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Practice and practices have been increasingly discussed in theology. In these discussions, practice is often understood in relation to theory. In emergent practice theory, however, practice is understood in terms of social ontology and as an alternative to methodological individualism and methodological holism. Society, including religion, is analysed as nexuses of collective practices. This article makes a distinction between two concepts of practice, one weak and one strong, and discusses these concepts in texts by Kathlyn Tanner and Linda Woodhead. It also discusses how a strong conception of practice may contribute to theology.

The doing mode of religion and theology is extensively debated in current academic literature. Religion is analysed as lived,[1] and the sociology of lived religion researches how individuals actually practice and negotiate religion in a variety of contexts, not the official or prescriptive role of religion. Theology is analysed as being done,[2] and practical theology is to a large degree becoming more empirical, analysing the practices of congregations, professionals, and volunteers. Consequently, religion is understood as everyday,[3] on the edge,[4] ordinary,[5] and not primarily as institutional and normative. The everyday practice and practices of religion are getting increased attention. In this turn to practice, however, the meaning and theorising of practice is quite implicit.[6] This is particularly surprising, given the interest in the emerging "theory of practice" in the social sciences.[7] The emerging and heterogenous tradition of "theory of practice" does not just give elaborate theoretical accounts of practice. Rather, practice is placed at the centre of understanding the social; it is given a social ontological role.

This article argues that there are two conceptions of practice, one weak and one strong, and that the weak conception dominates in the study of religion and theology. Moreover, I claim that a strong conception of practice offers valuable perspectives to the study of religion. The argument is developed in three steps. First, I give an account of weak and strong conceptions of practice. Second, these conceptions are used in an analysis of

two texts from key scholars, Kathryn Tanner in theology and Linda Woodhead in the sociology of religion. Third, I discuss the promise of strong conceptions of practice in theology.

Two concepts of practice

Several authors have pointed out that the concept of practice in the emerging tradition of practice theory is different from a common-sense use. Schatzki, Rousse, and Nicolini distinguish in somewhat different ways between an everyday and a practice-theoretical understanding of practice.[8] Rousse argues that a practice-theoretical conception is normative; it is taking a theoretical stance that argues for collective practices as a key to understanding the social. Nicolini uses the notion of a strong conception of practice,[9] with explicit reference to "the strong programme" and the Edinburgh School in Sociology of Science (Barnes and Bloor). In the strong programme, science, as the rest of the social, is understood as a social practice. Not only scientific failure, but also success, can be explained as social processes. This is called the principle of symmetry; nothing in the social world is beyond or above social processes, including the production of reliable and valid knowledge. Put differently, the production of theory is also a social practice.

The terms strong and weak may seem a bit odd, but they refer to the degree to which the conception of practice is theoretically loaded and how important practice is in understanding the social (see also Vähäkangas' article in this issue). In the strong sense, the concept of practice is more theoretically loaded than in the weak conception. One danger of constructing a two-fold distinction is, of course, entering the same kind of dichotomous modes as are criticised below. The difference between strong and weak here is therefore an analytical distinction, not an epistemic separation. Strong and weak conceptions of practice are blended in everyday life and in research. That fact does not eliminate the analytical gain in making a two-fold distinction.

Briefly, the strong tradition, or practice theory, is a heterogeneous mix with some common agendas. Many of the contributors are more concerned about their own specific traditions, such as cultural historical activity theory (Engeström) and actor network theory (Latour), than a common practice theory. Other writers, however, make the common agendas explicit in developing practice theory empirically and theoretically (Schatzki, Nicolini, Gherardi, Reckwitz, Shove). It is important to emphasise that there is disagreement on some issues among the

authors who are usually incorporated into the category of practice theory.

The different scholars draw on a variety of academic traditions, like socio-cultural theory, pragmatism and hermeneutics, and philosophers/theorists like Whitehead, Vygotsky, Bakhtin, Pierce, Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. The works of Taylor, Giddens, and Bourdieu are particularly important.

A weak conception of practice

A weak conception of practice refers to the everyday and common-sense use. This use has several characteristics. In everyday talk, practice is often used in an empirical sense. "In practice, however, this does not work" means that empirically, something that looks good on the drawing board or sounds good in the auditorium, does not work in real life. This may be because the original idea has not considered all vital conditions in the empirical field. But it may also be because everyday practice is incomplete, and unable or unwilling to change for the better.

Regardless, practice is understood as the doing mode of phenomena. The practice of medicine is the doing, acting, and interacting mode. Other modes are theory, organisations, politics, history, institutions, materials, technology, and the language of medicine. A main separation is between theory and practice. The separation is often described as a "gap" that needs "bridging." Famous attempts to bridge the gap includes Schön's conception of the "reflective practitioner," a practitioner who creates professional language through reflections in practice.[10] Schön's account can be understood against the backdrop of theory taking the primary role in the theory–practice binary in modernity. Theoretical knowledge, education, and professions have become in many ways superior to practical knowledge, training, and vocations. A re-evaluation of practice and practical knowledge and reason may bring balance to the theory–practice dichotomy, but it will not dissolve it.

Related to the above dichotomy is the language–practice binary. Practice is associated with acting and interacting, like replacing an engine fan. Language is able not only to formulate the procedure of replacing an engine fan, but to explain what an engine fan is, how it works, its role in the engine – and the basic principles of a car's gasoline engine. Mastering the language of engines does not in itself provide the skills of changing a fan, and vice versa.

Dichotomies enable separations that are necessary to make purifi-cations, which is a characteristic of the modern narrative, Latour argues.[11] Practice is different than theory and language. In the same way, pure religion is different than politics and economics; religious language is different from religious practice, and religious ideas are different from the materialities of religion. Practice in a purifying social order is at the end of the pipeline of knowledge production and processes. Pure knowledge is produced as theory and then transferred to different fields of practice, where it is applied. In the context of reli-gion, knowledge is produced as religious theory and language and then applied in different practices.

A strong concept of practice

In a strong conception, practice is removed from the end of the pipeline, from a purified doing-mode of social phenomena to the centre of the social. To understand the social, the order of social life, one has to start with social practices. Society is not a product of individual agents/actors, nor is it a product of social structures; it works as nexuses of practices. Centering social practice is an alternative to atomism and methodological individualism on one hand and holism and methodological collectivism on the other.[12] This is not the same as Schön's project of revaluating practice. Practice is separated from its theory–practice roots and replaced and reconceptualized at the centre of the social reality. This means that practice in this tradition is under-stood differently from its everyday and common-sense use, and since the everyday understanding of practice is interwoven in the academic literature as well, there are plenty of misunderstandings.

Practice theory offers an alternative social ontology,[13] an alternative understanding of the social order than those found in the structure-agent divide:

> From a strong perspective, the practice idiom is therefore much more than a theoretical lens that one can adopt in response to the latest academic fashion or can retrofit to the usual way of doing research. Rather, the practice idiom is an ontological choice, a recog-nition of the primacy of practice in social matters as well as the adoption of the idea that practices (in one way or another) are fun-damental to the production, reproduction, and transformation of social and organizational matters. As a new vocabulary, practice populates the world with new and different phenomena, objects

of inquiry, questions and concerns. It introduces a new ontology and alternative truth values (…).[14]

This means that practice is not one mode of the social, the doing mode. Practice populates the world. Looking at the social from a practice point of view, we all participate in social practices. Brushing our teeth is one example. The social practice of brushing one's teeth existed before we were born, and we were enrolled in the practice from early on. There are ways of doing and saying things in the practice – conventions, rules, techniques, purposes, and materialities. One rule may be that you should brush for at least two to three minutes twice a day. The purpose may be to avoid as many cavities as possible, and the changing materialities – electric toothbrushes, for instance – may change the practice somewhat. Being enrolled in and participating in a social practice does not exclude agency and choice. People negotiate and develop their own ways of brushing their teeth.

Being in romantic love is another social practice – there is a repertoire of material and symbolic artifacts (red roses, soft music, jewellery, ways of dressing) and ways of acting and speaking. This, again, does not exclude agency; quite the contrary. Doing romantic love your own way, in an active negotiation with the repertoire, is a main characteristic. Practice theory is not structuralist, in the sense of structuring conditions or even determining actions. But practice theory does not operate with an independent agent or actor. Human action is constituted and mediated by social practices, which means that actors cannot be understood in isolation from social practices and that social practices cannot be understood in isolation from individual actions. Human action is partly constituted by social practices, partly by individual agency, and the parts are interwoven.

Furthermore, Schatzki argues for a flat social ontology.[15] A flat ontology means that society is not understood a priori as structured by different macro, meso, and micro levels. I want to add two more characteristics of social ontology in practice theory. First, it is characterised by a radical relational social ontology; that is, that objects and subjects get meaning by the different relations in which they are interwoven. Secondly, it is characterised by a processual ontology, in which social and material activity is seen as in and as motion.

Philosophically, Schatzki explains the relationship between individual agency and social practice in a Heidegger fashion, with existence being thrown into the world, but at the same time "being-ahead-of-itself-already-in-the-world."[16] Human existence is understood as "in medias

res"; people are thrown into already-existing social practices and start interacting there and then. The main mode of existence is not cognition or experience, but involvement in the sense of action and inter-action:

> Being-in-the-world is not a matter of, say, a person's body being entirely surrounded by the entities that make up a given world. The *in* concerned is, instead, the *in* of involvement. To be-in-the-world is to be involved in a world, to proceed within it with, toward, and amid the entities that compose it.[17]

Action, interaction, and motion are closely related. This means that the doing-mode is not a separate aspect of the social order. All of the social is in motion and should be analysed in the doing-mode. Understanding the social as nexuses of practices means that action and inter-action are key aspects. The social and practices are not understood as essence, but as being interacted, changing in interaction, and being in motion.

Language is not understood separately from, but as an aspect of, social practices. In a broad sense, a practice is understood as a way of doing and saying things.[18] Language is not prior to action and practice, but is practice itself. Practice theory analyses language, talk, dialogue, and texts in use, in relation to actions and interaction. Sayings and doings are also entwined with the materiality of practices. The entwined character of practices can be described as hybridities and syncretisms.[19] This, in turn, makes them impure. Religious practices are never pure; religion is entwined with economy, law, politics, and so on. Religions are nexuses of practices, dynamic webs of different, and often contradictory, ways of doings and sayings.

Because of this, a congregation is not so much a "community of practice"[20] as it is a web of nexuses of practices. Practices are open-ended (Schatzki), dynamic and in motion. This means that a theological language of faith, beliefs, and God is not the only, nor theoretically a priori, primary language of congregational practice. There is a nexus of languages, and how they are mixed and used is an empirical question. Moreover, language is not the general cause of action, in a cognitivist fashion. In a social practice, interaction, materials, and language are interwoven in complex ways. Participants are enrolled in the language of the practice, but may also use language to individually and actively negotiate, act, and understand.

The distinction between impure and pure can be understood as a kind of dichotomy that practice theory criticises. However, drawing on

Latour, the point with hybridisation and impurification is that in the study of religion (and other phenomena), one cannot start with the assumption of purification.[21] Distinctions and connections have to be investigated from a point of view where everything may relate to everything else. It may turn out that in certain cases, there are processes of purification. This means that the processes of impurification and purification are complementary and must be analysed empirically.

The differences between a weak and a strong concept of practice are summarised in Table 1.

I will now turn to two texts within theology and sociology of religion to analyse their conceptions of practice. The different aspects of a weak and a strong concept of practice will be used as sensitising analytical devices. The reason for choosing these two authors, Kathryn Tanner and Linda Woodhead, is that they are key contributors in their academic fields, and that they both are generally concerned about religion and everyday practices. The texts deal explicitly with practice and religion. I do not, of course, argue that these texts are representative of all theology and sociology of religion. Still, they are interesting figures in this context, given their explicit interest in the issues discussed here.

Tanner on practice and theology

Tanner's article "Theological reflection and Christian practices" is published in the edited volume *Practicing Theology* (2002). As the title indicates, the article discusses the relationship between Christian practices and theology. Tanner first develops her understanding of Christian

Table 1.   Main characteristics of a weak and strong concept of practice, as argued in this paper.

Weak	Strong
Empirical	Social ontology
Individuals or groups	The understanding of society and agency
The doing mode	Everything should be analysed in process
Practice is binary to theory and language	Theories and language are practices
Dichotomies	Hybridities
Purifications	Impurifications

practice, and then agues how academic theology can be conceived of and what role it should take. A main idea is that theology is not sequentially primary or external to Christian practice: "Theological reflection instead arises within the ordinary working of Christian lives to meet practical needs."[22]

Moreover, she argues that academic theologians are inclined to idealise and stereotype the description of Christian practices. In many cases, the many normative assumptions of what such a practice ought to be are infused in descriptions of what Christian practices actually are. Among these assumptions are that such practices have a commonality in Christian beliefs and values, that Christian practices are self-contained or isolated, and that participants in these practices act on their beliefs.[23] On the contrary, she argues that:

> Christian practices do not in fact require (1) much explicit understanding of beliefs that inform and explain their performance, (2) agreement on such matters among the participants, (3) strict delimitation of code of action, (4) systematic consistency among beliefs and actions, or (5) attention to their significance that isolates them from a whole host of non-Christian commitments.[24]

Christian practices are in fact much more open-ended, she claims. There are two reasons for this. First, a social practice in general is fluid and processual, and it is interwoven with different sets of practices. This resembles the nexus of practices argument above. Secondly, and related, a practice is not an isolated unity, but highly dependent on social structures, discourses, and orders on a larger scale: "Christian practices cannot be understood in abstraction from their tension-filled relations with the practices of the wider society in which Christians live."[25] Christian practices are characterised by ambiguity, inconsistency, and open-endedness, she argues.

This seems to be a critique of communitarian-inspired theology, where Christian practices are understood as relatively homogenous, ideal, and theoretically constructed communities of practice. According to Tanner, theology would have no critical role on such a closed account of religious practice; there is no opening. Although she does not address the issue explicitly, it is vital to Tanner to construct and locate theology outside of religious practices, at a critical distance. On the one hand are the Christian practices, interwoven in other practices and the "complex, conflictual and unpredictable" society at large.[26] On the

other hand, academic theology is based in universities and seminaries and expressed in curricula.

Interestingly, Tanner locates the critical role of theology neither inside a self-contained religious practice, nor in the wider society. Theology is located in the intersections and dynamics between religious practices and the wider society (including other practices). She uses the terms "fit" and "judgment of fit" to describe these dynamics. The relationship can be understood neither as isolation nor as automatic adaption. The way Christian practices actively interact with wider society is through an active process of "fit" and reflections on how this fit should be done in the best possible manner. Fit is not one-way. Religious practice can change, but it can also contribute to changing society. In this process of reflection over fit, academic theology can contribute. In this way, theology is directed to Christian practices, but since these practices are fluid, open-ended, and in dynamic relation with society at large, theology also has a broader and wider direction.

> In short, sustained and explicit theological reflection helps establishing Christian practices as a whole way of life by sharpening commitments, by guiding performance of Christian practices in the face of the ambiguities, disagreements, and shifting circumstances of everyday life; by contributing to the excellence of such practices by making them more meaningful and meaning-giving; and by imbuing them with a historical, contextual, and theological richness that might otherwise be lost from view at any one place and time, and thereby enhancing their resourcefulness to meet the challenges of that place and time.[27]

Academic theology has to change accordingly, giving attention to the dynamics, intersections, and fits more than to isolated religious practices:

> To be of help in this regard, courses would have to provide more than knowledge of Christian practices, and therefore theological education would need to move in the direction of the wider humanistic frame for the teaching of theology in university contexts: Christian practices would have to be set in relation to non-Christian ones, in all the wide arenas of human life – economic, political, and social – to show how tensions between them are resolved.[28]

Tanner's conception of practice has similarities to some characteristics of a strong conception, discussed above. Practices are open-ended and fluid; they are characterised by change, dynamics, and motion; and practices are not isolated units – practices are best understood as nexuses, bundles, and constellations.[29] Other aspects of her account, however, seem to suggest another use of practice.

There is an interesting ambiguity in the description of Christian practices – as fluid, interwoven, and impure on the one hand, and as distinct, separate, and pure and on the other: "Christian practices seem to be constituted in great part by a slippery give-and-take with non-Christian practices – eating, meeting, greeting – done differently, born again, to unpredictable effect."[30] Eating, meeting, and greeting are not included in the conception of Christian practice. The question then is, what makes a practice Christian (or religious)? A separation seems to emerge between mundane religious practices and real religion. On the one hand, we have empirical Christian practices; on the other hand, we have aspects of this Christian practice that are really Christian and those that are not.

Implicit in Tanner's account seems to be an ambivalence between an ideal of the pure on the one hand and an impure reality on the other. The impure (complex, conflictual, and unpredictable) character of reality, practices, and religious practices is judged by an ideal of purity, and it is a pretty one-sided verdict. Nowhere in her text is the impure, fluid, ambivalent, and open-ended character of practices and reality described as positive. Practices are messy, Tanner argues, but she does not discuss the implicit claim that messiness is not good.

In her text, practice is placed in the empirical, doing-mode of religion. Academic theology is not discussed as a social practice. Practice is used as one aspect of social phenomena, not as a social ontological concept. On the one hand is theory, academic theology; on the other is practice, Christian practice. The relationship between theology and practice is one-way. Practice is in a state of incompleteness and in need of a normative corrective, and theological theory is the resource and corrector.

In the article, Tanner is more concerned about the possibilities of academic theology than its problematic aspects. Even though she suggests the widening mentioned above, the mode of theology as an abstract, constructive activity is taken for granted:

> … academic theologians, by virtue of their employment, are able to devote a great deal of time to their construction – and better-informed ones, at least in the sense of being constructed from an

unusually wide purview (though perhaps less informed on the matter of "real life" because of a tendency towards abstraction).[31]

Academic theology is doing constructions, and from "an unusually wide purview," a purview, however, not wide enough to include empirical knowledge about how religion is actually done, or about "real life." This strengthens the interpretation that religion in Tanner's text is not practice; it is something purer and ideal. Religious practices are the doing mode of religion, but also of so much else. They are impure, "real life," messy phenomena. The abstract constructions of theology do not need to know how religion is practiced, because pure religion is not practice. It is not religion or Christianity that is "complex, conflictual and unpredictable"; it is religious practices. Religious practices are impure practices *of* religion. Pure religion is found elsewhere, in texts and abstract constructions. On Tanner's account, academic theology is not informed by religious practices – theology has other sources of religion (Figure 1).

In sum, Tanner mainly uses a weak concept of practice in her article. This has consequences for the understanding of religious practices, religion, and theology. In her text, practice is used as a framework for Christian practice, not for the understanding of religion and theology. The complexity and impurity of practice is not found on the theology side. Moreover, empirical religious practice is not a source for the
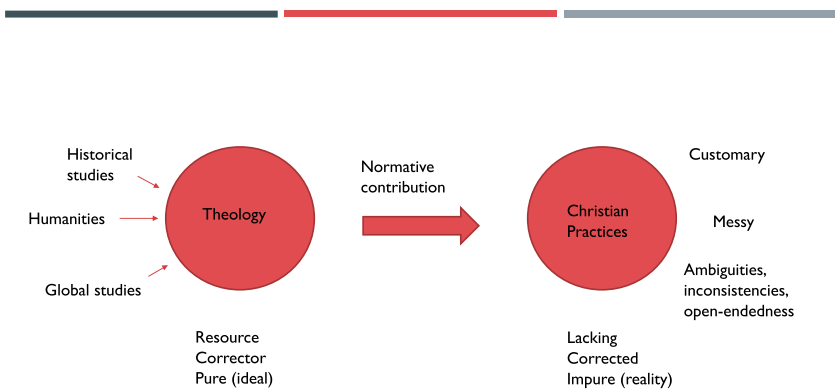
Figure 1. The conception of religious practices and theology in Tanner's "Theological Reflection and Christian Practices".

understanding of normativity. Theology takes the role of theory and Christian practices the role of practice. In Tanner (2002), practice theory changes the understanding of religious practice, not what religion or theology is or may be.[32]

Woodhead on practice and religion

Woodhead's article is published in the *International Review of Sociology* and directed to social scientists in general. The text argues that religion is a fruitful but elusive concept, which may legitimately be used in different ways in different research contexts and projects. The background is the criticism of the concept of religion and the arguments to abandon it altogether. Woodhead distinguishes between definitions and concepts of religion:

> Unlike definitions, which try to single out certain essential characteristics, concepts derive their meaning from the wider frameworks in which they are embedded. These may be theoretical, historical, empirical, methodological, and normative – or, more often, all of these.[33]

This means that discussing concepts of religion cannot be done in isolation; the concepts are entwined with epistemological and ontological questions. This opens up a plurality of possible concepts; the search for true religion is futile. The argument does not amount to full relativism. The different concepts have their separate strengths and weaknesses, and the choice of conception of religion must be aligned with epistemological, methodological, and ontological assumptions in the particular project[34] – the choice of the religion concept must be "appropriate within the research design as a whole."[35]

Woodhead presents and discusses in detail five different concepts of religion:

- Religion as culture
- Religion as identity
- Religion as relationship
- Religion as practice
- Religion as power

The discussion of these concepts is broad, indeed, and most possible versions of religion are included. Woodhead concludes her article:

This paper is intended as a provocation to look more closely – and more broadly – at the conceptual dimension of social scientific studies of religion. It also contains an implicit plea to allow empirical findings enough scope to shape, to revise, the concept of religion employed in a particular study. The underlying epistemology of this discussion is therefore neither realist nor constructivist.[36]

Woodhead argues that even though one single and true conception of religion is unattainable, it is possible to develop the conception of religion through theoretical discussions of empirical findings and research. I understand the reference to realism and constructivism in this context in the following way: the development of the conception of religion is not done by empiricist or constructivist research, but by the careful development of conceptual frames in and through empirical research.

Woodhead starts the section about religion as practice with the ethnographic and anthropological study of religion:

The ethnographic approach characteristic of anthropological study also lends itself to an awareness of religion as practice – as something which is lived out (or "danced out" as R.R. Marrett [1914, p. xxxi] famously put it), as much as thought out or written out.[37]

Religion as lived out and danced out – religion as everyday, lived, bodily, and aesthetic – is contrasted with religion as cognitive, textual, and lingual. Rituals may be seen as a paradigmatic example of religion – both in the sense that rituals are central in religion and that religion is understood as ritual. Still, Woodhead argues, religion as practice is also seen in non-orchestrated, mundane, everyday, and individual practices – the kind of religion that is explored by the tradition of lived religion:

This concept of religion [lived religion] is part of an approach which seeks to broaden the purview of sociological study to take account of what has often been ignored. Thus, it is less interested in formal theologies and religious structures *per se* than in their relations with religious practices in "everyday" life, which includes domestic, familial and leisure settings, as well as designated religious settings. It is also less interested in religion at societal level (e.g., religion and politics, religion and legal regulation), than in religion in micro-level interactions.[38]

Thus, Woodhead identifies religion as practice mainly with two traditions in the study of religion: anthropology and the sociology of lived religion. The lived religion-tradition, in particular, enables analysis of the aspects of religion that traditional sociology has partly overlooked, and partly seen as peripheral. Attention is given to religion in non-formal religious settings, like in homes, at work, in prisons, and at airports, but also related to health and fitness, meditation, and personal development. Moreover, lived religion is particularly attuned to the bodily, emotional, and material aspects of religious practices. The tradition has been criticised for going too far in locating religion in the mundane and micro, and not analysing how official and unofficial religion interact and how big-scale developments in late-modern societies condition religion at different levels. Still, Woodhead argues, "insights and methods pioneered by these approaches have been taken up into the current study of 'lived' and 'practiced' religion."[39]

In Woodhead's article, practice is one among many modes of religion. It is described as one of five main alternative conceptions of religion, a conception that draws attention to some particular aspects of the multitude of religion-phenomena. Religion as practice is the doing mode of, or dancing out of, religion – in contrast to cognitive, systemic meaning-making, text-based, official, and prescriptive religion. Hence, religion as practice is an empirical concept; it refers to certain empirical aspects of religion – aspects that traditionally have been ignored or seen as peripheral. Practice is not discussed in Woodhead's text; it is taken for granted in an everyday, common-sense way – not as a theoretical concept. Practice is not seen as a social ontology, as a way of understanding the social. Woodhead operates with a society of micro and macro levels, and there are no traces of a practice–theory social ontology. The understanding of practice neither challenges nor offers a reconceptualization of the social and religion. Practice is used in a weak sense.

The main point here is not to critically discuss the assumptions of social ontology in the article, but to analyse the description and understanding of practice and religion. Religion as practice works on a weak concept of practice, and the possibilities of understanding practice and religion differently are not mentioned in an article that is impressively broad and covers much terrain in the study of religion. Why is this? A possible answer is that there exists little research and theory in the study of religion working on a strong conception of practice. A search in the Atla Religion Database supports this. Searches for key contributors like Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, Nicolini, Shove, Engeström, Gherardi, Latour, and Giddens combined with "practice" give few, if any,

results. In a recent article, one of the key contributors to the sociology of lived religion, Nancy Ammerman, confirms this in a review of 64 articles within the tradition:

> Surprisingly, perhaps, only nine of these articles cite Bourdieu (1998) in their discussion of practice, nor is MacIntyre (1984) often mentioned. Theorizing "practice" may be an important frontier for lived religion scholars.[40]

In the next and last section, I will therefore discuss the promise of a strong practice conception in the study of religion, and theology in particular.

The promise of a strong conception of practice in theology

I will sketch the possible consequences of a strong conception of practice to the academic theology study of religion in five points. The aim is to discuss some related possible consequences of an understanding of religion as practice, from the perspective of practice theory.

1. From practice of religion to religion as practice

So far in the article, I have operated with a more or less implicit distinction between "practice of religion" and "religion as practice." There is a subtle difference between the two concepts. "Practice of religion" implies that practice and religion are in principle separate. The practice is of something that is given beforehand. First is religion, then comes the practice of religion. This means that religion is not necessarily made or created in practice. Practice is only one mode of religion, the doing-mode.

Understanding "religion as practice" means that practice is the intrinsic mode of religion. Religion is understood as doings, interaction, and motion. Real religion is not behind, under, or above everyday religious practices. The messy religious practices are religion. This means that religion is being-in-the-world in the sense of involvement and action, in a Schatzki sense.[41] Religion is not primarily culture, identity, language, experience, or meaning-making, but action and interaction in a broad sense of practice. The cultural, identity-related, linguistic, experiential, and meaning-making aspects of religion ought to be analysed as aspects of action, interaction, and participation in practices.

For theology, this means that religion is found in human and social action and interaction in a broad sense; that is, in social practices. Religion is not primarily found in texts and abstract constructions, but in how religious texts and abstractions are used in everyday practices, along with material objects, aesthetical symbols, rituals and tools, bodily practices like eating and exercising, music and colours, conversations, and speech. If religious practices, as ways of doings, sayings, and material objects, are where religion is done, then theology has to investigate and analyse what people actually do, how they interact, and how they do religion in different ways. Theology has to turn empirical. In the study of texts, attention should be given to how texts are and have been used in practice. In the study of history, the historical practices of religion are of main interest. Further, if one does theological abstract constructions, these constructions should be done in dialogue with the meaning-constructions that are made in everyday practices. Theological ethics should examine how ethics is done and reflected upon, and use these analyses as resources to how ethics can be understood and offer possible expansions or extensions.

Theology has for centuries been in partnership with philosophy, hermeneutics, and history. To analyse social interaction and religion as practice, one has not only to turn to the social sciences, but also to think of theology as a social science.

2. Both process and reification

One could of course argue that religion is not practice, interaction, and process alone. There has to be something religious to call it religious practice. I do not want to enter the never-ending debate on what religion is.[42] The point here is to balance between two extremes, a substantial, overly narrow understanding on the one side and a functional, overly wide conception on the other. Religion is not a thing, but it is also not everything. Process and reification are complementary. In religious processes, material objects, rituals, ideas, and discourses get a reified status; they can be understood not only as elements of religion, but also as core elements. Understanding religion as practice means that these are practices that involve religious reifications in different ways. Some things are religious; other things are political. But these differences are distinctions and not separations. Politics and religion may be blended, but they may also be separated. That is an empirical question. But analytically, it is

important to distinguish (not separate) between religion and other spheres.[43]

What constitutes the specifically religious, and here I agree with Woodhead, is just as elusive as other big cluster-concepts, like culture, politics, and economics. Working toward one clear definition seems futile. A family-resemblance approach that combines uses and understandings of religion in the field with academic reflections seems fruitful.[44] This approach of distinguishing religion from other social spheres is different from Tanner's. Distinctions are based on empirical studies of social practices and the self-understanding of these practices; they have an abductive character. Distinctions are also always impure and contextual.

A strong-practice approach would furthermore analyse religious reifications in use and practice, not in isolation. The meaning of the reifications is neither confined to the reification alone, nor its historical roots, but also to the relation of the reifications in the practice. In a semiotic and relational sense, the reifications get their meaning and give meaning through the dynamic relations in which they take part.

This also means that one should not understand religious practices as stable, delimited, and self-contained units. Religious communities, particularly congregations, can easily be understood as prototypes of a religious practice. That would bring the conception of religion as practice astray. First, a religious community is the nexus and constellation of numerous practices – for instance, economic, political, social, ritual, theological, and aesthetic. How the different practices are negotiated is an empirical question. One cannot assume that a theological practice has primacy. Secondly, a religious community consists of numerous activities that do not necessarily constitute one coherent religious practice. There are youth groups, services, social help, and activities directed towards elders and other persons and groups in need, funerals, concerts, tours, meditation groups, and so on. The point of analysing religion as practice is not to identify religion as a community, but that religion is made in the impure constellation and nexus of numerous practices. Religion is made in the privacy of yoga, as much as in the festivities of a cathedral. In both cases, there are negotiations in a nexus of practices.

Moreover, religion is found in other practices, in politics, economy, law, art, music, and education. The different practices are interwoven in nexuses. This does not mean that the making of religion in these practices is secondary, not real, or impure. It is still the making of religion, just in different contexts and constellations. Religion is not "represented" in politics, law, and education, but made and "re-presented." These different makings are out there, making a difference.

3. The principle of symmetry

The principle of symmetry was used in the Edinburgh School and Strong Programme of Science Studies.[45] The point then was that both scientific success and failure were to be explained as social processes. The last sacred place, the laboratory, with its production of true and scientific knowledge, was studied as a social practice. Later, Latour and others in actor network theory reformulated the principle of symmetry, referring to the relationship between humans and material things, and society and nature. Their argument was that one cannot a priori give agency to humans only; material objects may also make humans act and therefore have agency. Agency has to be understood as hybrid and relational, and investigated empirically.

Here I argue, somewhat in parallel with the latter understanding, that there is no a priori centre in religious practices; there is no central agent as such. How religion is made in practices is an empirical question. In some cases, God or Jesus may be key actors, in others, faith or meaning-making.[46] But it may also be the movement of bodies, the music, the conversations over coffee, the architecture of the buildings, the YouTube video, the food, the silence – and so on. In all cases, the practice is constituted in the relations and interactions between all these actors, objects, and aspects. Understanding religion as primarily transcendence, God and her relations, faith, or meaning-making risks placing the actual hybrid doing of religion on the periphery and creating a distinction between ideal and pure religion on the one hand and not-religion and impure religion on the other. It may very well be that there are key actors and intersections in religious practices, but these should be constituted empirically. This is, again, not an argument that everything is religion, but that religion is constituted by a variety of material objects, bodies, emotions, gods, angels, texts, and rituals. Blackboxing God or faith – or the Bible or Luther for that sake – prevents analysis of how God actually is acting in these practices, and where and how faith is acting. Everything in a religious practice is analysed in motion and relation – and with a flat social ontology.

A flat social ontology is not the same as empiricism. Reality is not a closed entity, but open-ended. This means that empirical analysis is analysis of what may be,[47] as well as what is. Transcendence is mixed with immanence; it is transimmanence.[48] Further, empirical analysis, as understood here, does not mean reducing God or angels to something else. Reality is actually filled with gods and angels. A flat ontology

means that theology cannot operate with separate levels of transcendence and immanence a priori.

4. Impure religion and theology

As already mentioned, the practice of religion is often understood as impure, in contrast to a "real," pure religion. Real and pure religion can be found elsewhere: in texts, in existential faith, in a transcendent mode. Latour argues that the purification processes of the modern account displace religion to either distant transcendence or the unempirical deepest inner parts of the human soul.[49] Religion in the middle ground, in the everyday proximity, is either removed or explained away as something else – as disguised forms of politics, economics, or social structures. His argument is that theology has explained religion away, to transcendence and the inner depths of the existential human soul, while the sociology of religion has explained away religion from everyday life, as something else (politics, structures, culture, identity, etc.).

These processes can be understood as a consequence of the modern account of purification. Religion must be pure; pure religion cannot be found in social practices, and therefore it must be located elsewhere. Understanding religion as fundamentally impure opens up different understandings. The symbolic and material are interwoven, as are the mundane and holy, language and action, subjects and objects, the sacred and secular, the immanent and transcendent, the is and ought. The hybrid and impure character does not exclude analytical distinctions; it excludes separations and dichotomies. In analysis, one should start in the middle of the impure, hybrid practices, in medias res, and then analyse the different actors, parts, relations, and processes from there – not in a priori separations or differentiations.

5. Distributed normativity

What, then, about theology as a normative discipline? Is not the account so far reducing theology to a descriptive social science?

First, I think the normativity of theology is an empirical question. There are reasons to suppose that the degree and character of normativity in academic theology varies a lot from discipline to discipline and

from one paradigm to another. I guess textual and historical disciplines would identify themselves as academic disciplines like most others, in the sense that they are trying to argue for objective knowledge, but still know very well that knowledge production is constituted by some epistemologically, ontologically, and methodologically normative choices and assumptions.

Secondly, research in late-modern societies works on the condition of distributed normativity. Trust in academic authority is by no means unconditional. If a patient disagrees with his medical doctor, he looks for a second opinion, or chooses alternative medicine. In the case of normative theology, authority is radically more fragile. A theologian may argue for a normative account of the Trinity, but most people would not notice because religion is mostly under the radar. Active members of a church might listen, but that would depend on whether they regard the question as relevant and interesting for their religious practice.

I would argue for understanding normativity as distributed. Normativities are made in a set of different practices, academic or not, and there is no reason to assume a priori that theological normativity is relevant to other practices, nor that it is the better understanding of a phenomenon. Surely, the academic version is more scholarly informed and abstract, but if worked out independently from the social practices where such normative questions are relevant and discussed, there is a great risk of idealising and stereotyping the complexities and impurities of practice. It may turn out that the normative arguments of theology are interesting and relevant firstly to other academics. If normative theology is not empirical, not analysing the issues, differences, tensions, and solutions of everyday practices, it is not only left with guessing what are relevant issues to discuss, but is also devoid of the normative resources made in everyday practices.

This, again, does not end in pure descriptions of normativities in practices, but, as in other social sciences, offers possibilities for critical analysis, expansions, and "better accounts."[50]

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Notes

1. McGuire, *Lived Religion* and Ammerman, "Lived Religion".
2. Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology*.

3. Ammerman, *Everyday Religion*.
4. Bender and Levitt, *Religion on the Edge*.
5. Astley, *Ordinary Theology*.
6. Ammerman, "Lived Religion".
7. Schatzki, Cetina, and E. Von Savigny, *Practice Turn*.
8. Schatzki, *Social Practices*; Rousse, "Two Concepts of Practice" and Nicolini, *Practice Theory*.
9. Nicolini, *Practice Theory*.
10. Schön, *Reflective Practitioner*.
11. Latour, *We Have Never*.
12. Reckwitz, "Toward a Theory" and Schatzki, "New Societist."
13. A note on social ontology is necessary. There is no ambition among these authors to work out a fully fleshed-out ontology – the point is to sketch alternatives to existing structuralist and rational-choice paradigms, to homo sociologicus and homo economicus; see Reckwitz "Toward a Theory." This means that society is neither understood as the sum of sociological structures, nor individual rational choice – but as the nexuses of social practices.
14. Nicolini, *Practice Theory*, 13–14.
15. Schatzki, "New Societist."
16. Schatzki, *Timespace*, 48–51.
17. Ibid., 53.
18. Schatzki, *Social Practices*, 73.
19. Law et al., "Modes of Syncretism."
20. Wenger, *Communities of Practice*.
21. Latour, "We Have Never."
22. Tanner, "Theological Reflection," 228.
23. Ibid., 229.
24. Ibid., 229.
25. Ibid., 231. See also Vähäkanga's article in this volume.
26. Tanner, "Theological Reflection," 232.
27. Ibid., 234.
28. Ibid., 239.
29. Schatzki, "Practice Theory."
30. Tanner, "Theological Reflection," 230.
31. Ibid., 239.
32. Tanner, "Theological Reflection."
33. Woodhead, "Five Concepts," 122.
34. Of course, as Woodhead points out, conceptions of religion are not always a result of deliberate choice, but of adjusting to conventions. Her article, however, discusses active and conscious deliberation of different and alternative conceptions.
35. Ibid., 122.
36. Ibid., 138.
37. Ibid., 132.
38. Ibid., 133.
39. Ibid., 134.
40. Ammerman, "Lived Religion," 89.
41. Schatzki, *Timespace*.

42. See, for example, Hill, *A Sociology of Religion* and Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion*. Contributions more in line with the argument in this article are Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* and Saler, "Family Resemblance."
43. In this text, I do not discuss the relationship between religion and neighbouring concepts of *spirituality* and *theology*. Briefly, I understand religion as a mode of everyday practice, partly overlapping with spirituality. I understand theology as the academic study of certain aspects of religion, partly overlapping with, e.g., religious studies.
44. Saler, "Family Resemblance."
45. Barnes, Bloor and Henry, *Scientific Knowledge*.
46. The connotation is the use of faith in religious studies, for instance Smith, *Meaning and End*, and the use of meaning-making in psychology of religion, for instance Schnell and Keenan, "Meaning-making."
47. This point involves complex discussions of ontology, which cannot be addressed in any depth here. By "what may be," I indicate that a flat ontology opens up for a pluralistic, relational, and processual understanding of reality. A certain phenomenon cannot be reduced to empirical facts, but has to be understood in relation to other phenomena in time and space. For instance, in *Timespace*, Schatzski argues that a present phenomenon should be understood as being constituted by both its past and present. Phenomena are understood as both being and becoming, as processes in time and space. The understandings of a phenomenon transcend the brute facts and its empirical immanent nature. What "is" always implies "what may be."
48. Taylor, *Theological.*
49. Latour, "Thou Shalt Not Take" and *Reassembling the Social*.
50. Taylor, *Sources of the Self* and *Philosophical Arguments*.

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