

Dreams and Visions

Critical Realism, Practical Theology, and the Spiritual Experiences of Pioneers Discerning the *Missio Dei*

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ABSTRACT

THIS ARTICLE DEVELOPS A narrative framework toward a methodology for my research exploring the call and practice of pioneer ministers in the Church of England. I argue for a critical realist perspective as a means of affirming and valuing spiritual experience as a locus for knowledge. Drawing on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and NT Wright a narrative framework of “intelligibility” is developed in which to place such testimonies of experience. This framework is then shaped by a biblical pneumatology whereby the work of salvation is driven forward toward the *telos* of the Kingdom by the mediation of the Holy Spirit. The value of this framework is explored in light of my future research into the experiences of pioneer ministers for whom discerning the *missio Dei* is a key part of their call and ongoing ministry in innovative mission and ecclesial reimagination. Attention is therefore given to the implications of this for practical theology and for spiritual discernment as a part of a methodology of empirical research.

INTRODUCTION

THE STORY OF THE genesis of the Franciscan movement commonly hinges around a moment of Francis's life in the church of St Damian in Assisi. Having returned to his hometown from military endeavors, bewildered and humiliated by sickness, Francis took to praying in front of the crucifix in the church. One day as he carried out this practice, he heard a voice say "Francis, seest thou not that my house is in ruins? Go and restore it for me?" (Chester-ton 1924, 46). On this experience the course and story of his life changed. This one experience brought about a radical movement of Christian mission, spirituality and discipleship which renewed the church of the day and continues to provide a source of renewal today.

I am currently embarking on research which aims to explore the reality of spiritual experience in the lives of those called to new missional and ecclesial endeavors in today's church. Many have noted the degree to which renewal movements emerge out of periods of significant cultural change (Cox 2009; Tickle 2012). Similarly, the church's own self-understanding, culture and form undergoes significant reappraisal and change in ways that correlate closely with wider social and cultural transitions. (Moltmann 2011). Yet, when the lives of those at the center of renewal movements are studied and their stories told there is another consistent theme—divine action in the form of profound and interruptive subjective experience. Profound because they are experiences that are initially outside the knowledge field and experience of the individual; interruptive because they interrupt the flow of the individual's life and take it in a radically new direction. Spiritual experience of this kind is therefore an important locus for knowledge about ourselves, God and the world.

In wanting to explore this "tradition" of spiritual and ecclesial renewal I am aware of my own investment and place within it. Having discerned a call to ordination, my own vocation took a surprising turn during my curacy in a traditional parish church setting. Much of the discernment of this turn was rational,

informed by reading and discussion with friends and colleagues. There was however a strong element of the kind of spiritual experience I am seeking to explore—in my case a dream. In the dream I am at a leaving party at the end of my curacy. Someone from the congregation asks me where I will be going to continue my ministry. I reach into my bag and take out a vellum scroll. On unrolling it a map of the British Isles is revealed with names on it locating the old kingdoms such as Wessex and Mercia. To the south of the mainland is an area of land where the English Channel ought to be and on this new kingdom of land is written the words “Resurrected from the Sea.” The details of the dream’s interpretation are not relevant here. But the effects are. For the dream ultimately had the effect of affirming and orienting my role in Poole around the emergence of new forms of church amongst people with little or no Christian heritage or experience.

These stories, my own and that of St. Francis, draw me into an important reflection on the nature of epistemology in the field of practical theology. In particular, how can the experiences that I have described be embraced as valid knowledge? How might this spiritual experience act as a valid locus of knowledge, in terms of the task of practical theological research? These sorts of experience may be categorized as “religious experiences” or “spiritual experiences.” There is a distinctiveness to such experiences that invites particular attention. Yet in the field of practical theology such experiences are given limited attention and at times scant credence. Mark Cartledge argues, “The theological narratives of those having religious experiences are often given cursory attention, if any at all” (2015, 56). Whilst practical theology places great emphasis on experiences, begins in experience, it tends to reduce experience to a shorthand for context, for starting in the midst of the forms structures, language and culture of religious practice. In this reduction the particular nature of spiritual experience can be ignored, perhaps conveniently in view of a preference for theologies that provide little space for experiences of such an unverifiable nature.¹

1. Root refers to “established practical theology’s allergy to realism” which

However, Cartledge argues religious experience is “essential to the spirituality that informs and permeates religious life” (Cartledge 2015, 56). Furthermore “human experience in a more general sense is the ‘place’ where the gospel is grounded and an important locus for the work of Spirit” (Cartledge 2015, 55). To continue in a reflexive mode, this has been my epistemological starting point. My own Christian faith has been formed to a large degree by the charismatic wing of the Anglican church, a stream of theology and spirituality that links back to the Pentecostal movement and the revivals of the early twentieth century. The theological and epistemological framework that I have been grounded in places a good deal of emphasis on experience, on God “coming to us” in various forms, whether through the Bible, gathered worship, the words of others, the natural world or even “directly” in terms of the “voice of God.”² There is a continuation of that stream into the ministry of others like myself, who as “pioneers”³ in the Church of England are asked to explore mission and ecclesiology in the secular context of modern Britain. For many it is a natural posture of mission and leadership to listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in the development of new initiatives. Religious experience in this sense has become normative in a growing arena of the Church of England’s formalized ministry. Where might a practical theology begin that can welcome religious experience, critical, robustly and fruitfully?

has led it to “overdose on the pills of dependant objective reality, claiming in its drugged state that all reality is dependant objective” (2014, 211). Elsewhere, Root argues that an “overcommitment” to empirical methods drawn from the social sciences has restricted the place of theology within the field (2016).

2. Though Cartledge asks to what extent any religious experience is unmediated: “In what sense is the Holy Spirit ever experienced directly at all? Even a ‘direct’ voice from heaven would be mediated in some sense via sound waves and ear drums, and an ‘inner’ voice is processed by the brain” (2015, 67).

3. Pioneer Ministers or “pioneers” are terms generally accepted into the language, local and official, of the Church of England for those leading innovative forms of mission and church planting. See, for example, www.churchofengland.org/pioneering.

A WAY IN—CRITICAL REALISM

At the heart of the disjunction that I have briefly described between the normative theology of pioneers and the field of practical theology lies the question—what is real? And how might we know that what we believe to be real, is real? The dilemma this creates for practical theology is summarized by Root:

I believe deeply generative possibility rests in contemplating divine action next to human experience and agency. And yet to do so is problematic, for divine action, if we are to contend that it is real—that is, a reality—is a transcendent mystery. (Root 2014, ix)

Thomas O’Dea describes religion as “the symbolic and organizational embodiment of the experience of the ultimate in less-than-ultimate forms” (1964, 31). All experience must be translated, expressed, given form in some way. The work of translation and expression can never be neutral or perfect, leaving a gap into which epistemological doubt enters. This is true of all experience. But perhaps most particularly true of religious experience in cultural context of the post-Enlightenment west.

Indeed, the roots of the dilemma with divine action lie in the Enlightenment and the dominance of a positivist philosophy that reduces the real to that which can be proven by measurable experience. Despite developments away from this position in the field of academic philosophy, the positivist perspective on reality continues to hold considerable influence over popular opinion which, perhaps informed by a media industry that revels in dualistic debates, maintains a view that there is choice to be made between empiricism and myth, where myth is a byword for nonsense.

The internal contradiction of positivism⁴ led to more post-modern anti-realist perspectives as described by Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida (Archer et al. 2004). These focussed on ontological constructions in the realm of language. Language functions to create reality thus leading to distinct realms of reality

4. That is, the claim that all that is real is that which can empirically verified cannot itself be proved empirically.

according to each arena of language. Religion is rendered as one language field, one arena of knowledge, one in which God exists only by virtue of language. The challenges inherent in talking about God in an academic world influenced by the long shadow of positivism made this new avenue for epistemology attractive. As Margaret Archer, Andrew Collier, and Douglas Porpora note, “Many theologians find this post-Wittgensteinian perspective congenial” (Archer et al. 2004, 8) in that it creates a valid arena for talk of God without making any claims about reality.

To affirm the validity of transcendent experience requires therefore a perspective that neither brackets out this experience as unverifiable (a positivist perspective) nor relativizes such experience as but one of a plurality of experiences without any claim on reality (a post-Wittgensteinian/postmodernist perspective). I seek a perspective that offers a dignified and humble attitude to the “brute fact” of people’s experience of the transcendent and a perspective that does justice to the data of people’s experience by more than simple description.

Critical realism offers such a perspective. Drawing on the philosophy, in particular, of Roy Bhaskar, whose work was engaged with by Archer, Collier and Porpora, the critical realism that developed the field of practical theology⁵ affirms a critical assertion about the stratified nature of reality and hence a distinction

5. Andrew Wright (2012) traces the origins of the various streams of critical realism. The dominant stream within practical theology is associated with the philosophical movement started by Roy Bhaskar. Archer et al. (2004) represent “a second wave of critical realism’s spiritual turn” (Wright 2012, 39) and provide the enduring connection between Bhaskar’s critical realism and its place within the field of Christian practical theology. Wright also identifies streams of critical realism emerging from the dialogue between theology and natural sciences (beginning with Ian Barbour and taken up by key voices such as John Polkinghorne, Arthur Peacock, and Alistair McGrath), a stream initiated by Thomas Torrance exploring a critical realist perspective on doctrine and a stream applying critical realism to Biblical interpretation (Ben Meyer and NT Wright). The latter stream is important for my own purposes of exploring a narrative approach to interpreting experience. Thus, whilst the critical realist perspective of Meyer and NT Wright has developed rather independently of the Baskharian stream it provides a complimentary resource in terms of giving a valid and rich means of engaging with and interpreting spiritual experience.

between the empirical (that which we experience), the actual (that which happens independent of our experience of it) and the real (the deeper truth of what lies behind all reality) (Taylor 2020).⁶ In addition critical realism asserts that it is not an *a priori* assumption about reality (or non-reality) that informs our perspective on the world but an *a posteriori* interpretation of our lives in the realm of subjective experience. Practical action in the empirical realm, our engagement in the world, draws experience which, as relational beings, we seek to share and interpret with others: “It is our doings in the world which secure meanings and not vice versa” (Archer et al. 2004, 189). For critical realism, however, these interpretations must remain as postfoundational, held humbly and critically as a lens with which to continue to critique and interpret further experience.

Critical realism’s perspective is constructed from three philosophical commitments. Firstly, rejecting the collapse of ontology into epistemology, it asserts that the real is something that exists independent of our ability to know it fully. It embraces realism as a truth about the way things are but not as a reduction to *saying* how things are. Secondly, rejecting the “epistemic fallacy” of positivism, but acknowledging that there is no such thing as the detached or “objective” observer, critical realism asserts an epistemological relativism. The quest for the real is not a zero-sum game of philosophical conquest, we are not seeking the next candidate for the hegemonic position held by positivism, rather the development of our understanding of the real is through the conversation between different ontological perspectives. Any ontology is seen as a

6. Andrew Root (2014), drawing on Christian Smith (2010), makes the distinction between the dependant subjective layer (empirical), dependant objective layer (actual) and independent objective layer (real). It is the experience of the real, whether as an infant dropping a cup from a high chair, Newton observing the apple dropping from the tree, or Francis hearing the voice of God, that propels us into the sharing and interpretation of experience and the seeking of understanding in the actual realm. In this sense all experiences are ontological, they are experiences of the real which are deeper than mere epistemology. “They are greater, more real . . . existing on a higher plane of reality because they encounter us as a real event outside of or ability to describe them” (Root 2014, 216).

provisional “best account” of reality and must be open to critique, dialogue, development or even rejection as the accumulation of data emerging from experience acts upon it. Thus “critical realism combines a realist ontology with a relativist epistemology” (Taylor 2020, 58). Finally, critical realism asserts judgemental rationality as a means by which reason can be applied to argue for decisions over the “fit” of one ontology over another. This is a critical move from the judgemental relativism of more postmodern perspectives and leads to the possibility of “alethic truth” (Archer et al. 2004, 2). This is the kind of truth that is commensurate with our experience and that of others to the degree that it is a shared truth that in practical terms is (at least temporarily) a closed case. In critical realist terms such “truth” is provisionally held, open to the future scrutiny and critique of new experience and new argument, willing to enter into dialogue with them in the search for a deeper vision of the truth behind the “truth.”

What critical realism therefore offers is a way in to explore the testimonies of spiritual experience in the context of practical theology. It validates practical theology’s starting point of experience, avoiding the trajectory from Schleiermacher to Cupitt where the primacy of spiritual experience leads to the relativization of all experience (Wright 2012, 49). It also validates practical theology as more than a “pseudo-science” or a mere mode of description; rather it is a discipline of enquiry, alongside other theological disciplines, that offers a means of discovery complimentary to the natural sciences.

EXPLORING METHODOLOGY

The question remains however exactly how judgemental rationality might be applied in the arena of spiritual experience. Such experiences are by their nature particular and personal. What is the difference between someone who professes to being communicated to by a unicorn and someone who hears the voice of God?

Alasdair MacIntyre develops the concept of “intelligibility” to describe the way human beings sort actions, statements and

experiences into plausible or implausible fields. The way we do this, our innate methodology, is to place the action or utterance in the context of a narrative:

It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for the understanding of the action others. Stories are lived before they are told. (MacIntyre 1981, 246)

This narrative structure may well be, initially at least, an experiment, but without any such narrative the data we receive makes little sense. The fit of the data to a story creates “intelligibility” so long as new data continues to fit the narrative that is being told. What develops is an iterative process of testing the narrative structure in which experience is contextualized with any new information that arrives. The process is therefore a dialectical one, a multivalent conversation involving sense-data, narrative and the interpretative tools that help discern whether new experience can be accommodated in the unfolding narrative.

Judgemental rationality in this methodology agrees with MacIntyre who argues that humans are like “a story-telling animal” (MacIntyre 1981, 250). For MacIntyre, discerning action and experience in the course of life our fundamental question is: “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?” (1981, 250). For NT Wright, this renders the typical subject-object frame for epistemology into a frame of story-telling humans and story-laden world. The scientific challenge of verification can be responded to within this framework whereby verification is the test of intelligibility with the theory-story we inhabit. Critical realism therefore “sets up as hypotheses various stories about the world in general or of bits of it in particular and tests them by seeing what sort of ‘fit’ they have with the stories already in place” (Wright 1992, 45).

Of course, our theory-stories do not emerge out of nowhere. They are stories we inherit from our communities and the traditions those communities hold. Such stories become a key part of our identity to the extent that we are our stories, and without our

stories we lose sense of our identity. Traditionalism (and fundamentalism) is the holding fast to stories despite the intervention of new sense-data that places a fundamental challenge to the story. A living tradition by contrast holds its founding story firmly but openly. It embraces the risk of ongoing conversation about the continued validity and nature of the story in the face of new information.⁷

However if it is true, and now valued, that all knowledge is embodied knowledge, embodied in particular traditions, stories and cultures, then how are we to say there is any kind of *transcendent* truth? This anti-realist challenge, whilst demanding a critical perspective on truth claims, cannot however go as far as concluding with *certainty* that there are no transcendent truths. Leslie Newbigin states, “The (true) assertion that all truth claims are culturally and historically embodied does not entail the (false) assertion that none of them makes contact with a reality beyond the human mind” (1995, 74). In this sense the commitment to judgemental reality is a necessarily personal one. It is the placing of data within a story in which I have placed a personal commitment. There is no other way in which truth is explored: “I can only affirm the objective of a truth claim which I make my committing myself to live and act in accordance with that claim” (Newbigin 1995, 75).

It is this framework into which I wish to place the commitment to judgemental rationality. For example, taking my own story, after rejecting the dream initially as “just a dream,” I sensed an invitation to attend to its significance. The story and tradition I inhabit is one where the notion of spiritual experience is normative, and also one where the biblical witness affirms dreams and visions as an aspect of the means by which God speaks, and particularly a means where God provides guidance (e.g., Matt 1:20; 2:12, 13; Acts 2:17; 16:19).

Thus the notion of a dream as a spiritual experience can be integrated into my own story by virtue of its embeddedness in the

7. “A living tradition, then, is an historically-extended, socially-embodied argument” (MacIntyre 1981, 257).

wider story of my own tradition. Alternative stories compete for intelligibility and these stories must be attended to. The positivist paradigm argues that dreams are purely brain chemistry and that there is nothing to prove that dreams can have any epistemological relevance beyond this. Without doubt the majority of dreams fit perfectly well in the limited scope of this account. But critical realism allows me to contend that there are some dreams that can inhabit a larger story intelligibly and with validity.

PNEUMATOLOGY AND NARRATIVES OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

NT Wright states: “Story can help us in the first instance to articulate a critical-realist epistemology and can then be put to wider uses in the study of literature, history and theology” (1992, 32). Likewise, story can be put to use in the study of spiritual experience. Is it possible, and constructive, though to talk about these narratives of spiritual encounter as particular kinds of experience? I want to argue that such stories like that of St Francis and many others contain a *particular* theological validity because of the particular story that they inhabit. Firstly, it is a story with a particular *telos*. Secondly it is a story with a primacy for the *agency of the Holy Spirit*.

Andrew Root connects realism and experience through cause: “We experience something as real because we are impacted by its cause. . . . We give epistemological shape to what has delivered cause to our being” (2014, 201). Spiritual experiences provide a validity to the realist claims of the transcendent, not only through the sense-data of the experiences themselves, what was seen, what was felt, but through the impact that they cause in those who experience them. NT Wright contends that the very validity of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is to be placed in the story of the disciples for whom the experience of the resurrection appearances and the day of Pentecost cause such a radical shift in their worldview and their posture toward the world (Wright 2003).

Furthermore, the story of God's salvation argues for a particular kind of cause, that is a cause that fits with the eschatological arc of the story. NT Wright's categorization of the story of salvation is one of a play of five acts in which the fifth act is still being written, and, though we know the end of the story as the healing of all things, nevertheless there is scope for creativity and "faithful improvisation" within the unfolding narrative. This is the act of the story in which the church is invited to participate (Wright 1992, 139-43).

A primary agent and actor within this final act of the story is the Holy Spirit. John V. Taylor asserted, "The chief actor in the historic mission of the Christian church is the Holy Spirit" (1972, 3). This assertion can be made from the witness of the New Testament where the salvation story is driven forward in the gospels by Jesus, who "full of the power of the Holy Spirit" as he begins his ministry, "can only do what he sees the Father doing" (Luke 4:1; John 5:19) and therefore discerns how to use his agency in the story by prayerful participation with Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. The promise of "another Counsellor" and the breathing of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples at the resurrection (John 14:16; 20:19-23), in connection with their commissioning as agents of the Kingdom in the world, argues for a continuation in the church of this co-agency with the Spirit in the ongoing story of salvation. As Cartledge puts it: "Following Pentecost, the praxis of the Spirit was determinative for the religious experience of the church in an active rather than passive sense" (2015, 57).

The experience of the Spirit therefore has a particular *telos* as the movement from the Father, mediated by the Holy Spirit drives forward the story of salvation with purpose to its inevitable conclusion. This concept of purpose is a critical one in distinction to the dominant philosophical perspectives of the post-Enlightenment west. Purpose in such schemes are speculative and unreliable. They require a prior assumption of some origin of purpose from outside what is observable. A position which of course is, according to positivism, untenable. Michael Polanyi however has argued that all knowledge is "personal knowledge" (1958); that is, it requires

a personal investment, a testing of one's weight. To provide a basis for being and action in the world an epistemology must make contact with reality, it must be tested. That in itself is an act of faith, a move with the ingredient of doubt: "Only statements that can be doubted make contact with reality" (Newbigin 1995, 52). Furthermore, Polanyi argued for a "tacit dimension" (1966), the presence of purpose in the scientific method. The ability to shape questions and problems that form the basis for scientific enquiry are expressions of an enquiry that is reaching from the possibilities of pattern and coherence towards a greater reality. Confirmed positivists would reject such claims. But the point remains that positivism's rejection of purpose is not straight forward. Furthermore, its commitment to empirical observation, to cause and to certainty, is itself a position of personal commitment, a story of the world that brings its own inherent predispositions. Critical realism accepts this epistemic relativism and invites the valid proposal of story as means of discovery and knowledge. It provides scope for a story of the cosmos in which there is a place for purpose and therefore a place in which stories with a *telos* provide the grounds for the testing of reality.

The particular *telos* of the Christian story is that of the *eschaton*, the age to come. Anderson argues that the Spirit's work is future oriented (Anderson 2001, 106). The Spirit comes "from the future" and mediates the enfolding revelation of the reconciliation of the cosmos made real by the work of Christ. Likewise, Moltmann states that "eschatologically, the Spirit can be termed the 'power of futurity'" (1977, 34). Further, "The church is the eschatological creation of the Spirit" (1977, 33). Through the Spirit, the church is created and renewed. God's Spirit is the Spirit of renewal, but also resurrection, an agent of radical innovation and the initiator of new chapters in the story. These are the sorts of interventions of the Spirit that place strong challenges to our normative theologies and practices. I want to suggest therefore that the tradition, in which spiritual experiences that I have described are embraced, has within it firstly the unfolding of the salvation story "to the ends of the earth" and secondly the promise of radical innovation

such that the story not only evolves step by step (the “now” of the kingdom) but invites an openness to paradigmatic development (the “not yet” of the kingdom). Therefore, we might expect and find fitting those stories of spiritual experience, including amongst pioneers in the church, which invite the church into new contexts and in radically new ways.

PNEUMATOLOGY, EXPERIENCE, AND PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

What might critical realism and an embracing of the presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit mean for the practice of practical theological research? Critical realism takes seriously the location of the observer in the midst of a world of epistemologies in conversation. There is no such thing as the detached observer. Consequently, a critical realist perspective is intrinsically reflexive, placing the observer in the midst of the story as a story-telling individual with an identity inseparable from their history and context. For myself, as a Christian, a pioneer, formed to a significant degree in charismatic evangelical communities I find myself as both participant and researcher as I approach this project.

The missiology of the pioneer ministry movement has drawn heavily on the concept of the *missio Dei*, a commitment to mission being a first step for God, not a second step (Bosch 1991, 390–91; Flett 2010; Moynagh 2017, 146–47). Mission is part of the nature of God’s being, not a function of it. Consequently, mission is not a second step for the church. It is not something in addition to the being of the church, an optional extra. Rather mission is part of the life of God in which the church is called to participate. The apostolic self-giving nature of God is the life given through Jesus and the Spirit to the church. It is this same life the church is asked to witness to in its own life. Life without mission is contrary to the nature of God and the nature of the church. The church’s missional posture is one of “active passivity” (Flett 2010, 259). This is a receiving of the life of God which invites a consequent activity in the participation of that same life. A consequence of this commitment

is a growing reemphasis on the spiritual practice of discernment in community. The oft repeated phrase within the Fresh Expressions movement⁸ of “seeing what God is doing and joining in”⁹ points to a conviction first of God’s prevenient action in the world and secondly our invitation to discern that action and participate in it. The concept of *concurus Dei*, that God’s actions can be discerned in and through the action of other agents, is similarly commonly espoused by those in the movement.

In this sense the pneumatology of many pioneers connects strongly with the concept of “mediation” described by Cartledge. For Cartledge, mediation means “the Spirit as intermediary mediates the presence of the triune God such that God is recognized as present within intermediate aspects of creaturely reality for the purpose of salvation” (2015, 68). This is not to collapse the work of the Spirit into the creaturely or the material, but to recognize the intermediary action of the Spirit as working through the mediation of other processes, events and experiences.

For pioneers a great significance is placed on discernment of the action of God, by the intermediate action of the Spirit, through the mediation of other agents and aspects of reality. This discernment is no different for the researcher, entering (for myself in a new but different way) into the ongoing dialectical conversation within the story of salvation being worked out in any number of different contexts around the country. Critical realism creates the framework to take the spiritual experiences of pioneers seriously as the they seek to interpret these experiences in the context of the narrative of salvation. Critical realism also validates as a contribution the practice of spiritual discernment on the part of the researcher within that conversation. For Root, this is encompassed in terms of “ministry” in the sense of personal, relational, participative

8. Fresh Expressions is a British ecumenical movement with a vision to promote and enable new forms of church for a changing culture. For more, see www.freshexpressions.org.uk.

9. A quote generally attributed to Rowan Williams, though with roots in the formal theology of the *missio Dei*, e.g., “The church participates in Christ’s messianic mission and in the creative mission of the Spirit” (Moltmann 1977, 65).

encounters of love and care as opposed to more clerical or institutional understandings (2014). Practical theological research is therefore a ministry, participating in the ongoing sense-making dialectic as the church encounters and participates in the mediating work of the Spirit.

This argues for a spirituality in practical theology, a posture of discernment in the practice of practical theology, that takes seriously pneumatology, experience and the mediating work of the Spirit in all aspects of the ministry of the church. This is not a perspective held strongly within the world of practical theology. Cartledge goes as far as to say that “the majority of books on practical theology simply ignore pneumatology altogether” (2015, 44). He references Bonnie Miller-McLemore’s “map of the field of practical theology” (Miller-McLemore 2012) and reflects that the majority of its fifty-six chapters “do not refer to the person or work of the Holy Spirit” (Cartledge 2015, 60).

Yet it is consistent with the widely held commitment to critical realism to explore the development of a spirituality of practical theological research which embraces the exploration of knowledge beyond empiricism, description, or even hermeneutics. It invites a move toward a “phronetic knowing” (Wolftreich 2009, 13). Here space is created for knowledge development which can be more conversational and cyclical in nature, drawing on various epistemologies and perspectives (Rooms 2012). Spiritual discernment can thus find a place within phronesis and contribute to such a conversation.

Spiritual discernment is however a broad term. Are there ways in which the concept of spiritual discernment might become a valid part of the methodology of practical theological research? Marc Henri Lavellee has offered a model for a process by which spiritual discernment can be integrated into the task for the practical theologian. He draws parallels with Ignatian spirituality which, in common with practical theology, gives attention to the lived experience of a person or community’s life as a means to “seeing” divine reality. Lavellee also sees parallels for the researcher with the role of spiritual director as one who participates in a collaborative

conversation between the person/community and the Holy Spirit (Lavellee 2016). Similarly, Pete Ward argues that one consequence of a critical realist perspective in practical theology is “the call to abide,” that is a commitment to a normativity of “discerning the presence of Christ” (2017, 184). Again, this is not a detached discernment for the researcher, but a participatory one that invites personal spirituality and attentiveness to the presence and voice of God in the midst of the process of research. This argues for the practice of prayer as a critical element in the arena of epistemology. James Butler provides an autoethnographic account of the use of prayer in practical theological research (Butler n.d.) and finds close correlation with Ashley Cocksworth’s reading of the spiritual theology of the fourth-century desert mystic Evagrius (Cocksworth 2018). Evagrius’s theology of prayer spoke of the pray-er as someone “eavesdropping” on a polyphonic conversation already taking place. In this sense practical theology is about practicing the kind of attentiveness necessary to eavesdrop well on the complex conversation already taking place in a community or network in its context where Christ is present and active by his Holy Spirit.

Which brings us back in a sense to dreams and visions. What was my dream? It was the experience of the real generating new knowledge for me in the realm of my new ministry as a pioneer. In the wake of that experience a process of discernment took place where the dream came into conversation with the stories of scripture, tradition, my church community and the context around me. This context happened to be a coastal town in which much of the land given for new housing development had been reclaimed from the sea over the course of the town’s development. Was God inviting me to venture beyond the firmer landscapes of church tradition and trust that something new would emerge? I could not be certain. But it was an interpretation that might well bear my weight in the testing of it. Likewise, as a researcher exploring such experiences with other pioneers I am placing myself as an abiding presence in the midst of the conversations between experience and the means by which we interpret them. I am in a sense entering the sea that is the uncertain, ungrounded space that pioneers and

others inhabit discerning the *missio Dei*. I am entering into the fluid conversation of research that trusts that in the wake of such listening and discernment something that begins to look like land, a place that others may come and stand on, begins to emerge.

CONCLUSION

My argument is for research that can explore spiritual experience and the discerning of the *missio Dei*, generally in exploring ecclesial futures, specifically in seeking to understand the practice of pioneer ministry. Critical realism provides a perspective in which these kinds of experience can be seen as valid forms of knowledge. Furthermore, the framing of this kind of knowledge in the context of narrative and the use of intelligibility as a means of verification provide a robust means of allowing these stories and experiences to find their voice. Pneumatology should lead us to situate stories such as these in the context of a salvation narrative that has a universal *telos* and in which the Holy Spirit and the radical newness of resurrection are inextricably linked. Furthermore it validates a practice of practical theological research as a participative process of spiritual discernment, inviting prayerfulness and attentiveness on the part of the researcher as they seek to “eavesdrop” on the voice and presence of God in Christ, by his Holy Spirit, in the lives of those people and communities he/she is amongst.

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