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### Case study research in/as practical theology

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# Case Study Research in/as Practical Theology

Mirella Klomp

## Überblick

*This article discusses how case studies are not only a method used in practical theology, but (more) often also a research methodology, and thus, how the use of case studies reflect the researcher's view on what practical theology is or should be. The author takes her latest research project as a case to reflect on the methodological knowledge she gained through that project and suggests that case study research can play an important role in times when people long for vigorous answers to the question ›What is truth and where to find it?‹*

## 1. Introduction

### Was über mich erzählt wird

In meinem Schloß brennen fünfundzwanzig Kronleuchter  
Und drei Goldfische habe ich in meinem Aquarium schwimmen

Und ich bekomme viertausend Mark für einen Vers  
Und arbeite an sechs Zeilen ein Jahr

Und jeden Morgen kann ich mir nach dem ersten Ei auch noch  
ein zweites leisten ganz wie ich will ein Ei oder zwei

- Elke Erb

Written in 1968 by a German poet, these six lines illustrate with words how people imagine the life of a poet.<sup>1</sup> ›What people say about me‹ (*Was über mich erzählt wird*) suggests that a poet lives or works in a castle, is alone (yet not entirely; she keeps fish as roommates), earns a huge amount of money with each written verse, is not a prolific writer (six lines a year), and enjoys great freedom in life: A poet can eat one egg for breakfast or two, however she likes it. A poet is, in short, a slightly unworldly artist. By focusing on what is being said about her, the poet sheds light on the views people seem to have of the life of a poet.

The poem constitutes part of an anthology of Erb's poems, published on the occasion of her winning the Georg-Büchner-Preis in 2020. Its title, ›That is the case here‹ (*Das ist hier der Fall*), made me realise that, in fact, the poem does what a case study does: It describes life as it occurs by focusing on some particular (views on) aspects of life. Does everybody say such things about the poet's life? No, but apparently the I-figure has encountered images like the one she draws here. Do all poets live this way? No, but there are poets whose lifestyle complies with this image. Here, we arrive at one of the core characteristics of case studies: They have the capacity to offer knowledge on specific situations. In shedding light on one specific case, they provide a way to learn about life, reality and the world we live in. They offer a particular way of knowing.

In this article, I will offer a methodological reflection focussed on case studies in/as practical theology and how they offer a particular way of knowing.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Elke Erb/Steffen Popp/Monika Rinck* (Hg.): *Das ist hier der Fall. Ausgewählte Gedichte*, Berlin 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Mirella Klomp*: *Playing On. Re-Staging the Passion after the Death of God* (ThiP 10), Leiden 2020.

## 2. Case studies: more than a method

Among practical theologians, case studies are a method that is likely to be chosen by some scholars more than others. Zoë Bennett et al. have suggested that although practical concerns play a part in the choice of particular research methods, in practical theology, this choice is related to »differing understandings of the practical theological project.«<sup>3</sup> The way one fundamentally understands one's project influences one's view of what counts as evidence, data and interpretation, among other things.<sup>4</sup> Each understanding relates to the ontological and epistemological positions of the researcher (i.e. how he/she takes the nature of the entities under investigation, e.g. a practice is »a ritual«, and how he/she acquires knowledge on these entities, e.g. through bodily participation in the ritual), the research paradigm following from them (e.g. a positivist/realist, constructivist or transformative view on reality), and the methodological »research home« of the researcher (i.e. the coherent and consistent organising system that structures the research activities) that steers the researcher's selection of the methods and tools that are employed.<sup>5</sup> Research approaches, methods and tools, on the one hand, and fundamental views on reality and the world on the other mutually influence each other: »research approaches, methods and tools reflect and help to construct worlds and world-views in practical theology.«<sup>6</sup>

Bennett et al. use a case study of two important and distinct research trajectories in practical theology to demonstrate that not all trajectories use case studies in their methods in the same way. The first trajectory the authors mention is the trajectory of empirical theology, which emerged in Nijmegen in the 1970s and is connected with the name of Johannes van der Ven. Here, scholars aimed to arrive at understandings of religious phenomena by making skilful use of social research methods.

### Research approaches reflect and help to construct worlds and world-views

These methods were considered to be able to generate observable, interpretable and »solid« research data through questionnaires and other tools that generate quantitative data. These data were then to be brought into conversation with theology, which was considered to

have a normative role in the critical reflection on practices of faith.<sup>7</sup> The focus in this trajectory is on »universal judgement«. Another trajectory the authors identify is feminist practical theology, which, around the year 2000, emerged as a »radical voice« against a lack of emancipatory Christian practices and the neglect of practical theological attention for social concerns.<sup>8</sup> Here, the normative status of tradition received less emphasis: »Feminist practical theologians drew upon the deep commitment to human flourishing enshrined within pastoral practice. They also valued the insights of liberation theology, including the conviction that Christian practice was not simply about living a Christian life with the Church, but also engaging in forms of transformative practice through which God was active in the world.«<sup>9</sup> Methodologically, the research trajectory of feminist practical

<sup>3</sup> Zoë Bennett/Elaine Graham/Stephen Pattison and Heather Walton: *Invitation to Research in Practical Theology*. Abingdon 2018, 132.

<sup>4</sup> This is related to what Osmer has called »the metatheoretical paradigm of the researcher«. Cf. *Richard R. Osmer: Practical theology: A current international perspective*, in: *HTS* 67/2 (2011), 1-7.

<sup>5</sup> Bennett 2018, 134.

<sup>6</sup> Ebd.

<sup>7</sup> A.a.O., 135.

<sup>8</sup> This occurred through a number of significant publications by scholars such as Bons-Storm, Ackermann, Graham, Miller-McLemore, Gill-Austen and Moessner. Cf. Ebd.

<sup>9</sup> Ebd.; *Elaine Graham: Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty*, London 1996.

theology has leaned more towards case study designs, life story research and collaborative research methods, thus clearly relativising the need to maintain a certain neutrality, or even rejecting the possibility of it. Quantitative data, when used, are employed to emphasise the problematic issues that reflected women's marginalisation, whilst qualitative methods are used to ensure that women's voices, experiences and concerns are heard. This research trajectory focuses more on the particularities and a deeper understanding of Christian practices in particular contexts, communities or events. Here, case study is often a research methodology rather than (only) a method.

Both trajectories have existed (and heavily criticised each other) within practical theology, each preferring their own research strategies, relating to their concerns, positions, assumptions and convictions, and each holding their own view of what practical theology as an academic discipline is/should be.<sup>10</sup> However, the focus on particularities, the need to be clear about one's own positionality, and the orientation towards the transformation of practices of feminist practical theologians has come to resonate widely within other research trajectories as well, not least against the background of the shift from modernity to post/late modernity through which modern scientific assumptions about the universality of knowledge and truth came under suspicion. In this respect, the Presidential Address of Bonnie Miller-McLemore, on the history and development of scholarship in practical theology, held at the International Academy of Practical Theology in 2011 can be considered a strategic landmark. Borrowing the structure and content of sociologist Bent Flyvbjerg's essay »Five Misunderstandings about Case Study Research«, Miller-McLemore formulates the following misunderstandings about practical theology: 1. The discipline is marginal and in crisis. 2. The problem with practical theology and theological education is the captivity of the clerical paradigm.

3. Practical and pastoral theology are interchangeable terms. 4. Practical theology is impossible to define (simply). 5. Practical theology is largely, if not wholly, empirical, descriptive, interpretative and not normative, theological and, in some cases, Christian. Her speech and a number of invited responses were published in the *International Journal for Practical Theology* and have thus drawn great attention to the value of case studies as a research method and the underlying fundamental understanding of the practical theological project.<sup>11</sup> Afterwards, the case study as a serious research method(ology), its challenges and its pitfalls, were seriously dealt with in other publications.<sup>12</sup>

Having established why case studies as a method are preferred by some scholars more than others, and having elaborated their situatedness within contemporary practical theology, I now turn to my own case to delve into methodological knowledge on case studies.

**How case studies are used often reflects the researcher's view of what practical theology is or should be**

<sup>10</sup> Bennett et al. emphasise that research strategies do not only relate to practical theological concerns, positions, assumptions and convictions but also to the power, status and access to money that the researchers do or do not have. Cf. Bennett 2018, 136-137.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore: Five Misunderstandings about Practical Theology, in: IJPT 16/1 (2012), 5-26; Bent Flyvbjerg: Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research, in: Qualitative Inquiry 12/2 (2006), 219-45.

<sup>12</sup> Cf., for example, Eileen Campbell-Reed: The power and danger of a single case study in practical theological research, in: Joyce Ann Mercer/Bonnie Miller-McLemore (Hg.): Conundrums in Practical Theology (ThiP 2), Leiden 2016, 33-59, here 47. Following Flyvbjerg's argumentation, she restates the value of case studies for practical theology: »A search in the scholarship of practical theology for universal, predictive theories is in vain. The most valuable knowledge is the context-dependent knowledge found on concrete cases.«

### 3. The research case of *The Passion*

#### 3.1 A multimedia ritual in the public square

*The Passion* is a ritual-musical play performed on Maundy Thursday that, since 2011, has annually been performed on a large stage in the public squares of a Dutch city, simultaneously broadcast live on Dutch national television.<sup>13</sup> Since 2011, this public ritual has yearly drawn an audience of around 20,000 people and up to 3.5 million TV/online viewers. This (for Dutch standards) large-scale live event involves a popular retelling of the passion story. Striking for its popularity in a country that is otherwise described as one of the most secularised countries of the Western world, *The Passion* was first initiated by a small TV production company and organised in cooperation with two Christian broadcasting companies from the Dutch public broadcasting system and the local municipality, among others. Some of the country's famous pop stars and actors singingly perform the parts of biblical characters such as Jesus, his mother Mary, and Judas, and one plays the part of the narrator, telling the story with great fervour. Part of the event is a procession with a large neon-lit cross through the streets of the city, which has acquired a virtual pendant as well: by scrolling on a their tablets and smartphones, people can follow an online cross that is pictured in the streets of city.

What sparked my interest to investigate this event was the seeming paradox that a contemporary multimedia event in the public square, based on the religious narrative of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, in Dutch 21st century ›secularized‹ society had become so popular. I wanted, among other things, to arrive at a better understanding and deeper knowledge of how contemporary appropriations and transformations of religion work, and I decided to take this public ritual on the passion of Christ as a case. My ontological position was that the practices and the people relating to *The Passion* are ritual practices and ritual participants.<sup>14</sup> My epistemological position as a liturgical studies scholar was and is that knowledge of the ritual is generated by various actors on different levels: Participants acquire embodied knowledge by participating in the ritual, and the researcher excavates this knowledge in the form of data (e.g. through immersion and participation in ritual settings), interprets this interpreted knowledge using theories from different disciplinary fields, and relates this to interpretations that arise in academic discussions and societal and ecclesial discourses in a cyclical process.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the type of knowledge that his project has yielded was thus not focussed on getting to ›evidence‹ or even ›truth‹; the knowledge generated on this ritual takes, rather, the epistemological form of perspectives and arguments. This research project thus relates more closely to the research trajectory of feminist theology than that of empirical theology.

#### The Passion becomes popular

<sup>13</sup> For an elaborate description of this case, see Klomp 2020, 23-52. On April 13, 2022, *Die Passion* was also performed in the German city of Essen and live broadcast by RTL.

<sup>14</sup> I took a broad understanding of ritual practices and ritual participants, meaning that I considered not only the audience on the city square, but also, for example, a newspaper columnist writing on *The Passion* as a participant engaging in a ritual practice.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the methodological chapter on studying liturgical ritual in *Marcel Barnard/Johan Cilliers/Cas Wepener: Worship in the Network Culture: Liturgical Ritual Studies: Fields and Methods, Concepts and Metaphors* (LC28), Leuven 2014, 59.

### 3.2 Ethnography or case study?

Well-versed in liturgical ethnography, I designed the research project as an ethnographic study. Yet, soon, the case of *The Passion* confronted me with ›next level complexities‹.<sup>16</sup> How should I describe ›the ethnos‹ here? The actors and parties involved in this project were hugely diverse and located in many different places. The case was extremely fluid; it combined online and offline practices, which were highly fragmented. I was not capable of describing how I understood ›the field‹. What elements should (not) be included within the domain of the research? As *The Passion* grew bigger after its first edition, I realised that performing a full-fledged ethnography on my own would be undoable: I had to accept that the case would inevitably be fragmented in nature.

At that moment, I decided that a research strategy based on case studies would be more adequate, considering *The Passion's* size and complexity. Robert Yin, who published a standard work on case study research, describes the case study as »an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.«<sup>17</sup> This definition seemed to fit the type of case that I was studying: The fluidity of *The Passion* and the involvement of the media, in particular, made it look like the case was everywhere.

**A changing research object in a changing world requires a change of methodology**

Familiarising myself with case study research, I turned to a book chapter by Daniel Schipani, where he writes that the case study »can be defined as an organized and systematic way of studying and reporting various aspects of a person, family, group, or situation utilizing a structured outline of subjects and questions (Asquith 1990: 123–126). In practical theology, the case study method can be used for different purposes, such as critical and constructive reflection on ecclesial and ministry practice; study, analysis, and evaluation of different forms of faith experience, formation, and transformation; and theory building as well as application or demonstration of theory. In each of those instances, the goal is fundamentally the same, namely, to provide further insight by focusing intensely on a particular case that is approachable from diverse perspectives.«<sup>18</sup> Offering a variety of different perspectives on different aspects of one particular case was what I aimed for with my case study. However, I did not utilise a structured outline of topics and questions. Quite the reverse, the influence of the field on the choice of topics remained strong. I used a rather open research question and, to obtain answers, kept using ethnographic research methods, meanwhile listening to participants in the field, focusing in on what struck me as interesting.

The research thus took the methodological shape of an ›ethno-case study‹; a hybrid form of research, combining case study research and ethnography. Marie Parker-Jenkins, a scholar in educational studies, coined this term, describing it as »an inquiry concerning people, which employs techniques associated with long-term and intensive ethnography, but which is limited in terms of scope and time spent in the field.«<sup>19</sup> She argues that the main difference between contemporary ethnography and case study research is the

<sup>16</sup> Cf. the Research methodology as accounted for in Appendix 1 of Klomp 2020, 205–216. Also cf. *Mirella Klomp: The Sound of Worship. Liturgical Performance by Surinamese Lutherans and Ghanaian Methodists in Amsterdam (LC26)*, Leuven 2011.

<sup>17</sup> *Robert Yin: Case Study Research. Design and Methods*, Thousand Oaks <sup>3</sup>2003, 13.

<sup>18</sup> *Daniel Schipani: Case Study Method*, in: *Bonnie Miller-McLemore (Hg.): The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, Chichester 2012, 91–101, here 91.

<sup>19</sup> *Marie Parker-Jenkins: Problematising ethnography and case study: Reflections on using ethnographic techniques and researcher positioning*, *E&E* 13/1 (2018), 18–33, here 24.

degree of immersion in the context and/or data. According to her, the advantage of the ethno-case study is that it »sets boundaries for the researcher; acknowledges that it is a study located within a richer, wider context; conveys the sense of conducting an inquiry with people, employing ethnographic techniques; suggests limited research time and immersion in the context and/or data; gives the reader some level of expectation in terms of the project results and claims.«<sup>20</sup>

Having drafted the project as an ethnographic study, the challenge of conducting research on a highly fluid research object and a fragmented ethnos in an increasingly digitalising world urged me to adapt the methodology in the course of the research process. This led me to use a hybrid methodology of which case study research is one part, and it taught me that a changing research object in a changing world can sometimes require a change of methodology during the research project.

### 3.3 Generalising from case studies, or practical theology as a creative process

The case study method has a long history of being surrounded with suspicion and being stereotyped as weak: It has been criticised for its lack of precision, objectivity and rigor.<sup>21</sup> Also, the possibility to generalise on the basis of case studies has been disputed.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, after I had published the results of my research study in a monograph, one of the questions I got at the book launch was precisely this one: »Is it at all possible to describe the transformation of religion in Dutch society on the basis of one single case?« I will not elaborate here on the rebuttals scholars have offered against the suggestion that »no« is the obvious answer to this question. Rather, I choose to share an important insight I gained during my research project.

One of the outcomes of my research was that in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Dutch »secularized« society negotiation has become a primary characteristic of contemporary practices that deal with the sacred: »Negotiations, both among groups and between individuals, characterise and surround the practice of Christian ritual in our time and culture.«<sup>23</sup>

**Like The Passion, practical theological research is a form of play**

The insight I gained was that the practical theological take on *The Passion* that led to this outcome was one of many possible perspectives: The value of my practical theological project did not lie in engendering general conclusions. I gave a contextual and situational interpretation

of how religion has changed in the Netherlands, an academic interpretation based on procedures that guarantee the reliability and validity of the outcomes generated in a research process characterised by rationality, transparency, verifiability and reflexivity, yet one of many possible interpretations.

What stimulated my thinking about the character and value of my own practical theological project was the nature of the phenomenon I investigated. A ritual practice is a form of play: In ritual, as in play, people connect two or more realities simultaneously.<sup>24</sup> In the reality they live in, they are capable of imagining other worlds and realities »as

<sup>20</sup> A.a.O., 25.

<sup>21</sup> Yin 2003, xiii.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Flyvbjerg 2006; Campbell-Reed 2016, »The Power and Danger«.

<sup>23</sup> Klomp 2020, 191.

<sup>24</sup> Crucial in my research was André Droogers' understanding of play, taken as »the capacity to deal simultaneously and subjunctively with two or more ways of classifying reality.« *André Droogers: Play and Power in Religion*. Berlin 2012, 81.



if; they are real: Standing on the city square or watching TV, people engaged in the reality of the passion narrative, as if this was real.<sup>25</sup> Over time, I became aware that this resembles my work as a researcher: Practical theological research, ontologically, is a form of play rather than a goal-directed enterprise or an efficacious discussion of a problem.<sup>26</sup> Epistemologically, I was one (academic) player in the playfield of knowledge construction, playing together with other and various participants. My effort to offer a meaningful contribution to the interpretation of what is going on with religion was play, as is scholarly research in general: Through research, we simultaneously combine multiple realities in the same place. In a playful search for answers to different questions and problems, we combine reality as it presents itself to us with the reality of (one or more) possible interpretations, thus exploring and/or creating new ways of seeing things. Thus, my research project led me to see that the question of whether case study research generates generalisable knowledge, in my opinion, is actually not so relevant: Academic practical theology is a structured, reflexive, verifiable, transparent and creative process that leads to a particular view on a particular phenomenon, which needs to be brought into conversation with new ways of seeing things as explored or created by other people (including scholars) to be able to see the bigger picture.

I started this article with a poem taken from Erb's collection of poems ›That is the case here‹, because a poem resembles a case study in its capacity to tell something about a particular aspect of reality, offering a way to get to know the world. I also started with a poem because I consider poetry and the practical theological project a creative process, an art form, if you will.

### 4. A future challenge

Anno 2022, we live in a world that is complex and difficult to understand unless we acquire deep knowledge based on particular cases and their contexts. We also live in a time of intolerance and polarisation around major societal issues and questions (e.g. the climate crisis, global pandemic and influx of refugees). In the wake of the postmodern absence of ›grand narratives‹, scholars have perhaps refrained from offering clear or normative answers to ›big questions‹, yet today, many people are searching for strong narratives and identities. This raises a challenge for practical theology.

Whereas ›post-truth politics‹, manipulated information (on global warming, vaccinations, or migrants and refugees) and conspiracy theories could offer clear and attractive answers to people who long for firmness and clarity, these answers seldom arise out of conversations *with* people about their questions or problems. Practical theological case study research has the potential to generate narratives in conversation with people whilst sharing what the discipline in ongoing cycles of research and theory building comes to

**Case studies potentially generate narratives in conversation with people**

<sup>25</sup> The ›as if‹ character is taken from *Victor Turner: Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality*, in: JJRS 6/4 (1979), 465-499, here 465-466. Also: *Victor Turner: The anthropology of performance*, New York 1988, 169.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. how Joyce Ann Mercer compares the expertise of practical theologians and the expertise of jazz-musicians: the first have the ability to play with unconventional combinations of theory from diverse fields, the latter have the ability to play with the unconventional combinations of notes that constitute jazz music. *Joyce Ann Mercer: Interdisciplinarity as a practical theological conundrum*, in: Mercer/Miller-McLemore 2016, 163-189, here 174.



understand as truth.<sup>27</sup> The challenge for practical theology will be (through an increase of case study research) to maximise this potential to be able to guide people in finding the vigorous answers they long for. The question ›What is truth and where to find it?‹ is, after all, not as arbitrary as the free choice of the poet to eat one or two eggs in the morning.

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. also *Henk de Roest*: Met leren en wijsheid wordt de vrede gediend en blaast de god van de oorlog de aftocht. Over Gods nieuwe wereld en de toekomst van de theologie. Speech on the occasion of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dies natalis of the Protestant Theological University, 18 January 2022. <https://www.pthu.nl/media/downloads/dieslezing-2022-henk-de-roest-2.pdf> (20.06.22).