OTTMAR FUCHS

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
PRACTICAL THEOLOGY
AND EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

In memoriam Dr. Klaus Sonnberger

1. Critical Indices in Practical Theology

In the wake of the epistemological quest for recognition of the reciprocal importance of the social sciences as partner disciplines in practical theology, a similar drive now appears to be underway, albeit in the opposite direction, insofar as theology appears to have subordinated itself to the social sciences. Could it be that the old paradigm that originally referred to the social sciences as disciplines ancillary to theology has now shifted completely around, with theology all too eager to place itself in the service of social sciences? In the questions that follow, we bring together the preliminary clues and indices that give rise to this suspicion.

A. In the area of research, are there signs that empirically-based psychological and sociological findings, which always contain explicit and implicit value orientations even though they are not intended as normative statements, may, in the theological context, and be it unconsciously or unintentionally, be taking on a normativity that has so far escaped theological reflection, all the while displacing the normative valency of theological substance, in some cases perhaps to the point that the theological word games become illustrations of social scientific insights, lacking the strength of their own theological conviction? If theologians are really doing social science in disguise, aestheticizing their personal ethical positions through the use of theological language, theology can no longer be expected to generate any autonomous scientific concepts of its own.

B. Are there indications that, as far as action orientation is concerned, it is the implicit and explicit votes of the social sciences that carry the day, while theological references, such as parables, function merely as linguistic plays on the social scientific interpretations? One of the result might be that humanistic "therapies" (in the broader and narrower sense of the term) come to form the "Big Vehicle" atop which the "Small Vehicle" of praxis-based theology is carried along for the ride.
C. On the experiential, and self-experiential level, do we find signs that proposed actions and strategies for heightening awareness and self-awareness draw more on social scientific information and methods than on theological sources, to the extent that the former already exert a disproportionately strong influence on the experience and determination of professional identity in those employed in ecclesial positions (cf. Fuchs 1995, 78ff.)?

D. Is there evidence that at the strategic level, empirical data carry more weight than do the theological arguments from the perspective of which research items and hypotheses were formulated? In terms of ecclesial policy it appears to be more desirable and more effective to shift from a theological to an empirical discourse, using empiricism as a vehicle for asserting theological arguments. The fact that empirical work in practical theology will hardly be “value-neutral”, but rather will be guided by very specific theological premises and intentions, is not a problem provided that the empirical results do not take the place of the explicit theological discourse.

To start with a positive example: A not insignificant number of church leaders believe that the Germany “Caritasverband”, the association of charitable institutions of the Roman Catholic Church in Germany, should restrict itself to the institutions that do make profession of the Christian faith a basic requirement for employment. The reason is a concern that workers who are not members of the Christian church are not be motivated by Christian principles and beliefs, and therefore have no place in a Christian organization. However, in a series of empirical studies, U. Schmälzle (1979) found that in many cases these “non-members” hold beliefs that can well be identified as Christian. Thus he was able to show the advocates of confessional purity that even the non-church-going employees of these institutions are motivated by convictions that are in keeping with a Christian identity, albeit not necessarily with the approved doctrine and dogma, and that consequently these employees support the overall Christian corporate identity of these charitable institutions. Schmälzle openly stated his theological interest - which was that the action related identity of diaconical institutions is not and should not be promoted solely by professing Christians, but also by others whose deeds and motivations are nonetheless Christian or partially Christian - and he found empirical evidence to support it (cf. Fuchs 1998). His findings, however, do not take the place of the theological discourse that must still decide why this type of Christian identity is „sufficient“ for the purpose of social ministry from the viewpoint of the Church.

Difficulties arise when the theological intent does not enter into the methodological awareness of the empirical work, creating the impression that empirical results are being used to shore up theological positions, their factual nature being presented as a particularly persuasive and practically irrefutable strategic argument in intra-theological discourse. The factuality proof then provides the