Practices Research Program

Title: Practices of Faith in Socio-cultural Networks
Program supervisor: Prof. dr Marcel Barnard

General description

In the Practices of Faith in Socio-Cultural Networks program researchers from practical-theological disciplines and from the social sciences are working together. In a multi-disciplinary approach practices of faith are the subject of empirical-theological investigation in their cultural and social contexts. The focus is on new, usually complex and fragmented developments in practices of faith.

The fading church boundaries and the mixture of traditional faith and new spirituality on the one hand, and a renewed emphasis on strict protestant practices of faith in varying degrees on the other, position practices of faith both within and outside the church in the narrow sense. This simultaneous movement of fluidization and solidification of practices of faith is seen as characteristic of a network society. The research domain of Practices therefore includes practices of faith both within and outside the traditional churches and practices of faith.

The research profile is empirical-theological: the empirical reality of the lived religion is investigated by means of instruments and concepts determined by a definitely protestant-theological stance as well as by social sciences, science of religion or the humanities. The program distinguishes itself by its theological accentuation, often from a Protestant perspective. In the tension between the social sciences, science of religion, the humanities and theological orientations, the theological angle prevails: each time the question concerning God is posed. Even so, cooperation is on a multi-disciplinary basis.

Questions at the core of the research program are developed on the basis of developments in the practical-theological discipline and developments and questions in the research domain. This warrants valorization of generated knowledge in the program. Research is more and more carried out in alliances with national and international partners.

Unpacking concepts

Some notions used in the section above require clarification. Conceptual frameworks and registers contribute to an understanding of specific Practices of Faith within a specific context. The choice of concepts in the program serves to obtain an insight into a Christian practice of significance that is woven into a multi-colored and extensive tapestry of other significant practices.

Practices of Faith in late modernity have come to form part of a network, and therefore the broad notion of Faith has been opted for in the program as closer indication of the practices under investigation. Empirically perceivable Practices of Faith force us to give up the oppositions between what is expressed in Dutch with three notions: sense of purpose, religion, and belief, but what is understood in English in the encompassing notion of Faith.

Socio-cultural networks is used as an orienting notion. Network theories characterize the network society in dual concepts, such as fluid-solid, connected-rooted, centralization-decentralization, unity-fragmentation, socialization-individualization. Human relations and the formation of social, religious and spiritual capital get shape in new ways in these dual structures; in this regard bonding, bridging and linking capital are key concepts linked up with the network concept. It is understood that the material basis under the network society is the multimedia information technology, of which the internet is the icon. Thus, the notion of a network culture sheds light on the complex dynamics that Practices of Faith display in this context.

Empirical refers to the starting point of the research with Practices of Faith in their realistic appearance, that is, as they are embodied, minded and performed. The program focusses on lived faith. Research starts with observation of practices, and from this will result in an analysis and evaluation of those observations, and will frequently lead to recommendations for the improvement or change of Practices of Faith as well. From this approach a multitude of methods reveals itself, depending on the research field and research question: ethnographical, analytical, hermeneutical, fundamental-theoretical, action-theoretical, as well as literary, sociological, educational, cultural-anthropological and psychological approaches co-exist in the program. Qualitative and quantitative approaches are both being used, but the emphasis is on qualitative research.

Theology in a general religious sense refers to the question concerning God, in a more specific sense to the triune God of the Christian faith. It is supposed that Faith Practices are theology-loaded. Participants' institutional and traditional perspectives on religion and theology in the investigated practices are to be distinguished, although they often interfere. Researchers also introduce particular theological views normatively into the research.

Protestant refers in the first place to the name of the university and its mission to train ministers for the Protestant Church in the Netherlands: the program clearly shows an ecclesial commitment. With regard to the research the adjective 'protestant' means that Practices of Faith are not held to equate God. The program upholds God as non-coalescent with the investigated practices; they are by consequence considered gratuitous practices, which conflicts with the principle of absoluteness. They can freely be investigated, without being burdened a priori by unconditional ecclesial claims.

Valorization is the contribution of the research to the further development of (protestant) religious practice. Renewal of the theory from a developing practice on the one hand and renewal of practice from a developed or essentially calibrated conceptual framework on the other, are constantly adapted thematically. Researchers are involved in work for societal, educational, cultural and church institutions and thus extend their field in which knowledge is disseminated and acquired.

Positioning and embedding of the program

The program unites researchers from what is called Practical Theology and Social(-religious) Sciences. The program, however, is determined by the notion of Practices of Faith in Socio-Cultural Networks and not primarily by the traditional sub-disciplines of Practical Theology. Even so, the sub-disciplines and their development will always be maintained to a certain extent

and they will be accommodated in the program. In national and international contexts work is often carried out at the level of the sub-disciplines in networks of, for instance, Societas Homiletica, Societas Liturgica, Religious Education Association, Ecclesiological Investigations Network (AAR), International Academy for the Study of Youth Ministry, etc., in Journals, Departments etc. As these contexts are meeting places for experts that contribute to the improvement of their research capacities, the program facilitates the participating in these networks and organizations. Moreover, disciplines that are included in Practical Theology in the protestant tradition, may be classified differently in the roman catholic or orthodox traditions. Nevertheless, the contribution of the program to the development of the discipline of Practical Theology moves on an inter-sub-disciplinary level. Cooperation with other academic disciplines, if applicable, is stimulated; the program meanwhile has realized or is realizing projects with the literary and art disciplines, as well as with clinical psychology, educational studies etc.

Cooperation on a national and international level is stimulated and realized, on a structural and long-term as well as on a project basis

The embedding of the program stimulates the meeting of peers and as a consequence the quality improvement of the participating researchers. The continuing education of individual members is stimulated by the program supervisor. Scholars in the program are supposed to be members of the Netherlands school for Advanced studies in Theology and Religion (NOSTER); the training of junior members of the program is hosted by the Graduate School of the PThU.

Research areas and foci of the program

The program has opted for a division into two research foci, which correspond to the two chairs of Practical Theology in the university. The choice for this division takes the traditional practical-theological sub-disciplines into account, but the division has only to a very limited extent been based on the classical partition lines between these sub-disciplines.

The one focus is Worship and Formation, that studies the liturgical-ritual, homiletical-discursive as well as catechetical-educational perspectives on Practices of Faith. Research lines and projects are developed that concentrate on 1. Liturgical-ritual and art practices in the arenas of worship in Europe and Africa , 2. Discursive acts, especially the sermon and religious speeches, in Christian and religious practices, 3. Religious socialization in mono-religious contexts and its pedagogical consequences in the present network culture. In the OJKC (Onderzoekscentrum Jeugd, Kerk en Cultuur – Research Centre for Youth, Church and Culture) research of the faith and faith development of children and adolescents over the three research lines is bundled; knowledge transfer is an important aim of the center.

The other focus is Community and Care; it concentrates on processes of group formation, network formation and community formation, both within and outside established institutions, as well as individuals in these groups, networks and communities. Research lines and projects are developed that concentrate on 1. The understanding of the embedding of faith communities in society in terms of social capital and social cohesion, 2. The faith community and the individual in different phases and different moments of their existence casu quo life, 3. The perception and reception of the diaconate, pastoral and spiritual care, counseling etc. In the Centre for Congregational Studies research in the arena of Congregational Studies is bundled; knowledge transfer is an important aim of the center.