Research Article

Kristin Graff-Kallevåg*

Distributed Normativity in Theology: On the Relevance of Empirical Research Approaches to Systematic Theology

Abstract: Empirical research methods have traditionally been absent from and are still foreigners to systematic theology. However, the turn toward practices in academic studies of religion and theology implies that empirical research methodologies cannot be deemed irrelevant to systematic theology. This article explores Hanna Reichel's theory of theology as design, focusing on the understanding of theology as practice and the potential implications regarding the relevance of empirical methods to systematic theology. Bringing Reichel's concept of theology as design into dialogue with Geir Afdal's concept of distributed normativity, this article makes the case that the question of the affordances of a theological interpretation is not only an imperative theological one but also an empirical one, calling for empirical research methods.

Keywords: distributed normativity, empirical methods, Hanna Reichel, design, affordances, Geir Afdal, systematic theology

1 Introduction

Despite increased interest in empirical research methods in systematic theology,[1] these methods are still on the edge of the discipline.[2] The overarching question posed in this article is as follows: What advantage do empirical research methods offer to systematic theology as an academic discipline?

Over the last decades, the so-called "practice turn" in theology has been increasingly recognized and commented on.[3] This turn, inspired by practice theories within different academic disciplines,[4] is characterized by an increased awareness of how ideas, beliefs, and knowledging are interconnected and embedded in distinct practices. One of the recent contributors to the understanding of theology as practice is Hanna Reichel. This article analyzes Reichel's position, especially as it is developed in the work

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1 For example, Robinson, "Theologie praktisch;" Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology*; and Leer-Salvesen, "Reconciliation."
2 For example, Vähäkangas, "Missing Theology," 53.
3 For example, the special issue named "Practice in Contemporary Theology and Religious Studies" in *Studia Theologica, 75:*1, 2021, and Johansen and Schmidt, *Practice, Practice Theory, and Theology*.
4 For this practice turn in contemporary thought, e.g., Knorr Cetina et al., *The Practice Turn*. The practice turn is present in various disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, pedagogics, and technology studies and relates to a longer tradition in Western thought of emphasizing practices and practical reasoning, represented by thinkers such as Aristoteles, Kant, American pragmatists, and neo-Aristotelian communitarians. For a presentation of characteristics of the practice turn, see also Reckwitz, "Theory of Social Practices." For an introduction of how the practice turn in practical theology relates to this practice turn in theory in other disciplines, Schmidt, "Practice, Practice Theory and Theology."

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* Corresponding author: Kristin Graff-Kallevåg, MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society, Oslo, 0302, Norway, e-mail: kristin.graff@mf.no

After Method,[5] and discusses it with regard to the relevance of empirical research methods to systematic theology. The first section of the article briefly describes the practice turn and presents Geir Afdal's distinction between strong and weak concepts of practice in theology, as well as his notion of "distributed normativity."[6] Against this theoretical backdrop, Reichel's concept of theology as design[7] is analyzed, with a particular focus on the understanding of the affordances of doctrine. In the discussion, insights from Afdal's and Reichel's understandings of theology as practice are discussed regarding their implications for the relevance of empirical research methods to systematic theology. By bringing Afdal's concepts of theology as practice and distributed normativity into a critical and constructive dialogue with Reichel's concepts of theology as design and the affordances of theology, this article makes the case that the question of the affordances of doctrine is a theological one and that answering it calls for empirical approaches that do not ignore the theologies present in people's everyday lives.

2 The Turn Toward Practices and the Everyday in Theology

In recent decades, there has been an increased interest in practices and in the everyday in studies of religion and theology. This interest has been inspired by and situated within a broader "practice turn" in contemporary thought in disciplines such as social science, philosophy, anthropology, pedagogics, and technology studies.[8] Studies of religion and theology[9] have also traditionally focused on practices. What is new about the contemporary turn is the way in which practice is understood and the implications these new understandings have for the study of religion and theology.

As one of the main contributors to practice theory, Theodore R. Schatzki, points out, different practice theorists approach the concept of practice from different theoretical perspectives. He concludes that "[g]iven this multiplicity of impulses, issues, and oppositions, it is not surprising that there is no unified practice approach."[10] There are, however, some commonalities, such as the idea that phenomena such as knowledge, language, and meaning do not exist prior to or disconnected from practices; rather, they are embedded in and aspects of distinct social practices.[11] In studies of religion, this new focus on practices has been followed and fueled by an increased scholarly focus on spirituality and religion as they occur in people's everyday lives outside of religious institutions, as well as the material dimension of religion.[12] A leading example of this turn is the study field known as lived religion, which exists within various scholarly disciplines, such as the sociology of religion and the history of religion.[13]

In academic theology as well, particularly practical theology,[14] there is an increased focus on theologizing in everyday life, religious practices, and the doing mode of theology.[15] In theology, the practice turn is complex and has various trajectories.[16] Common to these theologies is the claim that we must explore religious practices

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5 Reichel, *After Method.*

6 Afdal, "Two Concepts."

7 Reichel, *After Method.*

8 Note 4.

9 For example, in the disciplines of practical theology and church history and in political and liberation theology.

10 Schatzki, "Introduction," 11.

11 Ibid.

12 In studies about religion and spirituality, "spirituality" typically denotes the more individual and experiential mode, whereas "religion" typically denotes the more institutional, established, and organized one. In my use of these terms, I follow Meredith McGuire, who considers spirituality to be a dimension of religion and also considers them to be overlapping categories, as expressed in her definition of spirituality as "religion as lived." McGuire, *Lived Religion.*

13 This study field emerged with publications such as Orsi, *The Madonna*; Hall, *Lived Religion in America*; Ammerman, *Everyday Religion*; and McGuire, *Lived Religion.* For studies of lived religion outside the North American context, Rubin et al., "Lived Religion and Lived Citizenship;" and Woodhead, "Tactical and Strategic Religion."

14 For this development in practical theology, refer to Schmidt, "Practice, Practice Theory and Theology."

15 For example, Astley, *Ordinary Theology*; Müller, *Lived Theology*; Wigg-Stephensen, *Ethnogrpahic Theology.*

16 For a description of different trajectories, see Schmidt, "Practice and Theology," 13–6.

to understand religion and theology. Yet another common feature is a resistance to a dualist approach to theory and practice, viewing them, instead, as profoundly interconnected. Furthermore, the more conventional view on doctrine as existing prior to practice and (good) practice being something that should, ideally, follow from doctrine is increasingly being questioned. For example, theologian Jan-Olav Henriksen holds that doctrine and theology should be understood as "dependent on, and constituted by [their] relation to practices of orientation and transformation."[17] Thus, he represents what can be labeled a pragmatic approach to theology, viewing practices as existing prior to theological reflection. This article holds that this practice turn has consequences for thinking about the systematic theological method. Afdal's distinction between two ways of understanding the relationship between practice and theology and his concept of distributed normativity offers resources for use in such methodological reflections.

3 Afdal's Two Concepts of Theology as Practice

Working within the discipline of pedagogics but with interest in studies of religion and theology, Geir Afdal's approach to theology is strongly influenced by practice theory.[18] In practice theory, practices are understood as "nexus of doings and sayings"[19] and seen as the key to understanding the social. A social practice consists of several elements, such as the body, things, knowledge, and language. Interpretations and understandings of the world are seen as part of the knowledge element of practice, not as existing prior to practice.[20] Afdal's point is that this view of practices has consequences for the understanding of religion and theology. Religious practice consists of various elements, of which knowledge in the form of articulated faith beliefs is only one component.

Furthermore, religion happens in different places. Religion can be found not only in ecclesial and academic settings but also in everyday life and the meeting of various practices: "[...] 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."[21] From this, Afdal concludes that if theology wants to understand religion, it must become empirical.

In the article entitled "Two concepts of theology and practice," Afdal distinguishes between strong and weak understandings of practice in theology. The difference between these is measured with regard to how theoretically loaded the concept of practice is and the degree to which it is understood as important for the social.[22] A weak notion of practice sees practice as the doing mode of a phenomenon. An example Afdal mentions is the understanding of medical practice as bringing medical theory into practice. In theology, such an approach can be found in sayings about how theology must be more in touch with practice. He further emphasizes how a strong concept of practice, as found, for example, in the practice theories of Theodore R. Schatzki and Davide Nicolini, sees practices as the central unit for understanding the social. As humans, we participate in a nexus of practices, and language and theory should not be understood as existing separate from and prior to practices but, rather, as practices themselves. Furthermore, interpretations, such as medical interpretations of the body, are understood as part of distinct social practices, rather than as existing prior to practice.

Afdal claims practice is mainly understood in the weaker sense in academic theology. He exemplifies this by analyzing Kathryn Tanner's concept of practice, showing that although she emphasizes the importance of practice to theology, she nevertheless describes the practice as the empirical doing mode of religion and

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17 Henriksen, "Everyday Religion," 37. See also Henriksen, *Religion as Orientation and Transformation.*

18 In this article, I refer to his understanding of theology outlined in Afdal, "Two Concepts." In that article, he especially draws on practice theory as it is developed by thinkers such as Davide Nicolini, Theodore R. Schatzki, and Andreas Reckwitz.

19 Schatzki, *Social Practices*, 89.

20 Reckwitz, "Toward a Theory," 253.

21 Afdal, "Two Concepts," 22.

22 Ibid., 7.

academic theology. Thus, she sees theological interpretations as purer than and prior to practice.[23] He criticizes this understanding of theology and religion, as he sees all religions as social practices and, thus, part of the messy nexus of doings and sayings that must be analyzed.

This view on religion as a social practice has consequences for how Afdal views theological normativity:

> I would argue for understanding normativity as distributed. Normativities are made in a set of different practices, academic or not, ... 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 idealizing 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 analyzing the issues, differences, tensions, and solutions of everyday practices, it is not only left with guessing what are relevant issues to discuss, but it is also devoid of the normative resources made in everyday practices.[24]

Theological normativity can be found not only in academic theological accounts of doctrines but also in everyday religious practices. Normativity is distributed. Thus, Afdal argues that if academic theology does not relate to normativity in everyday practices, it risks ignoring the normative issues and interpretations found in social practices to which normative theological questions are relevant. Furthermore, academic theology thus risks ignoring the theological resources found in everyday practices. Also, based on this, he concludes that academic theology must become empirical.

4 Reichel's Theory About Theology as Design

Yet another proponent of emphasizing the doing mode of theology is theologian Hanna Reichel, who has developed a model for understanding theology as design. The article "Theology and Design,"[25] in which Reichel outlines some of the main points in the recent book *After Method*,[26] has the subtitle "Theology as conceptual design. What can theology – understood as practice – learn from design?" Thus, Reichel understands theology as a practice. Reichel distinguishes between theologies found in everyday practices and academic theology as follows:

> [...] a lot of cultural formations and political commitments contain implicit assumptions that are distinctly theological and might benefit from explicit forms of theological reflections. People are always already engaged in articulating these implicit theologies in words and deeds, in practices and habits .... Implicitly or explicitly, they wrestle with assumptions and experiences, with conflicting interpretations and ambiguous implications ..., and, sometimes, even through methodological disciplined scholarship.[27]

Thus, Reichel holds that theology may be found in everyday practices, as well as academic practices. Theology does not belong to an academic or ecclesial elite; rather, is done by all who seek a better understanding of faith and religion. In this "common theologianhood,"[28] Reichel includes all who reflect on these issues, regardless of any potential confession of faith. Thus, they share Afdal's concern that theological normativity also occurs in everyday practices and is not restricted to the academic discourse. Reichel concludes, "The professional theologian thus does not own theology. The professional theologian is merely the person who comes late to the conversation that is already going on."[29]

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23 Ibid., 15.

24 Ibid., 25.

25 Reichel, "Theology and Design."

26 Reichel, *After Method.*

27 Ibid., 3.

28 Ibid., 4.

29 Ibid.

Reichel may be seen as a representative of the practice turn, understanding theology as a practice, as something that is done. Design theory is then used to better understand this doing mode of theology:

> What if we took resonances between material design and the work of theology seriously? What would happen if we understood the doing of theology as a kind of design, of ideas and notions and language a design of conceptual objects, to better fit their theological purpose?[30]

Like the designs, Reichel pursues, theology never starts from nothing. Theology begins with some material (e.g., theological theory from the past) and designs new understandings to better suit some purpose. Central to Reichel's theory is the concept of affordances, originally coined in psychologist James Gibson's ecological studies. Reichel draws on this concept as it is used by Gibson and developed further by Don Norman in design theory and Eve Kosocsky Sedgwick in queer literary theory.[31] An affordance can be defined as "a relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used."[32] Just as environments and furniture have affordances, doctrines also have affordances or possibilities of use. For example, the affordance of a door is to open the door and enter a room. However, the door may be designed in a way that makes it too heavy for an older person to push it open. Then, there is a disaffordance on the part of the door for this person. Reichel's point is that a doctrine can also have dis-affordances.[33] For example, Reichel mentions how feminist and womanist theologies have shown how forensic atonement theories, which were designed to give comfort, can, instead, lead to more suffering for oppressed women. Thus, the intended affordance of providing comfort is not available to these women, and the doctrine has a "design flaw." Such a design flaw can be unintentional or intentional.

Reichel uses the concept of "misfit" to describe how a design may prove to misfit when it is designed without regard for those who have bodies or lives that are disabled by the design. Misfitting typically occurs when the designers assume that their designs will be used by a "standard" or "universal" person and do not consider the diversity of human beings sufficiently. This question of whether a theology fits or misfits has an epistemological dimension. It is when a theology does not fit and when it has dis-affordances that the way the doctrine works or does not work can be disclosed most easily.[34] Quoting Sara Ahmed, Reichel says, "Those who are not quite at home – in a body, a discipline, a world – have much to teach us about how things are built."[35]

Thus, in continuity with Afdal's approach, Reichel emphasizes the doing mode of a theory. However, Reichel differs from Afdal by strongly holding forth the critical dimension of studying theology as a practice. Whereas Afdal underlines the importance of exploring theological normativity in everyday practices, Reichel emphasizes the importance of exploring how doctrines work among those who are at the margins. Furthermore, Afdal argues for the importance of studying theologies (explicit and implicitly) as they can be found empirically in the everyday. Despite acknowledging how theology can be found in both academic and everyday practices (explicitly and implicitly), Reichel still emphasizes the significance of studying how some given theological doctrines work in different contexts. This comes to view not at least in Reichel's elaborations of the affordances of a doctrine.

Affordances, Reichel holds, are not secondary to the design. Instead, they are "what constitutes it."[36] The affordance, which the creators of the doctrine cannot always predict, is constitutive of the doctrine and must be analyzed to understand it properly. From this, Reichel concludes that theology as design has an ethical and justice-related dimension. Designs are never neutral; they always do something to someone. This understanding of theology as design and the concept of affordance shifts the ethical focus from intention to effects and the theological focus from meaning to affordance.[37] This means that academic theology must be in touch with the users of theology. Reichel argues as follows:

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30 Reichel, *After Method*, 2.

31 Ibid., 182–3.

32 Ibid., 183, referring to Norman, *The Design*, 11.

33 For example, Reichel, *After Method,* 191.

34 Ibid., 193–4.

35 Ibid., 198.

36 Ibid., 183.

37 Ibid., 183, 204.

> Conceptual design, as we practice in our theologies, demands close communication and iterative feedback loops of exploration and collaboration, trial and error, envisioning, correction, and development with the actual users of theology – or anyone who find themselves affected (or excluded) by the way theological structures are built.[38]

Thus, Reichel argues that to know what a design does and where it causes misfits and thereby redesign it in a better way, theology requires feedback from those a doctrine does something to. Reichel emphasizes the need for feedback from people at the margins – from "outsiders" and "misfits."

5 What Does Theology Do? Empirical Research Methods as a Resource for Systematic Theology

One of the critical insights following from practice theory is that theology does not exist prior to practice; instead, practices are "bearer[s] … of theological understanding."[39] In this view, theological understandings are always embedded in different social (everyday, academic, or ecclesial) practices. Furthermore, theology can itself be understood as a social practice. Here, I distinguish between theological understandings or interpretations, which are part of social practices, and theology as an activity that is itself a practice. In the following, I will mainly discuss the significance of studying theology as embedded in various practices. Afdal and Reichel provide resources for understanding theology as practice given both of these meanings. In the following, I will use some of the insights derived from their conceptualizations of theology to approach the question of the relevance of empirical research methods to systematic theology.

Systematic theology typically analyzes and discusses normative theological, philosophical, or ethical claims in written academic texts. Increasingly, in this discipline, there are examples of approaches to studying the theologies embedded in practices. In his program for dogmatics as contemporary theology, Niels Henrik Gregersen holds that the task of theology is twofold:[40] to describe contemporary articulations of faith beliefs and theology (descriptive task) and to contribute suggestions for new and better understandings (normative task). The first task, he argues, involves the exploration of theology as articulated in academic texts and expressions of faith in various Christian practices.[41] This article suggests that the descriptive and normative tasks at hand may benefit from empirical explorations of theological understandings in both academic and non-academic practices in explicitly religious contexts, as well as in other contexts.

As the contemporary turn toward the ordinary and non-academic theology has shown, theology, as a study object, may be found not only in academic and ecclesial texts but also in a variety of places, such as the reflections of ordinary churchgoers,[42] human everyday life outside religious institutions,[43] and the boundary between religious institutions and other areas of society.[44] Thus, one can find what Afdal labels "distributed normativity" regarding theological claims. This distributed normativity, which Reichel also emphasizes when writing about "common theologianhood," constitutes a challenge and opportunity to academic theology: not acknowledging this distributed normativity means being ignorant of theological resources outside the academic discourse, whereas the theological normativity of everyday practices may be a resource for academic theology. Thus, empirical studies of theology as it occurs in various settings are relevant to the task of systematic theology.

Studying theology empirically means acknowledging that normative theologies are inherent in everyday life practices – although these may sometimes also be in tension with the normativities of academic systematic

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38 Ibid., 250–1.
39 Bennett et al., "Invitation to Research," 64.
40 Gregersen, "Dogmatik som samtidsteologi."
41 The former he calls Theology 1, and the second he calls Theology 2.
42 E.g., Astley, *Ordinary Theology*; and Christie, *Ordinary Christology.*
43 E.g., Johannessen-Henry, "Polydox Eschatology."
44 E.g., Graff-Kallevåg and Stålsett, "Vulnerability."

theology. However, such tensions and disturbances may be seen as a resource for academic discourse. In a study of learning mechanisms at boundaries, Sanne Akerman and Arthur Bakker argue that learning processes at the boundary between two social worlds are most constructive when there is not only harmonious coordination between them but where there is also tension and disturbance.[45] In a study about theological meaning-making at the boundary between church and sports, which I conducted together with my colleague Sturla Stålsett, we argue that constructive theological reflection happens precisely where the tensions between interpretations in these two areas of society are made explicit and brought into a critical and constructive discussion.[46]

Thus, taking the theological normativities inherent in everyday practices seriously does not exclude academic theological interpretations as normative resources for systematic theology. One may, rather, see them as different theological repertoires that may be brought into dialogue (and that sometimes also overlap). How can such a meeting between these normativities take place? I here find that a three-step model developed by Afdal initially with regard to ethics[47] and modified in the following with regard to the research context of systematic theology is useful in conducting empirical systematic theology.

The first step in this suggested model of empirical theology is *articulation*, which is the explication of theologies found in different practices through analyzing empirical data material. The second step is *disturbance*, which is articulating tensions within the empirical theologies in the data material and/or by utilizing theoretical perspectives, which could be perspectives from academic theology or other disciplines, in dialogue with the material. The third step is *expansion*, which is the constructive process of re-articulating or constructing new understandings. This third step does not necessarily imply confessional and prescriptive normativity. It can also be a non-confessional, methodologically agnostic, and non-prescriptive construction of better understandings of the theologies represented in the empirical data material. Thus, the three-step model can be applied in both confessional and non-confessional and in prescriptive and non-prescriptive systematic-theological approaches.

Whereas the concept of distributed normativity helps us see that theological claims can be found in both academic and everyday practices and must be studied empirically, the concept of affordance offers an analytical tool with which to explore critically what some given theological interpretations in various contexts *do*. If affordances are constitutive of academic and non-academic theologies, we need knowledge about the affordances to provide better understandings of these theologies. Thus, the question of the affordances of a doctrine is an imperative theological question. This task has an ethical dimension, as it involves discussing who benefits from and who is violated by various theologies. Related to this insight into the relevance of exploring affordances, Reichel writes about the need for "feedback-loops." Perhaps because of their insistence on arguing for a different view of method rather than a different method,[48] Reichel does not outline what such a feedback loop might look like.

Thus, in continuity with Afdal, Reichel argues that theology happens not only in academic practices but also in everyday life. Reichel speaks of "the common theologianhood"[49] and argues in favor of collaborative and "distributed theology."[50] I argue that this acknowledgment of distributed normativity implies the adequacy of empirical research methods for systematic theology. Empirical research on theologizing in everyday life can provide resources for use in operationalizing feedback loops, which can offer systematic theology information about the affordances of doctrine. Thus, I suggest that the question of the affordances of a doctrine is not only an imperative theological question but also an empirical question, requiring empirical research

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45 Akkerman and Bakker, "Boundary Crossing."

46 Graff-Kallevåg and Stålsett, "Meaning Making Mechanisms."

47 Afdal, "From Empirical to Impure Theology." Here, the model is modified with regard to the research discipline systematic theology, but it follows the main outline established in Afdal's model. For example, the three labels "articulation," "disturbance," and "expansion," and their main content are borrowed from his model.

48 Reichel, *After Method*, 247.

49 Reichel, Ibid., 4.

50 Reichel, Ibid.; Reichel, "Conceptual Design;" and Benedict et al. "Citizen Science."

methods. Furthermore, the three-step model outlined above may be used to achieve this aim while empirically exploring the affordances of a doctrine.

It follows from the argument made in this article that empirical research methods are becoming relevant to the discipline of systematic theology. This does not mean that all academic theology must become empirical. It simply means that empirical methods should be moved from the periphery to the center of systematic theology, together with the more traditional hermeneutical and text-based methods. It also does not mean that traditional criteria, such as coherence or consistency, are made irrelevant.[51] Such criteria can very well be part of the analytical, critical, and constructive components of the three-step model of empirical systematic theology. This article argues for an extension of methods, not an exchange of methods, in which empirical research methods are given more emphasis within the research discipline.

I began this article by pointing to the scant presence of empirical research methods in systematic theology. Building on insights derived from Afdal and Reichel's theories of theology as practice, I have argued that the new turn toward understanding theology as a practice calls for empirical research methods in systematic theology as well. Theology does not happen only in academic and ecclesial contexts but also in everyday life and various cultural settings, both religious and non-religious. Furthermore, theological concepts and theories have affordances that can also be found in everyday life and various cultural settings. To seek better understandings of these theologies and their affordances and to discuss them critically and constructively, systematic theology may benefit from empirical research methods.

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51 For this point, see also Reichel, *After Method*, 218.

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