THEOLOGICAL NORMATIVITY AND CHURCH DEVELOPMENT

On the significance of theological normativity for church development[1]

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Abstract

This article attempts to answer the following question: how significant is theological normativity for church development practice? At a time when many leaders are busy developing local churches according to secular organisational theories, models and experiences, the following question arises: to what extent does the normative character of the Bible impact Christian faith, church life and ministry and how might normative theology affect development projects that are carried out by churches? The overriding issue that both current practice and the article focus on, is how theological normativity and empirical data can be integrated in the area of church development. After explaining the concepts of theological normativity and empirical data and the logical relationship between them, the article discusses how different national (Norwegian) and international researchers within practical theology attempt to resolve problems relating to the integration of normative theology with empirical data. The article's authors believe that these attempts end up with either assimilation or integration, neither of which is beneficial for church development practice. Therefore, the authors propose an alternative integration model that distinguishes between three levels / degrees of theological normativity, corresponding to three different fields and areas of church development. From this perspective, one can see how the integration of empirical data in the three levels of normativity brings both challenges and opportunities. The authors' conclusion and recommendation concerning the function and significance of the theological normativity in church development is that theological normativity bestows the church with identity and at same time has a guiding and corrective function.

Keywords: theological normativity, church development, Church and church identity, integration, empirical data, assimilation, integration

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research problem

Many people who are interested in developing Christian congregations today feel a need to clarify how biblical norms and values affect different practices within congregational development. The situation today is that many Christian congregations use various concepts for developing churches, based on models and theories from modern secular organisations and leadership theory. We often find elements of secular strategic thinking in basic models for the development of congregations as well. The question is whether this is acceptable. Are declarations about the significance of the Bible and about our faithfulness to the Bible merely fine formulations that we use to create credibility for what we are doing, while beyond this we are largely free to develop the church according to any model? Or is there a conflict between the organisational and management theory used and biblical norms – or for that matter the traditions of the church denomination, and its values and strategic guidelines? Why do we use the theories and models of thinking that we do? Is it to preserve the identity of the congregation or church, and to make it perform its genuine mission more effectively? Or are there other motives that drive us?

Questions of this kind form the background for the following research problem: what significance does theological normativity have for thinking and practice in the area of church development? In order to obtain an academic basis for answering this question, it is necessary to enter the more principled debate on the relationship between theology and empiricism. And this leads us to ask the following questions at the beginning of this article: how can – and how should – theological norms and empirical data or research be integrated more generally in theology and, more specifically, in ways of thinking about and practising church development?

To answer this question, we have seen the need for an academic basis to discuss different ways of understanding the relationship between theological normativity and empirical data in theological discourse. Here we shall discuss various attempts to integrate empirical studies with normative theology and ecclesiology. We want to show that various attempts at integration are in danger of ending up either in assimilation of normativity and empiricism or in an integration that becomes too general and thus unclear. In extension of this, we argue for an alternative and more level-specific integration model. The following questions will be central here: *How does theological normativity affect the various aspects or areas of church development work?* This approach to integration is characterised by the way that it operates within different "fields" or areas of ecclesiastical reality, which theological normativity impacts to varying degrees.

1.2 The main purpose

Based on the presentation of our own three-field model as an illustration of an approach to integration, we ask a third sub-question: *How can the type of thinking about integration that we*

present in our model be applied to thinking and practice in the area of church development? When application is concerned, we also put the spotlight on the function of theological normativity in thinking and practice in church development. Here we shall argue that theological normativity can be used to create or sustain church identity, that is, the basic understanding of what the Church or a congregation is from the viewpoint of biblical texts. Second, we shall argue that both that which we refer to here as the theological core normativity, and the denominational normativity, indicate a strategic direction for church development work. And finally, we shall point out how important it is that both theological and ecclesiological normativity serve as the criterion for our assessment of the relevance of empirically based material that we may use to develop the church.

In order to be precise in the use of the most fundamental concepts in this article, namely normativity and empiricism, we will begin by clarifying these concepts and the relationship between them. Second, with the help of various systematic and practical theological contributions, we shall discuss alternative models for facilitating the relationship between theological norms and empirical research and the use of empirical data in theological research. We shall also discuss our own integration model, a main feature of which is that we distinguish between theology's different normativity fields with associated normativity levels. In this context – and to conclude – we will also discuss how theological normativity affects thinking and practice in church development.

2. The concepts of empiricism and normativity and their interrelationship

2.1 Presentation of the main terms

Empirical research is, in a scholarly context, concerned with methodical or systematic investigations of reality. This is carried out by collecting facts or quantitative data via observation or experiments, which in turn provide a basis for interpreting and understanding the phenomena under investigation. The goal is to collect empirical data from reality and interpret them to gain knowledge about reality, the world or the universe. That which we call facts or empirical data are the product of interpreting sensory experiences. The words empirical, experiential and empirical have their roots in the Greek word *empeiria* which means "sensory experience" (cf. Lübcke 1988: 138-140). Empirical data is also called hard data or quantitative data, as opposed to soft or qualitative data (cf. Searle 1995: 34f. And 55f., Hacking 2000: 22f and 80f.). In social research, many methods can be used to obtain empirical data. Well-structured questionnaires with closed-answer alternatives are often used in quantitative studies (e.g.: were you inspired by the church service? Yes / no), while less structured, more open-ended questions are used in qualitative studies (e.g.: what did you think of the church service?). Different forms of observation are also common in qualitative studies (for example, observing how participants in worship behave).

When we talk about the use of empirical data in a theological context, the focus here is on empirical data in social-scientific terminology and understanding. When talking about the

use of empirical data in scientific work, it can also be useful to clarify the connection between the following three concepts: empirical data, subjective experience and objective experience, i.e., sense or sensory experience (cf. Swinton and Mowat 2006). It is not uncommon to link subjective experience to emotions and sensations, and objective experiences more to understanding and reflection (cf. Hygen 1977: 36). Here, however, it is important to be aware of the following relationship between subjective and objective experience: according to Gadamer, subjective experience (German *Erlebnis*) has "the character of subjectivity and closedness" (Austgard 2004: 3–13). In hermeneutic interpretation, to avoid these aspects of experience (subjectivity and closedness) and achieve objectivity, in hermeneutic interpretation, Gadamer (2003) talks about objective experience (German: *Erfahrung*). Experience in the broadest sense, that is, objective experience that includes subjective experience or vice-versa, is consistent and coherent with the normativity of theology. But experience in the narrow empirical-positivist sense, i.e., *objective* experience that involves purely a description of facts, is incoherent with theological and ethical normativity. From the *fact* that people (as a matter of fact) hate and fight each other, for example, it does not follow logically that they must or should love each other as the *norm*. Hence, norms are prescriptive statements whereas facts are descriptive statements. They are logically distinct and independent of each other.

In theology, there is a long tradition of talking about objective experience as fact, as a problem area or as a challenge for theological thinking (cf. Hegstad 2006, Asheim 1976). An example of this problem can be found in dogmatic or systematic theology, where *subjective* experience can be linked to the view of scripture, understanding of salvation and other matters. "In the face of the social sciences, theology must relate to 'experience' in a new sense, namely as quantitative data, or 'methodically secured empiricism'," says Hegstad (1998: 16). In this objective sense, experience is distinct from biblically and ethically normative statements such as: God is holy, peace is better than war, love is better than hatred, good is better than evil, and so on (cf. Hans Küng 1978: 539f.).

It should be noted that the words "empiricism" and "normativity" have somewhat different meanings and status in different types of sciences. Considering what we refer to here *substantive normativity*, the natural sciences (when they are at their best) are almost entirely empirically based, in the sense that they are fact-based and concerned with a product of sensory experience. When a natural scientist, for example, says that there is oil in the North Sea, and that the weather conditions require that one has solid platforms there, these are empirical facts that are established via observation, experiment and perception of that part of objective reality called the North Sea. And a purely objective description of these facts contains no norm or value. Empirical data are also important in the social sciences in the sense that they are also fact-based, but in a somewhat different way to the natural sciences. Ethical normative activities such as critical assessment and evaluation as well as interpretation and theory formation are more prominent in social sciences and the humanities or the Arts. Social and institutional facts are constructed by people using important values and norms, among other things. Some examples of such social and institutional facts are community, friendship, bullying, murder, discrimination, theatre performance, money and various types of games, cf. Searle (1995) and Hacking (2000). What turns paper into money, for example, is the value that humans give it. If all

people were to die, there would be no social or institutional facts. On the other hand, the facts studied by the natural sciences would still exist even if all people were to die.

2.2 Different concepts of normativity

It is relevant and fruitful to distinguish here between scientific, ethical and theological normativity. The word normativity comes from the word norm, and this can have the character of, for example, "one should", "should or must", "ought to" and "shall do". An ethical norm is, for example, "one should, or one must speak the truth". A norm is an expression of one or more values. The norm "one must speak the truth" includes the value truth. An example of a theological norm is "Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life". Within all sciences we can find "general scientific norms and values" and methodologies as "normative systems", as Tranøy maintains (1986: 144 f.) This is methodological normativity. Another form of scientific normativity, which is closely related to methodological normativity, is methodical normativity. According to this, if one wants to obtain a certain result or a certain type of knowledge, one should use a certain or adequate method for the research. From a methodological and methodical normativity point of view, all sciences are normative, i.e., they are determined by methodological rules and norms that state how scientific research should be conducted, and what quality and value research results should have. But it is not this normativity that we are concerned with here. Here we use the term "normativity" to refer to the content of normative statements, i.e., statements which express a value judgment on whether a person, an entity (e.g., God), a situation, etc, is desirable or undesirable or worthwhile in itself. Normative statements can be ethical, aesthetic, religious or theological, metaphysical, ideological, political, ontological, etc. Thus, this is about *substantive normativity*, not methodological and methodical normativity. Below we will specify what we perceive to be the peculiarity of theological normativity.

In scientific research, ethical, political, economic and other values may occur in assessments of what is important to research, why one is allowed to research it at all (for example human genes and foetuses), which scientific method one should use (can one use personal interviews for studies on the sexual habits of members of a congregation?) and how one should use scientific methods. Should one use any method that leads to good results, without considering the cost entailed by the method or what damage it may inflict on humans? In general, it can be said that in all sciences there are ethically normative activities such as critical assessment and evaluation of: interpretation, theory formation, application of theory, choice of research object, assessment of research methods and results.

2.3 The nature of theological normativity

When one says that theology is a normative subject, discipline or science, one does not think primarily of the methodological normativity that it shares with all other sciences. The normativity of theology is above all similar to ethical normativity, in that theology claims, for example, that there is an absolute, objective and ultimate truth which is the norm of all norms (Latin:

norma normans), that is, one which all ethical or moral uses of truth must obey or conform to. Second, the normativity of theology is ontological and transcendent in its character. Theology claims that there is an objective truth that is immutable, universally valid and inaccessible to man as a natural being, and that has its ultimate foundation in God himself, as the ontological ground and explanation of all reality. This truth claims to be the decisive rationale for biblical ethics, which claims to be normative in principle for all human actions and all human life. It is therefore not empirically testable in the strictly positivist sense of empiricism. It is transcendent, i.e., beyond empirical reality. Other examples of transcendent or metaphysical questions that imply transcendent truths are: does God exist? Was God incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth? Did Jesus Christ rise from the dead? Does God reveal Himself through the Holy Spirit to the Church? We believe that the Bible provides true and credible answers to these types of theologically normative questions.

When we talk about normative theology in the following article, we refer to answers to such questions and similar statements that claim to be true and normative for all people, but which are not empirically testable. We call them purely theological and metaphysical, that is, transcendent statements. By this is meant that their truth is not accessible to human sensory experience and reason unaided, i.e., without God's revelation. They are fundamentally normative for how one should understand and apply most of the Bible's statements. One can also say that some biblical statements are normative in the sense that they constitute the decisive basis for Christian doctrine (dogmatic) and Christian life (Christian ethics). To continue the analysis in this article, we shall emphasise the value and relevance of theological normativity for church life and church development.

It is in such a way that this understanding of normativity underlies what we write in the following article. And, as we have already pointed out, theology shares methodological normativity with other sciences. This type of normativity is not controversial within theology and so we will not discuss it in what follows.

3. The presentation and analysis of different integration models

3.1 Some elected integration models

We shall now analyse some models to illustrate and – hopefully – clarify the logical relation between normative theology and the use of empirical data in practical theology. We place an emphasis on models that aim to integrate theological normativity and empirical knowledge. Our selection of relevant theologians, who have proposed the models in their discussion of the relationship between theological normativity and empiricism, has the following rationale: first, we are interested in involving systematic theologians who have worked with various solutions to the relationship between normative theology and empirical science. Here we use the Norwegian theologians H. Aarflot (1982) and P.O. Brunstad (1998), who have made relevant contributions to the issue. Second, we have chosen two internationally renowned practical theologians who have each made significant theoretical contributions to the current debate on the issue.

These theologians are J.A. van der Ven (1996, 1998) and D.S. Browning (1996). In addition, we will use contributions from another Norwegian theologian, H. Hegstad (1998, 2002), who with his authorship has shed light on the relevant topics both from a systematic theological and from a practical theological point of view.

3.1.1 Aarflots and Brunstad's integration models

Aarflot and Brunstad present and discuss four different models to shed light on the relationship between theology and the empirical sciences. Then, each in their own way, they follow this up by arguing for and defending what they call an "integrative" model. In the argumentation for their understanding of integration, they review other ways in which one may imagine that the relationship between theological normativity and empiricism can be conceived. Both Aarflot's and Brunstad's first models illustrate how one may work with theology in a way that makes one disregard the relevance of empiricism to theology. Thus, according to the first model they discuss, there is no substantive relationship – nor any dialogue – between theology and empirical science.[2] Both theologians reject such a dualistic way of thinking, which we think is essential to Barthian theology. Central to Aarflot's second discussed model is that theology and empiricism can remain in a competitive relationship. Theology and empiricism then become alternative ways of understanding the *same* reality. Brunstad calls the second model under discussion "expansive" – in the sense that he thinks that theology stands above all other science and empiricism in a unified world. In this case, it would be theology that would provide the necessary premises or grounds for all other science or all other forms of knowledge.

Aarflot and Brunstad reject this second model and discuss a way of thinking about a third model that they call *complementary*. When one thinks about the relationship between normativity and empiricism complementarily, one imagines that theology "builds on" empirical data that is used as a foundation – with value judgments and norms as the superstructure. Brunstad asserts that, according to this third model, empirical data complements what theology lacks. If we have understood Aarflot and Brunstad correctly, this way of thinking sees theology as consisting of two components. The first is the empirical component, which is complemented by normative theology's understanding of human reality. Further, these theologians state that normative theology interprets empiricism for its own use. Aarflot and Brunstad reject this complementary model. And conceive of their own model, a fourth one.

The fourth model, which both Brunstad and Aarflot defend as the most reasonable, is described by them as an integrative way of understanding the relationship between empirical data and normative theology. On this topic, Aarflot (1982: 261) declares that:

> […] theology absorbs empirical data about the church as such data specifically appears in a social science conception of knowledge. Theology "illuminates" these data by having a normative impact on them through the word of God. The empirical data have this role in theology, without having to go the way of a social philosophical or in another way becoming an epistemological "superstructure" for theology.

[2] This Barthian distinction between normative theology and empirical science concerns first and foremost their content and not, for example, theology's use of certain methods that it borrows from other disciplines, such as philosophy, literary studies, history, psychology and sociology.

The task of theology thus becomes "to interpret empiricism in a theological and ecclesiastical context" (ibid.). And Aarflot further declares "that sociology cannot speak exhaustively about all aspects of reality, but only about those which have assumed social forms". For him, the task of theology is not only to apply empirical data in further practical or theoretical work, but also to interpret the historical, personal and social processes in society and the church that the empirical sciences disclose. Theology does this in light of the Bible's testimony of God, people and history. For Aarflot, the frame of reference becomes double, and "the normative key of theology" – in the interpretation of empirical facts – becomes the incarnation and Christology (cf. Aarflot 1982: 261f.).

The crucial premise for the fourth model of integration is, according to Aarflot, that there is only one world to which all sciences – including theology – must relate. From a theological standpoint, this is the world God has created, and where he has revealed his works of salvation – finally through Jesus Christ. The fact that theology can open itself to human experience and scientific empiricism indicates that theology can play an active role in people's understanding and interpretation of their experiences and of the world. "Theology must aid with the most comprehensive, in-depth and perspective-rich interpretation of the human life reality. For theology to be able to carry out that task, empirically based knowledge must therefore be integrated into the framework of a Christian holistic view of reality", declares Brunstad (1998: 8). The possibilities lie in theology's openness to the world of human experience.

Theology must therefore be critical – on its own terms. It must also dare to see conflicts between different paradigms and confront them (Brunstad 1998: 10). One additional challenge Brunstad sees is the danger of assimilation, i.e., "being absorbed in the other sciences in a way that weakens the normativity and uniqueness of theology" (1998: 11). There is partly an ambiguity and partly a reductionist tendency in the way Brunstad and Aarflot conceive the integration between normative theology and empiricism. We shall in due time return to a critical assessment of this way of thinking about integration.

3.1.2 Browning's and van der Ven's understanding of integration

Since the intention of this article is to discuss how we should understand the integration of theological normativity with empiricism in one field within practical theology, namely church development, we have thought it natural to bring in two theorists, both of whom have worked specifically on understanding integration in practical theology, namely Browning and van der Ven. The argument used by van der Ven (1998) applies to the relationship between practical theology and the social sciences as empirical sciences. First, a few words about van der Ven's understanding of integration. Van der Ven asks how the empirical approach in theology should be epistemologically structured or explicated (1998: 89f.). To answer this question, he goes through and appraises various models for illustrating the relationship between empirical research and theology (1998: 89 –112). In the model he calls the "monodisciplinary", he applies insights gained in other theological disciplines, directly, to the practical reality. This also means that there is no methodical processing or interpretation of empirical material in theology (cf. van der Ven 1998: 89–93). The insight gained through historical and systematic methods is

applied "more or less intuitively into the present pastoral and ecclesiastical reality", as Hegstad says in his description of the model (1998: 18). In what van der Ven calls "the multidisciplinary model", the social sciences contribute with empirical investigations and analyses, and theology then reflects on their relevance to theology (cf. van der Ven 1998: 93–97). In the model van der Ven calls "the interdisciplinary model", there is, according to him, a real interaction between theology and social sciences, either *intrapersonall*y in that a person has competence in both subjects, or *interpersonally* in collaboration between people who have different professional expertise, or who have competence in both subjects (cf. van der Ven 1998: 97–101).

The above-mentioned models are ways of thinking about the relationship between empiricism and theological normativity that van der Ven rejects for various reasons, which, due to lack of space, we cannot discuss here. Of the models discussed, van der Ven defends "the intradisciplinary model" (cf. 1998: 101–112). This model is about the process in which concepts, methods and techniques from one science are "integrated" into the context of another science. From this perspective, practical theology is thus not only satisfied with collaborating with other empirical disciplines, but also becomes empirical itself. This way of working with practical theology does what theology has always done – as van der Ven says "to take up and critically assimilate new methods and techniques developed in other areas of science, with a view to their theological development by theologians themselves." (1998: 89). Hegstad asserts that van der Ven argues that such an "integration" of methods is "theologically possible and necessary" (Hegstad 1998: 19). Rhetorically, van der Ven asks whether such empirical theology is still theology. And he answers: "Empirical methodology does no harm to the theological identity of theology and can, on the contrary, actually be of benefit to it" (van der Ven 1998: 112).

We believe that the American practical theologian Don S. Browning (1996) also defends the concept of integration in his "practice – theory – practice model" thinking within practical theology. For him, empirical methods, social sciences and various theological disciplines are part of a comprehensive theological programme. This consists of three sub-processes: *Descriptive – or empirical – theology,* which has the task of studying and understanding contemporary religious practice in depth – especially the practice that is formed in congregations – so that the relevant questions can be asked. *Historical theology* sheds a historical light on these questions and *systematic theology* seeks kinship between the Christian message and ecclesiastical practice.

These three theological activities – sub-processes in Browning's terminology – are combined in what Browning calls a strategic practical theology. Here, norms and strategies for church practice are developed. For Browning, the term "practical" is a fundamental and overarching provision of theology and thus encompasses both historical, systematic and practical theology (in the traditional sense). Browning relies partly on hermeneutically oriented philosophers such as Gadamer, Ricoeur and Habermas, and partly on more pragmatically oriented philosophers such as James, Bernstein and Rorty. "Common to these very different philosophers, according to Browning, is the basic idea that practical thinking is the center of human thinking, and that theoretical and technical thinking are abstractions of this", declares Akerø (2009: 40) – referring to Browning (1991: 8).

3.2 Critical assessment of the presented models

3.2.1 Assimilation or integration?

In our critical assessment of the models that we have presented above, we shall first discuss the relationship between thinking regarding assimilation and integration in these models. Then we shall address the question of how theological normativity is taken care of in the models. In the presentation above, we have seen that from the various positions discussed, the integration model is the one that they defend. But what Brunstad and Aarflot call "integration" is really, as far as we can assess, an *assimilation*, meaning that theology absorbs relevant knowledge and insight from empirical sciences, interprets it and incorporates it into itself. Theology has done this throughout the history of the Church.

For practical theology, it is knowledge and insight from the social sciences that is most relevant and productive. It is van der Ven who truly seems to integrate theology with empiricism is. But the problem with integration (of theology with something else) in general is that it can *ontologically reduce* theology to empirical social science. This type of reduction expresses the view that that practical theology is nothing other than an empirical social science, (cf. Barbosa da Silva 1982: 72f.). Van der Ven's integration is a good example of this. The consequence of such an *ontological reduction* is that theology loses its uniqueness. Like Aarflot, Brunstad also defends, as we have seen, what he calls an integration model. Brunstad argues that the crucial premise of this model is that there is only one world to which all sciences – including theology – must relate. From a theological standpoint, this is the world God has created, where he has revealed his works of salvation – finally through Jesus Christ. The fact that theology is open to human experience and scientific knowledge or empirical data means that theology can play an active role in people's understanding and interpretation of their experiences and of the world. Brunstad writes: "Theology must aid with the most comprehensive, in-depth and perspective-rich possible interpretation of human life. In order to be able to carry out that task, empirically based knowledge must therefore be integrated into the framework of a Christian holistic view" of reality (Brunstad (1998: 8).

The possibilities lie in theology's openness to the world of human experience. The challenges lie in the need to adequately interpret this experience. Theology must therefore be critical – on its own terms. It must also dare to see conflicts between different scientific paradigms and to confront (Brunstad 1998: 10). One challenge Brunstad sees here is also the danger of assimilation, "being absorbed in the other sciences in a way that weakens the normativity and uniqueness of theology" (1998: 11). If this were to happen, it would involve an *ontological reduction* of theology to empirical science, to put it in our terminology. On this point, we agree with Brunstad. But we disagree with him when he talks about *one* world that both theology and empirical research should relate to. We believe that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ implies that God belongs to a different, transcendent world than this our immanent, empirical world. And the normativity of theology concerns how this empirical world should or should not relate to the transcendent world. In other words, God is more than one dimension of the empirical world.

Brunstad declares that he justifies "theology's integration with empirical knowledge on the basis of a creation-theological and incarnational thinking" (1998: 9). Aarflot emphasises the task of interpretation or understanding that theology faces when it makes itself open to empirical reality. In our opinion, however, both Brunstad and Aarflot speak in general terms about the normativity of theology, so that it becomes unclear what degree of theological normativity applies in various theological and ecclesiastical areas or fields (see Figure 2). The explanation for this vagueness may lie in their view that theology and all other sciences investigate "one and the same world". But theology (gr. *theos* + *logia*) is the study of God – and not just of God's creation, namely the world. Here we can say that a Trinitarian theology must include a study of creation, but a study such as this is not primarily an empirical scientific study. We know that God created this world because the Bible says so, and not as the result of scientific discovery. And the Bible speaks of this fact as a result of revelation, which is to be received in faith (Hebrews 11: 2). One possible clarification of the term "same world" is that theology – and all other sciences – study the same world, but from completely different perspectives. It should also be pointed out that the study of normative theology presupposes Christian faith in the sense of both *fides quae creditur* (the content of the Christian faith or doctrine) and *fides qua creditur* (trust in God and his revelation in according to the Bible), while the empirical-scientific study of the world does not presuppose faith or some kind of religious belief. On the contrary, there are scholars who believe that researchers should adopt a so-called methodological atheistic attitude to the world.[3]

If our interpretation of van der Ven's understanding of integration is correct, it can be illustrated using the following integration model:

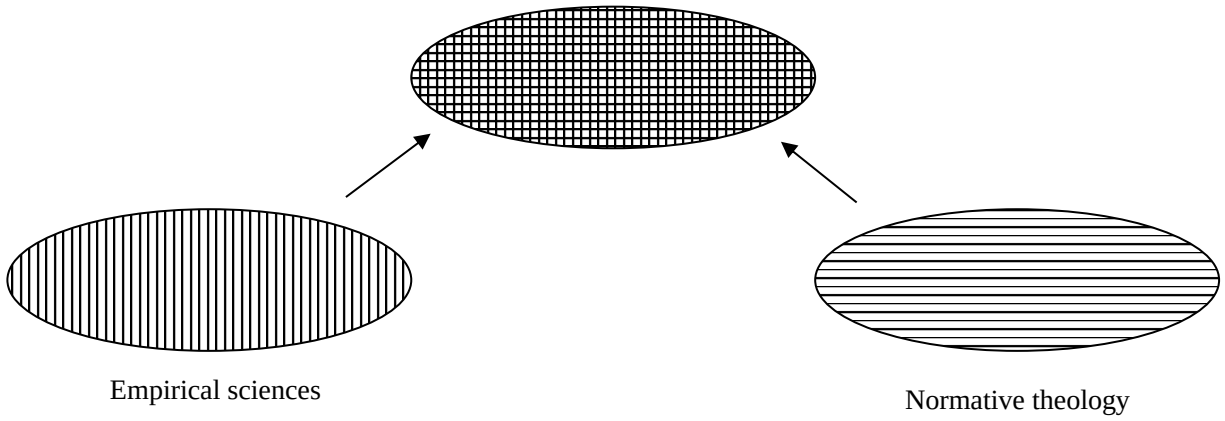

Figure 1: This model illustrates our interpretation of van der Ven's understanding of integration, where empirical data and norms constitute a synthesis.

The model illustrates how empirical research can be integrated with normative theology according to our interpretation of van der Ven. And it shows what integration really means. As Stenmark (1996: 145f) says:

[3] This is what Peter Berger claims according to Westphal 1984: 19. If one defines theology religiously, ie as the study of man's experience of God, this study – in order to retain its uniqueness – must be distinguished from other scientific studies.

> To "integrate" something with something else means to unite into a whole. It is not a question of aggregation, an accumulation, of beliefs that are connected or belong together in a special way. Thus, it is not enough just to have the ambition that the result should, if possible, be free from contradictions (the consistency requirement), in addition, one should strive for the different beliefs to be incorporated or merged with each other, they must be coordinated into a whole (coherence requirement).[4]

One might say that van der Ven's concept of integration is more precise than Brunstad's and Aarflot's. But the consequence of this is that he is in danger of losing the normative character of theology (its identity, to use his own words), because his view of the integration of empiricism with theology as normative science – in our opinion – constitutes an ontological reduction of the former.[5]

3.2.2 What about the normativity of theology in Browning's and van der Ven's view?

Since it appears to us that Aarflot and Brunstad generally consider the problem of the relationship between theological normativity to empiricism in the same way as we do, we believe that it is Browning's and van der Ven's views of that relationship that need a critical assessment.

The problem with Browning, seen from a theologically normative perspective, is that he seems to identify theoretical thinking with normative thinking, and that he allows theoretical thinking to depend on practice. Where this approach is concerned, one can say that although theory in relation to facts is normative, it is only methodologically normative – not normative in the same sense that the term "substantive normativity" has in theology and ethics (cf. 1.2.2 above). But Browning can, in any case, be credited for the courageous use of empiricism in his theological work. Hans Arne Akerø writes about this: "Browning strengthened the legitimacy of conducting empirical investigations in a theological context. He showed that such studies could help to raise relevant theological and ecclesiastical issues and provide a more reflective thinking about ecclesiastical action programs" (2009: 43). But we believe that such a contribution, which seems to be legitimate, is something other than an authentic integration of normative theology with empirical science (see our definition of integration according to Stenmark 1996: 145f in section 3.1 above).

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[4] Here it is relevant to distinguish between the concepts of consistency and coherence. Hospers (1995: 183f) explains the difference and the relationship between the concepts in the following way: "A body of beliefs is said to be coherent when (1) none of them is inconsistent with any others – that is, a system of beliefs including both 'Wood burns' and 'Wood does not burn' would not be coherent; and (2) when they mutually support one another – that is, each belief adds some probability to the other." On the other hand, the following examples are consistent (they do not contradict each other), but not coherent with each other: "The President of the United States is in China" and "we are writing this article in Norway".

[5] There are various forms of reductionism. By ontological reduction we mean statements of the type "X is nothing but Y", for example: "Religious experiences are nothing but neurosis" (Freud), "healings in revival meetings are nothing but psychological influence or suggestion" (cf. Barbosa da Silva 1982: 72f. and 2006/2010: 39f. on various forms of reductionism).

In his conception of the normativity of theology, van der Ven is concerned with what he calls "normative aspects of the hermeneutic-communicative practice" (1998: 59f.). Central to this practice is a constant reading and interpretation of biblical texts and texts from the religious tradition. Communication about the meaning and function of these texts is also part of this practice. Thus, the practice also has "a normative function", as Hegstad says (1998: 20). Van der Ven also links normativity to the concept of the kingdom of God in Jesus' own communicative practice (1998: 65f.). One can thus say that van der Ven goes from a type of practical normativity to a more basic one, but without the more classical justification for this. Here, Hegstad's critique of him seems relevant: "The theological assessment of this will of course depend on which theological position the assessment is based on. From a revelatory theological point of view, it may seem worrying that the concept of practice is both delimited and normed by means of a generally based theory." (1998: 21).

In two articles (1998 and 2002), Hegstad has provided valuable reflections on the relationship between empirical data and practical theology. In the article from 1998, he discusses the relationship between theology and empiricism in van der Ven's theology, and in the article from 2002, he also discusses the relationship between theory and practice. With reference to Browning's project, Hegstad signals his own position on the normativity question:

> Letting the ecclesiastical field of practice be the starting point for the theological work may immediately seem difficult to reconcile with the idea of Scripture as the source and norm of theology […]. The point of letting theological reflection start with the empirical, however, is not to let this reality be its own norm. Although the Church through its existence in the world represents the coming kingdom of God, the Church and the reality of the kingdom of God are still not two coincident quantities. In the church, God's innovative work is mixed with the fallen world. The Church is therefore constantly referred to seek to return to the testimony of the presence of the kingdom of God in Jesus, as found in the biblical canon. (Hegstad 2002: 175).

The awareness of the actual normative basis of theology in the encounter with – and in the use of – empirical data in practical theology that Hegstad expresses here, is clarifying and necessary for a correct understanding of the question of the normativity of theology. Against this background, van der Ven and Browning can, in our opinion, be criticised for being somewhat obscure when it comes to the normativity of theology, seen from a more classical theological normative point of view. And Aarflot and Brunstad can be perceived as being too general, when one considers the integration model that we present below. As for Hegstad, he has a clear conception of what the normativity of theology entails. But apart from that, we cannot see a way of thinking in Hegstad that can really help us to understand the meaning and function of theological normativity in the various areas of church development thinking and practice – where the use of empirical data can mean both an opportunity for and a threat to theological normativity.

4. Presentation and defence of an alternative integration model

4.1 Key concepts in our three-field model

Before we discuss in the following some different ways of conceiving and clarifying the relationship between theological normativity and the application of empirical data in practical theology and church development, we shall present our own basic theoretical model, which we call a three-field model. Our point is that in a possible integration of empirical data with normative theology, we need to distinguish between different fields of practical theology that correspond to different levels of theological normativity (cf. Figure 2). The purpose of our three-field model is to show how theological normativity and empiricism can interact with each other in a church development context. Our model assumes that the possibilities for integration are different in the various fields of normativity, depending on theological tradition. In Figure 2, we present the various areas or fields in which theological normativity can be applied to practical theology or church development. The three-field model can be illustrated as follows:

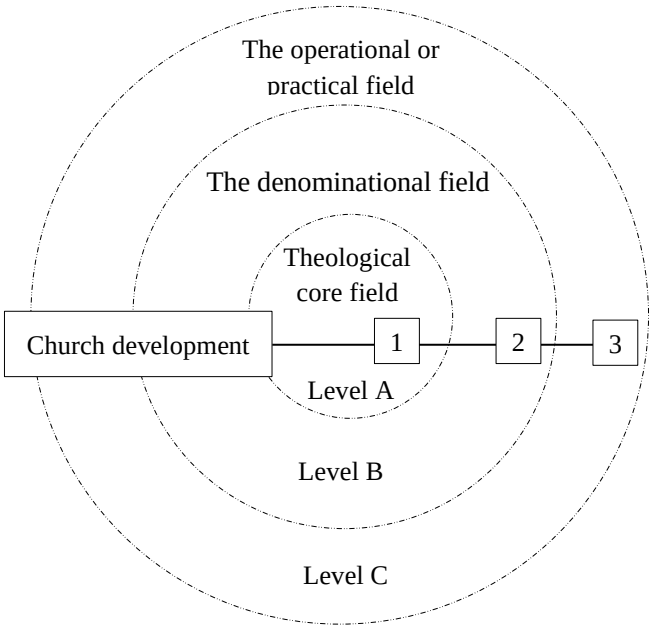

Figure 2: A three-field model illustrating different levels of integration of theological normativity with empiricism.

The circles in Figure 2 mark the different fields of practical theology or church development, corresponding to three levels of theological normativity. For levels A, B and C, A marks the highest degree of theological normativity and C the lowest. As the presentation below will show, the boundaries between these fields are fluid, as they largely depend on how one places oneself in different interpretive church traditions and denominations. The terms ‘theological core field’, ‘denominational field’ and ‘operational field or practical’ are intended both to

describe important areas or aspects of church reality and to indicate how the theological normativity affects the different areas of church development. This is also explained in the text below. The numbers from 1 to 3, relating to the three fields in the model, indicate the three areas where the empirical basis or practices in church development must consider theological normativity (A, B and C).

4.2 The relationship between theological normativity and empirical data on the various fields of application and levels of normativity

4.2.1 Level A: the theological core

The inner circle in Figure 2 shows *the core field* of theological normativity, which consists of the very basic Christian doctrines or truths. This level A can be said to be the *norma normans* (the norm of all norms) in a church development context, i.e., its basic normativity, from which all other theological normativity springs, is derived or on which it builds. Earlier in the first part of this article, we explained what distinguishes this basic theological normativity from the other two levels of normativity, and how it is related to and differs from empirical data. We have also previously argued that this type of normativity is characteristic of all Christian theology and must be said to be inalienable for all who work with theology in the classical sense. One can also say that the theological core normativity consists of the central biblical message or *kerygma* about Jesus Christ – that which Dunn describes as "the unifying center of Christianity" (Dunn 1977/2006: 203-213). One way of summarising and illustrating this core normativity is, for example, to refer the Apostles' Creed – which has broad ecumenical support. In an ecclesiological context, the NT's overall testimony about the Church's or congregation's biblically described nature and function will be an important part of what we here call the core normativity. We are not referring here to the denominational expressions of the Church, but of the biblically described truths regarding the Church and its mission.

The level of normativity (level A) – as the *norma normans* – thus consists of the basic and "revealed" truths in the Christian faith (Latin: *Fides quae creditur*). It can be described in different ways, but our point here is that the basic truths that the core theological normativity consists of, cannot be verified empirically. Thus, it can be said that empirical data (in the social science sense) has no real "function" in this field (cf. touch point 1 in the model). Here, it is theology that can describe and clarify the nature, value or function and necessity of core normativity in church practices and development. There will obviously be a conflict between empiricism and theology, if empiricism in any way threatens the core normativity in the sense of the basic truths that constitute the theological core normativity (cf. van der Ven's concept of integration, which we have previously explained).

4.2.2 Level B: the denominational field

What we in Figure 2 call the denominational field, consists of theologically normative statements and points of view that are also expressed in Scripture, but which in their design and application are conditioned by certain historical and cultural situations. Here we can speak about

a denominational expression of the Christian faith. As we know, such denominational expressions of faith have also helped to make their mark on different congregations, with the effect that they may in fact appear to be quite different. Different expressions of church order belong here. From a church historical point of view, it is reasonable to say that ecclesiastical issues of order are a typical example of an area where, in some ecclesiastical traditions, certain biblical texts are interpreted normatively, while in other traditions they are not. In some church traditions, for example, the function of elder or priest is reserved for men – in others not. Some ecclesiastical traditions view the function of bishop as crucial to the understanding of the congregation or church, others do not. Some nowadays make a point of getting as close as possible to what is perceived as a "biblical church order" (as the norm), others are not concerned with this. And so, we could continue.

For the individual congregation that is part of a church tradition as far as interpretation is concerned, there will thus be many normative denominational guidelines for ways of thinking about church and church development, which one should take into account in practical church development work, if one is to be loyal to one's own church or denominational tradition. Or one can choose not to take normative guidelines into account. In such cases, it may well be that one experiences a conflict between certain elements in the core normativity and the denominational perception or interpretation of this. The Reformers' rebellion against Roman Catholic practice in certain areas in the 16th century, can be an example of just this. However, it is the core normativity (cf. level A in Figure 2) that seems to create Christian identity for all the different Christian denominations, i.e., their common features – where the difference in biblical interpretation seems to be minimal.

How do theological normativity and empiricism "touch" each other in this field (cf. touch point 2 in the model). The empirical data here works to both enlighten and correct on different points of view and interpretive alternatives. The task of theology must here be to clarify alternative interpretation – and not least to try to express how the normativity of theology (cf. level B) is reflected in the various questions that fall under this area. If one takes as a starting point the denominational field (in our model), one can say that in the theological understanding and interpretation of basic Christian truths one can "update" one's interpretation or one's application of the core normativity. The example from the Reformation period is not about a change in basic Christian truths (cf. level A in the model), but an alternative understanding of how the truth about salvation and should be interpreted in the Church.

4.2.3 Level C: the operational or practical field

There is a third area 3 (cf. 1 and 2 on Figure 2) that we call the operational field or the practice field (cf. C in Figure 2). These terms are intended to capture the church development practice that forms the basis for the research problem in this article. In "field" 3 (level C in Figure 2) there is largely empirical development of congregations – which of course should take place based on – and with respect to – the theological normativity that we have described for levels A and B. Contact point 3 in the model (Figure 2) deals with the facilitation of different types of practice – where some of the practices are linked more directly to theological normative guidelines, while other types of practice are more detached from such guidelines. In some

ecclesiastical traditions, it is the case that either canon law or denominational normative guidelines govern more of the practice (for example, worship service and leadership system) than in other traditions for example, in the free churches. The peculiarity of this area (cf. 1 in level C, Figure 2) is that the theological normativity described here is used for both level A and B.

Regarding church development the function of empirical data in this operational or practical field will be to provide an organisational and professionally updated understanding of the framework for the organisation and development of churches in our time. Organisational theory and empirical research will thus be used to provide thinking and strategy for congregations, with useful perspectives and elements, which in turn will be able to contribute to the congregations being able to function in ways that are more in harmony with their purpose. Here, empirical science can provide a broader and richer understanding of reality. The function of theology will be to speak clearly about both the biblical and the tradition-related norms – so that one can always be aware of whether one is in field 3, or whether one is about to cross the border into some theological "minefield". The challenges in this area will – from the point of view of theology – be to use the empirical evidence in areas that do not conflict with the biblical or the current denominational, basic normativity. The danger of conflict will be relatively small, if one is aware of the character of the landscape from both the empirical and the theological point of view.

4.2.4 Examples of level conflict

The relationship between empiricism and theological normativity, especially related to level C, can be illustrated with Råmunddal's dissertation entitled *Konsept og endring*, (English: *Concept and change*), (Råmunddal 2011), which investigates how new local ecclesiologies are created in local churches from two different church traditions. These churches use church development models such as Natural Church Development (originally from Germany), and those from Willow Creek Church or Saddleback Church in the United States (US). The aforementioned churches create a way of thinking about church that avoids doctrinal minefields, as Råmunddal's dissertation points out – such as the understanding of the sacrament, for example. Among the informants in Råmunddal's dissertation, there is almost complete agreement that neither the concepts that are used for the process of change, nor the new ways of thinking about church that are developed, give rise to any conflict between elements in these processes and the existing denominational norm. But there are admittedly exceptions, both among the informants and among other Lutheran theologians. The dissertation quotes, among others, the Lutheran theologian Trond Skard Dokka, who points out that the concept of ecclesiology found in the Natural Church Development, cannot be reconciled with "Lutheran understanding of Christianity and Church" (cf. Råmunddal 2011: 10). With such a view, in many ways Dokka moves, what happens in the Lutheran congregation under investigation regarding its development of an approach to local church, from the normativity level C and over to level B, maybe even over to level A. Then it is reasonable to say that a normative conflict exists – at least in the Lutheran local churches that have been investigated.

5. Implications for church development practices

5.1 Possible functions of applying theological normativity

Biblical and ecclesiastical normativity can be applied in at least three different ways in church-developing thinking and practice. First: normativity is identity-giving in that it is in the normative texts (the Bible) that one is told what the Christian congregation or church really is, and what its function is intended to be. In this article we emphasise very strongly how important it is to listen to what the biblical texts say about the identity of the church. If one does not do that, one is in danger of developing something completely different from a Christian congregation.

Biblical and ecclesiastical normativity can secondly also serve as a guide for development of the church – which also includes new practices. There are namely guidelines in biblical and denominational theology and ecclesiology as to which direction or course a church should choose to take. A church's direction is largely about what efforts one should make to fulfil the church's biblical purpose. The church has a God-given purpose, and if it is not willing to fulfil it, it is off course. Today, one can find various methods for incorporating an awareness of this theological or ecclesiological purpose. In some congregations, statements of intent are formulated, for example, following the pattern of New Style churches in the US. Saddleback Church, for example, has formulated a "purpose/driven statement", or "declaration of intent", which several congregations in Norway have taken as their own. Saddleback's statement of intent reads as follows: "To bring people to Jesus and membership in his family, develop them to Christian maturity, and equip them for their ministry in the church and life mission in the world, in order to magnify God's name" (Warren 1995: 107). A similar statement in Willow Creek Community Church reads: "The mission of Willow Creek Community Church is to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ" (Church Leadership Handbook 1996: 63). In different ways, both the statements of intent mentioned here express a clear direction for the development of the church.

A denominational belief statement or creed can also be said to express awareness of the identity of both the church and its direction. In evangelical circles, the Lausanne Covenant has, in many ways, fulfilled this function. It is also not uncommon today to find Norwegian congregations that have formulated their own statement of intent or purpose. Here, emphasis is often placed on expressing the theological basis and ecclesiastical context in which one stands, and which informs the development of the congregation. This, in many ways, can be said to express the doctrinal direction of the local congregation. In connection with strategic work in congregations, it is also not uncommon to see that one formulates one's values – something that can also be said to be suitable for expressing identity and doctrinal direction for the congregation.

And third, one can often see that the decisive biblical and ecclesiastical normativity functions correctively in the field of practice. And perhaps it is the corrective function of the norms that most people associate with something that is normative. Also, in church-developing practice, it must be said that one very much needs an awareness of the function of theological normativity when it comes to the development of new or renewed thinking and practice. Both

history and personal experience show that it is easy for unfortunate practices to develop. The unfortunate practices that developed within the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, which the Reformers criticised, based on their understanding of the Bible's "normative" voice, is in many ways a good historical example of how biblical normativity can be used against unfortunate practice.

In his book *Willow Creek Seeker Services. Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church* (1996), G.A. Pritchard makes a relatively broad-based evaluation of Willow Creek's search-oriented church strategy. This book can also serve as an example of how practice can and should be corrected, based on a type of theological normative thinking. Pritchard especially criticises Willow Creek's use of, among other things, modern marketing thinking, and psychology grounded on a biblical and evangelical "norm" that he also explains in the book.

P.G. Hiebert's critique of extreme charismatic healing practices in the book *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (1994: 217–253) is also an assessment of what, from theological normative and biblical reflections, can be said to be the development of unfortunate healing practices. What is particularly interesting about Hiebert's review of the subject is the demonstration that certain types of healing practices are linked to non-biblical notions of God, creation, the world and man.

Regarding the type of church development thinking and practice that we analyse in this article, where we are particularly concerned with drawing lessons from the organisational and management disciplines, we also have a very great need to think about theological normativity as a corrective factor. But, as we have previously pointed out, since it is the case that theological normativity does not always have a direct impact on the field of practice, telling us what we should and should not do, we are left to judge for ourselves what is appropriate and inappropriate thinking based on our experience and from non-theological disciplines. What may be wise, therefore, is to ask several test questions when opening to the use that come of organisational theories and thought or conceptual models in church development practice. Examples of such test questions might be: does any of the thinking that we take from secular organisations or leadership – or from contexts other than our own – break with the biblical and denominational basis of faith or with the basic values that should characterise the church?

5.2 Conflict between normative levels and changes in the normative basis

In the foregoing, we have looked at the impact and significance of the theological norm basis for church development. We can also turn it around and ask: is it conceivable that in one's thinking about the church and development of practice one discovers a need to make changes to the theological norm basis? The answer is yes – if we think about what we have previously called the denominational field. This has happened many times before and it will happen again. There are several reasons why this can happen. For example, there may be a conflict between denominational normativity and understanding of biblical normativity, as we have shown with the example from the Reformation period.

There are also examples of local congregations that leave the denominational tradition in which they stand, and choose another, or choose to stand "for themselves". The reason they do this is often that they see aspects of the biblical text that are not well enough taken care of within the current denominational tradition. Internally in a church community, there can also be debate about issues that have traditionally been normative. The debate that has taken place in recent years within the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of Norway on the issue of female elders and pastors, is an example of this. Many in this debate have expressed that the time has come to change the practice in this area, which will also mean a change in the theological basis behind the church order, which also implies a change in the interpretation of many biblical texts in this area.

6. Conclusion

In the introduction, we asked what significance theological normativity has for church development. In order to provide an academically based answer to the question, we first presented and discussed various integration models, of both a systematic theological and a practical theological nature. While these contributions speak either vaguely or in general about how the normativity of theology affects church development, we advocate a more nuanced understanding, where we distinguish between three normativity fields with three normativity levels. When Brunstad and Aarflot claim that they argue for integration, we believe that they argue for an adaptation or assimilation model that involves the incorporation of empirical knowledge and insight into theology – where theology does not lose its uniqueness. In our opinion, the incorporation of empirical knowledge and insight into theology is not necessarily an integration of theological normativity with empiricism (cf. Stenmark 1996: 145f.)

Our alternative and more precis integration model distinguishes between three normativity levels of application, which correspond to three different fields of church development: Level A is the *core field* of normativity (the highest normativity level), level B we characterise as a denominational interpretive field (the middle normativity level), and level C – what we call the operational field – is the area where much of the church development practice takes place (the lowest level of normativity). We have also tried to show that the relationship between empiricism and normativity in these fields and levels looks quite different from the point of view of both empiricism and normative theology. Based on our presentation and discussion, it will be the case that in what we call the *core field* of theology, there should be no integration at all. From both points of view, one can also see opportunities and challenges associated with the integration of empirical data at the various levels of normativity. But, as our quote from Skard Dokka shows, traditional and denominational affiliation largely determines the boundary between the three levels of normativity.

Concerning the function and significance of theological normativity in practical church development work, it gives identity and guidance and has a corrective purpose. Thus, it is easy to see that theological normativity is not only an absolute necessity, but also a great resource for church development practices. We have also seen that theological normativity is both fixed

and flexible – fixed in the sense that it represents theological truths which, in our opinion, are inalienable or immutable for the church and the congregation – and flexible in the sense that parts of the theological normativity depend on theological and denominational interpretive traditions that can also change – without this affecting the congregation's relationship to the basic normativity.

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