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NORMATIVITY AND EMPIRICAL RESEARCH IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

SUMMARY

In research, normativity is 'unavoidable' because when a particular problem (or facets of a problem) is chosen and the decision for a concrete project is made, other problems (or facets) are excluded. Furthermore, unavoidable normative goals are connected to every research project. It can also be a matter of direct goals which relate to an immediate purpose or of indirect goals which refer to the indirect purpose of a research project. In the end, normativity is in fact unavoidable in the testing of hypotheses because no methodology exists to regulate the research process internally. In this contribution, normativity in the research process is prominent and is, more precisely, directed towards empirical research in the discipline of theology known as “Practical Theology” (PTh). First, it will be shown that normativity is already connected with the goal of PTh i.e. the development of descriptive object/subject theories (theories about practice). Second, it will be set forth that normativity is also unavoidable in empirical methodology. In the three following sections, how normativity plays a role in the context of discovery, the context of justification, and the context of application will be put in concrete terms. Normativity in empirical practical theological research is discursive normativity.

1. Normativity in the Formation of Practical-theological Theory

In order to answer the question, which theory in Practical Theology (PTh) is being talked about, a short clarification of the concept “Practical Theology” is necessary. Trying to grasp a precise understanding of “practical” as an adjective can lead to irritation. Is PTh “practical” in contrast to “theoretical” theology? Does the “practical” arise when PTh translates “theoretical theology” into practice? Does it aid theology to become “practical”? Does PTh show how religious practice should function? – If one answers these questions in the affirmative, then it is the duty of PTh to provide theory for practice. In this context, normativity would be clearly limited. It would lie directly in the numerous premises that such theories contain. However, the forefathers of PTh in the 19 Century, Anton Graf (1811-1867) for example, have already rejected such a deductive conception of theory and practice as unsatisfactory (cf. Ziebertz 1998; 1999). If theory does not serve to standardize practice, then what is meant by theory?
According to Norbert Mette (1978; 1984), the connection between theory and practice has changed to the effect that PTh no longer provides "Theory for practice", but is rather - modifying the phrasing of Schleiermacher - "Theory of practice". Religious practice is the material object of PTh. The distinction between whether "religious practice" is to be understood narrowly (in the form of participation in organized religion) or broadly (in the form of spiritually oriented practice in church and society) does not need to be further examined (cf. Ziebertz 2001). For Mette, one theory of practice is "reflexive": it is "enlightening" in relation to present and future conduct. It makes possible an educational and decision-making process for those seeking orientation for their goals as well as principles for the shaping of structured conduct, but it does not directly say what should be done. Dietrich Rössler argues along similar lines: first and foremost, PTh is and produces theory (Rössler 1994). It does not in itself constitute practice, but rather its practical worth is expressed in that it contributes towards or aids knowledge and also in that it lays the foundations for and enables judgmental ability in relation to practice. How then is normativity connected with such practical-theological theories?

In this context, the differentiation of three concepts of theories is helpful. First, everyday theories may be observed, which serve a function of orientation in routine everyday conduct. Second, we have what are called reflected theories of conduct. They have a higher degree of reflection and complexity, and they guide professional conduct. The third theory group concerns itself with object theories in a scientific sense. A practical-theological theory corresponding to the just highlighted understanding thereof can be counted in this third group. How does normativity come into play in such theories?

The educationalist Erich Weniger (1964, 7-22) has demonstrated that a theory in the "third degree" first serves knowledge. A "third degree" theory offers enlightenment through analysis and description. It strives to encompass its subject matter/object adequately. The basis of merit expressed in such a theory is an interest in truth and a decision for rationality (from which an array of further consequences arise i.e. from a methodological aspect). Consequently, normativity is expressed in "third degree" theories neither as an option nor as an appeal to potential recipients, but rather in a discursive way.

Second, a "third degree" theory helps to make practice more conscious. In practice, it offers the actor a regulatory system for the reflection upon and orientation of his conduct - i.e. it contains critical ideas for reflected theories of conduct (thus "second degree" theories). It is the goal of heightening consciousness that those who are engaged in practice may be able to decide responsibly (i.e. with knowledge of the available facts and in awareness of alternative aims and consequences). The relationship to practice of "third degree" theories differs clearly from that of the first two theory types. Normatively, it does not aim to improve practice in a direct sense. Whether and to what extent a "third degree" theory contributes towards a change in practice depends on those who act res-