

# HIV/AIDS, narrative practical theology, and postfoundationalism: The emergence of a new story

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## Abstract

*The practical theology that emerges from this article is one that develops out of a very specific context – in this case, HIV/AIDS. The philosophical framework is found in an integration of two paradigms, namely social-constructionism and postfoundationalism. The article concludes with a research case study from the HIV/AIDS context. Practical theological research is not only about description and interpretation of experiences, but it is also about deconstruction and emancipation. The bold move should be made to allow all the different stories of the research to develop into a new story of understanding that transcends the local community. According to the narrative approach, this will not happen on the basis of structured and rigid methods, through which stories are analysed and interpreted. It rather happens on the basis of a holistic understanding and as a social-constructionist process to which all the co-researchers are invited and in which they are engaged in the creation of new meaning.*

*The only space in which any determinations can be made ... is in the moment of praxis (always local, embodied, and situated).<sup>2</sup>*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The “moment of praxis” which functions as the meeting place between practical theology and postfoundationalism in this article is the HIV/AIDS-experience. It will be argued that practical theology, as enlightened by the postfoundationalist ideas of Calvin Schrag and Wentzel van Huyssteen,

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<sup>1</sup> With this article I gladly contribute to the honouring of Prof Piet Geyser as a colleague who was, and is always open for new ideas and creative insights. May he find joy in his retirement!

<sup>2</sup> A phrase from a lecture by Anthony H Jones, with reference to Calvin Schrag.

should be developed out of a very specific and concrete moment of praxis, in this case HIV/AIDS.

## **2. (HIV) POSITIVE PRACTICAL THEOLOGY: A NARRATIVE APPROACH**

In my own journey with practical theology in South Africa since the Eighties, I was influenced mainly by two sources of contact: The *practical theologians* from *Africa* and some *American and European colleagues*. During the last decade I had the privilege of being exposed to the thinking of various African meetings, conferences and courses. I am a member of the African Association for Pastoral Care and Counselling and had the opportunity to attend a conference in Ghana and was also part of the organising committee for a similar international conference in South Africa in 1997. I have learnt that the African approach to theology, and science in general, is more holistic, circular and narrative, than the typical Western approaches.

Practical theologians in South Africa can be described according to various categories, but at least two main streams have emerged: Those more associated with the “struggle” against apartheid where the emphasis is put on “doing theology” and on the more holistic approach; and then there are the more traditional practical theologians working at the mainly Afrikaans speaking universities, where the approach is mainly influenced by the German and Dutch scholars. Officially, I belong to the latter group, but because of the influences referred to in the previous paragraphs, I became increasingly critical towards the application of the hermeneutical approach in practical theology.

Although I am in agreement with the basic philosophy of hermeneutics, my feeling of unease about the hermeneutical approach *for practical theology*, grew out of two considerations:

- I share Bleicher’s (1980:191) concern about the inadequacy of the hermeneutical approach in situations where there is a continuous distortion of communication through the use of language (see also the discussion of these inadequacies of hermeneutics in the thesis by L L Bosman).
- Secondly, the apparent inadequacy of the hermeneutical approach to provide practical theology with real contextual outcomes. It seems to leave practical theology with theoretical abstractions. The “theories for *praxis*” thus created often remain distant from the real world.

By way of illustration, I would like to refer to a publication on HIV/AIDS in which the typical hermeneutical approach was followed. Later on in the article I will attempt to illustrate an alternative approach.

The Reformed Ecumenical Council on HIV/AIDS published a report: *REC FOCUS. Commission for Human Relations. HIV/AIDS* (March 2002, Vol 2, No 1). As could be expected, the study starts with an overview of the HIV/AIDS situation in Africa. It is followed by a discussion on the Biblical and the theological principles involved, and in its conclusion it refers to a number of applications for “Counselling and Caring” and for “Christians in Action.”

Although the last few pages of the publication seem to provide good “theories for praxis”, the publication still leaves the reader with a feeling of frustration and even hopelessness, the reason for it being the lack of integration achieved between context and principles from the gospel. The application part is detached from the descriptive part. It is as if all contexts are the same. Africa could have been Iceland for that matter. It is as if the expected possibilities for people to take Christian action are merely taken for granted. The desperate situation of faith communities grappling with the principles of the gospel in the midst of cultural, social and economic difficulties in Sub-Saharan Africa is not understood.

The narrative or social-constructionist approach on the contrary forces us to firstly listen to the stories of people struggling in real situations, not merely to a description of a general context, but to be confronted with a specific and concrete situation. This approach to practical theology, although also hermeneutical in nature, is more reflexive in its approach and method. It takes the circular movement of *practice-theory-practice* seriously and brings it into operation. Practical theology, according to this approach, indeed becomes part of “doing theology” and takes the social-constructions, within actual contexts, seriously. The practical theologian in this case, is not so much concerned with abstractions and generalisations but rather with the detail of a particular person’s story. The following quote from Pattison (in Willows, D & Swinton, J (eds) 2000:42) gives expression to this approach to practical theology:

Pastoral theology (*practical theology* – JM) at its best, like cultural anthropology, is probably a small scale enterprise, which pays minute attention to particular situations and is more remarkable “for the delicacy of its distinctions not the sweep of its abstractions” (Geertz 1991, p 25). It needs to pay minute attention to seeing and understanding a particular phenomenon and to listen before moving into carefully chosen words. Contextually and situationally sensitive

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pastoral theologies will be modest in their claims and assertions. This is a welcome feature amidst the past grandiosity of many theological enterprises which have sought to control and order the world rather than to understand it and to set particular individuals and communities free.

Practical theology is only possible as contextual practical theology. Practical theology cannot function in a general context. It is always local, concrete and specific. The moment it moves away from the concrete specific context, it regresses into some sort of systematic theology. The very essence of practical theology demands of it to be very focused on concrete contexts. It can be argued that theology as a whole should be practical and that theology, which is unpractical, no longer is theology. But it has to be even more so in the case of practical theology as one of the disciplines of theology. Practical theology should be differentiated from other theological subjects by its truthfulness, not only to the context in general, but to a very specific context. Further more, it should not only be truthful to the context, but also truthful to a methodology with a definite and purposeful movement from the context, or praxis, to theory, and back to the context. We can refer to that methodological process as the circle of practical wisdom.

The following anecdote of a little interaction between Hiltner, the pastoral theologian and Tillich, the systematic theologian, perhaps illustrates this position of practical theology at its best

Tillich: Let us say that there was a certain man ....

Hiltner: (interrupting): What was his name?

Tillich: Oh, ... err ... let us say John. So, there was this man named John and ....

Hiltner: (interrupting): Was he married?

Tillich: Let us say he was. So. There was this married man, John, who ....

Hiltner: (interrupting again): What was his wife's name? Did they both work?

Tillich: (with exasperation): Professor Hiltner, won't you please let me finish? What is the meaning of all your questions?

Hiltner: To speak of just *any* man is to speak of no man at all.

(Childs 1998:193)

This is why I am not writing a practical theology with reference to HIV/AIDS, but a practical theology, developed out of HIV/AIDS. It is the particularity of a practical theology that gives it life.

### 3. (HIV) POSITIVE PRACTICAL THEOLOGY: A POSTFOUNDATIONALIST APPROACH

Practical theology is a discipline that borders on a number of disciplines. Apart from all the theological disciplines, the fields of anthropology, sociology and psychology, among others, are neighbours of practical theology. In all these fields, as in practical theology, there are signs of a development towards a narrative approach. In terms of the method/art of research, it is especially in the fields of anthropology and sociology, and the health sciences where fascinating new developments have emerged. The books by Rubin and Rubin (1995), *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*; Trinder, L (2000), *Reading the texts: Postmodern feminism and the “doing” of research*; Cheek, J (2000), *Postmodern & post structural approaches to nursing research* are good examples of these new developments.

In practicing this kind of practical theology, I feel connected to both the paradigms of postfoundationalist theology and that of social-constructionism. These two paradigms developed in different fields, both aiming at the same objective though: *a third way*, a way out of being stuck in modernistic or foundationalist (fundamentalist) science and theology on the one hand, and the fatalism of some post modernistic approaches, on the other.

During 2003, while a research project on HIV/AIDS I was leading, was nearing its end, I had the opportunity of twice traveling to the United States. My first visit was to Chicago to attend a conference and workshop on narrative therapy. It was co-organised and presented by the “gurus” of this field in the world today: Michael White from Australia and Jill Freedman and Gene Combs from Evanston, Chicago. Again, I was exposed to the ideas of social-constructionism as the basis of the narrative approach to therapy. As was the case during previous visits, I was again inspired and motivated by the possibilities of the co-construction of preferred realities.

Two weeks later, I had the privilege of a two month sabbatical at the Princeton Seminary, New Jersey. Back in South Africa in between the two visits, I was devastated by a synod meeting, at which I was confronted with a fundamentalist hard-line approach. I had namely been part of a committee that occupied itself with a new approach towards Gay Christians. Our open-minded and inclusive recommendations, which I had to introduce to the synod meeting, were met with severe opposition, and I experienced personal rejection in various ways.

With those feelings of despair and rejection, I got to Princeton and was soon and unexpectedly rescued from my despair through the regular

discussions I had with Wentzel van Huyssteen, the South African theologian, holding a full-time position as Professor at the Princeton Theological Seminary. At the time I had read his earlier work, but we had no contact prior to my arrival at Princeton. After I have settled into my apartment in Payne Hall, I discovered that Wentzel and his wife Hester were my immediate neighbours. They welcomed me with friendship and hospitality and we enjoyed numerous social interactions. We shared a number of likes and dislikes. Wentzel shared some of his precious single malt whisky with me and we went to the movies and discussed theology for hours on end. At the time he was working on the Gifford-lectures, which he was invited to read at the University of Edinburgh in 2004. I was privileged to read these lectures in draft format. I also read some of his books<sup>3</sup> and joined him for some of his seminars with doctorate students. I was immediately impressed by, and attracted to his *postfoundationalist theology*.

I was inspired by the possibilities of postfoundationalist theology as a practical theological epistemology – a way of thinking about and doing practical theology. It also reminded me of social-constructionism. Like postfoundationalism, social-constructionism is an effort to come to a more balanced and viable epistemology after the cul-de-sac that resulted from some postmodernist approaches.

### **3.1 Sosial-constructionism**

In this article I will focus more on the description of postfoundationalism, than on the concept of social-constructionism. Elaborate descriptions of the latter appear in some of my other publications and for the purpose of this article, I shall limit myself to a few remarks on the basic understanding of social-constructionism, which would hopefully suffice.

The alternative paradigm advocated by this paradigm, already becomes apparent in the names given to it. Labels such as “post-structuralism”, “deconstructionism”, “the interpretive turn”, “the new hermeneutics” and “postmodernism” (Freedman & Combs 1996:14) are all, in some or other way, applicable in describing this alternative metaphor for understanding and interpreting reality. It is new and therefore a paradigm that has moved beyond certain ways of understanding. It moved beyond structuralism and also beyond constructivism. It corrects the subjective, individualistic, and intra-psychic ideas on the construction of realities within constructivism. At the same time it is a protest against relativism and an

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<sup>3</sup> The first I read was: Van Huyssteen, J Wentzel, 1997. *Essays in postfoudationalist theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

emphasis on the value-driven processes through which preferred realities are socially constructed.

### 3.2 Postfoundationalist theology

Wentzel van Huyssteen has published numerous articles and books in which he advocates the concept of postfoundationalist theology. In this overview I shall only make use of some of these publications. Apart from his other writings, the first Gifford lecture for 2004 is a useful introduction. This lecture provides a summary of his understanding and of the development of the notion of foundationalist rationality<sup>4</sup>.

Van Huyssteen (Forthcoming Gifford Lecture 1:10) does not use the terminology of social-constructionism, but clearly uses a similar line of thought when arguing for postfoundationalist rationality: "... we cannot talk abstractly and theoretically about the phenomenon of rationality anymore: it is only as individual human beings, living with other human beings in concrete situations and contexts, that we can claim some form of rationality." In social-constructionism there is a deep-rooted belief that we, with our rationality, are socially constructed. Van Huyssteen also argues for a construction of rationality/identity based on "own experience" which is also capable of reaching beyond. He says: "It is in this sense, then, that a postfoundationalist notion of rationality reveals the fact that one's own experience is always going to be rationally compelling, even as we reach out beyond personal awareness and conviction to interpersonal (and interdisciplinary) dialogue" (Forthcoming Gifford Lecture 1:12).

The idea of socially constructed interpretations and meaning is clearly part of the postfoundationalist approach. Van Huyssteen (Forthcoming Gifford Lecture 1:12-13) writes: "... we relate to our world epistemically only through the mediation of interpreted experience, and in this sense it may be said that our diverse theologies, and also the sciences, offer alternative interpretations of our experience (cf Rolston 1987:1-8). Alternative, however, not in the sense of competing or conflicting interpretations, but of complementary interpretations of the manifold dimensions of our experience" (Forthcoming Gifford Lecture 1:12-3). The concept of "received interpretations", as far as I understand it, puts emphasis on tradition, on culture and on cultural discourses, all of which contribute to interpretations. Therefore, although we sometimes may have the illusion of a unique understanding of reality, it is always *received*. Therefore not constructed in an individual and subjective

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<sup>4</sup> J Wentzel van Huyssteen, A postfoundationalist rationality, unpublished lecture, prepared to be used as a Gifford Lecture, 2004. Apart from the lecture, I have also used his 1997 work, *Essays in postfoundationalist theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.; 1998, *Duet or Duel? Theology and science in a postmodern world*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International as references.

sense, but co- or socially constructed. “Reality’ is *always already* interpreted” (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2000:17).

The moment when we realise and accept the fact that identity, and therefore rationality, is socially constructed as part of a continuing process, we are liberated from the urge to defend theological rationality over and against other so-called scientific rationalities. Then we also realise that our understanding of reality (rationality) is a co-product of a broader community and not the idiosyncratic product of theologians with their own isolated rationality.

### 3.3 A postfoundationalist practical theology

In the right hand column of the table below, I have “translated” Van Huyssteen’s (1997:4) description and summary of Postfoundationalist Theology (left hand column) for practical theology. The concepts of Postfoundationalist Theology are re-phrased in order to develop a practical theological research process, consisting of seven movements.

| POSTFOUNDATIONALIST THEOLOGY   | POSTFOUNDATIONALIST PRACTICAL THEOLOGY  |
|--|---|
| <p>... <b>a postfoundationalist theology</b> wants to make <b>two moves</b>. First, it fully acknowledges <b>contextuality</b>, the epistemically crucial role of <b>interpreted experience</b>, and the way that <b>tradition</b> shapes the epistemic and nonepistemic <b>values</b> that inform our reflection about God and what some of us believe to be <b>God’s presence</b> in this world. At the same time, however, a postfoundationalist notion of rationality in theological reflection claims to <b>point creatively beyond the confines of the local</b> community, group, or culture towards a plausible form of <b>interdisciplinary conversation</b>.</p> | <p><b>The context &amp; interpreted experience</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A specific context is described.</li> <li>2. In-context experiences are listened to and described.</li> <li>3. Interpretations of experiences are made, described and developed in collaboration with “co-researchers”</li> </ol> <p><b>Traditions of interpretation</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. A description of experiences as it is continually informed by traditions of interpretation.</li> </ol> <p><b>God’s presence</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. A reflection on God’s presence, as it is understood and experienced in a specific situation.</li> </ol> <p><b>Thickened through interdisciplinary investigation</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. A description of experience, thickened through interdisciplinary investigation.</li> </ol> <p><b>Point beyond the local community.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. The development of alternative interpretations that point beyond the local community.</li> </ol> |
| <p>(Van Huyssteen 1997:4)<br/>(Phrases in bold J Müller’s emphasis)</p>  |   |



#### 4. AN EXAMPLE OF DOING PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

In this section an attempt is made to take the concepts of Postfoundationalist theology one step further towards the development of a research process for practical theology. A new research project on HIV/AIDS, which is in the process of being developed, is used as an example.

*Research theme:* Orphaned and vulnerable children's narratives about intergenerational care in the HIV/AIDS environment in urban South Africa. How can they participate in just decision-making with regard to their care?

The research develops in 7 *movements* which reflect the assumptions and foundation of the Postfoundationalist practical theology that is implemented in the research. Methodological guidelines have been decided on for each of the movements for this specific project.

##### 4.1 A specific context is described

The context/ action field/ *habitus*<sup>5</sup> of this research is in the first instance the orphaned and vulnerable children living within the HIV/AIDS environment of South Africa. The intergenerational relationships, that are supposed to provide care are explored, as well as the possibilities the children have to participate in just decision-making.

*Methods to be used:*

- Have interviews with at least ten persons working in the field of caring for children infected/affected by HIV/AIDS.
- Interpretation of interviews on a social-constructionist basis.
- Doing research on existing and used research methods on listening to child narratives (see also methods used in the CINDI-project *Reaching out, scaling up*. 2001, p 77)

##### 4.2 In-context experiences are listened to and described

The team of researchers does empirical research, based on the narrative approach. They listen to the stories of children, parents, grandparents, and caregivers in order to gain an understanding of the in-context experiences.

*Methods to be used:*

- Two organisations are identified as case studies: Heartbeat and PEN. The existing voluntary workers are trained to be sensitive to and understand the world and language of children. Experts in this field of specialisation are used.

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<sup>5</sup> For a description of these concepts, the reader can refer to the articles on methodology by Müller; Müller, Van Deventer and Human.

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- Some of these helpers are selected, trained and empowered to enter into meaningful relationships with orphaned and vulnerable children (see Ward-Wimmer 1997; Graham 1991; Geldard & Geldard 1997, 2001).
- The same people are supervised to perform certain very specific tasks (story telling; drawings; games; etc) in order to hear the stories of children.

See also *South Africa Journal of Psychology* June 1998 for the interpretation of drawings and the so-called method of the “Memory Boxes”, created in 2000 as an initiative of the *Simonlando Project*, an outreach programme of the School of Theology, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

### **4.3 Interpretations of experiences are made, described and developed in collaboration with “co-researchers”**

According to this research approach, the researchers are not only interested in descriptions of experiences, but also and more importantly in their (co-researchers) own *interpretations*. During this phase, the researcher is in the first instance not looking for data, but for meaning given by the co-researchers.

#### ***Methods to be used:***

- Interpretation is done in constant feedback loops and in collaboration with “co-researchers”, in this case the two teams of helpers (cf Baart 2001).
- Multi-angular theoretical sampling is used when necessary (different sources, means, points of time, persons) in order to broaden the focus and to meet the richness of the data.

### **4.4 A description of experiences as it is continually informed by traditions of interpretation**

There are specific discourses/traditions in certain communities that inform perceptions and behaviour. The researchers will have to identify these discourses and try to gain some understanding of how current behaviour is influenced by such discourses, by listening to the co-researchers, but also by listening to the literature, the art, and the culture of a certain context.

*Methods to be used:*

- Discourse analysis
- Revisiting research narratives, to be found in literature, art and other cultural phenomena.

## **5. A REFLECTION ON THE RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL ASPECTS, ESPECIALLY ON GOD'S PRESENCE, AS IT IS UNDERSTOOD AND EXPERIENCED IN A SPECIFIC SITUATION**

This is not a forced effort by the researchers to bring God into the present situation, but rather an honest effort to listen to and understand the co-researchers' religious and spiritual understanding and experiences of God's presence. Again, this should be integrated into the social-constructionist process. The researchers' own understanding of God's presence in a given situation also constitutes a valuable contribution

*Methods to be used:*

- Listen for clues in children's narratives about experiences of God.
- Interact with those clues (explicit and implicit) through methods congruent with the world and language of children (cf Baart & Vosman 2003; see also Dotzbach 1996 & Robinson 1996).

## **6. A DESCRIPTION OF EXPERIENCE, THICKENED THROUGH INTERDISCIPLINARY INVESTIGATION**

Interdisciplinary work is complicated and difficult. Language, reasoning strategies, contexts, and ways of accounting for human experience differ greatly between the various disciplines (Midali 2000:262). Therefore, a one-size-fits-all methodology cannot be applied. But this interdisciplinary movement is part and parcel of practical theology. It includes the conversation with other theological disciplines and with all the other sciences. The researcher has to listen carefully to the various stories of understanding and make an honest effort to integrate all of them into one.

*Methods to be used:*

- Literature study
- Interviews with colleagues from different disciplines
- Focus groups; participatory observation and action in the interdisciplinary field.

## **7. THE DEVELOPMENT OF ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS THAT POINT BEYOND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY**

Practical theological research is not only about description and interpretation of experiences. “Alternative interpretations” mean that this way of doing theology is also about deconstruction and emancipation. The bold move should be taken to allow all the different stories of the research to develop into a new story of understanding that points beyond the local community, not in an effort to generalise, but to deconstruct negative discourses. According to the narrative approach, this will not happen on the basis of structured and rigid methods, by means of which stories are analysed and interpreted. It rather happens on the basis of a holistic understanding and as a social-constructionist process in which all the co-researchers are invited and engaged in the creation of new meaning.

### *Methods to be used:*

These methods are on the level of dissemination, and can be implemented in various ways, for instance:

- Groups/workshops/seminars held with stakeholders.
- Concentric dissemination, which includes the various communities, for instance the scientific community, the policy-making community; the communities of faith, NGOs, et cetera

## **8. CONCLUSION**

The story of practical theology that emerges from this article has two focal points:

- It is practical theology that is “HIV positive”. In other words, it is a practical theology that is local and contextual, but in such a way that it also identifies with the people in the context. It is not a system of theories which is formulated and then imposed on a certain situation, but a story of understanding, which grows from a real situation. It is a story developing out of an interaction between researcher(s) and a context.
- It is postfoundationalist theology. In other words, it finds its identity in a balance and dialogue between theological tradition and the context.

This practical theological narrative is not only a paradigm-story, but also a method-story. It is an integrative narrative, which allows the practical theologian to participate with integrity in processes of both “story-telling” and “story-development.” Therefore, it is a practical theology that is sensitive, descriptive, but that is also bold in its deconstruction of negative discourses and in its development of new alternative stories.

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