

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Topic: Foucault and Practical Theology
Conveners: Kathleen A. Cahalan, Saint John's University
Raymond J. Webb, University of Saint Mary of the Lake
Presenter: Thomas Beaudoin, Santa Clara University
Respondents: Paul Lakeland, Fairfield University
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Tom Beaudoin presented the paper "Practical Theology as Work on Oneself: Foucault and Intellectual Spiritual Exercises." Beaudoin introduced the topic through cases of practical theology which seem to be problematic according to generally accepted criteria for good theological argument, yet which have the effect on their author or readers of a spiritual exercise, reorienting the theologian's or readers' sense of themselves, their values, or relationships. The question is thus posed: What if practical theology is aimed not only at intervention in ecclesial and cultural practices, but also at the practice of the subjectivity of the theologian herself? How might this possibly quite common experience be accounted for?

Michel Foucault provides forms of analysis that are germane to this problem, insofar as he is a philosopher of practice. His concern for practice is deeply bound up with the question of subjectivity, tracing the practices that constitute subjects as subjects. Foucault took up historical and philosophical investigations into categories of personal and social identity influential in the functioning of French culture, and that had helped form the ideological background against and through which a marginal space had been created for groups of people deemed outcasts. Foucault argues that practices are the way we are governed and govern ourselves, because power circulates through how and what we can know about ourselves and our world, and that power circulates through practices (as distinct, for example, from just "ideas"), producing the world of identity, relationship, responsibility, and obedience which we then take to be simply given. In a deep sense, the very "organization of our practical knowledge," our forms of perception, the experience we have of ourselves and others, and the categories we employ for that experience, are historically constituted through power-saturated practices, making us subject to the institutions that support and are supported by regnant forms of knowledge in particular times and places. Foucault provides an agonistic rendering of subjectivity, highlighting the ambiguity of all power-knowledge practices within even the most seemingly liberative subjectivities.

In the latter stage of his work, Foucault began to refer to his researches in the language of spiritual exercise. They were, he wrote, ways to change his relationship to himself and others. Foucault referenced the historian of ancient philosophy Pierre Hadot, who has shown that ancient philosophy understood itself not as mere rationalistic, speculative or theoretical sparring, but as a "way of life." Philosophical schools were not for the purpose of making a philosophical argument, but for training in the living of a philosophical life. Schools did this by forming philoso-

phers to become a certain sort of person in the world through their unique spiritual exercises, practices that would help them to think and live according to wisdom. Importantly for theologians, Hadot shows how many early Christian theologians conceived of their work as a philosophy precisely in relation to the ancient sense, by which they meant both a way of thinking and a form of work on themselves, ways of changing one's modes of being in the world in quest of the divine life, which is the supreme life of reason: the *Logos*.

What this line of inquiry suggests is that the turn to practical theology, particularly in Catholic communities, is an opportunity to recover theological work as a spiritual exercise. This is not a romantic return to premodernity, but passes through the postmodern challenges placed by Foucault. Practical theology is the approach that today is poised to make the importance of the theologian's relation to self for theologizing a topic of rigorous intellectual inquiry. Practical theologians can radicalize their practical turn all the way—back to themselves in their relationships, to the way the theologian herself or himself practices their subjectivity through their research and writing, and deals with power. In addition, if practical theology be the form of theology that foregrounds theological work as a spiritual exercise, then teaching our students not only about theology but how to be theologians, how to lead theological lives, seems critical.

Lakeland raised two questions in his response: Should not the act of self-forgetfulness be a central aspect of the Christian theologian's attitude toward the self, understood as "a fundamental freedom from all that attaches us to our selfhood?" And second, "Isn't the spiritual exercise of practical theology, the benefit to self or even the transformation of self that might occur in the act of theological reflection, much more likely to follow from forgetfulness of self rather than the insertion of self as a fourth public?" Susan Abraham developed the notion of practical theologian as "transgressing critic" who "unflinchingly undertakes the task of investigating the historical events that constitutes the self and its attempt to think theologically." Further, she explored how postcolonial theories of the self, and the calling into question of the individual "I," support Beaudion's assertion that "work on one's self is not simply examining subjectivity" but coming to understand how subjectivity is "rendered in its otherness."

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