/dkultur/sendungen/religionen/1495024/](http://www.dradio.de/dkultur/sendungen/religionen/1495024/). Because baptism is considered as an event that has to take place in the congregation one belongs to, the concept of the “Zentrum Taufe” intends that persons to be baptized bring along their pastor and their congregation to Eisleben. The local church only provides the infrastructure and with that the “holy” place. The question remains what is so special about the (indeed very beautiful) Petri-Pauli-Church in which Martin Luther had been baptized by chance.

**51** Jörg Schneider, *Moderne Frömmigkeit zwischen Zeitgeist und Zeitlosigkeit. Auf dem Weg zu einer protestantischen Theologie der Spiritualität*, in: *IJPT* 15/2 (2011), S. 293–329, 324–326.

a connection of Christian spirituality to church and congregation. I think Christian academic theology should indeed do two things. First it should make its research without any purpose. Second it should prepare material and insights for those whom it may concern in church councils, in the parishes, in education, for private search of ways to enhance one's spirituality. But because the research of spirituality primarily tries to describe phenomena and tries to find reasons for current developments it does not give instructions.

But of course the academic work is done by people. Most scholars of spirituality and other academic theologians are deeply connected to lived religion and to church life. There they have to give an example of their critical reflection of what they believe and do and vice versa. Practical theology is the theory of the practice – to use Schleiermacher's definition – but Schleiermacher himself gives the best example of the intertwined Christian life of reflection and spirituality, even in the mode of religious speech, in his sermons. Of course today's practical theology has changed, but this prime definition is still valid. Scholars may have an interest in the enhancement of church life and religious life altogether, but it must be clear, that in this case they talk not on the academic behalf. I plead to clarify the respective mode of speech.

Second I would like to comment on the fact that Protestantism does not know a specific lay spirituality and therefore no specialist or priestly spirituality, at least by definition and by the theology of office and status. Of course there is the expectation that the professionals of religion lead a life according to certain Christian ethic (and moral) principles, which however differ very much (at the moment there is a discussion within the German churches, if partners of homosexual pastors may live in the rectory). The personal spirituality stays private. It shimmers through at almost all occasions and situations, but it can hardly be object of qualification for the job of minister or pastor. Because of the lack of a specific priestly spirituality the orientation may be more difficult in the Protestant area. Maybe some spiritual and charismatic personalities represent a priestly spirituality and spiritual guidance, even if they are not associated with a denomination, e.g. Willigis Jäger (OSB) or Eckhart Tolle. Their success lies in strong and public demonstration of their personal beliefs and their ascribed authenticity.

Third: The religious landscape in Europe seems to take a different development than in the USA. In Germany we have no significant influx of Christian denominations any more. As long as people from southern European countries came to Germany to seek for work there was a stabilization of the Catholic congregations, if they did not found own congregations of their language. The Protestant congregations had a phase of stabilization of membership by the immigration of German speaking Protestants from Eastern European countries

(Russia, Kasachstan, Rumania etc.). They fitted into the existing congregations. It seems that this did not influence a Protestant spirituality, however they stabilized the numbers of attendance on average Sundays because of their more traditional *praxis pietatis*.

A more visible and powerful Christian influx comes today immigration from former Soviet Republics and therefore the Russian Orthodox Church is young and growing.<sup>52</sup> This is not affecting the Protestant situation.

Today in Germany we do not have a substantial reinforcement of a Christian denomination but a shift in the whole composition of the central European religious landscape by a substantial and growing Muslim minority. Here exists an anxiety of Islam in its extreme and fundamentalist form even though fundamentalists represent various tiny groups. The secularist and the religiously indifferent people feel a danger against the democratic and secular institutions and constitutions be it from (extreme) Christian or Islamic forms. Maybe a latent animosity against religion and its institutions (though not against spirituality) gains weight amongst secularists because of political considerations. This already lead to a defensive position among mainstream Protestants. It is difficult to foresee the effects of further privatization of religion in Europe on its public visibility and on the private spirituality. Anyhow the extremist variants of a minority are quite visible and the resistance against them has side effects on the institutional forms of Christianity of whichever denomination and its variants.

To conclude I want to deal with the question of a more “mystical” spirituality. There are some Protestant sensitivities, which should be reconsidered and put into their context. The reflex of Protestants to dismiss mysticism has its origin probably in the close connection of mysticism and monasticism. Monasticism at the time of the Reformation was associated with a life closer to God and therefore more useful for salvation – a thought contrary to the justification of the unjust in the view of the Protestant theologians.

Sensitivities also come from the anxiety of a spirituality that might not entirely be based on the Bible or not be connected to a congregation or church. The fight of the early Reformation against the “Schwärmer” or “Schwarmgeister” was a fight against a spiritualism that could become revolutionary and threaten the order (social, political, ecclesial – all according to God’s will, as it was understood in an interpretation of St. Paul, especially Romans 13, 1–7).

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<sup>52</sup> In 2010 the Russian Orthodox congregation only in Stuttgart had 103 baptisms and just 11 burials. These numbers are almost vice versa at traditional Protestant congregations in the same region. <http://www.rok-stuttgart.de/v3/de/menu-localnews.html> (June 2012).

Nevertheless in the era of the Lutheran orthodoxy a *theologia mystica* came up.<sup>53</sup> It became clear that theology had to deal not only with an explanation of dogmatic problems but also with questions of personal dimensions within the dogmatic system. This was a starting-point that became crucial for Pietism that welcomed the mystical or esoteric (in a good sense) tradition to find expressions of individual religious experience. Since then mystical thought was present but not dogmatically acknowledged. In fact it was a renaissance because e.g. Luther drew much of his language to describe the interior effects of believe from late mediaeval monastic authors that are labelled “mystic”. It was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the influence of Johann Gerhard’s “meditationes sacrae” or of Johann Arndt’s writings vanished completely. One does not need to revive that specific spirituality, but there lies enough material for a renewed religious language. Such meditations, connected to the late medieval “mystics”, could help to formulate a modern spiritual language. The tradition however is broken and non-christian traditions seem to be more attractive.

From today’s point of view mysticism is not necessarily esoteric (in the bad sense). Mysticism can be a part of Christian renewal, but not be the whole solution. Besides many mystical elements have already become popular and entered the religious mainstream. Mysticism has escaped the cloisters and become vernacular. The difficulty will be to keep it precious, but for more people. Sometimes the diluted form of mystic that is presented in the media may hurt the highly religious and the religiously sensitive people, because it is detached from historical depth and mystery. But Karl Rahner SJ wrote in the atmosphere of awakening after the Second Vatican Council „... der Fromme von morgen wird ein ‚Mystiker‘ sein, einer, der etwas ‚erfahren‘ hat, oder er wird nicht mehr sein...“<sup>54</sup> (The religious human of tomorrow will be a mystic one, somebody who has made experiences, or he will not be anymore.)

The churches have the treasures, and if they were confident enough they could distribute these treasures. It seems to me however that the main issues of churches are at the moment social matters or self-preservation.

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53 Valentin Ernst Löscher compares the *Theologia Mystica* with the *Theologia Thetica*, see: Ruth Conrad / Martin Weeber (ed.), *Protestantische Predigtlehre. Eine Darstellung in Quellen*, Tübingen (Mohr Siebeck) 2012, 89 with introduction and annotation 2; Or Johann Gerhard, *Meditationes Sacrae, Ad Veram Pietatem Excitantam, & interioris hominis profectum promovendum accommodatae*, Jena 1606, new edition: Johann Anselm Steiger (ed.), *Meditationes Sacrae* (1606/7), Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt (frommann-holzboog) 2000.

54 Karl Rahner SJ, *Frömmigkeit früher und heute*, *Schriften zur Theologie* 7, Einsiedeln / Zürich / Köln (Benziger)<sup>2</sup>1971, 11–31.22.

Speaking less academic (see first comment) I see the need of a spiritual language that is not kitschy or esoteric, that does not make artificial riddles, but that is open for the mystery and for the unspeakable. This includes an openness and freedom. And if we cannot talk anymore with inherent theistic concepts because we allegedly live in a post-metaphysical era, the mystics may teach us to revere God in the silence.

We enter wild and interesting times. The institutional limitations are lifted and many new forms emerge. They may not be the archetypes that had been hampered by the institutions, even if they sometimes are regarded as such by the prophets and advocates of spirituality as *philosophia perennis*. But they will be religious as such processes have ever existed since people have been trying to find adequate forms for their need to express their belief. Mysticism is helpful because it may concentrate on experience, individualism, but also on scripture – and here the denominational streams flow into the same direction, and regarding most forms of spirituality they may even merge.

## II Claire Wolfeich on Jörg Schneider

Jörg Schneider's very interesting piece gives us much upon which to reflect. To foster this interdenominational and international conversation, I will identify and address several key points here that may be springboards for continued discussion.

We have many points in common. We note that in both the American and European context, "spirituality" has quite broad meaning that extends beyond ecclesial attempts to define it. It is a category that has vitality in a range of settings, including health and business. This complicates the task of defining spirituality. Questions of definition are important from a research vantage point; we need to precisely identify that which we study. Such debates about definition though are by no means unique to spirituality; they affect many fields of study within the academy. Spirituality scholarship contains helpful discussions about definition that can be used to clarify starting points for research.<sup>55</sup> From the Protestant side, Schneider notes more resistance to the term "spirituality" within the churches, as would be expected. While the Catholic hierarchy has sounded some alarms about new age spirituality and an uncritical acceptance of practices such as reiki or yoga (neither uncommon in Catholic retreat centers), the term

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<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth A. Dreyer / Mark S. Burrows, *Minding the Spirit. The Study of Christian Spirituality*, Baltimore (Johns Hopkins University Press) 2004.

“spirituality” remains important in Catholic tradition, teaching, and discourse. So, there is an interesting consideration here of how a community retains the language and practice of “spirituality” when the broader culture claims the same term even as an antidote to religion. The theological cautions about spirituality that Schneider identifies (spirituality as works-righteousness, self-deception) are still fruitful points around which Protestant-Catholic and interfaith dialogue on spirituality can occur. This is a place for practical theology as well. How expand our notion of “practice” to attend sufficiently to the workings of grace and the more receptive, less active aspects of spiritual practice?

In analysing the growing acceptance of “spirituality” within the German Protestant churches, Schneider sees an ironic phenomenon: the move to embrace “spirituality” within the churches may “promote the evolution of individual conceptions of religion” and thus unintentionally foster a move away from church affiliation. I concur that there is this possibility also within Catholicism. I also think that spirituality research needs to carefully explore the theological and cultural impulses even within “secular” or secularizing spiritualities. There is an assumption running through Schneider’s piece that spirituality is individual and private – at least in Protestant manifestations. He attributes this in part to the fact that Protestant spirituality separated itself from the more communal spirituality of monastic communities and their rules. I would be careful about overgeneralizing this point, for (as he notes) of course there are historical and contemporary examples of deeply communal Protestant spiritualities. Moreover, I would resist the categorization of spirituality as individual and private. As noted, there has been important work in spirituality scholarship that points to the public and social dimensions of spirituality, including mysticism. Latina/o spirituality also demonstrates a vibrant form of spirituality that is both public and grounded in the domestic and the everyday. Thus, in research we would need to be careful not to assume that spirituality is necessarily individual and private. At the same time, I would concur that the churches (Protestant and Catholic) need to be quite reflective and critical about the “spirituality” that they promote, lest they find themselves accepting an individualistic paradigm or simply marketing anemic versions of pop spirituality. We have many rich traditions and practices of spirituality in our shared Christian heritage; reaching deeply into them is a critical way for churches to respond to the contemporary desire for spirituality while situating spirituality in the communal life of the church.

A fundamental difference in approach between us gets right to the heart of the matter: can spirituality research be done “without any purpose”, as Schneider proposes? Should academic theologians avoid “giving instructions” when they speak from the academy? Can knowledge and lived religion, or the academic and ecclesial dimensions of practical theology, be so clearly separated? Schneider

takes the position that spirituality research should be performed in an objective fashion as a mode of description and analysis of phenomena. The researcher then may don a different hat and speak in a more engaged voice when addressing faith communities, a more private setting of spiritual search. I appreciate the need to uphold scholarly rigor in the study of spirituality. Indeed, top scholars in the American context have worked long and hard to establish the legitimacy of spirituality studies as an academic discipline. We should be careful not to dismantle the important academic foothold that has been gained. Yet, spirituality scholars themselves assert the self-implicating and transformative nature of their work. Moreover, introducing practical theological approaches to spirituality studies complicates matters. First, practical theology has been strongly influenced by hermeneutical theories that assert the practical and interested nature of all human knowing. While we strive for careful and thorough analysis, our hermeneutical lenses are shaped by practical questions and bias from the beginning – not just in practical theology but in all fields of scholarship. Moreover, attention to transformation, the shaping and guiding of practice, is an integral dimension of practical theology as a theological method according to many influential leaders in the field. For Don S. Browning, for example, “strategic practical theology” brings the fruits of descriptive, historical, and systematic practical theology to bear on contemporary practice.<sup>56</sup> It is not a movement that is separated out from the work of scholarship but rather one of the most distinctive analytical contributions a practical theology scholar can make from within the academy. While I agree with Schneider that practical theology involves developing “the theory of the practice”, I do not think that our work necessarily either begins or ends there. I would assume a more interwoven relationship between theory and practice, theology and spirituality. Theological scholarship – including spirituality research – has normative and transformative dimensions.

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<sup>56</sup> Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology. Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*, Minneapolis (Fortress Press) 1995.

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