

**PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AND  
HUMAN WELL-BEING:  
AN EXPLORATION OF A  
MULTIDIMENSIONAL MODEL OF HUMAN  
ACTION AS CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The notion of human well-being has become popular in academic discourses. In the first part of the article it is argued that in view of the theological importance of human salvation and human flourishing, practical theology could contribute to these academic discourses. It is further argued that there is a need for a broad conceptual framework regarding well-being that transcends narrow disciplinary approaches, but also allows for “thick descriptions” of well-being. The aim of the article is to explore a multidimensional model of human action as a possible conceptual framework for interdisciplinary discourses on human well-being. Browning’s multidimensional model of practical reason is briefly described. This is followed by an exploration of this multidimensional model with its visional, ethical, ecological, motivational, and practical dimensions as a broad conceptual framework for interdisciplinary discourses on human well-being. The possible contribution of practical theology to interdisciplinary discourses on human well-being is illustrated with reference to the five dimensions of the multidimensional model. The article ends with a brief conclusion.*

**1 INTRODUCTION**

The notion of “well-being” is popular today. Magazines, journals, and newspapers often feature sections dedicated to “well-being”,

from that of babies, to that of the elderly, and containing discussions on subjects ranging from finance to health. This highly individualistic, consumer-oriented conceptualisation is supplemented by other, more communal interpretations of well-being. *Wellbeing Magazine*, for instance, which is available online and in printed format at various outlets throughout the UK, focuses on health issues and creating happy homes and working environments. The notion of well-being is also part of civil society discourses. One can, for example, sign The Wellbeing Manifesto of The Australia Institute for a just, sustainable, peaceful future (Hamilton, Eckersley & Denniss). This manifesto challenges the Australian government on nine aspects of policy-making, namely providing fulfilling work, reclaiming time, protecting the environment, rethinking education, investing in early childhood, discouraging materialism, building communities and relationships, promoting a fairer society, and measuring what matters.

The notion of well-being is also increasingly used in academic discourses. There is a growing scholarly literature on well-being in such diverse fields as economics and development studies, positive psychology, sociology, and health studies (De Chavez, Backett-Milburn, Parry & Platt 2005). Gasper (2004b) writes, for example, that until recently well-being was not considered a topic for science, and that the “rise of well-being as an important, if not yet major, research focus in development studies and policy and more widely is extremely welcome and long overdue”. Well-known universities and research institutions devote resources to the study of the “science” of well-being. The Well-being Institute of the University of Cambridge, for example, aims to conduct high-quality research on the science of well-being. Its vision reads as follows: “To create a world-class centre within Cambridge University for the scientific study of well-being, which will make a major contribution to the development of new knowledge and its application in enhancing the lives of individuals and of the institutions and communities in which they live and work” (University of Cambridge).

Despite its widespread use in so many disciplinary and interdisciplinary academic discourses, well-being is still a contested and an “elusive concept” (Langlois & Anderson 2002:504) that is often used in an unreflective way (De Chavez et al 2005:71). “Well-being seems to have intuitive plausibility as a concept, but in practice we encounter a bewilderingly diverse family of concepts and approaches, partly reflecting different contexts, purposes, and foci of atten-

tion”, writes Gasper (2004a). Some disciplines emphasise the socio-economic dimensions of well-being, while others focus predominantly on emotional or psychological aspects. This is also the conclusion that De Chavez et al (2005:79) reached after a literature review of the concept well-being in economics, psychology, health studies, sociology, anthropology and biomedicine: “Most of the work on wellbeing has been undertaken within single disciplines and, as such, has tended to focus on one aspect of the concept, rather than drawing together the physical, psychological and socioeconomic aspects”. The scope of the present article does not permit an overview of all the various conceptualisations of well-being in the various disciplines (see Gasper 2004a; 2004b, De Chavez et al 2005). It is, however, clear from the literature that there is a need to transcend narrow, disciplinary approaches to well-being, and to give “thick”, contextual descriptions of well-being (cf Gough 2004; Gough & McGregor 2004). The aim of this article is to introduce a broad, integrative conceptual framework that respects the complexity and diversity of interdisciplinary discourses regarding well-being,<sup>1</sup> while simultaneously providing for “rich qualitative description” of “particular real people in their complexity, in their social and historical contexts” (Gasper 2004a).

Before we turn to such a discussion of a possible conceptual framework for well-being discourses, we first have to ask whether this discussion of well-being is of any concern to practical theology. I take as point of departure the fact that practical theology is deeply concerned with human well-being and human flourishing. This concern is theologically expressed in the term “salvation” (see Bosch 1991:393–400). It is in the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” of practices that Christians are involved in that mediate salvation in this broken world. It is precisely owing to an uncoupling of God’s “salvific” work and his “‘providential’ activities in respect of the well-being of individuals and society” that an unhealthy distinction between the vertical or spiritual elements of mission (salvation of the soul) and the horizontal and external elements of mission (education, medical care, and charity work) developed in the Western (Catholic and Protestant) churches (Bosch 1991:394–395). This view of salvation as coming from the outside, from God, has been

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<sup>1</sup> Gasper (2004b:13–17) identifies and discusses seven well-being concepts used by economists alone.

challenged since the Enlightenment. Bosch (1991:395–397) gives a brief overview of how salvation then, in reaction, came to be defined exclusively in “this-worldly” terms and to be seen as liberation from economic injustice, from oppression, from alienation and from personal despair. It is in reaction to these extremes that there is a concern today for a comprehensive salvation that goes beyond the narrow “vertical” or transcendent and “horizontal” or immanent views of salvation (Bosch 1991:399–400). Salvation is not “*out of this world (salus e mundo)*” but salvation *of this world (salus mundi)* ... Salvation in Christ is salvation in the context of human society en route to a whole and healed world”, writes Bosch (1991:399). It is on the basis of such a comprehensive view of salvation that practical theology, as a public practical theology, can and should take part in the interdisciplinary discourse<sup>2</sup> on well-being.<sup>3</sup>

The broad conceptual framework that I would like to introduce as a possible framework for practical theological and interdisciplinary discourses on well-being is an extension of the Browning’s multidimensional model of practical reason. In section 2 below, I briefly describe Browning’s multidimensional model. In section 3 I endeavour to illustrate how the five dimensions of this multidimensional model, extended to human action, could be used to provide a broad conceptual framework for discourses on human well-being. I then go on in section 4 to explore how practical theology, conceived as a public practical theology, could use this model for practical theological research on well-being, especially research on faith communities as communities of well-being, and thus contribute to interdisciplinary discourses on human well-being. An example is also given of how this model could be used to construct “thick descriptions” of

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<sup>2</sup> By interdisciplinary discourse I mean a “multileveled, integrative interdisciplinary conversation” as Van Huyssteen (2006:9) describes it.

<sup>3</sup> In a recent book on practical theology and the impact of globalisation, Reader (2008:65) writes: “The term that is coming to the fore and to which practical theology must give more attention is ‘well-being’”. Towards the end of his book he again refers to the term “well-being” and says: “The term needs attention because it is being increasingly used in secular debates and thus practical theology will have to enter this discourse” (Reader 2008:130).

well-being in practical theological research. The article ends with a brief conclusion.

## 2 BROWNING'S MULTIDIMENSIONAL MODEL OF PRACTICAL REASON

Throughout his distinguished academic career, Don Browning envisaged practical theology as a truly public theology. Furthermore, he was always interested in interdisciplinary work.<sup>4</sup> The Religion, Culture, and Family Project, of which he was the project director, gives us some insights into the way in which he endeavoured to contribute to the public good through practical theological research. One of the key assumptions underlying his work is that Christian practical theology should participate in public debate about the common good through a search for analogies and commonalities through dialogue (Browning 2007:318). Another key assumption of Browning's work is that practical theology's interest in religious praxis requires that attention be paid to the ethical aspects of actions. Browning has thus always been interested in interdisciplinary work, in the possible contribution of practical theology to public issues, and in the ethical nature of religious actions. This makes him an eminently suitable discussion partner in the current context.

Browning (1991:110–111) maintains that there are five dimensions or levels of practical moral thinking or practical reason to be considered in order to give “thick descriptions” of moral action. The first dimension is the *visional* dimension.<sup>5</sup> This dimension refers to the basic metaphors and narratives that inform our practices and that together form our “world views”. Browning (1991:11) refers to these as the “outer envelope of practical reason”, and says that they are “the fund of inherited narratives and practices that tradition has delivered to us”. Although this “narrative envelope” is not always spe-

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<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing, he served as an associate editor of *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science*, a journal with the aim of bridging the gap between the physical, biological, and social sciences on the one hand and philosophy, theology and religious studies on the other.

<sup>5</sup> In an earlier work, Browning (1983:57–63) referred to this level as the metaphorical level.

cifically Christian, it always entails faith assumptions about the world and our place in it. We usually express our vision of life in metaphors. Browning (1983:58) writes as follows in this regard: “The metaphors we use to represent the ultimate context of experience function to orient us toward that context, form our expectations, teach us to see the world in a certain way, and give us the basic vision by which we live.” Their metaphors of God as creator, governor and redeemer thus give Christians specific visions of the world and their place in it (Browning 1983:58–59).

The second dimension of practical reason is the *obligational* dimension. This dimension deals with the moral plurality and complexity of our lives, and the central question is: “What are we obliged to do?” (Browning 1983:53). It is at the obligational level that we encounter the various ethical and moral traditions, for example, the deontological and the teleological, the Kantian and the utilitarian ethical traditions. Within the Christian tradition we find at this level the great commandment to love your neighbour as you love yourself (Lev 19:18, 34; Matt 22:39) and the golden rule of Luke 6:31 (“Do to others as you would have them do to you”) (Browning 1991:105–106).

The third dimension, the *tendency-need* dimension, focuses on the motivation for our actions. The central question is: “Which of all our human tendencies and needs are we morally justified in satisfying?” (Browning 1983:53). Browning (1991:71) states that the tendency-need or anthropological dimension “raises claims about human nature, its basic human needs, and the kinds of premoral goods required to meet these needs”. He distinguishes basic human needs, existential needs, technical needs and culturally induced needs (Browning 1991:167). Some needs are more urgent than others: as Maslow theorised, it is, for example, necessary to first satisfy our basic human needs for food and shelter before we can attend to our “higher needs” such as a search for meaning and self-actualisation. However, it is not possible to satisfy all needs. It is thus necessary in situations of conflict of needs or scarcity to consider just and fair ways of satisfying the various needs that we experience. It is with regard to this dimension that practical reason requires input from the social sciences such as psychology, socio-biology, and sociology.

Browning calls the fourth dimension the *environmental-social* dimension.<sup>6</sup> This dimension has to do with the social, environmental and ecological context of our actions, the factors that condition it (Browning 1983:53) and the “social-systemic and ecological constraints” (Browning 1991:71) governing our tendencies and needs. This dimension focuses on the limits that the natural, social and ecological environment place on our actions. Some of these limits can be changed or challenged, but others simply have to be respected (Browning 1991:107). Browning (1991:157) also mentions the socio-structural trends and dynamics that we encounter in our modern world of laate, such as purposive rationality, structural differentiation and bureaucratisation, as part of this dimension. We can thus relate this dimension to processes such as modernisation and globalisation which place restrictions on our moral actions.

The fifth dimension is the *rule-role* dimension. The key question here is: “What specific roles, rules, and processes of communication should we follow in order to accomplish our moral ends?” (Browning 1983:53). This dimension deals with the concrete patterns of action of our daily living (Browning 1991:71). Browning (1991:104–105) gives some examples of these rules: “‘you should return your library books punctually,’ ‘you should pay your taxes,’ ‘a man should be the head of the house,’ ‘you should not have sex before marriage,’ or ‘it is all right to have sex before marriage’”. These moral rules are also tied to specific sanctions should we not adhere to them.

These five dimensions together constitute Browning’s multidimensional model of practical reason. The different dimensions can be described separately for analytical purposes, but it is important to keep in mind that they form one process of practical thinking: “I call them dimensions of practical thinking because they generally interpenetrate so smoothly that we are unaware of them as differentiated aspects of experience”, writes Browning (1991:108). Although Browning stresses the interrelatedness of the five dimensions, he also maintains that the visional and obligational dimensions “are more comprehensive and influence our interpretations of the lower three levels” (Browning 1991:108). He occasionally uses the spacial term

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<sup>6</sup> In his earlier work, Browning (1983) referred to this dimension as the *contextual-predictive* dimension, but later changed it to the *environmental-social* dimension (Browning 1991).  
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*levels* in contrast to *dimensions* to indicate this ordering from the most abstract (visional) to the most concrete (rule-role). For example, the rules at the most concrete “rule-role” level are “concretizations” of the more abstract levels of this model (Browning 1991:105).<sup>7</sup> Influences are, however, not only “top-down”; they can also be “bottom-up”. Browning (1991:280–281) thus maintains that changes regarding rules and roles will eventually alter the symbolic structure, the narratives and metaphors, underlying our moral actions.

### **3 A MULTIDIMENSIONAL MODEL OF HUMAN ACTION AS CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR DISCOURSES ON WELL-BEING**

In this section we return to the concept of well-being and our search for an appropriate conceptual framework regarding well-being. My thesis is that Browning’s multidimensional model of practical reason can function as such a framework that is on the one hand broad enough for interdisciplinary discourses (providing sufficient “breadth” in terms of different interdisciplinary discourses), but on the other also allows for “thick” descriptions of well-being in different contexts (providing sufficient “depth” to allow for the rich texture and contextual understanding of well-being). Before I illustrate the usefulness of Browning’s model, we first have to consider whether his model could be extended from a specific category of human action, namely practical moral thinking or practical reason, to human action in general. Although practical reason is an important aspect of our discourses on well-being, I think it is important for an integrative and interdisciplinary conceptual framework to consider human well-being from a broader, action theoretical perspective. Browning himself occasionally applied his model to human action in general. He writes, for example: “Action is (1) made up of concrete practices (rules, roles, communication patterns); (2) motivated by needs and tendencies; (3) limited and channelled by social-systemic and ecological constraints; (4) further ordered by principles of obligation; and (5) given meaning by visions, narratives, and metaphors”

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<sup>7</sup> “The rules and roles of life are the settled results of reflection at the higher levels”, writes Browning (1991:107).



(Browning 1991:111). We can thus say that these five dimensions together constitute the “thickness” of human action.<sup>8</sup>

We now turn to the five dimensions and seek to illustrate how these dimensions of the multidimensional model of human action could be used to provide a broad conceptual framework for discourses on human well-being. First the *visional* dimension. Although the underlying “worldviews” in discourses about well-being are not made explicit, there is always at least an implicit *visional* dimension present in these discourses about well-being. Our ideas about well-being, “quality of life”, “happiness”, “human flourishing” or just “the common good” are always shaped by our views on issues such as the nature of the world, how it is structured, why it is the way it is, our place in the universe, how we can participate in this world, what kind of future is ahead of us, and so forth (see Aerts, Apostel, De Moor, Hellemans, Maex, Van Belle & Van Der Veken 1994/2007). We may have a totally materialistic, biological or ecological view of well-being (see Jeffner 1996:147). The important point here is that discourses on well-being are normative discourses with an explicit or implicit view on life and the world (see Sarot 1996:2).

Is the *ethical*<sup>9</sup> dimension present in discourses on well-being? Following from the previous point it should be fairly obvious that discourses on well-being implicitly or explicitly imply some ideas about ethics, morality and values. The lack of well-being, or ill-being, of so many people as a result of poverty, disease, violence, social and economic inequality, and other injustices means that we cannot consider well-being without paying attention to those who suffer. Discourses about just and democratic societies are always related to notions of well-being and human flourishing.<sup>10</sup> The ideal

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<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that the tendency-need and environmental-social dimensions change places in this description.

<sup>9</sup> I prefer to speak of the *ethical* rather than the *obligational* dimension, of the *ecological* rather than the *environmental-social* dimension, of the *motivational* rather than the *tendency-need* dimension, and of the *practical* rather than the *rule-role* dimension. The five dimensions, arranged from the abstract to the concrete, are thus: *visional*, *ethical*, *ecological*, *motivational*, and *practical*.

<sup>10</sup> Seel (1997:39) writes that well-being is the central focus of social respect, and that a critical theory of modern societies therefore *Practical theology and human well-being*

of a culture of human rights, for example, implies engagement with moral principles. Some theory of morality, whether deontological or utilitarian, or some variety of these approaches, is always implicit or explicit in discourses about well-being.

Can we also relate the *ecological* dimension to discourses on well-being? The focus of this dimension, as I explained above, is on the “pervasive social and ecological patterns that channel and constrain these tendencies and needs”, according to Browning (2003:321).<sup>11</sup> Much research on well-being is undertaken to try to describe or to explain the relation between different structures such as the household, the community, the region, and the nation and well-being (cf Gough 2004:297). Processes such as modernisation and urbanisation can, for example, be studied as part of the macro-system that influences the well-being of people. Another example is Haworth’s (2007) research on work, leisure and well-being in changing social conditions. Higher workloads, greater job insecurity and higher unemployment impact negatively on the motivational dimension. The highly diverse work and leisure lifestyles in modern and modernising societies, and violence and crime are factors that have a very negative impact on the well-being of individuals and communities. Human security is a very important component of human well-being (Clark & McGillivray 2007:6), and living in a highly polluted environment, with no clean water to drink or fresh air to breathe, will have a negative effect on health and well-being.

The next dimension is the *motivational* dimension. Due to the centrality of human needs to human well-being, we find that this dimension is present in most, if not all, discourses on the topic. This dimension is also the focus of social scientific research on human well-being. Much empirical research is done regarding the relation between people’s needs and the fulfilment or frustration of these needs, and well-being. The importance of human needs and tendencies regarding well-being is, for example, clearly expressed in the following definition adopted by the Wellbeing in Developing Coun-

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“cannot do without an accredited concept of the well-being of those who belong to social and political communities”.

<sup>11</sup> This dimension of Browning’s model can be expanded by the five systems of interaction of Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological model, namely the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and the chronosystem (cf Swick & Williams 2006:371).

tries Research Group: “Wellbeing is a state of being with others, where human needs are met, where one can act meaningfully to pursue one’s goals, and where one enjoys a satisfactory quality of life” (WeD 2007). The needs referred to are not only material needs, but also relational needs and a sense of fulfilment (subjective well-being). Needs regarding health, income, family life, friendship, community life all form part of research that includes the tendency-need dimension. Research in the fields of genetics and the neurosciences can also contribute to a better understanding of our needs and tendencies (cf Changeux & Ricoeur 2000).

This brings us to the most concrete dimension, namely the *practical* dimension. This dimension deals with institutions, policies and processes, and the well-being of individuals, communities or societies; we could refer to it as the strategic dimension of well-being. This dimension is most noticeable in programs for promoting well-being, such as social policies, health programmes, programmes to curb domestic violence, poverty reduction programmes, developmental programmes such as the Millennium Development Goals programme, and so forth. Although the programmes at this level are quite concrete with regard to rules and roles in relation to well-being, it should be clear that all the other dimensions of the multidimensional model are concretised in these programs.<sup>12</sup>

Can this multidimensional model of human action function as a conceptual framework for discussions on human well-being? Although it is not possible to discuss the dimensions, and the relations between them, in detail in this article, the above overview should suffice to demonstrate that this multidimensional model of human action could serve as a broad conceptual framework for interdisciplinary discourses on human well-being. It leaves room for both the subjective and objective dimensions of well-being (Sarot 1996), it stresses the importance of moral-ethical aspects (justice), it permits considerable room for the role of culture in discourses on well-being, it allows for the relation between biophysical aspects and well-being, it gives both structure and agency a place in well-being discourses, it transcends the focus on individual well-being to include communal and societal well-being (cf Prilleltensky 2005:54), and it allows for the practical policy dimension on both a local and a global level. The

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<sup>12</sup> Gough (2004:291) refers to the problem of “one size fits all” policies.

interactions between the different dimensions also allow for a dynamic view of well-being. Focusing on all five dimensions thus make “thick descriptions” of human well-being possible.

#### 4 A PUBLIC PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AND DISCOURSES ON WELL-BEING

In the previous section I argued that Browning’s multidimensional model of human action could be used as a broad framework for interdisciplinary<sup>13</sup> discourses on well-being. I noted that all discourses on well-being always implicitly or explicitly have to deal with the visional, ethical, ecological, motivational, and practical dimensions of human action. In the present section I briefly turn to the field of practical theology to consider how practical theology could contribute to interdisciplinary discourses on human well-being with reference to the five dimensions of the multidimensional model of human action. I first consider how theology, and more particularly practical theology, could contribute to interdisciplinary discourses on well-being regarding the five dimensions (the breadth perspective). This is followed by a brief illustration of how the model could be used to provide “thick descriptions” of well-being (the depth perspective).

Before I do so, a few points deserve mention. First, it is important to note that the contribution of practical theology is not limited to the normative or the empirical or the strategic aspects regarding well-being. Practical theology could, through its combination of normative, empirical and strategic perspectives (Heitink 1999), contribute to all five dimensions of the model. Secondly, participation in interdisciplinary discourses implies that practical theologians must consider not only what they can *contribute* to interdisciplinary discourses regarding well-being, but also what they can *learn* from these discourses. Interdisciplinary discourses on well-being will certainly challenge our own discourses on well-being with regard to all these dimensions. Within the context of this article, however, we

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<sup>13</sup> The scope of this article does not permit a discussion of the possibility of using this framework for transdisciplinary research (cf Mittelstrass 2001). Interdisciplinary research does, however, seem a more appropriate option as it leaves more room for plural methodologies and methods than transdisciplinary research (Adger et al 2003:1097).

concentrate on what practical theology can contribute to each of the five dimensions of the multidimensional model of human action. Thirdly, practical theology enters the interdisciplinary discourses on well-being as part of the whole theological enterprise. Browning (1991:9) reminds us that the “rhythms of descriptive, historical, systematic, and strategic practical theology” all form part of the theological reflection on religious practice.

Let us start with the *visional* dimension. Practical theology could contribute to the vision of well-being that is taken as normative by drawing on a theological understanding of well-being. In theology, the term “well-being” has not been used that frequently. It is more common in theological discourses to encounter the concept “flourishing”; this concept is also often found in philosophical discourses concerning living the good life, health, and success. The metaphor of flourishing is found in the Old Testament, for example in Hosea 14:3–7, and more specifically in the Wisdom literature: “The tent of the righteous shall flourish” (Prov. 14:11), or “The righteous flourish like the palm tree” (Ps. 92:12) (Jantzen 1996:58). This use of the notion of flourishing is, however, restricted mainly to the Old Testament. In the New Testament, parallel concepts are used to express the idea of the well-being of persons, such as “fullness of God”, “blessings in abundance”, and the idea of living a life of abundance.<sup>14</sup> Jantzen (1996:59–60) maintains that Christian theology since the Reformation has focussed on the concepts of sin and salvation rather than on the ideas of flourishing and abundance. Her thesis is that the concept of salvation came to replace terms such as “flourishing” and “abundance” as a result of the social and political developments occurring as part of the process of modernisation, and that this reflects the masculine bias in western theology (Jantzen 1996:60). Although we cannot consider her arguments in detail here,<sup>15</sup> the important points for our purposes are that there are different theologies of flourishing or well-being, and that these different theologies also reflect different anthropologies.<sup>16</sup> It is these theo-

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<sup>14</sup> “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10).

<sup>15</sup> See Sarot (1996:11–13) for a brief discussion of Jantzen’s contribution to the volume.

<sup>16</sup>) “Fundamentally, the choice of the language of salvation rather than the language of flourishing in Christian theology both denotes *Practical theology and human well-being* 15

logies of human flourishing that inform our ideas of human well-being at the visional level, and that we can offer in interdisciplinary discourses on well-being. Practical theology, through its research of current religious praxis, could contribute further by providing empirical insights regarding the different theological notions of human flourishing.

Next is the *ethical* dimension. What can theology, and practical theology in particular, contribute to this dimension of discourses on well-being? Again we can refer to many texts in the Old and New Testament in which the obligations of human beings towards God, themselves, their neighbours and the earth are specified. Social justice is a constant theme in both the Old and the New Testament. There are constant reminders to love one's neighbour, to care for widows, slaves, the poor, the alien and the *personae miserae* (Van der Ven, Dreyer & Pieterse 2004:151–214). This does not imply that the biblical traditions speak with one voice regarding the obligational dimension, however. An interesting perspective in this regard is the polarity between particularism and universalism. We encounter a range of positions in the biblical texts, from plain particularism on the one side, where particular ethnic identities are in the foreground, to Jesus's multipolar, dialogic universalism on the other, encapsulated in his message of the Kingdom of God and the call to transcend all differences (Van der Ven, Dreyer & Pieterse 2004:211–214). Regarding this dimension of moral obligation, we can also refer to the tension between love and justice, and between the logic of superabundance and the logic of equivalence that we find in the biblical texts (Ricoeur 1995:315–329). It should be clear that the biblical texts have much to offer to the obligational dimension of human well-being. Practical theology can further contribute to these discourses by providing empirical insights into, for example, the relationship between ethnicity and religion.

Can practical theology also contribute towards the *ecological* dimension? As I mentioned above, this is an area involving human well-being that is receiving increasing emphasis. Human well-being is dependent on many contextual, ecological and structural factors. Without access to clean water, clean air, affordable housing, health services, employment, education, security, and so forth, it is not

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and reinforces an anthropology of a very specific kind" (Jantzen 1996:63).

possible to attain human well-being. It is also increasingly recognised that individual well-being cannot be attained without social and communal well-being (Prilleltensky 2005). Practical theology could, for example, contribute by researching the influence of policies (for example welfare policies), structures (for example family life) and institutions (for example churches) on people's well-being from a religious perspective. With regard to domestic violence we could, for example, investigate the role played by patriarchal ideas about the man being the head of his family, and whether specific religious ideas perpetuate patriarchal attitudes in our societies. We could also research the interaction between specific theologies and ecological attitudes. In my view, practical theology can make important contributions to the discourses on well-being by focusing on structures such as the family or household and faith communities as "centres" of well-being (see below).

What can theology and practical theology contribute to interdisciplinary discourses on well-being regarding the *motivational* dimension? Cochrane (1996:97) writes: "The human concern for salvation or redemption is as old as is the desire to meet unfulfilled human needs. To be more precise, redemption is related to particular, situated human needs." Based on a comprehensive view of salvation it is clear that the dualism between mind (soul) and body cannot be maintained, and that these needs are not only needs of the "soul", or "spiritual" needs, but all human needs, including physical, social and psychological needs. Research on human needs from a religious perspective, for example research on the quest for meaning, for spirituality, for identity, for community, and so forth, can further contribute to our understanding of human needs and their role regarding human well-being. This research must, of course, be contextual and must be done with a great sensitivity towards cultural aspects. The role of the ancestors regarding well-being is, for example, an important research topic in an African context.

The last and most concrete dimension to consider is the *practical* dimension. Practical theology can contribute knowledge to interdisciplinary discourses on human well-being relating to actual programmes in specific communities. For example, practical theological research of actual practices of healing (for example healing rituals) and community building can give insight into this dimension of human well-being. Practical theology's contribution is, however, not restricted to local communities. Practical theology can contribute

knowledge to national and global programmes such as land reform programmes, development programmes (cf Swart 2006) or the Millennium Development Goals programme.

This multidimensional model of human action can also be used by practical theologians to give contextual, “thick descriptions” of well-being. By attending to all five dimensions of the model we can add depth to the discourses on human well-being. For example, all communities of faith implicitly or explicitly attend to salvation and human well-being, and these communities and their practices can be described and analysed by using all five dimensions of the multidimensional model of human action. To illustrate this point, we may refer to research by Dilger (2007) into the practices of healing and community building by the Full Gospel Bible Fellowship Church (FGBFC), a Neo-Pentecostal Church in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Although the focus of his research was not on well-being (the notion of salvation is, however, explicitly mentioned), we can use the multidimensional model of human action to give a “thick description” of well-being in this particular community of faith. The *visional* dimension is present in aspects such as the worldview of the members of this community (the role of spiritual entities, the role of ancestors and the devil, the God concepts) and their cosmologies of healing (Dilger 2007:67–68). With regard to the *ethical* dimension, we can describe the obligations placed on followers to care for one another, to abandon former (sinful) lifestyles and to break with many of the obligations towards their families (Dilger 2007:66). The *ecological* dimension can be seen in the various systems and structures (households, schools, communities, and so forth) that form part of the context of this church. This context can further be described in terms of aspects such as HIV and AIDS, poverty, unemployment, and violence in Dar es Salaam on the one hand, and processes of modernisation and urbanisation on the other. The *motivational* dimension is seen in the role played by this church in fulfilling the basic economic, social and psychological needs of these church members. Dilger (2007:72) describes, for example, how a “network of mutual care and support has developed, which helps church members in situations of need, initiates cooking services for the sick, looks after the children of bedridden church members and even collects money for members in economic need”. The *practical* dimension is evident in the rules of this tightly-knit community, such as those governing attendance of healing sessions and Sunday services, and the con-



sumption of alcohol. These five dimensions of the multidimensional model of human action together can therefore be successfully used to describe what well-being means for church members in this particular Pentecostal church in Dar es Salaam. In this way we can ensure that our discourses on well-being do not succumb to “universal theorising of the type that is detached from the rich texture and meaning of everyday life” (Adger et al 2003:1095).

## 5 CONCLUSION

In this article, Browning’s multidimensional model of practical reason and human action was considered as a broad conceptual framework for interdisciplinary discourses on human well-being. This focus on well-being stands in stark contrast to the daily experiences of ill-being in our present context, as HIV and AIDS, widespread poverty, and violence in all its ugly guises form part of our daily lives here at the southern tip of Africa. It is against the background of these “contrast experiences” of ill-being that the intense longing for well-being, whether personal, social, communal or societal, must be situated.<sup>17</sup> By employing the multidimensional model of human action as described in this article as a broad conceptual framework, theologians can add breadth and depth to interdisciplinary discourses on well-being. Practical theologians, through their normative, empirical and strategic inputs in these interdisciplinary academic discourses on well-being (cf Pieterse & Dreyer 1995), can contribute to the theory and practice of well-being in a world that longs for salvation and human flourishing.

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<sup>17</sup> De Mesa (2001:12) writes that “concepts of well-being are situated in a framework of contrast experience. What people long for and desire is the opposite of the situation they want to be delivered or freed from.”

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