

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY/MORAL THEOLOGY

Topic: Moral Theology and Practical Theology: Opening Up the Conversation
Convener: Lynn Bridgers, St. Norbert College
Moderator: David Cloutier, Mount St. Mary's University
Presenter: David M. McCarthy, Mount St. Mary's University
Presenter: Claire Wolfteich, Boston University

Moral theology and practical theology, as two approaches to making theological sense of concrete situations, seem to have much in common. Yet dialogue between Catholic moral theologians and Catholic practical theologians has not yet developed substantially. This session featured such a conversation around three questions: (1) What do moral theology and practical theology share? (2) Where do they differ? (3) What are the prospects for their future relationship? The two presenters discuss these questions in light of reading a significant text from the other's field. Sparking a conversation between moral and practical theologians was the fundamental point of the session.

After introductions by David Cloutier, David McCarthy's paper, "Moral Theology and Practical Theology" opened the session by giving short answers to the three questions posed. According to McCarthy, what the disciplines share are concerns about the moral life and living as Christians along with a focus on virtues and practices. However, McCarthy asserted, the disciplines have different historical and institutional landscapes. He saw practical theology as important primarily in divinity schools, while moral theology was grounded in church and university. Given these assumed differences, McCarthy felt the relationship between the two disciplines would be one of frequent interchange, especially when the disciplines attempt to give accounts of normative practice. In his remaining comments, McCarthy expanded on these positions, reflecting that moral theology is diverse at the level of method. Practical theology seemed more consistent in terms of using certain methodologies, while also recognizing diversity in method. Addressing Claire Wolfteich's work, *Navigating New Terrain*, he noted that it fit the general contours of Jean Porter's article "Moral Rules and Moral Action," but it does not defend an order of good, rather addresses the higher goods of human relations. In terms of difference between the two theological disciplines, McCarthy cited the institutional complexity of moral theology and practical theology's role in divinity schools attached to universities. McCarthy concluded with a discussion of methodology in moral theology as contrasted with method in practical theology as presented in Don Browning's *A Fundamental Practical Theology* and Dorothy Bass. McCarthy concluded, "Insofar as both practical theology and moral theology attend to the good working order of these virtues and practices, there will be plenty of common work between practical and moral theologians."

In her paper, "Practical Theology and Moral Theology," Claire Wolfteich opened her comments with a disclaimer that she would not be able to do justice to

a field with “long roots” by a reading of a limited range of texts. She then began a reflection on her own formation as a practical theologian based on autobiographical reflections. She noted the strong dimension of theological ethics in her studies with Don Browning at the University of Chicago. Browning argued that theological ethics was integral to three of the movements of practical theology found in Browning’s work: descriptive, systematic, and strategic theology. Browning’s five dimensions of practical moral reasoning “guides the work of describing situations of practical action and thinking critically about norms and strategies of action.” Wolfteich reminded her listeners that Browning’s turn to theological ethics had a widespread impact on practical theology and continues to influence work in the field.

While integrating the mutually critical correlationist method of Browning and David Tracy in her own work, Wolfteich offered a critique in terms of the position of spirituality in practical theology. She suggested that practical theology needs more spirit and connection to the lived experience of faith. Ultimately, she suggested, “the aim of practical theology is transformative, seeking to invite persons into an abundant life in Christ...” and accordingly “makes no sense without spirituality both as lived experience and as an academic discipline.” In exploring recent work in moral theology, Wolfteich found a form of moral theology deeply related to spirituality and to matters of formation and discipleship. Attention to practices and formation, she noted, is a key point of intersection between practical theology and moral theology. Both fields share tensions between a pastoral or practical focus on the one hand and an academic focus on the other. Another similarity, for Wolfteich, is the orientation of both fields toward the promotion of discipleship, a convergence in the aims of both practical theology and moral theology. Wolfteich also sees a parallel in practical theology’s attention to the “clerical paradigm” and the discussion of the manual tradition in Catholic moral theology, and suggested that fruitful conversations could arise from discussions of the same.

Finally, addressing David McCarthy’s *Sex and Love in the Home*, Wolfteich suggested that the use of strategic practical theology might result in different conclusions from McCarthy’s use of moral theology. Critiquing his idea of the “open household,” she noted that the work of open householding falls predominantly on women, requiring a substantial amount of time and energy. A strategic practical theology, she suggested, should recognize the good of the open household while at the same time protecting women from risk.

In closing, Wolfteich suggested that moral theology and practical theology are natural dialogue partners, sharing attention to practices, formation, and concrete contexts. Her position was well illustrated by the engaged discussion that followed until the end of the session.

LYNN BRIDGERS
Saint Norbert College
De Pere, Wisconsin