PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Topic:	Social Science and Practical Theology: Theory, Method and Substance
Conveners:	Kathleen A. Cahalan, Saint John's University
	Raymond J. Webb, University of St. Mary of the Lake
Presenter:	Bryan Froehle, Dominican University
Respondents:	Kathleen Dolphin, Saint Mary's College, Indiana
	Thomas Groome, Boston College

The Practical Theology group addressed the convention theme, "Theology in Dialogue," through a discussion of the relationship between practical theology and sociology. As practical theologians, we often begin our theological work with a description of what is or what is happening now, which requires us to use the social sciences to help explain current social, cultural, or personal conditions. Many of us turn to sociology for an understanding of what people believe, how they practice their faith, demographic information, descriptions of congregations and parishes, and people's attitudes and opinions. Practical theologians are often dependent upon the information provided by sociologists since we rarely engage in descriptive work ourselves. But how does the practical theologian use sociological work in a responsible way? What does it mean to take sociological research and turn it toward the constructive work we do for ministers, church leaders, and theologians? What are some common ways practical theologians misuse sociological evidence? Do we trust sociological "evidence" too much? Do we rely on it for normative direction? How do sociologists intend their work to be used—where do they see it used creatively, or misused and abused?

We invited a sociologist of religion, Bryan Froehle, to present his view of the relationship between practical theology and sociology. A well-known sociologist of American and global Catholicism, Froehle describes himself as a pastoral sociologist, insisting on "bringing in a religion's self-understanding in order to contribute to the self-understanding of that religion." Froehle argued that both sociology and theology must take each other seriously: sociologists cannot dismiss religion and theology as unimportant, and theologians cannot merely use sociology as to gather a few data points. If the relationship is to be mutually beneficial and constructive, sociologists and practical theologians must find a way to be conversation partners from the beginning of their respective projects.

Practical theologians must be careful about how they use sociological research. Froehle warned that there is nothing "set" about sociological theory or findings, and cautioned theologians against naively assuming that sociologists agree about the "truth" findings of their various claims. Sociology strives to build explanations and it does so through a variety of methodologies, analyzing data on micro, meso and macro levels; using quantitative, qualitative and comparative historical methods; and utilizing consensus, conflict and symbolic interactionist theories. Theologians can fail to understand the complex way in which theory building happens in

sociology, and accept the products of sociology "meekly, with a naïve docility unaware of the possibility of alternative theory." If there was more interaction between sociologists and practical theologians, the latter would use data and social theory more wisely.

Froehle shared examples from studies on global Catholicism, youth religious involvement, and parish/religious belonging to challenge common misconceptions about secularization. He teased out several interesting points that practical theologians need to take seriously, and would greatly benefit from doing their theological analysis of these issues in relationship to the work of sociologists.

Kathleen Dolphin addressed the common method in practical theology today: the hermeneutical circle. She described how most practical theologians use sociological data at the outset of their work: the descriptive moment. Most theologians begin with a thick description of what is happening, which aids in focusing research questions and problematizing the situation in complex ways. But there is another point in the circle that many theologians forget: we can return to sociology after we converse with the tradition and scripture. We can take those insights and bring them back to the sociologists and explore what sociologists have to say about our historical claims. Here we are engaging sociology on its own terms.

Thomas Groome affirmed Froehle's rich description of the work of sociologists, something practical theologians can ignore. He encouraged us to consider how we can intertwine practical theology and the social sciences in ways that are not merely linear, but constructive. The conversation throughout the theological task is to move back and forth in dialogue with sociologists. Froehle's example of youths' religious knowledge was confirmed by Groome: we must know what we are claiming when we say that youth have less religious knowledge today. Compared to what? What is religious knowledge? Who's religious knowledge? The conversation among participants was fruitful and generative.

The practical theology group thanks Bryan Froehle for addressing the important relationship between sociology and practical theology.

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