Theology and Social Sciences in Ministry Research

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Abstract

There has been considerable debate about how theology should engage with the social sciences, particularly since the 1970s. While some theologians have been suspicious of the sciences, practical theologians have acknowledged the importance of engagement. Van Der Ven for example, has proposed an 'empirical-theological' cycle, which includes phases of empirical research, and theological reflection within the discipline of practical theology. This article examines how theology and the social sciences contributed to a specific project in practical ministry on the youth ministry in Australian churches. In reflecting on the project, it was noted that the project arose out of the theological imperative to pass the Christian faith from one generation to the next, and to reach out to people with no Christian background. The imperative was sharpened by the research, which showed how the theological objectives were not being achieved. The nature of young people's faith, as examined in the project, was grounded in theology, but research contributed to the understanding of what was important to young people in their faith as expressed in the Australian context. The methodology of the research had its roots in the social sciences. The recommendations from the project were primarily theological, but reflected factors identified by the empirical research. It is concluded, in this example, theology primarily, but not exclusively, described what OUGHT to be the case, while the social sciences primarily provided descriptions about what WAS the case. Theological descriptions about what WAS the case, about God's activity in the lives of people, were derived from the

descriptions of sociological analysis, evaluating them from the perspectives of the traditions and sources of faith. In this study, the social sciences, and theology had distinct and different roles in making recommendations for ministry praxis.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to show how theological reflection on Christian traditions, Biblical sources, and empirical research using social science methodologies may contribute to practical theology and to the development of pastoral practices. Through the examination of a particular case study in empirical research and theological reflection, this article explores how empirical research and theological reflection may intertwine, but make distinctive contributions. Before examining the case study, a brief account will be given of the recent literature on the comparative contributions of empirical research using social science methods, and theological reflection to practical theology.

The Debate about Social and Human Sciences and Theology

The theological issue of how the Christian faith should relate to culture has been discussed from the very earliest days of Christian theology, as has been shown well by Niebuhr's (1951) famous book, *Christ and Culture*. Niebuhr noted that, over the centuries, some theologians have seen Christ 'above' culture in which history is seen as a period of preparation for union with Christ, or Christ 'of' culture in the sense of pointing to the best in human culture as exemplifying Christian life. Other theologians have been suspicious of culture and those attempts to understand the world that were not based in theology, and have taken positions which Niebuhr describes as 'Christ against culture' in which Christ is seen as offering an alternative to human culture, or 'Christ in paradox with culture' in which history is seen as a period in which there is a struggle between faith and unbelief. Others have taken moderate positions, seeing human cultures as containing some good elements but needing 'transformation', as is represented in Niebuhr's category of 'Christ the transformer of culture'. The notion of 'culture' varies somewhat from one theologian to another. It can refer to the intellectual and artistic achievement of a group of people or society. It has also been used to refer to what human beings may achieve, particularly in intellectual or artistic forms, for example, in the phrase the 'cultured person'. However, when social sciences speak of culture, they usually use the concept developed in anthropological literature of culture as the patterns of belief and action that make up a 'total way of life' of a group of people, distinguishing these from individual differences and idiosyncrasies, or patterns common to small specialised sub-groups in society or universal patterns of behaviour or patterns which are of biological origin. Thus the activity of eating is not part of culture, but what one eats, where, when and with what implements is part of culture (Geertz 1975, pp. 4-5).

'Empirical theology', as an explicit discourse involving the study of cultures, began in the early 20th century (Heimbrock 2010, p. 155). Heimbrock suggested that it had two distinct branches, one in the United States, and the other in

Europe, both focussing in different ways on religious experiences. Van Der Ven, one of the seminal thinkers on the relationship between empirical research and theology, saw the clinical pastoral education movement in the 'Chicago School' as playing a key role in the development of what came to be called 'empirical theology' (Van Der Ven 1998, p. 5-6). In itself, empirical theology did not take an explicit stance in relation to 'Christ and culture'. The process of theological reflection in the methods of empirical theology involved neither an affirmation nor rejection of culture as compatible or incompatible with the Christian traditions of faith. However, while empirical theology was ready to critique culture where it saw that was appropriate, it took culture seriously as the context in which theological praxis should be developed (Van Der Ven 1998, part 2). Empirical theology, which developed into what is widely described today as practical theology, used empirical social science methods[1] and findings to explore culture and to critique from a theological perspective.

Despite these incipient movements, the theologian and sociologist, Robin Gill, argued that only in the 1970s did many theologians began to engage seriously with the social sciences (Gill 1996, p. 1). Social scientists had often been dismissive of theology, reducing belief in God to illusions created by the individual mind or by society, following the theories of people such as Marx and Freud, and this had provided little basis for discussion with theologians. Even sociologists who were sympathetic to theology were viewed with suspicion by many theologians as they sought to explain from a sociological basis how theology was formed and how it operated in the real world, as Weber did in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* Some philosophers, such as A. J. Ayer (1970), provided an epistemological basis for science, arguing that only knowledge that could be verified empirically should be accepted as valid knowledge. Such epistemological views provided a basis for the claims of scientists, including social scientists, but implied that theology's claims of knowledge must be regarded as invalid. Some theologians, such Karl Barth, responded by claiming that 'revelation' was an entirely separate source of knowledge, which could only be examined and evaluated on its own terms. The result was that there was no basis for conversation.

However, in the 1970s, more theologians began to read, and grapple with the social sciences. For example, in Britain, a group of sociologists and theologians began regular gatherings in 1978 for the 'Blackfriars Symposia on Theology and Sociology'. This group, which included prominent theologians who worked in the sociological domain such as Robin Gill and David Martin (Gill 1996, p. 2), met regularly for a decade. Another example was establishing a chair for pastoral theology in 1964 in the Faculty of Theology in Nijmegen, in the Netherlands. As the nature of its work was refined, the department was renamed the Department of Empirical Theology (Van Der Ven 1998, pp. 2-3).

In the British context, a debate erupted over the work of John Milbank's book, *Theology and Social Theory* (1990). At the heart of his dense argumentation was the following claim, as summarised by Fergus Kerr.

There is no need to bring theology and social theory together,

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[1] Social sciences is being used here in the broad sense to include what are sometimes referred to as 'human sciences' such as psychology and anthropology, as well as sociology.

theology is *already* social theory, and social theory is *already* theology. The task is to lay bare the theology, and anti-theology, at work in supposedly non-theological disciplines like sociology, and, analogously, to uncover the social theory inscribed in theology – not just the methodological humanism mistakenly respected by modern theologians but the theory of society which Christian theology, properly practised, always already is (1996, p. 431).

At the heart of Milbank's thesis was the idea that the 'secular' disciplines of political theory, economics and sociology emerged from 'an effectively non-Trinitarian theism' and contained their own values and views of what society should be. Thus, Milbank argued that 'theology encounters in sociology only a theology in disguise' (Kerr 1996, p. 432). However, as commentators such as Flanagan have noted, there is an 'epistemological imperialism' in Milbank's thesis which does not deal adequately with the variety of social sciences, their methodologies and their views of what society should be. Most social science research is not trying to create a particular view of the world. While there may be value-laden assumptions embedded in particular sociological research projects, it cannot all be characterised as 'disguised theology' or 'anti-theology' (Flanagan 1996, pp. 454-6). At the same time, Milbank has been criticised for his approach to the Christian faith, treating it in terms of its ideals and failing to recognise faith and the church as historical and social realities (Williams 1996, p. 435).

Milbank took an extreme position. However, some other writers in practical theology have been wary of the positivism of some sociological approaches to knowledge, particularly to sociological research based on survey research. Swinton and Mowat (2006), for example, argued that theology is logically prior to the social sciences, and that qualitative research is much more appropriate for use in practical theology than quantitative research because they saw quantitative research as 'positivistic' in its use of statistical forms of analysis. Most sociologists today do not see the rigid distinction that Swinton and Mowat drew between quantitative and qualitative methods (see, for example, Van Der Ven 1998, p. 154).

Quantitative research is not as 'hard' as once thought; for example, in drawing conclusions from the responses to surveys and Censuses there are many issues of interpretation of categories. The 'soft' nature of survey data can be explored through examining the patterns of responses across a range of questions, and few sociologists treat survey data in the positivistic manner that Swinton and Mowat assumed they do. At the same time, qualitative research has its limitations; for example, it is usually inappropriate to generalise from a small sample of interviews in specific contexts to large and diverse populations. By collecting data from an appropriately developed sample of many participants, as surveys allow social researchers to do, such generalisations can be made. Many social scientists have argued that a combination of both methods of gathering and analysing data within the one research project provides stronger research results contributing to a better understanding of the world in which we live, giving us both the richness of in-depth qualitative work, and the breadth of many sources of information provided by quantitative research (Bouma 2000, p. 182). The claim that social scientific approaches are 'positivistic' is rarely valid today,

even for the quantitative work of sociologists. Hence the earlier suspicions of social science on the part of theologians are no longer plausible.

One of the significant contributors to the formation of the discipline of practical theology as it has emerged in contemporary thinking is Johannes Van Der Ven. In his book, *Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach*, he outlined three possible approaches to a relationship between the social sciences and practical theology (1998, pp. 93-95).

1. Multidisciplinary approach. In this approach, all empirical work would be done by the social sciences and practical theology would reflect on the findings. Van Der Ven conceived this as being a two-stage process. However, he saw it as unsatisfactory as it made practical theology highly dependent on the approach that social scientists took, on their assumptions and the questions they asked.

2. Interdisciplinary approach. Van Der Ven envisaged this approach as one of a mutual dialogue in which each discipline retained its own perspectives, research methods and focal questions which they brought to the dialogue. However, Van Der Ven recognised that, in reality, there was often little opportunity for practical theologians to engage with social scientists largely because few social scientists were interested in theology or saw it as helpful in developing their own perspectives. .

3. Intradisciplinary approach. In this approach, Van Der Ven suggested that the practical theologian learned the skills and methods of the social sciences, and used them for their own practical theological aims and objectives. This means that the practical theologian has to become skilled in the social sciences, but it also means that the practical theologian is not dependent on those skilled only in the social sciences who may not be interested in participating in dialogue.

Van Der Ven opted for the third approach. In this approach, the practical theologian uses the methods of empirical research within the context of the theological exercise. Thus, Van Der Ven referred to the phases of research in hyphenated terms: the empirical-theological research design and data analysis, treating the empirical and theological processes as inseparably part of practical theology. Nevertheless, on several occasions in his description of the methods of practical theology, Van Der Ven hinted at the epistemological and methodological gap between the theological and empirical components. For example, he noted that the concept of 'church' may be developed differently in the theological and empirical contexts, (1998, p. 93). He argued that the development of the research design would be a theological exercise (1998, pp. 119-121), but that the theological concepts obtained from the theological theory formation would need to be operationalised in that they would need to re-expressed into terms that could be included in the 'operations' of empirical research, whether these be surveys or interviews (1998, p. 134). This would involve translating the theological concepts into variables in which the means of measurement were empirically valid and reliable (1998, pp. 138-9). His comments on the final phase of the research project as involving theological interpretation and reflection hint again at the distinction.

To avoid the danger of empiricism, the results need to be placed

within a broader theological framework, namely one of hermeneutic-theological evaluation. ... Empirical facts are meaningful only when they are placed within a hermeneutic context of theological concepts and theories and evaluated from within this context (Van Der Ven 1998, p. 153).

Mark Cartledge, took up the 'empirical-theological cycle' of Van Der Ven in his book *Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives*. He presented this cycle as 'a research tool which is used to pursue practical theology at an academic level' (Cartledge 2003, p. 21). The cycle included five phases:

1. The problem of the subject under investigation is chosen.
2. The subject is investigated inductively by empirical research, leading to the formulation of the research question and the design of the research project.
3. The detailed empirical research is undertaken. This may mean conducting a survey or doing qualitative research.
4. The new set of information about the area of study is analysed.
5. The resultant material is interpreted and reflected upon theologically before recommendations are made (Cartledge 2003, p. 21).

This cycle was not presented as a normative model, but one potential model of research. However, underlying such a cycle, Cartledge saw a more fundamental dialectic in which he suggested 'the dialogue between polar opposites is to be held together in the response of faith' (Cartledge 2003, p. 22). This dialectic occurred as practical theologians engage with the lifeworld or concrete reality as one pole, and the theoretical systems, including both theological sources and social science theory as the other pole (Cartledge 2003, p. 27; Cartledge 2015, p. 23.). Research, said Cartledge, is a movement between the concrete realities and theoretical systems, in order to lead to insights, new ideas and new practices (Cartledge 2015, p. 23). It may be noted that Cartledge also identified a second dialectic between practical theology and spirituality, so that the 'research process is correlated with the spirituality process' in which the theologian asks 'what is the Holy Spirit doing in this context?' (Cartledge 2015, p. 24). For Cartledge, as for Van Der Ven, the whole task of practical theology is theological, although descriptive, critical and constructive empirically-based research is used to contribute to the ultimate task of both understanding and transforming the world. For Cartledge, the social sciences become limited tools, used within the practice of theology. 'In practical theology,' Cartledge wrote, 'there should be no doubt as to which is the dominant discourse, however sympathetically and critically other discourses are used' (Cartledge 2003, p. 16).

This intradisciplinary approach, in which the social sciences are used within the processes of practical theology, minimises potential conflicts of different value orientations in the social sciences and theology. It allows the values and assumptions of theology to dominate and for the social sciences to be used to the extent that they are helpful in contributing to the aims of the theological project. In other words, the intradisciplinary approach allows the social sciences to be developed within a Christian framework, as suggested in the approach to the sciences of some Reformed theologians and philosophers such as Dooryeweerd (Basden 2003).

However, there are a number of problems with the intradisciplinary approach of Van Der Ven and Cartledge. Firstly, that approach does not clearly identify when different conceptual frameworks are used and thus cannot provide clear instructions for the appropriate use of concepts developed within a particular context. When, for example, within practical theology can one speak of God? Van Der Ven recognised that empirically, God is not accessible, and goes so far as to say that practical theology is about faith rather than about God (Van Der Ven 1998, p. 103). However, a theology which does not refer to God appears to be a very strange theology, particularly when it comes to the process of reflecting on the normative implications of empirical findings. The alternative is to separate the disciplines of theology and the social sciences, and to recognise the different conceptual frameworks they employ which would mean abandoning the intradisciplinary approach.

The intradisciplinary approach also appears to build a barrier between practical theology and sociology. It has the potential for each discipline to be impervious to the findings and perspectives of the other. It means that practical theologians may be ignorant of the developments in concepts, methods and findings of sociology, and encourages sociology to ignore the relevance of religious faith and the work of practical theologians to their own studies.

Rather than develop a specific unified methodology for practical theology, some more recent publications have argued for recognition of the diversity of perspectives both within and across the theological and social science disciplines. While the term is not used, these approaches are closer to Van Der Ven's interdisciplinary approach, but arguing that there may be a number of voices or sources of ideas and data involved in the conversation. Van Der Ven's supposition that one would need to find specific social scientific partners with whom to dialogue does not make much sense in a world in which there is a continuous flow of ideas continually crossing disciplinary boundaries.

In a recent book, the Australian theologian, Brian Macallan, attempted to develop 'a framework for the discipline of practical theology' in a 'postfoundationalist' context in which the '*universal rationality* of foundationalism' is rejected (Macallan 2014, p. 4 (author's italics)). Rejecting also the '*multiversal rationality* of antifoundationalism', Macallan argued for a 'critical correlational approach' (Macallan 2014, p. 5) within which both the social sciences and the Christian tradition should be held in tension and in dialogue.

In a similar vein, Dreyer (2012), in an article entitled 'Practical Theology and Intradisciplinary Diversity', pointed out that, in psychology, sociology, anthropology and other social and human sciences as well as in practical theology, there are a great variety of methodologies and perspectives. For example, he referred to the 2004 American Sociological Association address by Burawoy, which noted intellectual fragmentation and interdisciplinary conflict in sociology. Burawoy identified four types of sociological discourses: professional, critical, policy and public (Dreyer 2012, p. 40), each of which had different audiences and involved different value-orientations. Acknowledging this, Dreyer advocated the need for a critical 'dialogic pluralist response' of 'listening to and learning from' the many voices within and across the disciplinary boundaries

(Dreyer 2012, p. 53). Practical theologians cannot treat sociology as a single and united discipline, but must recognise there are many views, approaches and methodologies among sociologists.

Yet, bringing the voices into dialogue is not easy, even within disciplinary areas, apart from across disciplines. They speak different languages. They bring different perspectives. Neither Dreyer nor Macallan demonstrate how the languages may communicate with each other, or how their perspectives may be held in tension. The following case study provides an illustration, perhaps not so much of 'dialogue', but an interweaving of materials in the process of developing practical theology.

Reflections on Research in Youth Ministry

The following sections of this paper examine the interweaving of empirical research using social science methods and theological reflection in a study of youth ministry in local churches in Australia that was undertaken by the Christian Research Association between 2014 and 2016. While a single case-study will not provide a normative picture of research methods in practical theology, it may suggest some ways in which social sciences may relate to theology.

The issue which gave rise to the research was, at heart, a practical theological issue: how best to pass on faith to young people. From earliest times, there has been an injunction of parents to raise their children in the faith.

> *"Teach [these words of mine] to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up"* (Deut. 11:19).

Some social scientists, such as Peter Berger, have described this as a process of socialisation, in which a particular understanding of the world is built. It is not just a role for parents, but also for communities (Berger 1973, p. 25). Part of the process of socialisation is what Berger described as developing a 'plausibility structure', that is, a social structure in which the reality of faith 'is taken for granted' (Berger 1973, p. 55). Such social structures may include youth groups and local churches.

However, several recent research projects have demonstrated that passing on the faith in recent generations in Australia has not been highly successful. Analysis of the 2009 Survey of Australian Attitudes showed that of all people who went to church monthly or more often when aged 11 years, only 30 per cent were continuing to attend a church monthly or more often as adults at the time of the survey (Hughes 2011, p. 19). It also discovered that three-quarters of those who ceased to attend a church no longer identified themselves as Christian. Not only had they given up on church attendance, but had given up on faith itself. Analysis of the Australian government Census data, comparing Census results in 2001 and 2011, showed approximately 500,000 young Australians moved from identifying with a Christian denomination to identifying themselves as having 'no religion' during those ten years (Hughes 2013a).

Youth ministry also arises from the theological imperative to take the Gospel to those who have not heard it and to call people to be followers of Jesus, baptising and teaching them (Mtt. 28:19-20). Again, empirical research has

highlighted the gap between the theological imperative and the results on the ground. Social surveys have indicated that perhaps ten per cent of young people in Australia have regular engagement with a church (Hughes 2013b, pp. 7-8). Ninety per cent of Australians of secondary school age have little or no engagement. Thus, the issue arises as to how youth ministry can be most effective in engaging young people who have had no previous church involvement?

The 2014-2016 research project examining youth ministry in local churches used case study methods. The research team visited 23 congregations. The sample of congregations was dependent on the denominations willing to take part in the research and contribute to its costs. Within each denomination, cases were chosen in order to cover a variety of geographical and socio-economic contexts. The sampling method reflected methodological principles commonly used in the social sciences. The cases included congregations located at the centre of major cities, suburban areas, rural cities, and in smaller rural towns. In each case, interviews were conducted with young people, youth leaders, parents and pastors of churches. The researchers were aware that the sampling of those who were interviewed was not ideal. They had hoped to speak with young people who had left youth ministries as well as those who had stayed in them. However, because of the practical and ethical difficulties of contacting these young people, the research focussed on those currently involved in youth ministries.

Theological principles helped to define what the research team was examining: young people's faith in God. A variety of dimensions of faith were recognised. Some of the concepts of faith arose directly from theological conceptions, such as the devotional dimension, which was expressed in trust in God, in prayer and in public worship. The researchers were looking for evidence that young people had a commitment to their faith, which they expected to be a lifetime commitment.

However, the ways in which faith was examined was also influenced by previous social science research. Earlier studies, conducted by the Christian Research Association with school students, had shown that taking personal ownership of faith was important to many young people. In interviews in previous research, many students of Anglo-Australian background were insistent that they had to make their own decisions as to what they would believe and what they would reject. Many who had grown up in Christian families said that they wanted to work out whether they could own the faith for themselves (Hughes 2007, pp. 126-7). The researchers saw this sense of the ownership of faith as arising out of an individualistic culture in which every person is encouraged to think for themselves and take ownership of their own opinions and life-style decisions. It reflected what the sociologist, Anthony Giddens, described as the individualist reflexive formation of the self that occurs in 'high modernity' (Giddens 1991, p. 5). The researchers had noted that personal ownership of faith was not an issue for some young people who had come from non-Anglo cultures. Many immigrant young people had expressed the view that what one believed was dictated by the community of which they were a part, and should be accepted without question as part of one's heritage. Thus, this research had identified that faith takes on different forms in different cultural

contexts, and therefore the passing on of faith takes different forms depending on the cultural context. Developing a faith that is personally owned means that young people seek opportunities to critically examine ideas and beliefs for themselves, to ask questions, to work through doubts and challenges, and to come to their own personal conclusions. The development of faith that is part of a heritage involves learning about the content and implications of that faith, rather than critically questioning it.

The youth ministry research project also wanted to identify factors in youth ministry which would contribute to growth in faith. A major research project conducted in the USA suggested that the most significant factor in youth adopting faith was the ways in which the whole church was supportive of the youth in the church and the extent to which relationships were formed between the older and younger members of the church (Martinson, Black & Roberto, 2010).

Previous research in schools undertaken by the Christian Research Association had noted that parents have, by far, the greatest impact on the lives of their children in relation to faith (Hughes 2016, p. 2). Thus, the research team hypothesised that youth ministry would be more effective if parents supported the youth ministry and saw it as complementing their own efforts at passing on the faith. On the other hand, the team recognised that most Australian young people do not have parents who have a strong commitment to Christian faith, and they wondered how youth ministry catered for those young people.

The research team also felt that it was important to look at the nature of the youth ministry team and the activities that took place in youth groups. It asked about the relationships with leaders and about experiences which young people felt had contributed to their growth in faith. The research team developed a set of questions based on these issues which were asked of the young people and their leaders.

Social research, using surveys and interviews, is a peculiar socially constructed pattern of behaviour which has been developed in the social sciences (Burr 2003, p. 176). In many instances, it allows people from outside the immediate context of the situation being examined to be involved in observation and listening. Thus, it brings fresh eyes to the situation. Researchers conduct systematic observations which enable them to look for similarities and differences in various contexts. In relation to youth ministry, this is something that someone within youth ministry rarely has the opportunity to do.

The researcher, by the very way that research is framed as an activity in the Western world, can ask questions that they would not usually ask in everyday conversation. People have learned to expect that the researcher will often dig a little deeper into people's activities, motivations and thinking than people would in everyday conversation. In return, the researcher is not expected to make judgements or provide advice or direction. In most instances, the researcher leaves the context of the research and has no further contact with the person who has been interviewed. In return for openness and honesty, the researcher promises to keep the information provided confidential.

It is possible that the researcher will miss some things that are evident to the local person. The pastor of the church who has had a long involvement with a

young person will know much more about that young person than the researcher will ever discover in a short interview. Nevertheless, the pastor may not know the specific things the research is designed to uncover and will not have the comparative understanding of groups of people across different contexts

The Analysis of the Data

Various social science methods were used to examine the data that was gathered in the study of youth ministry. The researchers looked first at the categories of young people involved in the youth ministries they had observed. An initial observation was that about 80 per cent of the young people were from church families. In just one of the 23 case studies, youth ministry had effectively engaged many young people from beyond the families who attended the churches, although this was an explicit intention of youth leaders in all the case studies (Hughes et al., 2016, p. 8).

When youth leaders were asked about how they planned to engage young people beyond church families, most of them said they were relying on the youth to bring their friends along. But when the team spoke to the youth, some of them were happy to bring some close friends, but many of them said that they did not want to invite their friends from school. They wanted the youth ministry to be a safe place where they could openly be Christian and not be criticised for their commitment. It is hardly surprising, then, that the main method of increasing the involvement of youth beyond the church was largely ineffective (Hughes et al., 2016, p. 8).

The research team also noted that, in most places, some of the youth in church families were not involved in the youth ministry activities. In many places, youth ministry was providing activities that were attractive for some youth, but not for others, and the youth who attended were selective in their participation. This can be placed into a larger framework by describing it as an example of the general commodification of culture and the ways these cultural trends have extended to religion (Miller 2004). The youth group was seen by the youth as a set of services provided for them rather than as a community of which they were part and in which they had a duty to participate. In many areas of life, young people are selective about what activities they attend, just as they are selective about what products they buy. They weigh up participation in particular activities in terms of costs and benefits, rather than being involved because they feel a sense of duty to do so or because they identify with the community.

The research team looked for evidence of committed devotional faith and whether there was a relationship between involvement in youth ministry activities and the strength of that faith. Certainly, most young people in the survey indicated they prayed frequently and were involved in other devotional activities. However, it should be noted that, although the research can listen to what people say about their relationship with God and can examine people's behaviour, it is not possible for the researcher to measure or truly determine if a person *has* a relationship with God. Nevertheless, in order to draw conclusions for ministry, general decisions must be made as to whether God is working in the lives of young people. In making such decisions, the practical theologian must

look at young people's attitudes and behaviour in the light of the traditions of faith, the teaching of the Church and of the Bible.

Some questions were asked about the application of faith to decisions of life. For example, the team asked young people what sort of career they hoped to enter when they completed their education. Then the young people were asked if their thinking about their career had been influenced in any way by their faith. Some youth were aware of moral issues that might affect how they developed their career. One person, for example, wanted to go into a career in popular music, but was wary, as a Christian, of the sex and drugs in the music scene. Some were clear that, as Christians, they wanted a career in which they could do something to benefit others. For some, that meant working in the medical or educational world, for example. Other young people had not thought that their faith might influence their choice of career, but saw their career as a fulfilment of what they were good at or passionate about (Hughes et al., 2016, p.10).

Young people were also asked what had been most important in the development of their faith. Many young people referred to specific camps or special experiences. At such times, young people said they had benefitted from a focus on their faith for an extended period of time without distractions. During such times, they were surrounded by others for whom faith was highly important. Those special experiences had become markers in their growth in faith (Hughes, et al., 2016, pp. 39-45).

The young people who were interviewed were also asked about their relationships with older people in the church and the likelihood that they would stay involved with the church. In most cases, young people said that the relationships with members of the church existed because of family interactions. However, most young people indicated that they felt the older members of the church were supportive of them and of the youth ministry. Some young people told of their appreciation of older people who looked out for them, with whom they played in a music band. Another small group of young people had been on a work party to Africa with some of the older people in the church and the relationships they built in that activity were enduring. Certainly, those who had such relationships were positive about their sense of belonging to the church and their future church involvement.

In each of these areas, the application of faith, accounts of their experiences of faith, and relationships with other Christians, the descriptive data must be evaluated in the light of the traditions and bases of Christian faith. This evaluation of the data makes possible the development of recommendations for practical ministry. To determine what faith communities should do in order to most effectively build faith among young people depends on the theological evaluation of what is truly contributing to faith. While the case studies did not provide proof of the relative impact of particular factors, they suggested a range of factors that could be influential.

Firstly, the interviews suggested that, apart from the attractiveness of the youth ministry program, the relationships they formed with the youth leaders were of great importance. The fact that they could communicate well with them, that they trusted them, and felt they were important to the leaders was of great significance to their level of enthusiasm and involvement in the youth ministry.

Secondly, there was some evidence that relationships with other adults in the church had an impact. The fact that young people felt they were regarded positively by the older members of the local faith community contributed to their positive attitudes towards the church as a whole.

Thirdly, it was evident that special experiences through camps and retreats had played a significant role in their growth in faith, as the young people experienced it. Contemporary sociological studies have demonstrated that personal experiences have become much more important in recent decades? than in previous social contexts in the formation of identity and in orientation to life (see, for example, Giddens 1991). From the perspective of practical theology, it has been argued that the movement from rational and traditional forms of authority to experiential authority is one of the major challenges for churches in Australia today (Rose et. al., 2014).

The provision of opportunities in which young people might have deep personal experiences of faith, free from the distractions of everyday life, social media, work and study, is important. On the other hand, so also is the building of on-going relationships in which young people are mentored in faith and encouraged to apply it to the various aspects of their lives. Part of this is developing relationships across the generations within the faith community.

The qualitative research conducted so far was based on 23 congregations. The sample was sufficiently broad to identify some of the factors that operate in youth ministry contexts, but it was not sufficient to generalise across Australia as to the strength of various factors in effective youth ministry. Consequently, a second stage of the research has now been developed using surveys, which will gather a much broader range of information.

What Does This Project Show about the Relationship between the Social Sciences and Theology?

What does this all say about the relationship of sociological research and theology for the practical theologian? In most stages of the research project, both theology and the social sciences contributed, as shown in Figure 1, the impetus for the study was the theological imperative for parents and communities to pass on their faith to their children in the light of the social reality that this was often not occurring successfully. Christian concern for the development of faith in young people made this study important, and the social research which showed many young Australians rejecting faith provided evidence of the dimensions of the problem. The research question, then, was a product both of the imperative of faith and observations about what was occurring in contemporary Australian society.

Summary of the Contributions of Theology and the Social Sciences to a Research Project on Youth Ministry in Local Churches in Relation to the Different Phases of the Research Process

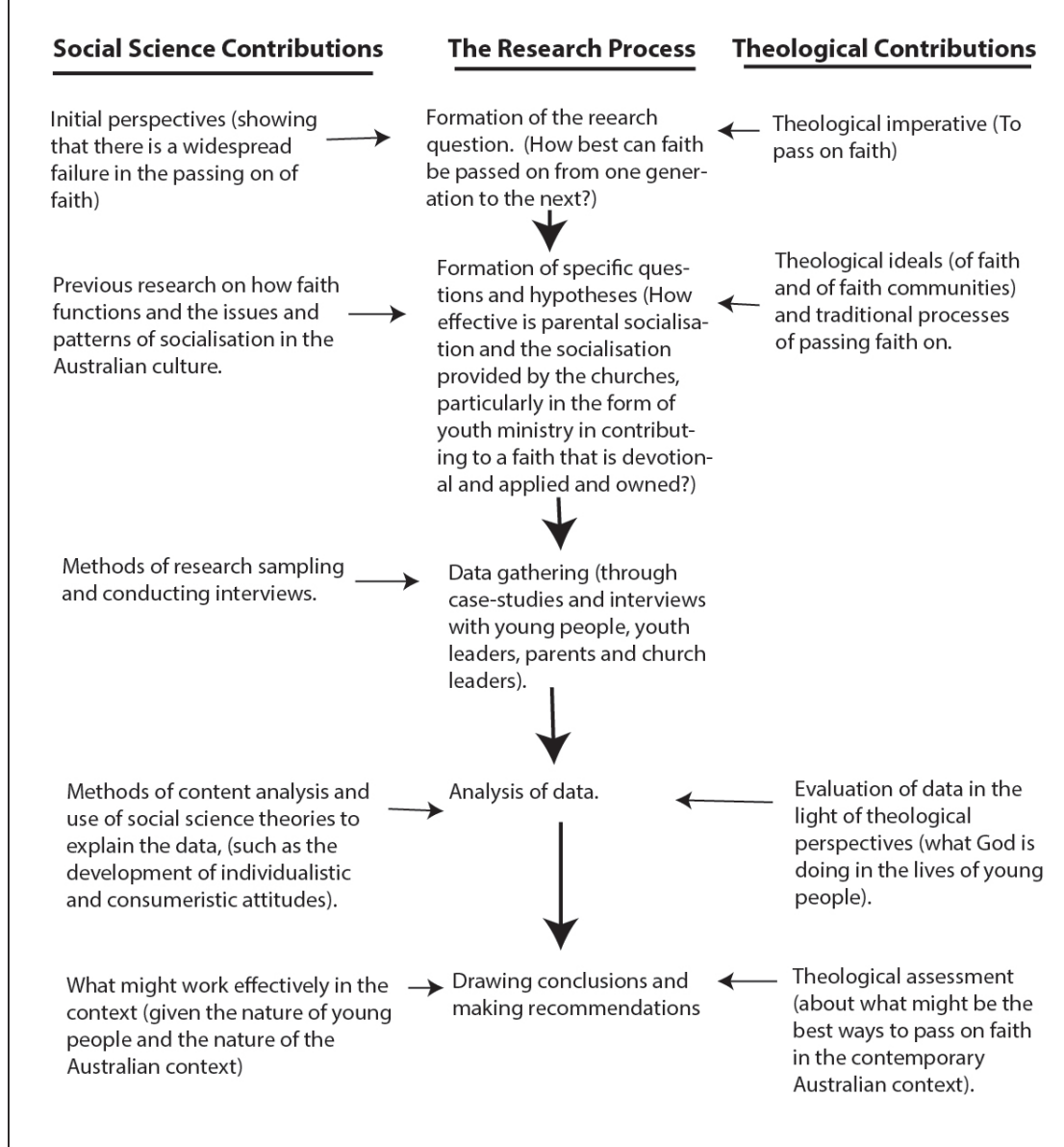| Social Science Contributions	The Research Process	Theological Contributions
Initial perspectives (showing that there is a widespread failure in the passing on of faith)	Formation of the reearch question. (How best can faith be passed on from one generation to the next?)	Theological imperative (To pass on faith)
Previous research on how faith functions and the issues and patterns of socialisation in the Australian culture.	Formation of specific questions and hypotheses (How effective is parental socialisation and the socialisation provided by the churches, particularly in the form of youth ministry in contributing to a faith that is devotional and applied and owned?)	Theological ideals (of faith and of faith communities) and traditional processes of passing faith on.
Methods of research sampling and conducting interviews.	Data gathering (through case-studies and interviews with young people, youth leaders, parents and church leaders).	
Methods of content analysis and use of social science theories to explain the data, (such as the development of individualistic and consumeristic attitudes).	Analysis of data.	Evaluation of data in the light of theological perspectives (what God is doing in the lives of young people).
What might work effectively in the context (given the nature of young people and the nature of the Australian context)	Drawing conclusions and making recommendations	Theological assessment (about what might be the best ways to pass on faith in the contemporary Australian context).

Figure 1: Summary of the Contributions of Theology and the Social Sciences to a Research Project on Youth Ministry in Local Churches in Relation to the Different Phases of the Research process

While the origins of many issues in practical theology will be theological, social sciences can play a significant role in identifying and describing what Macallan calls 'the pastoral concern' (Macallan 2014, p. 104). The social sciences bring new perspectives on the problems and illuminate some of the dynamics which may be significant in resolving problems. For example, quantitative research, using appropriate surveys and other means, can measure the extent to which specific pastoral issues exist and among which groups of people they are found.

The formulation of the research hypotheses regarding the faith of young people drew both on the traditions of faith and on research, which suggested that among certain groups of young people in contemporary Australia the personal ownership of one's perspectives on life in general, and on faith in particular, was highly significant. Thus, both sociological theory and prior research, as well as the traditions of faith, added to the development of the hypotheses.

The methods of conducting the case studies were derived primarily from the social sciences. Sampling methods were informed by the social sciences which encouraged the examination of a diversity of contexts, rural and urban, small and larger churches and churches of different denominational traditions. The research methods of systematic interviewing have been developed within the social sciences. Similarly, the patterns of identifying the demographic characteristics of those involved in youth ministry and the patterns of analysing the content of the interviews, looking for common themes and differences in perspectives, were also methods developed within the social sciences.

The social sciences provide methods of systematically observing and listening carefully to what is going on. That is the heart of the strength of the sciences. Scientific methods are not antithetical to Christian perspectives. Rather, they provide disciplined and systematic ways of listening to and observing the world, society and human life. Along with the process of listening and observing, they provide ways of analysing and categorising what is observed. They provide ways of analysing what factors influence situations. At the same time, it is appropriate to be aware of and to approach critically the value orientations that may be involved in the way that a particular set of social research has been conducted and the particular frameworks that have been used in the development of the research.

Frequently, social sciences provide descriptions of particular situations by identifying them as examples of more general patterns. For example, in this study of youth ministry, examples of consumeristic and individualistic approaches were identified. Sometimes social sciences provide explanations that are contrary to Christian expectations or the patterns that churches have adopted in the past, and it is appropriate to question those explanations. On the other hand, as Van Der Ven (1998, pp. 47-49) has noted, and as Macallan has reiterated (2014, p. 152), the traditions of faith have always been interpreted and applied in multiple ways, and must also be subjected to continual critique. There are times when the results of social research indicate that if particular outcomes are to be achieved, different patterns from those used in the past or which have become traditional must be used to achieve them. One example that arose in this study was the fact that 'friendship evangelism' among young people, the dependence on young people bringing their friends to youth group, was generally not working. Youth ministry needed to explore other methods of connecting with young people without a church background.

The assessment of what was discovered in the research and how the research might be applied was primarily a theological activity in as far as the purpose of the project was to recommend how faith might best be passed on to young Australians. In making this assessment, one must look at what appears to

be contributing to a true growth in faith as distinct from what attracts young people simply by entertaining them. Nevertheless, that theological evaluation must be informed by informed by the results of the research and its analysis of the factors operating.

Conclusion

In some ways, the youth ministry research reflected the dialectic described by Cartledge and Macallan between the concrete reality, social theory and theology. While the research arose from theological imperatives and concluded with recommendations about ministry, which were framed in theological terms, social science methods dominated the gathering of the information and describing the situation. What is evident, upon reflection, is that the social science methods of listening and analysing responses were primarily about describing what IS the case and putting it into some theoretical frameworks. The input from theology was primarily about what OUGHT to be the case: the imperative of passing on the faith, the desired nature of faith, and the role of the community of faith. These imperatives formed the basis of the research question and the hypotheses, the evaluation of the results of the research and formation of recommendations for the communities of faith.

The social sciences provided methods for examining what IS the case in the particular social contexts of this research project. Input from the social sciences was interwoven into the research project, providing clarification of the research question and contributing to the hypotheses as well as translating them into terms, which can be used in surveys and interviews. While sociologists may have values and assumptions, which they use in interpretation, the general aim of sociology, as of other sciences, is to develop descriptions, which have a validity and a reliability which would be echoed in the findings of other sociologists and in a repetition of this study if it occurred in similar contexts. There was no particular agenda in describing the consumeristic, individualistic and experiential approaches to life noted in the young people, for example. However, for policy implications, in the context of practical theology, it is necessary to return to theology for the framework for evaluating the findings and developing the recommendations for praxis.

As the philosopher, David Hume, pointed out in the 18th century, there is a significant logical gap between what is and what ought to be (Hume 1966, pp. 177-8). There are some intrusions across the gap as OUGHT statements require descriptions of what IS the case in order to be meaningful. IS statements often use terms which have implicit value content when, for example, one describes a relationship as involving trust, appreciation and care. The insight of practical theology is that the praxis of theology should be developed in the light of an understanding of what is the case, appropriately informed by the social sciences. For example, when one knows what *is* happening in youth ministries and how they are influencing young people, one can better make evaluations as to what *should* be happening in youth ministries in order to build faith.

It is not appropriate, then, to describe the use of social sciences simply as a partner in a conversation with or, as Van Der Ven and Cartledge suggest, within practical theology. Nor does the fact that theology and social sciences make different contributions mean that one is logically prior, as Swinton and Mowat

have argued. Rather, they bring different voices to the topic, each contributing in different ways to the task of determining the recommendations.

What this means, in this example, is that practical theology spoke primarily with an imperative voice. This voice assumed a metaphysic about God and God's design, and it is this metaphysic that is reflected in the creeds and other sources of faith. The OUGHT of theology is derived from a description of God's grace and salvific activity, although variously expressed and interpreted in different contexts. [2]

This means that, at times, theology also offers descriptions of what IS the case. When God is described as working in the lives of young people through special experiences and through the influences of family and church communities, theology takes the descriptions of what is happening and interprets them within its own context of how God operates in the lives of people. It interprets what is happening by reference to the traditions and sources of faith. The validity of these statements about what IS the case is tested in relation to the traditions and sources of faith, rather than in relation to the concrete reality using scientific methods. Thus, the logical nature of the IS statements of theology and the IS statements of the social sciences is different, and they cannot be directly compared.

The relationship between theological and social scientific descriptions of what IS the case can be compared to the different descriptions that can be given of human actions by different disciplines. The functioning of the body can be described in terms of chemical reactions or in terms of movements occurring according to the laws of physics. It can also be described in terms of intention and purpose. The validity of each description is determined in its own way and according to its own criteria. The validity of one description in no way annuls the validity of another description.

In the process of research, there are occasions when the social sciences and theology provide different explanations of the same phenomena. For example, the study of youth ministry noted that young people were influenced by special experiences and by building cross-generational relationships. The social sciences might speak of the significance of the 'aha' experience and the importance of plausibility structures, to use Peter Berger's term (Berger 1973). But does that mean that God is not at work here? Not at all. Sociology provides one description. Theology provides others. They are not incompatible. To describe God as being at work through special experiences and through communities of faith is to make a judgement rather than provide a description of what is happening. Sociology looks for regularities and patterns. Through the sciences, we gain insights into how the universe and social and personal world of human beings works. To say that God is at work in these regularities is to make a particular sort of judgement about them which is rooted in theological discourse.

Social sciences are often used within political, educational or health-related contexts in which the OUGHT has been previously determined and it is assumed that social sciences in themselves are about the transformation of society. Many

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[2] This does not necessarily mean that the epistemology of revelation is entirely independent of empirical considerations, as Barth has argued. This major issue is beyond the scope of this article.

theologians stress the value-laden nature of empirical research, the values that are involved in the choices of theory and in the nature of the concepts that are used in the research (Macallan 2014, p. 122). Van Der Ven argues from this basis that practical theology must be normative because of the value-laden nature of empirical studies (Van Der Ven 2005).

However, this is a misunderstanding of the nature of science in general, and of the social sciences in particular. The object of science is to develop descriptions of the world, which are both accurate in content and as simple and general as possible. One may identify assumptions and values in any particular research project, in the topics chosen, the theories tested, and the ways the hypotheses are framed. However, there are many voices in the social sciences as there are in theology. It is important to the social sciences themselves to identify these assumptions and values and to be critical of them. Internal debates continue within the social sciences about its methods and findings in developing general descriptions of the regularities of the universe, as the philosopher of science, Karl Popper has noted (Van Der Ven 2005, p. 108).

The fact that any piece of social research involves assumptions does not mean that the social sciences produce opinions of equal value to the hunches and suppositions of any observer. Built into social science methods are procedures for maximising the validity and reliability of their observations, through the careful processes of sampling, the careful repetitive processes of interviewing and surveying, the distancing of the researcher from the internal dynamics of the situation being observed, and in the continuing academic debate in scientific forums about the methods and the interpretation of the results. Social science methods also provide ways of identifying the limitations in the extent to which findings can be generalised, for example, by pointing to the limitations of particular sampling methods or sample sizes. As social scientists review their work and the assumptions and values involved in a particular approach, they also examine the validity of alternative approaches and methods.

The example of the study of youth ministry showed that the interactions between theology and the social sciences were complex. Both were influential, in their different ways, in identifying what the project should be about: in the development of the conception of faith among young people in the contemporary Australian context and the understanding of the various factors that might influence the growth of faith. Both contributed to the recommendations for practices in youth ministry that arose from the project (see Hughes et al., 2016).

The concern about sociology and other social sciences exhibited by some theologians arose largely out of all-encompassing theories of the some of the classical thinkers of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Here, indeed, was some evidence of social theory as 'disguised anti-theology' with strong value-laden assumptions, as identified by Milbank. But such theories have been well critiqued within the social sciences and it has been well shown that, although they may contain some truth, they do not explain the complexity of the world. Most sociologists recognise, for example, that religious faith cannot be reduced to a product of social deprivation or an example of pre-scientific thinking as some of the early sociologists thought. The critique of these general 19th century theories does not apply to the contemporary use of social scientific methods in

examining specific situations and identifying the variety of factors that are significant in them.

There is a step beyond description, which involves ethical or theological evaluation or evaluation in terms of a particular policy. Within the framework of this study of youth ministry, identifying what influences should be maximised and what minimised is primarily a task for practical theology, although it may also be influenced by the findings of social research. It is inappropriate to take the description of what IS the case uncritically as showing what SHOULD be the case. A famous case in the inappropriate adoption of sociological findings was the 'homogeneity principle' in the development of church life (McGavran 1980, pp. 223-244). It was found that churches grew more rapidly if they were homogeneous socio-economically. However, this conflicted with the theological aim of developing faith communities that cross socio-economic boundaries (Jam. 2: 5-7).

The use of the social sciences in relation to practical theology should not determine the particular theological approach one might take in relation to culture. It does not determine whether one sees 'Christ' as against, within, above, in paradox with, or seeking the transformation of culture. One may well respond to the cultural reality one discovers through the use of the social science by seeing it as evil and needing total redemption, or as inherently good, or as needing transformation. That evaluation is the on-going task of the theologian. Without the careful examination of the culture, however, the way theological pronouncements are framed may well be irrelevant.

The practices of youth ministry, the cross-generational relationships that characterise youth ministry and even the provision of opportunities for special experiences can be used for much good. There is always the potential that such practices, relationships and experiences can be used for evil, for manipulation and even the abuse of young people. Within the contexts of faith, the social sciences have an important role in describing what is happening, and theology has an important responsibility in evaluating what experiences and what relationships lead to spiritual growth, to living in God's ways and in relationship with God.

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