Postfoundational practical theology for a time of transition

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In reflection on the question as to in what sense is our time a time of transition, the article explores the various transitions in epistemology, advocated by the scholars mentioned in brackets:

- modern to postmodern
- secular dualism to post-secular holism (Cornel du Toit)
- structural to poststructural
- positivistic to relativistic
- rational-argumentative to narrative
- proposisionalistic to cultural-linguistic (Lindbeck)
- fundamentalist to postfoundationalist (Schrag and Van Huyssteen)
- maintenance to missional.

Transition: A personal perspective

In what sense is our time a time of transition? Many things can be said in answering this question. Different words, concepts and metaphors are used to describe the transition we experience. Some of the concepts include:

- modern to postmodern
- secular dualism to post-secular holism
- structural to poststructural
- positivistic to relativistic
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- fundamentalist to postfoundationalist
- maintenance to missional.

Different scholars prefer different expressions to describe the transition. The mere fact that so many different concepts are used is an indication of the complexity of the transition that is taking place. However, there seems to be consensus about the fact that there was, or is a turning point, that we are living in a time of transition.[1] Paradigms have shifted and are shifting. People interpret their worlds differently than previously and consequently use different languages than previous generations.

The language that I used and am using in order to express this transition, also changed through the years. Going back on my own track, I discover an evolution of language in my own description of the new world, which unfolded in and around me. At first I pleaded for the *eco-hermeneutical* concept (1994) in an effort to unite the ideas of eco-systemic and hermeneutics with the aim of developing a theological frame of reference. Later on, I was exposed to the therapeutic movement in which the narrative is the guiding metaphor for both the understanding of and doing of therapy. During the same period, I discovered the richness of narrative theology and in my book *Om tot verhaal te kom* (1996) I tried to develop the concept of pastoral narrative family therapy.

Since 1990, I was involved in full time teaching and my focus was on pastoral narrative therapy. As time went by, I felt a growing need to avoid teaching narrative therapy, but to convey the narrative method in both content and method of my teaching. As a consequence, I more and more discovered the meaning of the narrative metaphor for teaching and research.

Eventually I discovered through personal contact with Wentzel van Huyssteen, the beauty of a postfoundational understanding of theology. I have published several articles on the meaning and usage of the postfoundational approach for the understanding and doing of practical theology (2006, 2009). The result was the development of a framework (The Seven Movements) that can be used to do practical theological research. I also developed a set of guidelines on the basis of which students can plan and write their research protocols.

1.Fritjof Capra *The Turning Point. Science, Society and the Rising Culture.*

The postfoundational understanding of theology puts *inter alia* the interdisciplinary aspect of research very much in the focus. The key concept in this regard is *transversal rationality* and in my recent publications (2009), I have tried to develop a very concrete way of doing transversal rationality as a practical way of doing interdisciplinary work.

At this stage of my life, I prefer the language of postfoundational theology as a comprehensive language, which provides a theological framework within which the contextual and narrative approaches not only make sense, but also is inevitable. Therefore, my choice would be to use postfoundationalist language in order to describe the transition in the current society and church, and to understand and describe a holistic pastoral ministry by using the grammar of transversal rationality.

One of the key concepts of postfoundational language is contextuality. A very real, concrete and definite context is taken as starting point for academic reflection. Therefore, as a practical theologian who is seriously trying to work on a postfoundational basis, I would like to avoid a systematic, theoretical approach and start with a very specific context.

A postfoundationalist practical theology versus a foundationalist or universal perspective

The foundationalist approach takes it for granted that absolute truth is available to all of us. This would be a perspective faithful to the true foundation and which therefore would provide us with the 'God's eye view'. A theory built on such a presumption could be referred to as a 'universal rationality'. This rationality is based on the idea of a universe of knowledge that functions as an overarching frame of reference. Accordingly, there is only one theoretical truth and that must be pursued.

Such an epistemological position can easily lead to an overestimation of one's own discipline and its possibilities. Scholars tend to take the rationalities of their own disciplines for granted. It seems to be quite natural to use your own expert knowledge as the unquestioned starting point and then to engage the other rationalities from there.

If one's discipline is pastoral care and counselling, and you operate with this foundationalist perspective, you might perhaps regard all the other efforts by various professionals as helpful, but still incomplete. According to this perspective, your discipline, and especially *your* understanding and use of it, provides the 'God's eye view'.

Interdisciplinary work by means of this position is made extremely difficult, if not impossible because it leads to a process of assimilation, through which the other's point of view is integrated into one's own domain of knowledge. With this approach, the ideal is a unified perspective, with the aim to achieve and strengthen a universal rationality.

A combination of perspectives into a collage of different meanings is regarded as a threat to the truth.

With a foundationalist approach the only possibility is to seek for a universal perspective and therefore work towards assimilation and incorporation.

A non-foundationalist or diverse perspective

This can be regarded as the opposite of the previous position. Where the previous approach works with the ideal of a universal position that provides the answer to all problems, this approach takes it for granted that foundations or fundamentals do not exist and that we only have a diversity of opinions:

> In our times the concept of a universal truth is no longer accepted. The challenge raised by postmodern theories, such as Foucault's understanding of knowledge/power, cuts at the foundationalist assumption of the 'university'. Perhaps a so-called 'multiversity' takes no assumption for granted and is continually critical even of itself in a scheme of multiple rationalities and democratic organization, devoted to reducing the force of the power/knowledge matrix.
>
> (Tatusko 2005:114)

The non-foundational or anti-foundational position makes a pastoral understanding and intervention even more difficult, because there is scepticism about any effort to create mutual understanding. Understanding or knowledge according to this approach is always diverse. Such an approach will create more tolerance, which is always helpful for an effective pastoral ministry, but on the other hand, a non-foundational approach tends to be relativistic and therefore without any direction. This can easily create a helpless situation where stories are heard, but where there is a lack of development into alternative options. Transversal rationality, on the other hand, positions itself over and against 'transgressive rationality' and other forms of extreme postmodernism (Van Huyssteen 1999:138).

A postfoundationalist or transversal perspective

This approach is sceptical about both the aforementioned positions. Both these claims of reaching a complete 'multiversal rationality' and a 'universal rationality' are regarded with suspicion. The postfoundationalist approach is sensitive for both the danger of relativity and subjectivity in a multiverse rationality and of the rigidity and false claims of the universal rationality. Therefore, it consists of an effort to move beyond both foundationalist and nonfoundationalist claims. For that reason, it is called *post*-foundationalism and not anti-foundationalism or non-foundationalism:

> From radical hermeneutics we learn that [for humans] there is no truth at the bottom of being, no final, bedrock, correct interpretation [because of the limits of understanding and of expression] that supplies the *Letztebegründung*. The search for such is misguided . . . On the other hand, the hurried and facile claim of relativism that every interpretation is as good as every

other, is equally misguided. As no finite mind is privy to an absolute, strictly univocal, and timeless interpretive truth, so no finite mind can achieve a vision of *all* interpretations, which is required for the judgment that all interpretive claims are relative.

(Schrag 1992:75)

The notion of 'transversal rationality' is a proposal by Schrag and Van Huyssteen. It is a way of providing a responsible and workable interface between disciplines. In the words of Van Huyssteen (2006a):

In this multidisciplinary use of the concept of transversality there emerge distinct characteristics or features: the dynamics of consciousness, the interweaving of many voices, the interplay of social practices are all expressed in a metaphor that points to a sense of transition, lying across, extending over, intersecting, meeting, and conveying without becoming identical.

(Van Huyssteen 2006a:19)

The postfoundationalist approach forces us to listen firstly to the stories of people in real life situations. It does not aim to describe merely a general context, but confronts us with a specific and concrete situation. This approach, although also hermeneutical in nature, moves beyond mere hermeneutics. It is more reflexive and situational embedded in epistemology and methodology. According to Van Huyssteen (2006a:10), '… embodied persons, and not abstract beliefs, should be seen as the locus of rationality. We, as rational agents, are thus always socially and contextually embedded'.

This way of thinking is always concrete, local, and contextual, but at the same time reaches beyond local contexts to transdisciplinary concerns. It is contextual, but at the same time in acknowledgement of the way in which our epistemologies are shaped by tradition. Van Huyssteen (2006a:22) refers to the postfoundationalist notion as 'a form of compelling knowledge', which is a way of seeking a balance between 'the way our beliefs are anchored in interpreted experience, and the broader networks of beliefs in which our rationally compelling experiences are already embedded'.

Van Huyssteen (2006a) refers to Schrag and argues for *transversal rationality*. He says:

Transversal rationality is now fused with consciousness and self-awareness, and this consciousness is then unified by an experience of self-presence, emerging over time from a remembering self-awareness/consciousness in which diverse past experiences are transversally integrated as we reach out to others.

(Van Huyssteen 2006a:21)

Talk about the human subject is now enriched by resituating the human subject in the space of communicative praxis. Thus, the notion of transversal rationality opens up the possibility to focus on patterns of discourse and action as they happen in our communicative practices, rather than focusing only on the structure of the self, ego, or subject.

The shift of emphasis from individual to social, from subjective towards discourse, which constitutes a new epistemology in the social sciences, is also part and parcel of the postfoundationalist movement.

The idea of socially constructed interpretations and meaning is clearly part of the postfoundationalist approach. Van Huyssteen (2006a) argues:

Because of our irrevocable contextuality and the embeddedness of all belief and action in networks of social and cultural traditions, beliefs, meaning, and action arise out of our embedded life worlds.

(Van Huyssteen 2006a:24)

Contextuality is a key concept in the postfoundationalist approach. Experience is situated and experience is *always* interpreted.

According to Van Huyssteen (1997), a postfoundationalist notion of rationality should open our eyes to an epistemic obligation that points beyond the boundaries of our own discipline, our local communities, groups, or cultures, toward plausible forms of *interdisciplinary dialogue*. In his Gifford Lectures, *Alone in the world?*, Van Huyssteen (2006a) says:

A postfoundationalist approach helps us realize … that we are not the intellectual prisoners of our contexts or traditions, but that we are epistemically empowered to cross contextual, cultural, and disciplinary borders to explore critically the theories, meanings, and beliefs through which we and other construct our worlds.

(Van Huyssteen 2006a:25)

Van Huyssteen (2006b:147) repeats the very important notion of a 'democratic presence' for Christian theology in an open, postfoundationalist conversation. Theology shares the interdisciplinary standards of rationality, which will not be hopelessly culture bound and context bound, but will always be contextually and socially shaped. In this interdisciplinary conversation with other sciences, theology will act as an equal partner with an authentic voice in a postmodern situation.

What then would holistic pastoral ministry means in a context of transition? A few things come to mind:

- *Real* concern about a *real* person. Concerns in this paradigm are never theoretical, but always local and embodied.
- A *not-knowing* approach, but at the same time an approach of active engagement.
- *Holistic* in the sense of being fully committed to the real contextual story, but also committed to the exploring of traditions of interpretation.
- A *social-constructionist* approach where a person is part of the development of a preferred reality that makes sense to him or her. Such an approach creates both the most profound and the most fragile moment, a moment of true pastoral concern.
- Van Huyssteen (2006b:148) uses the term *wide reflective equilibrium* to point to the optimal, but fragile communal understanding we are capable of in any given moment in time. A postfoundationalist notion of reality enables us to communicate across boundaries and move transversally from context to context, from one tradition to another, from one discipline to another. He continues that in this wide reflective equilibrium, we finally find the *safe* but *fragile public space* we have been searching for, a space

for shuttling back and forth between deep personal convictions and the principles that finally result from interpersonal judgements.

- An *interdisciplinary* approach, not on the basis of assimilation, but on the basis of transversal rationality.

Degrees of transversality and the edge effect: Between theology, social sciences and the humanities

Van Huyssteen (2007:421) writes that transversal reasoning is not about arbitrarily opening ourselves up or closing ourselves off to other viewpoints, but rather it is about what it means to discover an epistemic space that allows for the kind of interdisciplinary critical evaluation that includes a critical self-evaluation and optimal understanding. There are also natural limits to dialogue between disciplines. In the transversal, interdisciplinary moment rich resources could be shared, but after this moment, a postfoundationalist approach points back to the contextual, natural, intradisciplinary boundaries of our own disciplines. Van Huyssteen (2007:422) maintains that transversal reasoning means that we have to be alert to *degrees of transversality* and that different theological approaches could have different degrees of success in interdisciplinary dialogue. It is however most important, that theology and sciences can share concerns and can converge in their methodological approaches on specifically identified problems.

It is here where a postfoundationalist practical theology has a versatility and dynamic in moving between various disciplines, moving on a continuum between social sciences and humanities and even further to natural sciences like evolutionary biology and cognitive science. From this perspective, practical theology is not only a subject, but also an act. What Bochner and Ellis (1996) write about ethnography is also true for practical theology:

It's not the name of a discipline. Ethnography is what ethnographers do. It's activity. Ethnographers inscribe patterns of cultural experience; they give perspective on life. They interact, they take note, they photograph, moralize, and write.

(Bochner & Ellis 1996:16)

The development of modern practical theology is to a large extend based on the work of Schleiermacher who understood it as a science of Christian religion in the praxis of human life (Gräb 2005:182). In the words of Gräb (2005):

Practical theology needs to explore how the symbolic strength of Christianity for making sense of life *and* for successfully coping with life *can take shape in the church under today's complex socio-cultural conditions.*

(Gräb 2005:196)

When interpreted like this, it was inevitable that practical theology leaned heavily on social sciences for the description and explanation of human behaviour within a religious context. Practical theology as a modern academic discipline developed strongly in the direction of social sciences (compare e.g. the work of Van der Ven [1990], Heitink [1993], Browning [1991] and Pieterse [1993], to name a few).

Germond (2001) writes that development is as concerned about how people understand themselves and their world as it is about physical and social development. He quotes Foucault who had a similar line of thought as Ghandi with regard to the ethic upon which other forms of life could be build:

What strikes me is the fact that, in our society, art is now only linked to objects rather than to individuals or to life itself. This kind of art is specialized, or produced by experts who are artists. But couldn't we ourselves, each one of us, make our life a work of art? Why should a lamp or a house become the object of art – and not our own lives?

(Germond 2001:30–31)

Ellis and Bochner (1996:18) make the statement that 'the walls between social sciences and humanities have crumbled'. This 'new ethnography' moves closer to the humanities. It is interested in depth of quality and approaches the lives of people as 'works of art'. It is therefore interested in real persons, that is, people with senses, desires and thoughts. The implication is that the metaphor best suited for the researcher is that of an artist. Therefore the emphasis is on the uniqueness of each researcher, and therefore on the surprising possibilities of the interdisciplinary process. Van Huyssteen (2006b) writes:

… in interdisciplinary dialogue the rather a-contextual terms 'theology and science' should be replaced by focussing our attention on specific theologians, engaging in specific kinds of theologies, who are attempting to enter the interdisciplinary dialogue with very specific scientists, working within specific sciences on clearly defined, shared problems.

(Van Huyssteen 2006b:151)

To practice practical theology within this line of thought, requires intellectual and emotional flexibility. This is where I refer to the *edge effect* of transversal rationality in a postfoundationalist practical theology. This term is more generally used in connection with an ecotone which is a transition area between adjacent, but different plant communities. Ecotone (n.d.) refers to Robert Smith and describes it as follows:

... the ecotone represents a shift in dominance. Ecotones are particularly significant for mobile animals, as they can exploit more than one set of habitats within a short distance. The ecotone contains not only species common to communities on both sides; it may also include a number of highly adaptable species that tend to colonize such transitional areas.

(Ecotone n.d.)

The *edge effect* is created along the boundary. A greater than usual diversity of species tends to inhabit this area. The *edge effect* could then be defined as:

the phenomenon of increased variety of plants as well as animals at the community junction … and is essentially due to a locally broader range of suitable environmental conditions or ecological niches.

(Ecotone n.d.)

The ecotone seems to be a powerful metaphor for a postfoundationalist practical theology. The practical theologian approaching his discipline from the perspective of a transversal rationality needs to be mobile and highly

adaptable. The fragile public space created in interdisciplinary dialogue is the practical theologians' ecotone, which provides for a *wide reflective equilibrium.* Such a wide reflective equilibrium together with the *edge effect* enables a process of transversal rationality. Such a practical theology is involved with an increased diversity of narratives. In and through these narratives more than one set of habitats are visited and re-visited. These habitats can best be explored by way of discovering the rationalities that are uniquely part of each discipline, but which can also communicate with each other on the basis of transversality.

Conclusion

The process described in this article illustrated and embodied the statement by Van Huyssteen (2000b):

> Each of our domains of understanding may indeed have its own logic of behaviour, as well as an understanding unique to the particular domain, but in each the rich resources of human rationality remain (cf. Bottum 1994:379). When we discover the shared richness of the resources of rationality without attempting to subsume all discourses and all communities under one universal reason, we have discovered the richness of a postfoundationalist notion of rationality.
>
> (Van Huyssteen 2000b:239)

In conclusion, we are part of a transition which makes us (as pastoral theologians) more dependent, more fragile and more needed than ever. The real meaningful contribution we can make in a situation like this is to facilitate the variety of stories that develop in the ecotone where different storying cultures meet. For the practical theologian one of these storying cultures would always be people's experiences of the presence of God in their lives. A focus on all these stories, including the religious story, does not make our contribution better than that of others, but it is unique. The so-called safe public space created by a *wide reflective equilibrium* becomes even more fragile because of the inclusion of the stories of the experience of God's presence.

It will also make more sense to refer to *Practical theological alternatives*[2] rather than limiting this discipline to a single, fixed way of understanding and practice. We must rather open up the boundaries between theology and disciplines within social sciences, humanities and natural sciences. In doing this, we can deepen and broaden the sensitivity for the human condition within human society and religious communities. The contribution of Practical Theology in this interdisciplinary process is to strengthen the sensitivity for the human condition and human community, also in terms of the community of faith. This will also create a greater sensitivity for the marginalised within these communities. A postfoundational practical theology can make a meaningfull contribution in terms of creating sensitivity for the interplay of all the alternative stories.

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2. In line with Ellis and Bochners' (1996:19) 'Ethnographic Alternatives'.