

BIAPT 2019 Anniversary Conference Issue
Roots, Shoots and Fruits: The Past, Present and Future of British and Irish Practical
Theology

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Practical theology has become a well-established academic discipline in Britain and Ireland over the past half century, evidenced by its contribution to transformed practices; the growing number of professorial chairs named for practical theology; journals (pre-eminently this journal); books (too many to mention); conferences; the rapid growth of the professional doctorate in a variety of English and Scottish universities; and the growing number of practitioners who identify as practical theologians.

The British and Irish Association for Practical Theology (BIAPT) and its journal, *Practical Theology*, has had a significant role to play in the story of this discipline. This special double issue is a celebration of practical theology in all its inventiveness and variety on the occasion of BIAPT's 25th birthday. Its genesis is BIAPT's 25th anniversary conference, which took place at Liverpool Hope University in July 2019, taking as its title 'Roots, Shoots and Fruits: The Past, Present and Future of British and Irish Practical Theology'. From the rich offerings of keynote lectures, seminar papers and other presentations, we have chosen articles which we believe represent most clearly something of the history, present diversity, and future challenges and opportunities of our shared discipline.

The question of what may or may not be distinctive of British and Irish practical theology is not a straightforward one. There is little sustained published reflection on the question (Zoe Bennett's piece on British practical theology in the Wiley-Blackwell *Handbook of Practical Theology* is a notable exception), although discussion about the distinctiveness of different contexts of practical theology does take place, very often at conferences, where practical theologians from different countries and contexts gather. Anecdotally, we have heard it said that British practical theology is less theoretical than American practical theology, but more experiential; less scientific than German practical theology, but more aesthetically engaged. It is sometimes said that British theology more broadly – systematics as well as practical theology – eschews the classic Germanic systematic tradition that was at its height in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as evidenced in the systematic theologies of Barth and Tillich, for example, and has tended to be more contextual and piecemeal in approach. This may be because some of Britain's leading (Christian) theologians have also been leading church men and women – Rowan Williams being an obvious example of an (arch)bishop theologian and Elaine Graham a lay theologian (both, not insignificantly, Anglican, as many of the leading English academic practical theologians have tended to be). Both have developed their theologies as much in

sermons, lecture series, occasional pieces and church reports as in academic books (though they have written those too). Whether these generalizations hold remains to be seen, but they may be tested by the articles in this double issue.

Whilst wanting to celebrate twenty-five years of BIAPT as a professional association of British and Irish practical theologians, our special anniversary conference did not simply want to be navel-gazing, still less self-congratulatory. If we wanted to ask questions about British and Irish distinctiveness and, particularly, the distinctiveness of what BIAPT has enabled and offered the growing discipline to be, this was not so that we could applaud our successes, but so that we could interrogate and learn from our history, be intentional about our present shape and commitments, and bold and visionary as we look ahead to the future of our discipline. Our metaphor of practical theology as a tree (reflected in BIAPT's new logo) with roots, shoots and fruits, is an attempt to capture something of the past, present and future of British and Irish practical theology. The roots represent the past, grounding the present and future activity of practical theology in much that is hidden and obscure. Without toppling the tree, we wanted to dig up some of those hidden roots for examination and exploration. The shoots and fruits represent both the present and the future burgeoning of British and Irish practical theology and the gifts it has grown. A tree may have one trunk but many and varied branches – represented, perhaps, by the various local and special interest groups which continue to grow (dedicated to mission, Bible and practical theology, spirituality and theological education at present, with new special interest groups in the offing). Pushing the metaphor further, the leaves and fruit may represent the range and variety of BIAPT membership, which includes academic scholars, practitioners and students, as well as many international members; is predominantly Christian but with a growing presence of members of other faith traditions, new religious movements and no religious tradition; remains overwhelmingly white but is slowly becoming more ethnically diverse; and, as BIAPT's membership shifts and expands, so its classically liberal Anglican ethos will be challenged and changed. We are only at the start of the changes that lie ahead, but we have tried to signal what some of these changes and challenges are likely to be in the essays that follow, particularly in parts three and four, although future projections are not absent in the earlier articles in parts one and two. We have also attempted to reflect this diversity of experience and perspective in the authors we have invited to contribute: established scholars and leading, well-published practical theologians take their place alongside new and emerging scholars; voices from inside and outside the British and Irish context offer insider and outsider perspectives (or a mixture of both); and the pieces are offered from a range of different ecclesial, theological, social and ethnic contexts. At the same time, this diversity is limited: there are no Irish or Welsh contributions here, nor Roman Catholic voices.

We have divided the thirteen articles that follow into four broad categories in order to highlight the differing emphases on past, present or future of the discipline. Of course, such categorization may hide as much as it reveals and, while it was obvious where some of the articles would go, we have had to make editorial decisions about the placing of others which could, arguably, have gone elsewhere. Nevertheless, we hope that the ordering of the articles that follow provides some kind of coherent logic to the readers' journey through a large volume of material.

In part one of this issue, four authors analyse and reflect on BIAPT's historical roots: not only the past twenty-five years which is, after all, a relatively short period, but going back beyond this to the pre-history of BIAPT and tracing its development

during the ensuing years. David Lyall and Paul Ballard, honorary and honoured presidents of BIAPT, share something of their personal experience of the early days of British (particularly English and Scottish) practical theology and the emergence of BIAPT from the Scottish Pastoral Association in the 1960s. They note the rooting of the discipline initially in the training of clergy (almost all of whom were men in the early days), with the practical imperatives of preaching and pastoral care leading to the gradual development of the discipline as it became more rooted in the academy and influenced by contextual and liberation theologies. Stephen Roberts, the current book reviews editor of this journal, offers a fascinating analysis of the ‘traditions and trajectories of British and Irish Practical Theology as evidenced in the history of BIAPT’s journal’. This article is the fruit of a small research project funded jointly by BIAPT and Contact Pastoral Trust and undertaken by Stephen over a period of nine months or so. It unearths many fascinating aspects of the history and development of the journal which began as *Contact* in 1960 and became *Practical Theology* in 2007, and is now an international peer-reviewed journal of six issues a year. Informed by interviews with the editors, the article throws up some surprises as well as what might have been predicted, confirming that history is often more complex and various than we tend to suppose. Elaine Graham’s analysis of some of the roots of BIAPT takes readers back to a conference in the University of Manchester in 1986, entitled ‘The Human Face of God’. Convened by Professor Anthony Dyson, this conference sowed seeds and raised issues, Graham argues, that provided an agenda for practical theology and pastoral theology for decades to come, not least in its attention to human experience as a source for divine encounter.

Part two of this issue focuses on methodologies in practical theology, looking both backwards and forwards as well as to present work in the discipline, and arguing as much for neglected methodologies as analysing those methodologies well embedded in the discipline. Clive Marsh is a theologian who straddles the practical/systematics divide – a divide that, interestingly, is increasingly called into question in British theology. Clive has particular expertise on theology in popular culture, and wonders why, with a few exceptions, British and Irish practical theology has largely ignored popular culture as a major source. He suggests good reasons why practical theologians need to think again about engaging with popular music, film and other forms of culture. Clare Radford advocates creative, arts-based research methods in practical theology: not simply drawing on the arts to illustrate themes in practical theology but employing creative, artistic methods themselves to represent lived experience and generate new, liberating methodologies. Radford illustrates her argument with examples of poetry and poetic writing, studio-based visual arts practice and life writing, as well as her own doctoral community-based arts practice. Graeme Smith engages methodological, as well as philosophical and political questions, in his article which employs the work of American philosopher Richard Rorty. Smith argues that public theology (one branch of practical theology) should give up its oft-lauded aim of ‘speaking truth to power’ for the more modest project of ‘redescription’, whereby the public theologian is a cultural, social and political commentator whose work generates empathy for those who suffer injustice. Finally, in a piece that is conversational in mode as well as content, Stephen Pattison reflects on decades of ‘conversations in practical theology’, arguing that conversation is at the heart of the discipline yet has hardly been paid much attention in discussions of method and methodology.

Part three draws attention to some of the pluralities that are increasingly evident in British and Irish practical theology and that we believe can both enrich but will also increasingly challenge some of the taken-for-granted assumptions of past and present practice (these essays therefore could equally be placed under our fourth category of ‘Challenges’). Three articles foreground areas rooted in human experience and practice, some of it painful: sexuality, ethnicity (alongside racism and colonialism) and the growing religious diversity of British and Irish practical theology. Sex, race and religion are not the only diversities we could think of that characterize the BIAPT community, but they are certainly key ones that demand scholarly attention and that can divide both scholars and practitioners. These articles seem important to us for bringing into visibility and conversation issues with which BIAPT has not always been quick to engage and which will certainly become more, not less, pressing in the coming years. Gill Henwood examines current practice, and theologies, of same sex marriage (and civil partnership), predominantly in England and within the Anglican church. On the basis of qualitative research with Church of England members, she argues that same-sex partnerships are unions of harmony and peace which can be seen to contribute towards the three benefits of marriage traditionally espoused by ecclesial theology and practice, namely mutuality, fidelity and procreation, broadly interpreted. Hartness M. Samushonga and Nomatter Sande offer a perspective from African diaspora churches – an increasingly large and visible Christian presence within the British, if not Irish, scene – analysing the challenges and possibilities of doing practical theology from a diaspora context, particularly how such theologies engage culture, ethnicity and national identity. Drawing on research conducted within a Zimbabwean majority Pentecostal denomination in the UK, Samushonga and Sande argue that the study of African diaspora churches needs more nuance in terms of recognizing denominational distinctives, and also present striking insights into first and second generation tensions that emerge in the congregations. Finally, Katja Stuerzenhofecker offers a challenge to what she sees as the hegemonic status of Christianity in practical theology and calls for a more radical pluralizing as practical theology engages intentionally with multiple religious traditions and with expressions of the quest for human meaning that are not rooted in any specific religious tradition. This is a trajectory that is already starting to be evident in BIAPT’s membership, albeit in a very small-scale way, and in the pages of this and other journals where the beginnings of a literature on practical theology in and from multiple religious traditions can be seen.

Each of the essays in this volume offers a range of challenges to present understanding and future practice, but the three articles in the final section, ‘Challenges’, may be particularly challenging both to theory and practice in British and Irish practical theology as we seek to be more discerning, more discriminating, more inclusive and more justice-oriented in the coming years. From the perspective of an outsider, the Asian-American practical theologian, Courtney Goto, provides an analysis of discourses around Brexit in order to highlight what she calls ‘The ubiquity of ignorance’: those things which we don’t know but don’t know we don’t know, which nevertheless shape profoundly our perspectives on and attitudes towards ‘the other’. She pleads for practical theologians to recognize their fallibility and to cultivate a dependence on others unlike themselves, in order to overcome the limitations of their ignorance. Emmanuel Lartey goes back to the roots of British and Irish practical theology in order to call attention to the significance of ethnically diverse contributions to our discipline, yet points to present need and future promise as he explores the significance of ‘intercultural, postcolonial and inter-religious

streams in practical theology'. In the final article, John Swinton echoes Lartey's insistence on intercultural and postcolonial engagement, while suggesting other features that need to characterize British and Irish practical theology of the future, namely faithful presence in truth-telling and public theology, hospitality and 'homefulness', alongside prophetic witness.

These varied, insightful and challenging perspectives on the past, present and future of practical theology have something to say, not only to British and Irish practical theology but also to the wider international scene, constantly shifting and changing as it is. We are grateful to all our contributors for writing and for their willingness to engage in the editorial task of revision and honing their texts, and we owe a particular debt to Nigel Rooms, the editor of the journal, for his assistance and support at every stage of our pleasant task. We hope that this will come to be seen as a landmark text in the unfolding of British and Irish practical theology in all its glorious distinctiveness, and a significant contribution to international debate in the discipline.

From the Editor, Nigel Rooms

In my turn I would like to thank Andrew and Nicola for curating this outstanding double issue of the journal which will stand as a marker in the field for some time to come. In due course the 13 articles will be published as a book available through our publishers Routledge. This double issue includes the themed or special issue for 2020 so coming up later in the year are three normal issues of the journal plus our adult theological education special issue. As readers will know this is an increase of one issue, taking the total number to six, which reflects the increasing number of submissions we have been receiving and their quality.

Erratum:

In the Doctoral Dissertation Notices 2018/19 in PT Vol 12 No 5 p.539 Catherine Sexton's award was listed as DPT. This should have read Ph.D.