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We Have Never Been Theologians: Postsecularism and Practical Theology

Abstract: This article makes a clear challenge portrayals of secularism and secularity that have become hugely influential within contemporary theology. It demonstrates how the theological concepts of immanence and transcendence have been mobilised as ciphers in cultural debate and argues that this has perpetuated unhelpful binary thinking about faith and culture. Drawing upon the work of Bruno Latour it constructs a case for an alternative mode of theological engagement with the way we live now. This will present a radical agenda for practical theology which has yet to make its own distinctive response to the challenges of postsecular enchantment. Practical theologians are urged to draw upon the traditional strengths of their discipline and combine creative new thinking with a recovery of insights from the arts of ministry.

The Problems of the Present Age

I went to Church last Sunday.

The morning was sunny through stained glass. The golden wood of pews and pulpit shone. Autumn flowers, big, dark and as red as old suns, were glorious on the altar table. Children were sat on a striped rug to the side of the aisle drawing pictures and building with Lego. Everyone who entered smiled at them. The first hymn gathered us all together. 'Now Thank We All Our God,' and I did thank with all my heart. But then things turned somehow. The children had left for their own classes and here we were - a small group of people scattered amongst the pews. The minister spoke and

his sermon was like a stain spreading. 'Our world is rotten. People have turned from God to the idols of consumption and materialism. We must take a spiritual stand against these times.' I felt all the loveliness departing and I very much wanted to be outside again in the street. I wanted to be back where I had been enjoying the morning; sitting on the wall next to the bus stop holding a coffee in my hand and looking out at all the life around me. The woman with red hair carefully deadheading in her 'wild' flower garden. The family cycling along in single file like ducks on a river. The little boy in his Spiderman suit holding the hand of his grandma as they crossed the road. I wished to be in the fresh air not inside contemplating sickness.

I am haunted by a passage from Bruno Latour's passionate and protesting essay *Rejoicing*:

[H]ow many years has it been, how many centuries, since those professionals of the word... found themselves in a contemporary period they did not hate with all their guts? Idols, materialism, the market, modernism, the masses, sex, democracy – everything has horrified them... They really believed that you couldn't possibly speak of religion except by first deporting peoples ... [somewhere] supposedly more 'spiritual'. ... As for me, this world suits me down to the ground, I don't know a better one, I don't have any other, what's more. There is no other world, just this one here, the only one we have to be seized again quite differently' (2013, 173-4)

I am a 'professional of the word'. But this is what I want; this is what I deeply desire. To live in and love this world – but to be seized by it and to seize it again 'quite differently'.

The Redemptive Drama of a Secular Age

One of the most interesting aspects of the debates about secularism, secularity and the postsecular are the *theological* representations of the nature of our present age that are entangled throughout the discussions concerning ecclesial viability, religion

in public life and contemporary spirituality. Very often these theological perspectives employ the ciphers of immanence and transcendence to describe and diagnose a spiritual 'malaise' in contemporary culture. Such heavy-duty theological terms pack a great deal of punch and can become powerfully active in shaping views of the world. Furthermore, although concepts of immanence and transcendence remain deeply associated with divine attributes in contemporary theological discourse they are simultaneously being mobilized as ciphers to explore cultural change. I find this interesting. What I am proposing in this article is that we pause for a while in the midst of depressing discussions concerning religious decline and spend a while reflecting upon the way practical theology might develop its own particular responses to contemporary configurations of immanence and transcendence as they inform understandings of the way we live now.

But first it is important to examine the perspectives that are already at play in contemporary debate. Charles Taylor's monumental work, *A Secular Age* (2007), is the obvious place to begin as it offers a highly influential rendering of secularity as a loss of a cultural sensibility for the transcendent and our corresponding enclosure within the confining parameters of an imminent frame.

Taylor's narrative carries us with confident momentum through centuries of historical developments within Western culture that have brought us to our current situation in which, he declares, most people have come to experience the world 'entirely as immanent' (2007, 376). Taylor's own theism subtly moderates the text but the story is a nuanced one. The loss of a resonance for transcendence is the result of a slow process that develops through many epochs and in response to diverse influences. Modernising 'reformed' versions of Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, are viewed as deeply implicated in processes of disenchantment through which the sacred canopy above us was removed (553). Secular disenchantment is thus just as much the outworking of our religious quests as our speculative reasoning. Furthermore, there is in Taylor's work no repudiation of the positive aspects of the journey that has brought us through renaissance, reformation and enlightenment to contemporary secular humanism. Taking this path was not

simply a mistake 'which needs to be undone' (637). It has also produced great gains for human kind. He does, however, register a profound sense of bereavement at the consequences of our 'progress'. 'There is a general sense in our culture that with the eclipse of transcendence something may have been lost' (307).

The 'sense of something lost' is examined in terms of the spiritual and social consequences of the conviction, 'that we are in a meaningless universe' which provides no source of endorsement for 'our most cherished meanings' (587). But whilst Taylor is interested in the philosophical and cultural outworkings of secularity it is also clear that, for him, this bereavement is a profoundly visceral experience:

It can come in the feeling that the quotidian is empty of deeper resonance, is dry flat; the things which surround us are dead, ugly, empty; and the way we organize them, shape them, arrange them in order to live has no meaning, beauty depth, sense. There can be a kind of 'nausée' before this meaningless world' (308).

Taylor's personal sense of nausea at the 'sterile flatness in the everyday...the repeated accelerating circle of desire and fulfillment in consumer culture, the cardboard quality of bright supermarkets, or neat row housing in a cleans suburb' (308) ¹ is very palpably inscribed in his work and the reader is clearly assumed to share the 'general sense' of weariness he describes. However, the depressing flatness of the immanence is not understood as the inevitable, whimpering end of transcendence. In a Hegelian frame, Taylor anticipates an inbreaking of transcendence after the epoch of immanence has done its work: 'this heavy concentration of immanence will intensify a sense of living in a 'waste land' for subsequent generations and many young people will begin again to explore beyond the boundaries' (770). But while the glory of transcendence may not yet be spent the overarching message of the book is that we dwell in the realm of imminence now and there will be no exodus for us – not at least until we fully comprehend the terms of our captivity.

Taylor's work has been enthusiastically received by many theologians. Although they might not concur with his narrative on all points the tropes it employs are very much their own and reassuringly familiar. The mythic pattern of the journey (exile-redemption; fullness-fall-future hope) is one widely recognized and endlessly repeated in theological writing. Most particularly Taylor's employment of transcendence and immanence as the key terms of analysis, and his explicit association of immanence with a certain emptiness and degradation in the way we live now, constructs a world view which is becoming very frequently inscribed in contemporary theological writing. So, for example, the creative and influential reformed theologian James Smith has recently produced a popular interpretation of Taylor's book entitled *How (Not) to be Secular* (2014) which seeks to enable Christian readers to negotiate the malaise of immanence in contemporary culture and respond to positive effect.

In a very different vein John Milbank's recent book, *Beyond Secular Order* (2013), which is endorsed by Taylor - both on and inside the cover - locates the seeds of secularism within misguided theological thinking that has confused relations between Creator and creation.² This, he maintains, seeded the development of immanent humanisms. Modernity, and most particularly its degraded materialist political representations (264-8), confine human potential and social vision. 'How can an abstract emptiness, a thinned-out formality... be a source of value or a stimulus to revisionary action' (268). In contrast, a reclamation of our pre-modern theological inheritance, when properly understood, does provide the resources to generate the renewal of our common life rightly re-orientated to its transcendent source.

I have chosen Smith and Milbank³ as illustrative of influential theologians whose positions that are broadly sympathetic to the dramatic plot contained within Taylor's text⁴. However, it should be acknowledged that there are many other theologians for whom the supposed loss of cultural resonance for traditional understandings of transcendence can be seen in a much more positive light. Within the work of Catherine Keller (2008, 2015) and John Caputo (2006), for example, we see a positive

turn towards an indeterminable divine fully implicated in the immanent processes of becoming that shape both the cosmos and the cultural order. This is a divine dispossessed of the traditional attributes of power associated with transcendence. Drawing variously upon ancient traditions of theopoesis and negative theology these theologians, and their many colleagues⁵, are keen to explore the immanent mysteries that surround us. Making a strong link between the operation of hierarchical concepts of transcendence and political and environmental violence they do not assent to the 'sense of something lost' that informs Taylor's work.

There is very much in this contrary theological approach that I engage with, welcome and assent to. It is intelligent, imaginative and enchanting. It presents an alternative ethical and political agenda for Christian theology which is dynamic and life affirming - albeit that the conventional theological abhorrence for materialism still lingers within some elements of its ecological critique. I am, nevertheless, uneasy about some of the governing assumptions at play within it. This is not because I am haunted by something which is lost. I do not suffer from weariness, revulsion or nausea. Rather it is because I think that a clinical separation between immanence and transcendence is still evident within the immanence affirming gestures of theologies of becoming.⁶ Affirming one in contrast to the other is always a problematic gesture which I believe that those of us who identify as practical theologians should approach with all kinds of questions.

Breaking the Immanent Frame.

Quite clearly none of the theologians named above, nor their respective positions on immanence or transcendence, are reductionist or simplistic. Their work is scholarly and nuanced and I like to read it. I am challenged by it. However, my argument is that within contemporary constructive and philosophical theology there is continuing tendency to elevate the status of one term in this binary pair implicitly leaving the other ethically, politically or theologically compromised. Furthermore, in this schema, one or other of the terms is negatively implicated in the analysis of contemporary forms of cultural relations. I began by referencing the work of Latour

and I return to him now as offering a challenge to the way we might engage with alternate resonances from immanence and transcendence as they inform understandings of our current age.

In his generative work, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) Latour offers a polemical but insightful analysis of the way in which modern culture operates according to two apparently oppositional but in fact deeply intertwined processes; purification and the production of hybridity. For Latour 'moderns' sought to set themselves apart from the fearful and enchanted world of their ancestors who confused the order of the cosmos by mixing categories that should rightly remain distinct. 'Century after century, colonial empire after colonial empire, the poor premodern collectives were accused of making a horrible mishmash of things and humans, objects and signs' (39). The remedy to this unhealthy confusion is separation, civilization, the defining of the disciplines, the cutting asunder of people and things, the divorce of nature from culture, the removal of heaven from earth. However, whilst instituting a 'Great Divide' and tearing the 'delicate web of relations' (12) the moderns, nevertheless, presided over an unprecedented production of myriad hybrids. Realms supposed to remain separate, and which are treated as distinct, are increasingly entwined in intricate relation (economics, religion, science, morality and government, for example). Furthermore, those things which appear to transcend the human, alternatively nature, culture and the divine, constantly shift-shape sometimes appearing as immanent and within our control and sometimes appearing as transcendent and beyond our grasp:

What an enormous advantage to be able to reverse the principles without even the appearance of contradiction! In spite of its transcendence, Nature remains mobilizable, humanizable, socailizable...Conversely, even though we construct Society through and through, it lasts, it surpasses us, it dominates us, it has its own laws, it is transcendent as Nature...The critical power of the moderns lies in this double language they can mobilize...they are free to make and unmake their society even as they render its laws ineluctable, necessary and absolute. (37)

Whilst the processes of purification that construct the modern are public and visible the premodern perception that 'a delicate shuttle should have woven together the heavens, industry, texts, souls and moral law ... remains uncanny, unthinkable unseemly' (5). The boundaries of transcendence must appear to have stability and the generative hybridity that in fact constitutes our lives must consequently remain unacknowledged. However, both the development of scientific and technological processes and the increasing realization of ecological vulnerability will, according to Latour, prompt us to concede at last that we have never succeeded in the purification processes we set such faith in. We have never been moderns. The world has in fact never been disentangled and graspable by us and as we cannot any longer ignore or control the lively agency of the hybrids we have created. Questions of immanence and transcendence thus emerge in very different forms; 'the repressed has returned' (76) with urgent questions.

How can we move from a transcendent/immanent Nature to a nature that is just as real, but extracted from the scientific laboratory and then transformed into an external reality? How can we shift from immanent/transcendent Society toward collectives of humans and nonhumans? How can we go from the transcendent/immanent crossed-out God to the God of origins who should perhaps be called the God below? (77)

Clearly Latour's analysis produces a very different image of our current context than that projected by Taylor. Just as we have never been modern the world has never become disenchanted. Far from it.

How could we be capable of disenchanting the world, when every day our laboratories and our factories populate the world with hundreds of hybrids stranger than the day before...How could we be materialists when every matter we invent possesses new properties that no single matter enables us to unify...How could we be chilled by the cold breath of the sciences when the sciences are hot and fragile, human and controversial, full of thinking reeds and subjects who are themselves inhabited by things (115).

Similarly, once we acknowledge enchantment we inevitably become less convinced of those dreary representations of our present age that portray humanity as captive within the tight frames of immanence and policed by the controlling forces of consumption and materialism. Latour is impatient of such nonsense.

Haven't we frightened ourselves enough with the poor European who is thrust into a cold soulless cosmos, wandering on an inert planet in a world devoid of meaning? Haven't we shivered enough before the spectacle of the mechanized proletariat...lost in cement and formica? Haven't we felt sorry enough for the consumer who leaves the driver's seat of his car only to move to the sofa in the TV room where he is manipulated by the powers of the media and the postindustrialized society?! (115)

This is not to say our current state is blissful. The world we inhabit possesses no barriers to exclude the tragic. An impure world of hybrids and agential assemblages that cross all Great Divides is fragile and dangerous and we are urgently required to imagine new political and social forms that will take us beyond processes of purification that have facilitated disastrous planetary exploitation the proliferation of power in unaccountable and violent hands. However, the world is also filled with wonder and joy; new occasions for delight that also generate the energy for cultural transformation – a theme that has inspired much creative thinking in the work of the philosophers and cultural theorists who have engaged deeply with Latour's thinking in recent years.⁷

However, to return to the key issue in this article and Latour's position on this point, once we have ceased to think and act as purifying moderns and started to embrace our 'nonmodernity' then we may reexamine the boundaries, separations and divides that we have constructed. 'It is the conception of the terms "transcendence" and "immanence" that ends up being modified by the moderns return to nonmodernity. Who told us that transcendent had to have a contrary? (128). Why not, he suggests, imagine a 'proliferation of transcendences' (129). This playful gesture reminds us that the world is full of mediators of transcendence and it is impossible to separate out things that must now be spoken of in one breath: 'the nature of things,

technologies, sciences, fictional beings, religions large and small, politics, jurisdictions, economies and unconsciousnesses' (129).

Archetypal Moderns?

It is important at this stage in my argument to consider what is happening theologically in the differences and contradictions appearing in the discourses of immanence and transcendence as they appear within historical and theoretical analyses of contemporary culture. It could, of course, straightforwardly be objected that the admittedly loose and arguably ill-defined ways in which both Taylor and Latour employ these terms does not easily map on to the sophisticated understandings available within the theological tradition. Might theologians be better employed interrogating their own taxonomy of transcendence rather than lingering here? Alternatively, it could be argued that theologians who have already embraced God's 'weakness' in processes of becoming have already moved far beyond the traditional notions of immanence and transcendence I am problematizing in setting out the contrasts between Taylor's and Latour's positions.

In response I would state that in an admittedly crude and polemical way I am insisting that the terms immanence and transcendence can never, in a nonmodern hybrid world, be separated out and purified. Immanence and transcendence are signifiers that are active across the diverse fields in which they have become entangled. Certainly, in current debates about postsecularism there are many elisions, syntheses and hybridities in the use of these terms. They have illicitly come to signify both essential attributes but also cultural states; they are transporters of value-laden judgments and they shape shift between secularity and enchantment. It is interesting to note also the deep association both Taylor and Latour with contemporary Catholicism. Certainly there is a religious impulse at work in the mobilizing of immanence and transcendence within the cultural realm. Furthermore, many theologians (even Milbank) appear untroubled by the evident hybridity of these concepts on the occasions when they can be helpfully employed to reinforce their own theological constructions of the way we live now.

Continuing in this crude and polemical way alongside Latour. I would also argue that although their business actively proliferates hybridities many contemporary theologians remain deeply attached to the modern project of purification; they have always been and still remain key actors in the business of defining and separating through their work of placing Creator and creation in correct relations. Theologians, indeed, could be seen as the archetypal moderns. However, perhaps practical theologians might be rather different? Perhaps our ragged ranks have always been assembled in a disputed territory on the borders of worlds and disciplines. It may be that our uneasy suspension between practice and theory lends us a different vantage point? We are the people whose vocation is to deal with the fact that in life is complicated, ambiguous and impure – and our challenge is to respond to this *in faith*. Maybe instead of binding ourselves to nostalgia for what is lost in secularism we should enthusiastically embrace the challenges of ambivalent postsecularism/nonmodernity? A state beyond binaries. Perhaps it is time to say aloud words we have often whispered in our hearts. ‘We have never been theologians.’

The Return of the Repressed

There I said it. Words that should never be spoken; summoning up all the horrid spectres that haunt practical theology. I have shamelessly beckoned into our midst all the ghostly presences of long centuries of intellectual humiliation and marginalization within the Academy. To this day there is not one of us who does not wonder in the nighttime, ‘But is this real theology?’ Of course, in asking, ‘have we ever been theologians?’, my intention is to participate in freeing us from the paralyzing insecurities of the past as well as urging us forward to meet new theological challenges. I am arguing that our despised status and location has actually placed us in a position where we might be able to make a particularly creative response to the challenges of the current age. But before progressing to this imagined future state we need to honestly face our fears. Is there some substance to the sense of theological inadequacy that burdens us so?

Sadly, I am afraid that there is.

A great deal of effort has been expended on challenging understandings of practical theology as applied theology, that is the application of predetermined theological principles to the practices of people of faith, that arguably held sway from Schleiermacher to Browning (see Graham, 1996). The model of applied theology was resisted for many reasons including the assumption that practice was the site of theological application rather than theological innovation. I will return to this topic later. However, we have been much less clear about what exactly constitutes the constructive/creative nature of the theological work practical theologians are supposed to be engaged in.

There have been some heroic efforts to address this issue. For example, Empirical Theology, which emerged in the Netherlands during the 1970's under the inspirational academic leadership of Johannes van der Ven⁸ sought to institute a constructive process through which new theological thinking might emerge from an examination of religious practices. The entailed four stages: the first was an intense study of theological thinking on a particular and significant issue; the second was design of a research project in which the terms of a theological challenge might be operationalized; the third was conducting research upon lived practice; the fourth was analyzing the theological significance of the data and renewing/revising the theological tradition in the light of new insights. Sadly this holistic project was rarely fully realized. As Empirical Theology developed and stages one and four became increasingly submerged and stage 3 came to dominate the whole. The *Journal of Empirical Theology* today presents interesting attitudinal studies, personality-type based enquiries into spiritual and pastoral preferences, varied inquiries into beliefs and behaviours - but it contains little 'vital' theology.

Empirical Theology is not the dynamic movement it once was but the lively 'Ecclesiology and Ethnography' network has continued to seek to ways to explore in a deeply theological manner the lived experience of faith communities. Many of the

engaged practical theologians involved with this movement emphasise the importance of foregrounding theology as the leading (perhaps dominant?) partner in the relationship with social research.⁹ However, on close reading of the work the network generates it would appear this is a largely rhetorical gesture. Theology might be used to frame research questions or make normative judgments concerning the results of a research project. It is less evident that constructive new theological work is being attempted which is responsive to the context under consideration.

And sadly, it is not the case that vibrant theological thinking is emerging full of grace and beauty elsewhere in the practical theological landscape. Alongside close colleagues my own academic efforts over the past two decades have been heavily invested in encouraging theological reflection (see Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005; Walton 2014). The techniques we have outlined to support this have been widely employed in practical theological research and ministry formation. However, I must be honest. When I read work that has been produced by those who have employed the methods which I have advocated¹⁰ then I have to admit that it is often much stronger on articulating powerful personal experiences or describing significant cultural contexts than it is at naming God within them. Everywhere I look it seems that theology is seen as a static resource rather than a creative response to the enchantment, wonder and terror of the present age.

In an essay probing this painful topic Tom Beaudoin (2017) argues that it is now time to examine more critically the strategies that practical theologians routinely employ when called upon to 'do' theology. According to Beaudoin we are used to deflecting theological challenges by substituting an indicative/imperative formula (i.e. if this is so then that is necessary) for genuine reflection. This manner of proceeding always leaves the 'if' unchallenged. This 'if' defers and refers to a theological tradition of assumed normative status which thus becomes our protective shield or buffer. We consistently fail to examine its grounding claims and their relevance within changing contexts:

Such indicative/imperative rhetoric is common and indicates the inflation of a normative bumper that is a defensive theological strategy, along the lines of “If Christians are incarnational, then in this circumstance they should live like this,” or “If God is merciful, then practice should go this way.” The investment in the “if” is substantial; in a way, it is everything. Practical theology does not commonly see it as its task to substantiate the grounding claims brought in for this normative bumping (28).

‘Normative bumping’ is not only a problem in that it confines practical theology to endless descriptive articulations of situations in which inherited theological statements are simply expected to apply. It also implies a profound misunderstanding of the nature of our theological tradition and the current theological task. Like Latour, Beaudoin does not believe we have ever been modern. The pure façade of theological discourse has always been a chimera concealing the heterogeneous, wildly-weird and rich rag bag of sources from which it is constructed. Drawing upon the work of the philosopher of religion Daniel Colucciello Barber, Beaudoin reminds us that Christianity emerged through processes of purification through which it distinguished itself first from Judaism and then asserted its, supposedly unitary, preeminence amongst other religions and traditions.

“Christian religion,” Barber argues, would do well to recall that “it is the heir of discontinuity,” so that it can better “affirm this discontinuity” as it confronts difference within and outside itself. To be constituted by “discontinuity” would be for practical theology to acknowledge the strangeness of the Christian heritage—its “queer” assemblage of materials and forms of life—and to advocate strangeness as a possible way of life for the souls for which it cares (24-5)

Acknowledging that what we have invoked as a defined line, a boundary point; an incontrovertible ‘if,’ is not clear and coherent but constituted from a queer ‘assemblage of materials and forms of life’¹¹ does not mean that our theological inheritance is useless or simply to be discarded as modern baggage we can now

learn to live without. What has become sacred for us was generated from the fecundity of impurity. We must read back beyond the boundary (frame) in which we have enclosed the 'normative' tradition and acknowledge its multiple sources, its generative hybridity, the deep longings and desires, performances and practices through which it was created. From this perspective the tradition then becomes potentially liberating as a witness to a vital energy within theological thinking that attempts to address 'ultimate reality' as it presents itself in new forms and shapes as human culture develops. The resources to meet theological challenges have always been drawn from beyond a stable unitary core and always consisted of compounds of 'strangeness'. Thus practical theology, if it desires to be truly 'theological' instead of sheltering behind secure boundaries, must and can:

hold open pre-Christian, Christian, post-Christian, and non-Christian meanings all at once, and let those meanings be non-exclusive to each other... Holding open such diverse meanings will necessarily revise the account of ultimate reality to which practical theologians tie practice. The cost of not doing so is enough to threaten the very work of practical theology: failing to adequately fit theology to the present, and profoundly impoverishing what can be learned of "God" through practice. (28-9)

Theological Existence Beyond Today

I enjoy writing polemically. It functions like impressionism in art. You can use thick strong strokes of colour to create form and you don't need to worry too much about the details. All the 'but-it-really-is-a-bit-more-complicated-than-that' stuff can be strategically ignored or addressed in footnotes as I have done here. However, I think it is important to concede (plainly in the main text) that in claiming practical theologians might be ideally placed to respond positively to the challenges of an ambivalent, pluralist immanent/transcendent, enchanted nonmodern age and that they have so far failed to do so is to make some pretty contestable claims.

It is clearly more complicated than that. To begin with there are many instances of practical theologians seeking to engage with creativity and depth with contemporary challenges. However, I am concerned that these efforts are not really owned by our community. So, for example, when Elaine Graham (2002) began a prophetic study of posthumanism, an important site of ambiguity, wonder and the blurring of worlds, in the early years of this century many of us asked why she was straying so far from pastoral practice and complained her work was 'difficult' or 'too theoretical'. Her work was greeted enthusiastically by non-theologians but it has taken a very long time for the theological community to awaken to its significance. Thankfully Graham has continued to explore theological sites of ambiguity and challenge and her recent major work on public theology (2013) contains a sophisticated analysis of postsecularism and particularly the need to find ways of approaching its challenges that carry us between the rocks and hard places that impede theological creativity in the service of justice.

Another woman whose prophetic intervention has not been sufficiently acknowledged is Marcella Althaus-Reid. Her work engages sexuality, postcolonial and queer theory and produces the fantastically impure and generative 'indecent theology' in which immanence and transcendence cross dress and cavort in all sorts of interesting and arresting ways (2000, 2008). Reid self-identified as a practical theologian but we have not claimed her as our own and it is from within constructive theology that the most significant responses have been made to her oeuvre¹².

These are only two examples. There are of course many more and I am very encouraged that recent trends appear to demonstrate that practical theology is now entering a reflexive period in which it is prepared to look at its own theological productivity in a more imaginative and self-critical way than it has done up till now (see McLemore and Mercer 2016). So, certainly there is practical theological work being done that does not shelter behind normative buffers and is responsive to the wonder, glory and the pain that intertwine in contemporary culture. Furthermore, to concede another moderation to my argument, although our current context presents itself as particularly ambiguous, ambivalent and challenging in truth things

have always been this way. Following Latour I don't think the world has ever been pure, simple or straightforward. We have never been modern and I think that practical theology has always been engaged in its own impure and hybrid fashion in making theology within an ill-mapped and shifting terrain.

To return at this point to the question of applied theology. I think that in our repudiation of understandings of practical theology as a mechanically understood applied science, or even worse 'hints and tips' for ministers, we have simultaneously denigrated the spaces in which some of our most creative theological work has always been undertaken (see Miller McLemore, 2007). We have denigrated the arts of ministry because within applied theology these had been narrowly conceived these as merely sites of application. The realms of homiletics, liturgy, music, Christian education and pastoral care have always been sites of hybrid theological performance where startling new theological constructions have emerged. Similarly, the production of church reports and statements of faith that attempt to address issues of contemporary concern has often been despised as representing 'amateur theology'; unsophisticated and conventional responses to contemporary culture. Sometimes this is indeed the case but often there are bright instances of intensely creative public theology to be found within them. When I first read the documents of Vatican II I found them the most beautiful theology I had ever encountered. But even the humbler documents that routinely issue from denominational offices often contain real treasures.

So now I admit myself to a sense of loss. Once our discipline of practical theology would have brought together liturgists, musicians, preachers and pastoral workers as well as those responsible within institutional contexts for the public presentation of faith. Today these specialisms have fallen into decline or are segregated into their own domains and it is rare to find representatives of these theological arts addressing their colleagues at practical theological conferences or sharing in published debate. To be sure I think that we never truly recognized the theological significance of work that was being done within these creative practices but it is not too late to do so. Nor is it too late to ask whether the provisional, responses,

imaginative and constructive approaches developed within the arts of ministry are precisely the resources we need to work within our contemporary context.

I think that they are. To go right back to the beginning of this article. I am a professional of the word. I am doubly so. I purveyed the word through preaching before I began to trade in theology. It was a passion for preaching that led me to theological approaches that incorporate creative writing as a vital resource. I have found that this artful practice has been profoundly important to me as a means of grasping the world differently; the tradition is both loved and radically revised through image, metaphor and imaginative construction. In artistic practice seemingly impossible worlds can be joined and apparently stable structures mutated into new forms.

I have written elsewhere about the need for practical theology to recover its artful practices and particularly argued that a new turn to poetics might be one means of recovering theological agency within our discipline (e.g. 2014, 2017). Poetics always resists purification and practices a 'non-innocent' making ideally suited to responding to the needs of our times. But not all of us will employ poetics in our theological work. Public theologians, contextual theologians, empirical and ethnographic theologians all have their tools, ready to hand, with which to undertake constructive theological making. Let us stop talking about the potential of using them and employ them now to meet the challenges of cultural change. For transcendence lurks in the loveliness of everyday life and our immanent desires compel us to reach out and touch the heavens.

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¹ It is interesting to note that Taylor considers that the people who are most likely to feel this sense of emptiness and disgust are the leisured and cultured (308).

² He is particularly critical of forms of Franciscan theology which employ concepts of univocity rather than analogy in their efforts to express understandings of God within the terms of human language.

³ Theologians from very different confessional positions and whose style and approach in theological writing are quite distinct. However, both have been strongly associated with radical orthodoxy. Smith does not now regard this movement as his current theological anchor point.

⁴ Despite sharing a broadly similar judgement of our cultural context Taylor's theological position is certainly not identical to that of Milbank and is much more open to correlational insights drawn from processes of cultural change.

⁵ I chose Keller and Caputo as representative of a significant position within constructive and philosophical theology. I could, however, have drawn examples from postcolonial, feminist, queer or other contextual theologies which also tend to critique traditional concepts of transcendence and are sympathetic to relational, embodied and unfolding understandings of the divine.

⁶ There is in fact a lively debate in process as to whether the highly creative ecological, process and relational theologies that have been inspired by the work of Keller and others have served to obscure the possibility of imagining forms of transcendence that are none alienating, relational, empowering and politically progressive. See Haynes, 2014; Tanner 2015. Although this is an important question my own concern in this article is different. I am interested in the way a traditionally established theological binary is mapped onto cultural analysis.

⁷ See in particular Bennett, 2001.

⁸ The Department of Pastoral Theology at University of Nijmegen became the Department of Empirical Theology in 1990. For an account of the movement and its origins and principles see van der Ven 1993; Kay 2003.

⁹ John Swinton, for example, writes 'theologians who desire to use ethnography as part of their theologizing should approach the issue *as theologians*. Ethnography should be perceived as occurring within a theological context, rather than theology speaking into a situation that is already defined by ethnography' (Swinton 2012, 87).

¹⁰ I have particularly employed critical correlation and constructive narrative theology

¹¹ This is a very 'Latourian' phrase. Latour is perhaps best known for his work on the agency of assemblages. See, for example, Latour, 2005.

¹² See Radford, 2017, for an insightful recent practical theological response to her work.