

Sola Experientia Facit Theologum? The Role of Empirical Study in Systematic Theology¹

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Abstract

Empirische Forschung spielt in verschiedenen Theologieverständnissen eine unterschiedliche Rolle. Dieser Beitrag entwickelt vier solcher idealtypischer Verständnisse und zeigt ihre Chancen und Begrenzungen. Dabei dient als Kriterium das jeweilige Weltverständnis sowie die Grundentscheidung, ob Theologie letztlich statischer oder dynamischer Natur ist.

In one of his *Table Talks*, Martin Luther ends his mixed German-Latin speech with the well-known statement *sola experientia facit theologum* – “experience alone makes a theologian”.² In spite of the important yet often unconscious role it plays in hermeneutics, experience is commonly still not given much attention in the classical theological canon except in practical theology – presumably because it is not easily located in a single systematic theological *topos* and does not seem to contribute to biblical studies or church historiography in a way that can be made useful for theology in a methodologically responsible way.

This article cannot go into depth as far as the whole discussion about experience is concerned. May it suffice to state that the meanings of the term “experience” vary depending on the context in which it is used.³ In other words, when “experience” is used in theological discourse, we often do not operate with a clearly defined concept. This, however, does not mean that we should stop referring to experience. Theology cannot but relate to reality and to the way real people live, feel, and think. Yet rather than assuming that the experiential, empirical dimension of faith somehow accompanies theologizing automatically, the question must be raised how to use experience in constructing theology – more precisely, in systematic theology.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference “Finding the ‘World’ in Theology: Empirical Dimensions in the Study of Faith” at Friedensau Adventist University, March 30, 2007.

² WA TR 1,16,13. The text here says *sola autem experientia facit theologum*, but several other handwritten versions of Luther’s students’ notes leave out the *autem*; see *ibid.*

³ One can distinguish at least six different meanings of experience, which partly overlap but also differ markedly: (1) a one-time observation; noticing something, (2) the result of such observations; wisdom, (3) a method of inquiry; empirical study, (4) a contrast to rational reflection; a different mental activity in the psyche, (5) a contrast to theory; application (this is where *sola experientia facit theologum* gets its proper meaning), and (6) the total of observations as undergone by humans as in (1).

One reason why this is both a *desideratum* and a mandate at present is the wide-ranging empirical research that has been done by practical theologians in the past generation. The journal *Empirical Theology* and the numerous monographs in the field⁴ demonstrate that many insights can be gained from a study of persuasions and religious practices as they are lived and held by people in a large number of cultures and countries – i.e., their religious experience and their theological content. It is all the more surprising to see that systematic theologians have hardly taken notice of these developments in the field of practical theology.

This paper wants to suggest how findings of empirical theology can be used in a systematic theology that remains authentic by staying in the tradition of the discipline yet is enriched through cross-fertilization with this subdiscipline of practical theology. The major assumption of this article is, therefore, that the empirical dimension of faith must be taken into account in systematic theology as well. After all, the personal experience background of theologians always plays a role in their reflection and writing, whether they acknowledge this or not.

Four different approaches to systematic theology will be discussed; these approaches suggest different ways in which theology can deal with the world and with its empirical study. This means that the experiential aspect is always viewed as an intrinsic part of theology, even if it plays different roles in these four approaches. In all four types of theology, the question will then be asked what function empirical research has in them. As all categorizations, the typology that is suggested here is obviously a simplification, but it is presented with the hope that it can help in clarifying the theological task, the brokerage between the gospel and the scriptures on the one side and between the church and the world on the other.

1. Theology as Adaptation: The Contextual Model

The reason why the Contextual Model is discussed first is that it is characterised by the idea that God-talk and the real world must always be closely connected. In other words, it emphasizes the premise that this article starts from – that all theology is contextual. Contextual theology, in spite of decades of development in different established variants, is still at times misrepresented; it is not to be understood as some game which is played because otherwise theologians would not have to say anything new, or as a pursuit of people somewhere in the periphery of Christianity, who have a hard time with “real” theology. Conversely, all theology is contextual. Or, as Gonzalo Arroyo, a theologian from Chile, once said to a group of North Americans, “Tell me, why is it that when you speak of *our* theo-

⁴ Cf. for instance the series “Empirical Studies in Theology” (Brill 1998 ff.) and “Empirische Theologie/Empirical Theology” (Lit Verlag 1999 ff.). For general reflections on empirical theology, see van der Ven 1990, Ammermann 1997, and Dinter, Heimbrock and Söderblom 2007.

logy you call it ‘Latin American Theology’ but when you speak of *your* theology you call it ‘theology’?” (Brown 1990, xix)

Having emphasized the contextual nature of all theology, the first part of the heading needs to be justified. When theology is characterized by a process of “adaptation”,⁵ what exactly happens? And is the choice of this loaded term still justifiable, when the older expressions “accommodation” and “adaptation” have long given way to “contextualization” and “inculturation”? The term “adaptation” has been chosen purposely, because what happens ideally in this model is the adaptation of the New Testament teaching to a particular cultural or social context. In other words, these are *humble* theologies – they do not pretend to be speaking for the whole world. At the same time, contextual theologies are *bold* in that they emphasize the necessity to make clear statements for a particular group of people, statements that only they may be able to understand because of their experiences, their social origin, or their cultural inheritance.

Therefore, in this type of theology, the world seems to be a decisive ingredient. Apart from the question of whether the world might become overwhelming in this kind of theology, it should be acknowledged that after centuries of Eurocentric theological discourse, it is a liberating blessing that contextual theologies have questioned old monopolies in the last two generations. Moreover, the plural “theologies” is of great importance. Contextual theologies are *realistic* in that they acknowledge their special relationship to particular parts of the world. Like Paul’s missionary principle, to “became as a Jew to the Jews” and “all things to all men” (1 Cor 9:20–22), they relate to a very concrete “world”. Thus, ideally, such theological reflections stem from the whole people of God in a given area – a dynamic that bishop and theologian Patrick Kalilombe calls *Doing Theology at the Grass-roots* (Kalilombe 1999). “World”, therefore, is “real people”, the way they think about God and the way this thinking informs the theologian.

At this point, a *caveat* is necessary. This article cannot do justice to the diversity of existing contextual theologies and does not attempt to classify, evaluate, or discuss them. Others have done this (see, e. g., Bevans 1992). The major point here is to ask: how does “the world” function in contextual theologies, and what does this mean for the role of empirical study in this type of theology? Certainly there are variations, but for the sake of typology, it is necessary to deal with something like an ideal contextual theology in some imagined country or society. This is not too difficult because every theologian is a contextual theologian for his respective environment. Such a theologian knows many cultural traditions, experiences the needs of the society that she or he belongs to, interacts with church members and non-Christians, and knows their religious concepts, questions, and shortcomings.

⁵ Schreier uses the same term in his seminal book *Constructing Local Theologies* (1985, 9–12). He also distinguishes contextual and adaptation models – contextual models of theology directly arise from the needs and concerns of a given society. This distinction is not made here. See *ibid.*, 12–16.

Theology, then, will naturally grow out of these observations, out of life – as good pastoral praxis does. One almost cannot avoid it.

Yet how does a theologian know that *his* or *her* particular understanding of the little world he inhabits appropriately reflects reality? Every “world” is divided into subgroups, parties, factions, which fight over interpretations of reality. Apart from the question of how to communicate the gospel in this context, how can one be sure that one’s particular analysis of the world is adequate?

Contextual theologians do a lot of intuitive theologizing, and probably this is very much what is needed in the Christian ministry. Theologians are often more artists than scientists; they resemble prophets more than technicians. Still, intuitive theologizing means that empirical methods are not taken very seriously. This is an irony of contextual theologies: their architects do aim at taking seriously the context for which they are built, but while attempting to relate to a certain culture, social class, or society, such theologies may ultimately be derived much more from a theologian’s genius than from the actual way people think and respective cultures or societies works. In other words, *because* contextual theology carries the word “contextual”, the context may not be properly analysed – because the theologian assumes he already knows what the context is, and he believes his major task to be the formulation of Christian theology into this context.

One example from Central Africa illustrates this: an empirical inquiry on African christology among 417 persons in the 1990s (Ross 1998). It shows that among Malawian adherents of different denominations alike, contextual christological metaphors with reference to traditional cultures such as “chief”, “elder brother”, and “ancestor” range very low in the people’s answers. On the contrary, biblical terms such as “saviour”, “Messiah”, “Lord”, and “God” are the most prominent answers, with “healer” and “conqueror” following. On the functional level, Jesus Christ is regarded as the one who gives eternal life, forgives sins, defeats the devil and evil forces, takes away the fear of death, helps to resist immorality, and protects against spirits and witchcraft. Here it is not the themes which are strong in contextual theologies – Christian concepts derived from ancient cultural leadership roles or relating to traditional religious terms – which are most important to people but religious themes which relate to their individual struggles and basic biblical teaching.

This, of course, is not to say that contextual theological constructions are necessarily irrelevant to the common people. Still, it is surprising to see how often contextual theology is hardly connected to empirical research – perhaps with the exception of anthropological research. The types of methodology that have been used in practical theology for several decades now have been utilized in such theologizing only to a very limited degree.⁶ Especially quantitative empirical studies

⁶ Even Schreier does not contain a reference to such methods, only to functionalist and semiotic cultural analysis (1985, 39–74 = chapter 3, “The Study of Culture”).

are few, and even qualitative research is not yet common to be seen. Kalilombe's challenge to professional theologians to do theology at the grassroots, together with the people, is still there.

2. Theology as Polemics: The Apologetic Model

The enthusiasm for contextuality is not shared by all scholars. The second approach to theology, the apologetic model, represents the opposite of the first – although, as so often in antagonistic perspectives, the two share some common presuppositions: they both imply a tendency of viewing the world (or, rather, their particular worlds) as static.⁷ However, while the contextual model values its construction of context, apologetic theologizing is done vis-à-vis a world that is construed as dangerous or inimical.

This model is *right* in emphasizing that theology is not merely a disinterested and peaceful process of construction. Quite to the contrary, theology also seeks to unmask evil and help destroy it. Theology as polemics is intellectual warfare in a world filled with sin. The apologetic model implies contending “for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3). After all, it is part of the Christian experience that the gospel, even if it is presented in most appropriate ways, is often rejected, ridiculed or treated with indifference. Theology as polemics therefore stresses that there are aspects of culture from which hardly any theology can be derived.

Most theologies are apologetic in one way or another. Naturally, one cannot stand for something and not defend it against competing views. At least indirectly, representatives of every position criticize somebody else's viewpoint. Thus, the apologetic model is *honest* in that it acknowledges the reality of disagreements. Clearly most academic theologizing is at least partly polemic in that it does not simply honour the context but radically questions it. Even the age-old marriage of theology and philosophy, albeit with varying brands of philosophy, is nothing less than the attempt of fighting the world with the help of the world. Apparently the apologetic approach to theology is *unavoidable*.

A crucial implication of theology as polemics is that not all ways in which we interpret experience helps and counts in faith reasoning. In essence, apologetic theologies say, don't take your experience too seriously. An appropriate detachment from *experientia* and, therefore, even from *empeiria*, from findings with social science approaches is necessary, for theological interpretation transcends the human status quo.

⁷ It is not difficult to notice that these two positions resemble the first two models presented by Richard Niebuhr in his classic *Christ and Culture* (1951), “The Christ of Culture” and “Christ against Culture.” Niebuhr's fifth model, “Christ the Transformer of Culture,” corresponds to a type of theology presented here as well: the third.

One example may illustrate this. Klaus-Peter Jörns of the Humboldt University of Berlin did a major survey regarding beliefs of ordinary people in 1992. An impressive research programme resulted in very interesting findings regarding the religious concepts and personal preferences of a little less than 2000 persons in Berlin and a few selected rural communities, as well as some high school students. Since this was a quantitative study, answer options were formulated by the researchers. The survey shows that there is a large variety of religious concepts among the different groups that were identified: Christians, atheists, and persons who are religious without defining themselves as Christians. What is surprising, however, is the connection that the author constructs between the empirical findings and theology, i.e., the theological bottom line of the whole undertaking: “If things believed and things taught are to be in agreement, the results [of the survey] do not speak for a renewed Bible-oriented reformation but for a revision of dogmatic traditions.” (Jörns 1997, back cover)

An apologetic model of theology would respond to such a reasoning that empirical findings can never dictate faith. *Empeiria* will certainly *inform* and possibly *mould* theologizing, but the rejection of a Biblical orientation in view of people’s beliefs is very curious indeed – especially in a Protestant context. In fact, Jörns’s argument seems to disregard the is-ought problem (i.e., Hume’s law, which states that things that *are* do not tell us how things *should be*). In other cultural contexts Christian views will likewise not be revised merely because a large part of the population views disease as a consequence of witchcraft or spells. Theology as polemics would correctly ask with what right one empirical reality such as assumptions of inhabitants of Central Europe should be preferred to another one. Clearly the apologetic model keeps theology from surrendering tenets of faith to changeable contextual realities.

At the same time, there are evident shortcomings in the apologetic model, even in relation to empirical methods. Pointing towards evil in society is no difficult undertaking. In a strictly apologetic-prophetic mode of theology, maintaining the world in a rejected condition is necessary; therefore, this dichotomistic attitude will find little good in humans even where it is there. Consequently, empirical methods would mainly serve to reinforce the construction of a thoroughly evil world. In a less pure form, however, theology as polemics reminds us that no point of contact for the gospel in culture is a guarantee for people’s acceptance of the gift of grace.

On the surface it would seem that theology as polemics has the least use for empirical methods. Yet in an ironic twist they may actually be used more than in contextual theologies, only that here other aspects of reality are highlighted. Empirical methods, if used at all, will probably serve mainly to describe what is considered the dark background of a bright if somewhat austere gospel.

3. Theology as Persuasion: The Conversionist Model

Theology as polemics raises a question that it does not answer: what if the world changes? With its view of the world as basically unchanging, the apologetic model resembles the first type, theology as adaptation. Both do theology vis-à-vis a culture viewed as rather static. Perhaps this is why empirical methods do not play a significant role in both of them; since the result of cultural analysis tends to be predetermined, there is no need to constantly repeat the exercise of investigating the world.

A third type of theology, theology as persuasion, approaches the world in a fundamentally different manner. Different from the “conservatives” or “liberals” of the second and first types, here are the idealists who believe that society *can* actually be changed because it *must* be changed. This type of theology may not be very elaborate at all, for what is deemed important are a few well-known major tenets of the Christian faith such as the apostolic creed or the basis of the Evangelical Alliance, perhaps with minor denominational additions and certain ethical emphases. Whereas the apologetic and contextual approaches represent invitations to argue even about fine points of faith, this way of thinking faith advocates basic theology and a strong impetus of transformation.

The sympathetic element in this way of dealing with the world is certainly its optimism. It is Niebuhr’s “Christ the Transformer of Culture” motto that applies here, a perspective that is found in Christian social reform movements as much as in the missionary movement of the 19th and 20th centuries. This is a *missionary* theology, a conversionist model, a mixture of tenets of both contextual and apologetic approaches with the addition of a dynamic view of empirical reality.

When asking what the role of empirical methods in this type of theology is, it may be surprising that it is generally not very significant. The typical theologies in this category – evangelical, mission-oriented theologies – often did not care very much about the actual context into which they spoke because the intended result was already known even before an encounter with the real world happened. Empirical studies of so-called “host cultures” were not really deemed necessary or merely means to achieve the end of changing these very cultures as efficiently as possible. Theology amounts to what has been called the “translation model” (Schreier 1985, 6–9) – the attempt to transfer a message as directly as possible from one context to another. This entails the danger of a simplistic understanding of culture, which assumes that meanings are rather easily converted into other languages and systems of meaning.

The conversionist model of theology may lead to several different results. One is the tremendous success of missionary outreach connected with it. In several regions of Eastern Africa, for instance, the denomination to which I belong, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, has become a folk church (cf. Höschele 2007). The conversionist impulse of the Adventist missionary undertaking was so successful that after a few generations the initial minority (“remnant”) identity was

complemented by a reality of being a majority religion. Yet with a little empirical research, one will note that such folk churches, while incorporating many into the Christian fold, also magnify problems inside itself; as the world is absorbed by the church on the basis of a conversionist theology, the church reflects the very structures of sin that it set out to fight. In some regions of East Africa, a large number of Adventists live in fear of witchcraft; in Rwanda, members of the denomination were apparently as much involved in the genocide as those of other religious groups. Power struggles between different ethnic groups continue to exist. In other words, as old problems disappear, new ones are coming up.

Theology cannot simply declare the task as accomplished, and it has to learn from empirical data. Moreover, as among secular, postmodern communities in Europe, there are communities in East Africa on whom conversionist types of Christianity and the theology produced among them has made almost zero impact – not only Muslim communities for obvious reasons, but also adherents of various traditional religions. Theology as persuasion evidently does not work everywhere.

4. Theology as Interaction: The Missional Model

Society is never “transformed enough”; the Christian mission and, along with it, theological reflection, will continue until the kingdom of God comes in its fullness. This is the reason for the existence of a fourth model of theology, a model that builds on the premise that both the empirical world and theology are dynamic. This model emphasizes interaction between the world and theology, but different from the contextual model, it does not primarily aim at making theology fit a particular context through adaptation. Rather, this theology forms a dynamic system of interaction with the world. As in any ongoing human communication, aspects of both adaptation and conflict are integrated.

To describe this model of theology, the term “missional” may be used (cf. Guder 1998). Different from “missionary”, this term has not been in the theological vocabulary for a long time and does not (at least not primarily) denote cross-cultural activity. Rather, it emphasizes that God’s people are a medium of God’s Mission wherever they live. In this view of theology, theology and mission are indissoluble. The missional model of theology, therefore, emphasizes that theology is always “on the way”; that talking about God into human contexts must remain provisional. As part of the *Missio Dei*, theology is more a procedure, a path to go than well-carved statements. According to this thinking, theology is in need of constant interaction with the world; experience, therefore, is an intrinsic dimension of theology.

Furthermore, interaction means more than trying to transform the world. Missiologist Charles Kraft makes a point in criticizing Niebuhr’s “Christ transforming culture” model arguing that finally it must lead to a transformed culture and, hence, to some variety of “The Christ of culture”. A missional theology would

want the church to *serve* the world but not dream of ruling it by attempting to change culture in the way we Christians want it to be, for God's kingdom is far greater than human attempts at constructing an ideal society. Kraft proposes instead the "God-Above-But-Through-Culture Position" (1979, 113–115). It entails that God can only be experienced *in* the world, and yet he is always greater than human experience. From this follows the position that only where the role of the empirical dimension of theology is given its proper attention can we properly do theology.

What role do empirical methods and inquiry play in this type of theology? Different from types two and three, where the world is viewed more negatively, here empirical data will be viewed as very important. With theology being interactive, a kind of conversation, teaching and preaching is only done while continuing to listen. In such a strongly communication-oriented process, *respect* will be a major dimension, even if friendly quarrelling with competing philosophies is not avoided. Missional theology calls for new research approaches, which include empirical study to a much larger degree than was previously done. In this view, not only theologians are viewed as the subjects of theology but all believers. To give one example of this approach, Tobias Faix, in his study on images of God among German youth (2007; cf. also Faix 2003), calls for an explicit use of Johannes van der Ven's empirical-theological cycle not only in practical theology but also in missiology.⁸

Missional theology will travel this route even further. Since theology is always concerned with the gospel, its interpretation in history *and* its communication in the present world, it will argue that empirical research is called for not only in practical theology and missiology but even in systematic theology. In addition to enriching theological reflection, such an approach would open up various fields of study and lead to fresh research programmes.⁹ Among the few major empirical studies done with a systematic theological interest, Wilhelm Richebächer's study (2003) on christological concepts among East African Christians of different ethnic backgrounds shows how grassroot theologies are related to traditional cultural concepts but, at the same time, develop dynamics of their own, which must be taken seriously when doing theology in such contexts.¹⁰

A further benefit of this type of research is that it reconnects systematic theology, practical theology, and missiology. A theology that asks what types of motifs help

⁸ Missiology has used anthropological methods for a long time, and therefore his suggestion is to add one more element to the inventory of approaches in this multi-approach discipline.

⁹ In their plea for critical empirical researching and thinking in theology as a whole, Hunze and Feeser 2000, 67–68, correctly emphasize this potential of empirical study to situate theology more firmly in the scientific discourse; after all, the open-endedness of research is a criterion for qualifying as a scientific discipline.

¹⁰ Carsten Gennerich's contribution to this issue of *Spes Christiana* is another illustration of how empirical study can inform systematic theology.

specific groups of people to understand God, how they imagine Christ as meaningful to them, or what metaphors of salvation are most helpful for people when they become followers of Jesus will be a theology that serves its true purpose – the communication of the gospel to humans in their particular situations.

On a more critical note, some missional approaches to theology are in the danger of overestimating the communication process as an ingredient of theology. By refusing to make any non-negotiable, “static” statement, extreme forms of “theology as interaction” may ultimately depart from the biblical basis of a clear confession of Christ. Being relevant and sharing the gospel does not mean discrediting everything that might appear as a “grand narrative”; a missional theology certainly fits a postmodern mood best, but versions that do not acknowledge the reality of conflict inherent in proclaiming the Christian message would contain the term “mission” in vain. Moreover, the direction suggested above also implies the possibility of taking empirical findings *too* seriously and over-complicating procedures of theologizing. At the same time, the potential of the missional model for Systematic Theology has not yet been tapped, and the prevailing tendency of the discipline is still to underestimate the importance of empirical study.

5. Conclusion

The categorization of approaches to theology and their respective uses of empirical research show that each type of theology has its strengths and weaknesses. These are related to the different perspectives of the task and nature of theology and of the world. Whereas the apologetic and the conversionist models view theology as rather fixed, as static, the contextual model and the missional model consider theology as dynamic. In assessing the world, the tendency of what has been called the apologetic and the contextual models is to view it as a fundamentally static entity, while the conversionist model and the missional model regard the world as dynamic, as having a propensity toward change. “Dynamic”, however, does not mean that there is no continuity. With regard to theology, “dynamic” means adaptability; at the same time, theology is still theology, i.e., there is stability in its basis in God and his self-revelation in Jesus Christ as found in the Bible.

World	Static	Dynamic
Theology		
Static	Type 2: Theology as Polemics: The Apologetic Model	Type 3: Theology as Persuasion: The Conversionist Model
Dynamic	Type 1: Theology as Adaptation: The Contextual Model	Type 4: Theology as Interaction: The Missional Model

The aim of presenting the typology was mainly to demonstrate how the experiential dimension of theology translates into different roles assigned to empirical research methods and findings in formulating the Christian faith. In type 1 (adaptation), the empirical dimension is used to help *adjust* faith to the world, in type 2 (polemics), empirical findings may be used in an attempt to *protect* faith from the world, in type 3 (persuasion), empirical data are used to help *change* the world, and type 4 (interaction) attempts to use empirical research to *relate* to the world. These are somewhat generalizing descriptions, but they can serve to describe tendencies inherent in basic orientations of the theological endeavour.

Another crucial question is to *what degree* empirical methods can be used in the different models. Probably missional theologies will utilize them most, with the slight tendency of over-emphasizing empirical findings. However, rather than partly or even largely ignoring the empirical dimension of theology as in the persuasion model or using mainly one side of its findings as in the adaptation and polemics models, in the best sense interaction would mean extensively using empirical findings by sifting them and experimenting with them, thus placing faith in a constant conversation with real people.

Being in conversation must not mean that those who communicate have no clear positions. To the contrary, it means being experienced in what defines oneself. In the very *Table Talk* where Luther's statement on *sola experientia* is found, he also compares the law professor and the theologian. He rightly stresses that since theologians have no practice like law practitioners have, they do need something comparable – they need an *experientia* of being well-versed in the entire Bible.

Still, Luther knew that this familiarity with the source of faith and life must be supplemented with an empirical element that makes the theologian's experience comprehensive. We find this insight in the last words he wrote:

No one can understand Vergil's *Bucolics* unless he has been a shepherd for five years. No one can understand Vergil's *Georgics* unless he has been a farmer for five years. ... Know that no one can have indulged in the Holy Scriptures sufficiently unless he has governed churches for a hundred years with the prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha, John the Baptist, Christ and the apostles. ... We are beggars; this is true. (WA 48, S. 421)

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