Discerning the Paradigm

The idolization of context is embedded in a paradigm that is difficult to discern, masking the practice with what seems normal or even good to most. Many scholars who belong to multiple dominant groups know the privileging of their assumptive worlds in practical theology only by a “felt sense” (Gendlin) of tradition or rightness. To understand the ideas I am posing, consider an analogy: During the Jim Crow era in the United States, one could cautiously make the claim that white supremacy may have felt normal, even moral, to most white members of society, especially in the South. To those whom the system benefited, its causes, privileges, and the devastating effects remained invisible because they were assumed. Though most whites could not name it, people experienced the power of white supremacy nonetheless. Similarly, both the idolization of context as well as the paradigm that it supports have yet to be known by symbols, which is the critical work we have to do.

In this chapter, I guide you and other readers through a step-by-step process of inductive reasoning. The paradigm will not necessarily be clear within a particular step along the way. However, the steps in the argument will, cumulatively, create a fuller picture in which these ideas will be illumined. An indirect, incremental approach to understanding the paradigm is necessary because to one degree or another you, other readers, and I are entangled in the very subject under discussion. If you belong to multiple dominant groups, more than others you benefit from the paradigm, which makes the paradigm more difficult to recognize. (I realize how presumptuous this might sound, but I hope to make this clear.) Even if you do not experience privilege most of the time, you may experience a sense of disorientation or even disbelief at moments. I certainly did. All of us in practical theology have been steeped in and formed by the paradigm, which means that everyone has a distance to travel in grasping its origins, effects, and pervasiveness.

1 Gendlin argues that one’s felt sense of an experience is vital to the process of meaning making. Eugene T. Gendlin, Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning: A Philosophical and Psychological Approach to the Subjective (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), xviii, 14, 91.

2 Though the dominant group in practical theology is not monolithic, those who have the most social power tend to share common characteristics. They tend to be white, male, able-bodied, Protestant, and from North America or Europe. Furthermore, they tend not to identify as LGBTQ in their writing.
Self-protective resistance to understanding the idolization of context and the paradigm in which it is embedded is to be anticipated and treated gently. For many, the concept of privileging an unexamined frame of reference challenges assumptions of which we have not been able to become aware and do not want to become aware – because it threatens to dismantle the advantages that come from idolatry, because there are risks to those who challenge it, because we fear being shamed, or any combination of these and/or other fears. Rather than provoking anxiety and possibly defensiveness by performing a shaming exposé, I move slowly through this chapter, painting the big picture in small steps. By taking an indirect, incremental approach I intend to help you ease into and manage the feelings that the ideas provoke. Paying attention to what arises in you as you read is part of the process of taking on that I am advocating. My intention is to write in ways that create conditions in which you and other readers are able to move with me so that together we can open up the complexity of idolizing context.

There are five steps in this process of inductive reasoning. First, I start with the lingering traces of the Enlightenment and empire – vestigial habits of objectivism and practices of colonialism that have been carried over to theology.