

# Practice Theory in Empirical Practical Theological Research

## The Scientific Contribution of LETRA

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### Abstract

Discussing the contribution of Learning and knowledge trajectories in congregations (LETRA) is a challenge, particularly when one was involved in it. Two research questions are posed: How has the methodological and theoretical framework of LETRA contributed to knowledge about learning in congregations? What are the differences between LETRA and related Norwegian research projects within practical theology? The first part presents key features of the three different strains of theory within LETRA, and brief examples of how researchers in LETRA have utilized them. The second part discusses the research contribution of LETRA on two topics, “object” and “materiality”, taking articles by other researchers as vantage points. The article concludes that LETRA has contributed to scientific novelty through its combination of an empirical descriptive design and a pool of practice theories. However, novelty is a moving target. It is necessary to continually pursue theoretical openness in order to conduct empirical research on congregational and religious change in society.

**Keywords:** Empirical practical theology, practice theory, collective learning, object, materiality, LETRA.

### Introduction: Learning and knowledge trajectories in congregations

Within practical theology, parts of the international as well as the Norwegian scholarly community maintain improvement of practice—particularly within churches—as a deep concern. A preferred research design among several of these researchers is different kinds of action research, whereby researchers try to accommodate staff and volunteers in processes of change (Mercer and Miller-McLemore 2016, Cameron 2010). *Learning and knowledge trajectories in congregations* (LETRA) is a research project (2010–2014) on how learning and knowledge construction take place in congregations<sup>1</sup>. It analyzes learning and knowledge processes in congregations with a wide range of learning theories and practice theories. The selected theories vary, but do have one fundamental assumption in common. Learning is understood collectively, which means that LETRA analyzes learning as changes in social practices and not primarily as changes in individual cognition. It contains research on activities often associated with learning, such as religious education for children, confirmands and youth, but also explores the professional learning and knowledge of deacons and pastors. Thus, the individual LETRA projects contribute to practical theology because close readings of congregational life are a small and under-researched field in Europe (Monnot and Stolz 2018, Ammerman 2018). Still, it differs from other practical-theological research projects since it is an empirical project without improvement aims and without an action research design.

This article discusses the overall research contribution of LETRA by asking research questions on a scientific meta-level: How has the methodological and theoretical framework of LETRA contributed to knowledge about learning in congregations? What are the differences between LETRA and closely related Norwegian research projects within practical theology? The first part of the article presents key features of the three different strains of theory within LETRA, and brief examples of how researchers in LETRA have utilized them. The examples will focus on the six PhD theses resulting from LETRA, and are of course only small, but telling, snapshots from these extensive research projects.<sup>2</sup> The second part will discuss LETRA's research contribution to two topics, "object" and "materiality", positioning LETRA against recent contributions from profiled practical-theological scholars in Norway more attuned with an action research or improvement agendas. The discussion on object will depart from brief summaries of articles by Erling Birkedal (MF) and by Stephen Sirris (VID). The discussion on materiality will take articles by Birgitte Lerheim (TF) and by Merete Thomassen (TF) as its starting point. Common to all of them, except Sirris, is that they refer to LETRA publications in their articles. This article argues that LETRA has contributed to scientific novelty within the realm of practical-theological

1 We have published a short review article about LETRA, "Learning and knowledge trajectories in congregations" in *Praktische Theologie* ([https://www.degruyter.com/view/journals/prth/prth-overview.xml?tab\\_body=toc-78025](https://www.degruyter.com/view/journals/prth/prth-overview.xml?tab_body=toc-78025)).

The previous article only presents the individual PhD theses of LETRA, and does not contain the presentation of the theoretical framework within LETRA or the discussion on object and materiality.

2 Other LETRA contributions will not be presented here. Afdal has co-written articles on curriculum texts (Holmqvist and Afdal 2015, Rodriguez Nygaard and Afdal 2015) and published an extensive book on learning and religion (Afdal 2013), and the other scholars have also published extensively (Mogstad 2013, Reite and Mogstad 2014, Leganger-Krogstad 2012, Kaufman and Sandsmark 2015, Sandsmark and Kaufman 2015).

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research through its combination of practice theories as its theoretical framework and its empirical descriptive design. The impact of LETRA has been significant since LETRA ended,<sup>3</sup> and we have noticed tendencies towards theoretical domestication, particularly within the Norwegian context. Thus, this article urges for a consciously theoretical openness when approaching processes of change in congregations, and in other religious practices, in a late-modern society.

A major reform of the Christian Education program in the Church of Norway (CoN) is an important backdrop for LETRA. The reform, initiated by the church but launched in 2003 by the Norwegian parliament, aimed explicitly to educate all baptized children and youth between 0–18 in in their Christian faith. Politicians and the church argued that the non-confessional religious education in school made the reform necessary. The state, it was argued, had to provide the church, as well as religious and life stance organizations, a possibility to transmit faith to their members. Thus, the majority of all the different political parties voted for the reform, and the church has since received about 25 million Euros annually to offer 315 hours of Christian education to their members.<sup>4</sup> The church implemented the reform gradually. The congregations needed more staff and volunteers, and it was necessary to develop able activities in order to attract as many of the baptized children and youth as possible. The first ten years were a dedicated experimental phase in which congregations could apply for funding for new and innovative Christian education projects. Those who had the best ideas received money to put their plans into action. Some of these new ideas involved climbing walls, canoeing, baking and concerts, which sparked a discussion about learning. Theologians, and some sociologists too, voiced worries about the content and argued for more learning and less entertainment (Mogstad, Lorentzen, and Hauglin 2008). These contributions were interesting, but had a fundamental constraint. None of them related in greater depth to theoretically grounded concepts of learning or more advanced pedagogical theories. In short, there was “a lot of Luther, but no Vygotskij” (Afdal 2008). LETRA approaches this pedagogical deficit, but not in order to exchange Luther with Vygotskij. LETRA contributes towards making research in congregations as developed on the pedagogical side as it is on the theological side. Moreover, LETRA argues that theories of practice are essential when developing knowledge about theological knowledge trajectories in congregations.

The LETRA project lasted for four years and was led by Professor Geir Afdal, second author of this article. The core group of LETRA consisted of scholars from MF School of Theology, Religion and Society—four PhD students (Morten Holmqvist, Ingrid Reite Christensen, Marianne Rodriguez Nygaard and Fredrik Saxegaard) and

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3 The impact is possible to trace in curricula in theology, religious education and diaconia at the major theological institutions in Norway, and in other Nordic countries, such as Aarhus University, Umeå University and Uppsala University. The number of master students who have applied theories used in LETRA are probably more than thirty, and ongoing PhD projects in Norway, Denmark and Sweden are directly inspired by the LETRA project. In addition, a Nordic biannual conference in practical theology has been established in recent years. The theme in 2016 was *Praxis and Practice in Theology* <https://conferences.au.dk/practice-in-theology-2016/>, and *Exploring Practices in Theological Research* in 2018. (<https://www.mf.no/en/exploring-practices-theological-research>) (reviewed 19.12.09). LETRA researchers participated as keynote speakers, with papers and as organizers.

4 <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/stmeld-nr-7-2002-2003-/id196490/> (downloaded 19.12.06)

two senior scholars (Heid Leganger-Krogstad and Sverre Dag Mogstad). Two external PhD students, Øyvind Holtedahl (VID Specialized University) and Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen (Faculty of Theology (TF), University of Oslo), first author of this article, were included during the period. Tone Stangeland Kaufman and Astrid Sandsmark from MF also contributed during the project period. The main activity the first year of LETRA was to educate ourselves in a pool of practice and learning theories used within the educational field. None of us, except Afdal and Reite, were skilled in this body of theories in advance.

The theories can be grouped into three: socio-cultural learning theories, activity theory, and socio-material theories. Common to all of them (possibly with socio-material theories as exception) is a basic understanding that learning is a social practice (Afdal 2010). The unit of analysis in LETRA is social practices, and not practitioners. To understand learning as a social practice means to identify what it makes sense for people to do and say, and how their doings and sayings are part of the tools, rules, and understandings that populate the life (Nicolini 2012) of, for instance, congregations. The set premise of the project was that every scholar had to employ one or several theories of learning as analytical tools, but it was not stipulated which one. Senior and junior scholars read and discussed different theories in order to bring with us a variety of sensitizing devices into the fieldwork in year two. There were primarily three selected congregations from the Church of Norway, but some of the LETRA projects have conducted fieldwork in supplementary and other congregations.

### A pool of practice theories

#### *Socio-cultural learning*

Every socio-cultural learning theory claims that what people learn is dependent on how they learn. Learning is not something that comes afterwards as a result, but is in itself part of the activity. Lev Vygotskij, often described as the founding father of this theoretical tradition, wrote his influential works in the 1920s in Russia. His basic claim is that no one has direct access to reality. How we experience reality is always indirect, mediated by culturally and socially developed tools and signs (Vygotskij et al. 1978). However, tools become invisible and taken for granted by those who live in a particular place. It is when new tools are invented, or when one is a newcomer into a practice, that the mediated character of reality becomes tangible. Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave have developed this insight further theoretically. One of their most famous concepts is *communities of practice* (Lave and Wenger 1991), defined by Wenger as mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire (Wenger 1998). One of Lave and Wenger's key interests is how newcomers become participants in a community of practice. A closely related term is *legitimate peripheral participation*, which means two things. First, if one is to know what to do in a practice, one has to be included in the activities constituting that practice. Secondly, it is necessary to have some kind of safe space when one enters a new practice. Newcomers must have the possibility to observe the practice from a distance, or at the periphery, before they can gradually move into the center. Wenger calls a movement from the periphery to the center an inbound

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learning trajectory, as distinct from peripheral learning trajectories, in which one stays permanently at the periphery, and outbound learning trajectories pointing to other communities of practice (Wenger 1998).

Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen has used Vygotskij (Johnsen 2012) as well as activity theory (Johnsen, forthcoming) and socio-material theories (Johnsen 2015) in her research on teaching activities for children aged six without much previous church experience (Johnsen 2012). However, Lave and Wenger are the key theorists in her analysis of Sunday worship services being part of “Baptism clubs” in two congregations. She identifies children as being involved in two kinds of tasks in Sunday services: *performance tasks* and *liturgical tasks*. The performance tasks were singing songs and acting based on a biblical text, followed by bowing and calls for acclamation, which is in one sense part of the shared repertoire in congregations. It is very usual to make children perform in worship services where they and their families are specially invited. However, the question raised by Lave and Wenger is how newcomers become participants in a practice as it usually is. Thus, to perform a play and to sing songs that are not part of regular Sunday services is to position children on an outbound learning trajectory. Performance skills are valuable in many social practices, but not particularly helpful in order to guide children towards the expected norms regulating Sunday services. However, the liturgical tasks they take part in are part of the regular service repertoire of most congregations in the Church of Norway. To walk into the sanctuary in procession, to light candles during prayer, and to prepare the Eucharist together with the pastor are all legitimate tasks in a service, and the tasks’ communal character takes care of the safety aspect of legitimate peripheral participation. Johnsen argues that liturgical tasks are necessary to learn the Sunday service practice. However, practices are not fixed. Performance tasks renegotiate Sunday services closer to other communities of practice, such as school and leisure practices (Johnsen 2014b, Johnsen 2014a).

James Wertsch is a well-known successor to Vygotskij, and one of his contributions is to bring Mikhail Bakhtin’s thinking into socio-cultural learning theory. One of Wertsch’s main concepts is *mediated action*, which emphasizes how human action is affected by cultural tools (Wertsch 1998). Inspired by Bakhtin’s definition of language as half one’s own, half somebody else’s, Wertsch claims that cultural tools, including language tools, are on the one hand something people use, and on the other something that they cannot control. Thus, mastery of a cultural tool means to make it your own, but the appropriation is never complete. Cultural tools have attributed meaning through history, which gives them their affordances and constraints. A tool is plastic and changes meaning continuously, but the inherited meaning will nevertheless constrain its possible meanings.

Morten Holmqvist utilizes both social cultural theories and socio-material theories in his research on confirmation in congregations (Holmqvist 2015a, 2014, Holmqvist and Afdal 2015). One of Holmqvist’s contributions is to bring religious learning into research on mediated action (Holmqvist 2015c). In an article discussing two episodes of prayer at confirmation camps, Wertsch’s concept of *affordances and constraints* of

cultural tools plays a pivotal analytical role, combined with Schatzki's (Schatzki 2010) concept of *times-space trajectories* (Holmqvist 2015b). As with the children studied by Johnsen, most confirmands in Norway are newcomers in the sense that their previous experience with church is limited to events in the family such as baptism and school worship services before Christmas. Holmqvist explores how youth leaders use material and language tools at confirmation camps, and how these tools are understood, and misunderstood, by the confirmands. Only one of the situations will be briefly presented here.

The situation is an outing into the forest during one of the evenings at the confirmation camp. It is dark and the confirmands are supposed to walk silently in groups through "a candle path" featuring small posters with a verse from the Bible, ending down by the sea with a huge bonfire. The youth leaders were excited. They really looked forward to seeing the confirmands emotionally and spiritually touched by the experience. It did not turn out the way they expected. The confirmands were not silent. They did not understand what to do with the posters, and showed no feelings of being touched when they came to the bonfire. Holmqvist analyzes the discrepancy as a result of the youth leaders' and the confirmands divergent previous experiences with the employed cultural tools. The path and the posters were new to the confirmands, and they were unable to break the cultural code inherent in the material objects. They did not recognize it as a religious practice, as an invitation to meditative prayer. Some thought it was some kind of quiz. Holmqvist asked the youth leaders why they did not say anything to prepare the confirmands, but they replied that instruction could ruin the experience. They wanted the newcomers to have an authentic experience. Holmqvist argues that the youth leaders and confirmands live in different time-space trajectories. The youth leaders had been part of the path many times, and felt deeply emotional about it; several cried when they walked the path alone after the confirmands went to bed. The confirmands, however, were not on this path, or trajectory. The tools did not mediate reality to the confirmands as they did to the youth leaders. Lack of information and previous experience constrained their interaction with the tools (Holmqvist 2015b).

### *Activity theory*

As shown in the previous part, socio-cultural theory is well suited to addressing questions about learning existing practice. The baptism club and the confirmation camp aim at making newcomers part of practices already present in congregations. However, the socio-cultural approach is inherently conservative and less well equipped to analyze practices in congregations where the need for change and transformation is pressing. Leont'ev was a partner of Vygotskij and is the founding father of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), or simply activity theory (Daniels 2008). This second theoretical tradition in LETRA is concerned with how organizations learn, and not how people become part of communities. One of the main theorists is Yrjö Engeström, who has developed a more complex model of Vygotskij's elementary model of artifact mediation (Engeström 2015). It is not only tools that mediate reality, he claims; social dynamics such as implicit and explicit rules, division of labor, and community are

decisive in how a modern organization works. Engeström, who has spent most of his career studying huge firms going through fundamental changes, argues that to solve their aim in a changed reality, organizations have to invent new ways of being. Old solutions cannot solve their aim or *object*—the term used in activity theory—any longer (Engeström 2001). Thus, changes of this kind create disturbances, often a result of new tools, rules, or division of labor, but Engeström argues that disturbances are a fundamental key to collaborative learning processes. It is only through contradictions that an organization can succeed in what he calls learning as expanding (Engeström 2008).

Engeström understands learning as expansion of the object of an activity. Here, object is not a material thing, but the drive, engine, direction and purpose of the collective activity. An object is not an aim in an instrumental and cognitive sense. An object is not primarily a future state of affairs; it is located in the activity here and now. Put differently, the evolving and forward-facing character is an aspect of the here and now of the activity (see also Schatzki 2010 on the understanding of time). The object is the drive and identity of the activity—that which keeps it going. At the same time, the object is the direction of the activity, the purpose that holds it together. This means that the object is both the being and coming of the activity, its be-coming. An object is not a normative, cognitive statement of future states of affairs, but an aspect of how the activity actually interacts and evolves. An aim or a value statement for a congregation is not its object. The object can only be analyzed empirically in the everyday interaction of the activity. Engeström's argument is that learning is an expansion of this empirical object. Counter-intuitively, individual learning is happening through participation in activities that change (Engeström 2008).

Fredrik Saxegaard employs Engeström in his analysis of congregations that are in processes of change, and particularly how pastors negotiate their role as leaders within these processes (Saxegaard 2017). Conflicts have tormented one of the congregations. The pastor told Saxegaard that the congregation was in a state in which the different activities were isolated from each other and the church personnel had lost control of who had keys to the church building. The levels of collaboration and community were low and the need for change was urgent, but it was quite difficult to identify how to change, and to what. The turning point for the pastor came one Sunday morning before the worship service. "Suddenly one of the ushers came running in, looking for him saying that 'someone has put a baby on the floor in front of the altar'" (Saxegaard 2017, 233). The pastor told Saxegaard about how he came into sanctuary and saw the baby on the floor, and the mother, with an Asian look and dressed in traditional Hindu clothes, sitting close by. The mother was not able to speak Norwegian very well, but the pastor understood that she wanted him to bless her child. The pastor paused for a second, and then he lifted the baby and pronounced a blessing, before he gave the child back to the mother (Saxegaard 2017).

According to Saxegaard, this became a decisive moment for a fundamental renegotiation of the congregation. It made the pastor realize that the congregation has to open up for the immigrant population living in their parish. The pastor reported

several initiatives to invite immigrant groups into the church, both Christian and Muslim, such as offering free use of the church building. However, the pastor's vision was to make the immigrants part of the regular congregational activities as well and the Sunday service in particular, arguing that being church means to embrace everyone and that the Sunday service needs to be more dialogical and include people of different faiths and religious belongings. Saxegaard describes how the pastor tried to anchor this vision as the new identity in the parish board. The parish board members were not necessarily negative to it, but few of them articulated explicit support. However, they became more positive towards moving in such a direction after a while. Saxegaard shows that one of the things that made this demanding process possible was a language tool. Thus, "the open church" was presented as a project, and not as something permanent. This project approach made it easier to communicate and garner support both internally and externally, for instance for funding. The object, the actual and empirical drive of the congregation, was previously to be a congregation for the Norwegian middle-class population. Saxegaard shows in detail how a contradictive process of negotiating tools, rules and division of labor enabled the congregation to redefine and expand their object as a place beyond religious divides (Saxegaard 2017).

As pointed out by Saxegaard, pastors apply theological tools to lead congregations. Marianne Rodriguez Nygaard shows how such theological language tools effectively undermine deacons' efforts to make things happen in congregations (Nygaard 2015a, 2017, Rodriguez Nygaard and Afdal 2015). Nygaard utilizes the concept of *knowledge creation* in her analysis of how deacons understand themselves and their work. Knowledge creation differs from learning as the acquisition of knowledge and learning as the acquisition of skills needed to participate in a practice (Sfard 1998). As Paavola and Hakkarainen emphasize, knowledge creation is a supplementary concept of learning that focuses on processes, practice and social structures that encourage formation of new knowledge and innovation (Paavola and Hakkarainen 2005). Similarly, as with Engeström, the emphasis is on finding new ways of solving the tasks and aim of organizations. Nygaard describes how deacons often take the initiative for new activities such as "open church" in staff meetings and informal situations. These suggestions, however, are turned down or not given proper attention. There is not enough time; the staff, particularly the pastors, have too much to do already, and the space for experimentation is limited. According to Nygaard, this limits the possibility for knowledge creation, or combining an interest in knowledge creation with care. Building on von Krogh, Nygaard argues that care is fundamental in order to create work communities of knowledge creation and shows that the congregations are low-care environments. The staff are mostly concerned about their own tasks and do not have the capacity to engage in collaborative work. The deacons report that they feel lonely and exhausted. It is hard for them to make themselves heard as professionals among the other church professions (Nygaard 2015b).

However, Nygaard also shows that deacons are creative in their work. One such example concerns a deacon passing by a woman begging for money every morning, and how the deacon eventually decides to invite the Romanian woman, called "Elena"



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for coffee in her office. However, she does so without informing the staff first. The deacon brings Elena along to church activities, such as everyday prayer worships, and Elena is introduced by name and interacts with the other participants, as well as with the church staff. Nygaard narrates how this initiative grows. The deacon invites church representatives high up in the hierarchy, and people form organizations providing help for people begging in the streets, and speak at seminars in the congregation. The media picks it up, and both newspapers and television conduct interviews with the deacon together with Elena. This way of making knowledge creation possible is achieved by establishing a parallel structure, according to Nygaard, interpreting it as deacons' ways of trespassing constraints set by the formal organization and work culture within congregations. Thus, the study provides examples of how deacons, via their boundary-crossing activities, make congregations expand their practices (Nygaard 2015b).

### *Socio-material theories*

The third theoretical tradition LETRA employs and contributes to is socio-material theories, particularly as it is developed within actor-network theory (ANT). This tradition is not a learning theory as such, but several influential educational researchers use it (Fenwick et al. 2011, Säljö, Rasmussen, and Ludvigsen 2011). A starting point for ANT is Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar's groundbreaking study of how scientists create science. Opening the "black box" of science, observing scientists anthropologically in the laboratory, showed that science is not as a clean and undistorted process, but actually rather chaotic and fuzzy (Latour and Woolgar 1986, Latour 1987). However, this unruly, elusive and chaotic character is also a key feature of ANT. It is a tradition resisting being a tradition, where basic concepts are continually reframed, rejected and replaced. Generally, the level of consensus is low among theorists claiming some connection to ANT (Law and Hassard 1999). Still, some key features prevail across all the disputes. Most importantly, humans and non-humans are considered as agents with agency (Latour 2005). Thus, socio-cultural theories and activity theory emphasize materiality, but ANT goes further in claiming a *generalized symmetry*, that humans and non-humans are actors on equal terms (Fenwick et al. 2011). The research task within an ANT design is to figure out how different human and non-human actors are connected, strongly or weakly, "in net that works" (Latour 2005). This is somehow similar to the basic practice theory approach, but it differs in its insistence on a flat ontology. ANT does not recognize any kind of predefined levels of society, such as micro, meso or macro levels (Law et al. 2014). The principle idea is to follow the actors and to conduct research without preconceived concepts about how reality is organized (Nicolini 2012, Law 1994).

Ingrid Reite Christensen has conducted research on how pastors do their work within congregations (Reite 2014, Christensen 2017, Reite 2013) and employs analytical tools developed within ANT, particularly educational research developing ANT. The Christian education reform was mentioned in the introduction, Reite has studied how another reform—the liturgical Sunday service reform, launched during the same time period—affects the everyday work of pastors. Reforms aim at making something

better, but Reite shows that reform is a non-human actor that interacts with human and nonhuman actors already present in the life of congregations. Thus, the liturgy reform creates highly energized professional learning dynamics in a congregation where there are spaces for experimentation, revealing a rich potential for new knowledge. However, the reform creates distance and a slowing-down of processes in the two other congregations. One of the situations she dwells on takes place before Christmas, only a week or two after the reform reached its official state, when every congregation was obliged to apply new liturgies and new liturgical music (Reite 2015).

Reite describes how two pastors and the cantor gathered to plan the upcoming Sunday service. They had the liturgy binder containing the new liturgies on the table in front of them. The meeting started and one of the pastors began to browse the binder, but he put it away, and the cantor started doing the same, suggesting that they could take it chronologically from the top and proceed through the service. The pastor took over and browsed the binder again, being in a state of indecisiveness; the other took over and suggested that they use the liturgy from last year and mix in some of the new elements. They continued to browse the binder and reached a conclusion: “But in order not to cause full confusion, I think that it was a nice variant that was chosen the last time – if we will use that as a basic fundament, then. And then we choose new hymns” (Reite 2015, 402). Reite holds that reform brings different dynamics into action, and high-powered learning dynamics are just one out of several possible outcomes. It depends on the various dynamics the reforms interact with and creates in local work environments. Her analysis also shows that reforms are not implemented, as argued by the strategical top-level of an organization, such as the Church Council of the Church of Norway. Rather, reforms are enacted into being by those who receive them. Pastors in congregations are not just adjusting to the liturgy reform and every other reform; they recreate it, ignore it, or replace it (Reite 2015).

One scholar making a substantial contribution to ANT is John Law (Law 2004, Law and Singleton 2013, Law, Smith, and Weintraub 2002), who has written and cooperated with scholars from Norway, such as Ingunn Moser (Moser and Law 1999) and Geir Afdal (Law et al. 2014). A basic concept in Law’s terminology is *modes of ordering*, which Øyvind Holtedahl uses in his research on youth ministries in two congregations in the Church of Norway (Holtedahl 2017). To research modes of ordering in ANT terms means to study how different human and non-human actors are related in loose or more stable networks. Put simply, one knows that one has a mode of ordering if a removal of one of the actors will change the network. The particularity of Law’s approach is that he foregrounds issues of power. Law argues that his concept of ANT, as well as feminist material semiotics, cuts Foucault’s notion of discourse down to a comprehensible size, not as some kind of philosophical materialism but with materiality as a relational effect. (Law 2003 (2001)).

Thus, this interest in how power is embedded in materiality is a key concern in Holtedahl’s research. Youth ministry is different from most Christian education for children and confirmands: regular, frequent gatherings for committed young people aged 15–18. They typically gather one evening a week, often on a Friday or Saturday

in order to stay up late. Holtedahl finds that enactments of *community* are a central mode within the youth ministries. His analysis demonstrates that this mode features “closeness, intimacy, and fellowship, with similarities to family life and the youths’ private lives at home” (Holtedahl 2017,9). One of the key actors that makes this mode possible, largely unnoticed by the youth themselves, were some sofas. Holtedahl describes how the sofas gradually caught his attention, partly because the youth asked him for help to carry them several times. The sofas were in the café area at the beginning of the evening and were moved into the sanctuary before the worship service began. It did not happen once; they reorganized the room every time they gathered: chairs out and sofas in. Asked about the sofas, the youths reply that they would have been much more “stilted and formal” if everyone sat on their own chairs. The sofas allow them to relax, make it cozy, and make the youths feel at home (Holtedahl 2017,125).

Hence, Holtedahl shows that the sofas are an actor in a network established within the youth ministry. To remove the sofas would be to make them sit on chairs, something that they associate with the adult Sunday service. The sofa empowers the youth to enact a kind of religious community other than that they find among adults; not to reorganize the room would bring them into the dominating adult mode of ordered worship services. The network enabled by the sofas would have been broken. The chairs’ materiality would simply put them into a stiff and boring mode of practicing faith. Sofas, on the other hand, open a space for a relaxed and cozy mode of religious practice (Holtedahl 2017).

### The research contribution of LETRA

#### *Object*

Rather many researchers conducting practical-theological research in Norway have been interested in LETRA, and the theoretical perspectives we have employed, something we find interesting and inspiring.<sup>5</sup> Still, to identify commonalities, but particularly differences, between LETRA and other Norwegian practical-theological research initiatives can bring forward the specificity and also the novelty of LETRA’s scientific contribution. Our first topic is to elaborate how LETRA understands the concept *object*.

Erling Birkedal has published extensively on the Church of Norway, and is currently the director of the MF-based project called “Congregational development within the

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5 The impact of LETRA has not followed a traditional practical theological research trajectory. Most articles are published in journals not associated with theology at all. The most visible impact of LETRA has been to bring congregational practices into scholarly discussions outside theological frameworks. Scholars specializing in practice theory, in ANT and socio-cultural learning theories have read about confirmations camps, pastors struggling with a liturgy reform and deacons’ creative ways of knowledge creation. Publishing in journals known for their advanced theoretical level has been encouraged and part of the aim for some LETRA scholars. The reviewers have been largely positive, acknowledging the articles theoretical contribution, and that they have learnt about religious life in Norway, which they otherwise knew nothing about. Others in LETRA have sent their articles to international practical theological journals. The responses have been more negative, often demanding major revisions or rejection, while specialized theoretical journals have approved the very same articles with minor changes.

folk church” (Menighetsutvikling i folkekirken), MUV in short. The MUV project is doing action research and aiming at contributing to change in congregations in the Church of Norway, which is different from the more descriptive and analytical ambition of the LETRA project. However, both projects analyze change in religious practices. Birkedal (2015a, 2015b) discusses the theoretical aspects of MUV. In short, the congregation is seen as the basic unit and there is an ideal of the congregation as a unitary whole, where the different activities are subsystems that should be realizing the overarching aims and values of the total complex system of the congregation. Change is partly a process of reflections over practice, partly cultural change in mentality and attitudes. Learning and development—a key element in change—is an official plan. The plan consists of the aims for development of the congregation and gives direction for how these aims can be translated into practice. Thus, one main theoretical difference between the two projects is that MUV understands collective change in terms of aims and values, while LETRA understands the same processes as changes in the object of the activity or practice.

Stephen Sirris (2015) at VID has also conducted empirical research on congregations within the Church of Norway as well as other Christian organizations. He discusses the difference between aims and values as the difference between instrumental and cultural logics and between instrumental organizations and value-impregnated institutions. He argues that religious communities are more similar to value institutions than to instrumental and aim-mean based organizations. Plans and planned processes for development should be characterized by value—and not primarily aim—work, Sirris argues. Hence, Birkedal’s and Sirris’s perspectives and discussions are interesting because they are in some sense close to how LETRA addresses collective learning. Particularly interesting in this context is it that Birkedal (2015a) refers to CHAT, and identifies the development process as the object of the congregations. This seems to be more on normative than on empirical grounds. The study of object in congregational activities in the LETRA projects provides a more empirical understanding of the object in the different activities.

Accordingly, we argue that the objects in the activities studied by LETRA are empirical and inseparable from the everyday interaction of religious practices. Objects are the actual direction and drive of what people are doing together. An object cannot be formulated separately from an empirical analysis of actions and interaction in the activity. The assumption is that a youth group, a choir, or a funeral is driven by its history, its current relations and the future direction—the totality of the routinized doings and sayings of the practice. This means that object is negotiated and developed in the activity. Thus, in Johnsen’s research on “Baptism clubs” she argues that there are two kinds of tasks in the Sunday services: performance tasks and liturgical tasks. The first kinds of task are introduced because they are assumed to engage the children. However, they are not tools or ingredients in a regular Sunday service, which means that they position children on a separate and outbound trajectory. The performance tasks are not integrated into the collective object of the activity of Sunday service. They connect to other activities outside the church, but create a plurality of objects

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in the Sunday service. These objects need to be negotiated. Negotiations like this one create possibilities for development and learning—but change is neither inevitable nor automatic. Learning and change can happen through changes in practice where, for instance, some of the performance tasks are included in the activity, which in turn expands the collective object and identity of the Sunday service.

Learning as change in the collective object of the activity is also clear in the cases of Nygaard's analysis of Elena, the Romanian woman and the deacon, as well as in Saxegaard's account of the pastor's spontaneous blessing of the unknown and foreign child in the church. In both cases, there are changes in how things are done. Elena is not just fitting into the regular activity of the congregation; things are being done differently. The blessing is also a disruption, a new way of acting and interacting. Elena and the deacon drew attention and new responsibility and care for the Romanians in the first congregation, and the blessing became a moment for decisive negotiation for what the congregation wanted to be and do. In both cases, learning and change had the character of new ways of doing things, of use of material space and who should have access to which rooms and so on. The order of change is crucial. Change and learning was not a result of aims, plans for reforms, mental values or individual attitudes. Potential learning is created by changes in what is done, in interaction, and in possible negotiation and analysis of the object and drive of the collective practice.

The LETRA research also shows that learning and change is neither inevitable nor automatic. Reite's analysis of the liturgical Sunday service reform and Holmqvist's account of the "candle path" at the confirmation camp show that new interaction and tools can be negotiated differently. In the first case, the pastors do not change the object of the service, the new hymns can be fitted into its existing identity. In the second case, the new participants, the confirmands, are not enrolled in the activity and its object. Without knowing the drive or meaning of the activity, they were excluded from the outset, and the activity was not transformed through their participation.

In neither of these cases was the object of activity the process of change itself. Learning was a change in the empirical object of the activity, its drive and direction. This means that in order to understand collective learning and change, one needs to empirically analyze the object of an activity. Furthermore, objects are conflicting, in motion and negotiated, between what is and what may be. On this account, aims and values are aspects of particular activities and embedded in the doings and sayings of these activities. Aims and values are understood as processes—as aiming and valuing—and as collective negotiations of the value of the activity in question. On an object-oriented account of learning, people do not first subscribe to aims and values and then act. Individuals are participating in social activities where interaction, aiming and valuing take place at the same time. Contrary to Birkedal and Sirris, the different ways the youth carry and organize the sofas in Holtedahl's research may be more important in order to understand learning than the aims and values in the plans for the local congregation. The modes of organizing the sofas constitute collective emotions, belonging and relationships—and possibilities for developing their religious practice and what they value.

### *Materiality*

The second topic concerns materiality, an interest LETRA shares with a whole range of researchers within social science and humanities. Birgitte Lerheim at TF has shown profound interest both in socio-cultural learning theories as well as in materiality. She addresses learning in relation to a case study of two university libraries (2017). Her primary interest is to explore how the material surroundings in libraries are able “to facilitate good spaces for learning for as many students as possible” (Lerheim 2017:115). Lerheim connects to Afdal’s descriptions of socio-cultural theory, but addresses learning as an individual matter employing “learning styles” as her main analytical tool. Accordingly, and in reference to Duun 1979 and Imsen 2005, learning styles is defined as “how each of us concentrate best, acquire, manage and remember new contents”; it is all about “personality traits and individual learning preferences” (Lerheim 2017:118). Materiality, the physical look of the libraries, is perceived as something that prevents or enables learning, all depending on individual learning preferences. Thus, a first fundamental difference to LETRA is that Lerheim treats the content students are going to learn as given; secondly, materiality is perceived analytically as a surrounding for learning, and not as something that constitutes learning as a collective social practice. Moreover, Lerheim also connects to ethics and thirdspace theories as having an explicit normative agenda for “emancipatory change and freedom from domination” (Lerheim 2017:115), well known in theological and also practical theological research, but differing from LETRA, where the primary aim is to empirically understand processes of learning and knowledge production. The object of inquiry within LETRA is how materiality is an actor changing congregations, but without a specific agenda for change.

Another researcher paying attention to materiality is Merete Thomassen, also from TF. Mainly interested in materiality related to worship services, she refers extensively to Gordon Lathrop’s *Holy Things* (1998) when discussing how confirmands experience being co-liturgists in Sunday services (Thomassen 2017). In accordance with Lathrop, Thomassen’s approach to materiality is exclusively focused on material objects having a long tradition in church. She finds that the materiality of things such as the procession cross, the oblates and wine, as well as the Bible and candles, seem important for the confirmands. However, she expresses surprise that none of the confirmands are able to answer questions about their theological meaning, even if the pastors have provided basic knowledge about the church space. As Thomassen underlines, there are junctures between her liturgical approach and research conducted by LETRA researchers, mentioning Johnsen and Holmqvist in particular (Thomassen 2017:151). However, the shared interest in materiality differs because LETRA is interested in how everyday objects that are not usually part of congregations enact and transform “holy things”. Similarly, learning is not understood as the individual acquisition of a set of established theological meanings of some particular material things. To conceptualize learning as a collective social practice means that learning cannot be separated as an independent product; it takes place even if it differs from an intended outcome. In addition, Thomassen differs from LETRA in her explicit normative preferences,

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providing warnings against turning liturgical participation into a performance focused on individual achievements.

Materiality, as argued across the diverse LETRA contributions, is more than a surrounding for individual learning of a predefined content. Hence, the example from Saxegaard shows how the insertion of new human actors, the Asian woman and her baby, led the pastor to question and eventually change their use of the church building. In ANT terms, this woman can be compared to the reform in Reite's study. The interruptive and unexpected presence of the woman and baby enabled a high-powered learning dynamic within the congregation. It was an incidence in which the previous mode of ordering of human and non-human actors became renegotiated, and a new network of actors came into being. The woman came to get her child blessed with no intention of changing the congregation, but still, her materiality fostered a recreation of the space in a far more fundamental manner than anyone could foresee. Holmqvist's study, on the other hand, illustrates a network of human and non-human actors that does not work according to the intention. It is assumed by the leaders that confirmands are able to join a network where candles, posters and bonfire are non-human actors establishing prayer as a social practice, but the material objects are part of other networks for the confirmands. The materiality of "the candle path" led them to interpret it as some kind of game, but this interpretation is rejected by the youth leaders. Thus, LETRA is oriented towards individuals, but within an analytical framework in which social practices are the fundamental unit of analysis. The question is not how individual learning styles might be affected positively or negatively by the material look of a building, but rather to analyze empirically how stable and looser networks between human and non-human create and recreate modes of ordering high and low-powered learning dynamics.

As emphasized by Lerheim, a key insight related to materiality is whether it involves power (Lerheim 2017). As shown in Nygaard's and Høltedahl's studies, analyses of power are part of LETRA. The basic question is, however, to understand how the power to define or restrict the use of material and language tools are regulated, and how power might be altered by the introduction of new material tools, such as the presence of the Romanian woman Elena. This woman is not a powerful person in herself—her life conditions are troublesome and demanding—but to situate Elena within social practices in the congregation spurs a renegotiation of power between the professions involved. The deacon, struggling to make herself heard among pastors possessing powerful theological language tools, becomes able to pursue her own agendas much more efficiently when Elena is present. Thus, it might be, and it is highly probable, that the deacon had similar ideas about emancipatory change and freedom as Lerheim requested, but this is not primary within the analysis of power in LETRA. The facilitation of liberation or empowerment is not defined as a research aim in itself. Rather, power is analyzed as is it enacted within social practices.

Høltedahl's study of how sofas are an important actor in renegotiating the power to define worship exemplifies how materiality works almost without being noticed or recognized as a substantial actor. This analytical emphasis on everyday material

things expands how materiality is approached within the liturgical theology to which Thomassen contributes. To orient oneself only to the “holy things” leaves things with less theologically significant symbolic meaning to go unnoticed. As shown in Johnsen’s study, to act with liturgically established things, such as walking in procession, are included, but the analytical interest is mainly to understand how human and non-human actors interact and intervene with the already-present liturgical actors. Thus, the primary aim is not to figure out to what extent the established theological interpretation of the liturgy is properly transmitted, but to understand how Sunday services become renegotiated when liturgical tasks are mixed with performance tasks.

### *Novelty and domestication*

This article provides the first overall discussion of the scientific contribution of LETRA, firstly by presenting how the diversified, but still coherent, theoretical framework of LETRA has been utilized in six PhD theses, and secondly by discussing two topics, object and materiality, across the individual LETRA contributions related to the research of Norwegian practical-theological researchers.

Even briefly presented, the first part is indicative of the empirical complexity of congregations. Contrary to other related research projects on congregations where change and learning are addressed as processes on a strategic level of an organization, the study of everyday situations in the midst of congregational life has offered rich possibilities to study processes of learning as changes in the collective object. Thus, empirical research such as this entails the observation and interpretation of all the fuzziness and unruliness of which congregations are made, not only the official version of what congregations say and do. Hence, we perceive empirical descriptivity as a prerequisite when researching how learning and knowledge trajectories take place in congregations.

All the empirical accounts offered by LETRA are highly informed by at least one, and most often a mix, of the theoretical strains LETRA has employed. Contrary to research designs having a more action-oriented or phenomenological approach, we claim that an articulate theoretical framework enables empirically descriptively oriented research. To educate ourselves in a pool of theories—socio-cultural theories, activity theory and socio-material theories—has been important for the individual LETRA projects, but particularly for those of us who have been embedded in normative theological discourses inside and outside the academy for a long time. Moreover, theoretical tools originating from other scholarly discourse—education and social science—have led to the empirical realities of congregations appearing as a new and uncharted territory. Thus, the combination of the empirical and theoretical interests has been essential in order for us to study congregations as social practices. Such results might be achieved within less theoretically developed and more action-oriented designs as well, but to study learning and knowledge trajectories without a responsibility to facilitate a particular change, for instance freedom from domination, has provided essential analytical engagement and freedom.

The second part of the article discusses and elaborates upon two of the most central



concepts within LETRA, object and materiality, both concepts being analytically elusive and edgy. To compare how closely related researchers understand their scientific tasks makes the specific scientific contribution of LETRA possible to identify, even for those of us deeply involved in the project. One of LETRA's main contributions is to show how change is a moving target. To understand how congregations, and even more so, how religious practices change in a late modern society, is to study an object on the run, as phrased by Engeström (2008). Or, as Latour (1987) put it, to open this black box has made us realize how messy learning and knowledge processes in congregations are. As Schatzki (2010) reminds us, the congregations studied are complex nexuses of sayings and doings in which material human and non-human actors enact networks that work in unpredictable manners.

The initial aim of LETRA was to make research on congregations as developed on the pedagogical side as it is theologically. The academic field and the church field in Norway have gained more respect and interest in practice theories, and references to Vygotskij are not as absent as they were in 2008. However, some of the theoretical perspectives introduced by LETRA have almost become domesticated. When reading LETRA-inspired articles and theses today, one might get the impression that Engeström is deeply involved in youth work and has deep knowledge about pastors in the Church of Norway. To our knowledge, only Latour attends church (Latour 2001, Latour, Latour, and Geiger 2004), and not in protestant Norway. It might be that the fruitful analytical distance to the empirical field of congregations is about to diminish. It is important to look for analytical tools that are able to say something new and unexpected about learning and knowledge in congregations. As we have learned from Vygotskij, our knowledge about reality will always be indirect and mediated. The pool of practice theories utilized to analyze learning and knowledge processes in congregations represents the scientific novelty of LETRA, but to turn Vygotskij, Wenger, Engeström and Latour into a normative theoretical trajectory within practical-theological research would be against the fundamental insights these empirically oriented theorists have taught us about research—and about congregations. It is necessary to continually pursue theoretical openness in order to conduct empirical research on how congregations, and more broadly religious practices, change in late modern societies.

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