A few years ago I co-taught a course for first- and second-year doctoral students from different academic areas in our graduate department of religion. As they rotated responsibility for presenting, I noticed a subtle but clear posturing, running just below the surface, written into body postures, gestures, and speaking habits. More credibility and status surrounded those in certain disciplines. For those familiar with theological education, I hardly need say: the more theoretically-focused areas garnered more esteem.

Why did those closer to practice (e.g., homiletics, pastoral theology) question their knowledge, while those who foreground theory (e.g., historical studies, systematic theology) assume an air of greater confidence? Since I served on the committee that oversaw their matriculation, I knew that on paper there was little discrepancy in their credentials. Their behavior was even more peculiar because these students had entered a funded program designed precisely around teaching for the practice of ministry. By the program’s standards at least, those closer to pastoral and religious practice should even have had an advantage. What most surprised me was how early in the students’ careers such patterns set in and became established. How did people fresh to the academy so readily absorb its unspoken values about theory’s dominance?

This moment in time encapsulates a conundrum in relating theory and practice that persists within the theological academy and its constituencies despite ourselves. Despite all that practical theologians have accomplished in advancing the cause of practice—and one of my central points in a 2011 presidential address to the International Academy of Practical Theology stressed the need to quit lamenting our sorry state—the very categories we seek to unsettle, those of theory and practice, continue to entrap us. The terms

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1 In addition to my appreciation for suggestions from other authors in the volume and my co-editor, I am grateful to Don Ottenhoff, Dorothy Bass, and Kathleen Cahalan for their constructive feedback on drafts of this chapter.

theory, practice, and praxis appear repeatedly in our literature, more frequently than other terms, precisely because a primary disciplinary aim has been to address the modern divorce between academic theology and everyday life. Yet those closer to the ground—those with practical knowledge and those who study it—still struggle to validate our particular kind of knowledge. We claim knowledge in practice but struggle to put that knowledge and its value into words and institutional practice. What exactly is going on here?

Several dynamics intensify the persistent academic devaluation of practical knowledge and practice and make the conundrum difficult to tackle. How theory relates to practice is actually a problem that has evaded satisfactory resolution for centuries, all the way back to Aristotle. As this suggests, epistemology or how we know what we know is in many ways a highly speculative subject, especially for those invested in theology as practical. The categories themselves reflect the hegemony of Western constructs. Why has practical theology's story been told through this terminology anyway? Have we reinforced the very dualism we are critiquing through our obsession with it? And does pursuit of this conjectural matter simply enact the opposite of what practical theologians recommend—attention to the concrete, immediate, and grounded? Theory/practice is simply not a key concern for those in underrepresented communities, as one colleague pointed out. Or, as another colleague objected, “haven’t we gotten beyond this?” Finally and possibly most troubling, how do we talk about our own devaluation without sounding like complainers, simply furthering alienation and stymieing progress? Do we further reify the hegemony by talking about it? “It is wise,” I remark in my presidential address, “to know the politics out of which our discipline emerged…. But it is no longer necessary to start here or bemoan our status.”

3 Duncan Forrester, a leading Scottish scholar in the 1990s, claimed that the question of the “proper relationship” between practice and theory “must bulk large in any discussion of the nature of practical theology” in “Can Theology be Practical?” in Practical Theology: International Perspectives, ed. Friedrich Schweitzer and Johannes A. van der Ven (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), p. 22.


5 See Courtney Goto’s chapter 5 in this book where she discusses the demand that she conform to a “template” of key issues that are “taken for granted as neutral” (p. 117).