



Inaugural lecture

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**Are we there yet? Probing the notion of
contextualizing Practical Theology and
pastoral care in a post-COVID glocal
African context**

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MAHIKENG CAMPUS

Biography

Alfred Brunsdon (21.03.1966) obtained his PhD in Practical Theology (Narrative Pastoral Counselling) from the University of the Free State in 2007. During 2008 -2010 he continued research as post-doctoral fellow at the Faculty of Theology of the North-West University. After a short period as part-time lecturer at the Department of Theology in the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences on the Mahikeng campus, he was appointed as associate professor in 2012. Professor Brunsdon's research focus developed in the field of contextualizing Practical Theology and pastoral care in an African context. Subsequent publications focused on a re-imagination of Practical Theology and pastoral care in this context against the background of the enduring decolonization discourse in higher education. More than thirty publications consisting of articles and chapters in books addressed key themes relating to issues of contextualisation and current pastoral challenges including the dilemma of human displacement and the recent COVID-19 pandemic. He is editor/co-editor of two books and regularly presents papers at national and international conferences. Professor Brunsdon is currently a C2 NRF rated researcher. After the NWU's migration to a unitary model, he assumed a host of leadership roles within the Faculty of Theology including Subject Chair of Practical Theology and Sub-programme leader. Professor Brunsdon has chaired a variety of Faculty committees and is currently serving as Faculty Coordinator for Teaching and Learning.

Abstract

The lecture probes the state of contextualising Practical Theology and pastoral care in an African context against the background of persisting Western epistemologies and the decolonisation discourse.

A brief historical overview of Practical Theology and pastoral care in South African higher education articulates its European epistemological framework, rendering its appropriateness within the African context questionable. The author introduces the notion of contextualisation which refers to making Theology relevant in a particular context. This approach is chosen above approaches such as Africanisation and indigenisation, as it retains the normative function of Scripture instead of culture. It recognises some of the challenges created by a dialogue between Western and African notions of Practical Theology and pastoral care. It subsequently engages practical theological models aimed at inter-contextual dialogue such as a post-foundational model for doing Practical Theology. It underlines the need for conducting Practical Theology from an ethical stance which is intent on exploring knowledge outside of Western frameworks in search of a more appropriate Practical Theology that can stand in service of pastoral responses that is tilted towards the African context in a more authentic way.

While it argues that contextualisation will remain an ongoing process due to the fluid nature of the African context, it also points out that the dawn of the post-COVID era presented urgent agenda points, rendering the journey incomplete. Three areas for future Practical Theological and pastoral consideration are highlighted, namely the consequences of intensified socio-economic realities, implications of the disruption of traditional religious culture and post-COVID challenges to higher education. The lecture concludes that a “glocal” lens, which is mindful of both local and global needs, will be the best way forward for the contextualisation project, recognizing Africa as part of the global village.

Introduction

The theme that we will be addressing is:

Are we there yet? Probing the notion of contextualizing Practical Theology and pastoral care in a post-COVID glocal African context

This theme is located in the field of Practical Theology and pastoral care.

For the sake of our varied audience, Practical Theology is the field of Theology that busies itself with the communicative actions of faith communities in the world.

More specifically, it is interested in the theories that underlie how the Gospel is communicated, whether through preaching, catechesis, liturgy, pastoral care, or witness. It thus generates theory which steers how the Gospel is preached, taught, and mediated pastorally in the many spheres of religious life and the realm of human experience, or simply life.

It is generally regarded that the emergence of modern Practical Theology is owed to German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. According to Gerben Heitink (1999:19), he was 'the first modern theologian, who, recognizing the value of the Enlightenment, wanted to build a bridge to modern humanity by reflecting on the Christian faith on the basis of the *experience* of the subject'.

In his *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, Schleiermacher (1811, 1830, 2007)¹ presents a theological encyclopaedia in which Practical Theology is argued to belong to the 'cohesive whole' of Theology as a science (cf. Gräb 2005:182).

As younger sibling in the family of theological disciplines, Practical Theology endured a contested development on its way to becoming a recognised discipline, not least of all from Schleiermacher's own colleague Gotlieb Planck (Gräb 2005:181). Planck's main *critique* was that Practical Theology is *theologia applicata* (an application of the findings of other theological disciplines). As it also engages and interacts with the social sciences, Planck argues that it should be excluded from theology proper. Even Karl Barth suggests that Practical Theology is a science of 'how' rather than 'what' (Heyns & Pieterse 1990:7).

Schleiermacher however demonstrates that Practical Theology is *not* merely *theologia applicata*, but indeed a *generative* discipline. According to Louw (2017:2), Schleiermacher achieves this by shifting 'the paradigms of practical theology from the

¹ *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study* was originally published in German. The William's translation (2007) is used here.

hierarchical and clerical paradigm to the empirical dimension of human experience and religious experiences', making it a true "action science", or 'handlungswissenschaft' (Heitink 1999) that attempts to 'connect the Christian faith to the praxis and context of our modern or postmodern society' (Louw 2017:2).

On the back of the historical development of Practical Theology as academic discipline in Europe, it was introduced to South Africa via the curriculum of the Stellenbosch Theological Seminary in 1899 and thereafter via the curricula of other seminaries as they came into being. An important note is that of Pieterse (1998:156): 'The discipline was called "practical theology" according to the teaching of this subject in Germany and at the State University of Utrecht in the Netherlands.' The significance of this remark is the implication for the epistemological roots of Practical Theology in South Africa, namely that of Europe (and later North America).

Practical Theology has, since its beginnings in South Africa, also run its own course showing a unique development in terms of its epistemological points of departures, something which is of crucial importance in seeking a current understanding of the discipline. Historically Practical Theology mainly departed from three stances: the Scriptures, empirical work or a certain context, leading to either deductive, inductive or liberative results (Pieterse 1998:159-161). Of course, the epistemological debate became much more complex with the dawn of postmodernism and the rise of feminist theology in the eighties and nineties²— and it will continue to do so as Practical Theology is an action-, or life-orientated science, continually responding to the changing landscape of the faith experiences of humans in an everchanging world.

Tonight's lecture is also located in the field of pastoral care as one of the applications of Practical Theology. As alluded to before, Practical Theology is concerned with the communicative actions of faith communities, which, to a large extent occurs in pastoral settings.

Academically, pastoral care and counselling is the sub-field of Practical Theology on which I focus. My Ph.D. studies, at the University of the Free State (2007), was done in the field of narrative counselling and from there my work developed a discernible focus in the field of pastoral care. A field which I define as follows:

Pastoral care denotes a unique approach to helping, in that it involves both informal and specialised care towards the other based upon the love of God, aimed at building faith which empowers the fellow human being to conquer challenges and embrace a life abundant (cf. Jn 10:10) (Brunsdon 2017a:111).

² See Janse van Rensburg's (2000) discussion on the paradigm shift from modernity to postmodernity and its implications for theology.

For the purpose of this lecture, I am not going to elaborate on the theoretical meaning of pastoral care itself, as my lecture will not be focusing on a specific case in pastoral counselling, but rather reflect on how this field featured in my academic focus thus far. A focus which is currently centred on the notion of the contextualization of Practical Theology and pastoral care within an African context – and which mainly emerged from my teaching experiences on this campus.

For most researchers, the appointment as full-time academic denotes an important transition, namely, to merge the role of teacher into your identity as researcher. Although it may fall somewhat strange on the academic ear, there is quite a difference between ‘writing’ Practical Theology and pastoral care and teaching it, thereby sharing theory for practice. By sharing theory for practice, we are putting it in the hands of students who put it to the test in real contexts.

It was in the classroom (close to where we are tonight), where my own perceptions on our current South African context was challenged. Especially when I was introduced to the ministerial settings of students. And there the proverbial penny dropped: the realisation that while we may be teaching *sound* academic Practical Theology, it might not be *contextually* relevant. Put in simple terms: The theory presented did not fit the context(s) where students were going to apply this knowledge, because, as pointed out before, South African academic Practical Theology emanated from Europe and America that was - for the most part – *uncritically* applied in the South African context.

In this regard, I was reminded of the findings of Prof. Hennie Pieterse, who in 1990 *empirically* inquired into whether a unique South African Practical Theological discourse was discernible at the time. In analysing South African publications in the field, he found that nearly 90% of works quoted by South African practical theologians were from its European and American counterparts (Pieterse 1990:253). The significance of this finding two decades later, was that South African Practical Theology did not, after more than a century and on the verge of a new dispensation, have a unique South African or authentic African voice. Consequently, others such as Jan De Jongh van Arkel (1995), John S. Pobee (1998) and Gordon Dames (2014) were continually advocating for a more contextually appropriate Practical Theology and pastoral care.

For myself, these became important clues in the development of a personal focus. Hence my research interest started to develop in two broad directions: Firstly, to re-imagine academic Practical Theology in an African context, and secondly to develop a pastoral focus that was faithful to the context of the students I was teaching.

In a certain sense, the latter was a lesser challenge as identifying pastoral voids in the African context did not prove difficult. Issues such as ritual male circumcision (cf. Brunsdon 2016), complicated grief (cf. Brunsdon 2019a), palliative pastoral care (cf. Brunsdon 2019b), pastoral anthropology (cf. Brunsdon 2019c) and human

displacement (cf. Brunsdon 2020a, 2020b; Brunsdon & Magezi 2020) all begged further consideration in the African context and hence became themes which I subsequently engaged. And, many other issues *remain* on the agenda, such as enduring poverty, issues of health and gender-based violence.

The former, however, to re-imagine Practical Theology in an African context, posed more nuanced difficulties. Two of the main challenges related to finding a suitable paradigm to carry such a re-imagining forward and the fact that I was entering the discourse at the height of the decolonisation project as European (white male) academic.

Pertaining to the first, seeking a suitable paradigm to guide the re-imagining of Practical Theology in an African context, uncovered several possibilities. In a book chapter, entitled “Towards a pastoral care for Africa: Some practical theological considerations for a contextual approach” (2017a), I critically engaged several paradigms introduced by African scholars such as Yusufu Turaki, Emmanuel Larrey, Maaki Masango and Gordon Dames. This included indigenisation, Africanisation, an intercultural approach, post-colonisation, and a so-called, contextual transformative approach.

All of these paradigms evolved as constructive critiques of what Larrey (2013:25) calls ‘received theologies’ that were imposed upon the continent during the colonial era, hindering the development of an authentic African (practical) theology. However, upon a critical assessment of most of these paradigms, it seemed that many hold the inherent danger of ending up with either a reductionist or exclusive form of practical theology and pastoral care, where culture and cultural beliefs assumes a normative position, excluding non-adherents to the African culture.

In light of this, the notion of ‘contextualization’ as presented by Yusufu Turaki (1999) was to my mind a significant approach. ‘This approach is not, in the first place, concerned with culture or the eradication of some form of political-historical deficit, but with making *theology* itself relevant within a certain context’ (Brunsdon 2017a:115).

As such, the notion of ‘contextualization’ *transcends* paradigms like indigenisation and Africanisation, because it is interested in *theological relevance*. Hence, Turaki (1999:20) states, ‘[c]ontextualisation as a tool of doing theology in Africa focuses principally on making the essence of Christianity relevant and understood within context’. This way, both *revelation* (the Word of God) and *experience* (context) are deemed non-negotiable variables in the search for a more appropriate Practical Theology and pastoral care approach to Africa.

I, therefore, chose this paradigm to forward my academic focus as contextualization is about an *approach* to doing Practical Theology to arrive at relevant pastoral care

approaches. It is not *contextual* theology in the traditional sense of the word, but about *mindful theological* interaction *with* a particular context.

Of course, all paradigms have both merits and limits, least of which the academics who choose to work with them. In this area, a second, more personal, challenge arises.

At the same time that my academic focus settled on the contextualization of Practical Theology and pastoral care, the decolonisation campaign in higher education came to the fore via the ‘#must-fall movement’ that swept the higher education sector since 2015. At the heart of this movement was the deep-rooted frustration about the slow pace of transformation in higher education that literally lit up university campuses across the country, including this campus where we are gathered tonight (and, incidentally, this very venue in which we are seated at this moment).

While there was much academic contemplation about the meaning and reasons for this movement, Savo Heleta (2016:1) suggested that it arose to dismantle the enduring domination by ‘white, male, Western, capitalist, heterosexual, European worldviews in higher education.’

Understandably, this led me to a personal, academic reflection about my own role in academia at that time. Here was I, a middle-aged white male academic, emersed in Western paradigms, entering the theoretical discourse on Practical Theology and pastoral care in an African context. The personal subtext being: Do I have anything to contribute? Would all of my academic offerings not be tainted by my European identity to the point that it would simply not be credible in an African context?

Even though, this was a highly personal question, it resonated well with Thomas Groome’s³ notions about the dynamic interplay between subjectivity and knowledge and the need to recognise it when we produce academic work. Especially when we share it with others, albeit through publication or by means of teaching in whatever guise (Beaudoin, 2005:127). A process, more commonly known as reflexivity: the purposeful process through which we recognise, interrogate, and declare our bias in academic work. Because, as Tom Beaudoin (2005:130) states: ‘*how* and *what* we know is rooted in *who* and *where* we are.’

Feminist theologians, such as Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (2002:228), have also latched onto this notion to emphasise the intrinsic relationship between ontology and epistemology and how this shapes our research.

Consequently, I embarked on a journey of academic reflection where I interrogated my personal academic situatedness/positionality or *habitus* as a precursor to future

³ See: Groome, T. 1980. *Christian religious education*. San Francisco: Harper and Row; Groome, T., 1991, *Sharing faith: A comprehensive approach to religious education and pastoral ministry: The way of shared praxis*. New York: HarperCollins.

efforts at contextualization. During this time, I came across the work of other contemporaries, such as Jaco Dreyer (UNISA) (2016) and Tom Beaudoin (USA) (2016) who also reflected about the question of *habitus*. It was especially Dreyer's reflection which guided my thinking. Under the theme of 'Conundrums in Practical Theology'⁴ he argues that while reflexivity offers the vehicle to articulate our academic biases, reflexivity in itself is a conundrum. 'The conundrum of reflexivity lies in the lack of a basis on which to decide whether our reflexive efforts are biased or not, whether they are true or false' (Dreyer 2016:105). Thus, while reflexivity sensitises the scientist to their biases, it is not to say that it will rid them of it.

One way of mitigating this is to commit to an ethical framework for doing Practical Theology. In this respect, Dreyer (2016:105) proposes the idea of "attestation", which he borrows from Paul Ricoeur. Attestation refers to the *type* of certainty from which we scientifically depart. It is a 'hermeneutics of the self that does not exalt the subject nor humiliates it' (Dreyer 2016:105). It includes the 'other' without excluding the 'self'. It is thus 'the kind of certainty of a self that recognizes its limitations and fallibility, but that acts with conscience and integrity' (Dreyer 2016:106).

On the back of this notion of an ethical approach to academic work, I published an article in HTS Theological Studies in 2019, titled "“Selfishly backward” or “selflessly forward?”: A white male's insider perspective on a challenge and opportunity of decolonisation for practical theology in the South African context”.

For me, this was a benchmark publication in plotting the coordinates for future contributions to the contextualization project against the backdrop of the decolonisation discourse. On the one hand, it was, within Ricoeur's framework of attestation, an academic declaration of 'here I stand' (cf. Dreyer 2016:106). On the other hand, it was about finding an *ethical* framework for doing Practical Theology as white male in an African context and in the *zeitgeist* of decolonisation.

I chose for the framework of, what I termed 'selfless' Practical Theology versus a 'selfish' approach (Brunsdon 2019d:6). Whereas 'selfish' Practical Theology would entail a 'business as usual' approach, comfortably remaining within the parameters of a Western Practical Theology, 'selfless' Practical Theology is intent on *transcending* the individual, historic and academic situatedness with a view to contextual appropriateness. As I, through a process of reflexivity, recognised that my *habitus* is by default Western.

In determining a framework for my imagined 'selfless' approach, I found the thinking of Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos helpful. Santos labels historic

⁴ Dreyer, J.S., 2016, Knowledge, subjectivity, (De)coloniality, and the conundrum of reflexivity, in J.A. Mercer and B. Miller-McLemore (eds.), pp. 90-109, *Conundrums in Practical Theology*, Leiden: Brill.

Western knowledge as ‘abyssal thinking’ that created abyssal lines between itself and other forms of knowledge (Santos 2007).

In a post-colonial framework, and to my own understanding, ‘abyssal thinking’ is not about the *intentional* discreditation of another knowledge, but rather being *oblivious* to it. Historically, this developed into a situation where knowledge on the ‘other side’ of the line did not matter. ‘The division is such that the other side of the line vanishes as reality and becomes non-existent’ (Santos 2007:45).

This resonated well with my own experiences as Practical Theologian in South Africa. Even though I was not ‘against’ any other knowledge that emanated from outside of Western frameworks – or in no way attempted to discredit it – simply being oblivious to it – worked towards deepening the abyssal line between my (Western) knowledge and other knowledge.

Mindfully ascribing to a ‘selfless’ framework would then at least entail widening my knowledge horizons in the context of democracy and multicultural coexistence, not being oblivious of the ‘other’ but by recognising the need for ‘dynamic interactions’ between knowledge(s) – (plural). This, according to Santos (2007), resembles *post-abyssal* thinking – or seeing knowledge as an ecology.

The notion of knowledge as an ecology, rests on three conditions, each having important implications for how a ‘selfless’ Practical Theology will play out in practice:

- Practices and agents on both sides of the lines are regarded as contemporary in equal terms.
- The recognition of a plurality of knowledges beyond traditional (my insertion) scientific knowledge.
- The utopia of inter-knowledge is learning other knowledges without forgetting one’s own (Santos 2007:66–69).

However, for theologians, an inter-knowledge dialogue begs further deliberation as it brings to the fore the underlying issue of epistemology. The question it begs from Theology is from which wells do we drink to generate new knowledge? What, ultimately, determines our answers? For Practical Theologians in the Reformed tradition, like myself, this concern is regarded as paramount and charges you to position yourself by articulating *how* the Word of God is normative in teaching and research.

I think I can safely say that this question is one of the golden threads weaved into all of my academic work since my doctoral research ensued. I recall that focusing on narrative therapy from a Reformed perspective (Brunsdon 2007) two decades ago, automatically begged epistemological positioning. The post-modern climate change of the time posed vital questions about the use of Scripture, prayer, and the role of the

Holy Spirit in counselling – and ultimately where – or to Whom pastoral care led (cf. Brunsdon 2010).

This soon sensitised me to what I since referred to in my work as the *innate tension* of Practical Theology and pastoral care (cf. Brunsdon 2014) as both perpetually operate within the dynamic tension field created between *Revelation* and *experience* or as Zoë Bennet in 'Using the Bible in Practical Theology' (2013) says, between the 'text of the Bible' and 'the text of life'.

For this reason, I not only critically interrogated my own academic *habitus*, but also existing African notions of Practical Theology, in order to determine epistemological points of departure for inter-dialogue. Here, to mention one, the seminal work of Emmanuel Larney, especially his 2013 book 'Postcolonializing God: An African Practical Theology', was significant, as it painted a vivid picture of what he construed an authentic African Practical Theology imagined through the lens of decolonisation. One of the important aspects he reminded of is the interrelatedness of the African spiritual heritage and culture - and subsequent theologies. This heritage is carried by seven 'seminal characteristics' (Larney 2013:25):

- sacredness of all life
- plurality within the spiritual and divine realm
- mystical connectivity through communal ritual
- desire for cosmic harmony
- creativity and adaptability
- affirmation of life
- pragmatic spirituality

This honest portrayal of Larney's notion of African Practical Theology was helpful in many ways. For the sake of this lecture's argument, it however affirmed that African notions of Practical Theology is deeply immersed in culture – and more importantly in belief- and knowledge systems that is alien to Scriptures, as it also draws from the wells of ancestry, mysticism and syncretism in order to express itself in worship, teaching and pastoral care (cf. Brunsdon 2017b).

In terms of the contextualization ideal, this is not very encouraging, because epistemologically African and Western notions of Practical Theology then seemingly find themselves at different ends of the theological spectrum. Does this then mean that African and Western notions of Practical Theology find themselves outside of hearing range (cf. Brunsdon 2017b) – and that contextualization is an unattainable ideal or even a conundrum in itself?

My contention is that this is not the case, as several paradigms have evolved in Practical Theology that encourage such inter-epistemological dialogues. Without discussing them in any depth, two examples can be mentioned:

Probably most well-known to South African practical theologians is Julian Müller's (2011:2) notion of post-foundational Practical Theology (or transversal rationality) which is aimed at a 'responsible and workable interface between disciplines and contexts' (Müller 2011:3). Transversal rationality transcends mere conversation in order to facilitate authentic understanding of the other. Müller reminds that transversal rationality is about real concern about real people, hence it is local and embodied, rather than purely theoretical – therefore also willing to explore the other's traditions of interpretation. According to the late Wentzel van Huyssteen (2007:422), transversal dialogue is guided by so-called 'degrees of transversality', which safeguard inter-contextual dialogue against transgressing the own disciplines' or context's natural boundaries. This means that even a post-foundational approach will ultimately heed the boundaries of its own epistemology, while at the same time creating what Müller (2011:4) refers to as an 'ecotone' where interdisciplinary dialogue may take place to the benefit of all stakeholders.

Another example relates to Esther Acolatse's (2014) notion of a pastoral hermeneutic of primal speech. This approach is built on the interdisciplinary method of pastoral care of Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger (1995) that relies on the Christological insights of Barth and his exposition of the Chalcedonian pattern of theology. Central to this pattern is the relation between revelation and human history that found an analogy in the incarnation of Christ, being divine and human at the same time and where the divine preceded the human – in particular, the 'indestructible order' of the divine-human relation 'which again for Barth is giving priority to revelation over human history' (Acolatse 2014:10).

In Hunsinger's pastoral theology this gave rise to the 'bilingual' approach (Acolatse 2014:211), which means that pastoral theologians can engage other disciplines in their approach very much like a bilingual speaker who is able to switch between two languages without confusing the two. Acolatse (2014:214) also links this train of thought to the work of Lamin Sanneh and his notion of the translatability of the Gospel message. Sanneh (1989) emphasises that the Gospel message of Pentecost was translated across cultures without losing its Christian nature. Acolatse refers to this as the 'expansive nature of theology' that allows for hospitable encounters with other cultures.

These ideas are helpful for the practical theological inter-contextual dialogue as it creates space for what Acolatse (2014:206) also calls the *perichoretic* nature of cross-cultural and, in this case, inter-contextual dialogue:

Referring to the interrelatedness-through-distinction in trinitarian thought, it places conversation partners on the same level, allowing us to frequent the other's dwelling place as if it is our own. Yet, we are doing so from the stance of our primal voices, that is for me, expressive of the

Christian faith – a faith that respects the divinely authored order through which it is recognised that God permeates culture and that the hallmark of all forms of theology is its trinitarian breadth and Christological depth. This has implications for epistemology, the authority we attribute to cultural beliefs, the influence of ideology, and so forth – making *theology* itself the middle ground to which our dialogue aspires. (Brunsdon 2017b:7)

From this premise, contextualization becomes feasible and endows the practical theologian with the responsibility to look beyond his or her own discipline and culture in search of a true inter-contextual dialogue.

Coupled with the ethical framework of a ‘selfless’ Practical Theology, two important implications arise:

A ‘selfless’ Practical Theology creates the opportunity to *reframe* traditional perceptions of decolonisation. In the South African context, decolonisation historically got stuck in either a retributive or a romantic approach (cf. Brunsdon 2019d: 7). In a retributive approach it is about breaking down the past and getting rid of all that is associated with the past as we have seen repeatedly during the ‘#must-fall’ campaigns. In a romantic approach it is about restoring some romantic ideal of Africa, a continent of *ubuntu* and what could have been – was it not for Europe or globalisation. As we know, neither of these approaches have borne much fruit thus far.

A ‘selfless’ approach opens possibilities of what can be termed ‘restorative decolonisation’ – to *restore* what has been suppressed and ignored in the past and to communally reincarnate it to the benefit of a radically changed context. In such an approach knowledge is embraced as an ecology. Embracing practical theological knowledge as an ecology would imply reaching out to one another as contemporary partners, recognising African beliefs and practices as forms of knowledge that transcend mere scientific boundaries and respect the intersection between knowledge and ignorance, by not unlearning what I know, but learning from others what I am yet to know (cf. Brunsdon 2019d:7).

Flowing from this, is a second implication. ‘Selfless’ Practical Theology unavoidably speaks to Theological education, specifically *curriculum development* in the field of Practical Theology and Theology as a whole. Such curriculum development has to be critically sensitive about the many ways that Western epistemologies are resilient, and even, remain exclusive in education (cf. Nyamnjoh 2012). Rather, curriculum development from the stance of a ‘selfless’ Practical Theology should strive to reflect local knowledge to address current contextual realities within a global context.

To a large extent, then, a 'selfless' Practical Theology generates an own agenda in which restorative decolonisation and restorative curriculum development assumes a pivotal position.

With these few remarks, we can now attempt to answer the somewhat, anecdotally formulated question this lecture is posing: *Are we there yet? Can Practical Theology in South Africa claim that it is suitably contextualized within a post-Covid glocal African context?* More aptly formulated in the context of this inaugural lecture: *Am I there yet?* Is my academic Practical Theology suitably contextualized within a post-Covid glocal African context?

This question is, like you might have anticipated, a *rhetorical* one. Its rhetorical nature partially resides in the fact that the very nature of all contexts is fluid, complex and ever-changing, rendering contextualization, in principle, a journey without an end.

As I have discovered over the last decade, the so-called African context is arguably one of the best examples of the complex nature of contexts. However hard we try to tie Africa down to a particular definition; we remain challenged by the notion.

Focusing on the geographic space of what we call the African continent, we are challenged by at least the following variables. Ethnically, the continent is home to many different groups. Spiritually, it is home to as many variants of spirituality and religions. Culturally, it is utterly complex. Through the ever-growing dilemma of human displacement and so-called human flow, all of these variables become more eminent.

Therefore, academics have reverted to more flexible descriptors of the concept. Daniël Louw (2008), for example, suggests that the African context should rather be regarded as a philosophical concept. From this vantage point, the African context denotes the 'unique contribution of the rich diversity of modes of being in Africa to a global world' (Louw 2008:147).

Louw also suggests that the African context can be seen as a spiritual category, denoting 'a unique approach to life that differs from the analytical approach emanating from Western thinking and Hellenism' (Louw 2008:147).

In my own, more *pragmatic* view, an African context can also refer to any context that is democratically constituted by the Africans living there (Brunsdon 2017a:112), transcending the idea that only the African continent can represent the African context. In modern diaspora then, Africa contexts can be found in London in the United Kingdom, New York in the United States of America, or Johannesburg in South Africa.

This multi-dimensional nature of a context and, in particular, what we today perceive as the African context, renders a simple definition impossible, and consequently all attempts to arrive at a *static* Practical Theology and pastoral care for Africa, not

feasible. Hence, to answer the question posed here, we are not there yet, we remain underway.

This is however not to say that an African context is non-descript, that there are *no* communal characteristics and features that are *typically* African. Africa is, for example, characterised by enduring challenges like political instability, the search for identity, poverty, corruption, human displacement, pandemics of different nature, lack of safety and a host of others that call for better understanding and, above all, effective ways of making the Gospel relevant. This compels us to forward the journey of contextualizing Practical Theology and pastoral care in this shifting context.

This raises the pivotal question of what the journey ahead will look like. Put differently: *What* will be important on the journey ahead?

Pertaining to myself and the contemplation of a future academic agenda, it seems that at least two factors are of critical importance. Subsequently, two concepts are embedded in the title of this lecture that allude to foci in my future academic journey. They also serve as *qualifiers* of the current African context, the constructs: post-COVID / and 'glocal' (Probing the notion of contextualizing Practical Theology and pastoral care in a post-COVID 'glocal African context').

With a few remarks on these factors, I will start concluding the lecture.

To say something meaningful about the post-COVID reality (or post-COVID *realities* – or even *world*) in a few paragraphs, is not possible. The question at hand, however, is what this reality begs from academic Practical Theology in an African context going forward?

Specifically thinking from an African perspective, it seems important to acknowledge that there will at least be *qualitative* differences in terms of both our assessments of what post-COVID realities mean and what it puts on the agenda in terms of further research. In other words, in the African context, COVID-19 and the subsequent post-COVID era gained unique meanings of which we should be mindful.

To illustrate this, it was for this very reason I opted for the specific denomination of a "post-COVID Africa" rather than the more generic 'post-pandemic Africa'. As prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Africa was battered by an array of epi- and pandemics. Hence when COVID struck, it was yet *another* pandemic. In our assessments of its meaning, we consequently need to be specific of the *unique* challenges it *added* to an existing agenda in a context that was already plagued with the likes of HIV/AIDS, cholera, Ebola, tuberculosis, malaria, yellow fever and measles to name a few (cf. (Echenberg 2012; Mubiala, 2022; Dirk 2021).

In light of this, one can most probably identify many challenges that demand the attention of Practical Theological and pastoral care *post-COVID*. On the back of my existing focus, I however propose that at least three agenda points beg the attention of a post-COVID Africa focus:

1. The consequences of intensified pre-COVID socio-economic realities
2. Implications of the disruption of traditional religious culture
3. Post-COVID challenges to higher education

In terms of the consequences of intensified pre-COVID socio-economic realities, it must be remembered that poverty is a historic feature of Africa – Africa often being perceived as the global benchmark for the meaning of poverty. Therefore, most conceptualisations of poverty in Africa are qualified in terms of its persistent nature (cf. Barret, Little & Carter 2013). In the years preceding COVID however, there were optimistic notions of anticipated long-term downward trends in poverty. In fact, in March 2019 the Brookings Institute⁵ headlined an article by Hamel, Tong and Hofer (2020) claiming that ‘Poverty in Africa is now falling’.

According to projections from the World Data Lab, Africa has now reached a milestone in the fight against poverty. As of March 2019—and for the first time since the start of the SDGs—more Africans are now escaping extreme poverty than are falling (or being born) below the poverty line

However, COVID-19 put a halt to these projections as the Institute for Security Studies reported in July of this year (2022) that the pandemic caused at least 30 million more Africans to fall prey to extreme poverty, making the UN’s 1st Sustainable Development Goal, to eradicate poverty for 97% of the African population by 2030, not attainable.

The implications for Practical Theology and seeking appropriate pastoral responses are obvious and do not need further elaboration, except to say that COVID rendered it an even more critical matter than before (cf. Dirk 2021:4).

The COVID pandemic did not only plunge Africa into deeper material poverty, it also disrupted its rich religious culture. One of the universal effects of the COVID pandemic was the abrupt banning of all social gatherings, including gatherings of a religious nature, such as public worship and funerals. Viewed through a pastoral lens, these

⁵ The Brookings Institution is a non-profit public policy organisation based in Washington, DC. ‘Our mission is to conduct in-depth research that leads to new ideas for solving problems facing society at the local, national and global level.’ (see <https://www.brookings.edu/about-us/>)

disruptions not only had a severe spiritual impact at the time (cf. Brunsdon 2021) but inflicted spiritual and psychological wounds that are yet to surface during the post-COVID era. In African contexts, funeral rituals, for example, are of communal and individual significance and pivotal in the healing of grief as these rituals unfold over the span of time addressing important milestones in the grieving process (Choabi 2016:25). The sudden loss of meaning-making rituals such as these most certainly produced pastoral voids, working towards what Leonard Sweet (2021:1) describes as a 'pandemic-pandemonium' state, rather than simply a post-pandemic era, creating a further practical theological and pastoral niche in our onwards journey.

In terms of academic Practical Theology in post-COVID Africa, theological higher education also finds a place on this agenda. The COVID pandemic impacted on higher education in multiple ways. Academics present here can all bear testimony to the challenges that emergency remote teaching and learning brought us up against. Post-COVID, there seems to be consensus that the higher education sector must be urgently making sense of the impact of the pandemic and the most meaningful way forward (cf. Habib, Phakeng & Kupe 2020; Du Plessis et al. 2022).

In terms of theological higher education, pre-COVID theoretical engagement with theological education in Africa had a positive energy, especially in the wake of the 'must-fall' movements following the 2015/16 uprisings. Shortly before the pandemic, I together with colleague Hannes Knoetze and several other colleagues present tonight (Du Toit, Mgqwashu & Fourie), for example, embarked on a critical engagement with theological education in Africa (cf. Knoetze & Brunsdon 2021). While this work, published in 2021, referred to COVID, the dawn and effect of COVID rendered its results preliminary and mostly descriptive (cf. Brunsdon 2021:29; Tarus 2021:61; Mburu 2021:101; N'Dri 2021:132; Smith 2021:152).

A post-COVID African engagement with theological higher education is however complex. Much like the first agenda point that pointed out that pre-COVID socio-economic realities were intensified by the pandemic, the same is true about historical deficits in African higher education as pointed out by scholars such as Teferra (2021) and Moodley (2022), but now also with a post-COVID patina.

What is more, is that theological higher education in Africa and around the globe, was facing a loss of interest in Theology as a career path pre-COVID. Traditional mainstream churches are shrinking – and together with it their ability to sustain pastors financially. In the majority world, where the cost of higher education is not accessible to most individuals, all these factors will post-COVID further conflate into diminishing student numbers. Inevitably, theological higher education will post-COVID not be afforded the luxury of only focusing on academic content, but face challenges such as accessibility, affordability, sustainability and how to reach the growing numbers of lay ministers serving the growing church of the global South without formal education.

This brings me to the concluding remark of this lecture, which pertains to the particular lens I propose for attending to these agenda points in a post-COVID African context.

In a certain sense, this lens is also indicative of a slight change in my own thinking on the matter thus far. For, when I started the contextualization journey, I tended to think about Africa in isolation. This is evident in the pastoral challenges I investigated in research articles which were mostly tilted towards unique issues facing the immediate African context.

If COVID, however, reminded us of something, it is that we are sharing the same global village. Collective efforts at finding solutions and generating innovative knowledge are of greater value when they work towards the greater and common good.

In light of this I intend to further my contributions to Practical Theology and pastoral care with a 'glocal' view on the post-COVID African context, in search of the nexus between the local and the global. For this is the intention of a glocal view: 'to bring together both local and global viewpoints' (Mampane, Omidire & Aluko 2018:2) to the benefit of both.

As such it offers a way out of isolated thinking that imagines an Africa for the sake of itself and it resonates more positively with my proposed framework of a 'selfless' Practical Theology as well as the notion of 'restorative decolonisation' unpacked in this lecture.

It furthermore accentuates the reciprocal ideal of authentic African Practical Theology in the framework of a universal *ubuntu*: that we ought to exist through one another - that what we say 'here', must also resonate 'there', where the 'others' are. In institutional terms, a glocal lens aims to embrace internationalisation and partnerships to the benefit of the contextualization ideal.

To this end, I would like to take a cue from the legacy of the late Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose theological work emphasised three principles, and which, to my mind, encapsulates the ideal of contextualizing Practical Theology and pastoral care in a post-COVID glocal African context aptly as follows:⁶

- *being there with and for others*
- *being mindful of the challenges of the immediate (local), complex context (as well as that of) – the world (global) (my insertions)*
- *and the need for good theology which translates into a well informed and responsible response to public discourses and life.*

⁶ See Botha's (2007) discussion on the theology of Bonhoeffer in honour of the work of Dirkie Smit.

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