

## Perspectives of empirical research in Systematic Theology

Symposium Michael Welker: „International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives of Theology“

“Don’t do that. People never tell you anything relevant.” A doctoral student of mine received this statement from an old Systematic Theology professor of hers when she told him about the project she was preparing: an analysis of pastor’s professional ethics that includes interviews with pastors, vicars and the like. “Don’t do that. People never tell you anything relevant.” Thus, she felt quite insecure: Am I allowed to do empirical research in Systematic Theology? Will I find out anything of relevance?

In my contribution, I will argue that this is indeed the case. First, empirical research is too valuable to leave it to Practical theologians; and second, armchair Systematic Theology might desperately need irritations from *out there*. Michael Welker has been in dialogue with empirical sciences since the very beginning of his theological career; I always found him eager to learn what happens *out there*. Yet I don’t know whether he would agree that Systematic Theology as a discipline would in itself benefit from empirical studies. The best place to find out is an honouring symposium; so I am happy to be here and grateful to Jürgen von Hagen, Bill Schweiker and Piet Naudé for the brilliant idea and all the organization.

I want to proceed in three steps. In the first section, I will explore some strands of Protestant systematic theological thinking that in my opinion lead to the idea of empirical research. Secondly, I will introduce some examples of the research my team and I do in Heidelberg. The third section will provide a short outlook.

### State of research

#### Systematical strands

It belongs to the prehistory of our topic, that even before the advent of modern empirical science there was a lot of theological interest in the world of experience. I do not want to bother you with single historical positions. Instead, let me propose a simple scheme, of course heavily oversimplified. But alas, I’m an ethicist, I need such schemes. So, if we differentiate in the history of theology basically between two bundles of motives: on the one hand, Platonist motives, and on the other hand, Aristotelian motives. What I want to call Platonist is the reference to a world of ideas *beyond (behind or under)* the world of experience, accumulating in the idea of the good or God, respectively. Platonist accounts, exemplarily represented in late Augustin, emphasize a radical notion of grace that is counterfactual and transcends anything in the empirical world, especially ourselves and our ridiculous and futile striving for justification and perfection. The empirical world is basically set free from any religious overtones, free to be pragmatically used (*uti*). Aristotelian accounts, to be found for example in Thomas Aquinas, stronger relate the divine to the empirical. Worldly efforts, strivings, habits, forms of life, forms of religion, organisations are far from perfect but nonetheless relevant in a theological sense. (In this scheme, the Lutheran Reformation can in the first instance be understood as re-plantonization of Roman Aristotelism. But of course, it is not so easy. The upcoming brilliant dissertation of James Dunn shows, how Platonist and Aristotelian strands of thought are heavily intertwined in

early Protestant university theology.) Under the conditions of Western modernity, the opposition between these two types reappears in the opposition of Kantian and Hegelian accounts to ethics and, hence, theology: Kants counterfactual *ought* and Hegels *Sittlichkeit* (as opposed to Kantian morality).

What's the benefit for our topic? In this ideal typology, the poles can be connected to two different notions of "experience": on the one hand the Platonist notion of inner experience, the joyful spirituality of *theoria*, turning away from and transcending the sensual world; on the other hand the Aristotelian notion of sensual, intellectual and affective experience, fueled by prudence, wisdom and all the well-known ethical virtues. Luthers "sola autem experientia facit theologum", only experience makes the theologian, refers to the inner experience of self transcendence in line with the late Augustin: a Platonist account. Melancton, although heavily in line with Luther, reintroduced some aspects of the Aristotelian account when he, in his *Loci communes*, revisited the traditional forms of theological thinking and Christian practice with the aim of reconstructing and reshaping these forms. Lutheran and reformed orthodoxy emphasized tradition and form, the pietists advocated for an inner experience that was entitled to burst all existing traditions and forms. It was a famous conversation between Nikolaus Ludwig Earl of Zinzendorf, the famous pietist and founder of the Herrnhut community, and John Wesley, founding father of the Methodists. Wesley, a modern, psychological thinker, referred to evolving religious experience with all its shades of grey, whereas the Earl of Zinzendorf insisted on a radical concept of grace, stepping into life in a non-derivable punctual inner experience. The German church father of the 19th-century, Friedrich Schleiermacher, who was educated in a pietist context, grounded his theory of religion in a Platonist account, but, the older he became the more, he referred to the traditions and forms of Christian life evolving throughout history. Right-wing Hegelian theologian Richard Rothe laid all his trust in this historical movement of the objective spirit, finally leading to a dissolution of the church in the moral organism of the state. Crisis theologians of the 1920s, thinkers as different as Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, heavily opposed this Aristotelian trust in existing forms and historical development and revived Platonist counterfactuality in terms of either bomb-like, vertically hitting revelation or of the abyss, underlying and potentially breaking every cultural form. Nonetheless, the emphasis on cultural forms returned: for example in contextual and postcolonial theologies that point at the contextuality and non-universality of every theology.

Of course, this ideal typology does not hold for more than 10 minutes. Of course, the outer and the inner, form and content need each other. This typology is not absolute but relational; so it's more a question of emphasis than a question of confession (which side are you on?). Nonetheless, for our topic of empirical research in systematic theology, the typology might be helpful. Whenever you state that empirical research is theologically relevant, you presuppose that there *is something* in the forms of culture, history, everyday life that is worthwhile being studied. So, willingly or unwillingly, you find yourself on the Aristotelian or Hegelian side. And you will have all that legitimate Platonist protest against you: I will return to that in the end. In the following, I will argue that also, and perhaps especially, Protestant systematic theology will heavily benefit from an empirical and thus Aristotelian account. Let me explain why.

### Present concepts of (German, Protestant) systematic theology

If you look at some recently published systematic theologies in German language – to stay in the province of my own context – experience plays quite some role. Ulrich Barths late work *Symbols of Christianity* revisits and reconstructs protestant *topoi* with permanent reference to today's experience. If you look closer, this experience is the specific religious experience of one single subject, the author in his piety. In Ulrich Barths case, this is a quite modest and humble piety of a late modern liberal, experiencing a personal uplifting mainly in the context of worship and church music. This reliance on one's own experience is part of the program: doing systematic theology means to give account of one's own religious experience in the context of one's own confessional tradition. This liberal systematic theology deliberately has a subject of experience, the authors I. But what does that mean in times of religious pluralisation and individualisation?

At the other side of the spectrum, Wilfried Härle's systematic theology (dogmatics and ethics in two books, but within one concept) refers to what he calls the "Christian understanding of reality". This Christian understanding of reality is nothing but the propositional content of belief: the belief in God as he has disclosed himself in Jesus Christ. Christians according to Härle claim this understanding of reality to be the adequate and true understanding of reality as it is. It's the task of dogmatics to explicate this Christian understanding of reality and the task of ethics to deduce moral consequences from it. This systematic theology has a subject as well, since there is no belief without believer who *experiences* this truth as true. But this subject completely vanishes behind the bold objectivity of theological propositions. (Contextual theology would answer that this is the narrow perspective of an old white man universalizing his own experience.)

A third example shall be named, the systematic theology of Claas Huizing, consisting of his ethics, "Shame and honour", from 2016, and his recently published "Doctrine of life" (Lebenslehre). Huizing follows the idea of a wisdom theology that operates beyond hyperbolic theological categories like sin and justification. The Bible as a brilliant piece of literature is a source of wisdom and prudence that allows for developing an art of living a bodily, sensual and spiritual life. Huizing, a renowned writer by himself, starts from his own experience of growing up in a traditional reformed environment near the Lower Rhine with a dark moral spirituality of guilt and sin. Unlike Härle and much more than Barth, Huizing often operates with a figure of an I that oscillates between a literary and biographical I, but nonetheless claiming relevance of its insights for others.

Now, who is the subject of experience in systematic theology? The author as a religious subject: vicariously giving account of his own faith but appealing to consent from other Christians like Ulrich Barth, claiming a pope-like universality like Wolfgang Härle, or offering wisdom potentially relevant for everyone who can read like Claas Huizing? Theology is different, but in every case its subject is the subject of the (old white male) author.

From homiletics we learn that one of the most dangerous words from the pulpit is "I". Does it mean: The pastor as an individual? As an exemplary subject of the community? As representative of "mankind" in total? In systematic theology, we tend to hide the "I". Maybe this is the most dangerous strategy.

In this presentation I follow the thesis that empirical accounts in systematic theology can at least irritate this “hidden I”-strategy. That does not mean that I argue for a sociology of conviction, as in news magazines just before Christmas: 12 % of the population believes that Jesus Christ is the savior or is risen from the dead etc. This is also empirical, but you can never understand by counting. Nonetheless, even a sociology of conviction points at a plurality of beliefs. And yes, plurality is the issue. The post-Kantian insight that – here: in the field of reason – one subject cannot speak for all humankind (on the liberal side), not even for the community, the “context”, one’s own subgroup, milieu etc. (on the communitarian side): this insight has not really been taken up in Systematic theology. We do not know too much about the plurality of working theologies *out there*: in the parish, in diaconia, in church leadership, in families, in schools etc. This does not mean that an empirical study of the working theologies in the field discovers the true, right and authentic. But maybe it can irritate armchair theology that is – on the side of experience – only derived from introspection.

### Learning from practical theology

Here, we can learn from practical theology. There are some approaches to theology as an empirical business. The phrase “Theology as an Empirical science” was – as far as I know – used first by James Macintosh from the Chicago School in 1919. Inspired by the natural sciences, he analyzed ordinary people’s religious experience, aiming at the formulation of “theological laws”. In another paradigm, but again under the headline “Empirical Theology”, Werner Gruehn started in 1936 to study personal religious experiences with psychological tools. His goal was to turn to “real life” in theology (with a very naïve notion of “real life”).

Later, the Dutch school around Hans van der Ven came to professionalize empirical methods in practical theology and arrived at a formal identification of practical and empirical theology. Here, research has been conducted in the field of specific dogmatic topoi, such as suffering and theodicy (van der Veen/ Vossen 1995), with systematic theology providing the theoretical framework for the empirical study. In some works, theological topoi are operationalized such that they can be researched in practice (“theological deduction”); in others, categories are derived from the material.

In a more phenomenological account, Hans-Günther Heimbrock conceives of „Practical Theology as Empirical Theology”. Referring to a phenomenology of “lived religion”, Heimbrock is interested in the lived experience [Erlebnis] seen from the first-person-perspective. The articulation of this experience by means of cultural patterns shapes experience. Thus, the “analysis of the culturally shaped forms and symbolic representations of life” (11) by means of in-depth case studies is the central method of this empirical theology.

Nearly a decade ago, Carsten Gennerich conducted a project on *empirical dogmatics of the youth age* at school (Gennerich 2009). He tries to relate pupils’ experience (that he standardizes to basic experiences referring to certain value orientations) and theological categories (sin, belief, justification, wisdom, providence, last judgement, hope, creation, neighborly love). Theological categories are, in line with symbol didactics, understood as “models disclosing reality” (391). The empirical account provides teachers orientation about the situation of the pupils and helps them interpret their statements (2009a, 194f.).

In evangelical theology, the missional approach in empirical theology has been proposed (Höschele 2009). Here the benefit of empirical research is seen in the fact “that it reconnects systematic theology, practical theology, and missiology. A theology that asks what types of motifs help specific groups of people to understand God, how they imagine Christ as meaningful to them, or what metaphors of salvation are most helpful for people when they become followers of Jesus will be a theology that serves its true purpose – the communication of the gospel to humans in their particular situations.” Empirical research is here an instrument of the missionary preacher.

Another approach that received some attention is *Theological Action Research*. The basic idea is here to study the relation of “theology” (knowledge) and practice (doing) in “living faith” (18). This concept is hermeneutical as well. The specific contribution of TAR consists in a set of methods that are located in a “collaborative process between participants [in an organization] and researchers”, acknowledging “the diversity of experience and capacity” (36). So, empirical research is a common endeavor of researchers and practitioners. The aim is understanding, but also bringing about new forms of action (36).

Another turn from symbols to practice takes place in pedagogics of religion. With reference to John Austin, religion is conceived of as practiced in performative acts (Thomas Klie, Bernhard Dressler). In this perspective, religion does no longer appear as a holistic interpretation of reality or a distinct sphere but web of social practices that has to be studied as such.

In sum, in empirical accounts in practical theology, a shift in social ontology (in the question: What do we consider as objects in social reality) can be observed: from subjects with their values and the symbols that address it to practice and action. This shift is interesting for systematic theology as well, especially for ethics.

## Empirical research in ST in Heidelberg

Let me give you a brief overview of our empirical research in systematic theology. I will touch four different fields of interest: first, working ethics and professional ethics; second, moral subjects and the reality of responsibility; third, the reality of religious communication; fourth, religious practice and its contexts.

### Working ethics and professional ethics

My first real empirical project was not yet on working theology but on working ethics. I was interested in hospital chaplains *doing ethics* in the clinic. The project, a cooperation between systematic theology, medical ethics and medical anthropology, included 29 hospital chaplains in different clinics all over Germany. By interviews and participant observation, we tried to find out what working concepts of ethics these pastoral caregivers have in their professional lives. Among the most important results was the insight that hospital chaplains understand ethics much broader than clinical ethics usually would do: not only restricted to difficult decisions in the course of medical treatment, but including organisational ethics, pre- and post-decision care and many other issues as well. Moreover, we could show what theological categories chaplains use in ethical situations, and how they use them. We took together these and many more findings in a normative (theological) reconstruction of ethics

in hospital chaplaincy and suggested education modules for Clinical Pastoral Training. The book, "Ethics in hospital chaplaincy", published 2016, was quite influential in the field.

From here, we combined the idea of working ethics with the concept of profession. Hospital chaplains can without doubt count as a profession: they are educated in scientific standards, they have a task to contribute to the common welfare, they work in highly asymmetric relationships with vulnerable individuals et cetera. Thus, the question of a professional ethics of hospital chaplains arises. In how far do hospital chaplains regulate their own affairs also in a normative sense, and in how far should they? So, in the field of professional ethics, we have an ethical triangle: one, the working ethics of professionals; two, the ethical self-reflection of professionals (this is professional ethics in a narrow sense); three, impulses from academic ethics and poimenics (this is why I cooperate with Annette Haußmann, our poimenics professor at the faculty). Each of the three corners of this triangle does in fact influence the others (and, normatively spoken, should do so), and to get the whole picture, they all have to be considered. This is one of the reasons, why systematic theology – in this case: ethics – needs empirical research in order to gain knowledge especially about the working theology: if, and only if, you buy into the Aristotelian or Hegelian presupposition that there is something relevant in this working theology.

#### Moral subjects and the reality of responsibility and autonomy

A different ethical approach does not start from professional subjects in their perceptions of ethical problems and situations. It starts from the grand concepts of ethics, especially theological ethics, such as dignity, responsibility, autonomy and so on. Usually, ethics explicates these concepts in a normative manner. How must we conceive of dignity, do we start with Kant or with for example Beauchamp and Childress, and in what sense do we have the duty to respect others' dignity? What is responsibility, how far does it extend, does it have limits? Et cetera. This is a normative business that either does not need any empirical knowledge at all (if you start with Kant) or at least not too much. The alternative I want to advocate for is to start with the same grand concepts but to ask for the social reality of dignity, responsibility, autonomy and so on. Now, if you want to ask for the social reality in a non-naive way, you have to presuppose a certain social ontology. There are several well-established alternatives: Do you speak about reality in societal structures, reality in discourses, reality in social actors' intentions? I want to suggest another social ontology, namely practice theory in the line of Theodore Schatzki and Andreas Reckwitz, to give just two names. Social practices are customary procedures in space and time that include human and non-human entities. Practices are not actions executed by primarily given subjects to achieve goals. Instead, they are social habits that include specific subject positions and specific forms of *knowing how* inscribed to them. Social practices might be discursive or non-discursive, but they always involve bodies and material entities. What can we find out about practices of dignity, practices of responsibility, practices of autonomy and so on?

At the moment, we are starting a project on practices of responsibility. It is situated in the context of environmental ethics. In a normative approach, responsibility is a relation between certain *subjects* are held accountable for a certain *scope* in front of certain *authorities* and in consideration of certain *values* (norms, goods or virtues). In the perspective of practice theory, this relation shifts its status from a logical scheme to a web of

social practices (Bachmann 2017). Responsibility, then, is socially practiced whenever liability of someone in front of someone else for a past or upcoming issue by invocation of certain norms or values is performed in concrete, identifiable routines. In this perspective, the elements of the responsibility relation are not conceived of as stable or given but rather as constituted and sustained by the respective practices (Buschmann and Sulmowskij 2018). For example, responsible subjects do not 'exist' by themselves; instead, the position of the responsible subject has to be performed in a web of social practices of holding each other accountable.

In each aspect, responsibility practices extend beyond discourse. To give an anecdotic example: the emerging habit in Western European countries to show oneself in thick winter clothes in video conferences can be reconstructed as a two-layered non-discursive responsibility practice. I (*subject 1*) show you (*authority 1*) that I lowered the room temperature in my office in order to reduce the consumption of gas and oil (*scope*). Even if I could afford to pay the higher energy prices, I abstain from freeriding due to climate (and, in times of the Ukraine war, political and social justice) reasons (*values*). Should you still wear T-shirts, I (*authority 2*) at least implicitly call upon you (*subject 2*) to do the same. This is what I mean by practices of responsibility.

Concretely, the project investigates the question if and under which conditions individual and collective actors take responsibility for climate protection, especially for the mitigation of greenhouse gases. This is a crucial question in environmental ethics. The fact that climate protection is a global public good and knowledge about climate change usually relates to the earth climate as a whole, whereas all possible subjects of responsibility operate in spatially limited areas, is likely to detach knowledge from action and to minimize responsibility. Recently, local approaches to climate responsibility – green city etc. – have been proposed. The question is: Do those initiatives change responsibility practices?

As a contribution to environmental ethics, this project aims at developing a theory of local climate responsibility. Only here, the project shifts from descriptive to prescriptive ethical reasoning. The empirical insights are integrated in a normative concept of responsibility that is related to other concepts such as the precautionary principle etc. With Axel Honneth I call that normative reconstruction – again an Aristotelian or Hegelian approach.

Another project, that is about to become reality, focuses again on the medical sphere. The idea is to study practices of autonomy in the hospital. We all know, that patient autonomy is the legal and legitimating ground of every medical treatment. But honestly, how often have you been explicitly asked by a physician whether you agree to a certain treatment or not? These situations are very rare and, in addition, usually quite formal (for example if you have to fill out a questionnaire before an operation). Nevertheless, usually you feel acknowledged as an autonomous subject by your physician. There are, anecdotically spoken, other practices of autonomy: there is that public deliberation just as "I think it is an inflammation. I'm thinking about – well yes, I give you an antibiotic", giving you the opportunity to intervene and say "Uh, antibiotic, isn't there another possibility?". There is that little moment of hesitance just before the tip of the syringe penetrates your skin, giving you the opportunity to defend your bodily integrity. These practices of autonomy are deeply rooted in the professional habits of physicians. They are practices of dignity, staging the invisible,

untouchable, counterfactual concept of human dignity. At the same time, these practices are highly vulnerable in the daily operations of the complex apparatuses that we call hospitals. Thus, it's essential to understand how these practices are sustained: how they come up in discourses, how for example physicians reflect on them, what symbols and imaginations they use to represent their intention to respect the dignity of the patient.

Practices of responsibility, practices of autonomy: I understand that as deeply theological issues: for example, dignity is an absolute concept. So how can something that is intentionally unconditioned and infinite become reality in social practices that are necessarily conditioned and finite? The same holds for responsibility. If you accept to be responsible, you again buy into something that is potentially unlimited. Behind your neighbor, the next neighbor waits; need is always bigger than resources and so on. The relation of potentially infinite extension and limited resources of responsibility has been heavily debated in theological ethics in the last decade. In the case of responsibility as well as in the cases of dignity or autonomy, rationality and practical wisdom are needed to navigate on the borderline between the finite and the infinite. I would call that religious rationality (or maybe religious wisdom) – an object worthwhile studying.

### The reality of religious communication

It's not ethics only that guides systematic theology onto the empirical track. Let me introduce you to another project with the title "Loci diaconici", meaning: theological topoi in diaconia (or, adapted to non-German contexts, Christian social services). In Germany, diaconia is considered part of the church by law, regardless of its organisation forms. The bulk of employees as well as volunteers works here, and the vast majority of German population get in contact with the church only as clients of diaconia. Nonetheless, diaconia is in many regards a quite secular enterprise. Many employees are not members of the church, theologians do not play a very important role in many diaconal enterprises, and in some cases, diaconal services are provided without any reference to the brand diaconia (and its famous logo, the so-called cross with a crown). In academic theology, the understanding of diaconia as something theologically relevant is somewhere near zero. Pithily said, the theological problem with diaconia is that it is not considered a theological problem.

In this situation, we wanted to find out whether something like religious communication (let's call it theology) takes place within diaconia. In in-depth interviews with diaconal employees – some of them theologians, but most of them not – we try to learn about their perceptions of religious communication in diaconia. Originally, we planned to triangulate these data by participant observation. But this was a victim of the Covid pandemic.

Nonetheless, the results are intriguing. Of course, as expected, religious communication in diaconia is perceived as rare and uncertain. But nonetheless, employees connect a broad spectrum of situations and issues to "religion". In a positive sense, if for example the preservation of personhood and individuality at the end of life is concerned. But also in a negative sense: the religious phrase "neighborly love" is perceived as denoting an overload of professional demands and, connected to that, tendencies of hypocrisy in diaconal leaders. Moreover, the data show a plethora of strategies to relate to religion in everyday professional life. At the moment, we are in the midst of interpretation of these findings.



And again, there is the question of the subject, now: the religious subject. Traditional liberal theology centres on the religious subject. This has been criticised, advocating for the objectivity of revelation or, in its apparently smoother post-modern version, for the strangeness of the stranger. Coming from the liberal tradition, I would not want to give up a focus on the subject with all its emancipatory potential. But I agree that the subject cannot be taken for granted. This can be learned from the ethical quest for practices of subjectivation such as practices of autonomy or practices of responsibility. When and in which situations do individuals perform as moral subjects? And, in analogy, in dogmatics: When and in which situations do individuals perform as religious subjects? When and how do they relate to something like religion? In what respect do they understand themselves as doing religion?

### Religious practice and its contexts

My final example is a project called “Religion in urban space” which is at the moment prior to its final publication. Again by means of social anthropology we investigated what happens on the religious field in newly erected city quarters in 7 midsize and large German cities. Usually, neither churches nor mosques (nor synagogues nor temples) are built there. So, how does religious life appear in the urban space? How is it performed, perceived, negotiated? How much religion are urban societies willing to bear, and in which forms are religions accepted and perhaps even welcomed by city officials, planners, and the population?

One interesting finding is that religions in the urban space try to stage themselves in the public as interreligiously open. Interreligiosity seems to be the central common normative expectation of the urban public towards religion. Religion may appear in the public as colourful and diverse, but it ought to appear as peaceful and conciliatory, providing –this is our interpretation – the urban society with a powerful image of domesticated and reconciled diversity. Religion is not tolerable as polemic or confessional, characterized by too high moral standards or truth claims. Thus, in the field of religion, urban societies vicariously work on their own perceptions of and problems with diversity.

This is related to a field of research on practices of publicity (or practices of the public). How do religions appear in the public but also contribute to the constitution of a public sphere – a sphere that we know is not at all stable and solid but has to be re-performed time and again. Here, theological ethics meets public theology in its interest for public spaces. In some respects, this leads us back to the practices of responsibility I started with. Normative concepts of the public presuppose subjects that feel responsible for common affairs. Thus, the circle is closed.

## Conclusion and Outlook

### Conclusion

What I tried to show you is the perspectives of a specific kind of empirical research in systematic theology, especially – but not only – ethics. This program results in the perception that the concepts we work with in systematic theology (e.g., the moral subject; the religious subject; religion; human dignity; holy places; the public sphere as theological space; et cetera) are part of a social reality that we must understand when we want to

understand the concepts. They are a part of the complex web of social practices. By analysing these practices, we probably arrive at a more realistic dogmatics as well as ethics. This is why systematic theology needs in my opinion its own empirical approach (and not only the acknowledgement of empirical data from the social sciences).

Especially the concepts that are traditionally controversial between different strands of theology can be addressed by means of practice theory inspired research. Is the *subject* a good starting point of theology or not? In how far can we speak about *religion*? Of course that does not mean that the battle between different theologies can be decided and ended by such research. But we can study how something like *the subject* or *religion* is performed in social practice.

### Methodological problems

Like many other empirical approaches, this account shows a lot of methodological problems. The most important one is the identification problem. What in that messy social reality of practices is identified as practices of dignity/responsibility/doing religion? As in every hermeneutical approach we are not able to escape the hermeneutical circle. We don't start from scratch. There are pre-concepts of dignity, responsibility, religion that underlie these studies. The only thing to do is to disclose these pre-concepts as far as possible and to use communicative validation of the interpretations. The decisive methodological question is: which method is able to irritate the open and hidden assumptions and the pre-concepts the study starts with? This question cannot be answered generally; but it has to be answered in every study.

Another methodological question is about normativity. Research on practices is normatively laden by its pre-concepts and by its interpretations. If we don't share Hegel's metaphysical optimism that social reality is successively enriched with objective morality (*Sittlichkeit*) that we can read out by studying it, we cannot in principle disprove the suspicion that it's our normative convictions that we project onto reality. The concept of normative reconstruction that we borrow from Axel Honneth is not immune in this respect. Again, we have to employ the triple strategy of disclosure of assumptions, communicative validation and cultivation of irritability to prevent us from Pippi Longstockings "I make the world as it pleases me".

Moreover, both problems, the identification problem and the normativity problem, are in a certain sense adequate. Research is part of the same cultural space as its field. The hermeneutical circle does not only come up when research starts; it's already present in the field itself. Individuals in the field reflect their experiences, they interpret, argue with others, drop their interpretations, reinterpret and so on. For example, the problem whether something is religious or not is not only a problem of research but a problem of the field itself. Hence, by finding itself involved in the hermeneutical circle, theological reflection mirrors in some respects the reality of the field: that's what I mean by adequate.

It is important to see that this empirical research in systematic theology is not at all representative –since we know from postcolonial theology that representation means stealing the other's voice. That is why statistics is of no value in this case. Luther's "pro me" only works in a population of  $n=1$ . This research is not even authentic in the sense that it

gives an original picture of social reality as it would be without this kind of research. Instead, it gives account of theology being in itself part of the social reality it addresses.

In sum, this project of an empirically enriched systematic theology is guided by the optimism, that the contamination with reality will provide more gain than loss for ethics as well as dogmatics. This is the Aristotelian optimism I described above. It might at least contribute to a fruitful irritation of long-lasting convictions. It might enhance the entanglement of academic reflections with theologies out there. It might provide many surprising findings on practical wisdom and religious rationality – findings on, if I may say so, the phenomena Michael Welker probably would include into the *work of the spirit*.